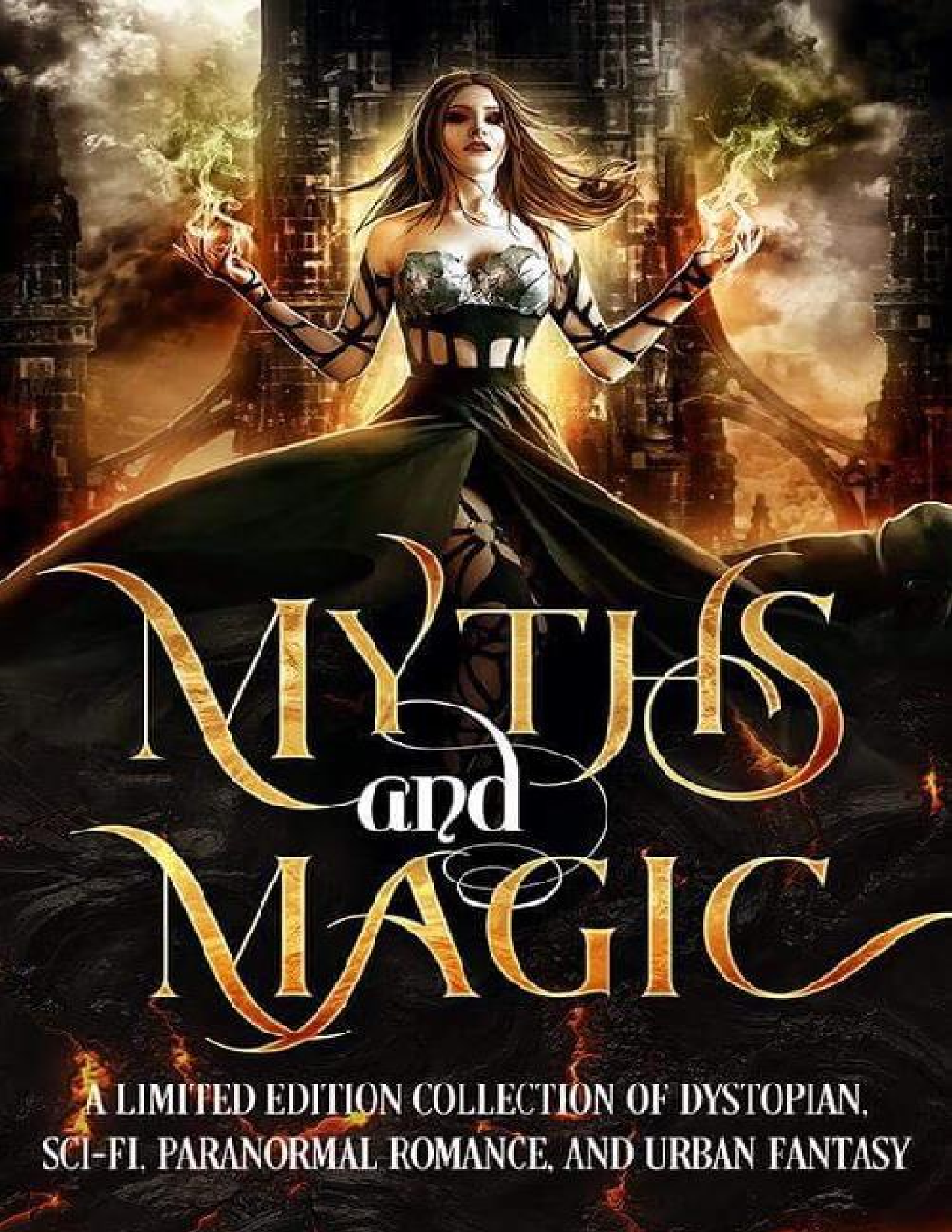




MYTHS and MAGIC

A LIMITED EDITION COLLECTION OF DYSTOPIAN,
SCI-FI, PARANORMAL ROMANCE, AND URBAN FANTASY

MYTHS AND MAGIC

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THE GUARDIAN OF BLACKBIRD INN

KERRY ADRIENNE

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THE GUARDIAN OF BLACKBIRD INN

Saving the inn might mean losing her life.

Sophia Yates travels to Blackbird Inn to help its mysterious owner, Garren Amsel, research its history. The state wants to lay claim to the haunted property, but the historic inn has been in Garren's family for generations.

When Sophia learns the truth behind the inn's biggest mystery, and why Garren stays, she realizes saving the Inn may come at the cost of her life.

How far will she go to protect him?

Chapter 1

“Welcome to Blackbird Inn, Miss...”

Sophia pushed her rain-soaked hair behind her ears and studied the tall man a moment before replying. He stared, probably at the frizz her red hair took on when wet. Either he hadn't been expecting her, or he wasn't used to guests at all. Being that this was a popular tourist inn, she assumed the former. With his good looks, he didn't appear to be the desk clerk type, and he seemed really uncomfortable, picking at pages on the desk and fidgeting as he talked. A chill rolled through her and she stepped up to the small registration desk and stuck her hand out. “Sophia Yates. I'm here to help with the research. Oh, and I have a reservation.”

“Ah, yes.” He grasped her hand and squeezed, his gaze lingering on hers a moment. Lightning flashed outside, illuminating him in blue and searing his image in her mind. Tall, dark, and mysterious didn't even begin to cover it. *Handsome* was too common a word. The man was divine, his features aquiline and his hair jet black.

She licked her lips and pulled her hand from his, certain he'd felt her palms dampen. “And you?” She fidgeted with the handle of her wheeled suitcase, noting the trail of water she'd brought in with her. The storm hadn't let up since her bumpy landing in Philly a few hours ago. Good thing the rental car had fog lights because the remote inn had been difficult to find, even after stopping for directions in the tiny town nearby.

The man behind the desk wasn't answering. He smiled, the sort of crooked smile a man might give you before he tied you up and...

“Garren.” Thunder boomed outside, and the vibration traveled through the inn, rattling the foyer windows. “Garren Amsel. I'm the owner of the inn, but you probably know that by my name.” He paused. “And I'm the desk clerk, occasionally.” He pushed his hair out of his eyes.

You've been reading too many scary stories. She shivered. Driving through a thunderstorm to the rocky inn on the side of a mountain in remote Pennsylvania didn't help. The place looked like something straight out of a horror movie, with its stone façade and overgrown hedges. A movie where the girl dies. “Nice to meet you.” *I think.*

“Likewise. I hope we can get this issue taken care of quickly.” He shuffled a stack of papers then set them aside. “But I can see you're cold, and probably exhausted from travel. Let me show you to a

room. If you want some hot tea, I can have it brought up to you.”

She nodded. Cold and tired explained her nervousness. That, and a day of traveling. Her unease had nothing to do with all the research she’d done about how Blackbird Inn was haunted, or about the disappearance of a young woman almost a hundred years ago. All stories to drive in business to the isolated inn, she was sure of it. She was here now on business, nothing more. Not to solve a mystery or be afraid of a ghost.

It didn’t matter that Halloween was in two days. The only sign of decorating she’d seen was a pumpkin and haystack arrangement on the front lawn. The inn didn’t need anything added to be spooky.

“Arturo Beck will be in tomorrow night.” She gazed around the small foyer, taking in the dark woodwork and high ceiling. “I hope we can find something useful before he gets here.” The inn was over a hundred-fifty years old, but seemed to have been well maintained. Ancient navy blue silk wallpaper lined the foyer, making it appear smaller than it actually was, and an antique clock rested against one wall. In the center of the tall ceiling, a chandelier draped in small crystals dangled on a lone cord. One bulb was out, and dust concealed the refraction of the prisms.

“He told me you’d be here first.”

She jerked her gaze back to Garren. “Yes, of course.”

“We can get to work tomorrow. Right now, you need rest.” He filled out notes in a book then pushed it toward her. “Sign your name, please. Here. Mr. Beck is taking care of the bill, but I like to have an accurate ledger of who stays here.”

In case they disappear? Sophia studied the guest register. She wasn’t the only visitor at the inn, but that wasn’t surprising. Late October would see the last of the fall tourists traveling through to catch glimpses of nature’s final show before winter. She signed her name, her hands still a bit shaky. “You still do this by hand?”

“I find it...practical.” He took the book and snapped it closed. “Besides, there’s no Internet here.”

What! She grabbed her phone from her jeans pocket. *No service.*

Garren set the book aside and leaned on the desk. “That’s right, no cell service, either. You’ll have to go into town if you have to get online.” He smiled. “But every room here has a landline if you need to make a call.”

She slipped her phone into her pocket. Anxiety crept up her spine. How would she function without Internet? Sure, it was only for a couple days, but it’d been a long time since she’d had to do without. She wouldn’t miss emails, but how would she do research? “That wasn’t in the brochure,” she muttered.

He raised his eyebrows. “You read the brochure?”

“Yeah.” She smirked. “Online, ironically. Mr. Beck showed it to me. Beautiful pictures.”

Lightning lit the foyer again, followed almost immediately by another clap of thunder. The desk lamp flickered once but stayed on, casting its yellow pall over the room. The clock ticked heavy

beats.

“Then I guess you know.” Garren stepped from behind the desk and took her suitcase handle. “That’s good.”

“Know what?” Sophia reached for her suitcase. “Hey, I can get that.”

“Allow me.” He moved his hand on top of hers, his fingers curling gently over her own. “Hotel policy.”

Shivers skittered up her arm, but not of the scary variety. These were sexy shivers. Garren was even hotter up close. His black hair hung to his shoulders and flipped in disobedient ways. The darkness set off his pale skin, making him almost glow in the half-light.

“Good thing I know what?” She repeated, aware that her voice had just come out a half-octave higher than normal. She sucked in a breath and pulled her hand from under his, immediately sensing the loss of his touch, his warmth.

“You know about the ghosts we have here. I wouldn’t want any surprises.” He clenched the handle and set off toward the long hallway leading from the foyer, the suitcase bumping on the wood floor behind him. “Come. I’ll show you your room.”

Oh, he was good at playing the part of the spooky innkeeper. No wonder tourists flocked to the out of the way inn. Everyone liked a good, safe scare and obviously Garren was used to performing. She stuck her hands in her pockets and followed him down the hall. Well, she was at the inn on business and Garren was going to have to cut the act or they’d never get anything done. Mr. Beck expected things to be mostly in order when he flew in on Friday night, and if they weren’t, she might not get paid. He’d been quite insistent when he’d hired her to research that she get things done promptly. Not getting paid would be unacceptable. She needed the money.

The sound of the rolling suitcase on the heavy wood floor reverberated off the wallpapered hallway. Sconces lit the path, albeit dimly, and they passed door after dark door with large brass numbers.

Seventeen, Eighteen, Nineteen...

At the end of the hall, Garren stopped. “Your room is upstairs.” He motioned to the staircase, enclosed in one of the inn’s two hexagonal towers. The wide steps meandered up in a gentle spiral of stone or maybe marble. What a grand sight the place must have been when it was built. People probably hadn’t seen anything like it unless they were from the city. She gazed up the stairs. *Amazing*. She tucked her hair behind her ears, prying the damp locks from her neck. A hot shower would feel really good about now.

A column of tall, stained glass windows ran up the height of the tower to the third floor. With pointy arched tops and red glass, they looked more like windows one might find in a cathedral than an inn. She sucked in a breath as lightning lit the staircase and the stairwell glowed bloody red. *Why think blood? Why not rose red?*

“After you,” he said. “Second floor.”

She ran her hand along the cool handrail and started up the stairs. “How many floors does the inn have?”

Garren lugged the suitcase and, for a moment, Sophia regretted packing so heavily.

“Only two for guests,” he said. “Third floor is my residence, and then there’s the attic.”

She nodded and headed up the steps, careful not to let her wet shoes slide on the slick stone. Heavy rain beat against the red windows like a cat scratching against a fence post. The storm had grown heavier since she’d been inside, and she wondered if it would continue all night.

The inn was exactly the type of place she would’ve loved to explore when she was in college. Historical and full of character, the inn felt alive with its creaks and groans. Dark shadows loomed in every corner and she wondered how much sweeping it took to keep the cobwebs and mustiness at bay.

She pushed open the heavy oak door that opened onto the second floor and Garren moved past her with the suitcase.

“Not much farther.” He struggled with the heavy bag. “You coming?”

Taking one last look down the staircase, she nodded. A bright flash of white caught her eye and she stopped, ice running through her veins. The white, almost translucent blob flew up the staircase, winding toward her. The thing pulsed and gave off iridescence like it was lit from within, and it trailed a shower of tiny sparks.

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Lightning flashed in the stairwell again, and the blob disappeared. Frozen, she craned her neck to see if anything else was coming up the stairs. The stairwell was much cooler than it had been moments ago. Not just cooler. Cold. Her heart hammered and she put her hand over her chest, as if that would calm her. Her breath came out in puffs of condensation, like tiny clouds in the dark.

“Sophia?” A hand clamped down on her shoulder.

She screamed. Not a girly scream, but an all-out scream of terror.

“Sophia!”

Garren.

She scanned the area, and then looked at him. What was going on?

He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her, his warmth soothing her instantly. And more than it should. “Are you okay?” he asked. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

Chapter 2

The hallway went on forever; she was sure of it, as she'd been walking for hours or maybe days. Did her bare feet even touch the ground, or was she floating inches above the wooden floor, propelled by the misty fog that consumed the space? And why was it so cold? She gazed at the long white nightgown she wore, fingering the thin, silken fabric. So thin. Then she wrapped her arms around herself to control her shudders. "This isn't mine," she said. Her voice echoed down the hall in a million repeats of "Mine, mine, mine." No one replied. Dust tickled her nose and the odor of decay and death filled her senses.

Would she ever find her way out?

With a piercing shriek, the sconces on the wall began breaking away one by one and slammed to the ground in front of her, creating little puffs of oily smoke as they went dark. Then she was holding a silver candelabra, heavy with five red candles, the flames dancing green and purple. She held the light high, but all she saw in either direction was endless hallway and closed door after closed door.

All locked. She'd tried to open them.

"Sophia?" The voice called to her again. The same voice had lured her from her bed and out into the hallway and now seemed to come from behind every closed door, under every floor plank, and on every wisp of chilled fog.

"Sophia? Come here."

Recognition chilled her veins.

Garren! The voice was his all along. Why hadn't she recognized it before?

He leaned against the wall up ahead, his black hair falling over his eyes, and she ran toward him. If she could reach him before he disappeared, maybe he could help her.

She stopped in front of him, her breathing labored. She tried to speak but no words came from her mouth. "Help!" she called to him in her mind, hoping he could understand her thoughts. Tears streamed down her cheeks and he wiped them away with his finger and gave her a sad smile. His blue eyes glowed golden and he took the candelabra and set it on the narrow hall table that had not been there a moment before.

Garren, she mouthed his name.

He leaned forward until his lips touched hers...

She fell...

Sophia jerked awake and gasped for breath. Darkness surrounded her. Tossing off the heavy covers, she reached to turn on the bedside lamp. The light cast the room in a familiar warm glow and the nightmare raced to the edge of her consciousness. *What the hell was that dream?* She rubbed her eyes and glanced around the quaint room, decorated in what could only be called inn chic. A cream-colored spread with matching pillow shams turned the iron bed into an inviting cloud, and a multi-colored hooked rug covered most of the bare floor. The walls, paneled in dark wood, closed in the space, but windows covered in pale curtains helped keep the room from feeling like a tomb. An antique oak dresser sat across from the bed and a small chair leaned against the wall just outside the private bath. Her unopened suitcase still sat on the chair.

She barely remembered falling asleep; she'd been so tired.

Garren had walked her to Room 217, given her the key, then left, promising they'd talk first thing in the morning. Still shaken by what she'd thought she saw in the stairwell, she washed her face and tried to calm her nerves. Exhaustion claimed her. She'd kicked off her shoes and crashed in the bed without undressing. All the talk of ghosts had definitely gotten into her psyche, and that combined with a long day of travel had conjured up a vivid nightmare. She tucked her hair behind her ears and moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

Why had she dreamed about kissing Garren? Or had he been suffocating her? *I don't remember.* She shivered. Her imagination was definitely up to some tricks tonight. She'd just met him and she was having erotic dreams about him. Or horrific dreams, she wasn't entirely sure which. Either way, she'd enjoyed the soft touch of his lips on hers.

Even if he was trying to kill me.

"Stop being ridiculous," she whispered, running her damp palms across the bed covers. Her crazy imagination was one of the things that drove off her last boyfriend, and she'd sworn to try to keep the craziness a little more confined.

The room had a set of double windows, and they creaked in the wind and rain. The storm hadn't died down yet and thunder boomed and rolled. When she'd checked the weather before traveling, rain hadn't even been in the forecast.

"Damn weathermen. They're wrong more often than they're right."

Her stomach rumbled. When had she last eaten? *Breakfast.*

Garren had told her to head down to the kitchen if she got hungry in the night and right now, that sounded like a great idea, even if she had to fight some ghosts over her food. She smiled. *Not funny, Sophia.* She wasn't just hungry, she was starving, and that had probably made her nightmare worse.

The tiny alarm clock on the bedside table read 3:33 AM. She'd have time to grab a snack and get more sleep before getting to work in the morning. *Ghosts be damned.*

She got out of bed and slid on her shoes. Slipping the key in her jeans pocket, she closed the door

behind her and headed for the stairwell. The hallway, similar to the one in her dream, was soundless and dim. Her footsteps, muted and heavy, barely broke the silence as she crept toward the stairs. She didn't know how many other guests were at the inn, but three AM wasn't the time to find out.

The sconces, unlike in her dream, remained on the walls and lit her way in a steady golden path. She stopped at the door to the stairs. *No ghosts.* She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, then opened the door and stepped into the stairwell. After she let the door drag closed behind her, she opened her eyes slowly.

The stairs were empty.

Rain dripped down the outside of the red windows and lightning flashed outside, but no orbs or ghosts lingered in the space. Still, her heart hammered and chills raced up her spine. Every little hair on her arms stood upright and she rubbed them back in place.

Get ahold of yourself. You're being ridiculous.

She walked down the dark stairs to the first floor as quickly as she could, and then headed out into the hallway. No point in lingering. She released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

The first floor seemed much brighter even though the hallway had the same sconces as the second floor. She hurried past door after door to the foyer where another hallway spoke toward the kitchen and common areas of the inn. No one was at the reception desk, though the little lamp was still on and a stack of papers riffled in an unfelt breeze. The antique clock ticked time.

She passed a lovely sitting room with a large stone hearth and wall-to-wall bookshelves laden with books of every size. Coals still glowed bright orange in the fireplace and the tang of burning wood seared the air. Two oversized couches with a shared coffee table corralled the fire—a perfect place to have a snack. She'd grab something from the kitchen and bring it back to the sitting room to eat.

She stopped outside what must be the kitchen when she heard voices. Her mouth went dry and she clutched the doorframe, staying out of sight.

Garren.

"Leave her alone," he said.

"But..." another voice replied.

"I need her help."

"If you say so, master."

"Don't call me that. You're no more a servant than I am a free man." Garren's voice rose with the last words.

"Someone's there," the other voice hissed. "Outside the doorway."

Sophia flattened against the wall. Her heart's throbbing would surely give her away. *I should run.* Her legs wouldn't move. She closed her eyes and waited.

"Who's there?" Garren called. "Come on in."

She let out a breath. Why was she acting like a scared teen in a horror movie? Garren wasn't a

serial killer. But what did he mean that he wasn't a free man? That was odd talk, plain and simple.

"It's just me, Sophia." She stepped into the kitchen, her legs weak. She'd always had an imagination, but this was getting ridiculous. She'd never been so jumpy and skittish. Imaginative, yes, but not *afraid*. What was it about the inn that made her so nervous? Or was it Garren?

He sat at a small round table, hands folded over one other, his button-up shirt from earlier replaced by a simple black vee-neck T-shirt. His hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. God, the man was gorgeous.

He smiled and stood. "Couldn't sleep?"

She shook her head and scanned the small kitchen. Modernized and functional, it wasn't what she'd expected. Granite countertops shone against the dark wood of the floor. Small appliances of all sorts lined the counter near the door and a row of ragged cookbooks leaned against the wall along the counter in another corner. Double ovens and dishwashers and a huge fridge, all stainless, gave the space a professional flair. A cook's dream kitchen, even if it was small.

And empty except for her and Garren.

She looked back to him. "Who were you talking to just now? Before I came in?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. She touched her lips. Had she asked that aloud? *Awkward*.

He shrugged. "No one here but me." He moved to stand nearer, his shadow casting over her.

"But..."

"Maybe you heard me mumbling," he offered. "I'm anxious about losing the inn and I was sitting here going over things. Stressing."

"But I thought I heard..." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence so she leaned against the counter. Had she heard what she thought she heard?

"The property's been in my family since it was built and I don't know what I'd do if something happened to it. I'm concerned. I must've been talking to myself without realizing it."

Okay...that was possible. She nodded. "Well, you can count on Mr. Beck. He's a great lawyer. He'll find a way out from under this mess." *And afterward, we can help you find a good shrink.*

"I hope he can help." Garren rubbed his face and scowled. "I can't lose Blackbird Inn. It's the only home I've ever known."

"You've lived here all your life?" She swallowed hard. She'd had at least fifteen moves by the time she turned twenty. Living in one place for that long was unfathomable. And unusual.

"Always. I've barely even been anywhere else. But that's okay. I love it here. It's home."

A loud clap of thunder shook the windows and Sophia ducked, covering her ears.

"Just thunder. It won't hurt you." He stepped close and put his hands on her shoulders. "You really need to relax—I don't think I've ever met someone as high-strung as you."

The warmth from his hands soaked through her shirt and she moved away to avoid the tingles he was causing in other areas. *The kiss was a dream. It wasn't real.*

"I hear that all the time." She fiddled with the long strands of her hair. "I guess I've been under a

lot of stress, too, but I think that goes along with being a new attorney. Stress is part of the job description, but I do seem to be more on edge than usual.” She sighed. “I’m not sure why. Heavy workload, maybe.”

“Well, let’s hope saving Blackbird Inn is an easy job with little or no stress.”

“Yes. I hope so.”

“How about a midnight snack?” He looked at his watch. “Well, a three AM snack? Food is good for calming the nerves. Right?”

“That’s why I came down.” She rested her hands on the counter and yawned. “I’m starving. I forgot to eat dinner. I was so tired, I crashed.”

“Well, let me prepare a snack. I know we’ve got some fresh fruit around here. Maybe some cheese.” He raised his eyebrows. “I’ll join you, if you don’t mind. I’m a bit hungry, too.”

“Sure.” What was the worst thing that could happen?



Sophia stared at the fire and sipped her cup of hot tea. The stone around the fireplace radiated the heat out into the room in waves of warm air. Garren had prepared a five-star snack of fruit, cheese, and bread and then stoked the fire to life before joining her on the couch. A beautiful copper teapot sat on the coffee table, filled with the most delightful floral tea she’d ever tasted. She was already on her third cup, and she hadn’t even needed honey to sweeten it.

“Good?” He leaned back on the couch, cup in hand.

The copper kettle reflected the bright fire. The florals in the tea mingled with the woodsy smell of the fire in the perfect combination. Definitely stress relief.

“Mmmhmm.” She peeked. God, the man was attractive. He didn’t look as pale in the orange firelight, but his skin was still offset by his unruly black hair trying to escape from his ponytail. He filled out the T-shirt in exactly the right way—not too many muscles, but not too thin either. She raised the cup again and watched him through the steam as he drank his tea.

“I love tea.” He set his cup down. “And it’s been ages since I’ve had someone here to share it with.”

Blue. His eyes are blue.

“What?” She set her cup on the coffee table, clinking it against the saucer.

He leaned close enough for her to feel the warmth of his body. “I said,” he whispered, “it’s been a long time since I had anyone to share tea with. So, thank you.”

“B-but you have guests all the time.”

He leaned back and laughed. “Yeah, but they don’t sit and spend time with the solitary innkeeper. They’re out exploring the mountains.” He leaned close again. “Or searching the property for ghosts.”

She forced a smile. Ghost stories made the inn money, and she understood why Garren needed to

play along, but did he really believe in the supernatural? Then again, the apparition in the stairwell wasn't a floating dust bunny. Something was there, she just couldn't explain what. "Tell me about Blackbird Inn."

He stood and stoked the burning wood, the embers brightening with each thrust of the poker. "Well, we have twenty-eight rooms." After putting another large log on the fire, he replaced the tool then sat down beside her again. "And the property is just shy of a hundred fifty acres. We have our own lake, barn, and cemetery." He poured himself another cup of tea.

"No, I mean tell me about your family. About the history." She crossed her legs and faced him on the couch. Something about Garren compelled her to talk to him, and it wasn't work. She could tell from the way his posture changed when she brought up the inn that it was special. And something about the sitting room, with its piles of books and fiery warmth, told her the place was close to his heart. Framed photos lined the mantel and a heavy mirror hung above the fire. "Tell me why such a large inn was built so far from town. It doesn't make a lot of sense."

He looked down at his hands. "It's not a long story, really, but it's a sad one. Or some say it's sad. I guess you should know since we'll be working together to try to save the place." He took a deep breath and stared into the fire. "But I'm more concerned about the inn's future than its past right now."

"But the history would help. I read what I could online, but we might uncover a nugget that would make the inn too historically important for the state to seize."

"We tried for historical status many years ago and lost." He turned to look at her, his eyes searching hers. For understanding? Compassion? "Even though we housed soldiers returning home after the Civil War, we didn't qualify because we didn't have the necessary documentation, or not enough of it. And just being old isn't enough for status, either. The requirements are strict."

"Yes, they are. Do you have any records detailing past guests? We might be able to use the paperwork to gain status, especially if someone important stayed here." Surely, with the inn being as old as it was, they could find something to keep the state from tearing it down to build a highway. It just didn't seem fair. Maybe an important Union general had stayed there. Maybe even President Lincoln. That would make it easy as long as they had proof.

"Maybe." He sipped his tea. "We'll have to look at the stacks of paperwork stored in the attic. To be honest, I haven't had time to go through that mess."

She shifted. "Not tonight."

"No, not tonight." He set the cup on the table. "But just because we haven't shown it, it doesn't mean the inn doesn't have a historical value."

"True. But who understands what the government does?"

"Yeah."

"Why is Blackbird Inn so remote?" She picked up her cup and sipped on the now-warm tea. "Seems like it would be better to put an inn closer to town. Especially a long time ago when transportation would've involved horses." She shuddered at the thought of riding a horse carriage up

the side of the mountain to the inn.

Lightning flashed outside the sitting room window, illuminating the skeletons of spindly trees outside. A low rumble of thunder followed. The storm seemed to be waning, thank goodness.

“It made perfect sense at the time.” Garren rubbed his forehead. “Civilization used to be closer, but the area along the road near us hasn’t been inhabited for nearly a century. And now, the land has reclaimed most of it. No one wants to build out here except the state.”

“Why? What happened?” She set her teacup down and pulled at the heavy blue afghan draped across the arm of the couch. She wrapped it around her up to her neck.

“Are you still cold?”

“A little.”

“I can build the fire up more if you want.”

“No, I’ll be okay.” She pulled the afghan higher. “Tell me what happened to the land near the inn. Did people pick up and move? Abandon their property?”

He nodded. “Pretty much.”

“But why?”

“Well.” He swallowed hard. “Essentially it was because of the missing woman, Alexandra Dumare, who supposedly died here.” He paused. “Or was rumored to have died here. I’ll admit that I don’t know the full story. No body was ever found, and my grandmother wouldn’t talk about it. But I did figure out that around the same time the woman disappeared, things at the inn got shaky. Less people came. We almost lost the property because of taxes.”

“Wow, but that’s been a long time. Almost a hundred years?”

“Yes, and people were a lot more superstitious back then.”

“You mean they believed in ghosts.”

“And demons.”

“Demons?”

A whoosh of cold wind swept through the sitting room, and the fire dimmed then flamed high. Sophia’s skin crawled.

“Demons.” Garren stood. “Let’s call it a night. We have a lot to do tomorrow. I’ll take the dishes to the kitchen. I trust you can find your way back to your room?”

“Yes, of course.” She stood, arranging the afghan back into place. Every time she began to relax around Garren, something weird happened. Her teeth chattered as chills broke across her back. Why was it suddenly so cold? “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Sophia.”

Chapter 3

Fire raged around her feet, flames racing down the hall and up the melting wallpaper, which dripped into pools of silver liquid on the wooden floor. She ran past heavy door after heavy door, her nightgown sticking to her damp skin and her feet blistering from the searing wood. Sulfur pierced through the tang of burning wood and smoke charred her lungs. She opened her mouth to scream, but clouds of red billowed forth, feeding the crackling fire into an inferno of molten flames and laughter.

“Come. Now.”

It wasn’t Garren. This voice was deeper and more rumbling, vibrating her flesh and turning her stomach sour.

Garren was dead.

She didn’t know how she knew, but she knew it as strongly as she knew her own name. Everyone else was dead, too. She’d seen the charred corpses as she ran. She was the only mortal left in Blackbird Inn and she wasn’t getting out alive. The ceiling beams crashed down around her in splintered explosions, knocking into the floor and shaking the foundation of the whole building...

Knocking? Sophia dragged her eyelids open then squinted. Her heart thudded as her mind tried to focus. Where was she? *Blackbird Inn*. The room, bright with sunlight, seemed much larger than it had the night before. The dream slipped away like silk through her fingers. She blinked at the ceiling’s matrix of cracks spider-webbing across hundred-fifty-year old plaster.

The fire was just a dream. All a dream.

“Sophia? Are you awake?” Garren called from outside the door.

Garren! He’s not dead. “Yes, I’m awake.” She tossed the covers back and hopped out of bed. Pushing her damp hair out of her face and taking a deep breath, she headed for the door. “Just a minute.”

“I was worried,” he returned. “It’s after two. Thought we should get to work soon since Mr. Beck will be here this evening. I’d love to have something useful to show him.”

Shit. “Of course! I’m sorry.” She pulled the covers up on her bed. “I overslept. I’ll grab a shower and be down as quickly as I can.”

“Meet you in the dining room for a late lunch?”

“Be there in thirty.” She yawned.

“See you then.”

She leaned against the door, Garren’s retreating footsteps growing quieter by the moment. Then, angry with herself for sleeping in, she yanked her suitcase off the chair and set it on the bed. Mr. Beck wasn’t going to be happy if he got to the inn and they hadn’t gathered the documents, at least. She’d hoped she would have the research done, and maybe have even found something to help by the time he got there. Now, she only had hours to get the work done.

Maybe she’d get lucky.

She set out her clothes—jeans and a slim-fit lavender T-shirt. No point in business attire if she and Garren were going to be poking around a dusty attic. She tossed her underthings on top and moved the suitcase back to the chair. She’d have to unpack later.

The sunlight streaming through the curtains brightened and she went to the window to check out the view. Below the inn, the mountain fell away at a steep angle filled with rocks and trees. The vista toward town was the better view and she marveled at how precariously the inn perched on the edge of a cliff. The other side of the inn faced a meadow before inclining up higher into the mountains.

Wonder where the barn is? She hadn’t seen any outbuildings when she drove in, but then again, it was storming and nighttime. She’d almost missed the inn entirely, except that its stone façade had uplighting near the door.

The trees in front of her shimmered in a dark cloud, and then a flock of birds alighted and whisked up over the inn and out of sight. Blackbirds. She could barely make out the ring of bright yellow around their eyes. So many birds.

She smiled.

Helping Garren save the inn was not optional.



After a quick lunch of ham sandwiches and chips, Garren led her to his office in the back of the inn. They’d talked through lunch about the inn and the state’s bid to take it over by eminent domain. It didn’t seem fair that property could be seized just because the state wanted it.

She glanced around as they walked, but she didn’t see any other guests. *Maybe they’ve gone out sightseeing.*

Garren stopped at a heavy oak door and stuck a thin skeleton key into the lock. The door groaned open and he motioned to the small room.

“This is where I keep the current inn records.” He flipped the light on in the tiny office, the single-bulb fixture barely illuminating the space. His blue button-up shirt glowed green in the dim light, but his hair looked as black as coal. A huge oak desk piled with stacks of yellowed papers consumed most of the room, and several old metal filing cabinets took up the rest of the area. The cabinets

leaned under the weight of their contents. The musty odor of old papers lingered in the air and the low ceiling made the space feel even smaller. Garren dusted off his blue jeans. “I know it doesn’t look very organized. Truth is, it isn’t. But I can find most things if I have enough time.”

Sophia cringed. Good thing they wouldn’t be working in Garren’s office. Claustrophobia was already setting in and her pulse hammered in her wrists and neck. She backed against a tower of boxes.

“Used to be a side porch till my grandmother had it walled in.” He yanked open the main desk drawer and reached inside. “I try not to spend a lot of time in here other than to store things.”

“Yeah, it’s a little...small. And cramped.”

“We won’t be in here long. My bookkeeper, Henry, works in here sometimes. Like I said, the most recent inn records are here—back until about 1970 or so.”

“You have a bookkeeper?” *Odd.* Mr. Beck hadn’t mentioned that. “We need to talk to him later. He might be able to help us.”

Garren looked up from his search in the drawer. “Henry is a bit...backward. He’s worked here for many years, but he really doesn’t talk to people he doesn’t know.”

“Oh.”

“If you have any specific questions, of course I can take them to him.” He held up a key ring with half a dozen keys dangling from a leather cord. “Found them! I haven’t been in the attic in a long time. Creepy old place. Of course, some people like that sort of thing.”

Great. She stuck her hands in her pockets. “Guess this will be an adventure.”

He slammed the desk drawer closed. “I loved playing in the attic as a child. There’s so much stuff that’s been piled for storage. I’m not sure I would even begin to know everything that’s there, and most of it’s junk. But, to a child, it was a realm of lost treasures. And a respite from the daily work at the inn.”

“I’ll bet!” She smiled. “Sounds like a lot of fun.” She remembered the days when she and her younger sister visited her own grandmother. They would count and sort buttons in her sewing room and dig through all the cast-off items in the standalone garage out behind the house. They loved trying on old hats and shoes. Having an entire attic to play in as a child must have been amazing. Had Garren been lonely?

“Do you have any siblings?” she asked.

His gaze darkened and she immediately regretted asking the question.

“No, I’m only child.” He looked down. “My parents died in a car crash when I was seven. Maybe that’s why I spent so much time up in the attic. Some people might find that creepy, especially for a child, but all my imaginary friends lived there.”

“I’m sorry.” She wanted to touch him and comfort him, but held back. The pain on his face ran deep—almost fresh. Touching him might set him off, and not in a good way.

“It’s not your fault.” He waved her away. “The attic was too hot in the summer, but fall and

spring, it was the perfect place to escape the inn guests. I'd grab a book from the sitting room or the library and sneak up there to read for hours. I could be someone else for at least a little while. Or somewhere else."

"You could read in peace."

"Oh yes."

"But you haven't been to the attic lately?"

"No. No reason to." He glanced at his watch. "But we'd better go if we have any hopes of getting started on those papers. It's already almost four PM. What time did you say Mr. Beck would be here?"

Sophia shrugged. "Last I heard his flight gets in around eight. Then, he has to drive here. So, maybe ten-ish? With no cell service, I don't have any updates."

"We'd better get busy then." He brushed by her. "Let's go. The stairs to the attic are behind the kitchen."

She followed him out into the cramped back hallway back toward the kitchen. As they passed, Bernadette, the cook, waved. Impossibly old, the woman had made lunch with the speed of someone forty years her junior. Her white hair, twisted into a knot on top of her head, gave her the appearance of a troll doll, complete with a twinkle in her eyes. Sophia smiled and waved back.

"How many guests are at the inn right now?" she asked. "I haven't seen many since I arrived."

Garren climbed the narrow stairwell to the attic. "Last ones checked out this morning. So, just you."

"I thought this was a busy time of year?" She held the rickety handrail to balance on the steep stairs. The thought of being the only guest at the rambling old inn gave her the heebie jeebies.

He turned and moved down to meet her on the stairs, leaning toward her until his breath caressed her face. "It usually is a busy time. Very busy." His voice slid over her like soft fingertips and she shivered as the stairwell temperature plummeted. "I didn't want thrill-seekers at the inn this weekend."

"What happens this weekend?" She paused. "Oh, you mean Halloween?"

His lips brushed her ear. "Tomorrow is the hundred-year anniversary of Alexandra's disappearance. Yes, Halloween."

Chapter 4

Sophia set the dusty cardboard box onto the pile. She'd gone through half a dozen boxes full of ancient papers already, with no luck. No evidence that Blackbird Inn had Civil War soldiers as guests, or anyone of note. Garren worked beside her, flipping through ringed ledgers and books and loose papers, looking for any scrap that might save the inn.

She hadn't pressed him about the upcoming anniversary of Alexandra's disappearance, though it seemed odd or perhaps coincidental that she and Mr. Beck were at the inn during such a notorious time. And Halloween, to boot. *If this were a movie, people would be saying it's too coincidental to really happen.* Garren didn't seem worried about it, so maybe she shouldn't be either.

She stared up into the rafters of the attic where large beams of old-growth wood crisscrossed the space. With the gables and hips of the roof, the attic was less than ideal for storage, other than its overall vast space. Nooks and crannies at every turn, there were enough boxes to keep them busy for much longer than a day, though Garren insisted that all the business papers were in the boxes where they searched.

What could be in all the other boxes and trunks spread around the attic? In the drawers of the cast-off furniture? *Maybe Alexandra's bones...*

Sophia shook her head to rid herself of the thought. She couldn't start thinking about hidden bones or corpses or she'd completely spook herself out. Still, the dark corners of the attic would be the perfect place to hide something. Something like a body. She shivered.

If the mere thought of Alexandra gave her such a fright, surely many people would clamor to visit the inn at the anniversary. Why hadn't Garren capitalized on the opportunity to celebrate? Most innkeepers would fly the haunted flag proudly. And tourists would pay extra to ghost hunt for Alexandra, a real person who had disappeared. Maybe the pending takeover by the state had kept him from any public display.

The situation was odd.

They'd worked in near silence for over two hours and the last rays of the setting sun streamed in through the attic windows, laying down runways of light across the ancient floorboards. Dust spun and twirled in the beams of sunlight, like tiny fairies suspended in midflight. It'd be dark soon. She peeked at Garren. A fine sheen of sweat covered his pale forearms and his shirt, rolled up at the

sleeves, was covered in dust. His ponytail hung low, strands of black hair escaping and sticking to the dampness on his neck.

He looked up and caught her gaze.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “You’re making this go a lot faster.”

She smiled. “I’m glad, too. This inn is so beautiful.” She rubbed her hands on her jeans. “Even the dusty old attic.” *And being here with someone as sexy as you helps me keep ghosts off my mind.*

She glanced around at the stacks of boxes. They had a lot more to go through before they could call it a day. Good thing they didn’t have to search the entire attic. It would take weeks, perhaps months. Old furniture lined one wall, some covered in sheets and some out in the open.

“I’m glad you like it.”

Had she imagined it, or had Garren’s face warmed under her words?

“I do,” she said. “Very much. It’s peaceful here, though I feel a little off balance. Like I’m always being watched. Like I’m not alone.”

“The inn has a way of making people feel like that. She’s a crotchety old mistress.” He pulled out another book from the box, flipped through to the cover page and then set the book aside. “So, where are your parents? Do you have family?” He paused. “I mean, where do you live? Not around here, obviously.”

Sophia sat back on her heels. “I live in Atlanta. I don’t talk to my parents much. We have differing opinions on how I should live my life.”

“Family is important.” He rubbed his face.

“Yes, but so is personal freedom.” She shoved the next box over toward him. “I am not the person my family wants me to be.”

He glanced over. “I understand.”

And he did. She felt it in her soul. But this job was not a place to be looking for romance. Mr. Beck would be really upset if he arrived and they’d found nothing. She turned away to grab another stack of ledgers. “I’m surprised the inn isn’t celebrating the anniversary of Alexandra’s disappearance. It seems like something a haunted inn would celebrate.”

“Why would we? It’s tragic.”

“But tourists like ghost stories, so I thought—”

He scooted next to her and tipped her face toward his with a finger. He was so close she closed her eyes. He smelled like rain and woodsy wilds. “You thought I’d try to make money off the story,” he whispered.

She nodded, her eyes still closed. The inn held onto its ghost stories so why was Alexandra’s story any different?

He ran his finger along her jawbone to her ear and she shivered under his touch. “I’d never exploit a tragedy.”

She opened her eyes. His face, inches from hers, tensed, and his blue eyes deepened.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed."

"It's okay." He smiled and sat back. "You wouldn't believe the number of news people that wanted to come out from Philly to report on the anniversary. I turned them all down. Alexandra's story should stay buried, where it belongs. A hundred years is enough time to be in limbo and I have no intention of dragging up past events or painful memories."

Sophia nodded. Her face still tingled from Garren's touch. For a moment, she'd thought he was going to kiss her. And she was going to let him. What would the harm be? It wasn't like he'd asked her to stay at the inn. She'd see him a few more days, and that would be it.

The pile of papers they needed to go through had gotten smaller, but they weren't close to finishing. The sun had mostly set, and only a faint orange light shone in. Garren had found an old lamp and plugged it into the extension cord running across one side of the attic. The overhead lightbulbs were out, but the lamp would give off enough light for the time being.

"We're almost done." Garren set another stack on the floor beside her. "Just a couple more boxes and we can get out of here."

"Yeah, but we haven't found any evidence yet. Most of the paperwork is inn maintenance and correspondence with town markets and such. No personal letters or anything that might shed some light on what was going on here. I'm sure if someone famous stayed here, there would be some kind of evidence."

"Yeah, the ledgers haven't been helpful. But we still have a few more to look through. Maybe we'll find something. Or maybe there's something in the box of stuff we'll take downstairs."

"I hope so. Mr. Beck won't be happy if we've got nothing to show him."

"I won't be happy either. We need to save Blackbird Inn. I don't know what I will do if I lose it. I'll die without it."

She looked up at him. "It would be bad, but you won't die. But it's not going to happen. We'll save it."

He set his mouth in a firm line. "You have no idea."

She sorted through the stack of papers and pulled out two ledgers, both of them small and dusty, their leather covers cracked from age and the heat of the attic.

"These look old." Changing the subject was a good idea. Things had gotten way too tense. She opened the first ledger, its yellowed pages crisp between her fingers.

"What year?" Garren slid next to her.

She leaned against him, not caring if the move was too brazen. Being with him felt comfortable, at least in the daytime. At night, he was a little spooky. She ran her finger down the page and over to the date column. "Nineteen...something," she said. "I can't make it out completely. The cursive is pretty, but sloppy in places."

"It's just the guest register, but I guess we should hold onto it and look through it later to see if we can find any famous names."

“Yes.” She started to close the book when something fell from the pages. A pressed and yellowed four-leaf clover.

Garren picked it up and twirled it in his fingertips. “Maybe this is the luck we need.”

She held the book open for him to place the clover back inside. She gasped. “Alexandra Dumare’s name is here.”

“What?”

“Yes, it’s her name all right.” She paused and scanned the page. “Oh my God.”

“What is it?”

“Below her name. Look.”

He stared at the page and his eyes widened. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, but Arturo Beck has some explaining to do. Why did someone sign his name to a register that’s a hundred years old?”

Chapter 5

What the hell was going on? Sophia held the inn register at arm's length and stared at the names. Printed in block lettering, both Arturo Beck and Alexandra Dumare's names were clear and written by the same hand. No mistaking it, someone with the identical name as her boss had not only stayed in the inn at the same time as the missing or dead Alexandra, but they had checked in at the same time and shared adjoining rooms.

Garren looked on, hands in his pockets. "That makes no sense. No one ever mentioned that Alexandra was staying at the inn with someone. I always assumed she was alone—that's part of what made her disappearance such a mystery."

"And that someone has the exact name of the man who sent me here to research. I can't believe it's a coincidence." She examined the names. "It's the same handwriting, too. The same person signed both of them in." She took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "Didn't the police ask for the ledger when they were investigating? This seems like an important clue."

"We're talking something that happened a hundred years ago. Police work was a lot different back then. No DNA tests or forensics like we have today. Mostly, they relied on interviews and confessions."

"Right, but still..."

"And I don't think they even investigated the disappearance as a crime. At first, the rumor was that Alexandra went missing and I know the townspeople and sheriff put a search party together and searched the woods around here. But when they found nothing, they assumed Alexandra had run off with someone. Those days, it was unusual for an unmarried woman to be traveling alone."

"She obviously wasn't alone."

"Yeah." Garren sighed and took the ledger. He ran his fingers across the names. "It wasn't until a few years later that the rumors began."

"That she'd been murdered?"

"Yes, or worse."

Sophia shuddered. What could be worse? Torture? Rape? She didn't ask. "But what about Mr. Beck? How does he play into this? How could his name be on a hundred-year old list—with the name of the person who disappeared?"

Garren shut the ledger and set it in the box of stuff they were taking back downstairs. “Maybe it’s a coincidence.”

“Or maybe it’s his grandfather or great-grandfather.”

“That’s possible. It’s definitely odd.”

“Something else is going on, I feel it. The Mr. Beck who sent me here must have known that another Arturo Beck had been here with Alexandra. And being here right at the anniversary of Alexandra’s disappearance? Something is definitely going on, and it’s making me nervous.”

“We’ll have to ask him when he gets here.”

“Count on it. I don’t like secrets.”

They worked through the last papers in silence, pulling out anything that might be of interest and setting it in the box to go downstairs.

“Is that it?” Sophia yawned and stretched.

“For these boxes, yes.” Garren stood. “There’s one more place I want to look. He pulled the keys from his pocket and held one up. “I think this is the one I need.”

She scrambled to her feet. “What’s that one for?” She imagined a tiny cage or closet that he could lock her away in. She shivered.

“My grandmother’s trunk. I want to check in there to see if there’s anything else that might help. She kept a lot of mementos in the trunk, but maybe something related to the inn will be there.”

She let out a sigh. “Especially if it was something important. She’d probably keep it separate from the inn’s business.”

“Let’s go.” He headed for the corner. “Over here. Can you bring the lamp? The cord should reach.”

“Sure.” She picked up the lamp and followed, keeping the cord clear of obstacles.

He led her to an area with a lot of furniture. Dressers, chairs, and bedframes stood in rows and leaned against the wall. Even a mattress, covered in a sheet, had been stored in the dusty attic.

The lamp cord tightened. “This is as far as it will go.” She set it on one of the grimy tables.

“That’s close enough.” He kneeled in front of the trunk. “I can see.”

“It’s beautiful.”

The antique trunk had a bowed top and hammered iron strappings across the top. In the center, a carving of a bird had been blackened with stain, or dirt.

A blackbird.

“It is beautiful. This trunk has been in my family for generations. Family stories say that it came over when my family emigrated from Germany. The blackbird on top was hand carved by a local witch. So the story says.”

She tapped her finger on her lip. “Why a blackbird? I’ve been wondering why the inn is named after a bird.”

Garren smiled. “*Among twenty snowy mountains, the only moving thing was the eye of the*

blackbird.”

“Huh?”

“Wallace Stevens, from his poem ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.’”

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain—”

“My family name, *Amsel*, means blackbird. So the bird has been our spirit animal, well, forever. It’s an important symbol in our heritage.” He stuck the key in the lock. “Let’s see what’s in here. I hope Grandma left us some answers.”

Garren lifted the heavy lid and peered inside.

Sophia watched, trying to see over his shoulder to what was inside the trunk. “That’s interesting. I saw some blackbirds outside earlier.”

“Yes, those are American blackbirds. There are some European ones, actually thrushes, here, too. You can tell by the golden orange ring around their eyes. Very vivid. And those are the ones my family is named for.”

“Thanks for the bird-watching lesson.” Sophia came closer but let him dig through the stuff inside. “I didn’t know there were different kinds of blackbirds.”

“No problem. Oh wow, look at this.” He dug in the chest. “I remember this hat.” He set out a small round woman’s hat with dusty black feathers attached to the side. “She wore it on Sundays when she served brunch. She always said a lady’s head should be covered on the Sabbath. And this black hat was her favorite. I used to think of her as a blackbird when she wore it.” He smiled.

“Your grandmother sounds like an interesting woman.”

He stared at the hat, running his fingers through the feathers. “She was.”

The way he talked so lovingly about his grandmother set her heart pounding. Not only was he sexy, he was sentimental. She let out a sigh.

He turned, his face lit in yellow light from the lamp. “What is it? We’re almost done.”

Her faced burned. “N-nothing.”

He went back to work, pulling all sorts of things from the chest. Bone-colored kidskin gloves, folded linen handkerchiefs in every color, even a set of fat faux pearls. The treasure chest seemed to be more of a lingerie chest.

Garren sat back on his heels. “Look at this!” His eyes shone as he held up a two small books. “I think we found something useful.”

She stepped close. “What are they? Books?”

“My great-grandmother’s journal. Or two of them, at least.” He flipped through the pages. “Looks like she wrote in them often. Maybe she wrote about Alexandra.”

“Why would your grandmother have your great-grandmother’s journals?”

He packed the other things back into the chest. “That’s a very good question. And these are dated right around the time of Alexandra’s disappearance. They must be important, since my grandmother kept them hidden away.” He shut and locked the chest, the hinges groaning as he aligned the lock.

“We’ll have to read through them and see what secrets they hold, if any. Maybe the piece of information we’re looking for is here.”

Sophia nodded. Maybe the journals would be useful to the mystery of Alexandra, but how would they help her save the inn? She hadn’t come to play Nancy Drew. And things were getting more complicated.

“I’ll stick them in the box.” He stood. “I’m ready to go back downstairs, how about you?”

“Definitely.”

“You meet me upstairs and we’ll have dinner and look through these things after we eat? Maybe we’ll still luck out and find something before Mr. Beck gets here.”

“I’d like to grab a quick shower first, but yes, let’s do that. I’m already getting hungry.”

“I’ll ask Bernadette to bring up dinner for two. You come on up to the third floor when you’re done. We can work until Mr. Beck gets here.”

“Sounds great.” Sophia shivered as the temperature in the attic dropped by at least fifteen degrees. Across the room, something fell to the floor, bounced, and rolled.

Garren scanned the room. “I think we need to leave the attic to the ghosts.”

Chapter 6

Sophia climbed the last set of stone stairs to Garren's rooms. The shower had certainly helped with her fatigue, but a million questions remained and her mind wouldn't slow down. Did Mr. Beck know about the inn guest that shared his name? Did Garren know more about the disappearance of Alexandra than he was telling? And were there really ghosts at Blackbird Inn?

She sighed. The questions were never-ending and the longer she stayed at the inn, the more questions there were. The mysterious inn held a lot of secrets. She spent more time questioning things than finding answers.

And what had possessed her to wear the white dress? She tugged at the hem. Form-fitting to the waist, with a flared short skirt, she'd tossed it in her suitcase on a whim. When she'd tried it on at the store, the clerk had raved about how great the white cotton looked with her long red hair. She'd bought it knowing the clerk was trying to make a sale, but she'd never worn it. It was the only dressy thing she brought with her to the inn and, for some reason, dinner with Garren had seemed like the place to wear it. Wearing her hair up had been a last-minute choice. Was she trying to impress the handsome innkeeper?

Maybe.

And she knew better than to wear white after Labor Day. This was serious.

"At least my shoes aren't white," she mumbled. She paused and glanced down at the red platforms she'd worn. They'd looked so cute online. Not the smartest shoes for climbing stairs, though, especially stairs where ghosts might be, and she might have to run for her life. She could take the shoes off, but she was almost to the third floor.

"You look stunning."

She looked up to see Garren standing on the landing, a glass of red wine in hand.

Her face warmed. *Stop acting so smitten.* "Thank you." She looked down so he wouldn't see the blush creeping along her cheeks. Her mouth went dry and she steadied herself on the handrail. Whether she liked it or not, Garren made her girly parts hot.

Who was she kidding? She loved it.

She reached the top stair and stopped in front of him. He'd changed into gray dress slacks and a black button-up, left open at the collar. His hair was pulled into a neat ponytail. Her insecurities

vanished and she smiled. Just another dinner. With a sexy man. What was there to fear? Technically, this was work.

Garren smiled in return. “Bernadette brought up our food. Are you hungry?”

Her stomach growled in response and she giggled. “Yes. I am. Quite.”

“Then let’s eat. This way.” He gestured. “I’ve got a small dining table in the parlor where we can have dinner and chat.”

Alone. Her heart thudded. Alone was good.

She followed him into the parlor and then stopped, immediately transfixed by the artwork on the walls. Every wall. Frame against golden frame, large and small paintings lined every inch of wall space in the room. Some paintings were portraits, some still life: all beautiful. Most looked old, the paint hazing and cracking inside their ornate frames, which added to their beauty. “Amazing.” Words couldn’t express the beauty. She covered her mouth with her hand, acutely aware that Garren was staring at her.

He raised an eyebrow. “My great-grandfather was a painter. Mostly oils. I don’t think he threw out anything he painted.” He glanced up at a large painting of a man in a wicker chair. “I didn’t inherit his ability, though. I can’t paint a straight line.”

“He was talented.” She moved to sit in the chair he pulled out for her. “I’m not an artist either, but I can tell that’s first-class work. And each one is so beautiful and full of life.”

Garren moved to the opposite side of the table, set his wine glass down, then sat. “Yes, he was a fantastic artist. But quite eccentric.”

That seems to run in the family. “I see.” She glanced at the largest oil, a portrait of a young woman with dark, maybe black, hair and bright blue eyes. “Wow. Who is that a portrait of?”

He studied the painting for a moment. “My great-grandmother. I think she was about twenty-five when he painted it.”

“She was gorgeous.”

“Yes. They were very much in love, so the story goes.” He paused then chuckled. “And she hated that painting.”

“Why?”

“She said portraits were phony. A snapshot of a moment, an outward glance, with no soul. Two-dimensional.” He looked at the painting then back to Sophia. “But that’s enough of art. I know you’re hungry so let’s eat.”

“Your great-grandmother sounds like an interesting woman.” She picked up the white cloth napkin and set it in her lap. “Everything looks delicious.” Her plate was filled with grilled vegetables and a chicken breast with a golden sauce. The savory smells caused her stomach to grumble again and she held her napkin closer.

“Bernadette is a great cook. She keeps me well fed.” He poured her a glass of wine then refilled his own. “Shall we toast?”

“To what?” She raised her glass.

He raised his. “How about to new friends and old mysteries?”

“And to Blackbird Inn.”

“To Blackbird Inn.”

She clinked her glass to his, and then sipped the wine. If it hadn't been work, she would swear the evening was a date. The way Garren looked at her, his interest in her clear. She set her glass down and dabbed at her mouth with the napkin.

Not a date.

She shook her head and sampled the vegetables. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a real date. Working all the time left little chance for a pet, much less a romance. Yet here she was in a magnificent old inn with a polite and handsome man, having a secluded dinner on the finest china.

If she let her imagination get away with her, she could picture herself as lady of the inn, a cast of servants waiting on her every whim. And a tall, dark, and handsome husband who protected her from all that went awry, whether it was burned soup or a rogue gunman.

She smiled and stuffed a forkful of food in her mouth. She'd date Garren, odd as he was.

They ate in silence. Once in a while, she'd look up and Garren would be staring at her. He'd smile and she'd look away.

But this is not a date.

She was getting full, her stomach happy but protesting another bite. She sipped her wine, the tartness bursting in flavors of ripe berries in her mouth. She savored the taste then sipped again. Wine wasn't food. It didn't count.

“Can I get you anything else?” Garren asked.

“No, thank you.” She'd set her napkin down, warmth rushing through her body. Maybe she shouldn't have drunk the wine so fast. “That was really good but I'm stuffed.”

“Okay. Me too, actually.” He pushed his plate away and set his napkin on the table. “I'm glad you enjoyed it. Bernadette will come clear the table, so we can go ahead and go to the library.” He paused. “It's the perfect place to talk, if you're still feeling up to it.”

“Oh yes.” She stood. “I want to talk. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Did I hear my name?” Bernadette clambered into the room, a large tray in her arms, her long skirts rustling as she walked.

Why did she wear such historical clothes? Sophia supposed it was something to help the ambiance at the inn. But cooking and cleaning in such clothing wouldn't be easy. She'd have to leave a big tip for Bernadette when she left.

“We've finished eating,” Garren said. He took the tray from her and set it on the table then began stacking the dishes on it. “Everything was delicious, as always. Thank you for bringing it up.”

“I'm so glad you liked the chicken. It's a new recipe.”

“Oh yes,” Sophia said. “It was really good.”

Sophia stood and watched Bernadette clear the table. The cook moved so quickly, it was difficult to believe she was as old as she looked. And she didn't leave room for Sophia to help, either.

"We had a phone call a few minutes ago." Bernadette took the silverware and stuck it on the tray. "It seems that Mr. Arturo Beck won't be coming to the inn till tomorrow. He sent his apologies."

"Why isn't he coming tonight?" Sophia scooted her chair under the table. "Did something happen?"

"He sounded okay." Bernadette shrugged. "All he said was he needed to pick up some things in town and the stores were mostly closed, so he's getting a hotel room and will drive up here tomorrow."

Her eyes are so blue.

"Well, that's not the news we'd expected." Garren shot Sophia a glance. "But it gives us more time to check out the papers we brought down from the attic. So I think it's a good thing."

"Hope you two find what you're looking for." Bernadette picked up the laden tray like it was made of air. "See you in the morning. After I finish the dishes, I'm calling it a night."

"Night," Garren said. "Sleep well."

"Thank you, mast...er, Mister Garren." She headed to the doorway, then stopped and turned. "You remember what tomorrow is, right?" she whispered.

"Samhain."

"And the anniversary—" Her eyes were wide.

"Yes, I'm aware of the anniversary. It's going to be okay. Night, Bernadette."

"I hope you're right. Night." She took a step and then stopped. "I hope there are no shenanigans. We don't need any bad press up here at Blackbird Inn." She spun on her heel as if the heavy tray weighed ounces and headed down the hall.

Sophia turned to Garren. "Does everyone know tomorrow is the anniversary?"

"Bernadette has worked here a long time. Of course she knows." He moved close and put his arm on her shoulder. "Are you getting spooked with all the talk of Alexandra's disappearance? It was a long time ago, you know."

She shook her head, though her body betrayed her. The job was supposed to be straightforward, not full of ghost stories and disappearances and handsome innkeepers with secrets. "No, but I agree. No shenanigans."

"Trust me, any kind of trouble is the last thing I want. And with Mr. Beck here, I'd imagine we'll be working day and night anyway. No time for shenanigans."

"Good." She sighed.

"Follow me, the library is over here." Garren walked toward the other side of the parlor then slid the oak pocket door open. "It's warm inside. I already have a fire going."

She headed to the room. Garren was such a puzzle. He could be mysterious and downright unnerving with his talk of ghosts one second, and sweet and empathetic the next. Who was the real

man? The man who hung on her every word and gesture like it was a gift? Or the brooding man who talked to himself when he thought no one was around?

Time would tell. But she only had a couple more days at most.

The library lived up to its name, though it wasn't huge by any standard. Wall-to-wall shelves filled with books and tchotchkes, a round table with two chairs and the box they'd brought from the attic, and a green velvet plush couch. The fireplace was tinier than the one downstairs, but it was perfect for the smaller room, and provided the only light at the moment. Two large windows filled one wall, framed by heavy dark drapes.

"This is a cozy room." She sat on the sofa and straightened her dress. "Lots of books."

He nodded. "I spend a lot of time in here."

"You like to read, still?"

"Yes, very much." He sat beside her. "Don't you?"

"Oh yes."

They sat in silence. *Awkward*. Her heart thudded. Why was she nervous around him? He'd done nothing to make her anxious. Even all his talk of ghosts hadn't bothered her *that* much. Maybe it was the way he drank her in when he looked at her. Like she was the only woman he'd ever seen. The only woman he wanted to be with.

But why would he want me?

No denying it, she felt special when she was around him. Rarely did a man give her his undivided attention.

"Sophia?" He scooted closer to her.

"Yeah?" She gulped at the softness in his voice.

"Can I ask you something?"

Her heart raced. "Of...course. Ask me anything." Had she really said that? She crossed her hands in her lap. This wasn't Truth or Dare. How complicated a question could it be?

He fiddled with the green piping on the couch cushion for a few moments then looked at her. She met his gaze and stared. His pupils dilated and he leaned in.

"I hope this doesn't sound too weird."

Too late. "Go ahead. Ask me anything." Her voice wavered as she spoke.

He took a deep breath. "Okay, here goes." Another deep breath. "Do you feel a kind of...bond? Between us?" He put his palm on her cheek and turned her head. "Do you?"

She looked into his eyes, deep blue in the mostly dark room. She swallowed hard. Did she feel a bond? Is that why she dreamt about him soon after she met him? *Yes*. She nodded. She felt something. Maybe it was just lust, but whatever it was she liked it.

"I do, too. I've felt it since you got to the inn. I'm not sure why, but I feel like you've brought a light to this dreary place. You've made it alive again. Made me feel."

She ducked her head as her cheeks heated.

“Don’t be shy,” he whispered. “I know it seems sudden, and we haven’t known each other long, but I really do feel like you belong here. Even if it’s only for a weekend, I want you to know that you’ve brightened my life with your smile.”

She fidgeted. “Thank you.” It’s all she could figure to say. She knew he was a little backward with the social graces, but she had no doubt he meant what he said.

Every word of it.

And that confused her.

He smiled and leaned toward her, his lips brushing hers like a spark of electricity that lit her from within. A shiver rippled down her spine. Did she want this? Did she want Garren? More than anything at the moment. Mr. Beck wasn’t arriving till morning and she and Garren had all night to go over the papers. What was the harm in seeing where things would go?

She put her arms around his neck and he reached for her, tugging her close and pressing his mouth to hers. She let her lips part and welcomed his tongue. Her body responded with a flush. He kissed with strong, firm strokes and her mind went blank except for the desire to feel his touch.

Everywhere.

He sat back and looked at her, his eyes heavy with desire. “Will you do me a favor?”

“If I can.”

He smiled. “Please take your hair down. It’s so sexy when it frames your beautiful face.”

“I can do that,” she whispered. She unclipped the barrette holding her hair in place and shook her head to release the long red strands, wavy from being up in a knot. She’d barely done so when Garren pulled her to him.

“You’re so lovely. I can’t tell you how long I’ve waited to hold you—it’s like you fit a missing piece inside me that I didn’t even know I had.” His eyes sparkled. “Do I sound stupid? I feel so... awkward, yet I need to tell you.”

She shook her head and ran her thumb over his clean-shaven cheek. “Not stupid at all.”

He kissed her again, with so much passion she couldn’t respond quickly enough. She wanted him, all of him. Her panties dampened as he ran his hand over her back. He wasn’t shy. He found the dress zipper and tugged it down, then slipped his hand inside. When he rubbed the bare skin of her back, every nerve ending stood at alert, tingling under his light touch.

Screaming for more.

She moaned and kissed him harder, using her tongue to convey how much she wanted him. When was the last time she’d felt such blazing desire? She couldn’t remember.

She was ready to lose herself in him.

He nipped at her jawbone, then kissed her neck from her ear to her collarbone. She laid her head back and lost herself in the dizzying sensation. When he moved to kiss the hollow of her neck, she squirmed. “Oh, that...feels...good.”

He pulled back. “Let’s go to my bedroom so I can treat you like the queen you are.”

Unable to open her eyes to respond, she nodded.

Chapter 7

Garren's bedroom was more luxurious than any room she'd seen in the inn. Two floor-to-ceiling windows framed with long white drapes on one wall and massive dark wood furniture around the perimeter. In the center of the room stood a large ornately carved bed with posts that reached almost to the baroque plastered ceiling, where a crystal chandelier hung. The room looked like something out of an old Hollywood movie.

The bed was covered in soft pillows—all white—and a matching duvet with gold flowers embroidered in swirling patterns. With the contrast to the dark wood, the bed looked like a spotlighted stage.

He shut the door and turned to her. She trembled as his thumbs glided under the fabric at her shoulders and slid the dress off into a puddle on the floor. She stepped out of the dress, then bent to remove her platform shoes. Garren picked up her dress and set it on the chair.

A cool breeze circled the room and she held herself and shivered as she watched Garren kick off his shoes and begin unbuttoning his shirt.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" He unbuttoned the last button then paused. "I have to know for sure."

"Yes-s." She shuddered. "I'm s-sure."

"You're cold again." He drew her into his arms and the touch of his body against her bare skin made her jump like she'd been jolted with an electric shock.

She squeezed him and he rubbed her back, flicking her bra clasp with one hand then pulling her bra away and tossing it onto one of the plush chairs. She whimpered as his mouth found her nipples. First one, then the other, sucking and squeezing until she forgot she was cold. Her chest tingled and she arched her back so he would have better access.

He kissed each nipple again then looked at her. "You are so beautiful, Sophia." He picked her up and carried her to the bed. "I've wanted you since the moment I saw you standing in the inn's foyer. I can't believe you want me."

"Please. Hurry." She laid back and waited.

"You don't have to ask twice." He dropped his shirt onto the chair then unclasped his pants. Breath caught in her throat as he took his pants off, and then his underwear. It was dim in the room but

she could still see how much he wanted her. She closed her eyes.

Yes, oh yes, she wanted this. Why had it taken her so long to admit it?

He was on her in a second, his mouth everywhere. Her neck, her chest—his hands following along, rubbing and kneading her flesh till it was pliant and warm. He lay beside her and ran his fingers down her abdomen and chills raced over her skin. When he slid his fingers into her panties, she gasped.

“You’re so wet.” He stroked her, slipping two fingers inside.

“I want you, Garren,” she panted. “Now.”

He pulled his fingers out. “Take off your panties. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” She tugged her panties off and dropped them on the floor beside the bed.

A rip of foil and she knew. *Condom.*

Smart man.

He slid into the bed and moved over her, holding himself up on his arms. “I’ll give you what you want, quick this time. But tonight after we look over the paperwork, I’m going to fuck you like you deserve.”

She panted and nodded. If he kept talking to her like that, there’d be no reason to touch her.

Positioning himself at her entrance, he pushed in. Sophia moaned as he filled and stretched her. She tugged him closer. Pleasure spiraled between her legs and she let go.

Feels so good.

He grunted as he moved in and out of her. She spread her legs and begged him to go deeper, harder.

“I want to possess every bit of you.” He held himself up on his arms and looked at her. “I can’t believe this is happening.” She yanked him down again and thrust her hips to meet his advances.

“So good,” she sighed. *So good.*

He continued to thrust and she felt him stiffen even more as his cock slid into her faster.

“Come for me.” He grasped her hair and held on as he pushed into her.

Vibrations tore through her and she fell into pleasure, her muscles contracting as she saw stars. *Oh God. Oh God.*

Garren doubled his efforts, holding her hair as he moved. She held his ass and yanked him toward her. Hard. He stopped and threw his head back as he came. She held on, wishing she could capture the groans and the moment forever.



Sophia read one journal while Garren read the other. He’d given her a black T-shirt to wear—her dress was still crumpled on the chair in his bedroom. Too bad they had to finish up the research, or they’d be in bed enjoying each other some more. She smiled.

I can't focus. She sighed. Garren was a perfect lover. Even after one time, she knew. So attentive. Like he was made to please her and her alone. Reading the papers and journals was the last thing she wanted to be doing. And what would Mr. Beck do if he found out she was having sex with a client?

Garren is worth losing my job over.

He leaned against her shoulder. "Find anything yet?"

"No, but I'm still reading." She stroked his hair, loose from its ponytail. In a way, she didn't want to find the answers. Finding the answers meant her job at Blackbird Inn was done. She'd have to leave.

"We've got to find something." He stared at the page. "And soon."

"We will. I feel it. There has to be something to help us."

"I hope you're right." Garren flipped the page and tensed.

"Me too." She sat up. "What is it? Did you find something?"

"Listen to this," he said. "'The demon has gone. His mistress is trapped in the well. From now till eternity, the family must guard against her escape.'"

The only sound in the room was the crackling fire and the thrumming of her heart.

"What does that mean?" Every hair on her arm stood. "What is your great-grandmother talking about?"

"I'm not sure, but my grandmother always told me I would be the inn's guardian. But surely, this isn't what she meant." He flipped the page. "Wait, there's more. This is written right after Alexandra's disappearance." He traced the words with his finger as he read, "'Take heed on Samhain that the demon isn't near. He will stop at nothing to free his mate.'"

A cold chill raced through the room and the fire dimmed but didn't go out.

Sophia shuddered. "I don't like all the talk about demons. Do you think she is referring to Alexandra as the demon's mistress? Maybe all of this is talking in code so the police wouldn't be able to relate what happened."

"I don't know." Garren stood and paced. "I've never heard any of this before. Like I told you, my grandmother didn't ever want to talk about Alexandra."

"Do you think Alexandra fell into the well and your great-grandmother knew about it but covered it up to protect the inn?" She set the journal down. "And maybe your grandmother hid the information, too. And they left the journals for you to find."

"I wish I knew." He scowled. "'He will send someone to take her place. Beware of witches. They will help him unknowingly.'" He paused. "'If the gate is opened again, someone must enter or Blackbird Inn will exist no more. Take heed on Samhain.'"

"I really don't like the sound of all this." Sophia stood and walked to the fireplace. Why did everything have to be so cryptic? The orange flames danced and licked at the logs and provided steady warmth. She rubbed her arms.

"Maybe we shouldn't have scheduled our meeting this week." He stood behind her and put his

hands on her shoulders and massaged her. “It could’ve waited another few days.”

The warmth from his fingers relaxed her and she leaned back on him. All the talk of demons had set her on edge, but Garren knew how to calm her. He massaged the demons away. She closed her eyes. “We had to do it now. Can’t wait till another time. The state—”

“The state can wait. This wasn’t a good idea.”

His hands turned cold and he moved away. Sophia turned as Garren opened the heavy drapes and peered outside.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Thinking.”

“There aren’t really any demons, are there?”

“Not here. Not yet.” He placed his hand on the windowpane. “But I’ve got a feeling that’s going to change really soon.”

A gust of frigid air filled the room and Sophia coughed. The fire went out. Not slowly, but like a switch had been flipped.

“Garren!” Adrenaline pumped through her.

His back was to her—she could see his silhouette against the window. The sky beyond was dusky blue, the clouds racing by at supernatural speed. The moon unveiled, near full, its white light casting a spotlight onto Garren.

Gold chains, attached to his feet and hands, materialized as the moonlight touched him. The chains made no sound as he moved. He turned, and his irises glowed golden.

Sophia screamed and backed away, her hands to her mouth.

“What is it?” Garren moved toward her. “What’s wrong?”

She kept backing until she hit the wall, Garren in pursuit. How could this be? The gold chains traveled along the floor and out of the room, the cuffs around his wrists and ankles.

She pointed and Garren followed her gaze.

“I should have told you,” he said, arms outstretched. “But I didn’t think you’d be able to see them.”

“You knew?”

“I’m the guardian of Blackbird Inn. I see the chains in the moonlight, yes. This is why I can only leave for a few days at a time. I’m destined to stay here, or some might call it cursed to stay. *When the blackbird flew out of sight, it marked the edge of one of many circles.*”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yes, more Wallace Stevens. His poetry means a lot to me. I don’t mind being bound here, even if I am trapped for my whole life. I belong here.”

“But this can’t be real.” She covered her mouth with her hands. “Those chains can’t be real.”

“Oh, they’re real. And the fact that you can see the chains means you’ve got power, too.” He stepped closer. “You must have witch’s blood.”

Sophia cringed. She'd heard the stories her great-aunt told. She'd never believed her. But how to explain...this? "I don't know..."

"You're part something. At least now I know why I can't leave, thanks to my great-grandmother's journal. I've got to make sure Alexandra stays where she belongs and that no demon frees her." He sighed and his eyes turned back to blue as the moon went behind a cloud. "Looks like I'll be busy tomorrow night. And I've got to make sure you don't help the demon..."

The fire roared back to life, spitting and crackling.

Sophia ran.

Chapter 8

*S*ophia ran, her bare feet stinging from the bleeding cuts from the pointed rocks and sticks in the yard. Her white nightgown's hem was stained with mud and damp from the mist that rose from the ground. She stopped at the cemetery gate, her heart thudding in her throat.

"Garren?" she called.

The cemetery lay still and silent. Not even an insect made a sound.

The moon illuminated the tombstones and cast long shadows across the tall grass. Sophia opened the iron gate and it creaked as rusty hinges groaned under the effort. She stepped inside, letting the gate fall open.

"Garren, where are you?"

She slipped between rows of curved stones and shattered crosses. Two large mausoleums occupied the center of the small cemetery and she moved closer. Garren's family name was carved into the lintel, moss-covered and dirty, it was barely legible. AMSEL.

A loud shriek sounded and Sophia turned.

In front of her, a large creature paced, flames shooting from its nostrils on each breath. Silver blue scales lined its back and a lengthy, barbed tail trailed behind it. The creature faced her, its eyes large and red, its mouth dripping blood.

It roared to the moon then crouched as the ground split open and bright light fractured the dark sky.

Sophia tried to run, but she couldn't move. She tried to scream, but no sound came from her mouth. In the distance, the inn raged a fiery death, lighting the sky in pink-orange.

The creature pounced and Sophia fell as darkness washed over her soul...

She sat up in bed, shaking and damp with perspiration. When had she fallen asleep? And why so many nightmares at the inn? She looked at the clock. It was after four AM. She hadn't slept for long. She tugged the covers up. Once again, she'd fallen asleep in her clothes—well, in Garren's T-shirt. Her suitcase, half-packed, was back on the chair.

I've got to get out of this crazy place.

She rubbed her eyes and lay back on the pillow. So many things happening, and none of them made sense. Only her time with Garren felt right. She could almost feel his touch now. But all the

wild stuff had to go.

And all this talk of demons and witches and curses...was it all an elaborate Halloween prank?

I saw Garren's chains. They were real.

She should pack her bag and get the heck away from Blackbird Inn. Who cared if Mr. Beck paid her or not? She hadn't found anything to help save the inn and there was enough crazy going around to last her the rest of her life.

It's just a job.

But running away would mean leaving Garren. Yes, he was odd and mysterious, but somehow, being with him felt right. Being around him made her feel comfortable—like she belonged somewhere for the first time in her life.

If I run, I'm running from Garren, too.

A soft white orb materialized over her and she studied it. No sense of fear overwhelmed her this time, but a strong feeling of warmth and comfort came over her. She sat up in bed to watch the hovering light as it moved closer.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Why are you here?"

The orb glimmered and moved to the edge of the bed where it pulsed and flickered. Then, the light began to morph and grow larger, brighter than any light except the sun. Sophia shielded her eyes with her arm. The air heated and a low hum filled the room.

She repeated, "What do you want?"

The orb shifted into a person-shaped mass and gradually solidified, the light growing dimmer by the moment. Sophia peeked, then stared, still unafraid. It was like the orb was giving off peaceful vibes.

The light went out and Sophia turned on the bedside lamp. Where the orb had been now sat Bernadette, smiling. She wasn't dressed to be working in the kitchen, but wore a long dress reminiscent of times gone by, a calico pattern with a white petticoat peeking from underneath.

"W-what?" Sophia wondered if Garren had slipped her a hallucinogenic compound. Things had gone from weird to crazy really fast. Why was the cook here, and how?

"My child, don't be afraid." Bernadette placed her hand over Sophia's. "Everything's going to be okay. I promise."

The touch tingled but had no pressure. It was like Bernadette was weightless.

"What do you want from me?" Sophia whispered.

Bernadette pulled her hand back and stared at the floor. After a few seconds, she met Sophia's gaze, her own filling with tears. "I need your help saving Blackbird Inn."

"That's why I'm here."

"No, I need your help fighting the demon and keeping the portal closed. He will be strong, but you have magic that can help."

"I don't have magic." Sophia recoiled. Was everyone in the inn crazy?

“You do. I sensed it the first time I encountered you, on the stairs when Garren brought you to your room. You have a deep soul magic that only the oldest witch families possess. I didn’t mention it to Garren at the time because I wanted to get to know you a little better.” Bernadette crossed her hands in her lap. “And I’m afraid that your presence here is no coincidence.”

Bernadette was the ghost orb she’d seen in the stairwell. Realization stuck Sophia like a truck in the pit of her stomach. How many ghosts were at the inn? Did they live here, or just visit? “I’ve heard stories that there were witches in my family, but I’m not one. I’ve never even met one.” Sophia pushed her hair back. “And what do you mean, not a coincidence? I was sent her by Arturo Beck to help Garren.”

“Do you really think Arturo needs you?”

“I thought so...”

“No.” Bernadette shook her head as sadness filled her face. “He plans to use you. I’ve only just put all the pieces together. He needs you somehow when the portal opens tomorrow night. For what, I’m not sure. But he needs you here.”

Sheer terror flashed through Sophia. “Are you saying Arturo is...a demon?”

The room grew frigid and she pulled the covers up higher.

“Yes. He stayed here with Alexandra back when I was guardian of the inn. He’s coming to reclaim her and he needs a witch to help him.”

“I’d never help him! Not with something that would hurt Garren.” She tucked her hair behind her ears. “I should leave. Now.”

“No!” Bernadette barked. “We need you and we will protect you. Otherwise, Garren is going to be pushed into the portal and locked there for eternity. I can’t let that happen and I don’t think you can, either.”

“Who are you? How do you know so much about the portal and Garren and Blackbird Inn?” Sophia rocked, her legs like jelly. Maybe she was still dreaming. She might wake up any second. Things were so messed up...but she’d seen the ghosts and the golden chains. Could demons be any different?

Bernadette smiled. “You haven’t put it together yet?”

Sophia shook her head. “Put what together?”

“I’m Bernadette, Garren’s great-grandmother. I help him protect the inn.”

Sophia gulped. “But that’s not possible.”

“Yes, it is.” Bernadette smiled. “I’m a ghost, so I’m not able to help much, but I try. And tonight, Garren is going to need all the help he can get. Once Arturo arrives, things are going to go downhill quickly.”

“I don’t...know. This is all so—”

“Overwhelming?” Bernadette stood. “Yes. But you’ve seen enough with your eyes. Use your heart to look. I think you’ll see that you need to stay here and help Garren.”

Bernadette's form began to shimmer and then she popped out of sight.

"What the hell is going on around here?" Sophia asked. She flopped back into bed, intent that she would figure everything out by morning. She could still pack and run if she chose to do so. Arturo a demon? That seemed even more far-fetched than seeing ghosts.

Chapter 9

When Sophia entered the sitting room, Garren looked up and smiled. Early afternoon sunlight streamed through the dusty windows, casting a filtered haze over the room.

“Get a good night’s rest?” He stood and kissed her on the cheek, his hand lingering on the small of her back.

She hugged him, her heart flip-flopping with a mix of relief and anxiety. Maybe she was making a big deal out of nothing. Maybe this was all a giant Halloween trick with treats to come later. “Tell me the demon thing is all a nightmare. Tell me we don’t have to fight it.”

“I wish I could.” He pulled her close and stroked her hair. “I’m sorry you got pulled into this. But then again, if you hadn’t, we might never have met.”

She smiled, melting under his ministrations. She should’ve stayed in his room overnight, not run away like a scared child. She took a deep breath. “Bernadette came to talk to me.”

He hugged her. “And?”

“And she told me everything she knows about the situation. Part of me still has a hard time believing it. Ghosts and demons and portals. It’s a lot to take in.”

“I’m sure. The whole thing is crazy.” He sighed. “I grew up knowing ghosts were real, and knowing I needed to stay close to the inn. But I never knew there was a veil portal on the property. I thought they were in sacred locations or caves or something. Not here in New England.”

“It’s crazy.”

He kissed her on the forehead, his lips lingering a moment before he stepped back. “I’m sorry. I should’ve told you about the ghosts and the chains.”

The chains. She’d forgotten about them. She stepped back. “Yes, you should have, but I wouldn’t have believed you. Who would, without seeing them? Truth is, I don’t know what to believe anymore.” She turned her back to him. How could she accept all this? So many odd things, and yet she’d seen many with her own eyes. Realization and acceptance washed over her. She needed to follow her heart, not her mind.

“Please, sit down.” Garren put his hand on her shoulder. “Let’s talk through this. We’ve got to have a plan. Once Arturo gets here our time will be limited.”

She faced him. “He isn’t here? Maybe he changed his mind about making the trip up.”

“Unlikely. He’s been planning this for a hundred years. Come, sit.” He gestured to the couch and Sophia dropped into it. He joined her. “He’s not going to give up easily. Not with Alexandra trapped behind the veil. He’s planned this out carefully. Waiting till the veil is at its thinnest. No, he’s not going to give up.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “What can we do? It’s not like we have a demon gun or something.”

He chuckled. “I wish there were such a thing. But that’s only in stories. No, we’re going to have to handle this with human ingenuity. And hope for a bit of luck.”

She ran her hand over his chest. “Bernadette said I was part of his plan. What does that mean? I don’t know anything about demons or portals. How would I help him?”

“I wish I knew for sure. I think having a witch nearby unlocks some of the magic around the objects, or in this case, the portal. Or maybe he intends to draw from your power to force the portal open. He may plan for you to be the sacrificial lamb.”

She sat up. “That’s not happening. And I don’t have any power he can take. He’s made a major mistake in choosing me.”

“You can see the chains binding me. You have power. Maybe you don’t know how to use it, but it is there, and it’s strong.” Garren hugged her tight. “After tonight, we’ll be free to live again.”

“I’m scared.”

“Me too, a little. But together, we can handle Mr. Beck and whatever he brings.”

Not if he’s like the creature in my dreams. She snuggled onto Garren’s shoulder and he stroked her head.

“That feels good.” She pressed her lips against his neck, his hair tickling her lips. “I want this to all be over, Garren.”

“Soon.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“One way or another, this will be over tonight. We’ll either save Blackbird Inn, or we won’t.”

She sat up. “Do you think the state is really trying to take the inn? Or is it a cover story?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m betting it’s something Mr. Beck set up.” He rubbed his eye. “I should’ve called and double-checked as soon as I got the letter, but why would I doubt it? It looked so official.”

“Yeah. No reason to doubt a letter from the state of Pennsylvania.”

“I’ve been so slack and trusting. I’ve got to learn to handle people better. Try to read them before I trust.”

“You do just fine.” A pecking at the window caught her attention. “Look!”

Garren turned. “Ah, another guardian. One of my blackbirds.”

The bird perched on the sill, its black plumage iridescent in the sunlight.

“You have birds? Don’t tell me they talk, too.”

He laughed. “No, I don’t talk to the birds. But there is a flock of blackbirds that hangs around the

inn. I jokingly call them guardians, too, though I doubt they know the inn is their namesake.”

The bird tapped on the window again then flapped its wings furiously.

Sophia rubbed her hands on her jeans. “Why is it doing that?”

The bird pecked a rhythm on the glass then flew off.

“That was odd.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “It’s almost like it was alerting you, or warning you.”

“Blackbird Inn is odd.” Garren nodded. “And maybe he was warning me. A good omen, I hope.”

“I’ll say.” She put her hand on Garren’s knee. Somehow, just touching him relaxed her. “So, what about Henry? How does he fit into the inn’s oddness? Will he help us tonight?”

Garren leaned back. “Well, it’s a long story. Henry is a ghost, like my great-grandmother, Bernadette. A great-great uncle, born well before the time you and I were. He helps guard the inn.”

“Is he trapped, too?”

“No.” He shook his head. “But he chose to stay and help. There are others, but they mostly stay hidden from humans, unless they are playing pranks. My family is pretty attached to the inn.”

Sophia scanned the room. No sign of demon portals. The room looked quite ordinary. Nothing out of place. “What about your grandmother? And your parents? Are they here, too?”

He cast his gaze down. “No, my parents never came back. Nor my grandmother. I don’t know how the whole ghost thing works. They don’t, either. For whatever reason, I have six family ghosts here helping out. A distant cousin ghost disappeared last year, without warning. So I suspect these ghosts have unfinished business, and when it’s over, they will also disappear.”

“This is all so unbelievable.”

“But you do believe.”

She bit her lip. “Yes, yes I do. I don’t understand why they never told you about the portal till now. If they wanted you to truly guard the inn, they should’ve told you about it.”

“Bernadette said she was prepared to tell me when it was time to know. Even if we hadn’t found the journals, which I assume she placed for us to find, she would have told me before tonight. I guess they didn’t want to worry me.”

“Still, it would’ve been nice to have some time to prepare.” Sophia shuddered as a gust of frigid air swept through the room, ruffling the curtains and rattling the windowpanes.

Bernadette stood at the door. “Arturo Beck has arrived.”

Garren leapt to his feet. “Where is he?”

“Parking.” Bernadette’s eyes widened. “Remember, don’t let him know that you’re aware of what is going on. You’ll lose your advantage.”

He nodded and turned to Sophia. “We don’t have a plan yet.”

“I know.”

Chapter 10

Arturo Beck was perhaps the prettiest man Sophia had ever seen. She tried not to stare at him while they sat at the kitchen table having tea with Garren. Blond curls framed a tan face, inset with melted chocolate eyes. He was perfectly proportioned, wide shoulders and narrow hips, and the slim-fit gray suit he wore showed off his assets. She set her teacup down.

Garren had a different kind of good looks, and his ran deep. He was a good man.

“I wanted to thank you for coming out ahead of me to start the research,” Arturo said. “I’m sure you’ve saved us some billable time. Did you get a lot done? Find anything interesting?”

Garren slurped his tea and she shot him a look.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Beck. I wish we had more information to give you.” She added, “But we’re trying. We looked through a ton of inn receipts and ledgers yesterday.”

“Please, call me Arturo.”

She nodded. “Okay. Sorry.”

Bernadette set another steaming pot of tea on the table and removed the old pot.

Garren cleared his throat. “What do we do next? You both know I can’t lose the inn. I have to keep it in the family.”

Sophia caught the forced nonchalance in his voice. “I guess we’re going to have to draw up papers to fight the state.” She refilled her teacup. “We didn’t find anything yet, but I suggest we go to the courthouse and look in the public land records next week.”

“Monday, you can do that.” Arturo straightened his tie. “I’ll work with Garren to come up with a strategy and a plan B. It’s very difficult to win an eminent domain case.”

“So what are we doing today?” Sophia tried to keep her voice even. If Arturo was a demon, wouldn’t he be able to sense her fear? Feed off of it? Or was that just the way it worked on television? Her hand shook as she picked up her teacup and sipped.

“I need to go over some legal documents with Garren.” Arturo yawned. “I’m exhausted from travel, though. I think I’ll take a quick nap and refresh. Would you mind if we picked up on business in a few hours?”

Garren’s mouth set in a firm line. “That’s fine. Shall we meet in the sitting room?”

“Yes. Say seven o’clock? Sophia, if you’re available, will you join us?”

“Of course.” Anxiety pooled in her stomach. Wouldn’t the portal be opened at midnight or was that a ghost story, too? She shuddered. “I’ll be there.”

Arturo smiled and stood. “I’ll retire to my room now. See you both at seven.”

Garren nodded.

They sat in silence until Arturo’s footsteps faded.

“Now what?” Sophia whispered. She set her cup on the table.

“Now, we wait.”



Sophia swore that time had slowed down. She’d talked to Garren, taken a shower, and changed into a white blouse and clean jeans. *The good guys wear white, right?* The clock had moved so slow, she wondered if it really had stopped for a while. Finally, it was ten till seven. Garren was probably already waiting in the sitting room.

She pulled her room door closed behind her. The hallway seemed longer and darker than usual, like a tunnel. She gulped down her fear and headed for the stairs.

Sunset filtered through the windows of the tower stairs, bathing everything in shades of red. Sophia took a deep breath and headed downstairs. Halfway down, she stopped. A whole gaggle of orbs floated around her.

“You can do this, Sophia,” a soft voice whispered. “You were meant to do this.”

“Save us.”

“Save the inn.”

“Garren needs you...”

She scrambled down the remaining stairs. She would never get used to having ghosts around.

The inn lay wrapped in silence so loud, she felt pressure in her ears. Shadows ran in long lines down the wooden floor, the sconces dimming as she walked through the first floor hallway to the reception desk.

The antique clock chimed, breaking the thick silence, each note deeper than the last and the echo barely fading before the next strike. The notes reverberated in her gut.

Seven o’clock.

The door to freedom beckoned. She could leave now and be far from the inn by the time anyone realized it. Hop in the car and be far away by the time the portal opened. She paused.

No, I can’t do that to Garren. I promised I would help.

After a deep breath, and a moment to steady her shaking hands, she headed toward the sitting room.

He needs me. Blackbird Inn needs me.

She heard the men before she saw them. They were talking as if nothing was about to happen. No

portal, no demons. No Alexandra. How could they both be so calm? A small fire burned in the fireplace, warming the room and casting it in oranges and yellows.

“Sophia,” Arturo smiled.

Shivers raced up her spine as cold slid around her, enveloping her. In another setting, she’d be drooling over the man. He had a presence about him that exuded confidence and sexiness, a charisma that charmed most anyone around him.

She looked at Garren and her heart warmed. A different kind of handsome, and her body betrayed her preference. He’d made her feel special in bed and out—and she bet Arturo just took what he wanted. No comparison. Garren’s hair, pulled into his trademark ponytail, shone in the light and his eyes twinkled as he watched her. He was a man that she could spend a lot more time with. *I hope we get the chance.*

“Join us!” Arturo pointed to a spot beside him on the couch.

Though she’d rather sit near Garren, she couldn’t call attention to their new relationship, or tip off Arturo in any way. She joined Arturo on the couch, sitting as far from him as she could without being rude.

“We were talking legal strategies.” Garren leaned forward. “Arturo thinks we have a solid case. The state has no good reason to seize this land. It isn’t like they are putting a road directly through the mountain.”

“I hope we can win. It’s always scary fighting the government.” Sophia fiddled with the ends of her hair. She didn’t know how long she could keep up the ruse, but Arturo didn’t seem to smell her underlying fear. Either that or he hid it well.

The thought chilled her.

“We’ll win.” Arturo said. “I’m confident. But we need to prepare.”

“Whatever I can do to help,” Sophia said. “That’s why I’m here.” She forced a smile.

Garren cleared his throat. “Blackbird Inn’s resources are at your disposal. Just tell me what you need and I will make it happen.”

The dimming flames popped and crackled. Having a fire was so nice in the late fall when the nights grew cold. Light and warmth and a hot man. What more could she want?

No demons. No ghosts. No portals.

Arturo stood and moved to stand in front of the fire, his form silhouetted by the flames. “I think the first thing that would help is a tour of the property. I can get a better idea of what’s here, and why the state wants to seize it.”

His eyes held rings of glowing red. Sophia blinked and his eyes were brown again.

“Sure, that’s fine.” Garren stood. “When would you want to do that?”

He glanced back at the fire again then turned to them. “No time like the present.”

Chapter 11

Sophia clutched her sweater, thankful she'd retrieved it from her room before they went outside. She held the flashlight in front of her, sweeping the ground with its yellow beam as she followed Garren and Arturo around the property. The fall night held a chill and when the breeze blew, it was downright cold. They'd walked a good bit of the grounds, seeing the barn and fields. Arturo had pretended to be interested, but she knew what was coming. He was biding time.

"And this is the cemetery." Garren stopped at the tall, iron gate. "It's small. Most of my family is buried here."

"Let's go in." Arturo lifted the latch and swung the creaking gate open.

Shit's about to get real. Sophia stuck her hands in her pockets. Shouldn't they have brought a weapon of some sort? How would she and Garren defend themselves against a demon? Garren had said mortal weapons would be useless, but she would feel a lot better knowing she had a knife or something. Or even pepper spray. Her heart thumped.

"Okay, but there's nothing to really see here." Garren followed Arturo inside.

Sophia took a deep breath. The portal wasn't in the cemetery, but it still felt creepy to be poking around a dark graveyard on Halloween night.

An owl hooted in the distance, followed by the howl of some kind of wolf or dog. The breeze picked up, sending leaves scattering and rustling across her path. The tombstones rose in the darkness, almost appearing to float in the mist that hovered just over the ground.

She wanted to be next to Garren, close to his warmth, but Arturo couldn't be tipped off to their relationship. He had to think she was there to help him, and him only. But what would he want from her? How would he draw power?

She shuddered.

"These are all your family?" Arturo waved his hand in an arc.

Garren shone his light over the tombstones. "Yes, mostly. My family has owned this land for over two hundred years."

All the flashlights shut off and darkness closed in.

"What the..." Garren mumbled.

The moon, now full and bright, came into view as the clouds parted, its almost silvery disc

looming over the cemetery like a watchdog. Garren looked up at the sky, his golden chains trailing across the cemetery and back toward the house.

Sophia covered her mouth with her hand. Did Arturo know she could see the chains? After all, he apparently knew she was a descendant of witches. She looked away before he could notice.

She shook her flashlight and the beam flickered then came back on, followed by Garren and Arturo's lights.

I hope they stay on.

"Thank goodness," Garren said. "Have you seen enough here?"

"Yes," Arturo gazed around. "I think so."

"We've about seen all there is to see, or all that we can in the dark. Are you ready to go back to the inn?"

The owl hooted in the distance again, its cry echoing off the stone face of the inn. Sophia wanted nothing more than to get inside, but she knew that wasn't happening yet. Until Arturo was down, they'd be outside.

"We passed an old well between the barn and the cemetery." Arturo set off walking. "I'd like to get a closer look before we go back."

"Okay. Why?"

"It looks really old. Maybe there's a marker or something that dates it." Arturo stuck his hands in his pockets. "Besides, it looks interesting."

Garren followed Arturo. "Come on, Sophia."

"Coming." She kicked at the pebbles on the ground and watched the two men head for the gate. Was she ready for the showdown? Did she have a choice?

Then she noticed them. Silvery orbs rose through the fog, winking dimly. One from each grave. They hovered close to the ground, partly covered by mist, like a bubble bath on the cemetery ground. Sophia relaxed, her shoulders easing. Arturo didn't see them, but the ghosts were there.

She and Garren weren't going to have to fight the demon alone.



Aboveground, the well was nothing more than a circle of stone about three feet high. Moss covered the ancient structure, and the grass around it grew nearly as high as the well itself. The wind whipped her hair into her face and Sophia shivered. The area around the well was not only cold it was frigid. Her teeth chattered and she tugged her sweater close.

When all this was over, she'd curl up in Garren's arms and stay warm.

Arturo approached the well with sure steps. Sophia backed away, her heart throbbing in her throat. A cold sweat broke out on her palms and she slid her hands down her jeans.

"What are you doing?" Garren stepped close to Arturo, the golden chains moving like silk across

the ground. “It’s getting colder. We should go inside.”

A rumbling began, low at first but growing louder, coming from deep underground. Sophia’s breath hitched and she backed up.

What the hell was going on?

Arturo roared and turned, his eyes orange with flame. The ground trembled and shook. He grew taller, more muscular and he began to chant an indecipherable spew of words, guttural and deep. As he spoke, the boards covering the well began to loosen, creaking as they flew away.

The wind picked up, roaring like a near-hurricane, and the ground quivered.

Sophia screamed, “What are you doing?”

Arturo turned to face her, spoke a few indecipherable words, then raised his hands into the air. Leaves and twigs swirled around him creating a vortex that centered over the now-open well. Garren backed away to stand by Sophia.

“What can we do?” She raised her voice against the maelstrom.

“Wait!” Garren took her by the hand and squeezed.

The moonlight disappeared and the flashlights went out again. Sophia dropped hers and held onto Garren. Arturo was too busy orchestrating the opening of the portal to pay any attention to them. He danced and chanted in the dark and then the wind stopped.

Instantly.

The night filled with silence. Not even an insect or night creature sounded.

Was it over? Sophia was sure he could hear the thudding of her heart. What the hell had she and Garren been thinking? They couldn’t fight a demon. They needed to run.

Now!

Whoosh! A beam of bright red light shot up from the well, slowly transitioning to pure white as it leapt into the sky. Sophia shielded her eyes. Arturo continued to chant and the beam of light strengthened until it was as bright as day outside.

He screeched, a piercing sound that struck straight through her, and she covered her ears. Garren held his head and tried to back away.

Arturo grabbed Sophia, yanking her to him, then grinned, his teeth now sharp and pointy and much larger. He raked his fingernail across her cheek, leaving it burning. She touched her cheek and looked at the fresh blood.

Quiet settled over the area again and the ground stilled.

Sophia shrieked and Garren lunged at Arturo. With ease, Arturo knocked Garren into the air, sailing. He crumpled to the ground motionless.

“Garren!” Sophia tried to wrench herself away from Arturo but he held her tight.

“You will help me.” Arturo laughed and swiped a finger of blood from Sophia’s cheek. The cut burned and throbbed and she winced as he wiped the blood off again.

He drew a symbol, somewhat like a triangle inside a circle, on the stone well wall and the ground

began to tremble again. Sophia dropped beside Garren. He wasn't moving.

Oh, God, is he dead?

She screamed, her anger piercing through the night, her heart heavy with the possibility of Garren's death. The air filled with orbs of all sizes, floating and bobbing in the air. One by one, they swooped toward Arturo and he pawed at the air to get them to go away but his hands passed through them without touching them at all.

Family!

Sophia stood, hoping to be undetected. Arturo was not getting away with releasing Alexandra. *Over my dead body.* She clenched her fists.

A female voice pierced the air.

Alexandra.

She was coming! The ground rumbled and shook as the orbs continued to strafe Arturo. He swatted at them, and then climbed up onto the well wall to reach the higher ones. His face contorted and he spit, trying anything to get the ghosts to leave him alone.

This is my chance.

Sophia lunged, arms out, and hit Arturo with as much force as she could. He stumbled and fell backward into the well, his body thudding as it hit the walls on the way down.

Adrenaline rushed through her and she steadied herself with a hand on the well. The orbs alighted around her, forming transparent human shapes, then people. Bernadette came forward, reaching for Sophia.

The light from the well flickered. Would Arturo be able to escape? The portal hadn't closed.

"Sophia," Bernadette called. "Repeat after me and spread your blood on the stones as you do."

Sophia nodded, her mouth parched.

"Gates of hell you hold within, close ye now, again."

Sophia drew an "x" with her finger across the bloodied symbol Arturo had drawn. The light grew red and shrank and lamentation and screams came from the well. The ground shook once, then stopped. The light from the well turned golden. She backed away, shaking, and right into Garren. He pulled her close.

"You did it," he said.

"You're alive!"

"Yes." He kissed her forehead.

"Not yet!" Bernadette and the other ghosts formed a circle around the well and began chanting. "We've got to seal the portal gate."

Hundreds of blackbirds swarmed in from the sky, each dropping a small pebble into the well. The hundreds of birds became thousands and the pebbles rained into the well until the last of the golden light blinked out.

Wings fluttering in every direction, the birds dropped more shiny pebbles till they filled the well

to the top. Sophia watched, her mouth agape, as the birds finished the job then flew away, leaving one bird to dance along the top of the stones.

He squawked and flapped his wings as he hopped about the top of the pebbles.

“Thank you.” Garren saluted the bird.

The blackbird tipped its head in a bow then flew away.

Silence once again filled the air.

Sophia clung to Garren, her head on his chest listening to the very real beating of his heart. If anything had happened to him, she would’ve been crushed. The ghosts began popping back to orbs, murmuring “thank you” and floating away on the night like bubbles.

Bernadette approached them, touching Sophia softly on the shoulder.

“I knew you could do it,” the ghost whispered. “I knew you would save Blackbird Inn.”

Garren hugged Sophia. “I knew you would, too.”

Sophia smiled. Good thing they had faith in her because she certainly hadn’t felt like much of a savior. “I can’t believe it’s over.”

“Let’s go back to the inn and get some tea.” Garren kissed her on the forehead. “I’m sure Bernadette will be happy to make us a pot.”

“Sorry.” Bernadette cast her eyes to the ground. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Garren asked. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “Because it’s time for me to move on.”

“No!” Garren reached for her.

Sophia’s eyes filled with tears. She’d barely gotten to know Garren’s great-grandmother but she felt a kinship deeper than family with her. “You can’t leave.”

“I have to. My job here is done. Blackbird Inn is safe for now.” Bernadette began to fade. “I’m no longer needed here.”

“But what about Arturo and Alexandra?” Garren reached for Bernadette but she continued to disappear. “Won’t the portal always be at risk? What if they come back?”

“Until another demon comes for them, they are stuck. Guard the portal. Be especially wary of Samhain...” She began shrinking, light coming from her eyes and ears and mouth in spokes of white.

“I don’t know how.” Garren’s grasp slipped right through the fading Bernadette.

“Sophia will help you.” The last words faded and Bernadette’s orb popped out of existence. “She is a guardian of Blackbird Inn...”

Garren heaved, tears streaming down his face. His sobs filled the night air. Sophia reached to dry his tears, her heart aching that he was hurting. He looked like someone who’d been abandoned.

“She had to go, Garren.” She rubbed his cheek. “You know that. She stayed to help you guard the inn but now she has to move on. She’s going to better things.”

“I know.” He nodded. “I just wish we’d had more time. I wish I’d known she was going to leave.”

Sophia clasped his hand. “It’s going to be okay. I promise. She even told you that.”

“I’m going to miss her.”

“I know you will.” She sighed.

Another owl hooting broke the stillness of the night. A breeze lilted by, warm like a summer’s afternoon or a toasty fire.

No more cold.

“Sophia?” Garren cleared his throat.

She turned to him and smiled. “Yes, Garren?”

“Will you stay with me?” His eyes searched hers. The moonlight broke through again and golden circles filled his irises. “Here at Blackbird Inn? I feel like you belong here. Belong with me.”

Sophia laughed and pointed to the ground. “This should answer your question.” Golden chains shimmered in the moonlight, attached to her ankles and wrists, but she didn’t feel she was wearing them at all. They crisscrossed Garren’s chains as they ran along the ground to the inn. “Does it look like I’m going anywhere?”

Garren laughed and took her into his arms. When his lips met hers, she knew that everything was going to be okay. They’d guard Blackbird Inn for as long as they lived.

EPILOGUE

Sophia watched the dust swirling in the stripes of sunlight that cut through the room. Garren snored lightly beside her. She smiled and peeked into the bassinette beside her bed. Their baby girl lay sleeping, a tiny smile twitching on her face as she dreamed baby dreams, thumb in mouth.

“Good morning, Bernadette,” Sophia whispered. “Today is going to be a beautiful day.”

A blackbird pecked its *good morning* at the window and Sophia smiled.

The End

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USA Today bestselling author Kerry Adrienne loves history, science, music and art. She's a mom to three daughters, many cats, and various other small animals. She loves live music and traveling most anywhere.

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HEART OF FIRE

BEC MCMASTER

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HEART OF FIRE

The old eddas speak of *dreki*—fabled creatures who haunt the depths of Iceland’s volcanoes, and steal away fair maidens.

Freyja wants none of such myths. *Dreki* seducing young ladies? Ha. They probably eat such foolish girls. But when the local *dreki* steals her last ram—costing her any chance of feeding her ill father through the winter—Freyja intends to confront the fearsome myth.

Sentenced to a life of exile from his clan, Rurik is fascinated by the furious woman who comes to claim her ram. She reeks of mysterious magic, and challenges him at every step. He intends to claim the passionate firebrand, but to do so he must take mortal form.

It’s the only time the *dreki* are vulnerable, and with a dragon hunter arriving on the shores of Iceland, he can barely afford the risk—but lonely Freyja, with her elf-cursed eyes and pragmatic soul, tempts him in ways he’s never felt before. Is she the key to reclaiming his heritage? Or will she be his downfall?

Chapter 1

Iceland, 1880

“Here, father,” Freyja murmured, tilting the steaming cup of broth to his lips. “Perhaps this will take away the chill?”

Her father slurped at the watery soup, his eyes blue and vacant as his trembling hands tried to cup hers. “It’s delicious, Freyja. One of your best.”

Freyja pasted a smile on her face, even though he couldn’t see it. Bitterness burned in her throat. “Yes, Papa. It is, isn’t it?”

There were more vegetables than lamb in the broth, and more water than both, but the fact he sought to spare her feelings made her shoulders hunch. It had been such a long winter, with little food or respite from the storms. The few coins they had left were drying up and her small herd of ewes was dwindling. She couldn’t justify slaughtering another just to add more flavor to their soup.

Her father coughed, that same dry, hacking cough that had haunted him all winter. Freyja grabbed a rag and helped to dry his cheeks with it. Sometimes she wondered if he would survive to see another winter.

A fluttery feeling rose up to choke her, and she forced it down ruthlessly. No point in being maudlin. He was here and this was now. The future could wait.

“How was the village this afternoon?” her father asked. “You didn’t see Ingmar’s boy, did you?”

If she had, then Benedikt would have no interest in her. Not a respectful interest anyway. He had already hinted he might have means to offer her coin to keep her larder stocked through the spring. Telling her father that, however, might send him to an early grave. He had such hopes. Freyja intended never to enlighten him; with his poor health, their dwindling resources, and her eyes, she was unlikely to make any sort of respectable match.

“He must have been busy, I’m sure,” she replied, squeezing his hand, then levering to her feet. Gathering the ceramic bowls together, she crossed to the kitchen. “He has all that land to tend, after all.”

Some of it theirs—or what she’d been forced to sell after her father’s eyes faded and he could no

longer work the land. She'd done what she could, but tending to him took a lot of her time.

The shutters banged on the windows as the winds lifted. Freyja glanced through the glass toward the enormous storm clouds boiling on the horizon. A storm from the north then, and bound to be bitter with the kiss of Arctic winds on its breath. She could feel it in her bones, tingling beneath her skin as if she herself were tied to the storm. It would blow a mighty gale, tearing its way through the mountains that shielded their little homestead, then blow out by morning. She knew it, with some inexplicable sixth sense.

Most of Iceland suffered from bitter chill at this time of year, but the area surrounding Akureyri was somewhat warmer thanks to a trick of the coastline, of cliffs and mountains. Of course, out here they were virtually alone. It was a day's sail to Reykjavik and longer overland, if one even dared.

"I have to fetch the sheep in," she called, watching the dull gray edge of the clouds roiling. Lightning flickered in the distance. "We're in for a storm."

"Be careful," her father called, sinking into his shawl and coughing again. "Don't be too long."

"I won't, Papa."

"And take Loki."

She rolled her eyes at the small bundle of white fur that nestled by her father's feet. "Come."

The little arctic fox yawned at her, seemingly content to stay where he was. Another mouth to feed when she truly couldn't, but then a part of her couldn't throw him out the door. He'd been with them since he was a pup.

Freyja frowned, reaching out with the inner part of herself that had some sense of connection to the creature. *Come.*

Loki rolled to his feet and shook himself, discarding strands of long white hair. Underneath, his summer coat grew darker. Another week or two and he'd lose the rest of his winter coat. He leaped with agile quickness to dart beneath her skirts, and threatened to trip her.

"You will make me a nice fur muff one day," she threatened, though he ignored her and scratched at the door, knowing full well the threat was harmless.

Skirts wrapping haphazardly around her legs, Freyja fought her way across the yard. It was almost five in the afternoon and evening was falling. In the village, most of the men would be retiring to the tavern to talk and laugh beneath the smoky eaves, whilst the goodwives tended their children and tucked them in for the night.

Not so out here. Freyja had been raised on these rugged slopes, beneath the looming volcanic mountain of Krafla. In the distance its constant plume of smoke seemed almost invisible against the gray clouds.

Still, its presence was more than felt. Freyja crossed herself. "Blessed Father, watch over us," she murmured, glaring at the mountain. "Let *dreki* sleep another night."

The small flock of ewes must have sensed the ominous press of the storm, for they were at the woven stick fence, bleating to be let into the small barn. Two snowy white lambs with black markings

peered at her from beneath one old ewe. Despite her mood, Freyja couldn't help a smile.

Loki watched them with avid interest, licking at his cheeks with his long pink tongue.

Don't you dare. She snapped the thought at him and he sat down obediently, giving her a sly, long-suffering look.

It took little effort to draw the small herd into the barn, coaxing them into the separate stalls. Her boots shuffled over the thin straw, the air still and musty here. One pen remained empty and she hurried back outside to fetch the battered old ram from his own paddock.

Loki yipped as she stumbled. The skies were darkening swiftly now, large fat drops of rain spattering down. One struck her cheek like an icy bullet, wind whipping her skirts and shawl. Her long blonde plait slapped her in the face. The whisper of the storm drove through her, setting her alight with a feverish excitement, her heart quickening. This was the time she felt most alive.

"Henrik!" she called, her voice stolen from her lips by another gust. The pen was empty; or no, not quite. The ram cowered against the wall, head bowed as if to fight the force of the wind.

"You stupid beast," she muttered, grabbing her skirts and straddling the fence. Loki darted in and snatched a mouthful of skirt, almost hauling her back onto his side.

"Curse you," Freyja cried, trying to shake him free. A sudden sharp spatter of rain made her gasp. "Do you wish me to be soaked? Then I shall catch a chill and you must find your own dinner!"

The little fox worried at her skirts, his ears flat to his head. Freyja scraped the wet strands of hair off her face and tugged the material, her curses lost in another hammering echo of thunder.

Let go!

But the little fox would not.

Henrik bleated suddenly, turning in circles as if he didn't know where to go. Freyja shot him a frustrated look, then reached down and grabbed Loki's ruff. A blast of wind knocked her into the ram's pen. She landed flat on her back in the mud, breathless and cursing—

A sudden roar echoed through the air, cutting through the thunder as if it were nothing.

The scream of it beat against her skin, pulsing in her ears until she was forced to clap her hands over them. The primal shiver of it seemed to be inside her, in her head, in her pounding heartbeat—everywhere. It was the type of sound that echoed down through ages past, and sent both man and animal fleeing in mindless fear.

It cut off and Freyja choked in her first gasp, lifting her head in disbelief as a sinuous tail flew directly over her.

"Wurm," she whispered, the heat draining out of her face.

Not just a wurm, but the Great One. He who haunted Krafla's depths, slithering out to stalk the night and hunt his prey.

She'd never seen him this close before. Golden scales gleamed even in the stormy darkness, each wing sweeping out an impossible forty feet wide. She shouldn't be scared; the village paid its tithe and had for decades in exchange for being left alone. But there was something distinctly primeval

about the sight of it directly above her. Some ancestral fear that made her feel like prey.

Then its forelegs curled up, claws plucking delicately at its victim. Henrik bleated one last time, and she could sense his fear as the wyrm thrust its wings downward again, launching itself into the air.

With her ram in its talons.

“No!” Freyja pushed herself upright in disbelief, mud squelching through her fingers. Without the ram she couldn’t breed. It wouldn’t matter *this* spring, but next year.... “No!”

Leaping to her feet, she chased after it. *Curse you! We pay the tithe!* Each week a lamb or goat was tethered out on the hilltop as sacrifice, though eddas told of a time when the sacrifice had been virgin flesh. Her father’s face flashed into her mind, thin with lack of nourishment and color fleeing his cheeks as he coughed.

“Come back!” She snatched up a stone and hurled it skyward.

A pitiful effort, for the wyrm sailed high, soaring beneath gray clouds with mocking disdain, both for her and the weather.

Freyja sank to her knees in the mud, the fist in her chest tightening. What was she going to do? Hope and pray one of the undropped lambs was a male? There were only two ewes still due to deliver, and even if the lambs were male it would be years before she could breed them.

She and her father didn’t have that time.

Something broke inside her. Tears she hadn’t shed even when her mother passed away three years ago, finally tore free. Since then she’d been holding on, trying to keep it all from washing over her as she looked after her increasingly frail father. Slamming her fists into the dirt, Freyja heard the lash of lightning strike the hill nearby. Again. And again. Lightning crashing down in answer to her fury. She would not accept this. She would not fail.

Not even if she had to take her ram back.

The cold rain washed away her hot tears as she looked up. Loki slithered through the wickerwork of the pen and licked at her hand tentatively as if to appease her, but Freyja shook him off.

“I’m going after him,” she told the fox. Dragging her shawl tight, she lurched to her feet, wet through, her skirts caked in mud.

The creature had terrorized her village long enough.

And Freyja was not without her defenses.

Chapter 2

Freyja waited until her father was tucked in bed and snoring before she began ruthlessly stripping off her mud-encrusted clothes. Cold was a constant enemy out here.

Slipping into a pair of her father's old trousers, she belted them tight and dragged her boots on. An oiled sealskin coat went over her shirt to keep the rain off, and she dragged her father's bow out of the chest by his bed.

The storm was blowing itself out by the time she ventured forth. Loki scrabbled at the door behind her, yipping to be let out, but Freyja ignored him.

She strode with cold purpose across the plains behind her house, feet sure on the mud-slicked sides of the hill. Her anger boiled beneath her skin like a storm of her own, frequently sending belated strikes of lightning down nearby. A crater still smoked as she passed by it.

The terrain grew rocky, and soon she was striding past the enormous standing tors no farmer dared remove. Goodwives whispered that trolls lived there, lurking beneath their rocky bases. Freyja had never seen one, but the hairs on the back of her neck tingled as if *something* was watching her. Glancing around, she loosened her grip on the bow.

Come on, she thought. *If you dare*. For anger was her ally tonight, and though the storm was abating, she could summon its fierceness to life again if she wished.

But nothing confronted her. She was almost disappointed as she set her body against the long climb ahead of her.

Stubby grass soon gave way to rock, and then ice. No matter how much she wanted to hold on to it, her anger waned as exhaustion began to tax her heavy limbs. Her father wasn't the only one dining on broth these days.

Lightning flickered in the distance, highlighting the smoking caldera of the volcano. Steam billowed from fumaroles as though hell itself rested beneath the mountain. Though she ached to rest, the sight urged her on. She had to hurry, or it would be too late; perhaps it already was, but somehow her mind was set on saving her ram. It couldn't be too late. It simply couldn't. She wouldn't believe it.

The Great Wurm had haunted the depths of Krafla for over three decades, plundering what it wanted until the villagers agreed to pay it the tithe. Nobody knew where it had come from, though

rumor whispered there were more throughout the center of Iceland and the southern coast, following the volcano trail, for that was where they lived.

Cold-blooded creatures they were, difficult to kill, and incredibly dangerous. She could remember the tales her mother used to tell of them. The fabled *dreki*. Constantly hungering for heat and slumbering close to the volcano's depths.

Freyja's favorite tale had been that of Marya, the virgin shepherdess who had been staked out for the tithe of the mighty Beirammon, back when wyrms still thirsted for human flesh. Instead, a young soldier named Alvar hunted the wyrm and his prey back to the volcano, and killed it in a dangerous duel.

Her mother had rolled her eyes as Freyja tried to enact the sword blow that lopped the mighty wyrm's head off. Helga much preferred the story of Anika, who had enticed the local *dreki* into mortal flesh and become his lover until the village had turned against them, and she'd flown off on his back, never to be seen again.

"He probably ate her," Freyja had said, practically ruthless even at the age of twelve.

"No. No, I don't think he ate her, my little one." And then her mother had laughed, as if she knew something Freyja didn't.

Thunder rumbled around the peak of the mountain as she climbed, her thigh muscles aching. Slipping on moss, Freyja scrambled up over the last rocky hill and stared for a moment at the gaping caldera. Sulfurous fumes leaked from crevices, and bubbling mud pools threatened to drag in the unwary traveler. Freyja avoided them as easily as if she had been this way before, *listening* to the earth's trembling beneath her feet, the aching groan of its bowels and the blistering hiss of its exhale.

Any local knew where the opening to the *dreki*'s lair was. As lightning flickered, Freyja stubbornly dragged herself up over the ice-crusting rocks. There was no trail, for the wyrm had no need of it. As she climbed, the smoldering coal of anger burned to life in her chest again. She almost fancied she could hear something bleating, but then thunder rumbled, low and ominous.

Her very own battle cry.

Finally, she dragged herself onto the ledge that opened into a fissure into the volcano. It was warmer here, though not unbearably so. Krafla had not erupted for many years, and no doubt the wyrm would not have returned if it were going to do so in the near future. *Dreki* had ways of listening to the earth's rumblings; the same sense Freyja herself had.

Right now the earth beneath her creaked, but it was not angry. No, that was all her.

Leaning under the overhang of the cave mouth, Freyja knelt and untied the small lantern from her belt. She dragged her gloves off and cupped her hands around the wick. *Come. Dance for me.* Her breath stirred the small wick and then a tiny flame sputtered to life, flaring up and almost singeing her hands.

Something shifted in the darkness; a sense of the mountain listening, as if it felt her small magic. Freyja placed a hand on the barren ground. *Easy.* She soothed it, stroking it with the awareness within

her, feeling it tremble beneath her touch.

An alien presence brushed against her mind and Freyja froze, sucking in a sharp breath. The pressure was almost overwhelming, a mountain leaning down upon her. Then suddenly it was gone.

Freyja closed the small glass door on the lantern, and stared into the darkness of the lava tube. “That is right,” she whispered in Norse. “You know I am here.”

The lantern guided her into the heart of the mountain. The air reeked of sulfur and burned cinnamon, smoky spices. A scent that was incredibly appealing. She breathed it in, feeling it sweep through her, warming her from within. Somehow she knew it, though she had never breathed its like before.

The scent drugged her, luring her ever deeper. Ice gleamed in a thin sheen over the entrance floor, melting with each passing step as the air warmed. The walls were smooth, with rough bands at interval heights where lava had flowed, like the tidemark on the caves by the sea.

As she turned a corner, taking careful, stalking steps, something gleamed white and stark at the corner of her vision.

Freyja spun, holding the lantern high. A leering skull stared back at her, the owner slumped forever against the wall, his pitted armor tarnished and rusted. A sword hung clasped in bony fingers. Swallowing hard, Freyja crouched beside it, and tugged the skeletal fingers away from the hilt as she exchanged it for the bow.

She could feel that other awareness watching her, listening as if it could hear her.

You won't frighten me. You won't.

The tunnel opened into a larger cavern, enormous stalactites stabbing sharp fingers down from the roof, some touching the floors in dripping columns much like melted candlewax. Piles of gold coins glittered in the darkness, heaped at the sides of the cavern as if the press of the enormous wyrm's body forced them there. Winking gemstones. A dozen rubies at least. For a moment Freyja couldn't think. She could only stare at the veritable hoard in front of her. Wyrms were said to be voracious for treasure, guarding it with their fierce tempers, but here was coin enough to see her father fed forever. The entire village. Perhaps even all of Iceland.

Her fingers itched to take just enough to buy a dozen ewes and several rams to replace what had been stolen. The gold meant little to her, but the concept of what she could buy with it was incredibly tempting.

She could buy a future for her and her father.

As if sensing her thoughts, a warning rumble smoked its way through the tunnel. Freyja tore her gaze from the glittering piles. The *dreki* were possessive of their treasures, it was said. To even think of taking but one coin was to bring her own death down upon her.

It was warmer here; sweat trickled down the back of her neck and between her bound breasts. Freyja held the sword in front of her, sweeping the darkness with the lantern. He was here. Somewhere. She could feel the dark energy of his power, dwelling in the shadows like some

enormous smoldering volcano.

“So now they send my tithe to me?”

The thought-whisper almost crushed her, and her fingers clenched around the sword hilt as she ground her teeth together. Pressure built behind Freyja’s left eye; a stabbing ache that promised to make her head throb for days. She drew her focus in on herself, creating a shield against the immense presence. The pressure eased.

“I’m not your tithe,” she called back. “The village pays you its tithe! And you have stolen my ram!”

A husky chuckle rumbled in the darkness, like a cat purring. Movement shifted, diamond-hard scales rasping over the polished stone floors. Freyja took a step back, her breath catching as she raked the darkness for signs of the wyrm.

Don’t be afraid. He can’t kill you. We pay the tithe, she told herself. Still the sensation of the *dreki* watching her made her nerves thrum with anticipation. She held the sword low, sweeping it in front of her.

“Tithe?” the dragon whispered. *“Your village has not paid its tithe in three moons. So, I will take what is owed. Your ram was... delicious.”*

Freyja’s lips pressed tightly together. *Too late to save Henrik.* Something hot and impotent burned at the back of her eyes.

Then she realized what he had said.

The tithe hadn’t been paid.

The dragon was no longer bound by his word not to harm her.

Freyja placed the lantern on the ground and crept behind a stalactite, sword held at the ready, her heart thumping in her ears, drowning out all other sound. What had she done? Trapped herself in here with a creature that might just eat her? A creature that was near invincible with its plated scales and impenetrable skin.

The only place that showed any vulnerability was the smooth skin under its jaw or behind its forearm, where a sword just *might* pierce it, if she believed the eddas.

“You tremble?” His voice echoed with his delight.

Shadows of a long sinuous neck and the devilishly shaped head shifted on the wall. Freyja spun back around her stalactite, breathing hard. She darted a look to the left, and then ran, her boots silent on the stone floor. The shadowy head whipped around and Freyja threw herself onto her knees in a slide, spinning behind a larger stalactite, and pressing her back to it.

“Do you know how many have ever dared enter here?” A whisper slid hot along her nerves. He was hunting for her, his mind darting over hers.

Freyja pulled her senses in small, trying to hide, limning herself in shadows, and wrapping them around her. Pressure washed over her, as thunderous as the storm outside, but her small shadow-shield protected her from the worst of it and the storm rolled over her, searching elsewhere.

“Do you think you can hide?” Another rustle in the darkness. *“I can scent your skin, your hair... the soap in your clothes. Did you think to come here to steal from me?”*

“To steal—? The only thief here is you! I came to take back that which was mine!” The thought flew from her before she could stop it. Freyja’s grip tightened on the sword hilt. What a fool she was. Always her temper got the better of her.

She’d expected the wyrm to lunge for her, but only silence greeted her. Silence in which she sat with breath held, desperate to track him through the cave.

“To take back your tithe?”

She wouldn’t be drawn. Not this time. Freyja glanced toward the opening, and froze as she saw the liquid shadow of a tail lash against the cave wall.

Curse him. He was waiting by the entrance for her. She looked to the right, deeper into his lair. But perhaps there would be more tunnels there? A way to escape that he would not expect? Levering to her feet, she glanced around the rock, and slowly stepped toward the next one.

“Come out, little mouse. I will not hurt you.”

The same tone she cajoled her ewes with when she led them for slaughter. She had to get out of here.

“Even if you do escape, do you think I will not know where to find you?”

Freyja froze.

Scales rasped against the walls. That alluring scent of cinnamon-spice flushed through her as he came closer. Freyja’s head swam, her body shifting toward it. That scent. Calling her. Filling her with a liquid heat that pooled low in her abdomen. She shook her head to clear it, forcing herself to breathe through her mouth until she could think again.

“You smell... delicious. Like something I used to know of.” A pregnant pause. *“What are you?”*

“The woman whose ram you stole—” She stopped the thought there, but he caught some of it because that purring rasp sounded again, as if he were laughing at her.

“Come out.” Shadows danced on the wall. His head, darting suddenly around one of the enormous rocks near her.

Freyja looked up. Sharp, dagger-shaped rocks clung to the roof far above. Did she dare?

Shadows rippled over the wall. Stalking her. Coming closer. Swallowing hard, she pressed her hand to the rock and closed her eyes, *reaching* out.

The cavern trembled, just enough for a few tiny pebbles to rain down. Freyja stretched her senses out, reaching further, trying to meld the earth to her touch. One of the enormous jutting stalactites shuddered above the *dreki*, and then she felt the tiny crack snake through it, breaking off the end.

Gasping at the sudden exertion, she snatched a breath as rock rained down from the ceiling, directly where she thought the wyrm to be. A rumble of surprise greeted her, and Freyja took her chances. Sword in hand, she darted back toward the entrance she’d come through.

Something lashed toward her feet.

She saw the whip of his tail too late, and screamed as her feet went out from under her. The sword skittered across the floor as she fell, staggering into a pile of golden krone and silver rigsdaler coins that cut her hands. They scattered everywhere, one of them rolling with mocking slowness toward the feet of the great beast behind her.

Freyja scrambled onto her bottom and hands, shoving backward with her feet toward the sword. Her breath caught as the dragon loomed over her, faint light playing over the iridescence of his scales.

Freyja froze.

She didn't dare take her gaze off him. He'd tricked her with his shadow, making her believe he'd been far closer to her than he was, and now he loomed over her, golden wings stretching out as if to intimidate, the enormous head stretched forward with eyes narrowed and dagger-teeth bared.

Beautiful and horrific and terrifying. She couldn't take her eyes off him, could barely breathe at the sight of such lithe magnificence, dancing around the cave on surprisingly quick feet. Savage death dwelled in his amber eyes. What a beautiful fury he was, like the storm outside. If she had to die, then she could almost think of no better beast to fell her.

But dying had never been her plan.

Freyja's hand closed over the sword and she wrenched it forward, pointing it at him pathetically. One last defiant act as she lay tumbled on her sealskin on one of his piles of gold.

"You think me beautiful?" His head lowered, resting on his forelegs, those razor-sharp claws flexing. *"You are fierce."*

Freyja's arm grew heavy as a low rumbling purr filled the cavern. Her eyes narrowed and she slowly let the sword fall to her lap, suspicion creeping through her. She was right! He was laughing at her.

Without taking her eyes off him, she climbed to her feet, dragging the sword with her. The futility of it struck her. She could see from the polished gleam of those scales she would never have been able to pierce it. Still, it gave her something to lean on as she stared at the mighty wyrm.

"What do you intend to do with me?" Freyja asked defiantly, her nerves itching. Why was he just waiting?

The pupils of his eyes were slit like a cat's. The eyelids lowered a fraction, an almost smug gesture that wasn't lost on her. *"What do you think the penalty should be for stealing into my lair?"*

He wasn't going to kill her? Freyja's shoulders slumped. Suddenly she wanted to cry. As if the thought spurred them on, hot tears flooded her eyes. "I don't care," she said. Her voice lost its edge. "Do what you will and be done with it. I'm too exhausted to waste words with you."

The wyrm rumbled deep in his chest. *'Words are all you have.'*

"I have cold steel too," she muttered.

"And it provided such wondrous protection for its previous owner."

Freyja stared at the wyrm mulishly. Not only did he laugh at her, but that was definitely sarcasm. She tossed the sword aside and crossed her arms, blinking away her tears.

“Better.” He settled again, entire body relaxing into a lazy sprawl on the floor. *“I do not like it when humans try to stick sharp things in me.”*

“I don’t like it when wyrms steal my sheep.”

The wyrm yawned, exhibiting an array of wicked-sharp white teeth. *“Make more of them.”*

Freyja actually took a step of startled anger toward it. “I would, but that was my last ram. I don’t have another, hence I cannot breed more. I hope your belly’s full, for you shall be getting no more lambs from me!” Again the tears threatened. “And neither shall I. My father and I shall starve for your greed!”

Those eyes narrowed. *“It was you humans who broke the tithe first. I only took what was promised.”*

“From one who had not promised it,” she retorted. “Each family knows the roster, and who must make the sacrifice. I paid mine months back!”

The dragon suddenly launched itself to its feet, and Freyja stumbled back in fright, tripping on a pile of kroner.

“It would not do,” he said at last, *“to see such a fierce little mouse starve.”*

Freyja’s fists clenched. “I am *not* a mouse.”

“No?” Again the satisfied rumble. *“No, you are not. What are you? You smell so familiar.”*

What are you? Words she had been taunted with all of her life, for the oddness of her eyes and the strange intuition she had always suffered. *“Don’t let anyone ever know what you can do,”* her mother had whispered. *“Not even your father. You are special, Freyja. Like me....”*

“Am I a changeling?” she’d asked.

Her mother had smiled and leaned down to kiss her forehead. *“Ignorance is your best weapon, my love. You are special, that is all you need know.”*

Freyja stared up at the mighty wyrm. “I am a woman,” she said carefully, for he would taste on her breath any lie she spoke. “I am human.”

“You are a mystery,” the dreki murmured. *“And there is nothing I like more than mystery.”*

“What do you mean?”

A claw lashed out and swiped through one of the glittering piles. Gold coins scattered toward her, tumbling over her boots and brushing against her trousers. *“Take as much as your cupped hands can hold as payment for the ram. It would not do to see you starve now I have found you.”*

Now I have found you.... Freyja didn’t move.

“Each new moon, you shall come and visit. I find myself curious about you. That is the punishment for daring to enter my lair, and price for your continued existence.”

She was right; he did have some plan for her, some perverse desire to... to.... She didn’t know. Couldn’t even comprehend why he would ask this of her.

“Next time I would suggest you do not bring the sword.” The wyrm glanced at her, its lips curling in an odd way one would almost think a smile.

Freyja knelt down and dug her hands into the gold. The price was more than she wished to pay, but she was pragmatic. Refusing his gifts would see both her father and herself starve, and some part of her doubted she would be allowed to refuse. She had been granted a reprieve. For whatever reason he granted it—wyrms were not human after all, and bound by their own whims—the truth was the same.

She had survived.

She had actually challenged the mighty wyrm, and won.

Still, Freyja did not feel as though she had won as she stood and pocketed the veritable fortune. Staring into those amber, cat-slit eyes felt as though she stared into the burning furnace of the sun. He was not finished with her, not yet.

“Now go.” A whisper across her senses, one that sounded eminently satisfied with itself. *“You look weary and should sleep.”*

Freyja took a step back toward the entrance, not daring to turn her back on him at all.

“I shall see you soon, little mouse.”



After she left, Rurik exploded into the storm-lashed sky with heavy thrusts from his magnificent wings, barely feeling the faint sting of rain.

Exhilaration danced through him, sending lightning crashing down again and again, dancing in tune to his desire. He pinwheeled through the sky above a ridge, gliding in and out of the flickering stabs of lightning, whipping it to a greater frenzy.

Fierce joy rode him, and a hunger he had not felt in many years. He felt as if the cobwebs had swept from his drowsing mind, as if a dash of icy water had splashed over him whilst he lazed on the heat-baked stones of his tunnels. A shock of life, returning.

Who is she?

Rurik circled high, his eagle gaze lighting on the tiny, bedraggled figure far below, fighting her way across the bleak landscape. She would not see him, but he watched over her. The *dreki* loved puzzles, and she was a curiosity wrapped up in a mystery.

Fierce.

His female. Appearing in the heart of the storm to challenge him in his own lair. Of course he could not resist her.

And then there was the mystery of her power. He could remember the taste of it in the air between them, crackling like lightning. It reminded him of something, though he could not bring the thought to mind.

What is she?

For the first time in decades his interest, long dormant, stirred. The male in him had looked and

seen a creature of flame and shadow, of mighty power, utterly bedazzling. A treasure beyond any he owned. He wanted her. Therefore he would have her, and together they would burn the world until he tired of her.

Rurik dipped his wings, feeling the lash of the winds. It turned him into a free fall, wind whipping past him with dizzying intensity until he banked at the last moment, sweeping over the moors and alighting on a crag. A shudder swept through him, an electric tingle lighting across his skin.

It had been a long time since he walked as a man. A long time since he had desired it, indeed desired anything. Lightning flickered in the distance and in front of him his shadow quivered, then shrunk, wings disappearing, and his serpentine neck folding in on itself. Rurik fell to his hands and knees, feeling the power of the land roil beneath his touch. Rain stung his skin, a whiplash of sensuous pleasure as he bowed his head and waited for the shock of his transition to fade.

Nude. Glorious. Full of immense power that boiled beneath the heavy muscle of his skin. Rurik lifted his head as water sluiced down over his naked skin and smiled fiercely, his teeth bared.

Time to go hunting.

Chapter 3

The problem with gold was that nobody in her village or the neighboring farms would be able to trade for it, nor was it wise to show too much of it, in case someone decided to see if she had more.

Freyja spent three days debating the problem, then finally harnessed their small Icelandic pony, Hanna, to the cart. Telling her father she intended to buy a new ram in Akureyri—without revealing the precise details of the demise of their previous one—she set out toward the trading town. The cart was stocked full of wool and eiderdown, for trips to the trading town were rare and she was practical enough to take this opportunity to sell what she had stored.

One day to travel, one to trade, and one to get home. He'd be fine. He'd lived in their little house his entire life. He wouldn't need his eyes to get around, and their distant neighbor had promised to keep an eye on him.

Sunshine washed down over her as she guided Hanna along the marshy plain toward Akureyri. The thin track was barely marked by passing traffic, as the last thaw had obliterated it. Only several *kerlingar*—small pyramids of stone shaped much like old women—marked the way.

“Easy now,” Freyja murmured, as Hanna crested the rise and Akureyri revealed itself below.

The trading town was nestled in the heart of a fjord, with a natural harbor and warmer waters that kept the bay ice-free. Red houses lined the bay and several Danish merchant ships lingered in the harbor. Sometimes the English came to trade for fish, but it was done under a cover of secrecy, for the Danish held the trade monopoly. One could often see them swaggering about the town, turning their noses up at the natives.

For a woman travelling alone, it wasn't wise to venture too close to the docks, but Freyja had been born with one mostly green eye, and one brown. Witch-born or elf-cursed, depending on which religion or superstition you believed in. People still crossed themselves when they saw her, and few would dare accost her.

She hoped.

Finding a room and board at a small inn, Freyja hastily brushed Hanna down, the gold in the pouch at her neck seeming to weigh her down. She felt as though eyes lingered on her as she left the stables, though that was ridiculous. Nobody knew what she had on her person.

“Hey now! Be careful with that!” someone bellowed as she hurried to the inn.

A large merchant ship had docked close to shore, and men were hastily trying to rig up some sort of contraption to swing what looked like an enormous crossbow on wheels from the ship deck to the dock.

Freyja tucked her bright red shawl around her shoulders as she sidestepped through the growing crowd. “What is it?” she asked no one in particular.

A young lad in a dark blue seafaring coat with brass buttons up the sides of it glanced at her, his hair covered in a knitted woolen cap. “It’s the dragon hunter, miss. From Norway.”

All about her people were lured out of their homes. Freyja stood on her toes to see. *Dragon hunter*. Chills of premonition edged down her spine. “The only *dreki* in these parts is the one beneath Krafla.”

“Aye,” the lad replied. “Some of the local villages have put together a fund for the dragon hunter’s reward. They want no more of this tithe, or this wurm’s demands. Iceland should have no master anymore.”

It would take more than a group of villagers to pay for the dragon hunter. It had to be Benedikt. He and his father made their fortune mining sulfur, and then buying up as much land as they could. He’d long been vocal about his hatred for the tithe and the demand it placed on the villagers. Not that she thought his desire to rid himself of the wurm was truly guided by his concern for others. Benedikt’s pride was enough to resent any overlord, no matter how little the wurm stirred their affairs.

“Where is the dragon hunter?” she asked, stumbling over the words.

The lad pointed. “There!”

Freyja’s breath caught as an enormous man strode into view, yelling harshly at the engineers as the ballista was levered off the ship. It dangled over the gulf between water and wharf, swinging precariously.

He was a tall man, wearing archaic chain mail and a long fur cloak. His hair shone moonlight-silver in the dying light, and even from this distance she could see he was handsome. Around her, several whispered murmurs assured her she was not the only one to believe so.

Freyja couldn’t tear her gaze away as the ballista swung toward the wharf. Unease twisted in her gut as she tucked her hands into the narrow crevices of her elbows. The gold seemed to burn in the pouch around her neck.

“Has he hunted many *dreki*?” she asked. “I did not believe them so easy to fell.”

“He has ways,” the lad assured her. “They say he’s hunted three of them in Norway.”

Three. A man who knew how to kill them then. Freyja shivered. In hindsight, the wurm seemed curious more than anything else. With time to think over the incident in the cave, she was swiftly realizing he never meant to kill her.

If he’d wished such a thing, he could have done so immediately.

An odd knot of guilt warmed in her chest. She shouldn’t get involved. After all, what could she

do? Warn the beast?

The dragon hunter stepped to the edge of the wharf, lifting his hands for silence. “My name,” he called in a strong accent, “is Haakon Haraldsson. I am here to rid you of the foul beast that lurks beneath Krafla.”

Clapping sprang up, women cheering for him and waving handkerchiefs. One would think him a feudal king for the way he carried himself.

A slight smile curled over Haakon’s mouth, though his eyes remained as cold as the glaciers further south. The precise same color too, she noted, as his gaze locked on her. “My team have destroyed three of the foul beasts, and sent them back to the hell they came from.” At this he crossed himself, and half the crowd echoed him. “They tell me Iceland is burdened by such creatures. And I say, no more!” He roared the last words.

Excitement ran through the crowd, trailing over her skin. Freyja was the only one not clapping, and he saw it, his eyes meeting hers with a challenge.

“I hear many words,” another voice called out in a low baritone. “But I do not hear how you will perform this”—the voice dropped to a mocking drawl—“miraculous feat.”

All eyes swung toward the back of the crowd. Gasps rang out as people stepped aside to reveal another man, sunlight gleaming off the golden thread of his embroidered waistcoat.

He did not move, gaze locked on the dragon slayers, and his arms crossed over his firm chest. Both men were of a height, though the newcomer’s shoulders were broader, and he held himself as though he were the tallest man in the crowd.

He was the sun to Haakon’s moonlit coloring. Silky golden hair raked back from his brow, his watchful eyes the color of amber. Someone long ago had broken his nose, and the imperfection only heightened the severely handsome cut of his features. He was breathtaking. The kind of man she’d pictured as the prince of all the stories her mother told her, though the predatory nature of his gaze told her he might not be quite as noble as she anticipated.

Definitely a stranger. Powerful and at ease with himself, as though he knew his worth. Freyja couldn’t stop her gaze from dropping to those muscular thighs, encased in superfine buff breeches. His coat was dark bronze wool, and a spill of snowy white lace at his throat highlighted the golden hue of his skin. She’d never seen the like in her life.

“And who are you?” Haakon called.

“You may refer to me as Rurik,” the stranger replied, with a slight accent. His voice was smooth, yet everybody strained to hear it. “And I study myths. Including this *dreki* you speak of killing.”

“A scholar.” The way Haakon pronounced the word spoke volumes. He smiled. “Perhaps you should leave the talk of killing dragons to those better suited for it.”

Laughter spilled around them.

“Knowledge is its own weapon,” Rurik countered, an amused gleam warming his eyes. There was a challenge there.

Haakon turned and gestured toward the ballista. “This shoots solid steel bolts at a hundred yards a second. It’s strong enough to pierce even a dragon’s hide.”

“He must stay very still for you then.”

Haakon tilted his head slightly to the side. “There are ways,” he said, with a chilling little smile.

"And the chainmail? Do you think yourself a knight of old?"

Haakon trailed his knuckles over the smooth rings. "This saved my life three months ago. A dragon has sharp teeth. This stops them."

A whip crack of sound drew everyone’s attention, including Haakon’s. Freyja’s gaze jerked to the far rope holding the heavy machine in place. As she watched, one strand of the hemp unraveled with devastating swiftness. The other held for a second before the pressure snapped it in half too.

“Secure that bloody thing!” Haakon roared as the ballista tumbled onto its side, dangling by two precarious ropes.

Another broke, and the ballista jerked closer to the water below before the final rope lost its fight, and snapped with a mighty crack.

“No!” Haakon raced forward as the ballista tumbled into the water below with a chilly splash. It sank without further aplomb and he cursed at the engineers who had rigged the harness, barking orders in a brutally authoritative tone.

“A pity,” a voice, darkly amused, murmured by her ear. “Now he shall find it most difficult to hunt *dreki*.”

The words whispered over the smooth skin behind her ear. Freyja shivered, and spun on her heel to face the man. Rurik stood closer than he ought to, his body cutting the cool slipstream of the wind so she instantly warmed. Or perhaps that was the heat that lingered in the air between them.

She hadn’t even heard him moving. Tugging her shawl tight around her shoulders, Freyja glanced up at him as if daring him to stare at her eyes.

And he did.

But not the way most men usually did, recoiling in horror. Instead he leaned closer, seeming to stare right through her as if he could see something no one else could. As if somehow he stripped her naked—not of her clothes, but of every pretense and inhibition she’d ever owned, every lie she’d ever told, every little smile she’d used to mask her hurt.

And it burned. The connection between them was irrevocable. Freyja was lost, unable to look away, drawn like a lodestone to iron filings, lured by the smoky amber of his gaze. Her breath trapped itself in her lungs, as though she wore a steel corset.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he finally murmured, and the spell was broken.

“Beautif—” she blurted, then stopped herself. Nobody had ever called them beautiful before, and this conversation was incredibly daring for a man who had not even asked her name.

Small lines creased in the corners of his eyes, as though he smiled without moving his lips. “You doubt me? Do you not own a mirror?”

“This is most unseemly,” she murmured, dropping her head so as to draw as little attention as possible.

“I did not take you for a seemly woman at all.”

Freyja looked up with a steely glare. “Sir, you have spoken out of turn. I will thank you to move out of my way.”

Those amber eyes sharpened, as though he had unearthed precisely what he wished to find. “My apologies. I did not mean to offend. I merely meant to point out you are a rare blossom in a garden of”—his gaze raked the crowd—“ordinary blooms. You’re not the type to conform. I find the effect stimulating.”

And then he hit her with the full power of his smile.

Freyja stepped back, tucking her shawl tighter as though it could somehow protect her or help sort her whirlpool of sudden emotion. “You offer compliments with a practiced ease.”

“I speak the truth and always have.” He offered her his hand as if to bring her fingers to his lips. “My name is Rurik.”

“So I believe you said.” His fingers were long and elegant. She eyed them as one would eye a toad. She didn’t want to touch him. Instinct had never let her down in the past and it was screaming at her now. Touch him and she would be lost. Touch him and all manner of dangerous, life-changing moments existed in her future. “And if honeyed words are the only weapons in your arsenal, then I fear you shall have a fruitless hunt.”

“Are you challenging me to prove my intentions?”

“All I am saying,” she stared at him defiantly, “is that I will not succumb to flattery.”

His eyelashes lowered as he realized she had no intention of taking his hand. “I don’t believe I caught your name.”

“I never offered it,” she replied, and gathering her skirts, moved to step around him. “Good day, sir.”

Freyja could feel eyes on her as she hurried toward the inn. Watching her. Smoldering. And then she realized Rurik wasn’t the only person watching her.

The dragon slayer glared at her, his arms folded across his chest and his face expressionless. Behind him, his men dove into the waters of the bay, to attach cables to the ballista, but he paid them no mind. No, his attention was all for her.

Freyja faltered. Her ears began catching hints of the murmurs that surrounded her. The flickering glances of the crowd.

“...curious how it fell like that? All at once, as if the ropes were cut...”

“Cut by what?”

Silence greeted the question. Nobody quite looked at her, but she saw an older lady cross herself.

Somehow Freyja forced herself to take another step. Then another. Moving stiffly, though she tried not to. Her pulse started to race. They did not burn witches anymore, but she was suddenly aware of

her vulnerability so far from home. There were none here to protect her or protest her innocence. No one who knew her.

It was not so bad out in the countryside where the goodwives told their tales, and everyone knew it was wise not to disturb the tors for fear of earning the wrath of trolls. Changeling, the local bonders whispered behind her back, but they did little more than whisper. Here in the town, religion had a stronger hold.

Freyja tried to ignore the dragon slayer's stare as she reached the inn door. The crowd was not where the danger lay.

"Here."

Rurik frowned down at her, offering his arm. He too understood the whispering vibe of the crowd. Somehow he looked different, as if the lazy, handsome wastrel had washed from his countenance, to be replaced by something infinitely feral. Meaner. His cheekbones seemed harshly cut, and his eyes glittered like a smoldering furnace. He placed his body between her and the crowd; cutting off the dagger-glance the dragon slayer gave her.

She shouldn't trust him.

"Take my arm," he said. "Dine with me."

Freyja slid her hand through the crook of his arm, swallowing hard. The press of his body against hers filled her with heat and an odd longing. Dare she trust it? Him?

"I won't let them hurt you. Come." He pushed through the inn door, holding it open for her. A slow smile curled over his mouth. "Be brave, my lady. I did not think you the type to retreat from anything."

Freyja sucked in a breath. He was right. If she could face down the mighty wyrm by herself, then she could certainly handle a crowd of superstitious, narrow-minded gossips.

The thought brought an ill-timed smile to her lips, and Rurik's gaze sharpened on them. "You are amused?"

"I have an odd sense of what to be frightened of. If you knew what I have faced... and yet I quail at this." She laughed softly. "Foolishness."

Rurik guided her through the door with his hand in the small of her back. The low-beamed ceiling was stained with peat smoke and several locals leaned on the bar, smoking their pipes. Mostly men, for women rarely frequented a place like this, only those like herself who were forced to trade for lack of menfolk in their lives.

"People are frightened of what they do not understand," Rurik murmured, the pressure of his hand warming the small of her back. For a moment she caught a hint of his cologne, and turned her face unconsciously toward his chest to breathe it in. Spicy. Smoky-hot. *Delicious*.

Their eyes met. Something about his gaze frightened her. Darkly knowledgeable. Patient. As if he knew precisely what sort of reaction she was having, and simply waited for her to succumb.

"Perhaps they have cause to be frightened," she murmured.

"And are we speaking of you or me here?"

His gaze raked over the plain black cloth of her *skautbúningur*. It was her best gown, with gold leaf embroidered around the neckline and skirts, and a spill of white lace at her throat. It covered her from throat to toe, but for a moment she felt dangerously unclothed.

Both of them. For he had a certain power too.

“Thank you,” she murmured, drawing away from him and ignoring his implication. “But I do believe—”

“You are not walking away from me again, are you? And here I thought the North was known for its hospitality.”

Freyja’s words died in her mouth. With such a distance between farmsteads, and the harsh climes, to turn a man or woman from your door was unthinkable. To suggest she lacked in hospitality was an insult, and he knew it, from the amused twinkle that lit his amber gaze.

“This is not my home,” she said, using precise, clipped words. “You may come or go as you please.”

“Then I shall stay to dine.” He stepped past in a swish of scent that left her breathless. Freyja’s hands curled into fists, but Rurik seemed not to see. A smile curled over his sensual mouth as he glanced behind him. “And look. There is one table left. If you ask me nicely, I shall share it with you.”

Arrogant devil. She did not wish to dine with him, but her stomach clenched as if reminding her of how long it had been since breakfast. And glutton that she was, she had been dreaming of baked kipper pie or roasted salmon for the entire journey to town. A rare treat, and now she had coin she could indulge herself.

But he was dangerous.

For she’d never felt like this before: as if she had a secret he somehow knew. A secret carnal craving that had never flared ’til now, as if her body knew things she herself didn’t. Perhaps having men shy away from her eyes had been a hidden boon in the past. Rurik’s frank interest in her unnerved her in so many ways.

“I wish to know more about the *dreki* beneath Krafla,” he said, starting toward the table as if she’d given her assent. “To further my studies. I would be most appreciative if you would join me.”

Curse him.

What could it hurt? She did not have to speak overmuch. And his insinuation of her inhospitality irked her. Her mother would have been shamed, and Freyja herself... Had she changed so much in recent years? For a moment she remembered the joy of being a child, when she had been sheltered and protected out there on the plains, not understanding quite why they had so few visitors, or why she was often sent to bed early when there were. She’d been hungry for human company once, before she’d learned what the world was truly like.

His manner had been uncondemning. Freyja’s heart gave a small twist in her chest. More than anything, she longed for that.

Rurik glanced over his shoulder as he wove his way through the crowded seats. Eyes watched

him as he went, conversation dropping to a murmur. An outsider. Like her.

Freyja didn't realize she'd taken a step toward him until the hardness leached out of his eyes.

"My lady," he almost purred, holding a chair out for her.

She sat and let him push her chair in, his knuckles brushing against her shoulders. A spark of heat went all the way through her at the touch. Freyja half glanced over her shoulder, but he was moving, circling the table with fluid grace and sinking into the chair opposite her.

"Now come, my lady." He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me about yourself."

Chapter 4

“Were we not speaking of you, and your fascination for *dreki*, my lord?” His little mouse countered.

She smelled like wildflowers and a spring morning, of dew wet on the grass, or the breeze that cut the mountain passes. Wild and free. Untamable.

The look on her face, however, was almost frigid; a cool, biting wind from the south, coming straight off the glaciers. Rurik leaned back in the seat, perusing her with lazy fascination.

Her manner ought to have left him cold, but he found himself only curious. She had not been so wary of him when she faced him in his lair. Only now, as a man before her, did he make her nervous, and he knew precisely why.

“I am not a very interesting man.”

She arched a brow. “I beg to differ. After all, you didn’t deny the courtesy title I just bestowed upon you.”

Clever mouse. He gestured to the serving maid to bring them wine. “You demand all of my secrets, and here I have not even your name...”

That made her pretty mouth purse. “Freyja. Freyja Helgasdottir.”

Freyja. Of course. “Goddess of love and war, beauty and death. It’s a lovely name.”

“I am no goddess.”

“That depends upon whose eyes you look through.”

Pink darkened her cheeks. “I have no wish to offend the gods.”

“So, you still believe in the old gods?”

Freyja hesitated. “I have been baptized, but I believe there are some things in this world that defy explanation.” Those mismatched eyes locked on him. “And you are doing an excellent job of not answering my original question, I notice.”

“I am not a noble man, by the very definition of the word,” he said carefully. “I own no lands,”—*technically true*—“I have no specific title, and I claim no king.”

“Do you mean you do not recognize the Danish king? Iceland has a limited constitution now, and some autonomy. Were you a follower of Jón Sigurðsson? My father had older copies of his annual magazine, and I have read his thoughts on democracy.”

This was where she came alive. Each flicker of her eyes toward him—those beautiful, unique eyes—made his body harden.

So she was curious about his thoughts, but immune to his flattery. How intriguing.

“No. I have not heard of this Sigurðsson—I’ve been absorbed in other matters of interest—but I do believe no... no man rules the earth beneath him. Not here.” He examined the bottle of wine the serving maid brought him, then nodded. “This will do.”

Freyja’s cheeks colored. “I do not drink wine.”

“Have you ever tried it?” He remembered delicious vintages from his youth, when he’d drifted through Renaissance Italy and France, curious about these mortals around him.

“No.”

“Do you wish to?” he asked, ordering his meal.

Freyja hesitated, but there was a ruthlessly mercenary look in her eye. “I shall make do with ale.” She looked to the serving maid. “And I should like the ptarmigan stew with sliced rúgbrauð bread.”

He kept catching hints of her thoughts, thrown into the world about her with careless abandon. And right now, she was thinking of gold coins. As much as he liked gold, he couldn’t quite imagine what it had to do with wine and ale. “I never make do.”

She eyed the cut of his magnificent coat. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

Hmmm. “Bring two glasses just in case,” he instructed the serving maid, “and my lady will have ale on the side.”

Images of his hands hit him as he stroked over the table, and the way his collar tugged open when he shifted, baring the tanned, smooth skin of his throat. Freyja liked the look of him, and Rurik fought a predatory smile as she threw the thought around her.

A curious thing, to see himself through another’s eyes. *Dreki* were strictly forbidden to enter another’s thoughts and pillage them, though anything she projected was fair game. And her thoughts danced over his skin like rainbows, so vivid and colorful he almost tried to reach out and catch them.

A bad idea. The stiff slant of her shoulders alone told him that. If she felt his psychic touch... if she knew precisely what was sitting at her table, then he would lose all chance at seducing her.

Not yet. She was too wary. More timid than he would have ever believed of his fierce mouse. His brows drew together momentarily. What had made her like that? The idea twisted inside him like something with claws.

“So,” she murmured, “where *do* you hail from?” For a moment her eyes lingered on the fine cut of his coat.

Tailor-made, all the way from London. He’d paid a small fortune for the extravagance of having it and others so swiftly finished, before he returned to pursue her. But he was *dreki*. He would no more clothe himself in peasants’ garb than wallow in a piggery.

“I come from the south,” he murmured, eyeing her strictly cut black dress. Freyja ought to be in silk, or better yet, naked, lying on silken sheets. She deserved finer things, and he would see she had

them before he was through with her.

“And you come here to seek tales of *dreki*? Of local superstition?”

Careful here. He could not utter a lie; the *dreki* were bound and honored by their word. “I am curious of what you think of such creatures,” he replied, as the wine, ale, and their dinner arrived. “Many don’t believe their existence. Mostly those in the cities, or on the Continent.”

“I have seen... proof of their existence.” Freyja frowned into her ale. “The cursed creature ate my ram.”

“Your ram?” *Always that bloody sheep.* Would she never forgive him for it? It had been delicious and it had brought her into his lair, when he might never have seen her.

“My village pays a tithe,” she explained. “For thirty years we have been bound to sacrifice one of our livestock each week to the wurm, so he might leave us alone. My father tells me he and the rest of the local farmers gathered together many years ago, and struck a bargain with the beast.”

Beast? “They were either very courageous, or foolish to brave such a fierce creature.”

Freyja shrugged. “Perhaps they knew their offer would be accepted? Wyrms are lazy. Why hunt when a lamb shall be tethered out for you once a week? He used to hunt more frequently, my father claims, but now he spends most of his time lazing in his mountain, soaking up the heat of the volcano.”

“I thought wyrms to be fierce, powerful predators.”

“When they wish to be. Most of the time he leaves us alone. He is bound by his word not to harm us....” A frown tightened her brow. “Though now it seems some of the local bonders have broken *their* word, and hired a hunter.”

“I would not think this would trouble you.”

“It doesn’t.” Yet the worry etched on her expression didn’t fade. She sighed. “If they’ve broken their oath, then the wurm is no longer bound by his. They are vengeful creatures, according to legend. I don’t particularly wish to incur his wrath. I can’t afford to lose any more livestock.”

And she wouldn’t. Her fierce desperation in his cave scoured him. *My father and I shall starve....*

“Perhaps other tithes might appease him?”

At that her mismatched eyes locked on his, a flare of her temper lighting the beautiful green and brown of them. “A virgin sacrifice, you mean? We do not take part in such barbaric practices anymore.”

“They are rare,” he admitted. “A pity.”

“Virgins? Or the act of sacrificing one?” she countered.

Rurik allowed himself a smile—and didn’t answer. “You speak as though it is a crime.”

“No woman should be forced to such depths.”

She was definitely angry now. Her eyes blazed. And Rurik caught the edge of her thoughts. There were few virgins around her farmstead. Most of the young women were either married, or still children.

Except for her.

“In olden times, women offered to be made sacrifice,” he said, sipping his wine, and watching her eyes spit sparks. *Beautiful*. “It was an honor.”

“To be eaten?”

So innocent.... “Oh yes. To be devoured.”

Freyja’s lashes fluttered against her cheeks, which were filling with heat. Yet she did not respond to his playful innuendo, deliberately it seemed, for she certainly understood it. “You are speaking of those foolish eddas, where the *dreki* walk among us.”

“Do you doubt such a thing could be possible?”

“Why would they wish to? My mother said it is the only time they are mortal and vulnerable to injury. So why would one of the *dreki* risk such a thing?”

“Perhaps he is lonely.”

“You are ascribing human attributes to an inhuman creature.”

“Inhuman, yes,” he countered, his own temper flaring. “Don’t ever mistake that, but perhaps all creatures yearn for companionship.”

“There are other *dreki*,” she replied. “Every volcano in Iceland is plagued by one. Sometimes more.”

Rurik’s fingers stilled on the edge of his glass. “Not all of the *dreki* welcome others. Nor are all of them welcomed. If one of their laws are broken, sometimes they cast a *dreki* from their ranks, exiling him to years of loneliness.”

Freyja lifted her gaze at the coolness of his tone, as if she sensed something underlying the words. “How do you know so much?”

“I have eyes. And ears.”

“You sound like my father,” she growled under her breath. “You speak, but say nothing.”

“I am curious as to how a man would allow his unmarried daughter to travel by herself?”

Rurik reached out, and captured the wine bottle, leaning forward to fill her glass. She sat so still, yet tension vibrated through her body. Captured lightning. Just daring him to reach out and touch it.

“My father is blind and ill, so he cannot travel with me.” Those glorious eyes narrowed, and a chilling little smile tightened her soft lips. “However, I am not without protection.”

As well he should know. His little mouse had claws and teeth, though neither would be truly effective against him. Still... he liked it. Liked that snap to her tone, and the way her pretty eyes narrowed as she examined him.

A challenge.

Rurik handed her the glass, their fingers brushing against each other’s as she took it. The touch of her skin sent lightning dancing through him. Like to like. What in the Dark Goddess Hel was she?

Freyja’s eyes widened slightly as if she felt it too, and then she jerked the glass close to her mouth. “Thank you.”

He watched the wine wet her lips, and leave them reddened. Plush, glistening lips he ached to trace, to caress.

Then her eyes widened and she peered into her glass. “This is delicious.”

“I know.” He wasn’t to be distracted. “You do realize you have nothing to protect yourself against when you are with me? I have no intention of hurting you.”

“Who says I am frightened of you?”

“Your manner.”

You couldn’t hurt me if you tried.... Freyja arched a sleek, honey-blond brow, as if she hadn’t just thrown the thought at him. “Then what precisely are your intentions?”

“You intrigue me,” he admitted, watching her lick a trace of wine from her lips. Gods, how he wanted her. “It has been a very long time since such a thing has happened. Perhaps not ever.”

“Do they believe such honeyed words in the cities?”

Rurik smiled, and turned her words back upon her. “You do not like to be complimented. How curious. Is it because you believe yourself unworthy of such words?”

“I am unworthy of nothing,” she snapped.

“Then you admit you are intriguing? That I might see you as such?”

Her mouth opened... and nothing came out of it. Then she pressed those lips firmly together. “I know what you intend when you look at me.”

“Do tell.”

“I am not that kind of woman,” she replied haughtily. “Your empty compliments and blatant desires shall earn you nothing more than this meal shared.”

“That still tells me nothing of my supposed desires.”

Freyja glared at him. “You wish for carnal relations.”

Rurik leaned closer, careful not to let the predatory heat of his desire leech out. Best not to frighten her. Not yet. “I intend to have you in every way possible, Freyja. I intend to discover every last little secret you own, to know you... in every manner. This is a game of seduction, and I will not harm you nor make your choices for you. I speak of courtship only. But I think you would enjoy what I intend, very much so.” At her swift intake of breath, he leaned back. “And I am not ashamed to admit I intend to chase you. Fair warning, fair maid. You will be mine.”

Freyja tilted the wine glass to her mouth. “Fair warning, handsome stranger... you’re wasting your breath.”

How delightful she was. At least she’d relaxed at his stated intentions, as if she were so set on denial the thought he’d win her over couldn’t possibly prevail. “I like a good chase, Freyja.”

“I hope you like a long and fruitless one then. Especially if the choice of consummation is in my hands.”

“Are you not curious?” He reached out and stroked her hand suddenly.

There was that flash fire of connection between them, and her gaze jerked to his. “No,” she said

as she withdrew her hand, but she'd hesitated.

"Do you know what I find so fascinating about you?"

A faint hint of pride and scorn mingled on her face as she swiftly restored herself. "My lips? My hair? My *eyes*?" The dancing flames of the fireplace lit her cheeks and skin with gold, until it seemed as though he stared into the face of a creature made of fire itself.

"Your fierce temper," he whispered. "And that dare you throw at me every time you look at me. It tells me I cannot have you, that you shall not succumb... even as your body reveals it for a lie."

Heat colored her cheeks. "You won't have me."

"You want me to have you," he murmured. "Don't lie to me."

"Your compliments are empty, and your declarations even more so." Standing, she glanced at the empty carafe of wine. "Do you care for more?"

Rurik glanced up from beneath his lashes. "Run, Freyja." He smiled dangerously. "And yes, I would enjoy more wine."

"I shall fetch it then."

Wending between the tables, she made her way to the bar. Eyes watched her back, lingering on her. Not all of them in suspicion or distrust. The very set of her shoulders defined her untouchability, and with it, part of her allure. He was clearly not the only one affected, and she could not see it, mired in distrust, and ingrained with suspicion. Rurik scowled, his lashes lowering as he leaned back in the chair and surveyed the room. With one lash of his temper he could destroy this room and all of the men in it. Men who hungered for her.

A dangerous hunger, marred as it was by their beliefs, for there were ways to force such a woman as she to heel, and such was anathema to his *dreki* nature. Women should never be coerced. But a whisper in the right ear and she could be accused of things she had no control over.... Thunder rumbled outside in the clear sky at the vile thought. He watched eyes glance toward windows and smiled, more a hint of his teeth than any sign of humor.

He would protect her. Whether she thought she needed it or not.

An odd tension filled him, and his gaze went to the entrance.

It opened, wind sending a man staggering through the light-filled doorway. The sharp scent of tar, fur, and the sea filled Rurik's nostrils as the dragon hunter stepped through the door, tugging his wolf fur close around his shoulders as he surveyed the room. His tangled blond hair whipped into chilling blue-gray eyes, and their gazes locked.

Rurik inclined his head slightly. A dangerous man, and one he would not underestimate, for the man spoke the truth on the docks as he spoke of killing three dragons. His lesser cousins were no match for *dreki*, but still monstrous creatures. It was a remarkable feat for a single man to have engineered.

"Would you care for company?" Haakon asked, as Freyja returned with the wine.

Rurik lifted his foot and slid the other chair back with a beckoning gesture and a hint of a wolfish

smile. "Please." The last thing he would ever do was fear a puny human.

And perhaps it would be fun.

Dragging off his gloves, the heavily muscled man took the seat and offered thanks to Freyja as she returned to the counter to fetch another glass.

"How go your recovery efforts?" Rurik asked, faintly amused.

"Badly. The tide is coming in, and the dockhands seem to think it madness to attempt to retrieve my ballista now."

"A pity."

Haakon shrugged, icy blue eyes watchful. "A brief setback. I'm a patient man."

So was he. "The mark of a true hunter."

A dangerous smile curved the hunter's lips as Freyja settled again at the table. "What would a scholar know of such things?"

"I know many things," Rurik countered. "Wine?" At the other man's nod, Rurik took the carafe and poured before Freyja could. He had no intention of seeing her serve another man. Not when she was his.

"Mistress Helgasdottir." Haakon nodded politely.

"I see you've been enquiring about me," she replied.

Enough to learn her name, and no doubt more. The amount of information the locals owned about the unusual young woman was immense, and offered generously. A growl curdled in Rurik's throat. For what he could learn, so too could others.

"What man does not enquire about such a striking young woman?" Haakon asked.

This time the compliment brought no heat to her cheeks. She remained cool, and on her guard. "You are not the only one who can learn about another. You come to hunt the *dreki*," she replied, sipping her wine. "To kill him."

"I make no lie of my intentions," Haakon replied. "Word reached my ears of this particular beast, and so I have come to try my hand at him."

"Word of the beast? Or word of the reward?" she asked.

"A significant sum." Haakon leaned back in his chair. "But no, it's the beast I'm most interested in. I am told you come from the village at the base of its lair. That you know of the creature."

Freyja's lips thinned. "I know the creature. It stole my ram, and so I was forced to enter its lair to try and save him."

Haakon's eyes sharpened.

"Without luck, I assure you," she replied primly.

"All here know of the mighty creature," Rurik murmured. "You should be warned: this is no lesser dragon you hunt. This is one of the mighty *dreki*."

"There is a difference between dragon and *dreki*?" Freyja interrupted. "I thought 'dragon' was simply another term used in different countries?"

“No. They are cousins, but far different creatures. Many, many years ago, the *dreki* were born to this land. Spirits of earth, air, and fire, created by a goddess into a single creature with the powers of all three of the elements.”

“Which goddess?” He’d captured her curiosity now.

“None of yours,” he murmured. “Only she that is sacred to the *dreki*, born many, many eons before your gods were but a thought. Some call her Creator, some Chaos, and her name was Tiamat, or Thalatte. This mighty spirit tamed the salt waters to her mastery, and of her children there were many, which some called gods. When these gods went to war with her husband, Apsu, and killed him, she created monsters with poison for blood, to fight them. The descendants of these creatures are what we refer to as dragons. The lesser of them bred serpents of the waters, vile beasts with limited thought we call leviathan and serpents.

“But the *dreki*... they were different. They say when the great goddess used her powers to turn herself into an enormous serpent in the sea to fight her husband’s killers, she was slain by the storm-god Marduk. He scattered her body across the world, but her soul remained, formless yet still powerful. The sea and her waters had failed her, and when the north wind blew her soul around the globe, her soul sought solace in the warm, dark earth, where fire brewed.”

Both of them were focused intently upon him. Rurik continued, “Long did her soul brew in the heart of the volcano, Hekla, and her spirit strengthened with the force of the element of fire. She sought life again, but to form a fleshly body was beyond her. Her only hope lay in creating more children, ones that spun to life from the earth, were gilded with the power of fire, and ruled the air. Using her waning powers in one last act of Creation, the volcano exploded and with each gout of fire, the goddess created her new children. The goddess tore her soul apart, pieces of her power imbuing each spirit with strength. These were the *dreki*, and they carry a part of the goddess within them. Powerful spirits who ruled the elements and could tame the sky itself; those with the goddess’s own ability to shapeshift.

“The wyrms, leviathan, and serpents were slowly hunted by men, the last of them dying out centuries ago in the Persian Gulf. But dragons remain, and some say they haunt volcanoes, seeking to steal the gift of fire that eludes them.” He tilted his head toward Haakon, “These are the creatures you have faced. Fierce beasts with poisonous blood, but no breath of fire, nor mastery of the elements. Jealous creatures who yearn for more.”

“And *dreki* breathe fire?” Haakon asked.

“Some do,” he replied. “You have to understand there have been many generations of *dreki* born. They are not immortal, though they have long lives. Now, only the purest of bloodlines have the gift of fire.”

“Hekla,” Freyja murmured, “the gateway to hell.”

“So say many who believe in such a place,” Rurik agreed. Now it was the home of the *dreki* court, though he would not breathe word of it here.

“I have never heard such a story told,” Haakon said. “Where did you come by such information?”

Rurik shrugged and drained his wine. “Years of listening, perhaps. There are many who will exchange an old tale by a hearth on a cold night. And perhaps you were not asking the right questions?” Setting the empty cup on the table, he leaned forward, “Such as why a man sets himself on such a dangerous pursuit as hunting dragons or even *dreki*? Especially when he does not know the difference between them?”

Haakon’s expression tightened. “One of them stole my wife six years ago.”

“Stole?” he asked thoughtfully. “You come from Norway, yes?”

“Yes.”

“There are no *dreki* on the mainland in Norway,” Rurik mused. “Which means one travelled far to take her, and I assure you *dreki* do not take that which is not given freely.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Haakon’s face darkened.

“I am wondering how you were so certain your wife was taken by such?”

Haakon pushed his chair aside with a scrape, leaning his knuckles on the table as he growled, “Because I saw her enter the grove, and I saw the beast launch itself into the air directly after she screamed. By the time I got there, all that was left was her basket, and scattered bread loaves she’d been taking to my sister. I have not seen her since and I have spent *many* a long night searching.” Haakon closed his eyes briefly, his voice becoming raw. “The last thing I remember is the sight of her face as she glanced one last time at me, and the look in her amber eyes....”

“Amber eyes?” A curious tale. Rurik frowned. “Describe the *dreki*, please.”

“What?”

“Describe him,” Rurik repeated. “What size? What shape? What color—”

“Gold,” Haakon spat. “The beast shone like newly minted coins, which is why I’m here. I’ve heard Krafla’s beast is the same color.”

Gold. Rurik sat back in surprise. Dragons could not change shape into mortal form. But *dreki* could. And there was only one golden *dreki* he knew of, beside himself.

Oh, Hel.

“*Árdís, what were you thinking?*” He threw the thought out into the world, and felt someone far away turn toward him as she heard it.



After a rather tense supper, Freyja escaped to check on Hanna before she returned to the inn. The wine had gone to her head, and though dinner was delicious, it left her feeling a little unsettled.

Haakon had stormed out in a huff after the confrontation over his wife, and even Rurik gave up any pretense at trying to charm her, dwelling on his wine with a frown. The story of Haakon’s missing wife bothered him more than he’d like to admit.

A storm rumbled overhead as she found herself in the courtyard behind the inn. Freyja looked up with a harsh intake of breath. Lightning lashed the mountains that surrounded the town. The houses were spread far enough apart that there was little protection from the wind.

“What is going on?” she whispered. This mood; this itch. It didn’t feel entirely natural. Reaching out, she felt the rage of the storm slip through her fingers as though it were a herd of savage horses, whipped to fury by masters she couldn’t see.

“Come.” A warm hand slid into hers, and Freyja looked down in shock as Rurik took her hand. She hadn’t realized he’d followed her out of the inn. His gloves were warm and he was the kind of hot-blooded man a woman would want in her bed on a cold night.

He wasn’t looking at her. Instead he stared toward the west, toward the origin of the storm, and that intense expression on his face deepened. His fingers slid between hers, locking their palms together.

“They say *dreki* ride the wings of such storms,” he finally murmured. “It would not do for either of us to be caught out this night.”

“I have to check on Hanna.”

Rurik stared at her for a long moment. “Follow me.”

Then he hurried her into the shadows of the stables. And madness of madness, she let him.

Chapter 5

The horses were restless. Freyja moved among them with a quiet murmur, soothing where she could and darting glances over her shoulder at the man by the doors.

Rurik peered through the slightly ajar door, lightning flickering over his masculine features and carving shadows across his stark cheekbones. He didn't move, but his eyes darted, searching the skies above as if he truly expected to see something there.

"This is ridiculous," Freyja murmured. "The wyrm will not be out this night. He will be sleeping in his lair, purring like a kitten."

"*Dreki*. Not wyrm." A flash of irritation crossed his face, then his eyes turned cunning. "You have seen him, you claimed."

Her hand slid to a halt against Hanna's neck.

"For few would describe it quite like that," he continued, lightning turning his face stark for a moment, his eyes as intense as the storm as they locked on her. "You have seen the *dreki*."

Freyja turned her face away, stroking Hanna's velvety muzzle. "I just wanted my ram back. I paid little attention to the *dreki*."

"Liar."

Freyja's head jerked up. Rurik eased the door shut and turned to her with a smile in the near-darkness.

Moving toward her on graceful feet, he reached out and held his fingers for Hanna to sniff. The mare snorted and backed away, but Rurik never took his gaze off Freyja.

"Where did you see him, Freyja?" Soft words, barely a whisper, but oh, it set her body on fire.

And that was foolish, for she had never felt this way for a man.

She moved to step around him, but he reached out and shoved a palm flat against the partition between each stall. Freyja's breath caught as Rurik pressed close, heat swimming in the air between them. She couldn't stop a gasp from escaping; her hands came up between them as if to shove him away. Or perhaps not. She wasn't certain. What did she know of him truly? Dark stables, no one else in the vicinity. Freyja's eyes narrowed. If his intentions were less than noble, then he was about to get the shock of his life.

Reaching out, she tasted the storm, feeling the coiling power within it. *Come then*, she dared him

as she stared into those gleaming eyes.

“I would not hurt you,” he replied slowly. “You have nothing to fear, not that way. I told you this would be your choice.”

That voice. She shivered, her clenched knuckles brushing against the edges of his coat. Soft wool. So warm from the heat of his body. The desire to reach out and touch him was staggering.

I have everything to fear.

Rurik’s face darkened as he watched her. “You are so wary. Has a man ever tried to... to hurt you?”

Benedikt. She shoved the thought away. It didn’t matter, and she’d proven she was hardly defenseless. Benedikt had stopped trying to force kisses on her years ago, and had begun to threaten instead. “*You should be kind to me, Freyja. Your father is frail—who shall you turn to when he is gone?*” Leaning close, hissing in her ear, “*Perhaps I should tell him what his daughter has been up to? What man would want to defend her if I name her witch?*”

Rurik saw the truth in her face. His eyelashes fluttered down, obscuring those magnificent eyes, but for a second she thought she saw rage there.

Outside, the storm suddenly broke over the town, wind screaming through the streets and tearing the shutters from their moorings. The horses spooked, even as a lash of sudden power swept through the air. A fierceness. A fury. For a second, she could almost believe his talk of *dreki* that rode the storm with their anger, whipping it along.

His face lowered, cheek pressed almost to hers, his lips not quite brushing her ear. “Tell me his name.”

“He is nothing,” she replied, feeling strangely protected. The cage of Rurik’s arms, his body, sheltered her from the chill, and some part of her felt safe for the first time in years. It was insane. She barely knew this man.

Hot breath against her skin made her shiver. “Tell. Me. His. *Name.*”

“He is a local landowner near my village,” she blurted. “What does it matter? You will never know him. You are a traveler and shall move on soon, and I—”

“Freyja.”

“His name is Benedikt!” she snapped, her chest heaving. “For all the good it shall do you. You’ll be gone in days, collecting your stories, your eddas. Seeking your dragons!”

“*Dreki,*” he corrected again, thumb stroking her trembling lower lip. “They are *dreki*. Ancient spirits. Ancient power. And what makes you think I am going anywhere?”

She could barely see, but knew he turned to look at her, for she felt the stir of his breath move across her heated skin. Her heart hammered in her chest. “Don’t pretend otherwise. I know men like you.”

“Oh, Freyja... you know no one like me. That I promise you.” Fingertips brushed against her other cheek. “Why do you always defy me?”

“You have not seen defiance yet. I barely know you.”

“You know me,” he replied. Fingertips brushed over her dress, between her breasts, the backs of his knuckles pressing against the racing thud of her heartbeat. “You know me here.”

She had set him a challenge in the inn, to prove his empty compliments were not the only arsenal he had. And he had accepted it, for the words, his touch, burned through her until she could scarcely breathe.

“I wish I’d never dared you,” Freyja whispered. A single beam of light from a hole in the roof cut across his face as it lowered to hers. Her heart erupted in a flight of dragon wings. She could have said no. She knew his intentions.

But though the words hovered behind her lips, they didn’t cross them.

What would it feel like, just once, to let a man kiss her?

For a second that lonely urge pushed aside the ruthlessly practical voice in her head that told her she was being a fool.

“Curious female.” His soft laughter caressed her lips. “Did you think I only decided you were mine when you dared me? You were mine the moment I laid eyes on you.”

The brush of his mouth against hers tore her apart. Somehow her hands caught his upper arms. To push him away or to draw him closer? She didn’t know.

A hail of rain drummed on the roof above her as Rurik tasted her breath. The brush of his mouth whispered against hers, back and forth. Drawing her in. Luring her. Tongue darting out to wet her lips. His assault was so tender Freyja’s shoulders relaxed, her fingers no longer digging into his arms. She couldn’t fight this slow seduction.

She didn’t want to.

Heat speared lower, in her abdomen. Freyja moaned as Rurik stepped closer, his hard body pressing hers against the stable door and trapping her there. “Kiss me, Freyja. Kiss me, *sarratum zamani*.”

She didn’t understand the words, the way he rolled over them with his tongue, but she felt it shiver through her. His mouth opened over hers.

Rurik had power of his own. Power to shatter her defenses and leave her gasping. Freyja kissed him eagerly, hands sliding up his chest where she could feel the steady thud of his heart beneath her palms. Her first kiss, and it was divine. *He* tasted divine, the scorching heat of his skin warming her all the way through. Suddenly she couldn’t get enough.

She wanted him all over her, inside her. Penetrating her. The sharp stab of the storm lashed over her skin, and Freyja opened herself to it, power crackling through her.

The tips of her hair flickered with static. As if he felt the change in her, Rurik thrust his hips against her, hands shackling her wrists as he pinned them above her head. Hard lips captured hers, brutal and ravenous. No kiss to steal her breath, not this time. This was meant to own, to possess her.

And it did.

Freyja threw her head back, breathless with need. Thunder rumbled through the building, the storm lancing the air outside. She felt it within her, lightning flickering along her nerves as Rurik's roughened cheek rasped against her throat. Her heart pounded like a drum as his arms slid around her, bringing her into his powerful embrace. Hands slid up her back, locking her in place as his tongue darted down to the crevice between her breasts. The sharp nip of teeth stung against her tender skin, marking her. Freyja dug her fingers into his scalp, helpless to resist.

What was she doing? With a stranger, no less?

But then his hand slid over the black wool of her dress, cupping the unbound weight of her breast in his palm, and Freyja's protest died on her lips.

For she was curious, despite knowing the danger to her reputation, her heart, her body, despite everything.... Not once had she ever felt such desire for a man. *Just a little taste*, she told herself. To see what he would do, how it would feel.

Thunder cracked, rattling the iron sheeting on the roof. A drop of icy rain splashed across her face, shocking her. Then Rurik brushed aside the neckline of her dress, his hot mouth capturing her nipple.

There was no more thought of protest. Freyja gasped in shock, throwing her head back as his tongue traced torturous circles around the aching bud. Then his hands were beneath her bottom, hauling her up, moving her legs around his hips. His body nestled between her thighs, the hot surge of his erection brushing against her hip.

Yes. Yes. More.

"Curse you," Rurik breathed, drawing back just a little. One hand thrust against the stable wall behind her for stability, the muscles in his forearm tightening. "I'm trying to go slowly." He laughed, breathless as he nipped at her jaw. "You taste delicious."

Don't stop. Freyja dug her nails into the hard muscle of his shoulders.

"I won't." The rumble came deep from his throat, the sound trailing over her skin. Then his mouth captured hers again and though her mind fought to latch on to something, she couldn't chase the thought down.

Not with his hips thrusting against hers, the rasp of his buttons riding over the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. Not with his tongue pressing into her mouth, practically daring her to meet him back. Not with his hand sliding over the small of her back, and pressing her harder against him.

His erection brushed between her thighs, thick and heavy, and Freyja's eyes shot wide open at the sudden shock of sensation that streaked through her. Outside, lightning flashed, the light searing her eyes as it flickered between the gaps in the timber door. All she could see were bands of light as she shut her eyes, her moan fading against the thunderous wind as Rurik's body rode over hers, again and again, taking her closer to an edge she wanted to throw herself off—

A primal scream filled the air, echoing across her skin and rattling the roof of the stable.

Freyja felt Rurik freeze, his face lifting from hers and his hard body pinning her to the wall. Her

heart thundered a ragged vibration in her ears.

“What is it?” she whispered, her hands still clasping his shirt.

He looked at her, eyes drugged and dazed in the low light, his body easing away from her. Wind battered the stables, another piercing war cry shattering the fury of the storm. It reverberated through the village like the call of an enormous horn.

A chill spiraled all the way through her.

She knew that cry.

She could feel the might of the great beast soaring past, its wings thrusting a downwash of wind over the tiny buildings and his power pulling at her.

Rurik shoved away from her, striding toward the door. He cracked it open, rain whipping over his hardened frame and wetting him instantly. Lightning flickered in the streets, too often for it to be natural. It stabbed the ground again and again, as if driven by something beyond the whim of earthly law.

“The *dreki*,” she whispered, and hurried after him.

Rurik’s body spilled heat through her as he glanced down, lashes wet with rain. “Stay here.”

Her thighs were wet with need, her body still trembling. One kiss, one touch, had shattered her resolve. How lucky for her the *dreki* had broken the moment, for she had little doubt she would otherwise be lying on her back in one of the stalls right now, with her skirts around her hips and a “Yes” on her lips.

Freyja didn’t know what was more dangerous. The wyrm outside? Or the man watching her with hot need still burning in his golden eyes?

“He won’t hurt me,” she whispered, pressing between him and the door to see. Rain stung her flushed lips, little razors of sensation against her cheeks.

The lightning lit the sky again, revealing the flash of wings over the rooftops. Light gleamed silver over scales. Beautiful. Dangerous. And so compelling she almost stepped out into the rain to see more of him.

Rurik hauled her back against his chest with a hiss, his arms locking over her breasts. “Do you have no sense, woman?”

He muscled her inside with appalling ease, slamming the door shut behind them and leaving her light blind in the darkness. Another primitive scream cut the air above them, and she looked up. Something whipped against the roof and Freyja screamed as Rurik drove her down into the straw, his heated body covering hers. Shards of timber lashed them both, an enormous sheet of iron tumbling where they’d just been standing. The noise ricocheted around the stables. Hanna squealed, and another horse snorted.

Then it finally fell silent.

Freyja trembled, feeling the press of Rurik’s hips against her bottom. His weight shifted as rain drove inside the hole in the roof, and he let her lift her head.

“You’re not hurt?” he asked.

“There... there are two of them,” she whispered.

“Aye.” A grim tone. “Foolish Freyja. Did you not see?”

“See what?”

“You spoke of the golden wyrm beneath Krafla,” he said, looking up with a hard expression darkening his face. “And the one outside was silver.”

Not her dreki. As if he read her face, Rurik’s gaze softened. “Not yours, no.” He levered himself to his feet. “Stay here. And do not come out until I come for you.”

“Where are you going?”

“To see who dares to enter the golden wyrm’s domain,” he replied, in a hard-edged voice.

Chapter 6

Rurik strode through the storm, the rain plastering his shirt to his chest. Spreading his arms wide, he summoned the power to transform, a surge of fury igniting in his chest. How dare these interlopers intrude in his lands? When he'd been banished from the court at Hekla, he'd claimed the north of Iceland, and none dared trespass. The *dreki* queen insisted Rurik was not to be roused; both out of a sense of wariness for his might, and simply because she knew how much the isolation would cut at him.

Amadea was more serpent than *dreki*, in some ways.

And this could not be tolerated. He felt his arms lengthen and—

“Where did it go?” a man bellowed.

Rurik froze, power whispering through his veins. He stood on the knife-edge of the shift, the *dreki* punching inside his ribs as it waited for him to free it.

A hand caught his arm and Rurik suppressed the change as he whirled, his head swaying for a second at the sudden loss of momentum.

“Which way?” Haakon demanded, searching the skies. Raindrops clung to his blond eyelashes, highlighting the arctic blue of his eyes. In them, Rurik could just make out the faint madness of obsession.

A good thing Haakon looked away, for Rurik's face tingled just enough to know he'd not been quite human in that moment.

“There are two of them,” Rurik said, gesturing to the south. “They went that way.”

Toward his home.

Fury caused the vein in his temple to throb. His gold, his lands, his volcano. If they thought for one second he'd tolerate—

“Two?” Haakon met his gaze. “Mother of God.” He crossed himself, then turned for the stables. “I need to get the horses.”

Rurik was seconds away from tearing the dragon hunter's throat out and simply erupting into flight when he caught sight of Freyja, peering through the stable door.

It swayed his intentions as nothing else would.

This was not done between them.

She'd surrendered to his touch, moaning beneath his kiss in a way that made his blood run hotter than lava.

But the second he revealed his hand, her wariness would return and he would lose all chance at claiming her.

Rurik let his power ebb until he could feel the rain stinging his skin once again.

"Have care, Haakon," he said quietly. "You know not what you face."

A twisted plot that threatened to sweep innocents into its midst, for the arrival of two *dreki* could mean nothing more than war, and he was certain he knew who sent them. Amadea wouldn't care if humans were killed. But he did. There were rules—*dreki* laws—he abided by, and they were innate to his nature. The queen and her brother cared little for moral restraint, but there were enough *dreki* still at court who did.

Honor and honesty were vital to *dreki* nature.

"Perhaps it is the wyrms who don't know what is coming," Haakon growled, swinging up onto his black Friesian when his man brought it out for him. Haakon reined the beast into a tight circle, shooting a look at his men.

Rurik caught the reins. "I doubt that."

The two men stared at each other.

"This is not your fight, scholar," Haakon spat. Tension knotted in his clenched knuckles. "And I will not yield to pleas nor empathy."

"Nor sense, so it seems."

Haakon's lips thinned. "The last time I saw a storm like this was the day I first laid eyes upon my wife. She was lost in the forest, and the clouds brewed like this above me. I swore then I would have her, and I would protect her forever." He tugged the reins free of Rurik's hold. "And I failed her. If the *dreki* has her, then I will take her back. If he has killed her, then I will have vengeance, pure and bloody. And nothing you say can sway me."

There was one thing Rurik could say, but he did not know enough of the story to speak of what he knew. This was Árdís's secret. Wasn't it?

"Gunnar, get the men ready! We'll lose them if we wait too long!" Haakon yelled over his shoulder.

"What about the ballista?" called the man he'd addressed as Gunnar.

"Leave it." Haakon whirled his horse, but it balked as Rurik's grip tightened on the bridle. "Here, now!"

"You're a fool to leave your machine here," Rurik told him, with strangely glittering eyes. "You face two *dreki*, and you have not the ability to defend yourself without it. Don't let vengeance blind you. Or all you shall do is see your men dead, and your bones blistered with *dreki* fire."

Haakon bared his teeth. "Let go of my horse, scholar."

Rurik considered him for a long moment. He let go of the reins, stepping out of Haakon's way.

“Let their deaths be on your head then.”

“Bring the ballista, Gunnar! You can join me at Krafla,” Haakon snapped, and drove his horse into the dying beats of the storm. But he glanced over his shoulder toward his men as he went. “Hyaah!”

“So be it,” Rurik whispered, still full of doubt about whether he had done the right thing. He believed in fate, and no *dreki* should pit his will against that capricious entity. He had done his best to sway the man.

Let Haakon ride into his destiny. Rurik had other matters to resolve.

These newcomers, these challengers, would find no entry to his lair. He’d sealed it with his power when he left, and there were few still left on this earth who could cut through his magic.

They would know that, which made him wonder just why they were here.

What mad scheme did Amadea plot now?



“You think he won’t return,” Freyja said, as Rurik stared after Haakon. She’d heard their argument, and a part of her knew Rurik’s focus on her had shifted.

Lanterns filled the night, and Haakon’s men tried to hitch his supply wagon to the horses. They’d thrown a tarpaulin over the ballista, but the rain was coming down in steady sheets now.

“*Fool.*” Or at least that was what she thought Rurik murmured. The wind snatched the word from his mouth as he turned back toward her.

“Why did you warn him?” Freyja asked, wiping the hair from her damp cheeks. She didn’t wish to see that ballista make its way inland. “He’ll kill one of them with that ballista, and I thought you were on the *dreki*’s side?”

Rurik glanced toward the south darkly. “I have no wish to see that machine pierce any *dreki*’s hide. But I think without it Haakon will be little more than a delicious morsel to those *dreki*, and that I do not wish for. There is a debt to be repaid there, and his golden *dreki* will pay it when he finds her.”

“Her?”

Rurik looked at her sharply. “Krafla’s *dreki* did not take his wife. There is only one other who wears golden scales, and I think Haakon’s fate leads him toward her.” He shrugged, and she couldn’t help noticing the way his shirt clung wetly to him. “I believe they are... destined to meet again.”

Freyja watched Haakon as he vanished at the edge of the town. “So, you save his death for another?”

“What makes you think death is his fate?”

Freyja frowned. “You’re playing word games with me.”

“Perhaps. You seem awfully insistent upon the fact *dreki* eat humans.”

“Unlike others,” she snorted, “I do not fall for those foolish romantic stories people like to tell.”

“No?” A faint smile touched his lips. “Did your *dreki* eat you all up, Freyja? Or did it leave you alone? You still haven’t told me the story of your meeting.”

Freyja frowned, and wrapped her arms around her. “It ate my *ram*. Perhaps its belly was full when I saw it?”

She almost imagined Rurik growled under his breath. “You eat lamb, do you not? Perhaps the *dreki* likes lamb too? That does not mean it eats people. There are treaties in place to help promote peace between both species. I think the last thing it would do is break the treaty. Besides,” he looked thoughtful, “those foolish, romantic stories had to come from somewhere.”

She threw her hands up in disgust. Virgin tributes, and happily-ever-afters.... They belonged in fairy tales, and nothing else. “You’re as bad as my mother. She too dreamed of forbidden romances. Of *dreki* walking among us in human form, and seducing stupid girls.”

That faint smile deepened. “Who says they do not?”

“Have you seen one? Has anyone? Not in recent times, if ever. Even though they can change shape, there is always a touch of the *dreki* still in them. They say their eyes remain lizard-like in appearance, and the sight of the holy cross reveals their true form.”

“And when they say this, are they speaking of *dreki* or of your devil?” he mused. “It sounds like someone shaped *those* particular stories.”

Of all the.... “You are a very frustrating man.”

“I would like to believe. That is all. One day I think you will meet a *dreki* in mortal flesh, and then you will believe too. We all need a little bit of romance in our lives. A little bit of magic. You shouldn’t trust all of the stories, but you should believe some, Freyja. After all, you’ve met Krafla’s *dreki*. And he is clearly interested in you, if nothing else, from the sounds of your story.”

Freyja snorted, and gathered a handful of her skirts as she headed for the inn. “You’re as big a fool as Haakon is. And I’m going in to bed. This is quite too much excitement for me for one night. Goodnight.”

“Freyja—”

She turned, wind whipping her skirts past her and blowing his hair back off that clean, masculine face. For a second she thought he was about to plunge them straight back into that reckless, passionate moment they’d shared in the stables. A moment when something inside her—something she’d never even encountered before—overruled logic and sense, letting the storm erupt within. Freyja’s heart skipped a beat.

“Would you like to break your fast with me?” he asked, instead.

Freyja hesitated. A part of her still felt that foolish, breathless moment in the stables, and the roughness of his hands on her skin. Heat flooded her cheeks. This man was dangerous. “I’m sorry, but I intend an early start. I need to get home and see to my father.”

Thought raced through his amber eyes, but then he merely smiled and slid his hands into his

pockets. “I will bid you adieu then. Until we meet again.”

“I doubt that,” she whispered.

Somehow he heard her. “You should not doubt fate, Freyja. That is like spitting in her eye.”

Freyja shivered, one hand on the inn’s doorknob. She could not escape this mysterious man fast enough. “I don’t believe in fate. I don’t believe in anything I cannot touch with my own hands, or see with my eyes.”

Rurik turned to eye the storm. “Why does that not surprise me?” His smile widened, or the half of it she could see did. “Run, Freyja. You might not believe in fate, but I do. We will meet again. I am certain of it. And when we do....”

He looked back toward her, amber eyes ablaze in the darkness of the storm, and Freyja jerked the door open. That look in his eyes spoke of inevitability, and she had the breathtaking feeling she wanted to run toward it, throw herself off that cliff.

She no longer knew whether she could trust herself. Not when Rurik was involved. For she wanted something only he could give her, and while a part of her yearned, just once, to touch the sun, another part of her remained wary. Perhaps he could teach her what passion felt like, what love felt like, but there was always the risk he might shatter her well-protected heart instead.

And she’d long known what it felt like to have your feet swept out from under her, time and time again.

Freyja ducked inside the inn, shutting the door and pressing her back against it. A rush of exhilaration swept through her veins, and she couldn’t, for the life of her, understand why.

Fate, indeed.

Chapter 7

The small village near Freyja's house bustled with excitement as she drove Hanna past. Dozens of nearby farmers strode about the village green, and the enormous wagon that housed the dragon hunter's ballista loomed nearby. It had beaten her here, and so too had most of Haakon's men. Sweat foamed on their horses' flanks, and she saw one man leading his bay and patting its velvety nostrils as its head hung in exhaustion.

"Shame on you," she muttered. Pushing horses like that so hard on this treacherous terrain would only end in tragedy at some stage. It wasn't as though Haakon could mount an assault on Krafla immediately, so it made little sense to her.

The dragon hunters were clearly distinguishable from the locals; hard men, wearing furs draped across their shoulders and chain mail beneath. Clearly mercenaries Haakon had scraped together, and she had to wonder where, precisely, he'd found them. Especially when one of them shot her a dark leer.

"Mistress Helgasdottir," someone called.

It was tempting to pretend she hadn't heard. She kept her gaze straight ahead, wishing Hanna would move a little faster as a blur of movement shifted in the corner of her vision.

"Freyja!" the voice bellowed.

Curse him. Freyja reluctantly eased Hanna to a halt, just as Benedikt caught hold of her bridle. The young ram in the cage on the back of the wagon bleated in shock.

He wore his finest coat, but after seeing Rurik in all of his glory, it looked a pale imitation. Benedikt was tall, his muscle soft and his face pale and pampered, with round cheeks and a boyish look that did not fade with age. He often reminded her of a petulant child deprived of some toy. The problem was he and his father considered the village and its people to *be* that toy.

Particularly her.

"What do you think of the news?" Benedikt demanded, his eyes alight. He continued before she had a chance to reply, as usual. "We're going to take back our lands, Freyja. Father and I intend to drive the creature from Krafla. Or kill it."

"Let us be honest," she interrupted, before he could descend into one of his infernal monologues. "You've hired a man to *attempt* to kill the *dreki*. I'm not entirely certain whether the cursed *dreki* will

think those dragon hunters a nice little gift to assuage his temper, considering you've been breaking the tithe and owe him several months' work of meat, or whether he will take serious affront at this notion, and burn our village to the ground. There's a reason we bargained with him in the first place."

Benedikt's fleshy lips pursed. He might have been handsome, in a sulky way, if the interior of the man weren't quite so repulsive. "You always see the worst outcome. At least my father and I are doing something about this menace. And I have faith in Haakon and his men." His lip curled in a sneer. "You would too, if you knew what faith meant."

A vague threat. Hanna jerked in her traces, and Freyja took the moment to settle the flighty mare—and her own temper. One of these days....

"Your father thinks it's a good idea," Benedikt continued. "I spoke to him yesterday."

That ignited her temper. She didn't want Benedikt anywhere near her father, where he sought to please with a honeyed tongue and silver lies. Sometimes he laughed at her, knowing her father couldn't see her frustration when Benedikt was playing the charming local son.

"Leave my father out of this. He is not well."

"You coddle him. He's a man, Freyja. Not an invalid for you to siphon away his will."

"The only leech here is the one I'm looking at," Freyja seethed.

"Ah, Mistress Helgasdottir," Haakon called, distracting both of them. He strode across the green. "Have you reconsidered? Are you here to inform us of the layout of the wyrm's lair?"

Benedikt's hand curled around Hanna's bridle, and Hanna winced at the restriction. "You have met my Freyja?" he asked Haakon. "But I assure you she is of little assistance. Nobody enters Krafla and returns unscathed."

"I am not *your Freyja*," she muttered.

"That's not precisely my understanding," Haakon countered, ignoring her words, and Freyja suddenly found herself the recipient of a pair of stares—one cool and considering, and one dark with thwarted rage. "I met Mistress Helgasdottir in Akureyri, where she was concluding some business. She claimed to have entered the dragon's lair."

Benedikt shot her a shocked look. "You entered Krafla?"

Freyja rolled her eyes. "Let go of the harness. And yes, I entered the *dreki's* lair. He stole my ram and ate it, thanks to your cursed meddling."

"Why did you not tell me?"

Hanna jerked her harness out of his grip, startled by Benedikt's tone, and Freyja collected her calmly. "Because it had little to do with you."

"Everything around here has to do with me," he snapped. "Or my father."

"So some would think."

They glared at each other. Benedikt cursed under his breath, and backed away. "One day you're going to regret the way you speak to me."

As he turned and stalked across the grass, she pursed her lips. One day she was going to spear

him with a stab of lightning and watch his boots smolder, and feel nothing but satisfaction.

As if the sky heard her, a distant rumble of thunder shook the horizon.

Haakon patted Hanna's flank, his lips quirking in an almost smile. "I see your winning touch extends to the gentlemen of your village, mistress."

"I see no gentlemen here."

"Touché." He didn't bother to plead his innocence. "There's been no sign of the two dragons."

"*Dreki*," she corrected, almost absently, and for a second she heard Rurik's voice in her mind.

"Perhaps they flew south, over the glaciers? There's nothing for them here."

"Nothing but death and carnage."

She didn't like the way that sounded. "The *dreki* is dangerous and powerful, but he causes us little grief, Haakon. If you do this, you might only stir his rage. There are people here who cannot fight against that."

"I don't intend to fail," he replied. "And you seem rather sympathetic toward a monster."

"Maybe I know what is like to be an outcast," she murmured. "All he wants is something to eat once a week. He's never caused us any other trouble. I see no monster there."

"Not everyone feels that way. Tell me, what was it like?"

"He was curious, more than anything. And he laughed at me, as though he considered me little threat. I don't think he ever intended to truly hurt me. But he could if he so chose." Freyja shivered, recalling the enormous teeth and the impenetrable scales. "He looked like he was covered in gilded armor, and the weight of his power nearly crushed my lungs...."

"I have iron and steel, Freyja. I will pierce his hide."

She shivered at the tone of inevitability in his voice. "Then we are done here. I will not help you, nor will I accept any blame for your deaths because I refuse to aid you. You've been warned, and you will not accept that." She gathered up Hanna's reins, easing the mare away from him. "I hope it is worth it, when the *dreki* is picking his teeth with your bones. Come, Hanna." She cracked the reins on the mare's shaggy hide.

Hanna leapt forward, and Haakon stepped out of the way.

"Be careful, Mistress Helgasdottir," Haakon called, patting Hanna's shaggy flank with a parting pat. "One might suspect your sympathies lie with the wrong party here."

A shiver ran down her spine. She didn't think Haakon would hurt her, but then she'd thought the same about Benedikt when they were younger and he'd first set his sights on her. It was only once she'd said no the ugly side of his nature emerged.

I am not without my defenses, she told herself again as she drove off.

Even if her powers set her apart and left her standing in a world alone, at least she could never be forced into something she didn't want.



The first sign something was not right at her home started when she saw all of the ewes huddled in their stone pen together, big eyes wide with fright. The bleating set her nerves on edge, but she couldn't see anything to cause such distress.

Leading Hanna up the lane, Freyja frowned. "What has my ladies in such a dither?" She couldn't resist scanning the skies. Evening fell like a curtain of inky shadows from the east, with paler golden tones lingering in the west where the sun took its time to descend. A few stars sparkled in the night sky.

But no *dreki*.

A shiver ran through her as she put her new ram and Hanna away, tending the sweet mare and slipping her a slice of dried apple she carried in her pocket. She had the same feeling in her stomach that she'd felt in Akureyri when she bid adieu to Rurik.

Fate, he whispered in her memories.

"Foolishness," Freyja muttered, and shut the stable door behind Hanna.

Wrapping her shawl around her shoulders, she scurried toward her father's house with her basket of goods. Night had finally vanquished day, but light glared from the kitchen window and the small sitting room next to it. What was her father thinking? They barely had enough kerosene to spare, and she hoarded it like the *dreki* in Krafla protected his gold.

"Father?" she called, pulling the door shut behind her and dragging her shawl off her shoulders. The heat inside the house enveloped her like a warm cloud. Good grief, he had the fire blazing as well. The dwindling woodpile in the corner of the kitchen looked alarmingly low. "Father, where are you?"

"Through here, Freyja," he called from the sitting room, and her heart skittered a beat at how well he sounded.

Thank goodness. Freyja squeezed her eyes shut, then let out the breath she'd been holding. Leaving him alone for a time was always a worry.

"Have you had dinner?" She could smell the lamb stew she'd left in the cool room simmering in a pot on the stove. "I've bought fresh bread all the way from Akureyri, and a wheel of cheese."

"Ah, leave all that!" her father called, "and come in here. I have a guest who is waiting to meet you."

Freyja set her basket of produce on the table, and crept toward the sitting room. Who would be visiting them out here? Benedikt and his father were in the village, as well as Haakon and his men. There were few others who would willingly step foot in her household, even with the iron horseshoe nailed upside down over the lintel.

"A guest?"

The chair creaked as her father levered out of it, and she caught sight of his shadow on the wall. Another shape shifted beside it, a tall man sitting in the armchair by the window, by the look of it.

Freyja stopped dead as she entered the room. "Rurik?"

What was he doing here?

Rurik sprawled in her father's second-favorite armchair, balancing an old chipped teacup in his hands with feigned nonchalance. Everything about his posture screamed he intended to pose no threat, but his eyes flared amber the second he saw her, and everything in her body screamed at her to *run*.

"Mistress Freyja," he purred. "I was just telling your father here about our meeting in Akureyri. He has some interesting stories about *dreki*, which I am collecting for my book, if you remember?"

Book? He hadn't said a blasted thing about a book.

"*What are you really doing here?*" she mouthed.

"Freyja!" Her father looked up from the small platter of honey cakes he'd been destroying. Those filmy eyes turned vaguely in her direction, and he smiled.

He looked well.

Freyja scurried to his side, pressing a kiss to his brow in a surreptitious way to measure his temperature. "Where did you get the cake from?"

"Master Rurik bought it in the village as a gift." Her father hugged her. "He intends to do some research in this area, and someone directed him to my door." Pride swelled his chest. "He wants to learn about the local *dreki*, and I know all of your mother's stories. I offered her books to him, and offered him board for a few weeks."

Weeks?

"You shouldn't have," she murmured to Rurik, embarrassed he'd noticed their poor plight enough to bring a gift of food with him. The little house no doubt looked like a hovel in his eyes, with its thatch of grassed roof, and the bare necessities were all that remained of their furniture. The house was spotless, and the furniture gleamed with beeswax she'd lovingly rubbed into it, but she'd been forced to sell pieces of it over the years, and empty spaces gaped where stuffed chairs had once stood. Even her mother's precious books had thinned out over the years as one catastrophe after another—their crops failing, or the fence breaking and precious lambs going missing—had struck their little farmstead. She'd never even told her father she'd sold some of them, and he'd clearly not noticed.

It would have broken his heart.

"We don't have a spare room," she told him bluntly.

Her father sucked in a sharp breath. "Freyja—"

"That's quite all right," Rurik replied, lazy-lidded in front of the fireplace. He looked like he was soaking up the heat of the flames. "It wouldn't be right for me to share a roof with a young unmarried woman anyway. So I bargained with your father for room in your stables. I can pay good coin."

In the stables.... For a moment she almost felt guilty. But then he gave her that faint smile that rubbed all her hairs the wrong way, and guilt evaporated.

"Freyja will see you to the stables," her father agreed amiably, leaving her with little recourse. "Won't you, Freyja?"

She'd see him to the door, in any case. Freyja jerked her head at Rurik as he stood, and then tried to paste a smile on her face for her father. "I certainly shall."

After all, she couldn't say what she really wanted to say with her father in the room, could she?



"What are you doing here?" Freyja whispered harshly, the second they were inside in the barn. "And don't feed me that lie about a book."

"Who says it was a lie? I am considering writing a book. There are too many wrong stories about *dreki* in circulation."

She ground her teeth together. "I'm not an idiot. And I detest it when men think they are smarter than I am, and try to smugly protest otherwise. If you continue to pretend you have not a *single* ulterior motive in being here, at my home, when last I saw you was many miles to the north, then I will be done with you."

Rurik paused, assessing her face.

"Why are you here?" she demanded. "Truly?"

"You're right. I didn't come here for a book. I came here for you. Fate, Freyja." He stepped forward, touching her cheek. "That's why I'm here." His breath warmed her lips as he loomed closer, and her heart gave a kick behind her ribs as he smiled at her. "Our destiny is incomplete."

Rurik's fingers tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Freyja froze. She'd thought what happened between them at Akureyri was simply a result of the storm pounding through her veins, igniting the passionate fury in her blood. But the second his touch landed on her skin, her blood seemed to fire again, and a shiver ran through her. A distant storm, but one that could be stoked with but a few simple touches.

"Oh no, you don't," she muttered, ducking beneath his arm and whirling in a storm of skirts.

The damned man simply stood there with a smile, crossing his arms over his chest.

His rather impressive chest.

Freyja growled under her breath, pressing her fingers to her temples. She didn't want to examine her anger too closely, just in case it wasn't entirely anger. Fluster might come closer. "You have your head in the clouds. Fate and destiny... what a jest. You're no better than any skirt-chasing scoundrel, though your words might be prettier. My mother would have liked you."

"*You* like me," he pointed out. "Or else you would have thrown me out the second you saw me inside."

"I didn't wish to cause a scene in front of my father," she retorted. "That's the only reason you're still here. He believes in guest right still, and expects me to uphold it."

Rurik's biceps flexed. "You are a most vexatious female. Why can you not admit you want me here?"

She refused to look at his bulging biceps. Simply refused. “My mother taught me never to utter a lie.”

Slowly he prowled around her. “You liked my kiss. You begged me for more, and curled your fists in my hair. I do not understand what you find so distasteful about the idea. You wanted me. You still want me.”

Every word drove straight through her abdomen, bringing little hammer-flashes of memory with it; the dance of raindrops on the roof; the feel of that hard body driving her into the wall; the lush stroke of his tongue against hers. “I often want things that are bad for me—ginger cakes, ale, books I cannot afford.... It doesn’t mean I give in to the feeling.”

He took a step toward her.

She took one back.

Rurik froze.

“Perhaps I enjoyed your kiss, but that doesn’t mean I will lie with you.” She could see from his expression he did not understand. But then, he wasn’t the one who might risk being left behind with a bastard child and a ruined reputation—what little there was left of it. “You’re persistent, I shall give you that, but all men want the same thing.”

“Your heart?” he challenged.

“A swift tumble in the hay.”

“I am not all men,” he replied. The shadows around him seemed to lengthen. “And you know little of what I want, Freyja. The second I saw you, I wanted to possess you—body and soul.”

“You’re being ridiculous. All these words—”

“I am bound by every word I utter,” he told her, and this time when he stepped toward her, she let him.

Treacherous heart, beating swiftly in her chest. Unfaithful body, wet with anticipation, and trembling with desire. Freyja swallowed hard and shut her eyes. All she had was her faltering will. Her steadfast nature.

“When have I ever lied to you?” Rurik whispered, as though sensing her hesitation. His fingertips skated over her cheeks again.

This time she let him.

This time her shoulders sank and she finally lifted her eyelashes to look him in the face. Some part of her wanted to believe him, to lift her mouth to his and offer herself up to him. But the warier part of her, the part that remembered Benedikt’s subtle viciousness, stayed her hand. “Why *me*?”

“Oh, precious Freyja.” His breath shivered over her skin. Rurik cupped her face, callused thumbs stroking gently against her cheeks. “You are a fascinating contradiction. Barely afraid of me when you should be, but frightened of me when I am at my least dangerous. Every second I see that flash of fire in your eyes ignites something within me I have not felt for a long, long time. Your very contrariness captures me, your intelligence, your fierceness... and the gentle nature that hides within. Shall I

go on?”

“You see this as a challenge.” And she knew men played to win. “That is all.”

“The fact you challenge me *is* part of the attraction,” he breathed. “I’ll concede that point. What man or woman does not care to be challenged within a relationship? If you agreed with me all the time or kissed my shoes, then you would be quite uninteresting.”

“I will *never* kiss your shoes.” The very idea offended her.

A slow smile spread over his lips. “I know.”

“I will rarely agree with you.”

“Even better.”

“I am stubborn, and angry, and not very good at conversation,” she said, giving in to exasperation. “I am not beautiful—”

“There you are wrong.” He cupped her cheeks in both hands and tilted her face to his. “Every inch of your skin pleases me. Every time our eyes meet, I want to consume you. You have lightning in your veins, precious Freyja. And when you kiss me it feels as though I can taste that lightning too. There is something between us that cannot be denied.”

“Fate,” Freyja whispered. She still didn’t believe in the word, but there was... something there. In that he spoke the truth.

Her heart kicked a little faster behind her ribs, the treacherous organ. There was a part of her that knew he was going to kiss her again, and this time she didn’t think she’d push him away. Even just the rasp of his thumb against her jaw felt so good, a renegade pleasure she could barely admit to.

Just who was she lying to? Him? Or herself?

“I don’t know if I believe you,” she admitted.

“Then set me a challenge. How shall I prove my intentions are true? How shall I win the heart of fair maiden?”

He was mocking her.

“Give me my heart’s greatest desire,” she shot back, dashing his hands from her face and darting for the door, “and I shall give you my heart.”

Rurik stilled. It felt almost as if an enormous tail lashed behind him suddenly, like a cat about to pounce, and then he smiled. “So be it.”

Chapter 8

Discovering her heart's greatest desire was proving to be more vexatious than Rurik had thought.

The next two days passed with little sight of her. Freyja was adept at maneuvering on silent feet, and spent countless hours tending to her home, or to the flock of animals that relied upon her. Every time he found her he was either handed a broom or a shovel and told to earn his keep, or several dozen bleating sheep rousing into a sudden panic sent him fleeing before Freyja could question their terror. Rurik himself was forced to keep an eye on the skies. There'd been no sign of the other *dreki* in the area when he arrived, but he knew they were out there somewhere. He strengthened the wards on his lair, watched curiously as Haakon led fruitless expeditions around the volcano, then subsided at Freyja's to wait the other *dreki* out.

Two could play at this game.

And he was patient, for a *dreki*.

Or at least, he thought he was, until he encountered the might of Freyja's will.

It didn't help matters her father, Einar, insisted on sitting with him for hours, inadvertently playing the part of chaperone.

"You're distracted," her father said one afternoon, as they sat over the small chessboard he'd dusted off and brought out. The little fox that lived with them sat on the side of the armchair, his dark amber eyes unblinking. Loki knew what he was, and when he realized Rurik watched him, he bared his teeth in a faint growl.

Fair enough. The little beast was only trying to protect his household. At least he didn't run and bleat like Freyja's sheep did whenever they saw him.

Rurik eyed the spread of ivory pieces. He enjoyed this game, and the old man had clever wits, despite his blindness. "I was thinking of the dragon hunters in the village. They seem to be making little progress."

"Is that why you watch the window so often?"

Caught. "No. I'm watching for your daughter. She is doing her best to avoid me." He didn't ask how the man had known. Einar seemed attuned to each rustle of cloth, and all of his other senses were exceptionally good.

“Ah.” Einar coughed faintly into the stained handkerchief in his fist, then reached for his knight. His hand quivered. “You have an interest in Freyja.”

The stale scent of encroaching death emanated from the old man. Rurik stilled. “She is intriguing,” he admitted. “She is beautiful, and clever, and stubborn, and utterly relentless.”

“I need not remind you your intentions had best be pure? I might be old and blind, but I can still be a force to be reckoned with when it comes to the daughter I love.”

Rurik respected the old man’s position, though he could swat him like a fly if he wished. “You can remind me, but Freyja has already lain down her rules. You might be a force to be reckoned with, but she is a force of nature.”

The old man chuckled, a sound that slowed, then died with a faint hush. “Aye, she’s proud and wary.” He scratched at his jaw, clearly upset by some thought. “It bothers me to see her so long unmarried. My health fades with each winter. I... I worry....”

Rurik surveyed the board, then moved his bishop and told the man what he’d done. “Freyja can survive without you, I assure you of that. She is independent and strong enough to rule her own life.”

“I know,” Einar replied. “But she has always been so isolated. You’ve seen her eyes?”

“They are beautiful eyes.”

“Some claim they are sure sign of a witch.”

“It’s a small village,” Rurik replied, lacing his hands across his middle. “I expect the people here to be sheltered.”

“Unfortunately, others don’t share your lack of qualms.” Einar looked troubled. “I always sought to spare her from their censure, and so Helga and I kept her close, and rarely invited strangers to the house. Or even guests. Maybe that was a m-mistake—” He broke into another hacking fit of coughs.

Rurik fetched the old man a glass of water. “Here,” he offered, sending a thin tendril of his power through his fingertips to energize the old man.

“My thanks.” Einar slurped the water down, and settled back in his chair, but at least his skin bore some faint signs of color now.

“Has she never had a suitor before?” he asked, as he waited for the old man to recover.

“I keep pushing her toward that Benedikt boy,” Einar admitted, “but she will have none of him.”

Every hint of the predator within him arose at the name. *Benedikt*. He was the man who threatened Freyja. Rurik’s voice turned silky. “He is local?”

“His father owns half the village.” Einar coughed again. “He’s not the sort of lad I’d normally choose for Freyja, but....”

He was the only man who showed interest in her. If only Einar understood what sort of interest Benedikt showed....

Not for him to mention. No. Rurik had other ways of confronting his rival. Still, he couldn’t say nothing, “Sometimes it is better to live alone, than to wed someone unsuitable.”

“Unless someone else who is suitable comes along?” Einar suggested unsubtly, his hand hovering

over his rook. He moved it. “I believe that is check.”

So it was. Rurik frowned. It was the first time the other man had beat him.

“Your attention has been elsewhere,” Einar mused, even as the door to the kitchen creaked faintly.

Rurik was suddenly all senses. There was a light footstep in the kitchen. Then another.

“And now you are distracted again.” Einar chuckled, clearly hearing Freyja’s entrance too. “Go,” he said, waving toward the kitchen. “You have my best wishes. I can tell she likes you.”

“I am not so certain of that. But we’ll continue our game later,” Rurik replied, pushing to his feet and moving after his fascinating adversary.

He had to move quickly. He could hear Freyja heading for the door again. The swing of her golden plait came into view, and Freyja snagged her shawl, reaching for the door handle with one guilty glance cast over her shoulder—

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

Freyja paused in the shadows of the kitchen doorway, her shawl in her hand. “For a walk.”

Lie. It ignited every single one of his senses. “May I come with you?”

“It is rather boring,” she said quickly, and he knew she was up to something. “You will not enjoy it. Muddy, smelly... I daresay it will ruin your boots.”

He was inclined to argue, but merely smiled. “Not my boots. Whatever would I do?”

Freyja shot him a narrow-eyed look, as if she couldn’t quite work out whether he was being sarcastic or not. She tucked the shawl over her honey-colored hair, then headed for the door. “I shall be back later.”

“I can hardly wait.”

That earned him one last twitch of the brow, before she vanished.

Troublesome female. If he were in his *dreki* form right now, his tail would be lashing. But then, if she thought to dissuade him from the chase, she thought wrong. Nothing stirred his interest more than a woman who refused to fall at his feet. And there was no reason for her to lie to him about where she was going, unless....

Rurik waited for all of two minutes, realizing Loki had followed him and watched from the corner of the cupboard, like some small chaperone.

“I am not going to hurt her, little brother,” he told the fox.

Those amber eyes narrowed.

Rurik reined in his predatory impulses, and headed out into the yard to see if his suspicions were correct.

That small light-footed figure headed out across the moors, her green shawl wrapped around her shoulders as she made her way directly toward the smoking volcano in the distance.

Easy enough to guess where she was going. What he didn’t know was why, or what she was up to.

His blood was up. Perhaps she was wary of Rurik the man, but she seemed to have reached a truce in her mind with the *dreki*.

It seemed she would be meeting him sooner, rather than later.

Rurik paced along the stone fence that housed her sheep. They bleated and scurried out of his path, pressing in a frightened huddle against the far wall. Freyja might not recognize him in this form, but all of her animals did.

He sighed. “I’m not going to eat any of you,” he pointed out. “She’s barely forgiven me for the ram.”

He’d never live it down if he sampled another of her delicious morsels.

His stomach chose that moment to growl. The bleating grew louder. Rurik bared his teeth at them, and then stomped around the corner of the stables. Idiot sheep. And frustrating shepherdess.

He’d given her more than enough time for a decent head start.

And the *dreki* itched within him, wanting to taste the wind on its face.

Plus there *were* his boots to think of...



Rurik glided across the skies, his shadow rippling over the tiny figure far below that trudged determinedly across the glacial moors. He felt utterly relaxed in his natural form, as though he’d been contained in a form far too small for him for too long.

Wind whipped beneath his wings and he soared on the thermals, delighting in the warmth of the sunlight on his scales.

Not a sign of another *dreki* anywhere. He’d made careful forays over the past few nights, but there’d been no hint of them. Which suggested they’d taken to ground....

Where though? What was their game?

And who had his mother sent to challenge him?

Silver scales. That bothered him, because while the color was popular among his clan, there was one particular *dreki* who gleamed silver, and his mother knew Andri would be a weakness of his. A part of him hoped she hadn’t sent his younger cousin on this mission, even as he knew better. Of course Amadea would exploit any weakness.

As for the bigger *dreki*, he hadn’t gotten a good look, but thought he’d caught a glimpse of a dark shape. Darker *dreki* were more common than the lighter or jewel-tinted shades, and the bigger *dreki* could have been any one of his uncle’s warriors.

He couldn’t scent them around his territory. No, they’d glided on elsewhere, though he knew the foray into his domain could not been accidental. Every *dreki* male at court knew the territory lines. When a simple incursion might mean war and a battle to the death, it wasn’t the sort of thing *dreki* were careless with. Which meant they’d been looking for something—some mischief—and it bothered him he could not figure it out.

Circling Krafla, Rurik caught sight of the determined figure crossing the moors far below. This

was a terrible time to be seducing an obstinate woman, but he couldn't deny that he was enjoying the pursuit more than he'd imagined. Rurik banked with care, and alighted on the ledge outside the entrance to his cave.

Just what, precisely, did Freyja value most? Freedom? Gold? A crown, perhaps? A rich manor where she did not have to work all day merely to put food on the table? No. He didn't think so. She seemed to enjoy the work, speaking with fondness to the creatures that inhabited her small farmstead. It was only when he was around that her tone became more careful.

Rurik tapped his claws on the stone, one after the other, as he sunned himself. Her challenge presented an intriguing mystery.

"You are early." He sent the thought to her just as she locked eyes with him. *"You are not due for another three weeks."*

Freyja hauled herself up the last stone climb, her dark blonde hair glowing like spun gold in the sunlight. "I know."

"Why are you here then?" He stretched, and decided to tease her a little. *"Have you bought me dinner?"*

A scowl met the words. "You're big enough and scary enough to fetch your own dinner."

"Yes. But they frown upon that here. Something about rams and ownership, and tithes and not taking what is due to a creature of my magnificence...."

Definitely a scowl. "You think you are amusing."

"I think you are up to something. Why else would you be here, hmm?"

Freyja looked away, the wind snagging strands of her blonde hair and tugging it free from her tight braid. He'd love to see all of that hair unbound. It was her true wealth. She stared over the valley below them, and he realized she was focusing on her village.

"I came to warn you," she said at last. "Some of the villagers have pooled their money and hired a dragon hunter to rid themselves of you. Others don't wish such a thing."

He rested his chin on his claws, watching her sleepily. *"I know."*

Those mismatched eyes widened. "What? How?"

"I am not stupid, little mouse." Rurik snorted. *"What sort of dreki would I be, if I let your puny villagers thwart me?"*

Freyja's lips thinned. "They will not seem so puny and insignificant when they bring that ballista up here and spear you with it."

"I should like to see them haul their machines up through the boggy moors and along the cliff path. It should prove amusing. I might even drop a rock on it. Or perhaps I will merely pinwheel through the sky above them? I've seen the aim on that thing. The dragons they've hunted must stand very still for them." Rurik spread his wings with a flap, enjoying the warmth on them. Freyja gasped and staggered, her back plastered to the sheer cliff face. He paused, realizing he'd startled her, and slowly curled his wings up against his sides. *"You won't fall."*

Freyja eyed the drop carefully. "You're not the one who was nearly blown off this ledge."

"*And if you did lose your footing, I would catch you,*" he continued. "*I am not done with you yet.*"

This statement earned him a narrow glare. "Saying such things does not ease my nerves one whit. What do you intend to do with me?"

"*I intend to hear your words,*" he replied. "*I am interested in conversation. One rarely finds humans brave enough to come into my den, especially those who have no designs for my gold.*"

"A *dreki* who wants only to talk?" she countered. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"*Surely you have heard the old tales?*"

A snort. "Yes, I've heard the old tales. All of them. Including the ones where a capricious traveler ended up in a *dreki's* belly."

"*I have no intentions of causing you harm,*" he replied. "*Dreki's oath on that. I am merely curious about you. Most of your neighbors are fools. How did such a curious female come about, when most of the village flees at the sight of my shadow?*"

Freyja eyed him. There was wariness there still, but also a certain sort of interest. As if, so starved for company and derided by humans, she could overlook the fact he was *dreki*.

"*Stay,*" he cajoled. "*Talk with me.*"

"Talk of what?" Freyja demanded, but the light in her eyes was back, her fear fading. Indeed, her tone had changed and she sounded more certain of herself when he was in this form.

Because you're no longer a threat to her as a dreki. Only as a man.

Which meant someone else had *been* that threat.

The thought made all sorts of possessive, violent male impulses whirl within him. Rurik contained it. He already knew he felt protective toward her, but the idea someone else had hurt her stirred the heart of the *dreki* spirit within him.

"*Yourself. Tell me why Freyja Helgasdottir is no fool.*"

Freyja gathered her skirts primly, and settled on a jutting rock. The look she gave him was faintly cunning. "And what will you give me if I do?"

Oho. Delight ran rampant through his veins. "*For all your talk, you have heard stories of dreki.*"

"Bargain with them at your own risk," Freyja replied. "Keep your wits at all moments. And never, ever offer a truth for free, for they are curious creatures and cannot deny their interest. Next to their mortal form, their curiosity is their second major weakness. My mother told me many stories."

All of it was true. "*Did she also tell you a dreki's second greatest strength is their patience?*"

"No." Freyja looked interested. "What is their greatest strength?"

"*Now that is a secret.*"

"And if I'm counting correctly, you owe me one." Was that a smile that played around her stubborn lips?

"*Perhaps. What do you want in exchange for your story? More gold?*" He didn't know how he

felt about that. His gold was *his* gold. But would it be worth it, to learn the heart of Freyja?

Yes. And not simply because he was failing in his efforts of seduction.

He wanted to know her. She would be his lover—that was a foregone conclusion in his mind—but the fascination for him extended beyond the physical.

“A truth for a truth,” she told him.

Which was potentially dangerous. His eyes narrowed. Denial here could cost him any chance at bridging the chasm she’d set between them. *“A truth for a truth. So be it.”*

Freyja held up a finger. “And not a random truth, but you must answer a question I propose.”

“What if I do not care to answer it?”

“Then I may feel free to ask another question,” she countered. “Out of three questions, you *must* answer one.”

Trouble. But damned if he did not wish to play this game with her. His *dreki* nature loved the challenge. *“Agreed. Now answer my question. Why is Freyja not afraid of me? Why did she dare confront me in my lair, when others would quail?”*

“You can see my eyes, no?”

“Such wondrous eyes.”

Her smile stilled, but didn’t entirely die as she gazed at her lap. “They call me elf-cursed,” she admitted slowly, as if the weight of this secret weighed upon her somehow. “Or think I make deals with the devil. When I was a little girl, a priest came to our village, where my father was selling geese in the marketplace. I was playing and happened to look up, and the priest reared away from me and made a sign of the cross. He was horrified, and it scared me. It was the first time I ever realized I was different.

“I don’t fit in to my world, not very well. So perhaps that is the reason I am not scared of you, nor believe in provoking you. Because you are different and so am I, and maybe I understand what that feels like.”

“You make no mention of magic.”

Another of those slow, careful glances she was known for. “Is that another question?”

“Perhaps it is merely a challenge. For you gave half an answer. You know you have power, and that made you fearless when you came to confront me.”

“I was scared,” she admitted.

“But?”

“Mostly I was angry. And hopeless.” She threw the smooth rock she’d been toying with. “There is a point one sometimes reaches that is beyond endurance, and I reached it the night you stole my ram. You are big and scary, and could have killed me. But a part of me simply didn’t care.”

He fell into those eyes. Freyja had such depths to her he wondered if he’d ever see the entirety of them. *“Now that tastes more like truth. A full truth.”*

Freyja sucked in a sharp breath, as if uncomfortable. “Which means it is time for my question.”

“Proceed.”

She frowned. “I intend to, but first I have to think of... the question that makes me most curious. I don’t want to waste my chance.”

Rurik laughed, a rumbling purr deep in his throat. *“So very female. Rest assured I have more questions for you. This doesn’t end with one.”*

“Oh.” That little knot between her brows furrowed and she dragged her knees up to her chest, her skirts falling around her ankles. “Can you change shape?”

The one question he’d been dreading. *“What is wrong with this shape?”*

“Nothing.”

“Yes,” he conceded, scratching his head against a rock. *“I can change forms. It is part of the goddess’s gift to us. But why would I? Humans are fools. They smell. And most of them are like brainless sheep. Then there are men here who wish to kill me, and I am slightly more vulnerable in human form—”*

“More vulnerable?” she broke in. “I thought it was one of a *dreki*’s greatest weaknesses—the only time you can be easily killed.”

“Easily is a matter of opinion,” he growled. *“I am powerful beyond your comprehension, and my magic is available no matter what form I wear.”*

“How often have you changed forms?”

He dipped a wing—the human equivalent of a shrug. *“That is like asking me, how many times have I eaten? I do not count such things. Often enough when I was younger, because I was curious, but not very often since. There is little reason to do so.”*

“Have you ever seduced a human woman?”

“No.” Not yet, anyway. *“And,”* he forestalled her, *“you now owe me three answers, for you asked four questions and I answered all of them.”*

Freyja frowned. “You answered with some questions.”

“But they were rhetorical, were they not?”

If he could smile, he would have, for she looked utterly captivating with frustration written all across her face. “I do not think that is entirely fair, but I’ll allow it.”

“How kind of you.” Turnabout was fair play. His eyes narrowed. *“What type of creature are you? For it is clear you are not human.”*

“Of course I am human,” she shot back, opening her arms wide. “Do I not look human?”

“You look human,” he admitted. *“You smell human, though you smell better than most of them. But you are not human. They have no powers, nor magic, unless it is god-given, and you do not bear the stamp of any gods.”*

“You can sense that?”

“I once met a man in Norway,” he admitted. *“He used to chew berries and send himself into a trance, where he could communicate with his god. The strain showed on his aura, and I was... wary*

of crossing him. He smelled wrong.”

“That is a very old practice.”

“It is. But then, I encountered it when I was in my youth.”

“How old are you?”

“Hundreds of years,” he replied, with a faint shrug of his wing. *“Dreki think in terms of cycles, not years, so I am not entirely certain. I am in my tenth cycle, however. How old are you?”*

“Four-and-twenty.”

“Where does your power come from?”

She paused.

“Did you think I had forgotten?”

“No.” Freyja’s lips twisted. “It’s just... I don’t know where it comes from.”

Lie. It seared along his magic nerves, making him hiss.

“That’s not the truth—”

But Freyja wasn’t looking at him. Her gaze settled on a point behind him, her lips parting with a faint O.

Rurik craned his neck. And there, pinwheeling above the glaciers to the south, was the smaller silver dragon he’d sighted that night in Akureyri.

On the edges of his territory, practically *daring* him to retaliate.

“Go home,” he growled to her, his claws digging into the rocks as he drew himself to his full height.

“Wait!” Freyja called.

But Rurik wasn’t listening. Instead, he danced along the edge of the path, careful of her frail mortal body, and launched himself into the air with a powerful thrust of his wings.

“Go home, little mouse, while I take care of this visitor.”

“Be careful!” she called.

“Always,” he sent back. *“After all, you still owe me the answer to that question.”*



It had to be a trap.

He knew this, and yet he went anyway, because to ignore intruders in his territory went against *dreki* nature. *His.* This land was his. Bought and bargained for with blood and death, and he could no sooner allow this transgression than he could roll over and submit.

Screeching a battle cry, Rurik roared through the skies. The power of the land shivered through him, until it felt like he’d captured the power of a storm, bottled lightning in his belly.

Ahead of him, the silver *dreki* spun, his wings stiff as he banked. There was the flash of a paler belly, and claw marks across the *dreki*’s cheek, and then he withdrew in a dive that sent him fleeing.

“*Andri.*” The unexpected sight made Rurik’s wings skip a beat.

All of his earlier suspicions bore fruit. Of course his mother and uncle would send the kit he’d once considered a younger brother.

Rurik beat his wings as he dove after his younger cousin. Andri had been on the verge of adulthood, almost two cycles old, when Rurik left in exile. Now he was a *dreki* grown, though not quite as large as he himself was. A young warrior who would bear the mark of his father’s temper on his face forever.

“*Go home,*” he told his smaller cousin. “*And I shall forget this trespass.*”

Andri hissed at him as Rurik fell in beside him. The smaller *dreki* was fast, but Rurik’s strength and skill meant Andri would never lose him. “*My father sends his regards.*”

“*His regards? Or his son as a sacrifice?*” Rurik spiraled in a slow circle around the other *dreki*. Together they began a dangerous dance. Airborne battles were brutal, and a fall could shatter wings and bones, but he’d been primed for this fight since the day he was born. “*Is Stellan so careless with his sons he would send one into a fight that is not his own?*”

Andri refused to comment. And Rurik began to grow suspicious. Was Andri here on his father’s terms—or did some part of the youth want to reach out to one he’d once trusted?

“*I won’t kill you,*” Rurik told his former squire, making a decision. “*Unlike others, I made an oath to protect you and I intend to keep it. You shouldn’t be here. This is not your fight.*”

“*I have a duty to fulfill,*” his cousin replied.

“*If you come against me and I am forced to protect myself, I’ll knock you from the skies, but I won’t kill you,*” Rurik warned.

Andri soared high over Krafla. “*You’re a fool then. You’re my clan’s enemy.*”

“*You’re my cousin,*” he shot back, “*And you were always mine, more than you were ever Stellan’s. You’re the one good thing he ever created, and you have more honor in you than any of your nestlings.*”

Andri broke the thought-thread between them, veering away. Rurik ignored his distress and went after him. There were only two reasons Andri could have sought him out today. Either the youth meant to lure him into a trap, or his guilt had driven him to make contact.

“*And where’s the other dreki?*” Rurik caught up to his squire swiftly. “*Who did your father send? Vargur? Grimold? Magnus? T—*”

A shock of connection betrayed Andri’s thoughts, and made Rurik’s heart thud in his chest. “*Magnus,*” he repeated. “*Of course he sent his heir.*”

He and Magnus were of an age. Kits raised together, but never friends. Never allies.

Magnus was everything Stellan hoped to produce. A *dreki* with a heart as black as his hide. When Stellan and Amadea married into Iceland’s *Zini* clan, they’d brought all of their Norwegian clan’s prejudices with them. The intermarriage was meant to be a treaty between the *Zini* and *Zilittu* clans to broker peace, but all of Stellan’s sons—bar Andri—thought of themselves more as *Zilittu* than *Zini*.

And with Amadea sitting on the throne her husband, Reynar, once owned, it seemed the treaty had been more of a long-seeded plot than an honest reconciliation.

As Amadea and Reynar's eldest son, Rurik was the only *dreki* who could thwart their ambitions to rule both clans. His brother, Marduk, was too young to be a threat, and though Marduk was considered an adult, he wouldn't have the strength to combat Magnus. Would he?

"Tell your brother I accept his challenge," Rurik said slowly, thinking of his brother. Magnus would want his path to the throne to be unhindered, regardless of whether or not Marduk could ever actually beat him. Then there was Andri... *"We can settle this between us. You don't have to be involved."*

"He's not offering challenge."

Of course not. Magnus would consider himself the strongest male now, and hence the rightful heir, which meant Rurik was the one who had to offer. And he would let his cold dead body sink into the seas before he ever condescended to those who'd plotted against his father, then blamed Rurik for the king's death.

"Even if you offered, he would not accept it," Andri said quickly.

So this was not to be an honorable duel. *"Why are you here then? Does your brother know where you are?"*

"I wanted to warn you," Andri said, after a long hesitation. *"And no, he doesn't."*

There was the hint of his old squire: Andri, whose sense of honor would forbid an ambush.

"I knew you were here," he replied. *"But thank you. I had hoped they hadn't corrupted you completely."*

The skies gleamed blue around them as Andri broke the mental connection between them. Even so, Rurik caught the faint mournful taint of the younger *dreki*'s emotions. This could not be easy for the youth. He'd followed Rurik around the court as a kit, like an enamored lass. The day Rurik took Andri as his squire had been the most joyful either of them shared.

The day his young squire lied and said he'd seen his prince in the king's quarters the night the king was murdered, had been the worst.

"I don't hold you responsible for my exile," Rurik sent, in a thought-thread. He could almost feel Andri's guilt through the thread. *"You were never the sort to fall in line with your father's plots, nor were you ever interested in his bribes. I know he must have threatened you with something in order for you to betray my trust."* Andri tried to shy away, but Rurik wouldn't let him break the thread. *"I forgive you,"* he told the youth. *"But you should have come to me the moment Stellan made his threat. I would have protected you."*

"You couldn't have," Andri whispered.

"I would have tried."

"I know."

The smaller *dreki* broke away, and this time Rurik let him go, hoping the words had been enough

to sway Andri from this fight.

Because if Magnus was involved, then this only ended one way... with someone dying.

Chapter 9

By the time Freyja returned home, Rurik was lying on a rug in the sun, reading a book. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing tanned forearms, and he clasped one hand behind his head, muscles shifting in his abdomen as he craned his neck to watch her walk into the yard.

It wasn't as though she'd suspected he was anything other than what he claimed, but a part of her had wondered.

He knew so much about *dreki*, after all.

But her *dreki* had thundered into the south, and that was the last she'd seen of him. He couldn't have beaten her back here, then changed form and waited for her, could he?

No. Not without Freyja seeing him in the skies.

She laid that faint suspicion to rest. She'd clearly listened to her mother's eddas too often as a girl. After all, what would a powerful creature ever want with the likes of her?

"Did you enjoy your walk?" Rurik graced her with a faint smile, taking in the state of her skirts. "Tsk. You've ruined your boots."

"Better mine than yours," she pointed out.

"True." Rurik rolled to his feet with fluid grace, setting the book upside down. "Where are you going?"

"Some of us do not have time to laze in the sun," Freyja shot over her shoulder as she headed to the barn. Thanks to her journey to warn the *dreki*, she was already behind in her day's work, and needed to see to dinner soon, if they were to dine at all.

Scrambling up the ladder into the loft, she glanced around, noting how much hay she needed to shift. Rurik's blankets lingered by the slatted window at the front of the barn, slashes of sunlight spilling over his makeshift bed. But she was not going to think of that.

"You look like you would enjoy an afternoon spent lazing in the sun." Rurik followed her up the ladder, looking far too male—a healthy one at that—as he hauled himself into the loft. There was a strength in his muscular frame she could not match. "Maybe you should join me?"

"If you're only here to flirt with me, then I might as well put you to good use." She picked up the pitchfork and thrust it into his hands. "Here." She pointed to the pile of hay. "I need to shift that over

there, so I can drop it down into the stalls when I need to feed my animals. If you want to impress me, then you can help. I will be back to check on your work within the hour.”

Rurik shot her a narrow-slitted gaze, then glanced at the pitchfork as if it was the first time he’d ever seen one.

“If the work is good enough for me,” she pointed out, “then it is good enough for you, my lord.”

And without waiting for a protest, she scurried down the ladder, and toward the door. She needed to fetch her small flock in, then set her stew on the stove. The clouds were brewing with all their spring glory, indicating a storm later that night.

It took longer than she’d expected—her small flock didn’t want to go anywhere near the barn, the stupid beasts—but she finally managed to hunt them all inside their stalls, and swung the iron pot she’d prepared earlier over the stove, before she returned to the loft.

Climbing the ladder revealed no sign of Rurik.

Nor were there any sounds of labor in process. Typical. She was just about bristling by the time she reached the top of the ladder and—

—found herself staring at a pile of hay near the top.

“What? How—?” Freyja looked around her.

All the hay had been moved. The pitchfork rested against the nearest beam, and Rurik was stretched out upon his blankets in the corner, with his coat folded neatly beside him.

Rearing up onto his elbows, he sent her a heated smile. “You’re back.”

“You... finished.” It usually took her at least an hour to do the same amount of work. Rurik didn’t even seem to have raised a sweat, though his collar was undone now, revealing a healthy slice of chest.

“Would I have dared otherwise?” Slowly, he rolled to his feet.

She examined the hayloft. “There’s no way you could have shifted so much hay in such a short time.” The bare timber floorboards where the previous pile had rested were a mockery. Not even a single loose straw lay there.

“Do your eyes deceive you?”

“You cheated. Somehow.” She simply couldn’t accept he could work swifter than she could.

“Aye.” Rurik slowly crossed his arms, his eyelids heavy and his smile smug. “I called upon the *nisse* to help me impress you, and they answered my prayer.”

Freyja set her hands on her hips. “*Nisse* are a fairy tale.” The small wights were said to help take care of the house or the barn, but only when the farmer lay asleep, and only in exchange for milk.

“Do you believe in *dreki*?”

That was different. “I have seen *dreki* with my own eyes.”

Freyja strode around him, trying to find some means for the almost miraculous feat. His shirt wasn’t even damp with sweat. Rurik glanced behind as she circled him, and the muscles in his thighs and ass tightened behind his trousers.

“You won’t find *nisse* there,” he pointed out, and she realized he’d caught the direction of her gaze.

Insufferable, smug bastard. She was tired, frustrated, and struggling to resist him, and that did it. The impulse to tackle him to the ground suddenly hit her, but something told her he’d win any fight she started. After all, he dwarfed her by a good six or seven inches.

Grabbing a handful of hay, Freyja stuffed it down the back of his shirt then began to run.

She made it two steps before his strong arms caught her up. Her feet left the ground, and her back hit his chest. “Where do you think you’re going? You owe me a debt now.”

Freyja wriggled, but there was no denying him. He was simply too strong for her. Muscle-bound arms trapped her like a cage, and she felt like she wrestled a wall. “I don’t owe you anything.”

Rurik dumped her on the pile of blankets he was sleeping upon, and Freyja rolled onto her back breathlessly. Ripping his shirt from the waistband of his trousers, he shook himself with a growl. “This itches!”

“Perhaps *nisse* can help clean all the hay from your shirt?” she told him, innocently enough.

Oh, yes. That was definitely one irritated male shooting her a baleful look. Freyja couldn’t stop herself from laughing. He looked like he couldn’t believe she’d done it.

And then that devil’s smile crept over his face. “Perhaps I won’t need them. Perhaps you could assist?”

Reaching over his shoulder, Rurik grabbed the collar of his shirt and hauled it over his head. Pieces of hay dropped from his skin and shirt, leaving him bare chested above her. Freyja’s mouth gaped. This was not what she’d planned. Not at all.

In the flesh, Rurik was breathtaking. Every inch of his skin was that sun-kissed color, and a taunting trail of golden hair edged all the way from his navel to where it disappeared into the waistband of his trousers. His chest seemed carved of heavy slabs of muscle, and he towered over her, perhaps six and a half feet tall of frustrated, dominant male.

He’d allowed her to set the pace in all of their previous encounters. For the first time, Freyja felt like she might have stirred him too far, and unleashed the predator within.

And, startlingly enough, she wasn’t frightened of him.

Perhaps it was the smile, the one that said he knew just how much he affected her.

Or perhaps it was the fact Rurik had never once taken what he’d wanted from her. Instead he’d allowed her to set the boundaries and he’d respected them, even as he flirted and teased her to the point where she wanted to growl in frustration.

She was the one who’d shoved a fistful of straw down his shirt.

Uh-oh.

“Indeed.” His voice came out in a velvety growl. Rurik threw his shirt at her, and Freyja caught it, almost recoiling from the heat retained by the linen. His scent wove around her, spicy-hot and alluring.

No, no, no.

She might have started this game, but she had the bad feeling he was going to come out the winner. Freyja scrambled to escape, but Rurik was simply too big, too strong, and too fast. He covered her with ease, caging her from behind, so that his masculine scent enveloped her. Freyja locked an ankle around his leg and threw his weight over her shoulder, and somehow they went down in a sprawl. His skin was deliciously hot, and she didn't think she was fighting as hard as she could be.

When her back hit the blankets, he slammed his body over hers, one knee pinning her skirts between her legs. Freyja ceased trying to free herself, and slumped beneath him. She wasn't going to win her way free. And if she were being honest, she wasn't certain she wanted to.

"Just what do you think the penalty should be for such an infraction?" he asked her, pinning her wrists above her head and breathing hard.

Freyja gave an involuntary shiver. All of that hard, male body was pressed above her, though he didn't make contact. Not fully. There was just enough space between them for her to catch her breath. "What do you think I would be willing to pay?"

Those amber eyes flared with heat as they both realized she was flirting back. *Oh, God.* What was she doing?

Enjoying the moment, curse her. Both body and heart wanted to see where he'd take this, and her curious mind wasn't far behind.

"I will accept favors," Rurik replied softly, "as I don't think you want me trying to return the gesture."

It wasn't the lay down her dress that bothered her, more the thought of him getting his hands on her bare skin. Freyja wasn't certain she'd have the sense to stop him, if he did so.

"What type of favors?" she whispered back.

Rurik's face lowered, and she found herself tensing in anticipation, and—

Nothing.

Freyja glanced up beneath her lashes, only to find him staring down at her, an inch between their faces. She let out the breath she'd been holding, her chest heaving against his. What was he waiting for?

"If you think I am going to steal a kiss," Rurik said, in a voice turned molten with heat, "then you should think again."

Freyja wiggled a little beneath him, her body tight with thwarted anticipation. She ached, and it was a deliciously horrible feeling. "What do you mean? You didn't just wrestle me down onto your blankets for the sheer enjoyment of it?"

"You don't know that. I was planning on tickling you into submission. Kissing you was not my intention," he admitted, rolling slightly to the side, so he rested on one elbow. His right hand came up, brushing a strand of hair off her face in a gentle touch, and Freyja realized he wasn't actually going to kiss her. "Though I might have thought about it, now we're here."

Soft fingers trailed down the sensitive skin of her throat.

Freyja sucked in a sharp breath, and became very still. Those fingers trailed lower, lower, then his knuckles brushed against the soft wool of her dress. Again she writhed, but it was a different feeling to when she'd wanted to escape. This felt like a silent demand, like her entire body wanted something her mouth couldn't articulate....

And he knew it, curse him.

"If you want a kiss, Freyja"—that smile turned utterly devilish—"then all you have to do is ask."

What? She froze. Her treacherous body was in utter rebellion against her common sense. Her body knew what it wanted. And she had to admit her own desires were somewhat thwarted. She'd expected him to kiss her, damn him. Then she wouldn't have to admit to herself she wanted him to.

"I thought you were here to seduce me," she said.

"I am."

"Then you're doing a rather poor job of it if you expect me to kiss *you*." She took an unsteady breath.

"Am I?" There was that smile again. Rurik's thumb caressed her cheek, and his eyes grew heavy-lidded. "You want me to steal a kiss—"

"I don't *want* you to do anything of the sort."

"Then you expect it," he countered, his breath whispering over her skin. "Most likely so you can push me away and tell me your hell hasn't frozen over yet."

Freyja swallowed. *Maybe*.

"I now realize," he continued, in that same silky-soft voice, "the men you have known have not been the sort to take 'no' for an answer. You know nothing of seduction, *sarratum zamani*; and you fear a single kiss will not end there."

"You've called me that before," she whispered.

"You're stalling," he replied, and tugged her braid over her shoulder. Rurik bought the end of her plait to his nose, and inhaled the scent of it, then those amber eyes locked on her again as the ends of her hair tickled across his lips. "Your choice, Freyja. All you have to do to receive a kiss is ask for one. If you want more, then you may take more. And if you want me to stop, then all you have to do is say so."

Her choice. Freyja turned the thought over in her head. It felt strange to consider such a thing, but... she was tempted. What would it feel like to have the reins in her hands? To be able to explore without fear he would push her further than she was ready? "I'm not going to lie with you, so... if we start, then it will end with a kiss."

"Is that a yes?" he purred, and his thigh nudged between hers.

A thrill shot through her as his weight shifted over her again. She could control this. Her hands curled around his upper arms as he rested his forearms beside her head. Freyja slid a hand up his bare chest. The heat of his skin felt like some inner furnace burned within. "What did you mean by

more?" she whispered.

Rurik lowered his mouth to hers, hovering there. "I could show you so much, Freyja. If you trusted me."

If she trusted him....

It was her choice to brush her mouth against his quivering lips. Hordes of butterflies took flight in her stomach. She didn't know how he did this to her. What was this odd connection between them? "Maybe a little more," she whispered, as she opened her mouth to his.

Rurik licked her tongue, his hips pressing flush against hers, and the hard length of his erection rubbing against her lower stomach. Each stroke of his mouth was an enticement, rather than a claim. Daring her to kiss him back, and letting her set the pace. Freyja's hands curled around his biceps, and she stroked his arms, her hands sliding up over his shoulders. All of that hot skin.... More. She wanted more. But Rurik held himself curiously apart from her, matching her kiss for kiss, and nothing else. Every time she touched him, he reciprocated. Every time her nails dug into his back, he grew a little more insistent, pressing his hips between her thighs and rubbing that heavy cock against her.

Her entire body ached, wetness dampening the skin between her thighs. An image of his hot mouth closing over her breast in Akureyri assaulted her, and Freyja moaned as she arched her back beneath him. She could almost feel his lips on her nipple, but the memory felt hollow, not quite substantial enough to satisfy her.

She didn't know how to ask for what she wanted.

Freyja curled her fists in his hair, and tugged. Hard lips captured hers, as if to encourage her. Not a sweet kiss now. This was messy. Pent-up frustration poured from him as his tongue tangled with hers, and his erection ground against the wet ache between her thighs.

More. Definitely more. That sweet friction made her body want to curl up on itself. She writhed against him, and her skirts rode up between them, leaving her legs bare. Then her greedy hands slid over his shoulders, exploring all of that smooth skin. She wanted to lick it and so she did, nipping at the muscle in his throat.

"Freyja." He sucked in a sharp breath as he turned his face to the side, muttering an unsteady curse under his breath. Hands trapped her wrists, and then Rurik pinned her hands above her head, leaving her utterly helpless beneath him. Those golden eyes locked on hers, and he shuddered, his voice turning all growly. "If you don't stop doing that, then this isn't going to end here."

"Doing what?" she whispered, cupping his hips with her thighs and rocking against him experimentally.

Rurik's lips parted, and his gaze became distant. It felt so, so good. But there was something *else* that beckoned and she couldn't quite understand what it was, or how to get there.

"You told me you didn't intend to lie with me," he growled, his lips curling back off his teeth. Utterly primitive expressions crossed his face. "Have you changed your mind? Or do you just want a little more?"

“I want...” She stalled there. And his body hovered over hers, his cock pressing with heated possession against her.

But he didn’t make a single move, and it hurt to deny herself, and *oh, God....*

Those golden eyes darkened as if he understood what she wanted when she herself didn’t. “Do you trust me?”

That was a dangerous question. Freyja’s mind raced. “Yes.” Barely a whisper.

“Good.” He claimed her mouth in another heated kiss, even as his hands slid down her arms, setting her free.

Freyja’s hands tangled in his golden hair. His found the laces on her dress. Suddenly she knew what he intended, and her eyes shot wide, even as his lips traced their way down her throat.

“Let me please you,” he whispered, nuzzling aside her neckline. Sharp teeth nipped at the curve of her breast, and then he traced the sensitive area with his tongue.

Pleasure threatened to claim her. Freyja rolled her head to the side. *Yes. Yes.* “More,” she breathed.

The rasp of his stubble grazed her sensitive breasts as Rurik rocked his hips against her. Somehow the steely length of his erection met the seat of her pleasure, and he rode over that delicate part of her, nearly sending her wild with need. Tugging her neckline open, he claimed her aching nipple with his hot mouth, and it was all she could do to stifle the cry that sprang from her lips.

“That’s it, *ati me peta libbu*,” he whispered. Teeth scraped her nipple, and then he was licking her there, that talented tongue driving every last thought out of her head.

All that remained was a creature of pleasure. She could feel the storm building within her, whipped to greater heights by that teasing tongue and the mocking rock of his hips.

Clasping her hips, Rurik slid his hand under the lengths of her skirt. The material rode up her thighs, leaving her in her drawers and stockings. Freyja wrapped her legs around his hips, even as his questing hand trailed between her thighs. Gentle fingers stroked her damp drawers, and a shudder went through her. Nobody had ever touched her there. Only herself, and she’d shied away from exploring too far.

This... this was like lightning coiling all the way through her.

Freyja cupped his face. Rurik stared down at her, lazy-lidded and curious, as if he wanted to see every single expression that crossed her face.

“Do you like that?” he whispered, as if his fingers hadn’t just worked between the slit in her drawers and finally found her, damp and trembling.

“Oh.” Her mouth fell open on a gasp as one finger stroked her in her most private place. Rurik traced tiny little circles there, seeming to find the secret heart of her, the place that seemed most sensitive.

“What are you *doing*?” she blurted.

“Want to ride the storm, Freyja?” He kissed the side of her jaw, his face nuzzling against hers,

even as his fingers worked her with slow and patient circles.

Almost there. Freyja's eyes shot wide, and her fingernails turned into claws in the soft skin of his shoulders. There. *Yes.* Almost. Almost.

She shattered.

Her entire body clenched on a wave of pleasure, and somehow she threw her head back, crying out in soft abandon as Rurik pushed her over the edge. This time the lightning wasn't in the sky. She felt like a bolt of it struck her, and flash-burned all her nerves. Exquisite. Breathless. The fiercest ache she'd ever felt....

Then it was over, and she was collapsing into a gasping mess in his arms, her heart thundering in her chest.

"That's it," Rurik whispered, still tracing his fingers through the slick folds between her thighs. "That's it, my fierce, precious Freyja."

Somehow her mind caught up with what he was doing. She buried her burning face in his throat, her body quivering with aftershock. She couldn't take any more. Freyja shook her head and grabbed his wrist, pulling his hand away from her. Another shiver worked its way through her. So intense. She felt like the earth itself when something monumental shifted beneath the ground.

And maybe something monumental *had* shifted....

Rurik kissed her temples, then her closed eyes, then her nose. Somehow he found her mouth, and this kiss was another gentle one, as if he tried to calm her flighty heart.

Too late. She would never be the same again.

"More," Freyja whispered, tilting her face to present her throat to him.

Rurik stilled, and then something hard and predatory slid over his face. Something she didn't quite recognize. Then he shook his head, his expression tinged with regret. "As much as I would like to comply, you're not ready yet. And I have no wish to rush you."

"Am I not the judge of that?" Freyja clapped a hand over his, then urged it back beneath her skirts—

"Freyja!" Her father's voice cut through their reverie.

Freyja froze, her hand on Rurik's, even as her pulse beat out of control. Their eyes met, his dark and predatory.

"Looks like we have little choice," Rurik rasped, his head twisting toward the window. The sun was beginning to set. "Damn it."

"Freyja?" her father called again.

Freyja shoved Rurik off her and rolled out from beneath him, her cheeks so hot she could rival a sunset, she imagined. Oh, my goodness. What had she been about to do? Lose her virginity in the barn? She tugged hay from her hair and out of her dress, yanked her laces tight, then pulled the material over her bare breasts. Everything in her body trembled, including her knees.

What would her father think?

What had *she* been thinking?

Clearly, she had not been.

“Don’t give me that look,” Rurik growled, under his breath. He groaned, and then slumped back onto the blankets, rearranging the fierce erection in his trousers. “What we just shared was not wrong.”

“Be silent!” she hissed, scurrying to the ladder. “He’ll hear you.”

“Freyja.”

She paused at the top of the ladder, her knees still unsteady.

Rurik sprawled on his blankets, his chest bare, his golden hair tangled across his brow and his smile dangerous. “This isn’t done.”

“Oh, yes it is!” she shot back, and fled down the ladder.

Chapter 10

Rurik clasped his hands under his head and stared at the shadows of the barn roof as night settled in. He'd dined with Freyja and her father, though Freyja barely looked at him. Every time she did, he could see thoughts racing through her eyes.

She'd let him touch her, please her... and now she was curious.

But the stubborn part of her nature had reared its head also. Freyja was not the sort to accept such a vital turning point in her seduction so sanguinely. She would turn herself in knots, no doubt all night, and in the morning their dance would begin again.

He could hardly wait.

Rurik could be patient, even as his body ached with the lack of release. Freyja was worth it, and today had been a concession he hadn't expected her to make just yet.

Closing his eyes slowly, he let his spirit hover just inside his body. Tonight he had another debt to repay, and if he felt perhaps a little frustration, then this would assuage the hunter within him.

A long time since he'd walked the dreams of man. A long time since he'd wanted to.

Rurik let his spirit separate from his mortal flesh, and rose high above the world. The little barn lay beneath him, and lights flickered merrily from the main house. He drifted above its grassed roof, and then turned his sight upon the nearby village.

One thought and he was there, the world rushing past him. Dozens of spirits flickered below him as men and women moved through the village, banking the fires for the night.

Rurik sorted through them, his predatory senses touching and discarding several souls before finally alighting on the one he sought. He circled the fine manor house, sensing the snoring pig that awaited him.

"Benedikt," Rurik whispered, feeling the other soul waken to his call, the man turning fitfully toward him in bed.

Not quite all the way awake, but not lost in sleep either.

Rurik formed within the room, staring balefully at his nemesis.

This man had hurt Freyja. Not physically, for she had her own defenses, but he'd struck at her where she was most vulnerable. Little whispers in the right ear, setting superstition against her, and threats to those villagers who might have helped her and bought her produce. Oh, yes. Rurik had

offered good coin for that information, as he waited for Freyja to make her way home from Akureyri.

Benedikt wanted her weak, alienated and powerless. His intentions had never been about seduction, but ownership. He'd wanted her begging and on her knees, rather than meeting her on equal footing.

No man of honor would ever pursue such a course of action.

Crossing to the bed, Rurik looked down on his prey. Every inch of him wanted to spill blood, but that went against the code he lived by. No true *dreki* could ever commit murder, no matter the offence. You did not take human lives, unless they attacked you first. It was a treaty that went back hundreds of years to when the human Althing met with the *dreki* court and demanded a cease to hostilities between human and *dreki*.

He had never before felt the need to break one the *dreki*'s greatest laws, but he came close now.

Killing this coward, however, would be too easy.

Rurik reached out with his spirit hand and clasped Benedikt's shoulder, plunging them both straight into the dream world.

Rurik manipulated the dream, twisting it to his liking. Taking his immortal form, he flapped high above the moors, where he set Benedikt to running. The man staggered and babbled with fright, finding himself in unfamiliar terrain. When Rurik's shadow rippled over him, Benedikt looked up, his face whitening with fear.

"Run," Rurik whispered.

Mist surrounded them, hot fumes bubbling from small crevices in the ground. Enjoying the mortal's staggering plight, Rurik flapped lazily above him, then suddenly cut his wings flat against his sides and plunged into a dive.

Benedikt bleated in fear, and splashed through a hot spring, his voice turning to a scream as the acid water burned him.

Swooping just short of him, Rurik climbed again as the man scrambled across moss-slick rocks.

"*It is not fun to be prey, is it?*" he taunted, diving again.

A wave of incoherent fear swept from the man. He pissed himself, and Rurik chose that moment to lash out with his claws, catching the man by the shirt. He hauled him into the air, wings beating as he climbed. The shirt ripped, jerking Benedikt in his grasp, and Rurik shook him a little, just to frighten him.

"Please!" Benedikt screamed, as the tear in his shirt began to jerk wider. "Please! I have gold—"

The shirt finally gave and Benedikt tumbled end over end with a high-pitched squeal as he plummeted through the air. Rurik waited until the last moment before he caught his blubbering prey. His claw locked around the man's ankle.

Now he had the peasant's attention.

"*I don't want your gold. Nothing you say can or will sway me. This is a warning.*"

Turning toward his dream-rendition of Krafla, he flapped lazily as Benedikt cried in his grasp.

“You have turned your village against Freyja Helgasdottir. You have threatened her, and threatened others so they may not provide her aide or trade coin with her. You’re not a man. You’re a sniveling coward, and you know not who you provoke.”

Circling the tip of the volcano, he pictured lava bubbling within the hollow of the caldera, flames licking up the sides as if they wanted to eat Benedikt alive.

“That bitch is lying! I never touched her. I never threatened her—”

“If you die here, then you’ll never wake.” Rurik bared his teeth as he circled above the volcano. *“If you so much as look in her direction ever again, I shall roast you alive,”* he snapped, and then finally let go. *“I know who the liar is.”*



Benedikt slammed his hands out in front of him as the lava rushed up to meet him, only to realize there was something wrong, something.... He jerked awake from the dream and plunged upright in his bed, his skin clammy with sweat as his familiar room formed around him. The fire in the grate had died down, but lit enough of the furniture for him to grasp hold of his sheets in relief.

Not real. Just a nightmare. His lungs sucked in air and his heart raced as he groaned and sank his head into his hands. His nightshirt was wet with piss. The image of the caldera rushing up to meet him sprang sharply to mind, then he was crying and snot was bubbling out of his nose, and damn him, he was a man, not a child. Benedikt wiped the tears from his eyes furiously, sucking in enough oxygen to stem the flow of tears.

“Just a dream,” he told himself hoarsely, even though it felt real.

Pain speared through his ankle as he twisted to right his sheets, and he dragged them up to see what the problem was—

There, against his skin, were the reddened claw marks of the dragon.

“Not a dream,” something whispered in his head.

Benedikt’s back hit the headboard as he scrambled up the bed, staring at his reddened skin. “Blessed father, watch over me,” he whispered, his heart thumping like a rabbit’s.

He scrambled for the chamber pot as his stomach suddenly heaved, too overwhelmed by the thought of what had happened. Real. Far too real. Benedikt vomited into the pot, piss splashing against his face. He was held captive by his stomach, however, until the wave of fear wrung everything from him.

Ripping his nightshirt off, he wiped his face and collapsed in a heap against the wall, shivering.

That bitch must have set the dragon upon him.

There was more than one way to answer *that* insult. He shoved to his feet, and reached for his clothes. He was halfway into them when the dream returned.

“If you so much as look in her direction, I shall roast you alive,” the dragon had hissed.

Benedikt swallowed, then he slowly dragged his trousers up his legs. It wasn't as though *he* was going to do anything. Not overtly. That was what he was paying others for.

He considered the thought for a long moment, turning it over in his mind to find the flaw in his argument.

There was none. He couldn't just accept this threat.

And he had a dragon hunter up his sleeve.

The dragon had to be dealt with. And Benedikt knew just the way to do it.



The fire crackled as Haakon nursed his horn of ale in the village taproom. Another long, seemingly pointless day stretched behind him. The frustration ached, but he knew to be patient. Today they'd mapped Krafla, finding no sign of the *dreki* itself, but plotting where the best place to set the ballista lay.

Turning the silver pendant his wife had given him over in his fingers, Haakon rubbed the embossed metal. A hawk in full flight gleamed, its wings flared and its eyes seeming to stare right through him.

"*A hawk for a hunter,*" Arja had teased as she lay beneath him the night of their wedding, and looped the chain around his neck.

He hated the fact the memory had grown ragged around the edges. He knew her face, but when he pictured her, somehow the image wasn't quite fully formed, as if he was forgetting parts of her. Hair the color of spun gold crowned her face, and eyes like polished amber stared up at him.

Six years of misery. Six years since the *dreki* stole her from him.

Haakon's fist closed over the pendant. He could wait another night or two, so long as his patience gained him what he desired.

"Who are you looking at?" Rollo demanded with sneer, his loud voice cutting through the taproom laughter. "Don't think I won't ruin that pretty face of yours!"

The enormous man shoved to his feet, fist drawn back as he launched himself toward the youngest of their company, but before Haakon could move to restrain him, another was there.

One of his newest recruits, Magnus, caught the man's wrist and shoved Rollo against the wall as if he didn't weigh the same as a bear. His lips curled back from his teeth as Rollo's attention turned from the young hunter to this newest threat.

"Keep your hands off my brother," Magnus warned, and that voice sent a chill through Haakon.

He pushed to his feet, recognizing the danger signs. His men were hungry for a kill, and the careful planning and days of unsuccessful hunting were wearing at them all. If he didn't stop them, blood would be spilled. "That's enough."

Both Magnus and Rollo looked at him, though Magnus's expression didn't change. He and his

brother, Andri, had joined Haakon's party in Akureyri, lured by the sound of plentiful coin. Though he had enough men, he'd taken one look at their hardened eyes and battle-ready frames and known warriors when he saw them.

Which was precisely what he'd need, where he was going.

"Focus on the *dreki*," he told the room of watchful men. "You'll get your blood soon enough."

"When?" Gunnar demanded.

"Aye," Jon snarled. "When do we take the dragon's lair?"

The rest of the men echoed him, thumping fists on table, and clapping their tankards on the trestle tables. Haakon held his hands up, the pendant chain curled around two fingers. "Tomorrow!"

A chorus of cheers went up.

But Haakon felt eyes on him, and noticed Andri was staring at the pendant in his hand. Slowly the boy's eyes locked on his, a shock of black hair falling over the youth's forehead and highlighting those dangerous blue eyes.

Just a lad, barely past the threshold of youth. But Haakon felt something shift inside him as their eyes met.

Even a boy could be dangerous, and he almost wanted to demand to know what put *that* look in Andri's eyes—as if the sight of the pendant stirred something heated in the lad's chest.

A foolish thought, for the boy had no connection to Arja. He would have been in short pants when she first swept into Haakon's life and turned his world upside down.

"Tomorrow," Magnus echoed, slowly sinking onto the bench beside his brother, his hawk-like features sharp with some unfettered bloodlust. He had no love of dragons, or *dreki*, or whatever they bloody well were.

"*I want to mount that dreki's head on a spike,*" the man had said the first time they met.

Andri's lips thinned, and then the boy looked away from the pendant that had held him captive for long moments.

Haakon curled his fist shut over it and sank onto his chair, just as the boy's head tilted toward the door. Sliding the pendant into his pocket, he picked up the sword he'd been polishing earlier.

The door to the tavern banged open and Benedikt appeared in the doorway, his plump cheeks full and his mouth turned upside down. He spilled inside from the night, as if Hel's three-legged horse, Helhest, were on his trail.

Something had upset the little farmer, Haakon thought, sliding an oiled rag along the length of his sword.

Conversations lagged as the mercenaries all noticed the pampered brat. Gunnar locked eyes with Haakon, and then spat in the reeds. He'd already voiced his thoughts on their benefactor and the way Benedikt seemed to think he'd bought them.

"*I don't care what the little lordling thinks,*" Haakon had replied coldly. "*He's paying for the men and the ballista, and I need them to get my wife back.*"

Looking the worse for wear, Benedikt slammed a pouchful of coin on the table in front of him. Haakon's gaze locked on it, then slowly lifted to the would-be lordling.

"I'm not paying you to sit on your ass and polish your sword," Benedikt snapped. "You've been here four days, and you've barely done a thing."

Gunnar lowered his tankard as Haakon shifted forward in his seat, putting both feet on the ground. Standing up, he loomed over the petulant man-child, then slid his sword into its sheath at his hip with a steely rasp. Conversation died. His men shifted in their chairs as they craned their necks to watch.

They weren't the only ones who were hungry for blood.

And Benedikt might be paying them, but there were certain insolences Haakon wouldn't tolerate.

Haakon rested his knuckles on the table and loomed forward, so they were of a height. "You know nothing of hunting dragons," he said quietly. "And this is no ordinary dragon."

He'd seen it circling Krafla two days ago, sunlight gilding its golden hide.

His heart had caught in his throat at the sight, and every instinct within him urged him to scale the mount and launch a full-scale assault upon the *dreki's* lair. He'd thought of Arja in that moment, begging any god who listened for her to still be alive.

"The volcano seems empty and the entrance is barricaded by an invisible door, or perhaps magic," Haakon continued. "To scale the mountain, we must take a narrow route, which leaves us vulnerable. I'm not throwing men at the *dreki* needlessly until I can figure out how to get it to meet me on my terms."

"You want the dragon?" Benedikt snapped. "I know how you can lure it out."

Stillness slid through him, and his knuckles ached as he clenched his fist. "How?"

Benedikt stomped his boot on the trestle seat, then reached down to peel up his trousers. "It visited me in a dream." There, around his leg, were the unmistakable red marks of a set of claws.

No wonder the little bitch was bleating so hard.

"What did it want?" Haakon demanded. Here was his chance, he just knew it. He'd stared past that invisible barrier to the *dreki's* lair and called his wife's name in desperation, hoping she was inside.

If he could just break the spell on the door, or bring the *dreki* to him... Maybe it was madness, but he *needed* to discover if Krafla's wyrm had stolen his wife. Being here, so close to the shadow of the mountain was sending him mad with pure want. Arja haunted his dreams all night, pleading for him to rescue her, until he didn't dare sleep.

Patience be damned, there was a feeling tingling through his veins as if fate rushed to meet him. This was it. This was the dragon who'd taken her. He knew it.

"It wanted to warn me," Benedikt said, smiling a little, as if he could see Haakon's need on his face. "It wanted me to stay away from Freyja Helgasdottir, or it would kill me."

The blood rushed from Haakon's face, leaving his cheeks cold. "Then Freyja is the key to luring it out."

Chapter 11

The next day, Rurik went in search of Freyja, feeling oddly restless. He'd taken care of the threat against her, now he just needed to charm the stubborn woman. At least he had yesterday's success still brewing in his mind.

And in his body.

He knew why he felt restless. Denying himself release yesterday during his encounter with Freyja had been sensible, as she wasn't quite ready for that. But it still ached.

And he was fairly certain yesterday's events would be lingering in her mind too. Which meant one step forward, no doubt two steps back. The bloody woman could give a rock lessons in stubbornness.

The faint scent of her captured his attention, and Rurik tilted his head toward the back of the house. There.

She was just lowering a wooden box into the dirt near the hot spring behind the house. Baking more of that bread he liked so much, by the look of it. Taking her pitchfork, she swept the heated earth back over the top of the cask, then brushed strands of damp hair from her forehead.

"Good morning," he called, striding down the slope toward her.

Freyja's shoulders stiffened faintly, but she nodded to him. "Morning? I've been up for almost six hours."

"So have I," he told her.

Freyja shot him a doubtful look. "Doing what?"

Flying halfway across Iceland, and paying a small fortune for things he thought she would like. "Preparing a surprise for you."

"A surprise? For *me*?"

"It's the sort of thing one does when one is wooing a young lady." Rurik crossed his arms over his chest, hoping her curiosity was stronger than her wariness. "Or so I am told."

"I don't have time for surprises," she said, and he admitted she did look tired. But Freyja also hesitated, and glanced at him from beneath those thick dark lashes.

Curiosity engaged. He smiled. "Give me an hour, and I will give you my afternoon's labor. After all, you do not know what I have in mind...."

"As long as it doesn't involve hay," she said.

“Nor stuffing it down someone’s shirt.”

Freyja tried to fight a smile, but couldn’t seem to help herself. “Do you never cease? You’re incorrigible and relentless and—”

“An excellent lover.”

She shot him a swift glare. “What happened yesterday will not happen again.”

Rurik brushed his hand against her hip as he moved past her; the lightest of caresses, as he murmured in her ear, “You shouldn’t make promises you might not be able to keep.”

“Do you think you’re the first man who has set his sights on me?” Freyja looked dangerous as she turned to follow him, pitchfork in hand. “Yes, you might own a silver tongue, and I’ll admit you intrigue me, but no man has won my heart before and I doubt one ever will.”

“Perhaps. But then, you have never been wooed by one such as I.”

A frustrated sound echoed in the back of her throat. Freyja stabbed the pitchfork into the ground.

“Spare me an hour, and I’ll leave you alone,” he said, taking pity on her and capturing her fingers. “One hour, Freyja. Do you not want to know what surprise I have in store for you?”

She was wavering. He saw it in her eyes. “One hour,” she finally said, sighing. “It had better be worth it.”

“Oh, it will be.” Tucking her hand in the crook of his elbow, Rurik led her around the house, into the sunshine.

He’d spread the blanket within a circle of birches that guarded the hilltop overlooking Freyja’s farm. The birches stood in a perfect circle around them, and though he remained wary about entering such a circle, he couldn’t sense any magic within it. Freyja’s interest was piqued when she saw the blanket and the basket he’d set out.

“A picnic,” she exclaimed.

“You work too much,” he replied. “You deserve a treat.”

“Someone must,” she replied, and folded her skirts neatly around her as she settled on the blanket. “Unlike others, I cannot rely on *nisse*.”

“No one can,” he replied, stretching out beside her. “They are unreliable little beasts, and if you don’t leave enough milk out for them, they’re liable to turn upon you.”

A smile softened her face. “Do you know, sometimes I almost believe you when you speak of myths and fairy tales.”

There was a hint of sadness around her eyes.

“Why would you not?” He stroked the edge of her skirts, fingers rubbing the soft wool between them.

“Because I know what hand of fate life deals,” she admitted, opening the picnic basket. “*Nisse* and *huldufólk* and trolls are all well and good, but they are stories for children.”

“You believed then, once upon a time.”

She set out the breads and meats he’d brought them, her face strangely devoid of any expression.

“My mother believed. It was she who spoke of *dreki* and *huldufólk*.”

He hesitated. “What happened to her?”

“Five years ago, she disappeared for several days. When we found her in the stone ring up near Krafla, she looked like she had aged a decade, and nothing seemed to satisfy her. She wouldn’t say where she’d been, or what had happened, but she began to waste away,” Freyja said gently. “She didn’t want to eat our foods, nor drink, but she consumed just enough to live. Yet it was as though someone took the light from her life. It took her two years to die, and no one knew what was wrong with her. My father has not been the same ever since.” Freyja sliced some of the soft cheese onto a piece of bread, and handed it to him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, placing his hand over hers.

Freyja looked at him very steadily. “You remind me of her sometimes.” She turned her hand beneath his, her fingers lacing through two of his. “She was a dreamer too, but... I don’t think I have enough left within me to dream.”

Dreams could be dangerous. He understood that. He’d spent thirty years hibernating within Krafla, trying not to think of the past, allowing the locals to bring him food so he did not even have to hunt. Merely drifting with his mind entwined with the volcano beneath him, feeling the earth crack and groan as he tried not to think of all that he’d lost.

Rurik’s thumb caressed the smooth skin of her hand. “I think... I had stopped dreaming too,” he admitted. “Until I met you.”

That brought a blush to her cheeks. Freyja rolled her eyes. “Of course.”

But she didn’t understand. He watched as she devoured the small spread of cured meat and cheeses, mixed with fresh strawberry jam and white fluffy bread, the kind Freyja had never eaten before.

The night he’d taken her ram, his entire life changed. Driven from Krafla by hunger, he’d thought little of the hunt behind the desire to fill his belly, but it had brought so much more into his life.

It had brought her.

He could still recall Freyja brandishing that sword at him, her face full of determination and weariness. Years of sleepy dullness sloughed away from him in that instant. He’d stepped aside from the world, turning his attention to the earth and fire beneath him, but she brought him back in a single moment, slamming into his life like a thunderstorm of epic proportions.

He felt alive, for the first time in years.

And he was starting to think of the future, of what part she would play in it. For he couldn’t let her go, not now. Not when she was the catalyst for this new awakening within his heart.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, nibbling on one of the fat strawberries he’d hunted high and low for.

“I am wondering: what is your greatest desire?”

“To finish my work swiftly, so I may have an hour or two to myself tonight,” she replied, red juice

staining her lips.

He wanted to lick the taste of it from them. “That seems a small dream.”

“You *would* say that, but just because it is a small dream, does not mean it is not a joy to me.” Freyja slowly rolled onto her back, resting on one elbow. Her braid slung over her shoulder, and she took her time with the last mouthful of strawberry, entirely innocent of what the sight of her eating it did to him.

“If you were not bound by time, nor money, nor any other mortal constraint, what do you wish you could do?”

Freyja gave him that serious look again. Rurik caught the end of her braid, toying with the ribbon that bound it. Her breath caught, and she tossed the stalk of the strawberry away.

Come on. Give me your heart. Tell me how to win it.

“Travel,” she whispered, as he tugged the ribbon loose. “See these great cities my books speak of. See this world.”

There it was. He smiled and began to unravel the bottom of her braid. Silky hair curled around his fingers. He’d dreamed of it spread over his sheets, dreamed of running his hands through it. “You like my stories, because you dream of adventure.”

“I like any story.” She watched what he was doing. Not with trepidation, but almost as if she wondered what he intended. “It reminds me there is something more out there, something beyond my day’s worth of chores.”

“And is this your greatest desire?”

“Why are you so insistent upon dreams?” she growled under her breath, capturing a handful of her unraveling braid. “They’re little more than wistful thinking. Wonderful in the moment, but rather insubstantial, because nothing will come of it.”

“To dream of something more is the greatest gift one owns. Without them, there is nothing to strive for. No reason to continue breathing. We might as well become the rock and stone beneath our feet.” Rurik brushed her hand aside and spread thick waves of golden hair across the picnic blanket, even as Freyja shifted as though she wasn’t certain she should allow him to continue. “And because you have set me a challenge: to give you your greatest desire, in exchange for your heart.”

Her heart began to beat a little quicker. He heard it. “That is not my heart’s greatest desire.”

“Then what is?”

Freyja suddenly smiled. “I’m not telling you. If you were paying attention, you should be able to work it out.”

“Vexing woman.” Rurik grabbed a fistful of her hair and tugged gently until she rolled onto her back. He came over her, shaking the last of her braid free. Thick strands of molten gold spread across the dark blanket, crinkled into loose waves. “I think you like being pursued.”

“You’re the mighty hunter,” she teased. “You wouldn’t enjoy the chase if it were too easy.”

“True. But then I know what comes at the culmination of the chase,” he replied, heat in his eyes.

“And I enjoy that far more than chasing.”

Bringing a handful of her hair up to his face, he rubbed it across his cheeks. She smelled like a summer breeze, like a wild storm. And her mismatched eyes watched his expression as though she saw something there she didn't know how to interpret. “What are you doing?” Freyja whispered.

“I have dreamed of running my fingers through your hair like this.” He rubbed a strand of it between forefinger and thumb, his eyelids lowering lazily. “You have beautiful hair and I want to see it down.”

Those perfect lips were so close to his, still stained pink from strawberries. Sweet, and lush, and practically begging for his caress.

Rurik lowered his face to hers, his fists curling in handfuls of her hair. One taste and he was lost. He licked her slowly, teasing his way into her mouth as Freyja opened up to him, slowly, softly, as if she were testing the waters.

The thought of yesterday consumed him, setting him on fire. Or maybe that was Freyja. She was light, and brightness, a catalyst of pure fire that awoke every single one of his senses. Something was happening to him, and he didn't quite know what it was, nor what it meant. But she was the key to it.

Freyja put a firm hand against his chest. Not so much pushing him away, but asking for space, and perhaps time to gather her thoughts. Both of them were breathing hard.

“You make me feel alive,” he whispered, somehow perplexed by the complex emotions swelling within him.

“You make me want things I shouldn't want,” she whispered back, as if it were some secret confession.

Not ready. Not yet. For though she craved him, something still held her back. Shifting to the side of her, he rearranged the painful press of his erection, and then stroked the soft river of her hair.

“What do you dream of?” she suddenly asked, glancing up from beneath those thick golden lashes. *Me?* He froze. Nobody had ever asked him that. Nor had he dwelled on the matter.

“I long for... home,” he replied slowly, startled to realize it was true. A sudden yearning filled him: the urge to drag his sister into his arms one more time, and to see his younger brother's smile. Just one more day at Hekla, where his people lived, and he could belong. Home. A sense of belonging, his father's voice echoing through the halls—

A dream dashed. There was no home for him there. Nothing more than memories of a time thirty years in the past, before he'd chosen exile. His father was long gone.

For all his power, he could never, ever relive that time again.

“What stops you from returning?” Freyja stroked his cheek, fingertips trailing over the roughened hairs that marked his jaw.

Restlessness edged through him, despite the tender touch. “Freyja, I can never go home.”

Pushing away from her, he drew one knee up in front of him, his heart heavy. His erection was gone, thoughts of seduction fading away. Freyja dragged herself into a seated position, a thousand

questions dancing in her eyes. “Do you wish to talk of it?”

“No.”

She accepted that. Simply began to pack away the remains of their picnic. This wasn't what he'd intended when he set it out, the afternoon suddenly souring. And yet, he almost felt as though this was what he needed to broach the walls that guarded her heart.

“I am exiled from my clan,” he admitted gently. “If I returned, my uncle would try to kill me.”

Those witchy eyes locked on him with a dangerous intensity. “Why would he want you dead?”

Old wounds ached in his heart. “Stellan is my mother's brother. When my father died, Stellan took his place as...” How to say this? “...head of the clan. I believe... I believe he had something to do with my father's death, with my mother's help.”

“You didn't fight him?”

Rurik felt his face shutter. “I was exiled, instead. Blamed for the murder of my father.”

Freyja's mouth fell open. “But—”

“I didn't do it, Freyja. I loved my father. But I was the first on the scene, I found his heart pierced with a blade of pure iron. There was blood on my hands. And... a witness who claimed I did it. A witness whom no one disputed.”

“Who?”

His heart sank like a stone in water. That betrayal was one he could never forgive. “My mother.”

She reached out to stroke his face. “Why would she do that to her own son?”

Rurik pressed into the touch, capturing her hand in his and holding it there. The fury of the *dreki* within him melted at her touch. Only she could tame it. “She wanted power, most likely. She controls Stellan, and he comes from the same clan she did. She has never controlled me. You cannot think of her as you think of your own mother. She birthed the three of us into the world; Árdís, Marduk, and me. But she had not the raising of us. We were marks on a contract to her. A fulfillment of the oath she gave my father and his clan when she married him. A duty. It was my father who loved us and reared us.”

And his heart ached in his chest at the mere thought his own people could consider him the hand that murdered his father.

“*I'm sorry,*” Freyja whispered on a thought-thread she didn't even know she sent.

And he could not link back with her, not when she thought he was merely human.

Rurik looked down, into her eyes. “I accepted the exile so my brother and sister would not be drawn into a war. They weren't ready. Neither was I, to speak the truth. But this is not the first time my mother and uncle have tried to see me dead.” He squeezed her hand. “It is the first time, however, that I have something more to lose than merely my life. My family are... a proud people. They would not accept you, nor any consummation between us.”

Freyja drew her knees up to her chest, resting her chin upon them. “You miss your brother and sister?”

“Fiercely.”

“Not so small a dream,” Freyja whispered, as if cognizant of the turmoil within him.

“No.” He met those beautiful eyes, aware the ground beneath them both had shifted, and he suddenly understood her own quiet yearning. “Not so small a dream.”

There was a long moment of silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts. He ached to know hers. Instead, he lifted a hand and brushed the backs of his fingers down her pale cheek.

Freyja tilted into the touch, her lashes shuttering her eyes, and her lips slightly parted. In this moment she was without fear or thought, existing only to *feel*.

And he thought he should kiss her again. The sudden urge to do so left him floundering as he realized this urge had little to do with pressing her against the ground and plundering her sweet mouth, or even body. It wanted nothing more than to taste her mouth, to share in her moment of peace, of acceptance. He wanted to kiss her for the sake of the kiss itself, and because she... she meant something to him.

Rurik drew back. What was this? He didn’t know what precisely he felt, but he knew it was different.

There was no endless curiosity in this feeling. No desire to claim, or plunder. Merely... tenderness?

Freyja looked up. And the moment passed, and suddenly he became aware he was staring at her as if she’d stolen his heart from his chest when he wasn’t looking, and he didn’t quite know what to do with that fact.

“The day is wasting,” he said abruptly, drawing away from her. “If you want some time to yourself, then now is the time to steal it. I have promised you an afternoon’s labor, so use my time wisely. We’re done here.”



We’re done here.

The thought plagued her as she tried to read.

She’d purchased a new book in Akureyri, and normally such a thing as *Gulliver’s Travels* would cause the room to vanish around her as she lost herself in the world within the covers.

Time to herself... It seemed a dream, until one lived in the moment and realized all she *had* was time to herself.

Freyja closed the book with a slap.

“What’s wrong?” her father asked.

“Nothing.” And everything. Freyja found her feet. “I just feel restless, that’s all. I’m going out to check the fences.”

“Restless, hmm?” Her father closed his eyes, drowsing in the sunlight that spilled through the

window. “Wouldn’t have anything to do with Master Rurik, would it?”

Freyja went still. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he is clearly interested in courting you, and you’ve been distracted ever since he arrived.”

Freyja toyed with the edge of her skirt. “Don’t get your hopes up,” she said quietly, though she wasn’t certain whether she was speaking to her father—or herself. “There is no future between Rurik and I.” Snapping her fingers, she headed for the door. “Come, Loki.”

The little fox sprang to her side, licking his lips, as they exited the small house. Freyja tidied her braid as she strode for the barn. Memories of his hands coursing through the silken waves of her hair heated her body. She had no intention of ensuring the fences were tidy. No. What she wanted was to find him. The earlier dismissal vexed her.

Rurik was the one who’d decided to chase her, wasn’t he?

And now, “*we’re done here....*” Just when she was starting to feel something for him. Just when she’d allowed him to take certain liberties.

Freyja knew she was being unfair. She’d kept him at arm’s length, and insisted nothing was going to happen between them, so why should she be so upset when he turned the tables on her?

Because he’d let her into his life a little, with the talk of his exile and his home. For a second, she’d felt as though she knew him intimately.

Because I’m lonely too.

The small herd of ewes hovered against the stone fence outside the barn, eyeing her with wild eyes. Ever since that blasted *dreki* stole her ram, they’d been riding on the edge of their nerves. It was a wonder her goat was still producing any milk.

The barn lay empty, though Hanna snorted when she saw her, as if asking for reassurance. All the jobs she’d given Rurik were completed, thought there was no sign of the man himself.

“Not you too,” Freyja grumbled to Hanna as the mare whickered with nervousness. Sunlight spilled between cracks in the loft floorboards, and dust spiraled through each shaft.

Loki bumped into her ankles, almost tripping her.

“Rurik?” she called up into the loft.

A shadow moved up there. She hadn’t seen him since they’d spoken of dreams, and a part of her felt sympathy for what he’d shared of his past. Enough sympathy that she’d brought out the *hangikjöt* and carved it, broiled some potatoes and set a loaf of *rúgbrauð* baking in the warm spring behind the house. It was the type of meal she might serve at Christmas, and the scent of smoked lamb already filled her small kitchen. The bread would almost be ready.

“I wanted to invite you in for dinner,” she called, craning her neck. Floorboards in the loft creaked, but why hadn’t he replied? “I made something special.” Freyja hesitated. “To remind you of home, perhaps.”

Still no answer.

All the hairs on the back of Freyja's neck rose. "Rurik?" she called, crossing toward the ladder to the loft.

Loki barked, and Freyja tried to hush him. Then he darted into the shadows, growling deep in his throat in a sound she'd never heard from him before.

"What is it?" she asked, taking a step back. There was something about the sullen silence in the barn that bothered her. Someone was there. And she didn't think it was Rurik.

A man cursed under his breath, and then Loki yelped and fled. "Little bastard."

"Who's there?" she demanded, peering into the shadows of the stall. "Loki?"

Noise whispered behind her. Freyja whirled, and another man stepped out of the shadows. Darting toward her pitchfork, she turned and almost ran him through, baring her teeth at him. "Rurik!"

"He's not here," someone said behind her. "Seems you ran him off."

Rurik was gone? The warmth drained out of her. What had she done or said to him? She didn't understand. He'd said he... cared for her. Was it all just a jest? Or had Rurik merely been interested in bedding her, and given up?

That didn't make any sense. He could have had her yesterday afternoon if all he'd wanted was to bed her. If she were being honest with herself, she wasn't certain she would have said no.

Laughter spilled out of the shadows as another man appeared. "Can you blame him? Look at those eyes."

Three men circled her. The words shouldn't have hurt, but they did. The speaker made a vague sign of the cross.

"You," she said, recognizing one of them as Haakon's man, Gunnar. "Get off my property."

"Haakon wants a word with you," the man replied, holding his hands up in a placating manner. "We're not here to hurt you."

"If Haakon wants a word, then perhaps he should have asked nicely." Freyja made a feint toward the man on her right as he took a step toward her—the one who'd made comment on her eyes. Fear filled her chest, tightening her ribs around her lungs. What did they want of her? She'd thought Haakon was a man driven mad by loss, but he'd seemed to hold some common decency. Had she been wrong?

"Just grab her," the third man ordered. She still hadn't gotten a good look at his face, though he was taller than the others and something about his presence made her uncomfortable.

"Make one more move," Freyja told them, knowing she couldn't hold all three off with her pitchfork, "and I'll set my magic loose."

Silence fell. All three men froze. The only noise was Loki yipping and barking madly from where he seemed to be locked within a stall.

"You like my eyes?" she told the man who'd sneered at her and made a sign of the cross. "One of the *huldufólk* gave them to me, along with the gift of magic. I can manipulate storms, and throw lightning from my fingertips."

Two of the men exchanged a look.

“She’s lying,” said the taller one, the one who scared her a little. He snorted. “Why would one of the *álfar* gift her with magic?”

“Don’t call them that,” Freyja murmured. “They don’t like that name.”

Gunnar muttered something about “there are no hidden folk” under his breath, but it seemed her ruse had worked. He wasn’t going to grab her.

Crossing to the stall, the sinister man reached down and hauled Loki up by the scruff of his neck. “I am done with talking.” He reached for his knife—

Loki! “No!” The power seemed to flood up from somewhere within her, sending a whirlwind through the barn. Stalks of hay flew through the air, and both Gunnar and the superstitious man backed away from her, faces pale.

Freyja summoned heat into her hands, and turned on the man who’d grabbed Loki—

He hauled Loki against his chest, putting a razor-sharp blade to the little fox’s neck. “Use your magic against me, and I’ll cut his throat.”

Freyja let the power spill through her fingers, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. She could feel Loki’s terror and protective urges pushing against her mind. He wanted to rescue her, though he was frightened of whatever the tall man smelled like....

“Let him go,” she whispered, swallowing hard.

“Easy, Magnus,” the man with the enormous beard said. “We’re not here to spill blood.”

“We’re getting nowhere without it,” Magnus replied, and his eyes burned as they locked on her. “Release your power.”

There was no choice. Her gaze met Loki’s frightened amber eyes. Freyja let the wind and fire fade, the barn falling into silence. “If you hurt him,” she said coldly, “then I will not rest until you are naught but ashes.”

Gunnar and the other man grabbed her by the arms. Gunnar’s grip was at least gentle. “You won’t be hurt, I promise. Haakon just needs you for bait.”

Bait? For what?

The other man plunged a hood over her head, and the world faded, her breath refracting back from the black wool and making her feel slightly claustrophobic. Tears pricked her eyes.

“Keep her eyes covered!” Magnus ordered. “If she cannot see, then she cannot work her magic.”

And Freyja shivered, because how had he known that?



Rurik soared back to earth behind Freyja’s barn, his form shrinking and power rushing through his veins as he made the change. A *dreki*’s bugle to the south had sent him hunting, circling Krafla and looking for the challenger, only to find nothing.

Or maybe that was an excuse. He was still haunted by that moment during their picnic, when something monumental seemed to shift inside him.

Freyja.

Sighing, he found his clothes where he'd left them, and was about to pull on his trousers when Loki's terrified barking caught his ears. Rurik froze. It seemed to be coming from within the barn.

"Little brother?" he asked, his thought-thread tangling with the fox's.

—angry, snapping at air, took the mistress, hurt her, hurt her, let me out—

Rurik tried to sort his way through the terror and fury. *"Freyja? Someone took Freyja? Who?"*

Images assaulted him: the bearded giant who rode at Haakon's side, and a stranger he didn't recognize.

But it was the image of the third man that made him suck in a sharp breath. A man with sharp, predatory features, amber eyes, and raven-dark hair. A man who held a knife to the little fox's throat and used the threat to force Freyja to submit.

"Magnus," he whispered, turning his face toward the village.

His cousin had Freyja.

Chapter 12

They tied her to the village green, both of her hands bound and tethered by pegs they drove into the hard earth. A rough strip of black linen covered her eyes, leaving her blind to the nightmare about to befall her.

“Please,” Freyja begged, but without her sight there was nothing for her to work with. She was blind to the world around her, and the ropes they used to tether her had been drenched in blessed water. It itched against her skin, resisting all her attempts to free herself.

The truth of it stung. They had planned this—no, Benedikt had planned it. He alone knew of the strength of her unnaturalness, and had worked to counter her.

Her heart thundered raggedly in her ears as the crowd fell silent. She could hear the harsh rasp of Benedikt’s breath behind her. Excited. Enjoying her discomposure. *Be careful of a man’s pride, my love*, her mother had whispered when they’d both noticed the way Benedikt began to watch her. *It is a dangerous thing, and unpredictable if rebuffed.*

“Blow the horn,” he instructed.

The enormous bellow of the troll horn cut through the silence, rumbling across her skin and vibrating in her ears. Freyja flinched. She had never felt so helpless in her life. This was what her mother had warned her of. *Choose your battles wisely, Freyja... for you are not invulnerable.* Every creature of power had a weakness, even the mighty *dreki* they were summoning to claim her.

Where was Rurik? She didn’t believe he’d left her. She *couldn’t* believe. But if he hadn’t gone, then he would have heard the villagers take her. He wouldn’t just let them do this to her. Would he?

The thought made her breath catch.

Unless he truly had gone. She shivered as her memory of their words that morning washed over her. “We’re done here,” he had said, a death knell of finality underscoring the statement. Stepping back, bowing his head politely to her.

Rurik! She threw the thought out into the world on an ache of despair. *I’m sorry!*

There was no answer but the wind swirling through her skirts. Then the thundering bellow of the troll horn again. The last time a man had blown that horn had been thirty years ago, when her father and the other villagers called the *dreki* forth to forge the treaty.

“Here he comes,” Benedikt murmured with satisfaction. His voice dropped even lower as he

stepped closer. “I’ll see you when you return, my sweet.”

No mistaking the dark intent behind those words. If he couldn’t have her now, then he would take the scraps that were left once the *dreki* had finished with her.

Freyja strained at the ropes to no avail. Her shoulders sagged as she heard the villagers moving back, scurrying for the safety of their homes to watch.

She couldn’t see. Yet she felt, more than anything, the mighty thrust of wings through an icy sky; the sudden ache of the pressure his immense presence wrought.

Wind beat down upon her as the *dreki* wheeled overhead. Freyja went to her knees, but there was no escape. She was almost flattened by the wind his mighty wings stirred, as the tether binding her left arm was tugged, then fell away.

The right snatched loose, the rope nearly jerking her arm from its socket. Free? She froze for one tremulous second, gathering her feet beneath her.

“*Not free,*” the *dreki* whispered in her mind. “*Mine.*”

Then its massive claws curled around her shoulders with a delicate gentleness, and with a mighty surge, he thrust into the sky.

“Now!” Benedict bellowed, as Freyja’s feet left the ground.

She screamed and wrapped her arms around the scaled claws; terrified the *dreki* would drop her.

“Release!” That was Haakon’s voice.

The world turned upside down as the *dreki*’s war cry pierced the air and it threw itself into a tumble. Over and over and over, her body jerked around like a rag doll. Something screamed through the air as it tore past them, and Freyja suddenly realized what had happened.

They’d used her as bait. Something to lure the *dreki* from his lair so they could kill him.

She ripped the blindfold from her eyes as the *dreki* righted himself, catching a glimpse of the tableau beneath them. Wind whipped at her skirts as little figures ran and screamed, pointing at the sky above them.

Haakon was clearly visible, the muscles in his biceps straining as he loaded the ballista and cranked the shaft back. The heavy steel cable tautened, the deadly sharp spear gleaming in the sunlight.

And Freyja felt a rage she’d rarely felt before.

Not powerless now. Not blinded, her magic muted within. She lashed out, her temper a whip she wielded with ruthless efficiency. She couldn’t touch the iron cable—iron was one of the few things that refused her power—but the heavy wooden wheels of the ballista were made of the earth. As Haakon reached for the release, she smashed each wheel.

The ballista angled forward, its sharp steel point dropping as the handle tore through Haakon’s grip. The cable let go, steel snapping with an audible twang as the javelin cut straight through cloth and flesh and buried itself in the stone wall of one of the houses, with Benedikt dangling from the end of it.

He squealed like a stuck pig as the *dreki* wheeled around curiously to watch.

“*Remind me never to allow you near that thing,*” the *dreki* whispered in her mind with a laugh.

Then he angled sharply, his fluid shape cutting through the wind as he soared toward Krafla.

“*What makes you think I need a ballista?*” she replied.



The flight was barely ten minutes, but even Freyja was starting to shiver with cold by the time Krafla loomed in front of them. The sparse, barren fields that surrounded the volcano smoked and bubbled, but she could see the glittering white of the glacial fields further south, and her breath caught, even as the wind stole it from her.

She could scarce believe the sight before her. The entire world stretched out in miniature, like a map come to life.

The *dreki* touched her mind, as if wondering what had caught her attention so. A light caress against her senses, a sudden connection where she sensed his curiosity.

“*You wish to see the glaciers? I will take you one day....*”

And just like that her sense of wonder died, protective walls sliding into place between her mind and his. “*Put me down.*” She eyed the sheer rock walls of the volcano’s side. “*Gently, please.*”

They wheeled lower, the sudden downthrust of his wings halting them mere feet above the ledge that led to the caves. His claws released her, and Freyja dropped. She landed on the ledge, her ankle giving way beneath her as she fell. Though his touch had been gentle, her shoulders ached from his grip, and for a moment she simply lay there, trying not to hurt.

The sinuous head was suddenly directly in her field of vision, and Freyja screamed despite herself, scrambling onto her back and away. The *dreki* froze, his golden eyes gleaming.

“*Are you hurt?*”

Freyja stared at him with the rock walls against her back, her breath coming hard and her skirts tumbled around her knees. “Am I hurt?” she gasped weakly, hot and sharp emotion dampening her eyes. She could barely hold it in anymore. The only creature that gave a damn about her was the *dreki*, and even he had ulterior motives, though what they were she couldn’t even begin to guess.

“I have been kidnapped, tied down, and offered as sacrifice to... to you. Then dragged through the air, dropped, and—” She couldn’t hold it in anymore. *Rurik, damn you.* “Nobody came to save me! They all just watched! My father will be beside himself with worry! Who will care for him? What do you want with me? Damn you, what?”

She exploded into tears, angry, damning tears that blinded her to the world around her. The last thing she thought she saw was an expression on the *dreki*’s face that could only be described as perplexed. And that set her off, laughing, crying, and hiccupping all at the same time.

“Why am I even telling you?” she whispered, scrubbing at her hot eyes. “You would not even

begin to understand what is wrong with me. With the world.”

“There are many things wrong with the world. These puny humans insist on marking it as theirs, even though it belongs to no one.”

“Not even you?”

His glorious eyes narrowed. *“Only a fool thinks he owns such power. I may wield it, but I do not own it. And why would I wish to?”* Even she heard the hesitation. *“I admit I am not certain what is wrong with you, however. It is difficult to understand in this form. Where is your blindfold?”*

“M-my blindfold?” she stammered. “I tore it free.”

“Make another.”

Freyja’s jaw dropped. “What for?”

“So you cannot see.”

And blinded, she would be powerless again. “No.”

“I will not hurt you, Freyja. I swear it.”

As binding as a dreki’s oath, the goodwives often said, to indicate manners of legal standing. No *dreki* would willingly break his word.

She'd felt powerless when Benedikt jerked her out to the green, hooded and vulnerable. Powerless when she cowered beneath the unknown, wondering when the *dreki* would strike. She hated that feeling.

Yet her hands tugged at her hem, taking the small knife she wore secreted in her boot and slicing a strip of the black wool free. Shaking slightly, Freyja bound it over her eyes, the wool irritating her reddened skin. He was not taking her power away. He had asked, and she had complied. That gave her some illusion of control.

“Why?”

Power washed over her, hot and liquid, an enormous cascade of it. Every inch of her skin tingled, her stomach pooling with heat. Tidal waves of molten power. She wanted to reach out and drag her hands through it, but something warned her not to.

“Because I do not wish you to see me,” a man’s deep baritone voice said.

Freyja’s jaw dropped open, her hands rising automatically to her blindfold.

“Don’t,” he warned.

Somehow she stopped herself, though she couldn’t contain the shock. He’d said there was little reason to shift shape. And with that thought came another, unbidden. *Why do the dreki hunger for virgin flesh, Freyja? Not to eat, for a certainty. Which means....*

“Because we are jealous creatures,” the *dreki* replied, his bare feet rasping over the stone as he stepped closer. She heard skin shivering over muscle as he knelt in front of her. “We do not like it when someone has touched what is ours.”

Fingers came out of nowhere and stroked her cheek. Freyja jerked, her heart racing, but his touch was soft. Gentle. Like a man soothing a startled filly. Insanely hot, as though the volcano’s fire burned

beneath his skin.

And suddenly suspicion burned within her.

This wasn't the first time a man's skin burned with an unnatural heat. No. It couldn't be. Could it?

"What do you want of me?" she whispered. But she knew. Oh God, she knew. And even as she thought it, she suddenly started putting together the little puzzle pieces in her mind.

He hesitated, but not, she thought, for lack of courage. Gauging her reaction, most likely. "It is time, Freyja."

His warm hand cupped her cheek and she softened, leaning into it. Hungering for... something. Not want, not need. So desperately did she want to be touched as if someone cared.

And this fearsome creature had never hurt her, nor betrayed her.

But had he misled her? She didn't know the answer to that.

"Yes," she whispered, leaning into the *dreki*'s touch. There was only one sure way to find out if her suspicions were true.

Let me burn my fingers, just once....

His hand caught hers, drawing her fingers to his scalding lips. "You will not be burnt, Freyja, but you *will* burn, this I promise."

And a *dreki* never lied.

Chapter 13

Arms swung beneath her and lifted her with appalling ease, swinging her against a chest that was chiseled with muscle and entirely hairless. Freyja pressed a palm over his heart, feeling the erratic thump of it deep within him. An almost purring sound echoed in his throat. Pleasure. As he swept her under the overhang of the cave into a blackness that she noticed even with her eyes bound, she slowly rested her head against his shoulder.

No sight. But she could smell him, that sweet cinnamon smell that seemed almost familiar, and she could hear the rapid thump of his heartbeat beneath the curl of her palm. Her fingers flexed, exploring the feel of him. She quite suspected he was completely naked, and despite everything that had happened to her today, she couldn't help feeling curious about this fact.

The only man she had ever come into such close contact with was Rurik, that night in Akureyri and again in the barn. Her cheeks flamed as a flash of memory struck her: gasping beneath his kiss, grinding her hips against the hard bulge of his erection, begging, her nails digging into the hard slab of his shoulders....

And again suspicion danced within her.

Perhaps it was the *dreki* she curled against. His voice was deeper than Rurik's, but something in the timbre of it reminded her of the man, and they were much of a build perhaps. Strong, sleek muscle slid beneath her fingers. She flexed again, tracing the harsh edge of his clavicle, dancing her fingers up the thick column of his throat as she explored. She couldn't deny how similar they seemed....

"If you keep petting me like that I shall not make the bed," he purred in her mind.

Instantly Freyja's curious touch froze. "The bed? You have a bed?"

What would he need such a thing for? Then her cheeks heated again. There was only one purpose she could think of....

"I created it for you, Freyja. The night you came here, hunting for your ram." His mind brushed against hers, a dark caress that made her gasp. A feeling of overwhelming satisfaction flooded through the link between them. *"Dreki can manipulate raw matter if they will it, and create small pockets of existence out of Chaos magic. The dreki court is one such place. A... sidestep into another world, if you will. Or a small pocket of existence within a bubble of Chaos. It's how Tiamat first created the universe, except her bubble expanded until it contained the entire world,*

and many others. You're about to enter one, so it may feel strange at first."

"Why would you create it for me?" she whispered, though her heart ticked loudly in her chest.

"Would you prefer that we do this on the floor of the cave?"

This? Freyja swallowed.

"Because I want you," the dreki added in a quieter thought-thread. "There have been no other women for me. Not for a long time. You are important to me, and I wanted us to have time alone, where we will not be interrupted."

"Why me?" She turned her face in the dark, feeling her breath refract off the skin of his throat.

Another low growl sounded deep in his chest. *"Vixen."* Then he laughed. *"Because nobody has ever challenged me the way you did."* And he sounded incredibly pleased with this fact. His arms tightened, possessive and strong. *"Fierce,"* he whispered in her mind.

And Freyja stilled.

Fierce. A word that another man had used for her. A man who hadn't been there today to rescue her.

She felt that soft brush against her senses and pulled everything about herself in tight, thrusting up her mental shields as she sorted through the sudden cacophony of thought. All her suspicions seemed to form into one loud voice.

Memories flooded through her:

Rurik suddenly turning up in Akureyri, a stranger she likes that even the local port town had never seen.

Rurik, with his deep knowledge of *dreki* culture, and the way he'd challenged Haakon about killing the *dreki*.

Rurik, kissing her in the barn, his touch setting her alight even as he proclaimed fate had thrown her into his path.

Suddenly it all made a horrid kind of sense, like a dozen misshapen puzzle pieces abruptly fitting into place. And she didn't know how she felt about that. Angry that he'd lied to her. Relieved, that all the little things that hadn't quite added up finally made sense. And also a vague, choking sense of loss.

Because some part of her had begun to look at Rurik in a way that saw him in her life forever, and now there was no chance of that.

"I do not like it when you close yourself off," he growled.

"You may have my body, my lord," she responded tartly, even as she worked her way through her confusion, "but you do not have the right to all of me."

Tension radiated through his menacing build. Oh no, he did not like that at all, and now she had a powerful, irritated *dreki* to handle.

Strange, how fear was the last thing she felt. She knew this man—or creature. He wouldn't hurt her, of that she was certain.

No, not physically.

Freyja slid a hand down his chest, enjoying the soft feel of his skin and the power that she suddenly felt. He had the ability to take her mind, rip it apart, and steal any of her thoughts. But he wouldn't. She knew so little about this curious beast, but that was one truth. There was more honor in a single eyelash of this inhuman creature than in Benedikt's entire being.

"You think to taunt me?" He didn't sound irritated anymore. Intrigued, perhaps. *"You throw such challenges in my face without thought to consequences."*

"Consequences?"

"Yes," he hissed. "You'll let me in by the end of this night, Freyja. I swear you shall."

The *dreki* turned her sideways and Freyja clung to him, sliding her arms around his neck. A cool wash of power whispered over her skin like static, as though she'd stepped inside the heart of a storm itself. "What is that?"

"It's a portal to my Chaos bubble."

The static shot straight through her, current consuming her until she gasped. Whatever they stepped into, she could feel the immensity of his power riding through the walls and humming through the floors. The air was cooler here too, and something sweet lingered in the room like a scented oil. It wasn't painful, but she couldn't escape it.

"Here we are, Freyja." He let her slide slowly down his body, each glorious inch of him pressing against her. Freyja's feet landed on the floor with a small jolt, and she leaned against his chest to catch her balance.

Her hands fought to make sense of what her eyes could not tell her. Bare skin met her touch everywhere, and she could feel the heavy thrust of his cock against her stomach. Her first instinct was to step back, but as her fingernails raked over his abdomen, she found herself hovering in indecision.

And then an evil thought brewed.

It would serve him right for deceiving her. "I want you," Freyja whispered. "I've never before wanted a man like I want you."

Hands softened on her hips. "Never?"

"Never."

The *dreki* stilled. "Surely there has been one...."

"Not a single one." Let him chew on that.

A faint growl sounded in his throat. Then he moved past her, the brush of his skin against her sleeve turning her head. Fingers trailed over her hip. *"Let me close the portal so we won't be disturbed."*

Behind her she heard the soft swish of a rug—or carpets—parting beneath his heavy tread. Freyja's heart jumped into her throat as she lifted her hands. Dare she? A wave of resolve swept over her. Pandora... Psyche... she knew their weaknesses well. And the growing certainty in her heart made her fingers jerk to the blindfold and tug it free.

Freyja blinked as the room swam into view, the haze of candlelight melting over an enormous bed

covered in decadent red sheets of some material she'd never seen before. Cushions spilled over the surface, white and gold and red. Her eyes couldn't quite take in all of the gilt. Mirrors clung to walls everywhere, sconces gleaming with candlelight. And small lashes of static lightning seemed to arc through the walls, as if they weren't quite solid.

Her eyes lifted to the arched stone ceilings far above. Columns of heavy rock supported the roof, craggy and unfinished, as though he'd hewn this bubble out of the heart of the volcano itself. The mixture of savage nature and human decadence suited him.

Freyja's breath caught as she took a step forward, toward the bed. A room fit for a prince.

The sudden loss of static alerted her to the fact that the bubble was now closed. She spun on her heel, the strip of black wool hanging from her fingertips as her gaze raked over him. One hand splayed against a stone circle in the wall as he whispered ancient words to the stone.

Golden windswept hair brushed against his nape, smooth amber skin sweeping all the way down.... Her ruthless gaze raked over the heavy muscle in his back and the taut globes of his buttocks. Her mouth dropped open, but it was too late. Something told him she was watching him.

Rurik turned around sharply.

Amber eyes narrowed over that once-broken nose as he saw her glaring at him. Silence fell, and Rurik tilted his head curiously. "You don't seem surprised."

"I only just figured it out," Freyja snapped. "Fierce? That's a word you use to describe me, in both forms."

"I see. You're angry."

Freyja set her hands on her hips. "I was starting to care for you. I trusted you, and you don't know how rare that is for me." There was a lump forming in her throat. "You told me 'we were done here.' And I felt bad about your history and what your family did to you. I even tried to cook something nice for you...."

Those eyes turned considering. "You thought I had said we were done?"

Freyja stilled. "That's what you said."

There was a dangerous look in his eyes. "It was an uncomfortable conversation for me, one that brought up many old memories. I didn't mean...." He cursed. "And you: 'Not a single man has ever tempted me'?" he paraphrased her, crossing his arms over his broad chest, a move that highlighted everything else.

Do not look down. Too late. She could feel heat spilling into her cheeks. "You deserved that. You lied to me!"

"I never lied," he growled, taking a step toward her. The hard planes of his stomach were dusted with golden hair, and his cock bobbed against—

She jerked her gaze to his face, with its sensual mouth and cat-slit eyes. The *dreki* swelled within him. Not quite human, not quite her Rurik. But still there. "Not directly," she replied, recalling a half-dozen statements that, in hindsight, had revealed all. "That must have required some very careful

wording.”

“Oh, it did.”

Anger swelled. “The whole time I was tied to that stake, I waited for you to come for me, but you—”

“I did come for you.”

“For me?” she demanded. “Or to flaunt your might in front of Haakon and his men?”

“For you.” Rurik’s eyes shuttered, and he stepped toward her with dangerous allure. “Everything’s been for you. Do you think I would take human form for the sheer enjoyment of it? I told you this was fate, Freyja. The night you dared come into my lair was the moment I knew you were the one. How could you doubt I would come for you? You’re mine, Freyja.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why?” he asked. “You know I cannot lie.”

“I challenged you,” she pointed out. “That’s why you did this. And you might not lie, but your wording—”

“*You’re mine*,” he growled out, and there was nothing to say to that, no means with which to misunderstand him.

Freyja tilted her chin up stubbornly, aware the ground was shifting beneath her.

“Of course it’s because you challenged me.” His voice turned gravelly. “You’re beautiful, but I have seen beautiful women before. No, what captured my attention was your fierce pride and stubbornness. Your determination. The storm brought me a warrior in female flesh, and I knew then that I wanted you. You were utterly glorious that night. *Because* you challenged me. Because, in all my long years in exile, I have never met a woman who dared.”

Freyja’s gaze dropped, then she jerked her head away, the image of his nude body burned into her retinas. He was taller now than he’d ever been as Rurik, bristling with heavy muscle, the ripple of his abdomen giving way to the proud jut of his cock. A creature that sauntered toward her with unearthly grace, knowing that it alone was the ultimate predator.

She swallowed, her voice suddenly very small. “And what happens when you’ve conquered me?”

“How does one conquer a storm?”

That was not an answer. How typically *dreki* of him.

Freyja took a step back as he took one toward her. She had refused to allow Rurik to court her, knowing she risked her heart. Yet a small part of her had begun to think perhaps he might own some genuine feelings toward her. She liked his flirting. She liked having him chase her. She’d even begun to think of him as something more: a potential husband, a lover, a friend. A whisper of a dream she’d not even thought existed in her heart. And this time, it was no small dream.

An impossible one now.

The *dreki* did not fit into her future. Rurik had, but he did not.

“You do not seem pleased.”

“You’re not who I thought you were.” None of this had turned out to be what she had thought it was, and a little part of her ached at the loss.

“You made your own assumptions and I didn’t bother to correct them.”

“Because it served your purpose!”

He took a dangerous step toward her. “And what do you think my purpose is?”

Freyja didn’t look behind her, but she could almost feel the heavy presence of the bed at her back. Her fists clenched and she tipped her chin up, the scrap of wool still in her fingers. It was very clear what he had wanted of her now.

“If that was all I wanted, Freyja,” he purred, “then I would have had you last night.”

A smile curled over his made-for-kissing mouth. Dangerous. Despite everything, her heart started thumping faster, excitement flooding through her veins, as her body recognized that look.

“*You’ve cornered the dreki in his den,*” Rurik whispered in her mind, the touch of it trailing over her heated skin. “*Now what do you think I should do to you for disobeying me?*”

“I didn’t disobey you.” Another step back. Then another. She dropped the blindfold, her chin tilting with the same stubborn arrogance he owned himself. “You told me to put the blindfold on, and I did. You never said I mustn’t take it off.”

“You argue like *dreki*.” His hand reached out toward her, and Freyja’s breath caught in her throat. “Or a solicitor.”

“Considering the fact you willfully deceived me, you have little ground to stand upon,” she shot back.

“True. But now we’re here, and you know the truth. What are you going to do now?” His burning gaze lit her blood on fire. “Always stubborn, my Freyja. I think that is what I like about you most. That you never fear what you probably should.”

“Why should I fear you?” She took another step back, the backs of her knees hitting the bed. “After all, you’re the one who warned me you don’t intend to harm me. No, what was it? You planned to *eat me all up*.”

That smile turned dangerous. There was nowhere to go. “Perhaps I *still* plan to eat you all up.”

Rurik took that last step between them and then she was tumbling onto a mattress so soft and fine that for a moment, she could only stroke the deliciously soft material that covered it.

“Silk,” he murmured with amusement. That devilish light still lit his eyes. “Especially for you, Freyja. I have dreamed of you on my silk sheets. Dreamed of what I would do to you.” That hot gaze scored her body. “Wondered how soft your skin would feel against the silk.” He held his arms out, the thick muscle in them flexing as he gestured to the room. “All of this was for you, and you say all I want from you is one night?”

Freyja swallowed hard. He didn’t know what he did to her with those words, or how long she’d dreamed of someone saying them to her. Foolishness. She knew it, and still she’d dreamed about it.

“*I do know.*” His eyelids hooded over dangerous eyes. “*I want to say them all to you*

—*and more.*”

Freyja slammed her shields back into place. He wanted her in his bed. He’d pursued her, tricked her, and finally resorted to taking what he wanted. Well, she would let him. He would have her body; he would never have her heart.

Rurik bared his teeth at her, swooping down to pick up the blindfold. Freyja scrambled back, her skirts slipping on the cursed sheets. Then his hand locked around her ankle, burning hot and immovable. She squealed as he hauled her back toward him.

A hand slid behind the back of her knee, his callused flesh meeting hers as her skirts curled around her waist. The feel of his touch so intimately against her made a shiver run over her sensitive skin. Images from the night before drove into her brain, and she remembered *everything*.

“I want all of you, Freyja. Not just the parts you choose to share with me,” he told her, the other hand capturing the back of her other thigh. He parted her legs as he stepped between them, and yanked her closer to the edge of the mattress.

The position put her aggressively in front of him. Freyja’s hands pressed against his thighs as if to halt him, her fingers digging into the bare skin there. Deliciously soft skin rode over hard muscle. She looked down, unable to stop herself. A surge of *something* went through her at the sight of his arousal, leaving her frantically sucking in breath, her fingernails making small half-moon marks in his tanned flesh. She didn’t understand any of this. How could she ache so at the sight of his desire for her? The sensitive skin between her thighs throbbed with it, even as fear circled through her.

He asked too much of her. For he asked not just for sex, or to take what he wanted from her, but to own her. To possess her heart entirely, and make her his.

And that terrified her.

“Well, you don’t get to choose how much of me you get,” she shot back.

“Don’t tempt the *dreki*,” he said. His hand caught her chin and lifted it, one of his knees pressing into the mattress between her spread legs as he leaned over her. “Or there will be hell to pay.”

Freyja’s fingers flexed against his chest. Heavens, but every inch of him was hard. “You don’t scare me.”

“Really? Then why is your heart beating so hard?”

“Because I’m arguing,” she pointed out.

Rurik gave her a slow, hot smile, amber eyes flaring with golden heat. “You’re always arguing.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you didn’t think you ruled this part of the world... and me.”

“You would argue until your face turned blue.” He leaned over her, one hand beside her hip. “You would argue until the world turned to dust. It wouldn’t matter what I said.”

“Then why bother with me?”

“Maybe I like arguing with you.” His cheek brushed against hers, his lips nuzzling her ear. “It gets me all hot under my skin. Makes me think of ways I could win the argument.”

Heat crept up her throat. She felt like she was in his claws again, flying through the air with the

wind whipping past her. Any moment he could drop her, and then she'd be freefalling through the air, and damn her beating heart, but the thought almost excited her. "Rurik."

"Like this...." His mouth trailed across her jawline.

Freyja's breath caught. His knee came down on the bed between her thighs, pressing her skirts beneath it. She was trapped. And all of this... predatory male heat was spilling over her.

"And this." Another kiss skated over her cheek, then her mouth. He nibbled at her lips, his tongue darting out to taste her.

Freyja tumbled onto her back as he followed her down, leaning on his elbows above her. That enormous weight came down upon her, pressing her hips into the mattress, and... oh, lord. Freyja's eyes shot wide, even as he claimed her mouth.

There was no denying him, nor herself. She didn't want to. She wanted to drink down this memory, to give herself something to sustain her in future days. One night with the man who made her heart leap in her chest.

"Am I winning the argument, Freyja?" he whisper-laughed against her lips.

Damn him. She curled her nails in his shoulder, and a soft groan escaped him. Freyja's fingers flexed as thought raced. Maybe there was more than one way to best him?

"I offer you this one night," she managed to say as his mouth brushed hers again.

Rurik's lips stilled, tension coiling through his shoulders. "I want all of them."

"We don't always get what we want." Some lick of anger stirred in her, and he drew back, hands fisted in the sheets beside her head, his eyes *glowing* with that strange light.

Freyja waited for him to deny her or demand more. Instead, a slow, wicked smile curled over his lips.

"Stubborn," he whispered, dropping his head to kiss her throat. His lips burned and Freyja writhed helplessly, a shiver running across her skin. "You throw challenges at me as if they were curses. Haven't you learned? There is no better way to capture my interest than to challenge me."

"I wasn't challenging you. I was setting the rules." She gasped as his wet tongue dipped into the hollow of her clavicle.

"I don't like your rules." As if to prove the point, his teeth dug into the tender skin of her shoulder. Shifting his weight to one side, he slid his roughened hand over the soft wool of her dress. Tracing her hips, her bottom. He thrust into the vee of her thighs, his cock riding over the wool. "There are no rules, Freyja. Not in this. You are mine. I'm not letting you go now."

She caught his shoulder, her breath catching as he rubbed against her. "You don't have a choice."

"No?" Rurik's lip curled back in a hiss as he lifted his head. "We'll see. Now you have the *dreki* to pay, my love. And he is much more dangerous than your devil."

Another kiss captured the protest on her lips. A kiss full of possession and ruthlessness, a kiss to drown in. It told her more than words precisely what was going through his mind. He staked his claim on her mouth, his tongue thrusting past her lips even as his hips slid against hers again. Somehow his

hand slid down her leg, drawing her knee up so that he settled deep between her thighs. The position made her gasp, but there was no escaping him.

Even if she'd wanted to.

Freyja's fingers curled in the heated skin of his shoulders, her nails flexing against the heavy slabs of muscle. One night she would give him, and she would take everything he had to offer her. She began to kiss him back. Sweet goddess, why had she ever resisted?

"That's it," he whispered, locking her ankles behind his bottom. Her skirts bunched between them, and she could feel the rasp of the fine hairs on his legs against her inner thighs. "Kiss me, Freyja." His voice dropped into a series of words she didn't understand, yet somehow her body did. The whisper curled in her abdomen, pulling at her, wetting her, making her ache.

She rocked against him, hands sliding up his nape and locking in his hair. This time her mouth met his, cutting off those foreign words. Her tongue darted against his. The taste of him was as smoky as his scent. And by the gods, it felt good. So, so good.

Rurik growled deep in his throat as he caught her wrists and pinned her to the bed. He nipped at her lip. "You steal my intent," he rasped, "and make me forget to take this slowly."

"I don't want slow." A gasp stole from her lips. His erection slid against her inner thigh. "I want you to make me feel...."

She needed to surrender to the storm building between them. Every inch of her body ached in unfulfillment.

Rurik's gaze half shuttered. He lowered his head and bit the fleshy lobe of her ear. "But you forget," his whisper trailed down her throat, "that you are not in control here."

Pinned beneath him, her body spread in surrender, Freyja narrowed her eyes. "I could be." She slid the soles of her feet down the backs of his thighs, rubbing her hips against him right where it ached the fiercest.

And she felt the response shudder through him, his gasp wetting her skin. "Vixen." Rurik bit her chin, her lower lip, lifting his hips away from her. "It appears I shall have to take a firmer hand with you."

Freyja's nipples hardened. "What does that mean?"

Rurik dragged the woolen blindfold up and tossed it on the bed beside her. Kneeling over her, he smiled darkly. "You're wearing far too many clothes."

Freyja rocked onto her elbows, eyeing the blindfold. "What did you mean?"

But Rurik urged her over onto her hands and knees, kissing the back of her neck and trailing his lips over the sensitive skin there as she straightened. A shiver of pure need lanced through her. He tugged at the buttons that ran down between her breasts, popping each free of its loop. The black wool sagged over her shoulders and he tugged it down to her hips, teeth sinking into the soft flesh of her shoulder.

Freyja lost herself in the sensation of his mouth. Rurik yanked the dress over her bottom and out

from under her knees. Freyja shivered, practically naked. Suddenly a sense of shyness swept over her.

“And this,” he murmured, starting to slide her chemise up.

Freyja flinched as the worn fabric slid over bare bottom, her cheeks heating. “Rurik—”

“Now this,” he purred, “is better.”

Lips traced the skin of her hip as he slid her chemise up her back. Freyja yelped as his teeth left a mark on the fleshy bottom. Then he was pushing the chemise over her head, tongue trailing up the indentation of her spine.

Blinded by the fabric, Freyja tried to fight her way free. His hair-roughened thighs pressed against hers, his cock dipping between her legs in a teasing movement that had her heart racing. Then she was free, and he was rolling her onto her back, one hand sliding up her throat to capture her jaw as he took her mouth fiercely.

Couldn’t think with him kissing her like that, thrusting against her, dragging her hands up above her head. Stealing her breath until her head spun and she was pinned beneath him, something tightening around one wrist... then the other.

Rurik levered off her just enough for Freyja to catch her breath, and then she realized she still couldn’t move. She tugged at her bound wrists, craning her head back to make sure that, yes, he had tied her to the bed, and now she was naked and lushly spread before him like his own personal banquet. “What are you doing?”

“Taking my time.” That wicked, self-satisfied look was back. Then his gaze locked on her body, and Freyja went still at the hungry look in his eyes. “You are so perfect.” His hand skittered over her ribs as he knelt between her thighs.

Freyja squirmed as his gaze dropped to the thatch of blonde hair between her legs. No man had ever seen her like this.

“I could just eat you all up,” he purred, leaning over her, kissing her breasts, his teeth rasping over her nipples. “After all, is that not what you claimed that *dreki* do? Devour innocent young maidens....” His breath stirred against her skin.

Suddenly it was all Freyja could do to stay still. “Please—oh, gods, oh!” How could a woman think like this? With his hands and mouth all over her, stroking her ribs, up under her breasts, plumping them up for the heat of his mouth. His tongue swirled teasing circles around each nipple, suckling them, making the ache fiercer.

The pressure in her body almost hurt. She could feel it building, a storm within. One of his palms pressed against her lower abdomen, as if sensing the power there.

“Yes,” he whispered, and heat slid from his hand, sinking down into the molten core of her.

Then those lips were trailing lower, his tongue darting into her navel. Freyja’s eyes went wide. *He wasn’t*—? Another kiss lower, as he nuzzled into the blonde hair between her thighs, sent a thrill of shock through her. *He was*. Suddenly she understood all the “devouring her” references.

“Rurik!” His name stole from her lips in a gasp as those broad shoulders nudged her thighs wider. Freyja craned her neck, unable to look away. His honey-gold hair fell across her pale stomach, and then he glanced up with one last smoldering smile, before he lowered his face and licked her.

There.

Volcanic heat sent a rush of power flooding through her body. Freyja’s spine arched at the lance of sensation, her feet digging into the bed. She couldn’t think. Could barely breathe. Sweet goddess, but what was he doing to her? “*Oh, my God!*”

The wet lash of his tongue left her with nowhere to hide. He nuzzled her, suckling the small bud between her thighs gently, until she could do little more than pant helplessly, straining at the woolen tie around her wrists.

“Am I winning the argument now, Freyja?” he purred.

“What... argument...?”

A laugh, and then Rurik tongued her deeply.

Suddenly it became too much for her. She felt like she stood in the heart of a maelstrom, or as if her own lightning had struck her body. Freyja screamed, hips jerking beneath his tender ministrations as Rurik licked her with slow, purposeful intent, absorbing each and every aftershock until she felt wrung dry.

She didn’t know if she could stand it any longer. Freyja gasped. “*Please*. Please... I can’t...”

Then he was kissing his way up her smooth abdomen, while she shivered, her inner muscles clenching. Freyja realized the room around her trembled, and Rurik glanced up, then looked at her with a slight frown.

She could barely think, but something about his expression managed to penetrate the fogged state of bliss she existed in. “What’s wrong?”

“You shouldn’t be able to affect this place.” Capturing her face in both hands, he rested between her thighs, the heaviness of his body so abruptly intimate that she sucked in a sharp breath. “What are you?” he whispered, and not for the first time.

“I don’t know.”

“I will find out.”

“Good. Then maybe you can tell me?”

Freyja swallowed, glancing down between them. His skin rubbed against hers, hairs rasping between her slick thighs. She couldn’t even contemplate what he’d just done to her. It seemed... indecent. Shocking. Wonderfully wicked. And she wanted more.

“I would love to know what you’re thinking right now.”

Not quite a question from her mighty *dreki*, yet nor was it a command. Freyja kissed his mouth gently. “Untie me. Please.”

He smiled, and nuzzled her lips. She could taste the musk of her own body there. “Why should I? I like you like this. Splayed out like some treasure I’m about to plunder.” The smooth rock of his hips

showed her exactly what he meant by the word *plunder*. The heavy length of his cock slid slickly against her, riding over exactly the same spot he'd recently devoured.

"Because I want to touch you," she cried.

Those amber eyes shuttered. "Hmm," he said. But he reached up and tugged her wrists free.

Freyja slid her hands over his shoulders. She felt freedom in this moment, unfettered by so many of the unspoken rules that had governed her life. And she wanted to *take*, just as much as she wanted to be *taken*.

"Touch me then," Rurik whispered, and Freyja slid her hands down his chest, over the rock-hard ripple of his abdomen. Her finger tangled in the trail of blond hair that grazed his navel, then hovered there.

"You're not stopping there, are you?" purred her golden *dreki*. He clasped her hand, and drew it lower. "Not you, my ever-curious Freyja."

Curious, indeed.

Freyja locked eyes with him as he pressed her hungry touch over the heated steel of his erection. Time to throw caution to the wind. He felt enormous in her palm, and Freyja could barely wrap her fingers around him. Rurik shuddered, his lips parting as he curled her hand around the engorged width of him. "That's it," he whispered, eyelids lowering in sleepy abandon. The tip of his erection darted along the slit between her thighs. Freyja froze at the lash of sensation, then cupped him again, learning his most intimate secrets.

Rurik stole her mouth again, and something began to stretch her. She dragged her hand over his hip, curling her fingers in the flesh of his ass, not quite certain whether she could handle this.

"Fate, Freyja," Rurik breathed, and finally pushed inside her.

It was too much. And not enough. She wasn't sure what she wanted, but as he thrust inside her, she could feel that tremor building again. Her body pulsed at the ache of the invasion, even as it accommodated him.

Rurik groaned, his mouth slightly parted and his cock plunging within her. Freyja found herself lost to the storm building on the horizon. All she could feel was him. All she could breathe was him.

"More," he growled, and then he was rolling her over, shoving her onto her hands and knees. She'd barely had a chance to settle herself, when his thighs settled between hers and he was parting her once more, this time from behind.

Freyja cried out as Rurik buried himself to the hilt inside her. He felt deeper this way, and she didn't know how much of this she could stand, but she was more than willing to try. Power swept through her, threatening to consume her. How she had never tried this, she did not know. It felt utterly pagan, utterly sensual, and right in a way she did not understand.

"Because you were waiting for me," Rurik growled, and he must have caught the edge of her thoughts. His hands clasped her hips, and he slammed into her again. "Mine, Freyja. Only mine."

Only yours. She arched her back as his hand slid along her spine, curling in her hair. Each thrust

took her right to the edge again as he brushed over something deep inside her. That pressure was back, threatening to erupt through her skin. *Please. Yes. And more.*

Then it was shivering through her. Freyja screamed. This time she wasn't alone. Rurik growled, spilling words in that language he sometimes spoke, his thrusts coming faster and faster, his body plunging within hers—

He shuddered, body rocking with fainter motions, holding her tight, one fist closing in her hair, the other leaving marks on her hip. “*You belong to me,*” he growled in her mind, as their thoughts fused together, and then she was utterly shattered as he spilled his hot seed within her.

Together they collapsed, Freyja's entire body aching with the force of his claiming. The sweetest ache she'd ever felt.

Freyja lay panting on her stomach, Rurik's enormous body covering hers, and his seed wetting her thighs. This moment was a peaceful one, drifting on a wave of post-coital bliss.

One night. She didn't know how she'd survive it.

Her *dreki* curled around her, his long, lean body pressed against hers from behind. He stroked her hair across her shoulder, and Freyja glanced up at him as he nuzzled her neck, scattering dozens of little kisses there. She felt utterly lost in that moment. Gone was her Rurik. In his place was a rather satisfied-with-himself *dreki*. The two seemed to combine, and she realized she'd only ever known half of their respective selves. This creature before her was a combination; the teasing man she'd kissed in the barn, and the powerful creature she'd met in a dark cave. A force of nature when he wanted to be, and a man who could be both warrior and scholar. His pupils seemed almost cat-slit, and golden light gleamed in his irises. Not human. Not now. If ever. And yet there was a sudden deep yearning in her heart, as they lay fused together, for she felt like she understood this creature in a way she'd never felt before. Lonely, he'd called himself once. Curious, somehow separated from the world, and hungry to reach out toward her. She could have been describing herself. Freyja stroked his hand where it rested on her shoulder. If only she could stay here forever, safe and secure, and utterly devastated with pleasure....

Rurik rubbed his cheek against her like a cat, his psychic touch brushing against her. “*I have never in my life wanted anything more than I want you, Freyja.*”

She reached back to him: “*Neither have I.*”

Her fingers paused on his hand, as she withdrew from the mental thread. She had promised herself one night. Nothing more. She didn't know if she dared accept anything else, for it was clear it would be far too easy for Rurik to steal her heart.

Nobody had ever come close to scaling the walls she shielded herself with. He could destroy her, if she let him. There was no future here for them.

Freyja rolled onto her back, staring up at the rock ceiling. Then she reached up and kissed him, cupping the back of his neck and dragging him atop her again.

One night.

And only one night.

Best not to waste a single second of it on doubt.



She was gone.

Rurik raged as morning revealed an empty bed, tearing at the walls with his claws and scattering the piles of gold with the lash of his tail. It spilled everywhere, sparkling in the light reflecting off his scales, but for the first time in his life it failed to soothe him.

Like most *dreki*, he loved gold, loved its shiny allure and glittering beauty, craving its presence in an almost obsessive way; but it was cold and it had no light of its own and it could not give him what he wanted.

He screamed his rage into the skies, feeling the walls of the tunnels shake and tremble around him. Beneath him the volcano stirred, hot molten lava licking at the crust that covered it, and bubbling below. He felt its heat seep through his mind, answering the frustration in his roar.

To unleash its lava would sate him. To let it burn and explode into the air, like a *dreki's* rage, the earth's furious answer to a storm above.

But there was a little cottage out there on the moors, its lights flickering cheerfully in the night. To unleash the mighty fury of Krafla would bury that cottage in ash or lava, sweeping away the one thing he wanted most.

Rurik let his head fall, his wings trembling with suppressed rage and pain. How could he win her back? Why would she not succumb to him? Why hold herself back?

And how had she stepped from this world, back into her own?

He had never felt this way before. The wurm's form separated him from the emotion he felt in his human form, yet even now he felt thwarted. He ached, and it wasn't a pleasant ache.

He had to win her back.

Somehow.

Chapter 14

Freyja grabbed the milking bucket as she opened the front door, and nearly went head over heels. Dawn light silvered the sky in the east, gleaming on the thing at her feet.

An ancient Viking helmet sat on the stone step, the burnished brass filled to the brim with gold and gemstones. Freyja's heart dropped to her stomach and she stepped over it, staring around. A single day had passed without a sign of her lover. She'd spent most of it tending to the jobs at the farm, but she couldn't deny that every whisper of wind made her heart race a little faster, and every shadow that flitted over her made her shoulders slump when she looked up and found only clouds.

He hadn't pursued her.

He hadn't even reached out to her.

Until now.

And she didn't know how she felt about that.

The world was quiet. Freyja's gaze took to the skies, but there was no sign of him there either, curse him. "You cannot buy me," she whispered, glaring down at the treasure.

She stared so long at its gleam that the sun began to warm the back of her neck, the single milking goat they owned bleating at the fence. Freyja sighed. Would one of the *dreki* even think this was mercenary, or would he consider this a courting gift? She had no way of knowing. Not without confronting him in his lair, which she was loath to do.

But if she accepted the treasure—even for one day—then he would think he had won. Freyja grumbled under her breath, despite the way her body heated. Every moment she'd spent in his arms was imprinted on her skin like a sensory burn. "Cursed wyrm."

A part of her wanted to go back there.

A part of her didn't dare.

The jingle of tack caught her ear, and Freyja realized what she'd been hearing, but not acknowledging, for several minutes: the soft thud of hoof beats on the marshy ground. The blood drained out of her face and she swung her milking bucket over the helmet to cover it, turning just in time to see a threesome of riders trot around the end of her barn.

Freyja hurried forward, trying to draw their attention away from the house and what rested on the doorstep, tucking her hands in her apron.

“Good morning,” she called in a barely civil tone, as Haakon rode into view through the morning mists.

He had some nerve in coming here.

His fur bristled over his shoulders, rimed with the morning’s frost, and the rasp of stubble darkened his cheeks. Those cold blue eyes locked on her through thick dark lashes. “Good morn.” He gave her a clipped nod, his gaze searching the yard as if looking for something.

Freyja’s gaze slid past him to the two riders that followed silently at his heels. A chill ran through her, though she didn’t know why. Magnus and another man, one she didn’t recognize. Both were dressed in menacing black leathers, with a crossbow strapped to each of their backs.

Magnus and Haakon had been involved in her kidnapping. And if they’d returned to further their mischief, then she was going to unleash all of the rage and frustration she felt.

Magnus caught her eye and bared his teeth in a smile. She swallowed hard against the instinct to step back, toward the safety of her home. Something about him set her on edge. Bristling with weapons, he turned his huge black stallion in a circle, ignoring the creature’s uncertain snort as he urged the beast closer to the barn. Steel spurs gleamed against the unrelieved black of Magnus’s boots, and his fingers were bare as he gripped the reins negligently in one hand. The other hand rested on the powerful muscle of his thigh, a garnet ring winking on his finger in the soft light.

“What do you want?” Freyja asked coolly. “For I warn you I am almost done with the three of you. If you have something further in mind than kidnapping, then we are going to have a serious disagreement.”

No ambush this time. She was ready to make her point, as the thunder that suddenly rumbled on the horizon proved.

“You seem none the worse for wear,” Magnus pointed out, and in that moment she hated him, he who had threatened her Loki.

“That’s enough,” Haakon warned him, and shot her an almost apologetic look. “We are not here to cause you further grief.”

Civility held. One didn’t speak of what happened when a *dreki* carried off a helpless young woman, though word of it was certain to be spreading around her small village.

None of her neighbors would ever receive her again. It was a curiously freeing realization.

The younger man swung down from his horse in a fluid movement, his raven-dark hair tumbling over his forehead. Those stunning blue eyes met hers and he smiled, white teeth dazzling. He’d not been involved in the kidnapping, and she hadn’t seen him on the village green. “Mistress Helgasdottir. You might consider this early morning visit my fault.” With a rueful smile, he slung his horse’s reins over its glossy bay head and patted it absently. The gelding’s nostrils flared, but he did not seem as unsettled as Magnus’s black.

“Andri’s horse threw a shoe some miles back,” Haakon said. “He’s beginning to favor his leg.”

“I’m not surprised.” Freyja reached out, offering her fingers to the bay to sniff. He snorted and

danced at the end of the reins, not quite certain about her. Freyja stroked his velvety muzzle. “Hush, sweet boy,” she whispered, reaching out to brush her senses against his, a touch full of warmth and gentleness. She’d always had more affinity for animals than she had for people. “I won’t hurt you.”

Pure foolishness to bring a horse like this out through the marshy terrain around Lake Mývatn. The lichen and moss concealed all manner of rocks and uncertain footing. A horse’s leg could twist before the rider knew it.

It was one of the reasons she preferred the stocky ponies that seemed to thrive in Iceland’s conditions. Poor Hanna might not be half as beautiful as these three beasts, but she would outlast them by miles.

Leaning down, Freyja ran her hand down the horse’s foreleg, feeling the heat in the muscle. She tugged at his fetlock, and he lifted his hoof obediently as she examined the spongy sole, fishing out muck and stones from the arrow-shaped frog. One of the nails still clung to the walls of his hoof.

“You need to get that out,” she pointed. “Why in heaven’s name you would need to shoe a horse here is beyond me.” There were barely any roads, and fewer tracks to follow.

Cornflower blue eyes danced into view, a crooked smile twitching over that devilish face. “Yes, mistress,” Andri said.

And she realized she was berating three powerful warriors.

Freyja let the hoof down and stepped back, brushing her hands against her hips. “Take him back to the village. Old Tóki will remove the nail, and then I suggest resting him. There’s heat in the muscle. Is that all?”

Andri raked the yard with a hard glance, though his manner seemed apologetic. “We came to speak to the scholar.” Those eyes locked on her with an intensity that made her shiver. “Master... what was his name again?”

“Rurik.”

“Rurik,” Andri repeated, as if it held some meaning to him.

Magnus shot them both a sharp look.

“I’m afraid you’re too late. He’s no longer plaguing my household.” *Only my heart.* Freyja crossed her arms over her chest, a cold sweat springing up against her forehead. “I believe he took himself off that way.” She pointed vaguely to the south, and the west. “Wants to see if the rumors of trolls are true.”

Haakon dragged his gloves off reluctantly. “Mistress Helgasdottir. It pains me to mention what happened in the village—”

“You dare bring that up?” Rage erupted inside her, though she was doing her best to maintain her temper. “How is Benedikt faring this morning?” The last she’d seen of him, he’d been pinned to the wall and squealing.

“Better than my ballista,” Haakon countered coolly.

Freyja crossed her arms. “A true shame.”

“It was never my intention to lower myself to such a ploy,” he replied, his gaze dropping and heat flushing against his sharp cheekbones. “I allowed the heat of the moment to sweep away my sense of decency.” His lips thinned. “I will never forget my shame, and I apologize for the part I played, but I must ask... would you speak to us of the layout of the dragon’s lair?”

Of all the nerve! “Get off my farmstead.”

“It is not yours, is it?” Magnus spoke up, his horse dancing in slow circles. “But your father’s. Perhaps we should take matters up with him?”

If her father heard of what had happened.... She couldn’t imagine the shame on his face. Many years ago there had been no censure in being staked out for the *dreki*, but with even the crofters out here succumbing to religion... And her father believed. Truly believed. Freyja stepped toward him, her fists clenched. “If you dare disturb my father—”

“You’ll what? I would not be making threats if I were you, mistress.” Magnus’s gaze slid sinuously over her breasts, seeming to strip off each layer of clothing.

Magnus wasn’t the first man to make her feel like this, and he wouldn’t be the last. But she was so tired of being made to feel like an outsider, or a piece of cattle to be traded. If he weren’t sitting on that horse, she might have lashed out with her power, but the poor creature snorted, as if sensing the slight shiver of her gifts across its skin.

Magnus’s gaze sharpened and he urged the stallion closer, forcing her backward. “You—”

“That’s enough!” Haakon snapped, grabbing his stirrup and yanking at it.

The two men locked gazes, something seeming to pass in the air between them.

“You’re here at my discretion,” Haakon challenged him. “Not yours.”

“Magnus,” Andri pleaded.

Magnus finally smiled, a chilling sight indeed. He bowed his head, though the gesture was barely a sign of submission, and more an indication that he would take up this fight at a later date. “As you wish.”

Haakon let go of the stirrup and stepped back, turning on her with almost vicious intensity. Freyja drew back and he noticed it, his gaze flickering to hers. For the first time she saw the coldness in his expression melt, a sense of true shame creeping over his hard mouth.

“My apologies.” He nodded to her, deeply. “We mean you no harm, you have my word.”

Magnus glanced at her over Haakon’s shoulder. Haakon might actually be speaking the truth, but the other mercenary had given no oath.

“Get off my land,” she repeated quietly. “And don’t ever come back. You’ve done enough.”

Haakon opened his mouth as if to speak, then hesitated. He swung up onto his gray gelding and gathered the reins.

Andri swung the reins over his horse’s head. Freyja licked her lips. He’d not done anything to her. “We use moss out here to make a poultice. He’s strained the muscle in his foreleg, and you’ll get few miles out of him today, if any. You’d be best to walk often, or you’ll lose the use of him for several

weeks.”

Magnus snorted under his breath and kicked his black into a canter. Clods of dirt flew up as he rode directly past her. *Good riddance.*

“Thank you.” Andri watched the bigger man go, then gave her a troubled look. “I won’t let him trouble you again, mistress. My word on it.”

“As much as your word is worth,” she said pointedly.

He actually colored.

Haakon and Andri she could manage, for they were bound by some sense of common decency at least. But the look in Magnus’s eyes left her cold, for he had seen her as nothing more than a common whore, a worm beneath his heel. Something to be used and discarded.

All of a sudden, she couldn’t help the rise of shame that filled her. All three men knew what had happened to her in the *dreki*’s lair. She had not felt shame until then. What had happened between her and Rurik had been both wondrous and private; a memory to last a lifetime and to warm her on cold, lonely nights.

For she knew now she would never make such a choice again.

Chapter 15

Freyja woke the next morning to a rose on her pillow.

At midafternoon, she found a book on her windowsill, covered in red leather with gold embossed writing on the spine. It contained Scandinavian fairy tales, and reminded her of her mother. Freyja shut it with a snap and put it in the pile of gifts she was determined to return to her *dreki*, even as her heart gave an unexpected twinge. She'd been forced to sell most of her mother's books, and it had been years since she'd had the pleasure—or time—to read.

A bottle of wine greeted her at dinner. There was an extravagant ham waiting for her on the table for breakfast the next day. Freyja stared at it for a good ten minutes before deciding there was no point in wasting it. Both she and her father were hungry. The ham would spoil if she took it back to Rurik, and she couldn't in good conscience allow a pig to die for nothing. So she made a thick and hearty soup with it, cursing him with every breath, even as she stirred the pot.

What did he want from her?

Forever, whispered his voice in her memories.

"Goodness, Freyja," her father exclaimed when he took his first taste. "This is absolutely delicious. Is that ham? I haven't tasted ham in years."

Freyja's eyes stung with tears as she watched him devour the bowl. Then another. How could she harden her heart to this? She wanted to thank Rurik for this gift, even as she knew it took her down a dark road where she would only end with her heart broken.

Rurik had made it clear he saw her as a conquest. He was *dreki*, and she was human. He wouldn't want her when she was old and gray, and she could not live in his world. There was no future for them. None. So she dried her tears, savored the soup, and then brushed off her apron to complete her afternoon's chores.

Only to find the bloody stables were swept clean, her lambs were feasting on hay she hadn't provided, and there was an enormous ram bleating in the spare pen, his horns magnificent and his wary eyes rolling as though he'd just had the shock of his life. He probably had. She could only imagine that flight. Freyja stood stock-still in shock. A ram. A cursed ram. She was right back where all of this mess had started.

If only I didn't go after my ram that night....

And the dratted man—*dreki*—was nowhere to be seen. She never heard him in the house, nor did she ever see him.

“Stop it!” she called, turning in circles in her empty barn after she found a necklace of extravagant emeralds she barely dared touch. “I promised you one night. Nothing more!”

Silence remained her only answer.

Freyja snatched up the necklace and shook it, suddenly furious. “You will not charm me, you arrogant beast! There is nothing more I can offer you! Stop this foolish game!”

“They were your rules, dearest Freyja.”

She spun in circles. Not a hint of him. “My rules? I promised you one night, nothing else.”

“You promised me your heart, if I could give you your most secret desire.”

Everything stilled within her. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Are you saying you lied to me?”

“No!” She bit her lip. All she’d meant was to put him off and grant herself space. “I just.... It was a jest, nothing else.”

“I am dreki, Freyja. Our word means everything, or else we’d have brought war to this world long ago. It is all that keeps us from chaos and we must abide by our promises.”

She turned. “Where are you? Show yourself.”

A caress stroked her back. Freyja spun, but she was all alone in the barn. *“Why should I? Unless you plan to thank me properly for my gifts.”*

“Thank you?” she growled. “I want to give them back. I’m not keeping them.”

“I’m not accepting them back.”

“Damn you—”

“Throw them in the bog for all I care. They were gifts, Freyja. Courting gifts. You may do with them as you like. I daresay your father is enjoying his new boots, however.”

Her heart plummeted through her stomach. “You leave my father out of this.”

“Very well.”

“And you are *not* courting me. Stop this madness. I won’t abide by it. There is no future between us. Nothing but misery. You got what you wanted, so let me be.”

Another gentle caress cupped her face. *“Stubborn, Freyja. I have barely begun, and you know nothing of what I want from you.”*

“That’s not fair. I don’t want this.”

Silence.

She turned, feeling utterly wretched for the words that spilled from her lips.

“You wanted me the other night,” he finally replied, and she had the feeling that she’d almost hurt him. He, with his unshakeable sense of pride and place in the world.

“That’s not—” She broke off with a curse. “Yes, I wanted it. Once. Something to remember you by. But we have no future, Rurik, and I am sensible enough to admit it. This might be a game to you,

but it is very real to me. You will ruin me, if you haven't already. And... I might have given up on the idea of marriage and children, but I should still like to hold my head up high when I walk into town. You don't understand what you cost me.

"Besides"—her voice quavered—"I'm not the only one who might lose something here. You have dragon hunters searching for you. They know you took me. Haakon and his friends, Magnus and Andri, visited yesterday. They'll be keeping watch for—"

"Friends?" A dark shiver rolled through her at the sudden pressure that pushed at her mental shields.

Freyja clutched her temples. "You're hurting me."

Instantly the pressure was gone. *"I'm sorry. But I know those names, Freyja. And they want me to know them. They're not dragon hunters. They're dreki, in mortal form."*

"Dreki?" She knew she'd sensed something strange from Magnus, a predatory intensity that made her feel uneasy.

"Don't go near them," he suddenly warned, and all of his courtly charm evaporated. *"Don't welcome them into your house, nor challenge them. They're not like me. Or Magnus certainly isn't, and if he thinks you have my interest he'll hurt you to get at me."*

"I have no intention of drawing his ire. What are you going to do?"

Silence.

"Rurik!" She took a step toward the barn doors. "Rurik, you're not going after them, are you?"

It was a long time before he answered, and she felt the distance between them, as though he was flying away from her. *"Would you care if I did?"*

She knew what the sensible answer ought to be. But she couldn't for the life of her utter it. *"Yes!"* Freyja threw the thought back at him. *"Please be careful. I don't want to see you hurt, even though I cannot allow this to continue between us."*

There was only a grim sense of acceptance in the link between them. *"I'll be careful. After all, I am not finished with you yet. I will see you later. You can thank me for my gifts then."*

And then he cut the connection and she found herself alone in the barn, her heart thundering in her chest as she wondered what he was doing now.

Courting aside, nothing could chill her more than the thought of Rurik in danger.



Rurik melted into mortal form in the small village near Freyja's homestead. Picking up the bag he'd dropped, he shook out his clothes and put them on, and then he went hunting.

A forlorn shape sat in the taproom, holding his head in his hands. From the smell of him, Haakon had finished several ales, and possibly more.

Rage smoldered in his heart, rage at all Freyja had endured. Rurik let the door shut behind him

with an audible click, grateful the dragon hunter was alone.

Haakon's head jerked up, and weary blue eyes met his, devoid of emotion. Shadows bruised the man's eyes, and his face looked gaunt, as though something had stripped him of the vitality he'd worn on the docks in Akureyri.

"You," Haakon said in a toneless voice. "I thought you'd headed south."

"I heard what happened," he growled. "I know what you did to her. What type of man can you call yourself?"

He stalked the man through the warm shadows. Haakon's breath caught as Rurik prowled closer, but he moved before the man could even blink.

Shoving Haakon against the wall as he tried to stand, Rurik pinned him there, one hand around the man's throat. Haakon tried to break his hold, but Rurik simply lifted him higher, until the man's boots dangled off the ground. Haakon gasped.

"I can abide challenges to my territory," Rurik admitted, feeling heat fill his eyes as he let the *dreki* slip its skin, just for a moment. Haakon kicked dramatically as he no doubt saw the cat-slit pupils and the golden haze of the *dreki* in Rurik's irises. "I even find myself feeling sympathetic for your foolish quest to hunt and kill me. But still, that does not give me an excuse to swat you like the fly you are...." His grip tightened until Haakon's face began to mottle. Rurik leaned closer, until their noses almost touched. "But if you ever go near Freyja again, or threaten her, or let her be tied to a fucking stake like you did, then I will make your death a slow one, do you understand me?"

Releasing the man, he stepped back as Haakon sagged against the wall, clutching at his throat and coughing air back into his lungs. Haakon's eyes were wide with fright. "*You*," he sputtered, finally understanding what he faced.

"Yes, me," Rurik replied, stepping back out of reach before the hunter did something stupid, like reach for his knife.

Haakon lurched to his feet, and then stayed there, shaking against the wall. "You were there all along," he rasped. "Right under my nose."

"For a man who hunts *dreki*, you are quite terrible at spotting them."

Haakon threw himself at Rurik, his fist swinging. Rurik sidestepped, and then flipped the hunter onto the table, slamming him flat on his back on the timber. The breath whooshed out of Haakon, and Rurik stepped away, the muscle in his jaw ticking. "Don't make me kill you."

Haakon rolled upright, his eyes bloodshot and swollen. "Why don't you?"

He came again, and again Rurik drove him down, hammering an elbow between his shoulder blades. Haakon grunted on the floor, trying to rise, but his arms gave out, and he slowly rolled onto his back. A bitter laugh exploded from his lungs. It sounded like it came from a man who'd lost all trace of himself, and it stopped Rurik from making another move.

"I won't kill you," he said slowly. "I think you're punishing yourself enough. Killing you would be too easy."

“Did you know I see her every night in my dreams?” Haakon whispered, hauling himself slowly into a sitting position. “Every night since I’ve been here. Begging me to rescue her. And these cursed storms don’t help. They only serve to remind me of the night I first met her, when she was lost in the rain outside my village.”

“I never had her,” Rurik pointed out, squatting in front of the man. They stared at each other, and he realized what he hadn’t seen before. This man was broken. And all it would take to drive him off the edge of the cliff would be a slight nudge.

After all, he wasn’t the only one who could enter dreams.

“The dreams started the night Magnus joined your party, didn’t they?” he mused.

Haakon flinched, then frowned. “Yes.”

Rurik reached out a hand and hauled the dragon hunter to his feet. “Your friends are not human, Haakon. Nor are they your friends. Magnus and Andri belong to the *dreki* court, and they’re here to kill me on their queen’s whim. You’re a tool to them, nothing else, and if you aren’t careful, then you’ll end up buried six feet under. Magnus is not the type of *dreki* to care for human foibles, nor share any hint of sentiment, not like I do. I’m sure you’ve had doubts. I’m sure you tried to test them the same way you did me that night we dined, but flinching at the feel of iron is an old wives’ tale, nothing more. Magnus has been sending you the dreams.”

A new fury roused in Haakon’s eyes. “Why?”

“Because he wants me dead,” Rurik replied, turning for the door. “But he won’t confront me directly, not until he’s certain he can beat me. No doubt you’re a distraction, one meant to wear me down.”

Haakon followed him out onto the village green. “Then this was all a wild goose chase.”

Sympathy stirred through him. *Don’t meddle....* “Maybe. Maybe not. You saw a golden *dreki* steal your wife—or thought you did—and I am quite clearly a golden *dreki*, though I had nothing to do with what happened to your wife.” He paused. Árdís must have had her reasons. “But there is one truth I know, that you do not. Your wife is still alive.”

“You said you didn’t take her.” Haakon’s face paled. “How do you know that?”

“I am *dreki*. You know I cannot lie.”

“Where *is* she?”

Rurik paused. He had little reason to give this man any hope, beyond a vague shared sentiment. He knew little of human emotion, but if that were Freyja.... There was nowhere on this earth she could be taken where he would not hunt for her.

Fool of a dreki. He closed his eyes. He finally understood what was happening to him, and why he could not simply leave this quest to win her heart alone. Perhaps he and Haakon shared more than they knew?

“I don’t think you’re ready to know the truth,” he said slowly, trying to sort through his thoughts of Freyja. “But you will be. Soon. And when you are,” he smiled, “come and find me.”

Spreading his arms, he felt them lengthen into wings as the *dreki* took shape with a burst of volcanic heat. Haakon stumbled back, shielding his eyes and face from the wash of power that erupted.

When it was done, Rurik smiled a particularly *dreki* smile. “*Let us hope I am still alive to tell you the tale of your missing wife.*”

Then he launched himself into the skies.

Chapter 16

Rurik returned to the house. There was no sign of Freyja, though her scent lingered all over the place, ingrained in the homestead. A scent that filled his heart with joy.

There was an old *dreki* tale that spoke of *kataru libbu*, an alliance of the heart. *Dreki* were the half-souled, and he'd always felt somehow incomplete. When the great goddess tore her soul to pieces to share it with her new *dreki* offspring, she had left them vulnerable, always hungering for the other half of their soul.

A myth of the *dreki* court. Some *dreki* found their other halves, the twin flame to their soul. Some did not. But all hungered for them. It was a concept beyond that of the mates they took, the lovers they consumed.

The second he saw Freyja, he'd known there was something different about her. He'd been unable to deny his yearning for her, and even now her distance from his side ached within him.

Was she the other half of him?

Was that why he was so helpless to walk away from her, so determined to claim her?

Some instinct stirred in his chest. He could not walk away from her. It would be like cutting out his heart. *Freyja*. Fierce, stubborn Freyja, who had brought him out into the light, brought him back to life. Without her, all he faced was an eternity of hibernation.

A *dreki* bugled, somewhere far to the south of him, reminding him this was not the time for such speculation. His enemy was still out there, somewhere.

Rurik turned to face the brewing storm on the horizon, looking for Magnus.

The bastard had used Haakon and his men to test Rurik, but why? Why not face him? He remembered battles between them as youths, where they'd tested their strengths against each other. Battles he'd won every single time.

There was a reason he'd been his father's heir. A reason his uncle and mother plotted for his exile, rather than outright killing him. If Stellan or any of his sons had challenged Rurik, then there was a possibility he would have defeated them.

"Are you frightened to confront me?" he whispered, sending the thought-thread lancing through the skies as he searched for his cousin.

Magnus's awareness linked with his, the other *dreki*'s fury searing his mind. "*Frightened?*"

Magnus spat. *“How dare you?”*

“What else am I to think, when you hide behind the plots of puny humans?”

Days ago, he'd refused to offer challenge to Magnus, his pride standing between him and the thought of openly acknowledging Magnus was ranked above him. But that was before he'd come to realize what Freyja meant to him. There was no moving forward until he defeated this threat.

“I offer challenge,” he called, feeling the heat of his cousin's surprise. *“You and me. No mercy. Let us settle this once and for all.”*

Magnus could *choose* not to accept.

“Unless you are wary of battling me?” Rurik added. *“I always won, did I not?”*

There was a long moment of silence. He almost didn't think his cousin would accept.

“That was a long time ago. Come and fight, you filthy cur. I am not frightened of you.” Magnus's thought-thread linked with his, and for a second Rurik saw more than Magnus expected him to. Always a problem when two *dreki* linked. Magnus swiftly hid his thoughts, but there was enough there to cause Rurik to falter.

Magnus did not intend for this to be a fair fight.

“One hour,” Rurik whispered, knowing he would be facing two *dreki*, and not one. Sympathy for Andri's dilemma stirred through him, even as a hint of doubt assailed him.

Could he defeat both of them? Knowing he would not—could not—harm the cousin he loved?

Magnus faded from his consciousness. And Rurik was left standing there, gripped by indecision.

What if he did not win? He was relying on Andri's honor to stay out of this, even though he knew some hidden pressure forced the youth to join Magnus in this plot.

If he didn't win, then what did that mean for Freyja?

She had not accepted him, not completely.

And he wanted so much more from her than merely a conquest, but how could he tell her that? He did not have the time.

Except... there was one last gift he could give her.

One last way to prove his intentions toward her were serious, and one way he could offer her protection, if Magnus defeated him.

Rurik slowly turned and looked at the house.



“You... you get out of here!” Freyja's father snapped as Rurik entered, maneuvering with wicked speed around the dining table. *“Benedikt told me what you are, and what you intend with my daughter! You leave her alone, you foul beast!”* He snatched up a cross and started praying in Latin. *“Our father who art in Heaven....”*

Rurik's temper flared. He had no time for this. *“Did Benedikt also mention precisely what he's*

threatened her with over the past few years? The coin he's offered for her if she allowed herself to become his mistress? Or the threats he made when she would not?"

The prayer faded as Einar gasped. "*What?*"

It dampened Rurik's temper to a smoldering coal, but the heat remained. Freyja had refused to allow her father to share her burden out of some misguided attempt to protect him, but in doing so, she'd not allowed *him* to protect his daughter. "Your precious Benedikt threatened to name her a witch if she'd not lie with him. Who do you think tied your daughter to a stake and offered her up to me? Who do you think has been stealing your sheep over the years, and whispering in local villagers' ears so they would not buy your daughter's barley when she tried to trade it? I have been talking to many of the locals. Some spit on your daughter's name for dealing with the devil—which you and I both know she has not done—but others admit they were afraid Benedikt would turn his wrath on them if they traded with Freyja, or tried to help her. She's slowly starving because of Benedikt, and you cannot see it. He wanted to cut off all of her resources so the only person she could turn to was him, when she was finally desperate enough. That is the snake whose words you listen to."

His words took all the wind out of Einar's sails. The old man slumped against the table, his mouth agape in shock. "She never said a word."

"Knowing Freyja as you do, did you think that she would?"

"But he... he said you had taken her."

"And so I did," Rurik replied. His temper got the best of him. "They'd tied her to a stake in the village green, and threw rotten food at her. What would you have me do? Leave her there?"

"Did you..."

He grasped what the old man wanted to know. "What happened between us is a matter purely for us."

The old man was gasping quite hard now. "No. No." He shook his head. "She is a good girl." His gnarled hands curled into fists. "Both Benedikt and you have ruined her!"

Rurik knelt in front of him. "You know *dreki* cannot lie. You said so yourself. So, know this... I love your daughter and I wish, in another world, she could be mine. I would not abandon her, not willingly, not if I had a choice. And I will never harm her, or place her in danger, which is why I cannot marry her. If I could—" His voice broke a little. "If Freyja would accept such a thing... then I would do so in a heartbeat. But to mate with Freyja is to place her in danger. I finally understand that. I cannot have her, not without bringing darkness into her life, no matter how much I wish to. But I also cannot leave her defenseless, and as much as she could bring this small village to its knees if she wished to, she is also remarkably vulnerable against those threats she has no power to control."

Rurik captured Einar's face in between his hands. "She needs you to protect her. And she needs you to be well, because she loves you. She will accept no other gift from me, but perhaps she will accept this..."

Power welled within him. Einar gasped as that honey-trickle of it slid through his skin.

“My cousin Magnus has accepted my challenge. I go now to face him.” He let his power threaten to brim over, finding the shadow in the old man’s chest, the one that was slowly killing him. “Think of me as the devil, or think of me as a monster, but the truth remains I might not vanquish two *dreki*. I would not leave your daughter unprotected in the wake of my death.”

Healing was not his greatest strength, but he knew well how to manipulate flesh and bone, and shift the core of the body. The shadow sat there, resisting him, a cancerous growth within the old man’s lungs. Rurik poured more power into the working, using lashes of fire to burn away the shadow, then sweeping the cobwebs from the old man’s vision, until Einar gasped, slumping against the table as though he breathed hot ash.

“Done,” Rurik gasped, and took a shuddering step sideways.

Something was wrong. He felt hollow and empty; his bones curiously light, as though he’d expended too much raw power.

Einar clapped a hand to his chest, his skin glowing with health and vitality. “You... healed me.”

Rurik could barely acknowledge him. “For Freyja,” he said, then staggered outside.

The storm battered at him. He’d cost himself a great deal of power in healing Freyja’s father, but it was worth it if by doing so, he could protect her. Rurik spread his arms wide, fanning the kernel of golden heat deep within him to flames. The change lashed through him, shockingly slow. By the time his wings unfurled, he felt almost breathless and a faint hint of nervousness lit his stomach.

Had he expended too much energy in healing Freyja’s father?

No. Of course not. He was a prince of his people, not a weakling. Magnus had dared to challenge his territorial claim, and such needed to be answered. He’d beaten his cousin before. He would not fail this time.

But as he launched himself into the air, wings thrusting down in furious beats, he couldn’t hide the hint of doubt in his heart.

Chapter 17

*H*oof beats drummed across the rocky soil. Freyja drew to a halt, tugging her shawl tight around her shoulders and sucking in a shattered breath. Loki caught up to her, circling her skirts with a desperate yip.

Not now, she told him, brushing the hair from her eyes as Haakon reined in his enormous stallion. She'd been trying to take a walk to clear her mind, dwelling on Rurik. She couldn't escape the memories of their night together, and he'd come for her, courting her with gifts she could not avoid. This was not done between them, no matter how many times she told herself it was, but she couldn't quite work out what the decision meant. She wanted a future with him. She wanted him. If she swept aside all her doubts and misgivings, that was the one fact she kept returning to.

But did she have a place in his future?

"Mistress Helgasdottir." Haakon seemed just as surprised to see her as she was to see him. The stallion beneath him sawed at the reins, sweat darkening its flanks as it danced in small impatient circles. Bruises darkened his skin, and blood had dried on his eyebrow.

"What do you want now?" she demanded, though his injuries bothered her.

"I came to find you, actually."

"Oh?" Thunder echoed in the distance.

The stallion's eyes rolled, and Haakon brought him back under control. "I came to apologize, and to warn you—"

"Apologize? For what?" Lightning split the skies, far too swiftly on the heels of Thor's thunder to be entirely natural. Freyja could feel her fury spitting beneath her skin, and curled her fingers into fists. She was so angry, and she didn't know if it was at Haakon, the world—or herself. She took a step closer to him. "For bringing your hatred to my village? For destroying the village's treaty with the *dreki*, the consequences of which could rain down upon innocent people? For tying me to a stake and using me as bait? For ruining any reputation I ever had, and stealing away any chance I might ever make a good match?"

She saw her words strike him. He flinched, but Freyja was merciless. "I know what you lost was not insignificant. I know you can never get your wife back. But did you ever once consider what you were doing to the people around you? What do your family think? How many other villages have you

brought your hatred to?" She paused. "How many innocent dragons did you kill, who had no hand in what was done to you?"

"Freyja." His voice came hoarsely. "You don't—"

"Perhaps the *dreki* stole your wife, but you are your own worst consequence. All you are is hatred and ruin, and while I might pity you for what happened, I cannot forgive you for allowing your hatred to consume you. What would your wife think of you now, if she could see you?"

"What would you not do to bring your lover back to you, Freyja, if the shoe were on the other foot? What would you do if it were *your fault* she'd been taken?" His eyes begged her for understanding.

"I would do anything that would not harm another person," she admitted.

"Pray you don't have to find out just where that line stands...." And she saw that guilt and loss had flayed the humanity from him, pushed him into making decisions he might never come back from.

Just as she might never come back from the harsh words she'd offered to the *dreki* who challenged her. Her shawl flapped in the wind and Freyja caught it, but she shot Haakon a fierce look. *What would she not do if there was a threat against the man—or dreki—she loved?*

Another shock of thunder rumbled across the horizon, and it felt almost as if it shook the earth itself. The clouds boiled now, seething masses of stormy white that threatened a dangerous storm.

"Another of those unnatural bloody storms," Haakon swore under his breath, circling his horse.

She'd thought it an extension of her own fury, but as she looked up she realized she felt vaguely hollow and disconnected from the storm. This was not of her making.

The blood ran from her face.

"It's a *dreki* storm," she breathed, feeling the wash of power through her veins, but knowing she was not the cause of it. No. She was merely a bystander, swept along in the current of its power.

But what was causing it? A glance back at the valley showed the lights gleaming in her father's homestead. As she watched, a dark shape came to the door and stared into the skies. Even from this distance she saw his golden hair, and felt that same twist around her heart.

She needed to tell him the truth about how she felt—and to apologize. Fear had driven her. Fear of the future, fear of handing him her heart on a platter and having him shred it—even fear of finally, irrevocably being cast from her community. Every time she'd been frightened of his intentions, he'd let her make her own choices. How could she refuse to allow him the same courtesy?

Fear had been her cage, and it was time to set it aside. Time to shed her skin and bloom into the creature she'd always been meant to be. One that accepted her dangerous powers. One that knew she was different from the mortal world, and could never fit in. One that was not frightened of love, or rejection.

Daughter of the Storm, her mother had called her once, and it was time for her to accept her true self, and cast aside everything that held her back.

But even as she took a step toward Rurik, he spread his arms and began to shift. Wings formed,

long and elegant. Golden scales erupted with slow grace, and then he took a belabored lunge into the sky that was less graceful than any she'd ever seen from him.

Something was wrong with him.

"Rurik," she whispered, her heart thudding dully in her chest.

He wrenched himself into the sky, and she had this horrible, impending sense of doom as she took a step toward him.

Too late.

The heat drained from her face. "Rurik!" she yelled, running toward him and waving her arms.

"Rurik!"

"Freyja!" Haakon cut in front of her, his stallion's hooves churning up the sod. He thrust a hand in her direction.

"Get out my way." She couldn't see Rurik anymore, but she knew she had to get to him.

Something bad is coming, whispered the earth beneath her feet, and the sky around her.

And all she could hear were her parting words as she denied Rurik. *You don't understand what you cost me.*

Fate, Rurik had once told her. But she had spat in fate's face, and now... now that miserable wretch seemed to be warning her once again, something was afoot.

"Freyja, here." Haakon offered her his arm as icy raindrops stung her face, and she realized he meant to sit her behind him.

Freyja drew her hand back.

Haakon's face twisted. "I know what I have done, Freyja. I know the damage I have caused, but you didn't let me finish. I came here to warn you. Magnus and Andri are not what they seem."

"What do you mean?"

"They're both *dreki*," he told her. "Rurik warned me about them an hour ago. I confronted Magnus and we fought. He couldn't entirely control himself." Haakon shook his head, horror lighting his expression. "I saw it in his face. For a second his eyes were gold and reptilian, and his skin seemed almost covered in scales. That was when I knew." His shoulders slumped. "They were using me to get to Krafla's *dreki*. Andri wouldn't let Magnus kill me, said it went against their oath—whatever that means—but I overheard them after they threw me in the cellar of the house I was leasing. They're here for Krafla's *dreki*, and they mean to kill him. They were using me to distract him and draw him out."

She gasped, but he wasn't finished.

"Freyja, this was all planned, and not by Benedikt. After I broke out of the cellar and found them gone, I went to him and demanded some answers. He didn't even know what he was dealing with, and had never seen Magnus nor Andri before in his life... but someone met him in Akureryi six months ago when he was trading, and offered him enough gold to sink a ship if he used half of it to offer a warrant for Krafla's *dreki*."

“Rurik,” she whispered in horror, before realizing what she revealed.

“Rurik,” Haakon confirmed, a knowing look on his face.

Freyja held herself between him and the house. “He’s not the golden *dreki* who stole your wife. I know he’s not!”

“I know.” Haakon’s stallion pawed the ground. He looked faintly disgusted with himself. “But he knows who did. Freyja, get out of the way—”

“I won’t let you hurt him,” she held her arms wide, and a tremor leapt from the ground at her feet, sending the stallion into a screaming whirl of fear.

Control it. Freyja grit her teeth and reined her temper in. She couldn’t afford to give in to the power trickling through her veins. The storm pushed her in its wake, filling her with power she’d never felt before.

It had never been this difficult to control herself before. Nor had she ever slid so fully into that golden pool of molten power deep within her. Freyja saw the world through a haze of amber, before her vision suddenly cleared and the earth stilled.

Haakon stared at her, white-faced. Froth foamed at the stallion’s mouth and its eyes rolled, but it was obeying him. Barely.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“The rumors are true then.” It was not a question.

“That depends upon which rumor you listen to,” she shot back.

“I don’t intend to hurt him.” Haakon hesitated. “It is clear Magnus and Andri were using me for their own purposes, and I now know what that purpose is. They mean to challenge him and kill him. It’s a trap, Freyja. But if we get to him first, perhaps we could warn him? Or help him?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “And why would you help him?”

“To make amends.” He clearly saw her disbelief. “And because he has the information I need to find the *dreki* who took my wife.”

They stared at each other for a long moment.

“You’ll get there quicker.” Haakon’s eyes seemed to soften, turning very blue. “You were right, Freyja. All I’ve done is cause harm here. Let me help. Please. Let me try and find my way back to the man I once was.”

Logic dictated she accept his hand. He was right. Speed was of the essence right now. Freyja jammed her foot into the stirrup he’d slid his boot from, and used his hand to haul herself up behind him.

“Hurry!” she yelled, wrapping her arms around his waist as he heeled the stallion with boots.



Freyja burst through the door of her house, her skirts flapping around her ankles. Time was of the

essence right now, but she needed to make sure her father was all right.

“Father!” she called, dragging on his old oilskin coat, and reaching for his stout staff. Any weapon was better than none, and if Rurik thought she was going to allow him to face two treacherous *dreki* alone, then he had another think coming. “I have to go out this night. I need—”

“You’re not going anywhere.” Her father appeared in the doorway, blinking and rubbing at his eyes. He lowered his hands, revealing clear blue eyes that locked on her face. “Rurik told me everything. And he... he has given me a gift, in exchange for promising to keep you safe.”

Those eyes. She hadn’t seen him look at her like that in years.

The floor felt like it swayed. “Father,” she whispered in disbelief, waving a hand in front of his face.

“Yes, I can see.” Pressing a hand to his chest, his face lit up briefly. “It feels like such a weight has lifted off me, like my veins are filled with pure fire. I haven’t felt this way in years.”

Blood warmed his skin, breathing new life into it. Her father’s spine had straightened, and he resembled the tundra in spring as winter finally sloughed away, revealing new growth. She felt like she might almost choke on her heart. His condition had weighed heavily on her too, and heat flooded her eyes as she realized her father’s long illness had vanished.

Freyja slid a hand over his paper-thin cheek in wondering fashion. “But... how?”

“The *dreki*,” he said. “He gave me a gift.”

Rurik had done this? Given her father new life? It struck her then, like an arrow to the heart. All along she’d been wary of him, holding him at arm’s length even as she submitted to his touch. Guarding herself for the betrayal she knew would come.

She’d been wrong.

He’d given her more than she could ever repay, and her words bit through her: *Give me a gift beyond any worth, and I shall give you my heart.*

This was that gift. One last attempt to prove his sincerity when she had doubted it. Freyja clapped a hand to her mouth. Her heart beat a little faster, a little louder, as the world swam around her, shifting on its axis of what she knew to be true and what she’d feared to accept.

She’d not dared love him. Yet it had crept over her night by night, stealing through her intentions as if they were mist with every smile he gave her, every little argument, and every determined quirk of his brow when she refused to fall into place. She’d known it and worried over the sensation late at night. Locked it up tight within her so he could never know, as if that could somehow protect her.

And now it left her utterly bereft.

“Oh no,” Freyja whispered.

Tears blurred her vision. He’d gone off to fight two *dreki* alone, believing she would refuse to let him court her. And he’d weakened himself, curse him, in healing her father so she would not be alone.

That thought, more than anything, sent steel straight down her spine.

“Rurik visited me and told me everything. About Benedikt and what he had threatened you with.

About him tying you to a stake.” Her father’s lips thinned. “Freyja, why did you not tell me all your worries? You know I would have protected you.”

But how sprang to her tongue, where she managed to catch it in time. Her father had his pride. “I know.”

She needed to thank Rurik. She needed to... God. To apologize for all she’d said to him. To make it right. It seemed her father wasn’t the only one who had to account for pride.

“Freyja,” her father warned, seeing the look on her face and interpreting it correctly. “Where are you going? Rurik wanted you to be safe. He doesn’t want you involved.”

She did not argue, or shout her sudden fury to the world. Instead she fetched the kitchen knife from its block. An odd sense of calm descended over her. “And what about him?”

“He’s a *dreki*,” her father said. “You cannot fight this battle for him.”

“No,” she whispered, “but I *can* stand at his side and give him a reason to fight.”

“Freyja!” Her father caught her arm as she moved to the door.

Freyja eased his grip from her arm. “No, Father. I know you want to protect me, but that time is done.” She hesitated. “And you should know I am quite capable of protecting myself, even against *dreki*.”

For the first time she let the storm show in her eyes. Her father’s mouth parted, but no words came out. He’d always known she had power—*how could you not, when your child tore the earth apart with a thought?*—but he’d always pretended she wasn’t different. It had been her secret to keep for far too many years, something her mother warned her to hide, and her father pretended not to see.

Freyja gently let his hand go. “I cannot deny what I am anymore, Father. And I know this upsets your beliefs, but there is something within me that is not human. And I don’t know what it is or where it came from, but I know my mother knew of it too. And I have to save the man I love.”

“Your mother’s powers are what stole her away,” her father whispered. “Please don’t ask this of me.”

Freyja’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“She never breathed a word of where she’d come from,” he admitted, “but she always feared certain things: circles of stone, or birch; All Hallow’s Eve. I don’t know why she entered that circle that last time, but when she came back, she was never the same. It killed her. They killed her.”

“They?”

Her father shook his head and made a sign of the cross, and she knew he would not speak of it.

Freyja’s heart ached in her chest. “I love him,” she whispered. “He needs me. I know you’re frightened to lose me, but I promise I will come back. Would you have let her go, if you could have saved her?”

Her father’s hand curled into a gnarled fist. Then he finally broke down with a sob. “Be safe.”

“Always,” she said with a parting smile, and opened the door to step into her destiny.

Outside in the yard, Haakon waited impatiently. Time was running out, but she’d needed to ensure

her father was all right before she went into battle.

“You want to make amends?” she asked him grimly.

“Yes.”

“Then you can start now.” She gestured to the south. “If Rurik dies, then you’ll never find out what happened to your wife.”

And she would never get to tell Rurik the truth—that she’d been such a fearful fool she’d run away from the best thing that had ever happened to her....

Oh, Rurik. Heat slid through her eyes, but Freyja was determined. She was not going to lose him, nor her chance to tell him the truth she nursed deep in her heart.

“What can we do?” Haakon demanded, bringing her back into the present. “They’re in *dreki* form, Freyja. Immortal, powerful, and impervious to harm. We are but human, and they could crush us like gnats.”

“Almost impervious,” she said darkly, picturing Magnus’s face in her mind. “You have a ballista....”

“A crippled ballista,” he countered.

“Then put it on a wagon. I only destroyed the wheels.”

Haakon dwelled on the thought. “And you?”

“Well, you’ve caught a glimpse of what I can do, but that’s not important. What I have is a burning desire to save the man I love,” she said grimly, turning toward the stables to fetch Hanna. “Go and fetch your ballista, and I will meet you at Krafla. We don’t have much time.”

Chapter 18

Rurik soared in slow circles around Krafla's smoldering peak, riding the thermals and the heated edge of his fury.

There was no sign of the other *dreki*, but he'd expected that.

"Come out, you cowards." He bellowed a challenge into the air, and it echoed like the thunder that was brewing on the horizon. Weakness stole through his veins, a little whisper that wore away at his confidence. Healing Freyja's father had taken more out of him than he'd expected, but the heaviness in his heart was the true weakness.

I should have told her how I feel about her.

Maybe then she wouldn't have run from him.

Rurik poured all of his world-weary pain into another bellow. *"You want your throne? Then come out and take it from me!"*

This entire plot had Stellan's hand all over it. His uncle, the *dreki* queen's brother, always liked to tie up any loose ends, and while Rurik and his brother were still alive, the queen's control over her throne was not complete. Amadea could keep Árdís in check, but not her male progeny.

As if exiling him for a crime he didn't commit hadn't been bad enough.

Pain bled through him. He'd lost every *dreki* he ever loved by choosing exile over a challenge to his uncle and mother, but he'd made that choice to protect them. Challenging Stellan would have dragged his younger brother and sister into the war, and they hadn't been strong enough then to survive. He had little doubt his mother and uncle would cut their own blood down in a heartbeat.

After all, his uncle had murdered his father and his mother hadn't blinked at blaming Rurik.

He let the rage of his loss fuel his strength. *"Come out!"* he roared as he overshot Krafla and went south in a swoop over the glaciers.

"You're not fit to rule these lands," came Magnus's thought-whisper. *"And who are you to call us cowards? You, who tucked tail and fled when your mother took the throne?"*

"When your father stole it for her," he shot back. *"By plotting to murder his king."*

"My father didn't kill yours." It echoed with truth, and Rurik gritted his teeth together.

"Maybe it wasn't his hand that ripped my father's heart out of his chest," Rurik shot back, *"but his was the hand behind the murder."*

“You stupid fool.” Magnus’s laugh echoed through the link. *“My father had nothing to do with the death of yours. You did that yourself.”*

Truth again. The rage that filled Rurik almost threatened to obliterate rational thought, but he couldn’t afford to lose his mind now. Not when there was so much at stake.

But the answer still ached within him. All he could remember was blood slick on his hands, and his father’s ribs spread wide, the heart torn from within. And the thought he’d pushed this death upon his king, because he hadn’t known enough to back down when he overheard his mother and uncle plotting a coup. In an act of mercy, an attempt to reach the *dreki* who’d birthed him, he’d actually warned her he knew what she was up to. *No. “Come out, you coward! Where are you?”*

“Here.”

Rurik wheeled in a fury, sighting his opponent rising from a valley near Krafla. Bat-like black wings thrust Magnus into the skies, and his lip was drawn back from his fierce fangs. Twenty tons of fury struck through the air toward him, but Rurik was fueled by vengeance and rage.

Storm clouds brewed on the horizon, and he was riding his own storm now. The black *dreki* pinwheeled through the skies ahead of him, banking just enough to flash his claws at him.

“Rules?” Rurik demanded.

“There are no rules.”

So be it. *“Killing you will be my pleasure.”*

With a twist of his body, he plummeted toward Magnus, claws spread for a strike.

He had the better position and the weight advantage here, plus years of experience battling other *dreki*, but Magnus was no stranger to battle himself. They called him the Black Prince in the *dreki* court, for his cunning and deviousness, and Rurik was weighted down by the exhaustion that had stolen through his veins the second he healed Freyja’s father. Magnus was completely fresh.

Which meant he needed to finish this battle as swiftly as possible.

At the last second, Rurik flattened his wings against his body and dove straight down toward the other *dreki*, knowing his claws could not pierce Magnus’s black hide. Not from above.

Magnus’s wings flared wide in surprise, and then he tilted sideways to avoid the clash in a defensive maneuver. Which was exactly what Rurik wanted. Ignoring Magnus’s wings—the most obvious target—he caught his cousin’s claws in his and then rolled and flung them both into a pinwheel of violence. The world blurred around him, sky then ground then sky flashing through his vision, and just as the ground grew dangerously close, he let go, flinging his cousin toward the jagged rocks below.

Perfectly timed. Perfectly executed. *“You’re getting slow in your old age, cousin,”* he taunted, as Magnus used sheer strength to haul himself out of the dangerous dive in an inelegant maneuver.

“And you’re still brimming with false nobility,” Magnus spat back. *“No rules, Rurik. Remember?”*

A flash of shadow in the corner of Rurik’s eyes alerted him a split second before claws raked his

unprotected flank. Pain seared his nerves, but he'd twisted in time to prevent the second *dreki* from opening up his abdomen. Lashing out with his whip-like tail, he scored a cut along the silver *dreki*'s snout, and it wheeled away in a spiraling pirouette that hurt his heart.

"Andri. Stay out of this."

His former page banked in an eerie glide. *"I have my orders."* Regret laced Andri's mental touch. *"You bring a dreki youth to this battle?"* he demanded of Magnus.

"He was my brother before he was ever your page," Magnus spat back, *"and it is his turn to prove his loyalty to his blood kin."*

The betrayal would be tearing Andri apart. He knew the lad. Andri was the one shining branch in his uncle's family, the one son who remained uncorrupted. Rurik dove for Magnus, using his larger form to batter at the black. Claws slashed and tore, and wings thrust in midair to hold them locked against each other. *If he could get the bastard's throat....*

A body battered against his, knocking him aside a second before his razor-sharp teeth locked around Magnus's neck.

Andri, forced into this conflict against his will.

The three of them spiraled apart.

"This is not your fight," he shot toward Andri. *"Remember who you are. Remember what I tried to instill in you. You're better than this."*

The silver *dreki* drew back from his touch, rejecting the attempt to reach out to him. But guilt laced Andri's withdrawal, and Rurik had to cling to that.

Two against one. He'd had worse odds, when he fled the *dreki* court. But this was different. He wouldn't—he *couldn't*—strike down the younger *dreki* he loved like his own brother.

And Magnus knew that.

Time to play dirty. There was no honor in fighting a battle against these odds, and the last thing he wanted was for Andri to be forced to do something he'd never forgive himself for.

Battered on both sides, Rurik fought and slashed, smashing his body back against Andri's to force the youth out of the way, even as he tried to slash open Magnus's belly. The ground was getting dangerously close. Lightning stabbed through the air, but so far neither of them had brought their powers to bear in this duel.

Can't afford to.... Not with Andri hampering both of us.

Rurik's lungs strained. Care for the younger *dreki* was possibly the only similarity both he and Magnus shared.

Again they came for him. This time they were fighting in unison. And Rurik felt a crucial claw scrape against his belly, igniting a line of fire along his flank. Panic surged through him as Magnus's teeth scraped across his shoulder, and shuddered free. Close. Too close. For the first time, he felt the tides of the battle changing. A shiver of cold knowing ran through him.

He couldn't defeat both of them.

Filling his lungs, in desperation he vomited a gush of white-hot fire toward the fierce black dragon, and Magnus screeched and dove out of the way in frantic haste.

It was the one true advantage he had here.

“You’re no true heir,” Rurik shot at his cousin. *“I see fire still eludes you.”*

Only the most powerful bloodlines still had access to Tiamat’s gift.

Banking, he began to climb, his weary wings sweeping through the air so he could get some height. A silver wisp trailed him. Andri was far lighter than either of them, and moved through the air like a bullet.

“You don’t have to do this.” He tried once again to connect with Andri. *“I know you. I know this is not you. You have more loyalty in your littlest claw than either of your brothers, or your father.”*

A mournful hesitation. *“It’s been different since you left. You don’t understand.”*

But he did, oh, he did. Stellan had always wanted to drive the gentleness from his son, and he would have ruled the *dreki* court with an iron fist.

One last thought-whisper from the boy. *“I have to protect my mother, Rurik. Please understand.”*

And then the silver *dreki* came after him with pure, bloody-minded vengeance.

No way out without hurting him. Rurik knew Andri’s mental defenses, could have smashed through his psychic shields and knocked him from the skies with barely a thought. But the same mind that’d conjured this ploy knew his weakness well, and knew Rurik could no more hurt the boy than he could lift a hand against his own brother or sister.

Someone else didn’t have the same conflict. Andri flinched as he came after Rurik, shaking his head, and Rurik saw the golden dancing lights of Freyja’s touch strike the youth.

Freyja. Intense terror suddenly struck him, straight through the heart. She shouldn’t be here. She *couldn’t* be here.

But he also knew the stubborn woman would have come after him, if she’d caught any hint of what was going to happen here.

“No! Freyja, stop! Go home!” He threw the thought at her, losing track of what was going on around him for a split second.

And it was in that split second Magnus attacked.

The furious black *dreki* came out of nowhere, slamming into him. Rurik staggered sideways, his right wing momentarily locking with Andri’s. The smaller *dreki* lashed out, trying to catch his balance and stop himself from plummeting, and Rurik caught him with a claw around his shoulder, helping the boy stabilize—

Pain smashed through him, razor-sharp claws shredding through his left wing. Magnus saw only the win, not the risk to his brother.

Rurik flapped desperately, trying to get out of Andri’s path, but something was wrong. His wing wasn’t working properly, and as he plummeted between them, he clipped Andri, sending the youth into a spin.

One last thought speared through him. Rurik caught at Andri's mind, even as his crippled wing began to scream in pain as he fell. "*I forgive you,*" he whispered, and then lost the connection.

Air whipped past him. Panic. Fear. His claws scrabbled to right him as he tried to haul out of the dangerous plummet with his one good wing, knowing, *knowing* it was too late.

Freyja! He saw her face in that moment, as if she stood there watching him, her hands clapped to her mouth and her eyes wide in horror. The only true regret he had was not knowing her love. And not telling her how much she meant to him. Capturing her mind in a caress of golden thread, he sent that last thought to her before it was too late.

"*Rurik!*" Andri cut through their connection as Rurik fought the air... and lost.



"Hurry!" Freyja screamed, urging Haakon and the rest of his men up the rough road that cut through the landscape. She could see the three *dreki* fighting in the air above him, and every harsh bellow and dive stole her breath, as the three clashed again and again.

The bloody wagon with the ballista was too slow. They'd never get there in time.

And Rurik was being hit from both sides.

It was also clear that though he attacked the black *dreki*, he merely avoided the silver one, when he could so easily clip him from the skies with one hard slam.

Something was wrong. Why wasn't he fighting back? He couldn't win against those odds. She could see it in the oddly reluctant way he tried to duel.

Her heart stayed in her throat as she belted her heels into Hanna's flanks and urged the small pony into a gallop. Everything that had never been said welled up between them, and for one ridiculous moment, her eyes were blurry with tears.

I never told him how I feel. I never told him I love him.

Pure stubborn pride and a healthy dose of fear had stopped her from letting him inside her guarded heart, and she had the horrible suspicion that now she was going to be too late.

"*Freyja!*" Haakon bellowed behind her, but Freyja leaned low over Hanna's shoulder and urged the startled mare on.

Blow after blow was rained upon Rurik. Hanna balked at the top of the hill, nearly throwing Freyja over her shoulder. Three dueling *dreki* were probably more than the mare could handle.

Freyja wasted no time. Slinging her leg over the mare's back, she landed on her feet and let the mare flee. Then she was running, her skirts flapping around her calves as she hauled herself across the barren terrain.

The earth rumbled beneath her feet. Freyja's lightning flickered in the southern skies, but it wasn't anger she felt now, not when Rurik's was so hard-pressed, but fear. And fear kept her thunder quiet.

"*Rurik!*" she screamed, hitting the crest of the hill.

Freyja spread her feet, grinding her teeth together as she locked eyes on the silver *dreki*. Magnus and Rurik were too close together for her to attempt to take the black, but the silver *dreki* was like a dart in the skies, hammering at Rurik's golden back. She lifted her arms and felt the rush of lightning begin to skitter along her nerves. She'd never attempted something so powerful or focused before. The very air felt like it grew thick and static with electricity. Freyja unleashed everything she had in her toward the silver *dreki*.

And then it happened.

Rurik must have felt it, for he lurched into Andri's path, knocking the young *dreki* just enough to take the brunt of her energy upon himself.

She almost thought the silver *dreki* was going to overshoot Rurik, but then Magnus slammed into his golden body, just enough to send him straight in to the path of Andri. It happened in an instant that felt like an hour. Rurik's wing tore under Magnus's second strike, and those deadly claws went straight through his precious wings.

"Rurik!" she screamed, and scrambled down the rocky path, cutting hands and fingers as she ran for him. "Rurik!"

A flood of golden heat swept her up as he plummeted, and for a second she was seeing through his eyes as they linked. Warmth surrounded her in a golden haze. An absolute rightness of being that felt like she walked with her power braced against his. There was no him and her in this moment. No secrets, no lies. And she knew instantly what he was trying to tell her. What he'd been trying to tell her all along.

"*I'm sorry, Freyja. My fierce, beloved mouse.*" And the feel of it was like liquid gold bursting over her skin, like molten warmth rushing through her veins. A feeling so pure and strong she knew she could never feel alone again.

Then something cut the link.

No! She tried to grab hold of him, but the feel of Rurik's touch slipped from her grasp like mist dissolving in her hands.

Suddenly she was alone and falling to her knees, the pain of the blow shocking her back into her own skin, her own mind.

Just in time to watch her beloved *dreki* plummet from the skies in front of her.

Chapter 19

“No!” Her scream seemed to echo in the air, in her mind, and even in others. She felt Haakon and his men fall to their knees behind her, and realized she’d somehow extended her horror beyond herself and connected with other minds in the vicinity.

The silver *dreki* plummeted after Rurik, cutting through the air like a knife. Freyja slammed her hands over mouth in horror as the silver *dreki* attacked.

She had never, in her life, felt so helpless.

Rurik fell backward through the air, his claws scrabbling for purchase and his wings splayed flat. Andri almost caught him, claws reaching for him. And just when she thought he would cut her *dreki*’s unprotected belly to pieces, he tried to catch Rurik’s talons in his.

Andri’s left talon caught Rurik’s right, and it was just enough to turn him so he was no longer flat on his back. Rurik slammed into the shale-covered side of the mountain with his left side. Andri tried to let go at the last minute, but it was too late. He crumpled atop Rurik, then flung apart when they both rolled and tumbled down the slope. Wings flashed and rock flew as both of them vanished.

“Rurik!” She was running before she knew it, watching hopelessly as he bounced and jolted down the shale, his wings held clear. Andri hit with a jarring thud, and slid past Rurik, sending a rain of shale down the hillside.

Freyja found herself caught in it, her boots finding little purchase beneath her. She reached out and the earth slowed beneath her feet as she manipulated it, letting her ride a flat piece of shale to a safe plateau. Freyja grabbed at a boulder and hauled herself to a halt as the avalanche swept past her.

Dust obliterated her vision and settled thickly in her throat. Freyja coughed, trying to sweep it from her eyes. Where was he? “*Rurik?*” She threw the thought into the void around her.

She couldn’t see him. But she could feel his touch flicker against her own, a smoldering ember against the rush of heat it usually was. Their minds meshed again, just for a second.

“...so tired....”

“*Hold on, you stubborn male! I am not done with you yet.*”

“*Andri...?*” She could almost feel him struggle to lift himself. He was protecting her from most of the pain he felt, but the searing edge of it made her head ache.

“*I’m not sure where he is.*”

The dust began to clear. Freyja glanced around her. The shale had settled, but who knew what would set it off again?

You rode it last time. She wondered if she could do that again, and as she lost her connection to Rurik for the second time, she knew she didn't have the time to worry about herself anymore.

Freyja's gaze settled on a flat piece of shale and she hauled herself up, examined the distance between her and Rurik's crushed form, and then stepped onto it. Steering the earth beneath her feet, she whizzed down the slope again. Her passage set off another minor rockfall, but she managed to reach the bottom in one piece and jumped off, staggering at the sudden loss of velocity.

"Rurik!"

The enormous *dreki* lay crushed and broken. He struggled to lift his head and she simply couldn't look at that wing. One section of it was completely shredded.

"Rurik, you have to get up! Why did you take my wave of force upon yourself?" Her skirt tore, and her palms were grazed as she slipped and skidded on the uneven surface. "Damn you, I hurt you!"

"Andri is my... kin. I swore an oath to protect him when he was a boy, and a dreki's oath is binding, or he may no longer call himself dreki." Rurik's golden flanks heaved. The bone in his left wing sheered straight through the skin, making her feel sick.

"He was trying to kill you!" She finally reached his side and hesitated there, not quite certain where to begin. Bloodied gashes marked his flanks, and he wasn't moving very much, his wings curled in against his sides as though something hurt. Tears heated her eyes, turning her vision to a blur.

"If he'd truly wanted me dead, then he had at least three chances at my wings," Rurik gasped. The link between them seemed thin and faded, almost like a knot that was unraveling. *"He's as caught in this as I am. Freyja, get out of here."*

"No! I won't leave you." She put her hands against his golden scales, trying desperately to hold on to the link between them.

"Freyja." He managed to haul himself up onto his belly and she saw the wing wasn't the worst of his hurt. Mottled dark veins bruised his left shoulder, and bloodied muscle protruded through his scales. *"This is... not done. Get out of here before Magnus hurts you."*

As if he knew that they spoke of him, a *dreki's* scream pierced the skies above them, and wind whipped as the black *dreki* sailed above them.

A fire began to burn in her heart. Her nostrils flared with anger. That treacherous snake had lured Rurik into an unfair fight. And it wouldn't end here.

"Will he try to kill you?" she whispered.

"He'll not stop... until this is done." Her Rurik sounded absolutely exhausted.

And the logical part of her brain said Rurik had no more fight left in him. He couldn't handle a twenty-ton *dreki* like Magnus, not in this condition.

There was no one who could stop the fierce beast.

No one but her.

Cold slid down her spine and sweat broke out on her temples. She had some defenses, but not enough to take on a creature a thousand times the size of her.

But the alternative was to walk away as Magnus assassinated her lover, and that was something Freyja couldn't do. Something she wouldn't do.

Shale slid down the harsh slope. Magnus appeared at the top of the ravine, his dark wings spread in a victorious fashion.

"*Freyja*," Rurik pleaded, finally moving. But not to flee. No, instead he tried to shield her with his own ruined body.

"You should know better than to argue with me," she told him, stepping over his tail and facing the black *dreki*. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she'd felt the earth rouse to her call and she'd wielded lightning before. She was not helpless, and she wouldn't abandon Rurik. "Don't come any closer, you mangy cur, or I'll shred your wings!"

A wave of psychic force lashed down upon her, like a fist slamming into her mind. Freyja screamed and clenched her fists against her temples, but it wouldn't stop. Her vision blurred and something warm wet her top lip. Just as she thought that she could no longer withstand the onslaught, it suddenly vanished.

She came to pressed against Rurik's flank. Her nose was bleeding and he was shockingly still, but she could sense the warm cocoon of his own mind shielding hers.

"*Run, Freyja*," came the whisper, and that link between them seemed so thin now she feared it would snap. "*I can shield your mind, but... not much more than that.*"

He was dying. She could feel the heat of Magnus's psychic attack slamming against Rurik's shields, and knew he was too weak to withstand them.

Too weak because he'd risked everything in order to heal her father.

Risked it for her.

"I love you," she whispered, running a hand over his flank. "Keep him out of my mind."

And then she stepped forward.

The earth began to tremble beneath her as Freyja reached for it. She held her hands out as shale began to skitter across the slopes. Magnus hissed as the ground beneath him began to move. Freyja could feel the currents of it rising to her call. She knew this land. She knew the feel of it, the weight of it, the immense power of it. Rurik might have claimed these lands as lord and master, but she was mistress of it.

"*Shift*," she whispered, tearing the earth apart with but a thought.

Magnus danced uneasily as a furrow ploughed its way through the rock beneath them, toward his feet. A thrust of his wings sent him into the sky, but there was no refuge there.

The sky belonged to her too, and the wind that whipped her hair behind her answered her call. For the first time in her life, Freyja lost herself to the power swimming through her veins. No more

hiding, or trying to quash her own powers. She flung a hand toward the airborne *dreki*, and a whip of wind sent him scrambling for the ground again, landing on the haphazard slope. Magnus's claws scrabbled frantically, but there was no escape into the air, nor any shelter on the ground. As if he realized it, he turned and those vicious green eyes locked on her. He stopped fighting against the slide of shale beneath him, and rode it down into the ravine where she protected her *dreki*.

Thunder grumbled in the distance. Clouds swam against each other, brewing darkly as she called the winds to her and split the sky with lightning. Its electric lash ran through her veins and when Freyja opened her eyes, she knew they gleamed.

"*You foolish girl,*" the *dreki* hissed as it alighted on flat ground. "*You think you can turn my own skies against me?*"

"They're not your skies," she told him in a hollow voice. "And they're not the only thing I control."

Freyja flung a fist into the air, and the ground erupted around the *dreki* in a whirlwind of shale and rock that cut and slashed at him. He screamed in fury, lashing out with his claws, but there was no way to fight a thousand shards of rock.

She caught a glimpse of narrow green eyes and then he lashed out, sending an enormous shard of shale directly toward her.

Freyja jerked her hands up. The shard stopped in midair, then dropped to the ground. So did all of the razor-sharp pieces surrounding Magnus. She lost control of the whirlwind and it petered out, letting her skirts fall against her stockinged calves.

Freyja gasped, her knees trembling. Wielding so much current was taking its toll on her. She'd never mastered so many different elements at once. Only the storm, and she'd been angry then, the night she went after her ram.

"*A child,*" Magnus chuckled, in a murderous voice that echoed in her mind thanks to the protective shield Rurik encased her in. "*Who does not know what she plays with.*"

"Play with this," Freyja spat, and a strike of lightning speared through the skies toward him.

"*Freyja, no!*" Rurik screamed, and something seemed to encase her. A protective dome of... nothingness.

The lightning hit the ground where Magnus had stood an instant beforehand. The black *dreki* vanished as light obliterated her vision, and the world clapped around her in a sudden fierce explosion of heat. She realized her mistake almost instantly. She might wield the lightning, but she was not entirely impervious to it. Small fragments of rock cut against the dome around her and as she blinked, still half-blinded, she realized Rurik had probably saved her life.

Between one blink and the other, an enormous shadow reared above her. Magnus. She'd missed him. Magnus began to strike toward her, his razor-sharp claws gleaming in the light above her, and his wings flared as though he were some demon from hell. Freyja suffered a moment where she saw her own death striking toward her with absolute inevitability.

“*Fire!*” someone bellowed.

Haakon. Freyja glanced up from beneath the arm she’d thrown above her head, and saw iron flash in the shaft of sunlight that suddenly split the clouds. Then the enormous bolt from the ballista sunk into the enraged *dreki*’s chest, right where his black heart lay.

Magnus screamed, and the sound cut through her like a knife. Freyja slammed her hands over her ears, her blood seeming to vibrate within her veins as the earth had done at her call. She went to her knees and was grateful when Magnus hit the earth in front of her. His wings flapped like a downed bat’s, and he clawed at the rocks, his tongue protruding from his gaping maw. Freyja slowly took her hands from her ears as Rurik stumbled into her, wrapping his right wing around her in a move too slow to prevent the previous strike. He made a mournful sound in his chest, one that sounded akin to a whale’s bellow, and Freyja pressed her hand against his neck.

“I’m fine,” she whispered. “Fine.”

Stepping out from under his protective touch, she saw the light go out of Magnus’s eyes. A green glow began to emanate from deep within his chest, and then it hovered in the air above his fallen form, an enormous wraith of electric green that flapped faint wings at them before it began to fly into the sky above them.

She’d seen those lights before, when the night skies darkened, and the flicker of green and pink began to dance across the Arctic. But she’d never before understood what they were. Freyja watched in wonder as Magnus’s actinic form vanished over the horizon.

A mournful sound echoed behind her, and then a second joined it, as both *dreki* lifted their heads and wailed.

Andri appeared in a flap of wings, alighting with a limp beside her. Freyja barely had time to step back before Rurik’s growl filled the air, and he somehow hauled himself up onto his feet, and hissed at the smaller *dreki*.

Those violet eyes blinked at her, then Andri bowed his head before his cousin. Rurik snapped at his cheek, almost in chastisement. “*Freyja is mine. If you touch her I will kill you.*”

“You’re barely in any condition to swat a fly,” she snapped back, hurrying back to his side and pressing her hands against the hollow of his chest. “You stupid *dreki*.”

“*You foolish mouse.*”

“Fierce,” she corrected, stroking his muzzle. Her heart wrenched in her chest. “Don’t ever frighten me like that again.”

And suddenly tears spilled from her eyes down her hot cheeks. Freyja flung her arms around his neck, but could barely reach halfway around. She couldn’t believe he’d survived. *I promise you I will never turn from my fate again, if only you heal*, she thought, hoping that any gods who were listening might hear her.

Heat shimmered beneath her touch. Power flushed and ebbed. Then her arms clung to the bare, naked shoulders of the man she loved so much. He winced and took a step to catch himself. Freyja

clung tightly. “Rurik?” she blurted.

“Take me into the volcano,” Rurik gasped, his left arm curled against his side and his skin mottled with bruises.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. There were *dreki* hunters here. Men she didn’t trust, not with her *dreki*’s life.

“Got to... protect my wings,” he replied, and his face blanched of color.

Freyja turned, her gaze locking on Haakon’s. He and his men stood at the top of the ravine, the ballista glaring dangerously down at them. His face remained implacable, but he nodded, once, toward her. An apology, and an offer of amends.

That didn’t mean she trusted him an inch.

Freyja’s eyes narrowed. She reached out and swatted the ballista with her power, and the hauling mechanism cracked and split in half.

“Just in case you have any foolish ideas before my *dreki* has a chance to heal,” she called up to him.

“Damn it, Freyja.” Haakon curled his fists at his sides. “That’s twice you’ve broken my ballista.”

“Which makes us even,” she shot back, before Rurik groaned and slumped against her. “Now get out of here, before I really lose my temper.”

Chapter 20

“One more step,” Freyja gasped, helping Rurik toward the steaming pool within one of his caves. Steam whispered from its surface, and the heat almost blistered her skin.

But Rurik stepped into the water with a sigh of relief, and lowered himself into the sulfurous liquid. He almost completely submerged, water turning his golden hair dark.

Freyja knelt beside him, though she didn’t dare touch. Would it be enough? He’d said the waters would heal him and he could drain energy directly from the elements around him—fire, water, and earth—but she couldn’t shake the horrible suspicion his wings would never be the same again.

“He’ll heal,” Andri said, stepping up beside her. The youth had helped her haul Rurik into his caves. Black curls raked over his face, and his eyes were the same unearthly violet color he wore in *dreki* form.

She wasn’t quite certain she trusted him—but Rurik evidently did. And she had no one else to turn to, who might know how to help Rurik.

“Will he fly again?” she whispered.

Andri looked down at his cousin, his face devoid of all emotion. “If he allows himself time to rest, then yes. He’s of the First Line. A pureblood.”

The *dreki* saw her confused expression, and interpreted it. “His line descends directly from the goddess, and his blood has been kept pure. Within his line, *dreki* have only mated with *dreki*. They have not mixed their blood with dragons or serpents, or even humans. He has powers very few *dreki* own, including the ability to directly channel fire. He can manipulate the damage to his body if he regains his energy. In fact, he should have been able to heal himself out there. He was dangerously overtaxed for some reason.”

Her father. Freyja’s nostrils flared.

“I understand why he helped you, but I do not understand why you helped him,” Freyja murmured. She had no intentions of leaving Rurik behind, nor of turning her back on Andri even for a second. “You came here to kill him, and I won’t forget that.”

For the first time, conflicted emotion showed on Andri’s face. He looked down at his cousin. “I came here because I was ordered to. My father wanted him dead and promised his lands to my brother.” For a moment, he seemed more of a boy than a man. “You do not argue with my father. I am

not the son he would choose,” Andri replied, and lowered his gaze. “My father thinks my weakness is my mother’s fault. She’s his second mate, and he’s never thought highly of her. I was given a choice: prove I can be a son he is proud of, or watch her suffer. I had to come. I had to... to protect her. But being here... seeing Rurik again. It reminds me of everything I once was.”

A hush fell.

“What will your father do when he hears you failed and watched your older brother die?”

More emotion in those dangerous eyes. Andri blinked through long lashes. “I do not know. His heir is dead. Some within the court will say Magnus earned his death for daring to trespass on Rurik’s lands, but... my father’s loyal companions will take offense at this death.”

A chill ran through her. “They’ll come for him again.”

“Maybe.” The word echoed in the hollow chamber. “Some will be wary to rise against their prince. Magnus was one of the best, and Rurik defeated him. They’ll—”

“Their what?” she broke in.

The *dreki* met her gaze. “He did not tell you?”

“He did not tell me quite a few things, from the sounds of it,” she said angrily. *A prince.*

“Rurik was his father’s heir,” Andri said. “Which makes him a prince of our people. When his father was killed, Rurik was offered the means to fight for the throne or to go into exile. He chose exile.

“So not only is he their prince, but he is more powerful than most of the entire court. If my father’s *dreki* come again, they’ll come in force.”

“I *won’t* let them hurt him,” she whispered fiercely.

“What are you?”

She’d been asked that question so many times. Circles, circles, what did the damned circles have to do with her and her mother? Freyja rested her elbows on her knees, next to where Rurik rested his head on the edge. A golden gleam seemed to emanate from his body, highlighting the dark waters, but he seemed quite oblivious to the world around him. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “My mother called me a Daughter of the Storm, and I think she knew some lore that gave rise to me, but... I don’t entirely understand how it all works.”

For so many years she’d been trying to hide from her nature, to suppress the unnaturalness within her. Every time the locals crossed themselves, she’d looked away and locked her true nature deep within her, but the past few weeks had pushed her to accept truths she’d long turned away from.

There was power within her.

Immense power.

And it seemed both tied to the elements as Rurik’s magic was, but also somehow separate.

Andri squatted down beside her. He was naked, but until that moment she hadn’t truly noticed it. He eyed Rurik with a faint frown. “Whatever you are, you’re a threat to him, because you’re the one person who could stop his people from accepting him. Without allies, Rurik has no hope against

Stellan, regardless of your powers. And his people will never accept you, or any children you might bear.”

A stark chill ran through her. “His people exiled him.”

“He is beloved among those who were his *dreki*. I hear their mutters, their whispers that things would be better if Rurik were king. There is no love for my father, Stellan, but none are strong enough to challenge him.”

“Except for Rurik,” she said, finally understanding.

“Except for Rurik. But you’re human and he is *dreki*. It’s the one thing that could turn those who are loyal to him, against him. You’re not *dreki*. Mating with you goes against the creed, and his people will consider this an act of defilement of his pure blood. We can take humans as lovers, but they are never accepted as our consorts, and their children are bastards. They will never accept you as his mate, and he can never come home again.”

Home. The blood ran from her face. Home. Rurik’s greatest dream, the one that had put shadows of loss in his eyes. His sister, his brother, his people... all things he could never have if he tried to stay with her.

A cold knot seemed to settle in her chest. “Rurik and I never had a future,” she said quietly. “I have always known that.”

“And yet you fought for him?”

“I love him,” she whispered.

“Love.” Andri seemed to consider the word. He frowned.

“Rest,” she whispered, brushing a strand of wet hair from Rurik’s temples, knowing she could not explain. “Rest and heal.”

Chapter 21

A week later, Rurik awoke.

He was still submerged in the pool, and the waters were finally cool against his skin, as though he'd adsorbed all of the heat within the volcanic waters. Vague memories returned: of a hand cupping his forehead as though checking for a fever, and a pair of lips pressing gently against his cheek. Of words whispered in his ear that stole straight to the heart of him, even through his protective coma.

"I love you, Rurik. And so I must set you free."

"Freyja?" Rurik staggered to his feet, his knees still shaky, though his body finally felt whole. "Freyja?"

"She's gone," Andri said, stepping out of the shadows and staring at him.

No! He bared his teeth, primitive urges arising within him and shaking the volcano around them. His *dreki* heart ached, hollow once more, as though it had lost something far more precious than just love. "Where is she?"

"She's gone," Andri repeated, stepping between him and the exit to the cave. "I explained what would happen to you if she accepted your mating bond."

Rurik's head swiveled toward the youth, and he forced his fingers to curl into fists, rather than smashing him flat. "You explained *what*, precisely?"

"The truth." The words came out of Andri in a rush. "She's human and you're not. You cannot mate with her, or the entire court will turn against you. You can't defeat them all, and they'll destroy you for daring to pollute your bloodline."

"They can try." He shoved past the lad, but Andri slammed both hands against his chest.

"No!" the boy burst out. "No. I won't let you do this. Your people need you. They need their prince. You're our only hope."

Stillness slid through him. "You have a queen."

"We have a monster." The words tore from Andri in an almost sob. "You don't understand what has changed. Your mother doesn't believe in honor, or in *dreki* code. The strong make their own rules, and only the strong survive Hekla. I didn't even believe in the power of right, until I saw you again. Until you made me believe it doesn't have to be this way anymore." The youth's eyes filled with

tears. “I lost my way, Rurik. Everything you taught me had been ground to dust under the never-ending erosion of my father’s will. I stopped believing. I have *done* things I will regret forever, but it wasn’t until I saw you again that hope gleamed. You tried to save me. You wouldn’t hurt me even when I worked against you because you *gave your word*. You don’t know what that means to me.”

Rurik’s heart thudded dully in his chest. “If I’d stayed, I would have plunged the entire court into a war it couldn’t cope with. *Dreki* would have had to choose sides.”

“Father killed Áki, Prior, and Sámaur.” All of them powerful warriors who might have swayed the court, and stood against Stellan and Amadea. “Marduk fled, and no one has seen him since. The court’s already at war, and no *dreki* trusts another, for fear their words will reach Amadea’s ears.”

Marduk, the little brother who was named after a god-killer. Rurik froze, turning all his predatory attention upon Andri. Marduk and Árdís were the reason he’d accepted exile, rather than fight. His little brother had been barely across the threshold of adulthood, and no match for Stellan and his sons. Not yet, anyway. “Are you certain he’s still alive?”

“Árdís seems to think he is.” Andri hesitated though. “She doesn’t say much, and told Amadea she didn’t know where Marduk has gone, but I’ve heard whisper among your father’s *dreki* that his heart still beats. As for your sister, my father’s promised Árdís’s hand to Sirius.”

Andri’s other black-hearted brother. “What does Árdís think of this?”

“What do you think?”

Árdís would be furious, but with her uncle’s *dreki* around her and no allies, there might not be much choice. Rurik paced, his knuckles cracking. He’d only ever intended to protect those he loved.

Could he kill his uncle? Could he challenge him?

Stellan’s not the dangerous one.

Truth, said his *dreki* magic.

Amadea was only queen with Stellan’s backing. As a female *dreki* she wasn’t powerful enough to face challenges herself, but with her brother standing at her side, who could unseat her?

And could Rurik honestly kill his own mother?

“I’ll think about it,” he said hollowly. This was no small cause he had to commit himself to. And Andri spoke part of the truth. Those who might be his allies at court would balk at seeing Freyja by his side.

How could he make that choice? He’d only just found her, and she was *everything* to him. Only with her at his side did he feel whole. *Dreki* spent their entire lives searching for their twin flame, the one lover who completed them.

And he knew now she was it.

But as prince of his people, he owed them more than he’d given them. How could he stand aside and see his sister forcibly mated, and his brother hunted down and killed? How could he speak of duty and law and right to Andri, when he would not even accept the duty his people needed from him?

“My father’s been in contact with me.” Andri hesitated. “I have to return.”

“What did he say?” Rurik demanded, in a chilled voice.

The lad was young, but his eyes were ancient as their gazes met. “Someone must be punished for this failure, and for Magnus’s death.”

“He’ll kill you.” Rurik stepped forward, trying to catch his cousin’s arm.

Andri backed away, his lips pressed together in suppressed emotion. “Maybe. Maybe not.” Andri shuddered. “There is a great deal I could survive, and he has already lost one son. Only Sirius and I remain, and Stellan likes having a spare in the wings. If I do not go, then he’ll choose another to take my place.” Thick lashes swept down over his eyes. “He’ll choose my mother to submit to my punishment.”

No. Rurik bared his teeth. “And the court allows this?”

There was no honor in punishing females or kits. And *dreki* youths were to be cherished, because they were so rare.

“Who can stand against him?” Andri asked simply.

Damn him. Turmoil turned Rurik inside out. He needed Freyja. This was no simple choice his cousin asked of him, but... this was wrong. And he was the only one who might stand a chance at uniting his clan and casting out the usurpers.

“I need to speak to Freyja,” he said, because this was not a choice he could make alone. “And maybe you’re wrong.... I don’t think she’s entirely human.” Some part of his subconscious had been dwelling upon what he’d seen when she confronted Magnus. “I knew she could shift the earth and touch the storm, but what she did during that fight was more than simply open herself to the elements. She controlled them. She more than matched a *dreki*, especially one of Magnus’s power.”

“Only *dreki* control the elements,” Andri said softly. “She’s not *dreki*.”

Did they? There was one other, but he’d barely seen fragments of that myth long ago in his youth, and he’d not studied enough to remember what it was. More a glancing recollection. But *Daughter of the Storm*. He’d heard that name before. Somewhere. “She might have some *dreki* blood within her,” he argued, though he wasn’t entirely convinced. “In the Dark Ages, when our numbers were dwindling, some *dreki* took humans for mates.”

“And when it became clear the progeny of such couplings could not fully control the powers they’d been gifted from their *dreki* side, the clans set to hunting down their descendants and killing them,” Andri said incredulously. “That’s why it’s forbidden.”

“Maybe they didn’t find all of them,” Rurik countered. “Maybe some of them could learn to control their magic?”

“And maybe her powers will spiral out of control—”

“If anyone thinks to move against her, then they will deal with me,” he snapped. That was one decision that could be easily made. “Stay here, and wait for me. I will speak to her.” He turned to leave.

“Rurik!”

He shot his cousin one more glance.

“Even if she isn’t entirely human, you still can’t have her. You’re of the First Bloodline. Your children would lose the gift of fire, and no *dreki* would follow you. It’s forbidden. It’s been that way since the courts first formed.”

“She is my twin flame,” he said gently, seeing the boy flinch. “The other half of my soul. And I cannot walk away from her.” His heart grew heavy. “I will think on what you have told me about the court. Don’t make any rash decisions. I will need you if I decide to face your father.”



There were debts to be paid before he could seek out his mate.

Rurik stopped in the village, following the scent of his old enemy—the man who’d saved his and Freyja’s lives. Haakon could finally add a *dreki* to his dragon-killing tally, and Rurik hoped none of Stellan’s men ever discovered how their leader had died.

Haakon jerked upright as Rurik’s hand clasped over his shoulder. He’d been slumped over the table in the taproom, staring so intently at nothing he hadn’t even heard Rurik enter.

“You again,” Haakon slurred, and then wiped a tired hand over his face.

“Me,” Rurik said, surveying the room. Only one of Haakon’s men lingered there, keeping careful watch over his leader, and sharpening his blade. “Out.”

The man arched a brow, and looked to Haakon. “Go,” Haakon said, slinging his leg over the bench so he straddled it. “He’s not here to kill me, Gunnar.”

Gunnar hauled his enormous bulk to his feet and left—but not after shooting Rurik one last threatening glance.

“You survived,” Haakon said, the second the door shut behind his man.

“It would take a great deal more than my cousin’s assault to kill me—so don’t go getting any ideas.”

“What do you want?” the man growled.

Rurik stared down at his nemesis. There were a pair of coins in his hand, and he turned them over and under his fingers, moving with dexterous grace. They reminded him of what he owed this man. He bared his teeth. “Every move you have made since you arrived has been against me, but you also saved Freyja’s life. I owe you nothing, for we are even now. But another of my kind does, another of my... line. And *dreki* always pay their debts.”

While Haakon might have hurt Freyja, he had done so for a reason, and that reason was a lie. How many other innocents had been swept up in this mess?

“You hunt the *dreki* who took your wife,” Rurik said, and Haakon sat up straighter. “This truth will cost you,” he warned.

“Then I’ll pay it. What do you want?” The man stood, yellow bruises splayed all up his face, as

though he'd gotten in some fight. "I have gold! I have—"

"It will gain me nothing," Rurik interrupted, holding his hand up in the air. "But it will cost *you*. Cost you the depths of the lie you have been telling yourself ever since your wife vanished."

"Curse you!" Haakon suddenly roared. "Do not toy with me!" He kicked over a chair, then turned and upended the bench. "Tell me where she is!"

As the other man subsided into a pulsing heap of fury, Rurik closed his fist around the coins, his choice made. "There is only one golden *dreki* beside myself," he said. "Her name is Árdís, and she is my younger sister. She resides in the *dreki* court below Hekla."

As Haakon strode toward his bag, Rurik stepped in front of him, shoving him to a halt. "You will never get into the court. It was built with magic and resides between this realm and the next, created out of pure Chaos magic. A realm within a bubble of power. Over a hundred *dreki* live there. Perhaps you could kill one, but they will chew you up and spit you out before you even set foot in the place."

"I don't care." Haakon tried to shove past him. "That *dreki* took my wife!"

"She did not steal your wife, you fool," Rurik hissed. "She *was* your wife."

"What?" Haakon slammed to a halt, the breath hissing out of him.

"Think about it," Rurik warned. "*Dreki* do not eat humans, unless provoked. And what need would Árdís have to steal away your wife, when she has no interest in mating with her or eating her? You said yourself that your wife—*Arja*—had eyes like polished amber. You describe my sister's mortal form. Her coloring. Tell me this, did she like berries? They were Árdís's favorite too. And she despises smoked cod with a passion. She loves to lie in the grass, warming herself in the sun, and she has an obsession with jewelry, particularly emeralds." He saw the other man flinch. "I don't know if your wife had a temper, but Árdís does. She is petulant and spoiled, but when she laughs she could light the entire room."

The color drained out of Haakon's face. "No," he whispered, but it was with the tone of a man who knew he was wrong.

"Yes," Rurik corrected, righting the chair. "Your wife was a stranger to your village, one caught out in a wild storm one night, a storm the likes of which you've never seen before. Those are the kinds of storms *dreki* ride upon. None of you knew her, you said."

Haakon's knees gave way beneath him as he sank onto the bench. "But... how? Why?"

"Ten years ago, my sister went abroad in the world. I heard the ripples of her passing in the wind, and she is the only *dreki* I've connected with since I was exiled. There would have been... pressure on her to breed, and Árdís has always disliked pressure. She wanted to see more of the world before she was old enough to accept a mate. Perhaps she came upon you. Perhaps you pleased her... for a time. But my uncle would have been pushing her to return, and she could never take you with her. I'm sorry. I don't know her reasons for marrying you when she knew it could never last, and I can only suspect why she left. But I do know you deserve the truth."

Haakon scraped a hand over his face, reeling from the news. For a second, Rurik almost felt sorry

for the man, and didn't understand why. One did not feel pity for one's enemies. But...

Haakon had based his entire life on a lie, and had killed three dragons and chased Árdís halfway across the seas in an attempt to find her.

Perhaps Rurik understood what would drive a man to do such a thing, for he felt the same need in his heart when he thought of Freyja.

"That lying bitch," Haakon whispered. He looked up, heat returning to her face. "Everything we had was a lie. What the hell do I do?"

"Go home," Rurik said gently. "Go back to your family. And bury your memories of your wife."

The other man's nostrils flared. "*No*. She owes me the truth from her own lips."

"The truth will get you killed."

"You don't know that."

"My mother believes *dreki* blood should remain pure. The second she sees you, she will kill you for daring to touch immortal flesh. Perhaps the reason Árdís left you is because she sought to save your life. Doing this will only guarantee your death."

"I don't care," Haakon croaked. "What would you do if that were Freyja?"

Burn the world to ashes to confront her, and demand the truth. Rurik's lips twisted.

"You cannot change my mind," Haakon declared, and Rurik saw the truth of it in the other man's eyes.

"Dig your own grave then. I'll be no more a part of this insane quest."

He had paid the debt Árdís owed the man, and fate would work what it intended.

It was time to find Freyja.

Chapter 22

Rurik found Freyja in the barn, pitching hay into the stalls where her lambs rested. After all that was said and done, everything they'd been through, she was back to acting as though she had nothing else to do right now.

Doubt filled him as he watched her silently from the shadows. Light pierced a hole in the ceiling, highlighting the gilt in her dark blonde hair. She muttered to herself, cursing under her breath as she finished her task and leaned on the pitchfork to rest. His heart twisted in his chest at the sight.

Let her go, said logic. Your uncle will kill her if he hears of her existence.

But there was a part of him that was not so rational. A part of him that curled its lip and growled deep within at the mere thought of surrendering what was his. It burned within him like the molten heart of a volcano, threatening to erupt through his veins.

He could no more deny himself than deny the truth. Freyja was the other half of his soul.

The connection that burned between them from the start was finally one he understood. Here was his other half, the one spirit who could match him. All he had to do was claim her as his and bond with her, for the link between them to be complete.

Freyja's head lifted, almost as if she heard him, which was ridiculous.

Or was it? He still did not understand her powers.

"Rurik?" she whispered, turning around to search for him in the shadows.

Their eyes locked.

And he was done.

Fever danced within his blood, a primal need surging through him, driving him to claim her. Arguments whirled through his head, all the reasons he should not do this. But there was such a sense of rightness within him too. His wildness ached for something more.

Rurik stepped out of the shadows. Freyja's face lit up hungrily, as if she too shared the wildness that lit him on fire, before she swiftly shuttered her expression. Her eyelashes swept down, hiding those magnificent eyes, sunlight staining the tips of them.

"You're well again," she finally said, and her chest heaved as she let out a relieved breath. She hovered on the balls of her feet as though she wanted to go to him, then stopped herself, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

Precious Freyja. More beautiful than a storm itself and almost as dangerous. Still a mystery, though he vowed he would unearth the secrets of her power. One day. If she'd let him.

"Thanks to you."

Color darkened her cheeks, and she finally met his gaze. This was when she was at her most beautiful. Both defiant and yet opening herself up to him. No longer holding him at arm's length.

"You weren't there when I awoke," he said, taking a step toward her.

"Your cousin said you were a prince," Freyja whispered, her hands turning white as she gripped the pitchfork. "Your people will not accept me, and I know you would stand between me and them to protect me. I cannot do that to you. You long for home, Rurik, and I will keep you from it. You long for your people, and I cannot join you there. I left as soon as I knew you were healing and your cousin was no longer a threat to you."

"Is that not my choice?" he demanded, taking another step toward her. "I know the risks, and the dangers. And I accept them, for if I cannot have you, then what is the point in living? At every moment in our journey together, I have taken no more than you would allow. You wanted everything that happened between us to be your choice, and it was. So how can you deny me my right to make that choice now?"

"I love you, Rurik. And so, I must set you free." He drew the memory from his subconscious and shared it with her, letting her feel all of the hurt he'd felt at such a decision.

"Do you know what it felt like to wake alone, without my Freyja?"

Freyja swallowed, and a single tear slid down her cheek. "I watched you almost die," she croaked. "Because of me. You weakened yourself for me."

"And I would do it all again, because you mean everything to me, Freyja. Everything."

A look came over her face, as if the weight of his words finally sank in, as if Freyja finally accepted the inevitable truth. Their gazes clashed, and suddenly he knew he wasn't the only one who felt that fire in his blood. Capturing her face in his hands, he pressed a kiss to her lips. Then another. The desire to claim her was nearly overwhelming, especially when she slid her hands up and down his chest, kneading the muscles there, then slowly filtering lower.

But she needed to know what the mating bond meant for her.

He'd promised her a choice in everything he did to her.

With a groan, Rurik withdrew from her, clasping her wrist and drawing her hand away from its devastating work before he could no longer think. He pressed his forehead to hers, breathing hard. "Freyja, Freyja, stop. Wait."

"I don't want to wait." Her breath caressed his lips. "If I stop, I'll start thinking, and I don't want to think of all the reason this can't work."

Neither do I. Rurik bared his teeth in a snarl. "There's something you need to know first."

Those mismatched eyes opened and locked on his.

"This time will be different. There's no coming back from this. I mean to claim you and take you

as my mate,” he told her bluntly, breathing in her sweet, wild scent. His fingers brushed her cheeks, his body firm against hers as he pressed her against the stall door. “I’ve never felt this way before. You make me weak and mortal, and every instinct tells me you will be my undoing, but I can’t give you up. I can’t. I need to claim you.”

“Your undoing?” Freyja pushed past him, earning some breathing room. Her eyes spat sparks as she stood in the center of the aisle, facing him down with her hands fisted at her sides. Tendrils of golden hair snaked around her face, tugged free from her braid.

And something sang within him. The same sensation he’d felt when she entered his lair the first time and faced him down. A pure exhilaration unlike any he’d ever known.

He’d known then she belonged to him, and he would have her. He’d thought he could burn the feeling out of his blood once he slaked this reckless thirst on her flesh.

What he hadn’t understood was that reaching out and merely tasting her fury would never be enough. He could *never* slake this thirst.

But the cost would be tremendous. Freyja weakened him, for suddenly, he had far too much to lose. Not himself. Not his people, or his court. But her. The one being who owned his heart.

“Yes,” he breathed, taking a step toward her. “My undoing.”

“And you’re mine,” she shot back, no longer retreating. “I am mortal. And this... whatever this is between us... has an expiration date.” Her expression suddenly turned entreating. “I have made some decisions in the last few days. I am no longer ashamed of what I am, nor will I ever hide from myself again. I am powerful and dangerous, and I... I love you. I know this now, but the practical side of my nature understands that loving you does not mean there are no more obstacles to surmount. You will not age, Rurik. And I will. Will you still love me when I am an old woman, and you are a young man? What of children? I’ve always yearned for them, deep in my secret heart, but your people will not accept my mating with you.”

Rurik reached for her, but she darted under his arm again, igniting all of his predatory impulses. “I speak of love, and she throws logic in my face.”

“One of us must be practical,” Freyja whispered, wrapping her arms around herself.

Rurik cupped her cheek, caressing her silken skin. “I used to think we had an ending too,” he whispered, sensing how much she wanted him to convince her there was a chance. “But I was wrong. There is no beginning or ending when it comes to us. The *dreki* speak of the other half of their soul, a being so twined together with theirs that when they find them, it is like realizing how empty you have always felt, and staring at the one being who completes you. You’re my twin flame, Freyja. You’re my forever. And I will rail against the stars themselves if they seek to part us.”

“I think the stars might be your undoing.”

He gave her a sleek, predatory smile. “Then you know nothing, little mouse. A *dreki*’s lifespan is tied to their twin flame. We will age together if you accept this mating bond. And as for children, if anyone dared touch ours then they would face my wrath. Perhaps the *dreki* need to accept a new

world order. But lying with you tonight changes everything, Freyja. The last time our bodies met, I was not entirely certain what was happening to me. Now I do. I'm mating with you. Claiming you again completes that bond, and there is no going back from this point." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It's your choice."

Questions danced in her mismatched eyes, making her gaze distant. Rurik bit her lip. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"That doubt in your eyes."

Freyja swallowed, her eyes wary, as if he suddenly had the power to destroy her. "If I am your forever, then why would you call me your undoing?"

He brushed a strand of wheat-gold hair from her eyes, stroking it with a tenderness he'd never felt before he met her. It was a curious sensation. "Freyja, Magnus, and Andri didn't just come here of their own accord. They were sent here by my mother to kill me. I told you once about my exile, and my mother." A shudder ran through him. "Loving you weakens me. If my mother wants to strike at me, then now she has a means to do it. I would rip her throat out if she dared to harm you, but I don't know if I can protect you. Not from an entire court of *dreki* who are loyal to my mother." He finally exhaled, "You are my undoing, Freyja, but I am your destruction. They will kill you for loving me. You must know this."

He could not keep the truth from her.

Even if it destroyed this fledgling hope that beat in his chest. A dream of a better existence. A promise he had been searching for, all his life.

Freyja frowned up at him. "They can try."

"Freyja—"

"No," she told him fiercely, pressing two fingers to his lips. "All my life I never dared yearn for more. And the one time when I could see my heart's true desire was when you walked into my life, and I pushed you away because I feared the way you made me feel. You nearly died, Rurik. Because of me. But you didn't. And in that moment I swore an oath to the gods, both old and new, that I would never turn my back on my fate ever again."

"I owe my people a chance at freedom," he said. "Andri wants me to challenge Stellan, and take my mother's throne."

"Do you want your throne?"

His heart seized in his chest. It had been all his father ever dreamed of. Everything Rurik had been raised to reach for. But matched against Freyja, it was little more than a cold, stone throne, and a heartless court. "Not if I cannot have you. I love you." His voice dropped to a whisper. "And I understand little the emotions that rage within me, but... I cannot give you up."

"Then let them come," she breathed. "I am not without my defenses, *dreki*-mine."

His heart skipped a beat in his chest. "There are others who can take the throne. Others I trust."

His thumbs caressed her mouth. “But Andri is right. I cannot walk away from my people. I want to mate with you, but duty compels me to go to war for my people.”

“I love you,” she breathed, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “And your words terrify me. But I am done with fear. I am done with regret. And if your mother, or your uncle, or your fellow *dreki* try to come between us, then I will face them at your side.”

“Freyja.” He shuddered.

“I accept your bond,” she whispered. “Forever and ever, no matter who tries to tear us apart.”

A distant rumble of thunder echoed and he glanced to the walls, before looking back at her. Lightning danced in her eyes, the hum of power whispering through her veins.

Yes. His heart soared. This was just the beginning, and yet it was their beginning. He captured her mouth, his thumb stroking that wet tear from her cheek as he kissed her. “Everything and forever,” he breathed, tracing the corner of her mouth, his fingers delving into her silky hair.

Freyja’s tongue tangled with his. Fearless. Fierce. All the things that first ignited his curiosity. Her mouth brushed against his, and he tasted the violence of her power on her tongue. *Mine*. Rurik fought free of her hands and captured her around the waist, drawing her into his embrace. This woman could be a queen, if only his people could see the same things he did when he looked at her.

Breathing hard, with her breasts crushed against his chest, she let him plunder her mouth. Rurik felt his hard body melting into her soft curves. It was a kiss to tell her everything he felt in his heart. He wasn’t letting her go. Maybe he hadn’t been entirely certain of that when he came here, duty to his people warring within his breast, but seeing her now, having her skin beneath his, cemented his desire.

The court could wait. His uncle could wait. Freyja was his to claim, and without her there was no point in existing.

Suddenly, he could no longer withhold the heat of his need. The world reeled around them as he pushed her backward, hand sliding down her hips, then up, to the curve of her breasts, as if to make sure she was real. That she was really there, in his arms. He couldn’t get enough of her. Freyja’s back met the barn wall, and her mouth tilted to his as she claimed him with her hungry lips, her hand still fisted in his shirt.

Rurik dragged a handful of her skirts up between them, even as her hand slid down to caress his erection through the thin fabric of his trousers. Cupping her thigh, he dragged it up to nestle around his hip, thrusting into her hand. The shock of that touch lanced through him. *Sweet goddess*, but he’d yearned for this. To see Freyja boldly take what she wanted from his body, as if there was no longer any barrier between her heart and his. To curl those fingers around his hard length and work him, as if she wanted to imprint the feel of him on her skin.

Biting back a gasp, Rurik thrust his cock into her hand, rubbing against her touch. A desperate ache filled him. He wanted to be inside her. Now. To claim her and fulfill their mating bond, so she could never, ever be taken from him.

His fingers found her, wet and slick. He didn't know if it was his hands that freed his cock from his trousers—or hers. But he grabbed her under the ass and lifted her, impaling her with a single thrust.

“*Mine.*”

Her thought-thread connected with his. “*I claim you, Rurik, prince of my heart.*”

“*And I claim you.*”

Power spilled between them as the mating bond roared to life. A strangled sound tore from his throat as the heat within him suddenly flared volcanic. The world faded. All that remained was him and Freyja, and her tight little body clutching at his as he thrust home. One. Last. Time.

Pleasure roared through him, and he could feel her match him as the mating bond took them both over the edge. Freyja cried out, throwing her head back as they rode the storm. *Sweet Goddess*. Rurik sank his teeth into her throat, rocking into her hard, grinding his hips against hers as his seed flooded within her.

Their minds danced against each other, until he no longer existed as Rurik, nor she as Freyja, but both blended as one. White-hot pleasure obliterated all else, until slowly sensation began to return; Freyja's hand cradling his nape, her face nuzzling against his throat as little aftershocks ran through her. Rurik turned his face and found her mouth, kissing her with slow affection. *His*. Finally his. Utterly and irrevocably. He gasped against her lips, completely spent.

Freyja's skirts fell around her thighs. Slowly she looked up, her eyes heavy-lidded and a lazy, satisfied smile on her face. “*Everything and forever.*”

Her mind touched his, locked together in a thought-thread that could never be broken. She could never hide anything from him ever again. Nor he her. The feeling might have left him slightly exposed once upon a time, but this was Freyja. His mate. His twin flame. He could feel the sated ache in her body where they joined, as if her body was merely an extension of his own, and it felt like coming home. Like finally feeling complete in himself.

“Everything and forever,” Rurik whispered, and lost himself in the sensation of loving her.

The End



Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *Heart Of Fire*! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review online. Rurik and Freyja have just begun their journey, but first there's a little tale of love and loss and revenge to deal with in book two, *Storm of Desire*, when Haakon finally finds his elusive wife:

Long ago, Haakon thought a *dreki* stole his beloved wife. He has sacrificed everything to gain revenge for her loss—including his own honor—but now Haakon knows the truth. His

entire marriage was a lie. The woman he knew as his wife was a *dreki* princess named Árdís, in mortal form.

And when he finally tracks down the deceitful *dreki* princess, there will be a reckoning of passion and glory....

Want to know more about *Storm of Desire*? Make sure you sign up to my newsletter to be the first to know its release date, read exclusive excerpts, and see cover reveals. When you subscribe, you will receive a link to the first two chapters!

<http://eepurl.com/cIFIDL>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BEC MCMASTER is a writer, a dreamer, and a travel addict. If she's not sitting in front of the computer, she's probably plotting her next world trip, and plans to see the whole world, whether it's by paper, plane, or imagination. She grew up on a steady diet of '80s fantasy movies like *Ladyhawke*, *Labyrinth*, and *The Princess Bride*, and loves creating epic, fantasy-based romances with heroes and heroines who must defeat all the odds to have their HEA. She lives in Australia with her very own hero, where she can be found creating the dark and dangerous worlds of the London Steampunk, Dark Arts, Legends of The Storm, or Burned Lands series, where even the darkest hero can find love.

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CRIMSON UNDERCOVER

BRYAN COHEN AND CASEY LANE

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CRIMSON UNDERCOVER

A covert mission. An ancient artifact. A shifter mafia...

Lyra Thorne's life as a hunter of vampires is over, but her job protecting humanity is far from finished. As an operative for a secret team keeping unhumans in line, she's willing to do whatever it takes to keep Chicago safe. But she never expected she'd end up going undercover with a mob full of wolf shifters...

Mace Conner thought he had everything figured out until he fell for Lyra. Now he's forced into surveillance duty while he watches Lyra romance a Russian double agent. Can he keep his feelings in check to prevent an ancient magic from wreaking havoc?

As the mystery deepens, Lyra and Mace have one chance to stop the city from tearing itself apart...

Chapter 1

Lyra Thorne crossed one leg over the other in her short dress, careful not to reveal the hilt of the knife hidden in her boot. The smell of roasted tomatoes and cream sauce wafted over to her table, which was covered with a fine tablecloth that could only be found in a four or five-star restaurant. She took a sip from her red wine and looked across at the muscular Russian sitting in front of her. Nikolai may have been strong, but he seemed to approach each sentence with caution. Lyra wasn't sure if it was the fact that English was his second language or that he was worried someone was watching him. He had a right to be worried.

Lyra raised an eyebrow. "Do you take all of your blind dates to restaurants where the wine costs over \$200 a bottle?"

After a moment of hesitation, Nikolai smiled. "Do you not think you deserve wine this good?"

"I know that I do. But from your side, it seems like you're taking a chance on a stranger."

Nikolai took his own sip. "Maybe I just like expensive wine."

Lyra couldn't help but smile. Even though she wouldn't refer to this as a completely social encounter, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been on a date.

She brought her hands together on the silken tablecloth. "I guess this is the part where I start the small talk."

"Small talk. Big talk. I don't mind either way."

Lyra tried to look beyond the veneer of the Russian man's finely-pressed dress shirt and the gold watch on his wrist. She tried to even get beyond his brown eyes and into the soul of the man who was involved in something magical and deadly. "What is it you do for a living, Nikolai?"

Nikolai straightened his collar, an action he'd done several times since they'd arrived. "I work in the family business." The Russian looked to his left briefly before returning his gaze toward her. "It's maybe not so much my dream job, so sometimes I'm not doing exactly what I want. But there's something good about sticking with your family."

Lyra nodded. "I understand, though I haven't seen my own family in a while." She let out a wistful sigh. "They didn't exactly approve of some of the choices I made during my youth."

For some reason, choosing to hunt and kill vampires to protect humanity didn't sit well with my parents. I wonder why?

Nikolai looked down at the table for a moment. "It is tough when the past continues to haunt us, no?"

Lyra attempted to decipher all the meaning behind her date's statement. "I couldn't agree with you more."

After the waiter came by to take their orders, Lyra and Nikolai engaged in some polite small talk. When nothing related to her mission had come up for several minutes, she heard a faint buzz in her earpiece.

"Stick to the script, Casanova."

Lyra's lips curled into a smile.

Mace sounds a little bit jealous. I guess some vampires just can't stand humans having a good time.

"Sorry, what did you say Nikolai?" Lyra tapped the comm device in her ear. "My hearing aid was on the fritz for a second."

Nikolai smiled. "I was just asking why you chose me over many eligible bachelors on dating website."

Lyra let her fingernails slide down the glass. "Who's to say I didn't pick five men to date on the same night? In fact, we should probably hurry things up a little."

Nikolai didn't seem like he was sure that he should smile. "This is a joke, yes? I have yet to master American sarcasm."

"Don't worry. I don't have any other dates." She let her arm extend as she laid her palm on the table. "Tonight I only have eyes for you."

Lyra kept her laugh internal as she heard a cough on the other side of the comm device. Nikolai laid one hand on top of hers. There was something about the man that seemed both strong and weary.

He gripped her hand gently. "Good. I only have two other dates, so it's okay if this one runs longer."

Lyra snorted. "You're better at this American sarcasm than you let on." She withdrew her hand and took another sip of wine. She wished for a second that her superhuman metabolism allowed her to get at least a little bit tipsy. "So why are you in town?"

Nikolai laced his own fingers together. "More of this family business. My father and brother are planning a big event. It's something they've looked forward to, so I will try my best to help."

As Lyra nodded her assent, she could sense an out-of-place movement in her peripheral vision. She'd been practicing distinguishing vampires from regular humans since the age of 10, which made it all too easy for her to spy the three vampires walking in together through the front door. Her heartbeat quickened. While it was now common for vampires and other unhumans to mix openly with the population, there was something out of place about this trio.

Business or pleasure?

The answer came to her quickly when all three of the restaurant's newest patrons looked right in

her direction.

Chapter 2

Mace Conner shifted uncomfortably in the small, musty van. He hadn't felt quite right about this covert operation ever since Rhea, the group's godlike leader, had suggested it. Despite her protestations, Mace had insisted on being inside the surveillance vehicle when Lyra and the Russian mobster made contact. He tried to find the best position for his spine in a way-too-small chair beside their trusty technology expert, Doug. To his left, their criminologist and morgue specialist, Heidi, took up very little space beside him.

Doug shifted his shoulders from side to side. "You know, this whole surveillance thing is a lot more comfortable when we don't stuff three people into a two-person van."

Heidi's high-pitched voice echoed inside the van. "You're just mad that you aren't here alone and can't catch up on old *Ghost Hunters* episodes."

"That's just a rumor that's never been proven. Although, I do love the show, and every so often, they do spy a real ghost." He glanced over at his petite coworker. "Anyway, why are you even here? Don't you have some dead or undead flesh to cut into?"

Heidi sighed. "Nobody's brought in any dead bodies in a while. I got bored down there."

Doug grunted. "And what's your excuse, Mace?"

Mace wondered if there was any way he could share the truth. While he trusted Lyra out in the field, he was in no way on board with having her go out on dangerous dates with the mafia. Ever since he had drunk some of her blood to revive himself, his already intense feelings for the former vampire hunter had grown. Even Lyra's requirement that their relationship stay professional as long as she was on the team couldn't stop him from thinking about her. It couldn't stop him from dreaming about her at night. He hoped that deep down Lyra felt the same way.

Mace tightened his headphones. "Honestly, I wanted to watch a few episodes of that ghost hunter show."

Heidi and Doug chuckled while Mace listened more intently.

Hearing her flirt with another man boiled his blood. But he'd spent his entire life hiding his true emotions from the people around, so the fake, faint smile remained plastered upon his face.

He wrinkled his nose. "She doesn't have to act so... interested."

Heidi leaned over and placed her hand on his shoulder. "You sound a little jealous, Mace. Are

you threatened by his sexy Russian accent?"

"No. Of course not."

Doug licked his lips. "I know what you should do. You should try to adopt a Transylvanian accent. Then Lyra would be all over you."

Mace grumbled and listened more intently to Lyra and the Russian.

"After we finish our pasta, I could really go for a late-night sandwich."

Mace's body stiffened. "That was the safe word."

Doug groaned. "A man drops one sandwich, and she'll never let me hear the end of it. Couldn't you have just chosen some kind of innocuous safe word. Like yogurt? Or giraffe?"

Mace ignored the computer genius and looked into the camera screens they had set up around the perimeter of the restaurant. At the exact moment his heightened sense of smell caught wind of fellow vampires, he could see an increase in activity in the screens both in front of and behind the bar. Whatever the dozen darkly-attired unhumans wanted with the restaurant, Mace guessed it had nothing to do with pasta.

Chapter 3

Lyra placed her napkin on the table and stood up as if there weren't a group of vampires waiting outside the restaurant to kill her.

She faked a smile. "I need to use the ladies' room. You'll still be here when I come back though, right?"

Nikolai raised an eyebrow. "Okay, as long as you don't take too long. My other date starts in half an hour."

Lyra chuckled softly and walked toward the back of the restaurant. When she reached the hidden hallway of the restrooms, she knelt down to unstrap her heels. She quickly kicked them off into the corner and walked over toward the swinging kitchen door.

Let's see what we're dealing with here.

Lyra gently pressed open the door. She spied half a dozen vampires in formfitting dark clothes having an escalating conversation with the kitchen staff. She had a feeling that the head chef would not come out the victor in this scenario. She let the door slide shut as she tiptoed back into the main dining area. She looked back over at her table and was surprised to see the three vampires standing around Nikolai.

Wow, I haven't had a date interrupted by a vampire since high school.

Nikolai seemed calmer than she anticipated. Her date placed his napkin on the table beside his plate and stood up to face the unwelcome guests. As the Russian took a step back, all three vampires stepped forward in sync.

Lyra didn't hesitate, stumbling over toward the table and in to Nikolai's arms.

She affected an intoxicated giggle. "Nikolai. I told you not to take any clients this late. You need to get me home and into bed."

As the Russian's muscular arms worked around her midsection, she nuzzled her head against his neck. She had to admit, the mobster smelled pretty good.

Nikolai seemed unfazed. "You are right, Dear. If you gentlemen will excuse us."

The three darkly clad visitors stood steadfast in their way. They didn't seem to be buying the drunk act at all.

Lyra threw herself to the ground and made it look like an accident. "Oh my God. I really should

have stopped after the fourth martini."

When one of the vampires folded his arms and looked down at her disapprovingly, she brought her fist straight up into his groin.

The unfortunate recipient of her punch doubled over with a scream as Lyra pressed her hands into the ground and pushed herself off. Her powerful bare feet slammed right into the center of the vampires' chests. The kicks caught both unhumans off guard as they sailed through the restaurant and onto a large table of breadsticks and appetizers. As they cracked the plates and scattered silverware, the patrons of the restaurant shrieked and scattered.

As Lyra stood back up, she took her date's hand. "You need to come with me."

Nikolai shook his head. "I can handle myself. You are the one who should run."

Lyra yanked the Russian's arm, and he reluctantly followed as they sprinted toward the back of the restaurant. As she looked over her shoulder, she saw the half-dozen additional attackers coming out through the kitchen.

Nikolai yanked at the handle to the back door. "It is locked."

Lyra turned around without speaking and slammed her superhuman foot into the door. It gave way with ease, ripping apart from the doorjamb and landing with a thud in the alleyway.

Nikolai let out a sharp laugh. "You do the CrossFit, no?"

Lyra grinned. "Come on."

As they reached the alley, Lyra quickly sensed danger closing in on them from the only way out. She could see additional attackers coming toward them through the dimly lit gap between buildings. When she turned back toward the restaurant, she could see the other unhumans streaming into the back patio. Behind her was a brick wall that she could scale, but she doubted her Russian friend would be able to do the same.

They were completely surrounded.

Lyra smiled and put up her hands. "You've got us. You're welcome to have our leftovers and the second half of a \$200 bottle of wine. But only if you let us go."

The vampire who she'd struck where the sun definitely doesn't shine adjusted himself before her. "We don't want you, little girl. We're here for him. Give him up or we'll turn you into leftovers."

Nikolai whispered in her ear. "Run, Lyra. This is not your fight."

Lyra smiled. "I wouldn't be a good blind date if I just left you here to be killed. I have a feeling my star rating would go down on all those dating apps."

"Do you never stop with the joking?"

She looked back at the 12 very strong-looking vampires before her. "Haven't had to yet. But I'll let you know tomorrow." Lyra cracked her knuckles. "If I live that long."

Chapter 4

It didn't take long for Lyra to absorb her surroundings completely. Her former handler, Piers, had trained her to fight her way out of almost every possible scenario. He'd even once dropped her into a well to fight some kind of sea creature. She left the fight with a broken ankle, but she lived to tell the tale.

Lyra smiled during her moment of absorption when she saw a half broken chair sitting beside a green metal dumpster.

It almost feels like my birthday.

Before any of the vampires could make a move, Lyra sprinted and dove for the chair. She grabbed the wooden weapon with one hand and smashed it into the ringleader's face. As two more unhumans reached for her, she rolled underneath their grasp and took the now-broken chair legs in her hands. With incredible speed, she whipped the makeshift stakes directly into two attacker's chests. The creatures exploded in a puff of dust. All that remained was the two chair legs clattering to the alley ground. She glanced over to her side and saw Nikolai backing away from four of the vampires. The rest of them closed in on the greater threat, which of course, was her. She swung her leg with a roundhouse kick to keep the attackers at bay. But with six of them surrounding her and just one little former vampire hunter to fight them off, she knew it was only a matter of time.

Lyra continued to back away until she could feel the brick wall behind her.

Any time now, Mace.

Almost as if on cue, several blasts of blue light fired into the alleyway. The laser beam struck several of the vampires, stunning them and knocking them to the ground. She caught a glimpse of her hunky coworker, his futuristic gun blazing as he mowed down more unhumans.

Mace continued to fire as he tossed an object toward her. "Catch!"

Lyra leapt high into the air and snagged a sharpened stake from the night sky. When she landed, she turned left and immediately stuck the weapon through one attacker's back. The moment he screamed and disappeared, Lyra snagged the stake from the now-dusty air, and used it on the heart of another attacker. When he disappeared, the alleyway was littered with piles of dust and unconscious unhumans Mace had gunned down.

Lyra sprinted to Mace's side. "You guys certainly took your sweet time."

Mace looked back and forth between Lyra and Nikolai. "I didn't want to be a bad wingman."

The Russian looked down in awe at the unconscious vampires. "I don't understand. Is this date or rescue mission?"

When the tires of the surveillance van screeched to a stop in front of the alley, Lyra grabbed her date's hand once again. "A little bit of both. Come on."

The three of them rushed forward and jumped into the now-even-more-cramped surveillance van.

Doug shouted from the driver's seat. "Hold onto something!"

As the van peeled away from the restaurant, Lyra slammed the door shut behind Nikolai. She heard a loud thump as one of their pursuers leapt upon the vehicle. Then another thump. Then another. Before Doug could get the van into third gear, one of the vamps began pounding on the metal roof.

Lyra looked up at the noise. "Does Dougie Boy's magic gun shoot through metal?"

"I heard that! Stop calling me Dougie Boy!"

The van swerved to avoid oncoming traffic, and the passengers inside lurched to their left.

Mace shook his head. "Might just ricochet around in here and kill one of us."

Lyra pulled the knife from her boot. "Guess we're gonna go old school with this."

When the vampire pounded so hard through the top of the vehicle that his hand went through, Lyra stabbed her knife right through his palm.

The attacker screamed and lost his balance, falling off the van and landing with a thud behind them.

Nikolai braced himself against the backdoor of the van while Doug once again swerved to avoid oncoming cars. "I may not have the best memory, but I do not think any of this was in your dating profile."

Before Lyra could respond, the backdoor flew away from the van, torn off by one of the remaining attackers. Nikolai lost his balance and fell out of the moving vehicle.

Heidi shrieked. "Stop the car!"

As the van skidded to a stop, the remaining vampire on top of the vehicle went flying forward. Lyra watched him land on the pavement with a sickening crunch.

She leapt through the now-open back and looked to see what damage had been done to her Russian date. The vampire with the knifing through his hand and the one who'd pulled off the door closed in on Nikolai, who remained motionless on the street.

Lyra rushed toward him, until she noticed something that gave her pause. Through the back of the Russian's dress shirt, she noticed tears begin to form. And through the new rips in his shirt, she no longer saw muscles and skin. When the Russian arched his back, she could see the fur begin to spring forth as his body grew in response to an unnatural change. Claws descended from his hands, which now looked more animal than human.

She shook her head and continued to walk toward the transformation. "Great. Looks like my blind date is a shifter."

Chapter 5

Mace could feel his jaw drop as he watched the Russian mobster's full transformation into a werewolf. In over 100 years of life, he could barely remember the last time he'd seen what looked like a human transform into something very different. The Russian's fingernails had grown into sharp, frightening claws. The well-fitting dress shirt had been torn in several places, with ratty fur sticking through the ripped stitching. And there was one trait almost all of these wolflike creatures seem to share: they always looked pretty pissed off.

Mace pulled his futuristic-looking stun gun from his holster and glanced over at Lyra. "I guess neither of us saw that coming."

Lyra's beautiful eyes stared straight ahead at the vampires surrounding the Russian mobster turned wolf. "I guess not. Hell of a lot super smell did for us."

"I suppose we're out of practice."

Lyra's response came in the form of springing out of the now-damaged van and running for the closest vampire.

Heidi, who didn't look shaken in the least, took the spot the former hunter had vacated. "You guys are great with this conversation stuff. I think you're meant to be."

Mace grumbled as he joined Lyra in the fray.

As his partner seemed to be handling her vampire quite well, he pointed his weapon and fired blasts of hot blue light toward the closest assailant. His first two shots were true, stinging the side of one vampire, who convulsed and fell to the ground. Attacking members of his own species never sat well with Mace, but everything had to play second fiddle to the mission. The second vampire he fired upon was faster than most, avoiding several blasts and getting right up in the face of the former prince in a matter of moments. With a swipe of his razor sharp fingernails, the vampire attacker sliced through the side of the weapon, causing sparks to fly and rendering Doug's creation useless. Well, not completely useless, as Mace used the weapon to pistol-whip the unhuman in the face.

The vampire touched his cheek and turned back toward Mace with a smile. "You're on the wrong side, my brother." When the vampire stood all the way up, Mace realized the attacker had half a foot on him. "You should be shooting the wolf in the face with that thing."

The former vampire prince crouched into a ready stance. "And you shouldn't be disrupting fine

dining without a reservation."

The unhuman sneered and once again used his speed to his advantage. His fists were lightning fast, and Mace barely avoided a series of three rights and four lefts. As he dodged the blows, he took his eyes off the attacker for just a second. While it afforded him the opportunity to see that Lyra had her boot on her attacker's neck, and that the wolfman Nikolai seemed to have carved out the chest of his attacker, it wasn't a great idea against such a speedster. The vampire unloaded a barrage of attacks on Mace's jaw and chest. The former prince lost track of the number of hits the tall, lanky assailant landed on his body. While vampires didn't feel quite as much pain as humans, Mace could feel these resonate throughout his body. His eyes began to water before they turned blurry. He threw up his arms in front of his face and attempted to leap backwards to avoid the assault. But it was no use, as the vampire jumped with him and wrapped his sharp nails around Mace's midsection. The unhuman slammed the former prince into the blacktop so hard, it unlodged a manhole cover and caused a crack in the street.

Mace could feel a stinging sensation through his spine as he tried once again to block the vampire's attacks. Fists and elbows flew at him with incredible speed, though he was able to block about half of them with his own reflexes. One whopper of a blow landed under Mace's chin, causing him to let his guard down and the vampire to show off a fanged smile.

"It's not going to be better if he wins, Turncoat. Do you really want the city crawling with werewolves?"

Mace quietly moved his left arm to the side and grabbed hold of something solid between his fingers. "I don't, but I appreciate the heads-up."

With a faster-than-expected swipe of the manhole cover, Mace sent the metal disk right through the vampire's neck. The speedy creature didn't even have a chance to scream as the improvised weapon decapitated him. The severed head flew off the unhuman's body and rolled to a stop with a surprised look on his face. The headless body flopped to the side as Mace quickly got to his feet.

With the rest of the vamps disposed of, Lyra looked straight into Mace's eyes and began to slow clap.

She grinned. "Now that is something I've never seen before. Kudos."

He cracked his neck and rubbed at a particularly nasty blow the now-headless unhuman had left him. "I'll take the style points." He glanced over at Nikolai, who seemed to be wobbling a bit over the dead vampire beneath him.

Lyra was the first to his side. "You're not looking good there, Wolfman."

Mace watched as the fur and claws retracted and the transformation reversed itself. Gone were the wolflike indicators, replaced by a now-half-naked man with his clothing in tatters.

Nikolai stumbled and Lyra caught him before he could fall.

"Is a more exciting first date than usual."

Before Mace or Lyra could say a thing, the wolf shifter went completely unconscious in her arms.

Mace gingerly walked toward them. It was true that vampires had incredibly fast healing, but it certainly wasn't instantaneous.

He placed two fingers on Nikolai's throat. "He's still alive."

Lyra smirked. "It sounds like you're surprised."

"This whole thing is surprising. What the hell did those vampires want with the Russian mob anyway? And since when was the Russian mob made up of wolf shifters?"

Lyra heaved the unconscious mobster onto her shoulders. "I think you're telling me we're going to do an interrogation, right?"

Mace sighed. "We are. But can you try not breaking the suspect's arm again this time?"

"You're no fun." Mace and Lyra walked back to the van as the former prince wondered if they'd accidentally stumbled into a gang war.

Chapter 6

Nikolai felt terrible pain in every organ of his body as he came to on what felt like a hospital bed. He hated having to transform without getting properly warmed up, as it gave him one hell of a hangover the next day. He groaned as he tried to bring his hand up to his head to rub out some of the cobwebs. Unfortunately, his wrist was bound by his side, along with his ankles being shackled down as well.

"I guess I have not earned much trust."

"Being a wolfman plus a mobster puts you at a disadvantage."

Nikolai's eyes widened as he watched the blonde American woman keep her distance from the bed as she checked his vital signs on a monitor.

At first, he thought he might be in some sort of hospital, but the equipment seemed too new, and from his keen sense of smell, he couldn't pick up the usual mix of disinfectant and illness that a medical building usually gave off.

He wrinkled his nose. "If you got to know me, you would know I was a very nice mobster and wolfman."

The woman gave a slight smile before returning to neutral. "Don't try to charm me, Russian werewolf in America. I don't care much for the living."

Nikolai chuckled. "Where am I? Or is that on a need to know basis?"

"You are usually where I examine the dead bodies. But they apparently want to keep you alive, so I suppose that's a good sign."

Before the Russian could say a word, a tall, skinny man who looked like he belonged in front of a computer monitor came blasting in through the door with way too much energy.

"Okay, thank God interrogation hasn't started yet. I have so many questions about shifting. I've never had a chance to talk to a shifter before."

Nikolai chewed at his cheek. "This seems like interrogation already."

The skinny man laughed. "No, no, no. They have way tougher questions than I'll have. So, do you have like dozens of the same shirt to get ready for when you tear yours apart during the transformations?"

Nikolai glanced toward the blonde woman.

She waved her hand. "You don't have to answer him. He's not that important."

The skinny man looked shocked. "Not that important? My tech runs this place. I probably make your job 20% easier."

"Your tech makes it 20% easier. Your voice makes it 50% more annoying."

Nikolai laughed. "You fight like married couple."

The man and the woman shot him a glance at the same moment. "We're not together."

Just then, his date and her comrade stepped into the room. He remembered seeing the two of them in the van with him before the backdoor was torn off its hinges and he was forced to transform for the fight. While some creatures couldn't remember their actions upon transformation, Nikolai remembered every single second. At least until the combination of unpreparedness and wine sent him collapsing into his date's arms. Whoever she truly was.

His date was the first to speak. "Rise and shine, Honey. I think we're past the small talk portion of our relationship."

Nikolai tried his best to look relaxed even though he was surrounded by strangers and had no idea where he was. "I don't know. I would love to know more about your family, your friends, and your occupation."

The only vampire who seemed interested in keeping him alive stepped forward. "Date's over. Why was the vampire gang after you?"

"What, you can't ask your friends. Is there not some kind of vampire Facebook?"

The blonde woman laughed. "Actually, it's all about vampire Snapchat right now."

His date flashed her co-worker the side-eye. "Heidi, don't encourage the Russian comedian."

The vampire folded his arms. "We know some things about you, Nikolai. We know that you and your gang have been snatching up ancient artifacts throughout the United States, and we know that you plan do to something with them. Whatever it is, it doesn't seem like it's making the vampires very happy."

Nikolai didn't love that his family's secrets were being talked about so freely, but his well-practiced smile didn't portray any of those feelings. "And your friends would still be brooding." Nikolai looked around the room and did his best to give a shrugging motion despite his restraints. "Tell me I'm not right. Happy vampires are like golden goose, no?"

The Russian could tell he was getting under the vampire's skin. He couldn't help but laugh a bit on the inside.

The interrogator shook his head. "Is somebody going to help me here?"

Nikolai's date bobbed her head from side to side. "The Russian does have a point. I haven't seen many happy vampires in my time."

"Enough."

A short, older woman with dark skin walked into the room and immediately took over. He could sense her magical, ancient energy from the moment she stepped in. Whatever she was, the woman was

no one to be trifled with.

Nikolai could feel his smile starting to slip away. "I will cooperate. But, I would love to know where it is you have me imprisoned, first?"

His date put a hand on the vampire's shoulder as she gestured throughout the room. "This grumpy vampire, which I realize is kind of redundant, is Mace. That's Doug, Heidi, and Rhea. And you already know me."

Nikolai nodded. "Not as well as I previously thought." He looked into the eyes of the powerful, elderly woman. "Tracking down these artifacts is plan my father has had for many years. I am, how do you say, left in the dark? I'm just being good son."

Mace grumbled. "And a good mobster."

"Use whatever labels help you sleep at night. I imagine some would call you illegal vigilantes. But I am not one for labels."

Lyra walked up to the side of his bed. "So, you're telling me you don't know anything else about what your father is trying to do with these artifacts?"

Nikolai shook his head. "My father has great temper. Sometimes you just don't ask questions."

The short, powerful woman caught his eye. "And you have no clue why the vampires would be trying to stop you?"

Nikolai grinned, but not so much as to offend the magical woman. "What can I say? You've seen it in movies: vampires and shifters don't always get along. As you can probably tell, I am Team Jacob all the way."

Mace looked toward his master. "He's obviously hiding something. Maybe Lyra should break one of his arms."

Nikolai felt a shiver of nervousness go down his body as he saw just how close Lyra's hands were to his unprotected arm. "I tell truth. If I had choice at second career, it probably wouldn't be this. I am victim of familial circumstance."

Rhea put her hands on her hips. "We can't trust him, but we also don't get much out of keeping him here." She looked over to Lyra, who seemed to be eyeing his arm with hunger. "Lyra, I want you to accompany Nikolai to the gang's next acquisition."

Nikolai's heart beat faster. "This not sound like such good idea."

He watched with amazement as purple swirls of magic appeared above the woman's hands. "I'm sorry, but this isn't the kind of situation you have a choice over."

The Russian leaned back in his bed. "I understand you. No need for demonstration."

The vampire, unfazed by his master's magic, tried to speak under his breath. "I agree with the Russian. This isn't a good idea."

Lyra moved her hands toward Nikolai's arm, and a panic set over him.

"There is no need for broken bones!"

His date bypassed his arm and unfastened the restraints on his wrists. "I thought it said

somewhere on your profile that you were full of courage and Russian vigor."

"We all exaggerate on dating profiles. This is not an American-only practice."

With his arms free, he stretched out his shoulders. "If I am to take date to gang meeting, I cannot guarantee her safety."

Rhea nodded. "You'll find she can handle herself quite well."

With the vampire burning a hole into his face using his eyes alone, Nikolai looked up toward Lyra. "I look forward to finding out all about this."

While a smile graced his lips, he hoped that bringing the woman into the inner circle wouldn't get both of them killed.

Chapter 7

Mace pleaded with Rhea for over 20 minutes, but his fearless leader refused to relent. He followed her down the never-ending hallway of their lair 10 stories below the Hancock Tower. "When it was mobsters, I would completely understand where you're coming from. But now that we know they're shifters as well, this could end badly, Rhea."

The short being who was neither human nor inhuman kept her gaze forward. "This isn't a decision you can haggle over. We don't know how much time is left before the Russians get all of these artifacts together. These are powerful ancient creations, even stronger than the bombs Lyra's handler had put together."

"Her former handler."

Rhea stopped and met the vampire's eyes once again. "I know why you're trying to protect her, but she can handle herself. She saved your life a couple of times already."

He looked away. "I saved her life too."

"This is not a competition, nor is it up for discussion. Lyra is going to help us get to the bottom of this, and we're not going to let your anti-shifter bias get in the way of the mission."

Mace put his arms up into the air. "I don't have a shifter bias."

Rhea lifted her eyebrows. "It's the only thing the movies seem to get right. You won't see Lyra for a while, so you should probably say goodbye."

With that, the powerful woman was already halfway down the hallway.

As Mace stepped into the doorway, he could see that Lyra was almost done crafting her undercover costume. Her outfit was lower cut than normal, hoping to disarm everyone she came across. But it still presented a few opportunities for stowing weapons, which would be a different kind of disarmament altogether. Even if she wasn't wearing more makeup to accentuate her lips and captivating eyes, Mace would be hard-pressed not to stare.

Lyra continued to focus on her clothing as she spoke. "You know, the walls are thin for those of us with superhuman hearing. Rhea has a good point. We don't have any information, and even if I tore the Russian's arms off, we'd probably be right back at square one."

Mace stepped into the room. "I know she's right. I just don't like to see you have to go after 20 werewolves on your own."

Lyra smiled. "You're sweet, but you also know I can handle myself. Besides, I'm starting to rely too much on your technology. It'll be nice to have a solo mission."

Mace walked close enough to Lyra to touch her. "You could still say no. You don't have to do everything Rhea says to do."

"I thought I was supposed to try to be a good team player."

"Not when it puts you in danger of getting killed."

Lyra looked deep into Mace's eyes. "This isn't about the Russian or the shifters or listening to Rhea, is it?"

Mace's heart felt heavy. "I think this boundary you've put up between the two of us is full of crap. There's obviously something more between us, and you going off on a suicide solo mission shouldn't be your way of proving that we can't be together."

Lyra shook her head and let the words stand for a few beats. "This is what I was afraid of. This is exactly what I was trying to avoid."

Mace put his hands on Lyra's shoulders. "I still have your blood running through my system. I can't stop thinking about you."

"So you're saying it's all about a freaky vampire blood attraction thing, right?"

"You know that's not the case. Before you found out who I was, we almost—"

"But then I found out I killed your father, you were a vampire prince, and you're part of a secret organization trying to keep shit from exploding in everybody's face. It's a pretty good reason not to date somebody."

As Mace took a step forward, Lyra stepped back and turned away.

She looked at herself in the mirror, and her eyes met Mace's in the reflection. "Do I look harmless and sexy enough to keep around as a Russian mobster's girlfriend?"

Mace gritted his teeth and did his best not to say what he really thought. "I'd never say you looked harmless, but I think it'll work."

Lyra turned back toward him. "You know I have feelings for you too. But if we start making compromises, they're going to get in the way of the mission. People will die because we wanted to bone."

Mace wished for a moment he'd been given his father's power of compulsion, because he certainly would have been tempted to use it. "Just be careful out there, okay?"

Nikolai arrived in the doorway. "Your boss lady says it's time to go. Are you ready, my fake girlfriend?"

Lyra glanced over her shoulder at him and back toward Mace. "I promise I'll be as careful as I always am."

With a wink, she stepped away from Mace and brushed past the Russian without giving him a second look.

Nikolai let out a small chuckle. "She still pays more attention than last girlfriend."

Mace ignored the tightness in his chest as he bridged the gap between him and the shifter. "I already don't like you, but if anything happens to her, I'll tear out your throat before you have a chance to grow paws."

The Russian didn't seem the least bit fazed. "You talk good game, but who is the one dating the beautiful woman?"

Mace stewed. "You two aren't really dating."

"Not yet, my temporary friend. Not yet."

The Russian turned and followed after Lyra, leaving Mace alone in the room.

He let out a low mumble. "If anybody dies today, it better be him."

Chapter 8

Lyra's arm linked with Nikolai's as they stepped off the elevator and walked toward his family's rented suite. The air smelled fresh, as if the mobsters had paid someone to walk around spritzing the place with floral aromas.

Not a bad way to spend dirty money, I suppose.

Nikolai leaned in toward Lyra's ear. "Just let me do talking, okay?"

Lyra bent her head towards his. "You mean they don't like strong independent women in the Russian mob?"

"Not at all. They prefer quiet ones."

Nikolai and Lyra stepped up toward two hulking bodyguards who blocked the way into the suite. She had absolutely no problem picturing these massive unhumans as terrifying gray wolves.

One of the strong men with a scar on the side of his face put all his attention on Nikolai. "This is family meeting, Cousin. There is no room for prostitutes."

Lyra bit her tongue, but she wanted to give the bodyguard much more than a piece of her mind.

Nikolai kept his head up high. "You underestimate me, Cousin. Lyra here is corrupt former police negotiator. A valuable asset to the mission." The scarred Russian mobster shook his head. "If your father doesn't slit her throat, your brother might."

"Let me deal with my father and brother. Will you let us in?"

The bodyguard hesitantly opened the door into the beautiful rented suite. Lyra gave a light nod. "Thank you, Cousin. And please don't assume that every gorgeous woman is a prostitute. It's not good for women's lib."

Nikolai pulled her forward before the cousin could craft a response.

He forced her arm to link with his once more. "If you are interested in being killed, please continue with back talk. It actually solves one of my problems."

Lyra ignored him as she took in the decadent furniture, artwork, and general amenities that came with the million-dollar rental. For a moment, she even felt like a high-end prostitute. As the eyes of Nikolai's family began to settle on the two of them, she could easily discern the dynamic. Given his father's distasteful look in his direction, she wouldn't be surprised if Nikolai was telling the truth about not being privy to the mission's true objective. By the graying patriarch's side was the angry-

looking brother the bodyguard had mentioned. Unlike Nikolai, he seemed to look like a carbon copy of the mob's leader, right down to a wolflike scowl. Several other people in the room, who all bore a resemblance to Nikolai and his father, didn't mince words. Instead, they surrounded Nikolai and Lyra and appeared to get ready for anything.

The unpleasant-looking brother was the first to approach. "Nikolai, don't you know that we stopped making human sacrifice hundreds of years ago?"

Nikolai raised an eyebrow. "She is not sacrifice. She is both girlfriend and asset to the mission."

Nikolai's brother seemed to undress her with his eyes as he looked from top to bottom and back to top, with extra attention paid toward her bosom. "I am not interested in asset so much unless she is woman to be passed around."

Lyra was about to speak, when Nikolai put his hand on the back of her neck. "Father, since Vanya tends to let his temper get the best of him, I thought having negotiator in mix might prevent future issue."

Nikolai's father, Yuri, took an extended moment to stand up behind his wooden desk. Much like the desk, the mob leader seemed meticulous and ancient. But he also appeared to be as solid as an ox. Lyra hoped she wouldn't have to get involved with a creature that massive.

"My son, I hope you understand our skepticism. You know we have reasons for keeping everything in family." He stepped up toward Lyra, and she could smell the confidence emanating from the man in charge. "What is your name? And how do we know we can trust you?"

Lyra took a step forward until she was eye to eye with the mob's leader. "My name is Lyra and shifters, vamps, and other creatures don't scare me in the least." She turned back toward the still-seething Vanya. "But I don't like seeing deals go sour. I know the vampires are already on your tail, and I spent most of my youth killing them." She turned back toward Yuri. "I'm here to make sure your deals run smoothly and quickly so you can do what needs to be done."

Lyra took the temperature of the room. Several of the family members seemed impressed with her ability to stand up and face down their leader. But she seemed to have made very little progress with Nikolai's brother.

Vanya stomped toward her and grabbed for her wrist. She quickly darted her hand out of the way and took control of his wrist instead.

Nikolai's brother snarled. "Get your hand off me, filthy human."

"If there's any unstable element in these negotiations of yours—" she looked back toward Yuri. "I think it might be your son here."

Vanya's teeth began to turn into fangs before her very eyes. She ignored the tightening of her throat.

Yuri appeared bored by the entire encounter. "Vanya, that's more than enough. How about you take a cold shower before we meet the trolls."

Nikolai's brother growled, but his father's words seemed to make an impact. His teeth returned to normal in a matter of seconds, and Lyra let his loosened wrist drop.

Nikolai nodded toward his father and looked into Vanya's eyes. "Thank you, brother."

"If she screws anything up, I break her spine."

Vanya stormed away and toward one of the suite's multiple bathrooms.

Lyra placed her hand on the small of Nikolai's back. "That was fun, wasn't it? When do we go?"

Yuri put his hand up in the air as he moved lumberingly back to his seat. "You don't go anywhere until we run background checks. If all checks out, you've passed my tests."

Yuri smiled at his son. "Besides, Nikolai seems like he's been lonely lately. Who am I to stand in the way of love?"

Nikolai played his part well, smiling and taking Lyra's hand. "Thank you, father. I appreciate it."

Yuri nodded before addressing the room as a whole. "Get her info now, we leave in one hour."

Nikolai and Lyra sat on the corner of a bed that was bigger than any sleeping surface she's ever seen. She supposed crime really did pay.

Nikolai shook his head. "I am very surprised you are not dead." Lyra smiled. "I would say I've done a pretty good job of staying alive so far."

"If I know my brother, he will try everything he can to make sure your streak of living ends."

Lyra nodded. "I appreciate you looking out for me. He seems fun to be around." She looked toward the door and then back to him. "So, we get to play with trolls today, huh?"

"We saved the best for last. Well, second to last. Even I'm not sure where last artifact is."

"Good to know. Is there anything else I should look out for when I'm out with your family? Do they do that pull your finger joke in Russia?"

Nikolai smiled. "You never stop, do you?"

"Why stop now?"

Nikolai took a deep breath. "I will tell you one thing. Be careful what you say and do around the trolls. Because if they don't kill you, my brother still might."

Lyra grinned. "How is that any way to greet his fake future sister-in-law?" She cracked her knuckles. "Don't worry, I'm ready for anything."

Chapter 9

Mace sat alone with his thoughts in an unmarked van about 10 car lengths behind the Russian mobsters. With Doug on a research mission to determine the true meaning behind the artifacts the shifters were after, the former vampire prince was on a solo mission to keep tabs on a girl he couldn't stop thinking about. While they were in motion, the feed certainly wasn't perfect, but it was enough to make Mace's skin crawl.

"Nikolai, you really should wear more shirts like this." Mace could hear Lyra's fingers touch the material of the Russian's clothing. "They really accentuate your figure."

The vampire held his tongue. While he knew Lyra could hear him through Doug's much-less-conspicuous comm device, he understood that the covert operative would probably lay the compliments on even thicker if he voiced his displeasure.

It's like living in a nightmare. A werewolf mobster nightmare.

Mace kept tabs on the three vehicles far ahead of him as they progressed toward the unknown destination. He thought back to what Rhea had said about the history and bad blood between shifters and vampires. It wasn't as if there was some kind of known war between the factions that kept them angry at one another. The movies certainly hadn't stumbled upon any great truths about the rivalry.

As long as Mace could remember, his kind had hated the creatures with a fiery passion. He even remembered his late father's colorful language about the unhumans. He wondered how much of that hatred he'd adopted himself without even thinking of it.

The signal on Lyra's comm cleared up a bit as the lead car turned and slowed in a rundown parking lot. Mace listened intently while he watched the other vehicles turn in stride.

"We need to approach this very carefully." Nikolai's father spoke slowly, as if his words held wisdom that could keep the other shifters alive. "These trolls are very untrusting, and they're the only unhumans I know with a worse temper than Vanya."

A trickle of laughter worked its way through the vehicle as Mace drove past the parking lot and pulled over a block and a half past the building to stay in range.

"One of the reasons I agreed to take Pretty Face along was because trolls have soft spots for the women."

Mace could hear Lyra's smile even through the microphone. "A soft spot as in they like me? Or a

soft spot like an evening meal between dinner and dessert?"

More laughter peppered the vehicle as Mace heard the door open to the outside world.

Vanya gave a grunt of disgust. "Enough with comedy hour. Let's do deal before trolls change their mind."

The other mobsters seemed to agree with their comrade as they began shuffling out of the vehicle.

Mace wondered how Lyra was playing her relationship with Nikolai. Was she holding his hand? Or was she draped over him?

Keep it together, Mace. She's doing this to stop the shifters, not to screw one.

As he listened closely, he could hear the mobsters enter a building, with the sound shifting from the outside hum of the city to the indoor buzz of fluorescent lighting. Since Doug's camera, which was expertly placed inside Lyra's top shirt button, tended to mess around with car radios, Mace waited until now to flip it on. He waited as his eyes adjusted to the low light on the inside of the troll's domain. The camera pointed straight ahead, the image projecting the upper torso of a slimy, bluish, gargantuan creature before her.

He watched as Lyra bowed alongside the shifters in a show of respect to the creature. When the troll bowed in return, he could see the grotesque top of his shiny head.

"Note to self: Create line of wigs for trolls."

As the creature finished his long, slow gesture, he waved them forward.

He'd become accustomed to a snarky word or two from the former hunter, but her relative silence seemed to indicate that Lyra was playing things cool in an unknown environment surrounded by killers.

When the mobsters reached a large chamber, Mace saw Nikolai's father step forward to greet a creature who appeared to be the head troll. Somehow, he was even bigger than the one who'd stuck by the front door.

"We appreciate this audience, Your Excellence." Nikolai's father had the grace of one ruler paying homage to another. "Were you able to discover artifact among your many treasures?"

The head troll's grunt was halfway between a roar and a belch. "We found treasure. It will cost you dearly, Shifter."

Nikolai's father waved his hand as two of his cohorts brought forth a chest that was likely filled with jewels, gold, and whatever other ill-begotten treasures the shifters had come upon.

Mace shook his head. "Getting those back to their rightful owners may be a project for later."

Upon seeing the contents of the chest, the troll nodded and began the exchange. The artifact another troll presented appeared to be half crumbling with age. Though amidst the dim light, it glowed with magical energy that Mace could feel even nearly two blocks away. It was adorned with the head of a wolf.

Lyra couldn't seem to help herself. "A little on the nose, wouldn't you say?"

Her whisper seemed to catch Nikolai's attention. "I am pretty sure it's not meant for a fireplace

mantle or decoration."

"I think your brother could pull it off."

Almost as if on cue, Vanya shushed his brother and Lyra and stepped forward. "Let's get on with this already. I have no patience for pageantry."

The camera turned toward Nikolai's father, who appeared to be just as offended as the troll leader.

"You think we part with wolf we've had for centuries in one minute's time?" The trolls grumble grew in volume. "You not appreciate our sacrifice?"

Vanya let out a sound of disgust. "Sacrifice? Did you see just how much we've parted with for this trifle?"

"Enough, Vanya! Go back to the car."

The head troll certainly didn't seem appreciative of Vanya's back talk when he let out a scream that seemed more fitting for the battlefield than the negotiation table. "You'd rather fight for treasure? We can arrange this."

The hair stood up on the back of Mace's neck as he watched Lyra's camera shuffle in the hubbub that ensued. The trolls seemed ready to strike, and Nikolai's father and most of the shifters tried to take the submissive role.

"My son is wrong in head." Nikolai's father put up his hands. "He is only one who wants fight."

"I have been insulted! And someone will pay for his insolence."

Mace watched in horror as Lyra walked right up to the head troll.

Mace gritted his teeth. "Lyra, get out of there."

"You want someone to pay?" The former hunter stood straight up as she spoke. "Consider me the banker."

Chapter 10

Lyra was so close to the head troll she could see movement beneath the outer translucent layer of the unhuman's skin. It was unsettling to say the least.

The creature seemed just as surprised as Nikolai was when she'd stepped forward into the accelerating tension of the room. She expected the surprise, though she didn't anticipate the smell from being that close to the hydrophobic creature.

"This is graver insult." The troll's teeth were black with decay in his mouth. "You send woman as sacrifice?"

Lyra wondered if Mace was pissing himself in the nearby van. "Nobody sent me for anything, Your Eminence. I'm here because I want to see this deal get done without anybody losing their head."

The troll let out what Lyra could only imagine was his version of a hideous laugh. "Lose head? Trolls bludgeon to death and use head as decoration!"

The other trolls by his side cheered, as if this was some kind of rah-rah mantra amongst their community.

Lyra considered the unhuman's weak points. In most cases, she'd be able to use her speed to get such a lumbering monster into a bad situation. But she was on troll turf, which meant that there would be few corners to turn where she could find an advantage. Going hand to hand with the unhuman would most likely turn her head into a troll sculpture. Using her mind was likely the only path to survival this time around.

She ran her hand through her hair. "I heard that trolls have a thing for human women. Do you find me pretty?"

"Do not have sex with that troll!" Mace's voice buzzed in her ear. "You have no idea where he's been."

Lyra made a mental note to stab the vampire the next time she saw him.

The troll examined her like she was a science experiment. "Yes. Is this an offer?"

Lyra shook her head. "Unfortunately, I'm already spoken for. But, I looked inside that chest that these fine gentlemen were willing to provide. You could certainly buy a lot of female companionship for all of those jewels."

The king troll nodded along with his subordinates. "You speak much truth. Are you sure you have

no interest in being our first ..."

Lyra stepped away from the troll and lifted the lid of the chest. She picked up a weighty jewel and tossed it toward the king. He easily caught it in his massive slimy hand.

"It's your choice. Either you get shifter blood all over your hideaway, which is notoriously difficult to clean."

The trolls grunted their assent.

"Or, you give them the artifact, which you weren't doing anything interesting with anyway. And you trade these jewels to get a woman's touch around the place. And around whatever place you want a woman's touch."

The troll seemed to be coming around. "I like her plan." He turned toward Nikolai's father. "You send another chest of jewels after this one. Will bring twice as much women."

Yuri smiled. "Of course, Your Eminence. This is worthy cause."

The troll's tone turned joyous as he extended his arm and wrapped it around the head shifter's shoulder. "No fight. Today is celebration!"

The other trolls joined in a slimy fist-pumping hoorah. The other shifters looked toward her as they dragged the chest forward. One of the head troll's subordinates passed the weighty artifact to her. She didn't hesitate to take the gaudy wolf sculpture and covertly place one of Doug's analysis chips in an undetectable crevice.

She proudly presented the artifact to Yuri. "I believe this belongs to you."

Yuri nodded his approval. "It would not have happened without you. Nikolai all of sudden has good eye for women."

Lyra smiled over at her fake boyfriend, and he seemed to grin his thanks back.

On the entire way back to the mobster's suite, she put up with frustrated comments from the vampire on the other side of her comm.

"You could've been killed. Do you know how much force is behind a troll punch? He could've caved your entire body in."

While she wanted to shut off the incessant chatter, it was kind of comforting to hear Mace's voice after she'd put herself in such a dangerous situation.

When they reached the hotel, Lyra held back for a minute in the vehicle to say a few choice words to her own comrade. But when she did, she realized far too late that Vanya had waited for her as well.

Lyra raised an eyebrow. "Did you want to thank me in person? You know, for keeping you and your whole family from getting killed?"

Vanya growled. "I don't trust you. There is something you're hiding."

She smiled as she leaned back against the car. "My love for your brother? A desire to stay alive?"

The Russian stepped toward her, his breath blew against her face from point-blank range. "The second I find out what it is, I will destroy you. It may break brother's heart, but eating yours will make it worth it."

He finished with an in-her-face snarl before turning away and stomping through the hotel's lobby.

Lyra enjoyed being threatened about as much as the next person, but most threats didn't come under surveillance.

Mace huffed on the other end of the comm. "If you don't slit that guy's throat, I'd be happy to do it for you."

She sighed. "I'm way ahead of you." She thought of the long knife concealed in her outfit. "Way ahead of you."

Chapter 11

Doug felt as if he were conducting a symphony as his fingers moved across the keyboard to place the final lines of code in his algorithm. Rhea taught him where magic and mechanics intersected to allow him to track nearly every type of mystical energy they could think of. His tech wizardry and her actual wizardry allowed them to locate the bombs Lyra's former handler had placed around the city just a few months earlier. And now, as he finished off his own fugue state, Doug put the code on a program that would track the artifacts the Russian mobsters were after as well. As soon as the last code was put in place, Doug allowed the program to start compiling to do its work.

He leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Another masterpiece, Dougie Boy." He scrunched up his face. "Great, now Lyra has me saying it too."

He snatched a Sharpie marker from his desk and pulled out a list of shifter questions he'd tried to ask Nikolai before the Russian had left. He crossed out several, though he hadn't been able to find a right way to ask what happens to shifters in wolf form when they need to go to the bathroom.

"Next time. I'm sure there will be a next time."

He glanced over at his much longer list of questions for Lyra. While he'd never told Mace or Rhea, he'd put together the list long ago as part of a file he was collecting on the history of hunters. It had been deep in a forgotten corner of the internet that Doug first discovered the lore of the hunters. Whenever he'd told his parents or friends about their supposed history, he was met with nothing but blank stares and admonitions to stop spreading weird rumors online. But Doug refused to drop his obsession, and as he gained more knowledge on coding and robotics, he likewise pulled together facts from unlikely sources to complete his unabridged history of hunter mythology. Lyra had only been somewhat helpful in filling in the gaps, mostly chatting with him to remind him of a time he dropped a sandwich when she pulled a gun on him. But his efforts over the last decade had gotten him far more information than any one person had ever compiled on the women meant to beat back the vampire scourge.

Doug's monitor beeped to signify its first sweep of the city. As Nikolai had said, the Russians were in possession of most of the artifacts they needed to collect to do whatever it was they intended with the ancient sculptures. He could see six hits in the hotel the Russians were camping out in in the South Loop of the city.

He let out a low whistle. "I wonder how many chest of jewels you guys had to give up to gather those."

As he examined the results further, he saw another blip in what seemed to be an abandoned warehouse district. A few Google searches of the area showed nothing of interest in the far northwest corner of the city.

The computer programmer grumbled to himself. "It's always in some kind of abandoned something. Of course, it's never really abandoned, is it?"

Doug saw a strange phenomenon when the computer ran it's second search. He blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes just to make sure he was seeing things right. There were three more dots that appeared on the screen. Only they weren't showing up in some abandoned corner of town. The three additional artifacts he picked up seemed to be coming from the Hancock Tower itself, but more likely was that they were within 100 feet of where he currently sat.

"What in the heck?"

Doug tried to move on to other projects, but over the course of the next hour, his curiosity got the best of him. He took an old handheld tracking device and found a way to program it with the algorithm he just developed. It took some time to get it right, but in this job, there wasn't exactly a boss breathing down his neck. The device began working right away, and a faint beep turned louder as he seemed to get closer to the nearby artifact.

He smiled to himself. "Just follow your nose."

The tracker beeped louder as he entered a walk-in closet he'd never stepped foot in before. The tracker seemed to beep louder and louder as he reached the corner of the dark and dusty room. He flipped off the device as soon as he saw what it was tracking. The design was almost exactly the same as the images Mace had sent over, minus the wolf on the top. Whoever had made the artifacts the mobsters had traded so much for had seemingly made this one as well. And the computer program had accidentally found three of them in their very hideout.

Doug picked up the object in his hands, and even though he had no mystical powers himself, he could feel the buzzing energy emanating from the object.

"I wasn't supposed to find this." He started to breath a little heavier. "And I'm guessing there's only one person who would have hidden this here." He looked from left to right and placed the object back in its corner. "What do you do when the supernatural woman who signs the checks is keeping a major secret from everyone?"

Chapter 12

Lyra tiptoed around Nikolai's condo. While most of his Russian brethren stayed in the massive suite in the South Loop, he'd made sure to give himself a second lodging. Lyra ignored the possibility that this house was somehow connected to their blind date just a few days ago. She looked through the mostly bare shelves and bookcases. Mostly everything was covered in Russian scrawl, which she only had a passing familiarity with.

Mace's voice intruded on her snooping. "You see anything interesting in there?"

Lyra shook her head. "I know vampires don't need sleep, but it seems like you spent an awful lot of time spying on me."

"You're on a covert mission; I'm on surveillance duty. If I spend more time spying on you, I'd say I'm doing my job."

She picked up a weighty book and opened the pages. She was surprised to find photos of Nikolai from when he was a child. "I never really thought mobsters were the sentimental type." She placed the book under her arm and continued to look around. "I don't think you need to worry too much about me, Mace. There aren't anymore trolls for me to confront. Did you really think I would try to have sex with a troll?"

Mace seemed embarrassed over the comm. "Of course not. I was just startled is all."

Lyra threw the book down on the bed and began flipping through it. She suppressed a chuckle when she saw Nicolai as a teenager with braces from ear to ear. "I can handle myself. Besides, nobody died and nobody slept with a troll. I'd say it's a successful day."

"I don't think you're going to find anything in that photo book."

Lyra let out a sigh. "How about you take a break for a bit, because having you narrate my every move is driving me crazy. Why don't we just go and find out where the trolls got that artifact from in the first place?"

She could hear Mace suck on his teeth through the other line. "No can do, Lyra. I need to be there when the Russians turn on you."

"Is this really all about the *Twilight* thing? That you guys hate wolf shifters for some reason?"

"I'm neither Team Jacob nor Team Edward. Vampires don't sparkle."

Nikolai cleared his throat as he entered the room. "Am I interrupting something? I could pretend

to walk around the condo a few more times, but I'm starting to get sleepy."

Lyra waved him forward as she moved to turn off her comm. "We're going dark here, Mace. Good night."

"Wait, Lyra, don't!"

As she flipped off the devices, she held up the photo book to display her findings. "You looked pretty good in a fake tie. I'm not sure if the girl you were dancing with felt the same way though."

Nicolai laughed. She had to admit, he looked pretty good in his silk pajamas.

"I believe you've found what they call the motherload. These pictures could blackmail me quite well."

Lyra looked intently at the photo until she seemed to discover something. There was a little bit of fur on the back of his dance partners neck. "This was a shifter dance, wasn't it?"

Nicolai joined her on the bed and nodded. "Both my family and... condition... make it difficult to find people who understand me."

She laughed. "It's a shame that people like me are only one in a generation. It's like going to Catholic school: one person at a time and narrow prospects." She raised her eyebrows toward the Russian. "Have you dated some shifters?"

Nicolai leaned closer on the bedspread. She could smell his tasty cologne at that distance.

"Are you asking about my history of romance? This seems like territory for second date, no?"

"Call it what you will, Nikolai."

He smiled. "I dated werepanther once. And I have scars to prove it."

She chuckled and rolled away from him on the bed. "That's what I would call too much information." She stood up on the ground and stretched. "I guess I should be getting over to the couch."

Nicolai got up on his knees and put his hands up in the air. "No, no, of course not. I will take couch, you take much more comfortable bed."

She looked at Nikolai in the bed and over into the other room. She nodded to herself.

This is probably a bad idea, but let's see what happens.

She smiled. "You know what, after leaving your family, I could see them storming into the condo. How about we share the bed just to keep up the ruse."

His forehead wrinkled. "And vampire boyfriend won't be mad at this?"

"I don't have a vampire boyfriend. Just a jealous vampire coworker. Scoot over. And expect me to steal the covers."

Nicolai shrugged and moved the photo book to the nightstand as he pulled himself beneath the covers.

Lyra did the same, noticing just then that the entire bedspread smelled of his cologne mixed with something else. She supposed it was the smell of man mixed with beast. She sort of liked it.

Nicolai turned to her, his eyes driving deep into hers. "The more you learn about this mission, the

more dangerous it is for you. I could figure out cover if you decided to leave."

She smirked. "Are you getting worried about me, Nikolai?"

"I can't help being sensitive. I develop fondness for people I share bed with."

"I appreciate your concern. But I need to follow this all the way through." She thought back to the troll and holding the artifact in her hands. "The power in that thing was epic. If your dad is planning something with a half dozen of them, I have no idea the implications. But it's not going to be pretty."

Nikolai nodded. "I wish I could be more helpful. My father trust no one with his plans."

She attempted to detect any dishonesty in the shifter's eyes. Unfortunately, he seemed to be telling the truth. "I understand. We better rest up. I have no idea if I'm going to be facing down any trolls or brothers tomorrow."

"Vanya is all talk. Well, talk and knives. But I feel like you can handle it more than most."

"Good night, Nikolai." She smiled softly. "May your dreams be filled with beautiful troll women."

Nikolai shuttered. "Ugh. I hope yours are too."

And as the shifter closed his eyes, Lyra let herself stare at his face for a bit. It would be so easy to wrap her arms and legs around him. She wondered what kind of vigor the unhuman would have in the bedroom.

Let's keep things about the mission. I'm not about to have Mace call me a hypocrite.

She heard the even breaths of sleeping across from her, and she closed her eyes to attempt to do the same.

Chapter 13

Mace hadn't realized just how frustrated he was by Lyra's radio silence until he felt his vampire fangs descend in his mouth. That and the fact that he was halfway between the surveillance van and Nikolai's front door when he felt the sharp teeth coming out his gums. He took a few long deep breaths before retreating back to the van and his solitude. He tried his hardest to ignore any thoughts of Lyra and Nikolai and whatever it was going on in his rented condo.

This is no time to have an imagination.

Instead, he took his friend's advice and flipped through the contents of an email Doug had sent him several hours prior. It turned out the device Lyra had slipped into the artifact had found out a fair bit of information. The sculpture had been crafted from a material that used to be referred to as blessed rock. It was a magical substance, and that made it very, very dangerous. As Mace tried to keep awake through the more boring specifications Doug's device had returned, he remembered something in an ancient text about this supposedly blessed rock and a prophecy. Fortunately, Doug had uploaded so many of these magical books in their database, it only took a few keyword searches to pull up exactly what he wanted.

"Technology is pretty amazing. Until it gets you killed."

The passage he sought after talked of unhuman guardians protecting humanity from enduring the same weaknesses as their magical counterparts. Mace's Latin was a little rusty, but there was something in the text about these artifacts making humans like everybody else. As he looked over at his now-useless headphones, he realized he was in no mood for riddles.

He rubbed his hands together absentmindedly. "She could be slitting his throat. He could be slitting her throat in there and I wouldn't know. It's like she's trying to get herself killed."

He shut out an image of the shifter on top of her in the bedroom for the hundredth time when his cell buzzed in his pocket.

"Heidi, tell me you're sending over some vodka."

He could hear her smile on the other end of the line. "You're having that much fun, huh? I found something interesting, unless you want to keep on surveillance duty for the rest of the night."

He shook his head. "I'll be there in 20."

Mace felt like James Bond as he descended the secret elevator from the alleyway down to their hideout. While he knew he traveled that path a thousand times over, there was still something very secret-agent-like about the whole endeavor. For some reason, he wondered what his dead, murderous father would think about the whole thing.

He was met with a sly smile as he entered the morgue.

"You get too tired of listening to Lyra and the Russian having sex?"

Mace grunted. "If you called me here just to make fun of me, I could just go drink in a corner alone."

"Now, now. I have something much better than making fun of you and your crush."

"I do not have a crush."

She smirked. "Fine, whatever you vampires call it when you're obsessed with someone after you drink their blood." She waved him over to a covered body. "Here, check this out."

Mace walked to her side as Heidi removed the cover from the vampire he'd beheaded a few days prior.

Mace marveled at the thick neck he'd been able to cut through with the manhole cover. "That's disgusting. Did you just want to show me my handiwork?" He let his eyes trail down over a tattooed back and the bare rear end of the motionless unhuman. "Or did you and Doug have a bet about showing me a bare butt?"

She bit her bottom lip. "It's not about his ass. Does anything seem familiar about those tattoos on his back?"

He focused his attention on the inked design. Mace looked back up at Heidi. "No, they're not from any clan that I recognize."

She raised her eyebrows. "I didn't recognize either, so I brought them into one of Doug's insanely nerdy computer programs."

She tapped on the nearby keyboard, bringing up the image of the tattoo on a large monitor. He watched intently as she hit a few keystrokes, and a small part of the image flew away. Something bit at the corner of Mace's mind that made him lean forward. When Heidi hit the same keystrokes again, even more of the image came into focus. He could barely believe his eyes. After one more set of clicks, the tattoo was clear as day. It was the same exact markings he bore on his own back.

He put one hand to the side of his head. "But that's impossible. After my father died, no one picked up the slack, and the Tuscan clan disbanded."

Heidi nodded. "At least, that's what they wanted you to believe."

"But why are they trying to stop the wolves from getting the artifact?" Mace stared at the image on the screen. "And with my father dead, who the hell is running the gang?"

Chapter 14

Nikolai blinked in the darkness. It was some kind of combination of his father's mission and having a beautiful woman by his side that kept sleep at bay. If it hadn't been for her, they might have all been bludgeoned to death by trolls. But a random blind date connected him with the one person who might actually be able to make his father's dream come true.

But are all my dreams his? Is there anything I want more?

As his body turned back to Lyra's, he saw her eyes on him.

"I can tell you honestly. You're tossing and turning and keeping me up."

He gave a sheepish look. "I am too nervous that I will pass gas before you."

She let out a girlish giggle, which may have been the most feminine thing he'd ever seen her do. "If we aren't going to sleep, can we at least eat?"

"I know just the place."

Nikolai and Lyra settled in at the table of an all-night diner, and the former hunter dove into a basket of fries.

Her mouth worked on the salty potatoes as she spoke. "I was like you once."

"Russian and manly?"

"When I was in full-on hunter mode, I never questioned what Piers had to say. If he told me to break in somewhere and steal something, I did it without question. If he told me to assassinate some kind of murderous vampire, I didn't look him up." She licked the salt from her fingers. "I just did the deed."

Nikolai nodded. "What made you stop listening? Why did you stop doing everything he asked?"

Her head bobbed from side to side. "It was a combination of him skipping town... and how he kind of went crazy and tried to kill all the unhumans in Chicago."

Nikolai felt the bubbles from his soda almost go up his nose while he snorted. "That would probably do it for me too."

Lyra grabbed Nikolai's soda and took a sip.

"Hey, you have your own for reason."

"I wanted to try yours too." She placed it back on his side of the table. "Mine's better. Anyway, what I'm saying is you don't have to listen to your father. You know that whatever he's doing is bad

news and it could get a lot of people killed."

"Possibly. Possibly." He took a fry of his own from the bowl before him. "My family has asked me to do things of which I am not proud. But there is difference in our situation."

She lifted her chin. "Does this have something to do with you being part wolf? Definitely not part wolf."

He shook his head. "There is difference between leaving trainer and leaving family."

Her eyes seemed to catch his drift. "All I'm saying is you have incredible powers that you could use for good too." She dipped another handful of fries in ketchup. "It might do you some good to spend less time with your homicidal brother. Your father might understand." She devoured the fries between her fingers. "Though it could be worth fleeing the country if he doesn't."

It wasn't as though Nikolai had never considered leaving the gang. He doubted working for another person's goals was helping him to live up to his full potential. Then again, family is family.

"I appreciate your input. More thought would be needed before I could decide."

He reached toward the bowl in the center of the table, only to come up empty. "If we were actually dating, my father would be very impressed with your appetite."

"If this is going to turn into some kind of fat joke, I'd advise you not to continue."

Nikolai grinned. "Of course not, you have perfect body. Obviously, fries do no damage to you."

Her eyes examined his face before they locked with his. "You aren't so damaged yourself, Nikolai."

When they got back to the condo, Nikolai had a strong desire to hold Lyra's hand. He wasn't sure what she'd do, but something deep down wished that whatever this fake relationship was between them could be genuine.

He placed his hand on her shoulder. "If this was actual third date, I would say I had nice time."

She looked at his hand but did nothing to remove it. "I probably would too."

"They have spirits for nightcap if you are interested."

Lyra looked away from the building at a tiny bit of sunlight that came in at the bottom of the horizon. "It's almost morning. I think I'm going to go for a quick run to work off some of those fries."

He gave a slight bow. "Suit yourself. I may drink for two."

"Thanks for the midnight snack, Nikolai. And the chat. Think about what I said."

He nodded as he watched her turn away and start to jog down the steps. He did his best to be a gentleman and not watch her backside as she ran down the street. He took a deep breath and wondered if Lyra would survive when the horrors of the artifacts were released.

Chapter 15

Doug stumbled through the darkness of an unused portion of the hideout. The only light source came from the tracking device, which he'd rigged to light up instead of making sound. His stomach hadn't felt right since he'd found the hidden artifact in the closet.

"Maybe it's just all a misunderstanding. This tracker could be broken and all it's detecting is something a builder left here in the early 20th century."

While he hoped his technology was on the fritz, it certainly seemed to be working well enough to light up brighter and brighter as he stepped forward. When the device reached peak brightness, he moved it from left to right and discovered the second artifact in the room's corner. It looked exactly like the first one, and Doug's nervousness grew as he held it in his hand.

"I think she's even told me not to go in here. Said that it was dangerous. But is the room dangerous, or just what I'd find here?"

Doug thought back to the first time he met Rhea. He'd graduated from high school two years early, which made him an outcast in the top-notch university he attended. It didn't help his social status much that his parents moved nearby to be a sort of base of operations for him. It made it twice as challenging to keep his secret obsession hidden. He knew that nonhuman creatures existed, well before the day the vampires went public. But every time he shared that information with his few friends or his family members, they threatened to put him on medication. He was in the school library late one night, researching the prophecy about a dragon being born from the earth, when an old woman he didn't recognize tapped him on the shoulder.

"This research you're doing is pointless."

Doug's eyes widened as he turned toward the woman. "Excuse me?"

She had a wise smile about her. "I said that the research you're doing is pointless."

Doug minimized his internet browser window and turned toward the woman. "Did my parents send you or something? They've always told me my research is pointless too."

"It's not pointless because the prophecy is wrong. It's pointless because your math is off."

He laughed. "My math is never wrong."

She leaned over and pulled the keyboard and mouse toward her and opened a browser of her own. A site about ancient calendars loaded on the screen. "You assumed that the unhumans who created this document always used the same calendar to track their dates. Only, 1,100 years ago, they switched from a lunar to a solar calendar. So, in conclusion, your math is wrong."

Doug's mouth hung open. "Unhumans? Who are you exactly?"

"Come back here every Monday at 2 a.m. for the next few weeks. I'll tell you more about who I am and who I think you could be."

With that, the first conversation he and Rhea had ever had came to a close.

His curiosity got the best of him, and he returned every Monday at 2 a.m. for the next three years of college. While his grades never suffered, he was a genius after all, his career prospects weren't terribly enticing at the end of his four years. Working with Rhea for a secret organization was the only calling that made sense.

Doug looked down at his tracking device as it picked up the signal for the third and final hidden artifact. He was so focused on his path forward that he nearly ran straight into Heidi in the hallway.

She laughed. "Jesus, Doug. You're in the zone. The sandwich zone."

Doug tried and failed to compose himself. "Hello, Heidi. Good to see you here right now."

She cocked her head at an angle. "You're hiding something. You're hiding something, and you appear to be terrible at hiding something."

"What ever do you mean, my co-working friend?"

She shook her head. "Fine, I won't ask any questions about it. But in the future, I'm happy to give you some lessons on effective lying. My parents still have no idea what I do for a living."

He looked back down at his tracker and then at Heidi and then back at the tracker again. "That sounds fantastic. Great meeting, running into, I mean, seeing—"

"I'll see you later, Doug."

Heidi took a wide berth around him and continued in her original direction.

Doug hadn't realized he was holding his breath. "Good. She doesn't suspect a thing."

As he kept moving down the corridor, the tracking device grew brighter and brighter until it led him down another unused hallway and into a room he'd never seen before. When he closed the door behind him, he could sense more than the artifact inside.

He pursed his lips and turned the tracker off. "Hi, Rhea."

The lights of the room came up with a purple hue as the woman who set him on this path came into view.

She had a neutral look on her face. "Doug. You didn't really think I would ignore this little quest of yours, did you?"

His throat felt tight. "I don't know. I didn't really think about it. I just wanted to know for sure that

we had the same kind of artifacts as the ones the Russians are looking for."

She nodded. "And do you trust I have a good reason for keeping them here? Do you trust I have my own reasons for keeping them secret?"

He blinked. "I assume so, but I also imagine that if you have artifacts just like them, then you know what it is the Russians are planning to do. And if you know that without telling all of us, then you seem to be keeping secrets from us for no reason. Is there a reason?"

Rhea's pained look spoke volumes as she stepped toward him. He instinctively took a step back.

"Do you trust me, Doug?"

"I haven't had any reason not to. But, I assume you'll tell us now what the Russians are doing. Right?"

She shook her head and continued to walk forward. His back hit the closed door behind him.

"The mechanics of the world are strange sometimes. I can't always intervene, and sometimes we just have to let bad things happen."

"I don't understand that. That runs counter to what we're doing here."

Rhea came closer until she was within an inch of Doug's face. "Do you trust me enough not to tell the others about this?"

Doug's hands were sweaty by his side. "I'm not sure. I'm a scientific kind of guy, and the evidence feels like it needs to be shared with others."

She let out a faint sigh. "I do understand. I knew you when I hired you."

Her hands began to glow a deeper shade of purple. "But unfortunately, that means I'll just have to make you forget the evidence."

As Rhea moved her hands upward, Doug could feel the room closing in on him. He let the tracker slip from his grasp and land on the ground with a crack as the darkness took over his world.

Chapter 16

Lyra and Nikolai arrived back at the hotel early that day. He'd been mostly quiet in the car ride, and she'd followed suit. While it was a little ridiculous, the fake dates she'd had with the Russian shifter may have been some of the most enjoyable ones of her life. Even if they were a part of a covert mission. At one point during the ride, she thought he was looking at her, but the moment she tried to meet his eyes, his darted away.

As Nikolai started for the lobby, Lyra caught his hand. "Nikolai, wait."

He turned back toward her, but kept his eyes focused on the ground. "My father is expecting us."

"Look, after we figure out what exactly these artifacts do, you don't have to keep going with this mission."

Nikolai's eyes slowly moved up towards hers. "It's a nice fantasy, but what would I even do?"

She smiled as she took his other hand in hers as well. "You could work with the team. Having a shifter on board would be a huge asset to us helping humans and unhumans throughout the city."

He gave a short laugh. "I don't think vampire boyfriend would be very happy at this."

"You know he's not my boyfriend. And maybe we can find a way to be both Team Jacob and Edward."

"This Twilight metaphor has really run course, no?"

She looked deep into his eyes. "Tell me that this is what you really want. Tell me that you want to go along with whatever your dad says and I will drop it. I'll find out what the artifacts are for, and if it's a really nefarious purpose, me and my team are going to stop it. Tell me this is what you want to do with the rest of your life."

His heart beat faster in his chest. "What you say is tempting. I know life could be more than this, but I just can't give up on family."

Her heart sank as she let his hands fall away from hers. "I understand." She walked ahead of Nikolai. "Well, we better not keep your father waiting."

When they reached the suite, Lyra could feel the tension bubbling out from the room. Several of the shifters seemed ill at ease, and Vanya appeared to be pacing more than normal. He didn't even look up at her to scowl, which worried Lyra more than anything else.

Yuri nodded at his son when they entered. "You are late. I share news of last artifact with

everyone before you."

Nikolai gave a sharp nod. "My apologies. Tell me what we missed."

A creepy smile spread across Vanya's face. "What you miss? There is one artifact remaining. We are this close to success."

When Nikolai's brother resumed his pacing, Lyra couldn't bear the mystery any longer. "You all don't seem very excited about it. Where's the last artifact?"

Yuri glanced at her briefly before focusing on his son. "I have dangerous mission for you. The artifact lies with our greatest enemy. The Tuscan clan of vampires."

Lyra hoped against hope that the surprise she felt didn't show up on her face. As far as she'd known, from the moment she'd killed Mace's father, the leader of the Tuscan clan worldwide, the group had disbanded and scattered throughout the world. Even Piers seemed to think that the group was gone for good. She should have known that wishful thinking never paid off.

Nikolai licked his lips. "I have feeling vampires aren't interested in our gold and jewels."

Yuri nodded. "That is correct assumption, my son. You, your brother, and your lovely girlfriend will lead strike team into the heart of Tuscan stronghold."

Lyra tried to slow her accelerating breath. "They're here in Chicago?"

Does Mace know about this?

Vanya's nervous grin spread wider. "We're the ones who are going to pull this off. And then the mission will finally be complete."

On the word complete, Vanya's gaze rested upon her. She had a feeling that if Nikolai's brother had anything to say about their forthcoming mission, her death would be its final punctuation mark.

Chapter 17

Early that morning, Mace traded off shifts with an even chattier-than-normal Doug. The computer nerd had a glazed over look that didn't put the vampire at ease.

He gave Doug a sideways glance. "Are you sure you got enough sleep to keep an eye on her?"

Doug nodded about ten times in response. "Of course. You saw yesterday that she could handle herself anyway. I'm sure they'll just be planning out their final mission today."

"But if anything happens, you'll definitely call me right away?"

Doug's smile was wide and creepy. "You'll be the first to know, Mace. Besides, this van was starting to smell too vampiric. We need to bring a little humanity back to it, you know what I mean?"

"No. I don't know what you mean." He took his first step out of the van. "Just call me if anything strange happens."

Once again, Doug nodded way too many times for Mace to feel comfortable.

It didn't take long for the vampire to take a cab over to the former stronghold of the Tuscan clan. The taxi driver even asked him twice if he was sure he was going to the right address. Mace stepped out into the street of an abandoned lot that seemed more likely to attract squatters than unhumans. The building that had once been a powerful fortress hidden in plain sight now appeared to be crumbling along with the rest of the neglected corner. If the city of Chicago had any interest in the rundown neighborhood, the building might have been torn down years ago. It remained a relic, like the kind of building you might find underground in an archeological dig. He tapped on a rusted metal door, and the hinges creaked as it opened up the abandoned stronghold. Mace pulled out a flashlight and began pointing it left and right. While he spied a few symbols of the old Tuscan clan, everything else had been stripped bare from the walls and floors.

It felt like so long ago, but Mace could remember his father showing him everything that he would someday inherit. It made complete sense to the Tuscan king that his son would be interested taking over everything in the duplicitous clan, from its vast holdings of wealth, to its frequent criminal endeavors. The Tuscans had lasted for centuries in this way. But Lyra's timely assassination of his father plus the public outing of vampires seemed to erase all of that from history. At least, it had for Mace until he saw the altered tattoo on Heidi's computer. Mace touched the wall and wondered what had truly become of his "birthright." It was just then that he heard a sound coming from the front door.

Almost instinctively, Mace sprinted up the wall with incredible agility and braced himself between the wall and the ceiling. This gave him the perfect bird's-eye view to the source of the sound. Two men, who he assumed were vampires of course, entered the room with a purpose. One of them placed his hand on a certain part of the wall, and much to the former prince's amazement, a new doorway opened up on the other side of the room.

"These shifters are driving me crazy. Why doesn't she just have us go over there and slit their throats?"

The other vamp beside him nodded in assent. "I wish we could. Seems like they have a little bit of help."

"The hunter? She's out of practice."

The conversation continued as the two vampires walked through the doorway, which quickly shut behind them. To the naked eye, there was no obvious way that the wall had ever been anything other than what it was.

Mace released his grip and landed softly on the cement ground.

He examined the spot in the wall that the vampires had used. "They know Lyra as the hunter." He looked toward the door outside and then back at the wall. "I really should tell Rhea about this." He took a deep breath and pressed his hand into the wall, which instantly opened the doorway once more. "Maybe just a little peek."

Mace tiptoed across the room and walked into the secret passageway. As he could still hear echoes of the vampires' conversation, he waited a few minutes until nothing but silence met him. The passageway was lit by fire alone, which felt extremely familiar to Mace. His father had never been much of a fan of electricity. As the passageway angled downward, Mace could see the true Tuscan hideaway come into focus. The two vampires he'd seen weren't alone. He detected dozens of unique voices and smells amongst them.

"And they're probably going to smell me too. It's not worth it."

As he turned to go back, Mace heard the door behind him open once again.

His chest tightened. "Damn." With no hiding place to speak of, Mace pressed forward into the stronghold. He listened for voices and turned the corner whenever someone came close, doing his best to keep a mental map of the place.

While fire had lit the passageway, he now knew it was more of an homage than anything else. Everything inside the stronghold was as modern as can be. It looked as though it had been redecorated within the last few years.

"Someone has good taste." He quickened his pace as he heard more and more voices approaching. "Just go in a circle, get back to the exit, and get the hell out of here."

In his mind, Mace had made the necessary three lefts to get back around to the entrance, but as soon as he saw the passageway, he realized his plan was screwed.

A half-dozen vampires stood in his way, as if they'd been expecting him the entire time.

The vampire who first showed him the way inside stepped forward. "It seems as though we have a bit of a rat problem."

Mace's mind plotted every possible scenario as he spoke. "I'd be happy to call the exterminator for you. Should I tell him to go to the basement unit?"

"Funny. I have a feeling she'll know exactly what to do with you."

Mace could feel the presence of another three gang members behind him.

These are not the best odds.

Mace crouched low before pressing hard off his heels and flying backwards through the air. The unprepared vampires behind him couldn't react in time as he landed past them and immediately engaged in a full-on sprint. Mace grabbed one of the flaming torches off the wall and used it right away to smash an attempted assailant in the face. When two more vampires passed by, he threw the torch at one of them and caught the other in the face with his boot. He didn't hesitate for a moment as he continued to sprint past them and the wave of vampires closed in behind him.

He had reached top speed when a leg he never saw coming swept under him and sent him slamming hard into the ground. Mace kicked up and turned toward the mystery attacker. Even the momentary slowdown was more than enough time for the other members of the clan to surround him. But they didn't faze him nearly as much as the identity of the woman who stood before him.

Mace knelt down before her. "Isn't this a surprise?"

The woman smiled as she looked down upon him. "It's nice to see you too, Brother."

Chapter 18

Lyra had gotten used to not flinching when she heard the crackling voices over her comm device. But she had difficulty not reacting when Doug spoke these words.

"I just wanted to let you know that Mace is currently missing. He was examining something about the reemerged Tuscan clan. I'll call you when I know more."

Lyra gripped the seat cushion beside her leg as Nikolai glanced in her direction.

"Is everything okay? I'm sure the mission is going to go fine."

She nodded. I'll be all right. Just a few pre-breaking-and-entering jitters is all.

Lyra's chest tightened. She had no clue what the Tuscan clan would do if they got their hands on Mace. Will they treat him like a beloved former son or a traitor?

Vanya cleared his throat from the other row of seats in the van. "Lyra, I think we got off on the wrong foot, no? This is important mission and it's best if we work on same team."

Lyra looked into the eyes of Nikolai's brother and ignored the sense that she was walking into a trap. "That's very big of you. After all, we'll be spending a lot of time together over the coming years."

Vanya seemed to hold back a laugh as he spoke. "Yes, for years. Maybe dog years, right brother?"

Lyra scrunched up her face as she looked toward the Russian beside her. "What does he mean dog years?"

Nikolai shrugged his shoulders. "Not sure. You know that my brother is quite crazy."

Vanya laughed to himself once again and turned back toward the front.

On the edges of her mind, something was starting to come into focus about the artifacts, but she couldn't quite place her finger on it. Before any grand revelations could be made, the van came to a stop.

Nikolai gripped her shoulder. "I will handle my brother. You just focus on staying close to me, right?"

Lyra tried to detect any hesitation or wavering in her fake boyfriend's voice. There was none. Either he was telling the truth or he was one hell of a liar.

"Right. You wolves lead the way."

The three of them exited the van to a rundown part of the city Lyra didn't recognize. She used her

powers of deduction to determine they were on the far Northwest Side, but beyond that, all she knew was that there were a lot of vampires nearby. Her ability to detect them hadn't wavered in the slightest over the last decade.

Vanya waved the two of them forward as they crouched down beside a former storefront that had long since lost its window.

"When you hear explosion, that is our cue. Me and the lover boy will take care of fanged friends, and you find that artifact. Good plan?"

Lyra nodded as the blast took her by surprise earlier than she expected. The ground shook beneath her as she saw a crater open up halfway down the block. The smile that spread across Vanya's face was unsettling to say the least.

He stuck out his tongue. "It is time for business."

Without a moment's hesitation, the Russian changed from human to grotesque wolf in a matter of seconds. He let out a howl and bared his teeth for Lyra to see.

She did her best "not impressed" face as she turned toward Nikolai.

"Have fun on all fours."

The Russian grinned. "I always do. Be careful in there."

Nikolai gave a stoic look as his transformation began as well. Unlike his brother, his wolf alter ego was well-kept and almost regal looking. He joined his wolfish brother and gave a nod in Lyra's direction.

She started off toward the crater. "Time to take you puppies out for a walk."

The wolfish Vanya howled once more and sprinted toward the vampire stronghold. His brother headed in his direction as well.

As she reached the improvised entrance, she could see the faint glimmer of an old symbol. On one of the walls, the ancient Tuscan clan logo was alive and well.

She shook her head. "I cut off the head, but it looks like the snake is still alive."

Chapter 19

Mace relaxed into his arm and leg restraints as he looked up into the eyes of Aella, his younger sister. As with most vampires, she aged quickly until she appeared to be in her 20s, only to stay that way for the rest of her life. Both of them were locked into an eternal youth that she appeared to wear well as the apparent new leader of the Tuscan clan. She'd been younger than him when their father died and the news broke about vampires being real. A hint of remorse washed over him as he realized he could have been a father figure to his sisters and brothers. After they were separated shortly after the bombshell dropped, he wasn't sure what had happened to any of his siblings. At least one mystery had just been cleared up for him.

Aella chuckled as she looked down at him. "I hope you like what I've done with the place. Father's tastes were a little old school for my liking."

Despite being in chains, he had to admit it was sort of nice to see her. "I should have known when I was snooping around. You always had a flair for art. Though I never pegged you for a clan leader."

Her tongue moved across her fangs. "Neither did I. But when the shit hit the fan, I had to fend for myself. You certainly weren't here to help me become a respectable member of society."

Mace ducked his head. "You're right. Me not being here certainly didn't help things."

Aella walked across the room and put her hand on his face. "I'm not mad at you, Brother. With you and everyone else out of the picture, I had to learn self reliance."

"You mean, you had to take over?"

"I may not have been next in the line of succession, but I was the only one available. There were challengers—" A sharp fingernail slowly sliced down the side of Mace's cheek. "But I handled them with a woman's touch."

The former prince ignored the stinging sensation on his face. "So, when given a choice to be good or to be a murderer, you picked being just like dear old Dad."

Aella let out a sharp pointed laugh. "Don't act so high and mighty. We struggled to survive just like you. Even considered trying to bring you in until we found out you became an agent of the FBI." She stepped over to her own bar and poured herself a drink. "Not to mention your whole secret society that stops all the bad unhumans thing everybody knows about."

He raised his eyebrows. "You do your homework."

She took a sip of the clear, strong-smelling liquid and bore her fangs. "We have to know everything that's going on. But you and your huntress are the least of our worries. For some reason, you seem to be aiding and abetting the wolves."

He watched his sister intently. "I'm not trying to help them. I just want to figure out what they're up to."

She shook her head. "You're going about it the wrong way. Torture is still the best way to get information."

"You and Lyra feel the same way."

"I'm not even going to get into the fact that you're canoodling with dad's murderer. I'm just here to tell you that the wolves are about to destroy the city you hold so very dear. And they couldn't have done it without your help."

He leaned toward her. "What do you mean? What do the artifacts do?"

She took another sip from her drink and sucked it through her teeth. "Apart, they're completely harmless." She stared right into his eyes. "Together, they create limitless chaos."

Just then, the ground shook beneath them as the echoes of an explosion reached their chamber. The electric lights that their father had been so hesitant to use all went out at once. The low light of torch flame was all that reached them from the hallway.

Mace tugged at his restraints. "What the heck was that?"

His sister gently placed her drink down on the bar and extended her long deadly fingernails. "They're here."

Chapter 20

Lyra could hardly believe her eyes. A stronghold of vampires she never knew existed was in perfect condition beneath the city. Well, perfect except for the giant crater the shifters had just blasted into the side of their secret hideaway.

She followed close behind the two wolves as the first wave of vampire guards moved forward. She crouched down to fight, but she need not have made the effort. Nikolai and Vanya quickly leapt into action, and with their claws and razor-sharp teeth, they tore through the necks of the vampire guards with ease. Before she knew it, half a dozen Tuscan vamps lay broken on the ground. She shook her head. "I should have kept a pet back in my hunter days."

She swore Nikolai turned back and flashed her a smile in wolf form, but it was tough to tell without his human veneer. When a noise reached their room from the left, Vanya went sprinting toward it. Nikolai followed close behind. She could sense the vampires all around her, but there was another energy inside. It was older and potentially more dangerous than the creatures with fangs or claws. The artifact was nearby, and she was the only one with the opposable thumbs to get it. As the shifters did their dirty work, she walked toward the vampires' cries.

As she moved in the direction of the energy, she wondered if the evil members of the vampire race could ever be snuffed out.

"I killed so many back in the day. And yet here they are right under my nose."

She sensed something coming up from behind her and ducked at just the right moment to avoid a sword-wielding vamp who'd gotten the drop on her. She felt nostalgic, wondering when she last fought a vampire one-on-one.

When the vamp approached again, three swift kicks to his arms sent the sword scuttling across the floor.

She winked at him. "Your move, Toothie."

The vampire growled and reached for her, and she easily slid under him and worked her way behind. An elbow to the back of his head sent him to the ground and instinct had her on top of him in a moment. It also had the stake in her hand and ready to strike.

As the vampire cowered beneath her, something stopped her from going through the motions.

This vampire did nothing wrong to me. And I'm the one who broke into his house.

She grunted and tossed the stake away before landing a solid punch in the center of his forehead. The vampire went limp and unconscious beneath her.

"You got me on a good day." She got to her feet and picked up the sword just in case. "Let's go find us some wolf art."

She listened to the chaos of the wolf infiltrators echo through the halls as she went down several corridors and found the artifact resting atop a pedestal. She snatched it from its perch and removed a shoulder bag from her pocket. "This doesn't really go with the place anyway."

As Lyra began jogging back toward the crater on the street, she heard the wolves galloping back toward her. She noticed Nikolai's limp right away.

Lyra knelt down and the wolf came right towards her. His mouth and fur was covered in blood, but from the smell, she knew that most of it wasn't his own. "That doesn't look too bad. Not deep at all."

Vanya growled in her direction.

She held up the artifact toward him. "Don't worry. I got it. Let's just get out and—"

The scent hit Lyra like a ton of bricks. She smelled vampires all over this place, some of whom were headed in their very direction. But that wasn't what shocked her. Mace was somewhere nearby in the stronghold.

She took the bag off her shoulders and laid it at her feet.

"You two go on without me. I've got something I need to do."

Vanya snapped in her direction with his teeth, but Nikolai clawed at him long enough for Lyra to get away unscathed. She kept the sword close by as she ran toward the smell of her partner. As it grew more intense, she continued to wonder exactly how they might treat the former prince.

"Be alive, you idiot. Just be alive."

Her heart beat faster as she sprinted toward the scent. When she reached a dead end, she realized the vampire was just through that wall.

"Mace!"

She heard a muffled sound from the other side, though she had no clue what the person said.

"I'm coming!"

As she prepared to lower her shoulder and blast through the wall, she heard a faint growling sound behind her. When she turned, she saw the wolf who hated her staring her down in a dead end. Vanya finally had her right where he wanted her.

Chapter 21

It didn't take long for Mace's eyes to adjust to the dim torchlight, though he could feel his nerves stretch with the far-off sounds of howling wolves. His sister didn't seem nervous in the slightest, in fact, she took another drink before placing it back down on the bar.

Mace strained at his shackles. "Aren't you going to do something? Aren't you the leader?"

Aella smirked. "I trust my generals. Obviously, you haven't had much management experience."

Mace gritted his teeth and did his best to rip his chains apart, but it was no use. "Let me out and I'll help."

She laughed. "Because I can trust you so much. Weren't you the one who sneaked in here in the first place?"

Mace heard the scream at the same time she did. While it was impossible to know which side was winning the battle outside the room, the vampire's death rattle seemed to indicate the tide of the battle.

"Look Sister, I promise that if you let me go right now, I'll make sure that we turn a blind eye to everything you do outside of murder."

Aella raised an eyebrow. "How generous of you."

Mace took a deep breath. "I know that I should have sought you out after vampires went public. I can't ever take that back. But if you let me go, I promise that I'll help you now."

When another scream followed by a throat gurgle wafted in from the other room, Mace's sister shook her head and dove toward her brother. With expert precision, her razor-sharp nails sliced through the powerful restraints, and Mace was once again free.

He nodded toward her. "Thank you."

Aella scrunched up her face. "Don't make me regret it." She looked toward the doorway. "You want some leadership? Come with me. Don't get killed."

Mace followed her lead. "You're practically Abraham Lincoln up in here."

"Minus the assassination I hope." She looked left and right. "By the way, if you break your word, I'll kill everyone on your team."

Mace didn't acknowledge the threat as he and his sister pressed forward. Almost immediately, Mace sensed the presence of three shifters sprinting toward them at top speed.

His sister smiled. "I like these odds."

As her claws grew longer in response to impending battle, Mace used his speed to catch one of the wolves by surprise. He tackled the lead shifter to the ground, and their two solid bodies rolled across the floor. When Mace slammed hard into the wall, the wolf took a swipe at his face. He caught the creature by the wrist and turned his arm against the socket. The shifter yelped and growled.

Mace winked. "You've been a bad, bad puppy."

With a swift punch to the shifter's jaw, the wolf went limp beneath him. His claws retracted, and the shifter went from doglike to human in a hurry. Mace didn't recognize the Russian who lay beneath him.

As he turned back toward his sister, he saw her claws slice through the throat of both of her attackers in quick succession. Their hairy bodies fell hard against the ground.

Mace frowned. "You could have captured them."

She wrinkled her nose. "Nothing is worse than a backseat fighter."

Just then, Mace picked up something he hadn't expected. Her smell was unique enough to make it to him from several rooms away.

Mace stood up. "It's her. I have to find her."

While her face remained neutral, her eyes told a story of hatred. "Go. I'll be fine on my own."

Mace met her eyes. "Thank you. I won't break my promise."

Aella said nothing as she turned her back on him.

Mace sighed and began to run once again. He dashed toward the smell of Lyra Thorne.

Let's hope she showed a little more restraint this time.

As he sidestepped half a dozen bodies along the path, he could now hear her as well. But as he reached the adjacent room, she wasn't the only thing he heard. He could hear growling and the gnashing of sharp wolf teeth as well.

Chapter 22

Lyra's hand was raw from alternately punching Vanya's solid wolf face and preventing him from clamping down on her arm. Vanya seemed to be tiring as well, and she wondered who would make a mistake first.

She grinned. "I guess all that talk of letting bygones be bygones didn't amount to much, huh Vanya?"

The wolf did nothing but growl in response as he ran toward her. Lyra once again removed the sword from the back of her pants and swung the blade in the Russian's direction as he came close. For the sixth time in a row, the wolf easily avoided the attack.

When she thought Vanya was vulnerable, she pushed off the wall with one leg and swung it toward the Russian's face. But Vanya was much less vulnerable than she supposed, changing directions in midair and clamping his jaw down on Lyra's calf muscle. The pain spread through Lyra's body like wildfire. Her leg locked up with agony, but her arms still worked just fine. With a quick swing, she lopped off Vanya's tail. The blood shot off in every direction as Vanya released his grasp on her leg. He whimpered and backed away, turning several times to examine the stump where his tail once lived.

Lyra took the opportunity to crouch down and examine her leg as well. Her eyes watered as she looked down at the wound, which almost seemed as though a shark had bit in and luckily hadn't torn her entire leg from her body. The blood seeped out onto the ground.

She clenched one fist in an effort to deaden the sensation. "No more treats for you."

Vanya snarled at the dog pun and ran toward her once again.

Her eyes lit up as she saw an opening and swung her sword. While she thought she had a clear path to the wolf's mouth, she hadn't expected Vanya's teeth to go straight through the blade. The metal crunched in his mouth, and the once-promising weapon was neutered.

She limped as she attempted to crouch down in a fighting stance. "That's all right. I like hand-to-hand better anyway..." As the blood loss increased, Lyra allowed herself to blink for just a second.

When her eyes opened, she saw Vanya a few inches away from her face. As she braced herself, a whoosh of air came streaming into the room. A blur her eyes didn't have time to register yanked the wolf out of the air and slammed him into the floor before he could get one claw on Lyra. When her

eyes could finally discover the identity of the blur, she wasn't surprised in the least. Mace threw fist after fist into the wolf's jaw. Lyra saw the blood and teeth exit the creature's mouth, complete with whimpers and growls. The Russian didn't stand a chance against a vampire with a crush.

When Mace finished his smackdown, he breathed heavily atop the wolf. The shifter gave one final whimper as he transformed back into human form. He didn't look much better than his wolf counterpart, as the blood and gaps in his mouth remained even after changing his shape.

The Russian spit blood toward Mace's eyes. The crimson missed the mark. "Try a fair fight. One man against one man."

Mace raised an eyebrow. "No thanks."

With one last swing, Mace's knuckles connected right between the Russian's eyes. With a groan, the crazy brother went silent.

Lyra took a deep breath and shook loose the cobwebs. "I was coming to save you."

He grinned as he stood. "We really should keep tabs on how many times we've saved each other."

Lyra fought the urge to give her vampire savior a hug as she looked back in the direction she'd come from. "I'm glad you're alive."

"How glad on a scale from 1 to 10? I want to make sure we include that data in our spreadsheet."

She waved him toward the doorway. "First, we get the artifact. Second, we do the data entry."

Mace's eyes twinkled as he followed close behind Lyra.

They reached the crater just as she heard the sound of a van starting. As she got back into the sunlight, she saw Nikolai in the passenger seat of the van with the bag draped across his shoulder.

She called out. "Nikolai! Wait!"

Nikolai met her eyes and smiled. He gave a short wave as the wheels from the vehicle peeled out, leaving them in the van's dust.

She growled and looked down at her still-bleeding leg. "Damn."

Mace put his hands on his hips. "I guess your boyfriend went home with another date."

Before Lyra could scowl in his direction, an attacker she didn't see coming leapt upon her back and wrapped an arm around her throat.

Lyra instinctively rolled forward, shedding the assailant and taking another roll to get to her feet. Her leg burned in response to the motion, and she turned back to face someone she didn't expect.

The creature scowled and extended her claws. "This is for my father, you bitch."

The vampire sprinted towards her, but once again Mace dove through the air and slammed the attacker to the ground.

Her vampire partner held the woman back. "Come on, Sis. There isn't any time for that."

Lyra's mouth hung open. "You have a sister? You have a sister who just tried to kill me?"

Mace's sister screamed beneath him. "She murdered our father, Mace. Doesn't that mean something to you?"

Mace pulled her to her feet. "The Russians got the last artifact. So unless stopping her is going to

save the city, you better start telling us what the hell that thing does."

The sister let out one last snarl before her temper seemed to cool.

Lyra could see the family resemblance now that she had a moment to look. The sister had Mace's eyes, as well as her father's ruthlessness.

The sister shook her head. "There's nothing you can do."

Mace grabbed her shoulders and shook. "Tell me what the artifacts do."

She looked him right in the eye. "You think a half dozen wolves is bad?" His sister's eyes moved toward Lyra's. "Imagine an entire city of them."

Chapter 23

As Doug moved the small sculpture to the “X” of tape in the spot Rhea had told him, he couldn't help but feel there was something missing. It was as if a portion of his brain had been temporarily removed. And when a person is as smart as Doug, even the smallest change is easily noticeable.

"Why do I feel this way? Did I eat a bad sandwich or something?"

He placed the ancient-looking sculpture down and faced it in the proper direction. Now all three pieces of art were in place. But for what reason?

"Rhea told me something about these. Right? There's some reason why I'm doing this?"

Not having the answers bugged the programmer and resident genius to his core.

Heidi walked into the room and gave her coworker a sideways glance. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Doug's forehead wrinkled. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"You know, some weird tracker device. You almost running into me in the hallway. Does any of this ring a bell?"

Doug had been known to hyper-focused sometimes so much that his interactions with people went out the window. But this seemed different and more unsettling.

He cleared his throat. "Sure. I found it. Thanks for checking in."

Heidi shook her head. "You're a terrible liar. I suppose that's probably a good thing in the long run." She looked down at the sculpture. "Rhea get a new decorator?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just the hired help."

But to what end?

Doug sighed. "I better get back to the office. It's been a while since Mace and Lyra checked in."

She nodded, a hint of skepticism remaining upon her face. "You know, that sculpture would look much better over—"

"Don't move it!"

Heidi put up her hands. "Why?"

"I'm not sure. Rhea said not to move it."

Heidi stared at her coworker. "I'm not sure what's gotten into you, Doug, but it's not a good look."

She turned and walked away.

As Doug tried to piece his last two days together, he placed the third and final sculpture in the area Rhea had instructed. The second it locked into place, he felt a low hum of energy. A warmth seemed to enter his chest, like he'd been wrapped in a blanket of protection.

As he stepped back to the control room, Rhea looked across the room from him. "How does that feel?"

"It feels good. Why does it feel good?"

She looked toward a monitor that showed a half dozen camera feeds in the Loop. "Sometimes you have to protect yourself against what's coming."

Before Doug could ask exactly what was coming, a ring came in on the comms. Doug pressed a blinking red button.

"What's happening?"

Lyra's voice echoed through the room. "I found Mace. We're headed away from the Tuscan stronghold; I need to know if the artifacts have moved."

Doug pulled up a new window on the monitor, which displayed the six artifacts he'd been tracking.

"Wait, weren't there nine?"

Doug shook his head and focused back on the monitor. "They are moving. Looks like they're headed downtown. Is there an artifact festival this week?"

Lyra's voice was rushed over the comm. "I would consider locking yourselves down if you can."

Doug looked toward Rhea, she didn't seem the least bit worried. "Why? Why do we need to lock ourselves down?"

Lyra sighed. "Because things are about to get hairy in Chicago."

Chapter 24

Once Lyra passed along the instructions to the cab driver, she could get back to her current purpose: berating Mace for his stupidity.

She wrapped her leg in a piece of fabric she'd torn from one of the dead vampire's uniforms. "How could you just go into the stronghold without any backup whatsoever?"

The vampire gritted his teeth. "If someone hadn't been too busy spending the night in a shifter's bed, maybe none of this would've happened."

She let out a sharp laugh. "I see. Now all of this is my fault."

Lyra watched cars whiz by as they got to a more populated area of the city.

Mace pointed his finger at Lyra. "You're the one who turned off your comms to do whatever it was you wanted to do with the wolf."

She shook her head. "You're jealous. You're jealous of anyone who gets to spend time with me. And because your jealousy has clouded your judgment, you let yourself get captured. They could've killed you."

The cab driver in front turned slightly to the back. "This seems like a private conversation. Is there any chance you could hold off until we get to—"

The driver's words began to change into screams. The car swerved from left to right as the human shook in the driver's seat.

Lyra turned her rage into focus. "Open your door, Mace."

Mace's eyes grew wide. "What?"

The car continued to swerve, now going even faster as the transformation came into full focus.

"Open your damn door!"

Mace tried the handle, but with the door locked, he was forced to resort to more primitive means.

Lyra watched as the vampire's fist slammed hard through the car. His hand left a hole in the vehicle, but the door still remained. Lyra checked the rearview mirror and saw that their driver had now fully become a wolf. He growled and strained at the seatbelt holding him in. The vehicle sped up and seemed destined to crash into the swerving vehicles in front of it.

Mace leaned back against her and used his feet to propel the door off his wrist and skidding along the ground below.

Lyra's heart pounded within her chest. "Go now!"

The two of them undid their seat belts and dove out the uncontrolled vehicle. Lyra's shoulder roll got her back up to standing on the blacktop in a hurry. Mace wasn't as lucky, slamming his legs and rolling along the street. When Mace finally came to a stop, she saw a pack of wolves behind him. Their clothes were tattered from the transformation, and they seemed interested in one thing alone.

Lyra screamed. "Mace, look out!"

Mace just avoided a swipe from two wolves that sprinted for him. As he stood, he pointed once again at Lyra.

"Look out behind you!"

Lyra turned to see another vehicle swerving out of control, and it wasn't the only one. She leapt at just the right moment, tapped her good leg on the top of the car, and came down in a crouch. Sharp pain shot through her injured calf as Mace reached her side.

"My sister apparently wasn't kidding. But we're not wolves."

Lyra took a long look around. Men, women, and children had all been changed into predators. And in their eyes, Mace and Lyra were the prey.

"Just supernaturally lucky I guess. We'd better find those artifacts."

Lyra and Mace sprinted away from the middle of the street and spied one of the wolf statues attached to a streetlight in the very center of town. Mace spotted it at the exact same moment. "There's another one across the street. It's like they're acting as some kind of magical beacon."

She nodded, but she couldn't help but notice that while they were scoping out the Loop's latest decorations, hundreds of wolves that had previously been shopping or walking were now prowling. And all of them seemed to have eyes for her.

Chapter 25

Mace glanced to his left and right, but wherever he looked, a wolf seemed to be circling toward them.

Lyra pressed her back against his as the wolves continued to build their presence. "Well, if we destroy one of these, it should break the spell, right?"

Mace grabbed the nearest weapon he could find, a hunk of a cement block he had to rip from the ground to lift. "Let's find out."

As the wolves continued to converge, their teeth bared, the vampire tossed the block through the air. Its aim was true, crashing hard into one of the artifacts. The wolf statue broke into a thousand pieces, but the wolves remained.

Lyra cursed under her breath. "What do we do?"

His nostrils filled with the smell of fur. "Start punching."

Mace didn't have to tell Lyra twice. Despite her injury, she flew through the air and began attacking whichever wolf was closest to her. The creatures struck with incredible efficiency, but she was faster.

Mace turned toward his own set of creatures. "Trust me when I say this is for your own good."

Mace's fists blazed through the line of wolves ahead of him. His knuckles cracked furry heads around him. Speed was his only weapon against numbers this ridiculous. As he knocked several wolves down, more creatures filled in the gaps to face him. When they leapt for him, he punched them in the underbelly. When they stood their ground, he went for the head. Before he knew it, two dozen wolves lay unconscious on the ground. But now any nearby wolf seemed poised to fill their spot from the surrounding city blocks.

The sound of hundreds of growling angry creatures surrounded them.

"Mace? Can you hear me?"

The vampire kicked one wolf into another trio, giving him a moment of respite. "Doug? You're still human?"

"It's a miracle. Now, it seems like the artifacts together created a magical frequency. If you're going to stop the frequency, you need to destroy all of them."

The vampire cracked one wolf with the back of his knuckles and swung his foot through the air to

take down two other assailants as well. "And that should turn everybody back?"

"That's what the data says."

"One plan is better than no plans." After knocking down another creature, Mace leapt off the shoulders of one wolf and propelled himself into the air. Wolves jumped up and swiped at him as he reached another streetlight. As he climbed up, he could see another artifact hanging from the top. He looked down at Lyra and noticed that while she was surrounded, the hunter knew how to hold her own.

He shimmied up the streetlight with incredible speed and cracked the artifact in half.

"Two down. Four to go."

He climbed atop the streetlight over 20 feet above the ground. Mace spied the third artifact across the street and leapt with all his might toward it. As he flew through the air, he didn't expect a shifter to be able to jump just as high. But, when the wolf creature grabbed Mace by the leg, the vampire knew he had no chance of reaching the other artifact. Mace attempted to reestablish his balance in midair as the shifter threw him down hard onto the middle of the street. The blacktop cracked beneath him as he tried to ignore the pain.

Landing softly beside him was the shifter who transformed back into human form.

Mace was surprised to see the smiling Nikolai staring straight at him.

"If it isn't jealous boyfriend. I hope you like what we have done with place."

Mace bent his knees and clenched his fists. "If it rains, this city's gonna smell a lot worse than usual."

Nikolai laughed. "Now, everyone will know what it is like to be wolf. And everyone who isn't so lucky will be first meal."

Mace sensed more wolves coming around behind him as his stare into Nikolai's eyes intensified. "You knew what was happening all along."

"Guilty as charged. Except no one will be left to charge me."

Nikolai easily transformed back into a hulking wolf figure. But as he took a step toward Mace, something whizzed past the side of the vampire's head and struck the creature in his hindquarters.

Nikolai yelped and growled as both of them turned toward the source of the projectile. Aella and a dozen vampires behind her walked proudly into the square. Mace's sister loaded the next crossbow bolt.

"It's about get *Twilight* up in here."

Chapter 26

As Lyra saw the dozen vampires streaming into the intersection, it was the first time she could remember ever being glad to see the unhumans in mass. She swung her leg around in a circle, keeping several approaching wolves at bay.

"Looks like the cavalry has arrived."

While she appreciated the support, 14 against an army of confused wolves and their shifter masters still didn't inspire much confidence. A wolf that, from the looks of her, used to be a housewife in mom jeans leapt for her back. Lyra ducked the assault and spun to sweep her leg into the other attackers who tried to take advantage. The endorphins had kicked in to reduce the pain of her leg, but it wasn't completely gone. Between that and constantly having to fend off what used to be a few hundred humans, she wasn't sure how much she could keep this up.

"I'm getting a little tired of doggie daycare. Sandwich Man, you got anything that can help?"

Doug's voice was frantic on the other line. "This is happening throughout the city. Unless you get to those artifacts, I'm not sure what we can do from here."

Lyra leapt forward to avoid another attack and planted herself beside one of the city's parking meters. She braced herself and tore it out of the ground. Quarters flew out into the street, clanging as they went. She swung the meter like a bow staff, keeping an ambitious trio of wolves away.

"Great. Anybody know any other vampires' gangs we can get our hands on?"

Mace grunted on his comm. "I don't exactly have them on speed dial."

Lyra twisted herself like a top, swinging the meter in every direction. The wolves kept their distance, but they seemed to be growing feistier and hungrier with every passing minute.

Lyra spied one of the remaining artifacts in throwing range. She took the parking meter in one hand, wound up, and threw it like a javelin. The metal pole whirled through the air as it struck another artifact right in the center. The sculpture shattered as she prepared herself for the next onslaught of wolves. "That's half of them."

Lyra could see the other magical artifacts mocking her from across the street. Between her and them was a battlefield she couldn't see any way to cross.

"I could really do with a tidal wave right about now."

As she punched four more wolves to knock them to the ground, the kernel of an idea began to

expand.

"Doug, we need a storm. We need a tornado."

The computer programmer seemed confused on the other line. "I'm not exactly sure what you mean. We don't control the weather."

Lyra pushed a diving wolf hard in the chest. It crashed into several more approaching creatures. She flipped backwards over another attacker and back-handed the wolf who tried to take advantage. Her arms started to grow numb with the flurry of attacks.

"I don't mean an actual tornado. Tap into the city's controls and set off a tornado warning."

She could hear Doug's mouth open wide on the other line. "I think I know where you're going with this. Just give me a second."

Lyra watched as half a dozen wolves circled around her. It wasn't hard to tell that they planned to strike at the exact same moment.

She breathed heavily. "Not a problem, Doug. Take all the time you need."

"You called me by my real name."

"Set off the damn alarm!"

Lyra tightened her body and readied it for the assault as the alarm began sounding throughout the city streets.

The sound echoed loudly against the buildings. She looked intently at her would-be assailants and watched as one of the wolves lifted his head into the air and started howling.

Chapter 27

Mace didn't have time to cover his ears to block the deafening noise that engulfed the city streets. But after landing one final blow on one of the wolves beside him, he watched as wolf after wolf lifted their heads and joined the city's alarm system. As he spied so many of the converted humans joining the chorus, something unexpected happened. Not only did the street open up considerably for the quest to take down the remaining three artifacts. He could also tell from the wolves who weren't howling, exactly who the shifters were. From the corner of his eye, Mace saw Lyra dash across the street and obliterate one of the remaining artifacts with a powerful kick.

Two left.

Mace followed suit, running through the howling creatures and grabbing one of the statues from its high-up perch. He tossed it to the ground, where it fractured into hundreds of pieces. He landed on the street beside it.

One to go.

As Mace's eyes darted over to the final artifact, he could see a wolf with no interest in howling at the base of the streetlight. As Mace began walking over, he spied the former hunter sprinting toward the artifact and the shifter. But she never made it half way. A bloodied and massive shifter who could only have been Nikolai's brother tackled her to the ground and began slicing at her face.

Mace was about to rush to her side when a shout entered his comm.

"Get the statue, Mace. Just go get it!"

His heart stung a bit as he followed directions. He stared down the only shifter who wasn't currently engaged in combat with the vampires.

Mace wiped the sweat from his brow. "Nikolai. I'd say your undercover assignment is over."

The shifter smiled a bit before clenching his teeth together in a growl. Mace ran toward him, but the wolf was faster than he expected. Before the vampire had a chance to react, the shifter had sped through the air and clamped his teeth down on Mace's shoulder. Mace whipped his elbow into the creature's face, which knocked him off and revealed the massive wound the shifter had left behind. As Nikolai came in for another speedy attack, Mace dove to the ground, but a sharp set of claws tore through his shirt and his back on the way past.

The vampire kipped up to standing and felt the pain of the two assaults throughout his body.

Straightening his back was nearly impossible, but he wasn't about to slouch in front of the shifter bastard.

"Is that all you've got?"

Mace could swear he heard the wolf laugh as he leapt in once again. But this time, the vampire was ready. He circled his arm over Nikolai's outstretched paw and tightened his grip hard. Before the wolf could clamp down his teeth, Mace let loose with his free arm. He wasn't sure quite how many body blows he unleashed on the wolf, but he could feel one punch in particular absolutely tear through the shifter's ribs. Nikolai's wolf face went from angry to frightened in a hurry as Mace continued to strike time after time. When the vampire finally let go, Nikolai wobbled on shaky paws. Mace didn't give him any space to stabilize, however, as he leapt high for a superman punch and slammed his fist down just behind the wolf's neck. The shifter's legs splayed out as he slammed into the street with his chest.

Mace held back instincts that told him to clamp down on the shifter's neck. "Why'd you even do this? Why would you want the city to all be like you?"

The vampire watched as Nikolai's body changed back from wolf to human.

The Russian seemed to have a lot of trouble breathing, as if his lungs were on the verge of collapse. "We didn't find artifacts ourselves. A vampire helped us."

Mace shook his head. "No vampire is going to work with a shifter."

The Russian ignored Mace's words. "Yes, he led us right to artifacts. It was very generous of your father to help us."

Chapter 28

Lyra could hardly believe Nikolai's brother had anything left after their previous encounter, but she supposed that a little bit of crazy went a long way. She pressed her legs against the shifter's chest and kicked him high into the air. As she rolled back to standing, she marveled at the shifter's mid-sky-flip and redirection. The shifter landed back on all fours with ease.

"I guess they do always land on their feet."

Vanya briefly transformed back into his human form. "That is cats. You humans never understand shifters. So we make you all become them."

She smirked. "Looks like you left one of us out. It's a pity."

"You will not become wolf. You will become corpse."

Vanya shifted back and ran for her with incredible speed. She tried to punch him as he arrived, but the wolf clawed her arm out of the way and slammed her hard in the chest. Lyra lost her balance and felt the impact of a car's hood beneath her. She turned to her left and noticed the wrist Vanya had clawed was bleeding profusely. When she turned back toward the fight, the Russian was already on top of her. First he clawed at her chest. Then the side of her face. The warm trickle of blood from all her wounds began to coat her body. She could feel darkness press in from the corner of her eyes.

Vanya reared back his wolfish head and made one final leap for her neck. Lyra gripped down hard on the metal behind her and rolled at the last second, taking the entire hood of the car with her. She heard the crunch from Vanya as the creature bit into the car's engine. His teeth seemed to tear through it as easily as he'd ripped the sword blade earlier.

Lyra held the hood with one hand as Vanya quickly turned and rushed toward her. As he leapt into the air with a snarl, Lyra kicked hard in the exact right spot. Her aim was true, connecting with the unhuman's throat. Vanya's trajectory changed drastically as the wolf fell to the street, clutching at his neck while he tried to breath. Lyra leapt toward him and placed her foot on his chest.

She held the car's hood high in the air. "I guess you won't be the best man at me and Nikolai's wedding after all."

With impeccable speed, she slammed the metal object straight through the wolf's throat. The attack was so quick that her improvised weapon easily severed the shifter's head.

She turned away from the gushing blood and convulsing wolf body and looked toward the final

artifact. She could see Mace standing nearby, but he seemed to be dealing with a shifter of his own.

She grabbed the bloody car hood and set her feet. "And here I haven't played Frisbee since college."

With a flick of her wrist, Lyra threw the hood like a disk. It traveled over the howling wolves, the fighting vampires, and the dying shifters. As the metal object connected with the sculpture, she could feel a wave of magic shoot through the air. When the artifact shattered, the transformations began immediately. The wolves, who had minutes ago been aiming for her throat, shifted back into humans in tattered clothes. They looked down at their hands and bodies, wondering what on earth had just happened.

Lyra ran towards Mace, who appeared to have Nikolai right where he wanted him.

The former hunter ignored the Russian. "We have a lot of confused people here. It's probably a good idea to get a team out here."

Mace looked down at the coughing Nikolai and back up to Lyra. "According to your fake Russian boyfriend, all of us have one hell of a problem."

Chapter 29

Lyra stood across from the battered Nikolai in one of the pristine rooms of the headquarters 10 stories beneath the Hancock Tower. She crossed her arms and looked into the eyes of a shifter she'd thought could be different.

"I'm surprised you'd go to all this trouble for a family you didn't see eye to eye with. Or was that a lie too?"

Nikolai smiled, though it appeared as though it pained him to do so. "Women are always trying to change men. The case is no different here."

Lyra shook her head. "I don't think I wanted to change you, so much as hope that you weren't an asshole trying to take over the city."

"I don't think you understand the plan." He winked. "We weren't trying to lead. The hope was chaos. Chaos was what we got."

Lyra scratched her head. "Then why work with Mace's father? How is Mace's father even alive?"

Nikolai's eyes twinkled. "I keep thinking back to that night in bed. If things were different, maybe you would have wolf child inside you."

Lyra shuddered at the thought. She had found Nikolai attractive, that much was true. But for some reason, she thought of Mace's reaction above anyone else's.

"Just tell me how the Tuscan King is still alive. That's all you need to do."

Nikolai raised one eyebrow. "Is not too late, you know. You turn off cameras. You take off shirt. Everything can be as it was a few days ago."

Lyra slapped the shifter hard in the face. His hands instinctively reached toward his now-red cheek, but the restraints wouldn't let him get that far.

He shifted his jaw from side to side. "Violence always comes from truth. Just undo restraints and I will be happy to give pleasure."

Lyra considered hitting him again with all her might, but she was worried an attack like that might leave him in the same state as his brother.

"Rhea, Mace? We're gonna have to get creative."

The vampire and their leader walked into the room. She was impressed that Mace looked a few shades shy of wanting to tear a hole through the shifter's chest. She lamented that she'd yet to say

anything about the news related to his father.

Rhea lifted her small, wrinkled hands and a bubble of purple magic appeared between them. "Creative, you say? I'm happy to oblige."

Nikolai struggled in his restraints. "What is witch doing? You cannot make me say a word."

Rhea smiled. "A creature formed so long ago, with no knowledge of the magic the world possesses." Rhea let the bubble of magic leave her hands, allowing the mystical purple sphere to float across the room and enter the shifter's mouth.

Even Mace seemed impressed as the shifter gagged several times before the words tumbled out of his mouth.

"Was coalition of unhumans who brought Tuscan King back to be our leader."

Lyra shook her head. "How is that even possible?"

The Russian continued undeterred. "Once he was back, he worked with my father to create plan that would open door."

Mace stared toward the shifter with steely resolve. "Open the door for what?"

Nikolai laughed, as if he only just realized what truths he'd revealed. "There is army of unhumans coming. Now that you stop them once, they will come back faster, bigger, and angrier." Nikolai's smile turned into horror. "No, no. I would never tell you." His eyes locked on Rhea. "You wretched witch. My father will tear your throat out."

Rhea nodded toward the shifter. "Let him come." She looked around at Lyra and Mace. "I think we have the information we need."

Mace touched his hand to his forehead. "So my father is really still alive? How did they even—"

"Very dark magic. Ancient magic that hasn't been seen in millennia." Rhea turned towards the door. "Magic that means there's a war brewing. And it's going to be very, very difficult to stop."

With that, the old, powerful woman stepped back into the hallway.

Mace gave Lyra a look. "You need any help getting him to holding?"

She shook her head. "Thanks."

Mace ducked his head and walked through the door.

Lyra felt herself reach for him. The creature who'd created him. The unhuman she herself had killed was back in the world, somehow. Killing him had nearly ended her life the first time. She wasn't sure if she had it in her to do it again.

Nikolai cleared his throat. "You have ruined my life. I hope that makes you feel terrible."

She sighed. "Oh, you're still here. I forgot you existed."

"If you truly want to forget, let me go, and you'll never hear from me again."

She smiled to herself. "Wouldn't that be nice? If we could just forget everything you did wrong and every lie?" She walked up to the Russian and grabbed him by the shirt. "That's not how things work. Life has consequences, and where you're going, nobody will ever hear from you again."

Nikolai's eyes turned cold. "But Lyra. I was just following the family business. You have to

understand."

She grabbed the back of Nikolai's transportation unit. "Tell it to the wall you'll be staring at for the next hundred years."

Chapter 30

Mace took a sip from his latte and placed it back down on the table as he waited for his sister to say something.

The two of them had been almost silent since Mace revealed that their father was still alive. His sister seemed absolutely dumbstruck by the news.

Aella's hand shook on her mug of hot chocolate. "How? Who would do such a thing?"

Mace shook his head. "Apparently, someone who wants to start a war."

His sister ran her hands through her hair. "Look, Mace, you aren't the only one who isn't interested in killing humans. That's why we came and helped, but if he's still alive—the others aren't going to follow me anymore."

Mace held out his hand, and his sister took it. He looked up into her eyes. "You don't know that. It's possible to prove that not all vampires are bad."

She only met his eyes for a second before looking away and down toward the table. "I'm just not sure what to do."

Mace chewed at his cheek. "I have no clue either."

Aella looked up. "Come back to the stronghold. You and I can lead together. Then maybe we have a chance at challenging Dad's power if he comes back."

"I'm not sure, Sis."

She squeezed his hand. "Things can be different. We'll stop doing all of the things you don't approve of."

He sighed. "I don't think it can ever work. I've got my calling, and you've got yours."

His sister bit her bottom lip. "Just don't say no right now. Think about it, will you? I'm not sure if I can do this without you."

Mace wasn't sure what to do. They'd need every ally they could get if a war was truly happening. But he wasn't sure if he was ready to draw up the battle lines quite yet.

"Okay. I'll consider it." He stood up and tossed down a ten-dollar bill. "We should see each other more often."

Aella nodded. "I would like that. I'll see you around."

"See ya."

As Mace arrived home, he saw someone sitting on his doorstep. He wasn't sure how long Lyra had occupied the stoop outside his front door.

Mace walked up the steps and sat down beside her. "How's the healing?"

Lyra flexed and unflexed her leg. "Dougie Boy's medical devices sure are something." She turned toward him. "I wanted to tell you sorry."

"For what?"

She scoffed. "Oh, come on, Mace. I muted the comms to piss you off. It pissed you off. It didn't really make me feel any better, so I'm sorry."

He laughed. "I was acting like a jerk. So, no apology necessary."

She sighed. "You think Nikolai's right? You think there's really going to be a war?"

Mace looked into her eyes. "If my dad's involved, then it's certainly possible. If all the unhuman gangs got together, they could cause some serious havoc."

Lyra and Mace sat in silence for a little while. Mace continued to look forward when he finally broke the pause. "But if there really is something coming, I completely understand where you were coming from. We need to keep things professional. We need to keep our priorities straight."

Lyra almost seemed a little disappointed at his words before she nodded in agreement. "Look at me, a new trendsetter for being logical."

Mace grinned. "Come here." He opened his arms and enveloped Lyra in a hug. He could feel her warmth sinking into him, and he wished for a second the world was a different place. He wondered if someday it would make sense for the two of them to be together.

After the hug had lingered a few seconds too long, they broke off and nodded at each other in sync. Lyra stood up and began to walk away.

Mace felt the words come to him all of a sudden. "Lyra, wait!"

Lyra turned and raised an eyebrow.

Mace smiled. "No more blind dates, okay?"

Lyra chuckled. "I'll consider it."

The former hunter gave a wave and walked off out of view.

As Mace sat there on the stoop for the next few hours, he thought far too deeply of the horrors his resurrected father could bring upon the world.



Hello, dear reader! If you plan to continue with this series, there's an epilogue...but I suggest you stop here if you don't like cliffhangers and don't plan to continue.

Thanks for reading!

EPILOGUE

Rhea examined one of the half-shattered artifacts in her hands. It wasn't until closer inspection that she realized she actually knew the designer of the magical object hundreds of years ago. This wasn't the only set of such sculptures in the world, and for many years they had intentionally remained separate. Upon seeing them together, she truly understood their purpose.

"I figured out what you did to me."

Rhea broke off her train of thought and looked up at Doug, who appeared as angry as she'd ever seen him.

She pursed her lips. "It was only a matter of time. After all, I recruited you because you could figure things out, not because you were a sheep."

Doug looked straight through her. "How many times have you done that to me? How many times have you used your magic to erase my memories?"

She sighed. "Doug, I only do these things for—"

"How many times, Rhea?"

She placed the half sculpture back down on the table in front of her. "Six."

Doug appeared shocked by the news and looked toward the other walls of the room, as if he'd find some support there. "If you knew you had the magic that would potentially protect the city, why didn't you do something to stop this? A lot of innocent people could've died."

She walked toward him. "There are certain things that must come to pass for the world to move forward. I could tell this was something that I wasn't supposed to intervene in."

Doug looked down at the floor and then back at her. "Can you really see the future?"

Rhea locked her fingers together. "For the longest time I could. Sure, changes could occur over the hundreds and thousands of years, but I could see it as it was supposed to happen."

"What do you mean you could see it?"

She took a deep breath. "I had always hoped it was a mistake. But the future always seemed to be black after a certain point. The future ended at that point."

Doug frowned. "But it wasn't a mistake."

"A thousand years ago, I assumed it was a blip. Something we'd skip over. A hundred years ago, I got more concerned. But there's still nothing left after a certain point."

"When?"

She opened her eyes wide. "You know that if I tell you I'm going to have to erase your memory."

He managed a slight smile. "I know."

She turned away and looked back toward the artifact. "As far as I can tell, the world as we know it will be gone in six months." She turned back toward Doug. "All of us have six months to live."

The End



We're currently working on future installments in this series. Keep up with us on our websites. Thanks for reading!

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Casey Lane has written or co-written six novels, including *The Viral Superhero Series* and *Cinderella Dreams of Fire*.

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KIN SELECTION

A SHIFTER'S CLAIM NOVELLA

L.B. GILBERT

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KIN SELECTION

Animal activist Denise Hammond had no idea the wolf cub she just rescued was a shifter—not until the werewolf sent to recover him kidnapped her.

Saving a wolf cub from an animal-testing facility changes everything for Denise Hammond, a feisty and dedicated animal activist. Determined to protect the innocent pup, she's shocked when the cub shifts into a toddler right before her eyes.

Yogi, a wolf shifter, is bound by honor to keep his species' existence a secret. He kidnaps Denise and takes her to the cub's family to make her prove her trustworthiness. Knowing a hellion with curves like hers is the ultimate temptation for the other males in his pack, Yogi stays close to Denise, fighting to keep his desire for her under control. But she just might ignite the animal within him.

Chapter 1

“Denise, if you don’t get moving right now, we’re going to be arrested!”

Denise Hammond bit her lip and stared at the wolf cub on the other side of the bars. The little thing was crying, its paws pressed to the door of the cage just under her hands.

Reliance Research wasn’t supposed to be doing animal testing on anything bigger than a rat. Between this cub and the chimps now in the van, her team had been right to target this place. But what was she supposed to do now?

Unlike the other cages in the adjoining room, this one had a digital combination lock. Even with her repurposed ATM decoder, it would take more time than she had to get the cage door open.

She spun around, checking the dimly lit lab space for anything that would help her. The facility was a series of converted warehouses, whose big storage rooms had been divided into a bunch of smaller ones. There were no other cages save for the wolf cub’s in the central laboratory. Most of the space was taken up by lab benches and shelves full of chemicals that lined the plain white walls.

Unfortunately, there were no crowbars handy. Not even a misplaced plumber’s wrench.

“I’m serious.” In Denise’s Bluetooth earpiece, Karen’s voice was getting louder. “We’ve got to get out of here! The guards will be passing on their rounds any minute. Denise, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here. Lower your voice,” she whispered.

“Why aren’t you out yet? The rest of us are in the van. We’ve got the chimps. We’re done, but you’re way behind schedule. Any second and the guard will check the lab.”

Shit. “I can’t go yet,” she whispered. “There’s another animal here. A wolf cub.”

Another voice cut in. “Damn it, Denise. You can’t save them all. The chimps were our priority. Get your fat ass out here,” Max hissed.

A cutting response rose to her lips, but she heard footsteps in the distance. She gripped the bars weakly, her hands starting to sweat in her gloves. Wincing, she stared down at the little wolf. Max was right. She was out of time.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Inside the cage, the wolf whined. Its eyes seemed to plead with her not to leave it behind.

The footsteps were louder now, closer than she expected. *Frak.* She’d miscalculated. The guard was outside the door. Denise spun, diving for the only cover at hand—a narrow space between a lab

bench and a poorly placed equipment shelf. When she squeezed between them, she cursed her plentiful curves as the metal drawer handles dug into her thigh.

Max wasn't wrong about her ass. However, as her new boyfriend, he was supposed to be less of a jerk about it. But Max had never received the how-to-be-a-supportive-partner memo.

Maybe getting involved with one of her teammates hadn't been the brightest idea. *Whatever*. She would deal with that later—possibly after she got out of jail.

The guard was inside the room now. Denise held her breath, her eyes so wide they hurt. Across the room, the little wolf was still looking at her as the security guard stepped closer. Denise could see a bit of the man's pant leg as he moved to the occupied cage. Praying the little cub wouldn't start yipping or do anything that would give her away, she put a finger to her lips, silently shushing it.

Please don't bark.

The little wolf cocked its head, then moved it up and down. Denise blinked. Had the animal nodded at her? Impulsively, she gave it a thumbs-up.

What the hell am I doing? The cub couldn't understand her. She had to focus and figure a way to get out of here, or everything she'd worked for would be over.

Except... the cub nodded again. Or at least it appeared to before it sat on the floor of the cage, resting its head on its paws.

Okay, the stress of being caught was making her crack up. *Crap*. The guard had moved to the left. All she saw was the back of his head. If he turned around now, he'd see her crammed between the shelves.

Moisture pricked and began to trickle between the valley of her breasts. Would the guard hear if a drop of sweat hit the tiled floor?

"Hey, Jackson, did the lab coats order the chimps moved?"

There was the crackle of a radio. "I don't know. Why?"

"Well, obviously cause they're not there."

There was silence for a minute before the voice on the on the radio came back. "They don't have anything down in the schedule, but weren't they due to start testing that new drug soon? They probably forgot to file the paperwork again."

"Well, we have to call them to make sure," the guard in front of her said.

More silence, then the voice broke through the static. "I can't find the number."

The guard in front of her swore. "Sure you can't."

"Just come back and find it for me."

"Fine. But you're still making the call. I don't want to talk to the asshole in charge either."

"It's *your* turn," the voice on the radio protested.

"The hell it is. I did it last time—when the fire alarm short circuited."

"Fine, whatever. If Mr. High and Mighty didn't want to be bothered at home, he should have forced the brass to upgrade the wiring in this place. Hold on, I'm coming back."

The guard moved out of view, his fading footsteps indicating he was walking away. Denise knew he had left the room when the little wolf stood up, its head swinging between her and the direction of the door. It was almost as if it were trying to tell her the coast was clear.

Denise hurried back to the cage. "Okay, little buddy. I owe you for that one." Without stopping to think of the likelihood of success, she ran to the other side of the room and grabbed one of the lab carts. She sprinted back to the cage and lifted the whole thing onto the cart with an audible grunt.

"Don't bark," she ordered the pup, praying it would remain quiet until she reached the facility's side door. Half-running, she pushed the cart toward her designated exit, wincing every time the wheels squeaked.

By the time she reached the exit, she was panting. But she didn't stop. Taking a deep breath, she flipped the handle and shoved, wedging the cart into the opening and pushing with her hip to widen the gap enough to get it through.

It was dark outside. There was no armed guard pointing a gun at her. No spotlight shone down as she hustled the cart beyond the trees where the van was waiting. But the reception from her team left a lot to be desired.

Max was standing at the door. "Damn it, Denise, what the hell? You got the dog anyway."

She ignored his bluster. "It's a wolf cub. Now help get this in the back."

"No, you idiot. It won't fit."

Her blood heated. *If he called her an idiot one more time...*

She glared at him. "It will fit. So just open the door and make room."

"I'm telling you it won't fit. Why don't you ever listen to me?"

Maybe because you're an immature jagoff?

"It's my van. If it doesn't fit, I will take the cage and leave you here instead. Now open the door and make room. We don't have much time. The guards have already noticed the chimps are gone."

Max swore under his breath, but he finally yanked open the door. The long bed of the van was crowded, but by stacking the cages, they could fit all four inside.

"Go!" She waved him to the passenger side and ran to jump into the driver's seat.

"This is a bad idea," Karen said from her crouched position in front of the cages. "The dog is going to get the chimps all riled up."

Denise fastened her seat belt. "Again, it's a wolf cub, not a dog. And it's too late. If you wanted quiet, we should have drugged the chimps."

That had been a point of contention for the group. To carry off the rescue quickly and efficiently, she had suggested using a small amount of animal tranquilizer. They needed to keep the poor animals from hooting and screeching during the extraction or the guards would come running.

Her arguments had been rejected. According to them, drugging the animals was cruel. The fact that the excitable chimps would get them caught without sedation didn't seem to matter.

The others, Karen in particular, argued they would be no better than the monsters experimenting

on them if they drugged them. Only Max had agreed with Denise, and that was probably because they were dating.

She sighed. *I may have to rethink the team's composition.*

Denise was the organizational force behind their little band. She had originally chosen the members of the rescue team according to their degree of commitment to the cause, but that had clearly been a mistake. They needed dispassionate and methodical thinkers if they were going to keep doing this without getting arrested.

"The chimps were being quiet before you brought that damn dog in here," Karen said with an annoying cluck of her tongue.

Because I drugged them anyway... She couldn't let the plan fail because members of her team were too soft.

The chimps had been gibbering quietly since they picked them up. They were making more noise now, but it wasn't the earsplitting screech they would've made without the partial sedation she'd secretly administered.

"Listen, we are a democracy—"

Denise's temples were starting to throb. "Karen, stop yelling. I made an executive decision on the fly to save a life. That's why we're doing this after all, isn't it? We just saved an innocent wolf pup—one that is not even barking right now—so can we argue about this at the next meeting?"

"What good will that do after the fact? It's not like you listen to anyone else anyway."

Denise focused on the road ahead, but silently conceded Karen had a point. She'd been doing this on her own for a while before deciding to take on bigger targets. Larger research facilities meant more test animals. Unable to handle the job alone, she'd formed a team. But a lot of the time, she still acted like she was flying solo...

She sighed, turning right onto the highway. "Let's just wait until we're in the clear before we continue with this discussion."

Karen muttered something under her breath that sounded like *bitch*, but Denise ignored her. Karen was the veterinary technician in their group. She worked at a zoo and had experience treating primates. Denise needed her too much to cut her loose, but maybe she could convince the woman that she could serve their goals better by joining the second team—the one that transported the animals to the nature preserve.

"That reminds me. I need to ask you for a huge favor." She looked in the rearview mirror, trying to gauge Karen's reaction. "I meant to talk to you about it earlier, but I think it would be a good idea if you went with the chimps to Zambia."

Karen poked her head between the two seats. "Me? I...I have to work."

"Can't you call in sick?"

The vet tech sounded uncertain. "I don't have enough vacation days."

"Would it be possible to get some unpaid leave? I can cover you as long as you make sure the

animals get where they need to go in good health.”

“Um...”

“I would *really* appreciate it.”

Karen thumped the seat behind her. “You know what? I’ll do it. I’m going to call my boss now.”

Beside her, Max snorted. No doubt, he’d be using this in an argument later. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d accused her of being manipulative.

Denise didn’t see it that way. She was a problem solver—more concerned with getting results than soothing bruised egos. There weren’t enough hours in the day for that. Besides, Karen always had dark circles under her eyes. An all-expense paid trip to Zambia might be exactly what she needed.

Twenty minutes later, Denise was pulling behind the abandoned gas station on the edge of a tiny no-name town. Parked in a break in the tree line was another vehicle—a truck this time. It was attached to a horse trailer.

They transferred the still-drowsy chimps with a minimum of fuss, something none of the others thought to question.

Even Max didn’t appear to catch on to what she’d done. “You guys are cute, but lazy little bastards, aren’t you?” he asked them before poking her in the ribs too hard. “Now we know why they lost the evolutionary arms race.”

Intent on getting the chimps unloaded as quickly as possible, Denise simply gave him a tight smile. Her teeth were gritted to keep from correcting him on what that term actually meant.

As the others finished up, she changed the plates on the van and added matching decals to the side panels. Once they were in place, the van looked older, like a seventies throwback. A few strategically placed dirt smears cemented the transformation.

Denise studied her work critically and decided it would pass muster in the dark. Even a cop at a checkpoint would most likely fail to recognize the van unless they looked very closely.

Here’s hoping no security feeds caught it in the first place.

The chances of that were slim. Reliance Research was in an isolated corner of Wyoming, a few hours from the Colorado border. The nearest town was ten miles away, a place with a budget too tiny to have traffic cameras. The facility only had a handful that were easily avoided. As the guards had pointed out in their argument, their budget had not gone toward infrastructure or security.

“What are we going to do with the cub?” Max asked. “You’re not planning to send it to Africa, are you?”

“No, of course not. We’ll take it with us, at least until I figure out what to do.”

Max shuffled his feet. “Oh yeah, about that. I was thinking I could maybe tag along with the chimps or something. The second team probably needs help.”

He looked at Karen—or more precisely at her low-cut sweater and skinny thighs—and shrugged.

Denise’s lips parted. “*Oh.*”

Blinking hard, she fought to mask her reaction. The sudden lump in her throat made that difficult. “If you think you can help them, knock yourself out. But first, I’d appreciate some help with the pup’s cage. See if you can open it,” she said, handing over the decoder device.

Your voice was steady enough. She hadn’t given herself away. Denise turned, needlessly adjusting the decal one more time as he went to work on the lock.

Why am I even upset? She had just been thinking he was an ass. But he’d been *her* ass.

Apparently, that was about to change.

After a few minutes, Max called out to her. He’d managed to unlock the cage. *Well, at least you’re good for something.* Leaving the cage unlocked but fastened with wire, she shut the van doors and casually waved goodbye.

Denise waited until she was a few miles away before letting a few tears slip down her cheeks.

It doesn’t matter. I don’t care. She was used to being on her own. That was the primary reason for dating him in the first place—to stave off loneliness. But it hadn’t exactly been a match made in heaven.

Behind her, the pup yipped, and she snorted, remembering she wasn’t as alone as she thought. “Well, I guess it’s just you and me, kid.”

The little animal yawned as it curled up on the floor for a nap.

Chapter 2

“Son, it’s Douglas.”

Yogi Kane scowled at the road ahead and adjusted his Bluetooth earpiece.

Why was the chief calling him? His mind leapt to the worst-case scenario and he yanked on the steering wheel, pulling his Jeep over to the side of the road.

“Are Sal and Sammy all right?”

He’d talked to his younger sister and brother just yesterday. Everything had been fine, but he knew from experience things could change in an instant.

“Yes, they’re okay. It’s not them.”

He exhaled a pent-up breath. “What’s going on? Is it Connell or Mara?”

The chief’s children were his closest friends. They had stuck with him through his family’s recent troubles, making a show of their friendship and giving him and his siblings their unconditional support. Not everyone in the pack had been so generous.

Douglas paused. “Actually, this is about one of the Averys.”

The Averys. If there was a werewolf equivalent to the Hatfield and McCoy feud, it was the conflict between his family and the Averys. His father had railed and ranted about them for years...

“Yogi, you still there?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m sorry. What’s going on?”

“Do you remember the girl Santiago married? The human named Sheri? She’s missing, presumed dead.”

“That’s fucked up,” Yogi said, wondering where Douglas was going with this.

He only met Sheri once. She was a quiet and timid woman, small in stature. Jessup Avery’s son, Santiago, had taken her as a mate a few years ago. Santiago had died unexpectedly last year while doing another tour as a ranger, but Yogi didn’t know anything about him or his family beyond that.

“They have a baby boy,” Douglas continued.

“They do?”

“We need you to look for them.”

“Me?”

“Logan thinks they’re near you.”

Logan, the Air Elemental and Connell's mate, had a freaky way of finding things out. Part witch and part force of nature, she could do impossible things—crazy shit Yogi had only seen in superhero movies. *And that's coming from a werewolf.*

Yogi had seen proof of Logan's skill and magic firsthand. If she said he was near Sheri and her kid, then he probably was. Of course, with her powers, she could literally fly anywhere, so why did they need him?

"Is Logan on her way to swoop in to save the day?" Did she need backup? Was Connell unable to help her for some reason?

"She and Connell are somewhere in Eritrea. They can't drop what they're doing to come. I'm afraid this is on you."

Yogi swore under his breath. As comforting as it was that his alpha still had some faith in him after what had happened, he'd literally just left home. If he found Sheri and her kid, he'd end up having to take them to their pack.

So much for escaping...

"*Yogi.*"

"Where do I go?"

"Logan gave me two places to check. The first should be just a few miles from where you are now."



Sheri had been dead at least a day by the look of it. Yogi found her small compact off the highway and down a steep embankment. The vehicle had slammed into a tree amid some dense shrubbery, hiding it from the sight of the vehicles passing on the road above.

There was no sign of Oliver, Sheri's eighteen-month-old son.

The baby had survived the crash. His scent was strong in the trees around the car, but it died abruptly a half mile from it. The trail ended just a few dozen feet from a smaller access road that branched off the highway.

Someone had found Oliver. Whether that person had anything to do with the accident had yet to be determined.

While any road was potentially dangerous, the one Sheri had driven off was well lit with a decent railing along the edge. The lack of skid marks suggested she might have fallen asleep at the wheel—or she'd had no time to react and brake when another car forced her off the road.

Sheri's car was too much of a mess to know if it had been struck by another vehicle, but there were a few bits of orange plastic on the asphalt. It was the kind that came from a headlight. Two cars had collided on this road, but he couldn't say when it had happened.

Somehow, Logan had known the baby wouldn't be here. It was why she'd given him two vague

locations, not one. He'd assumed she simply hadn't been sure of her information, which sometimes happened. But at least he had a second chance to find the kid.

Chapter 3

Denise left the wolf cub in the garage of her rented cabin while she ran out to get supplies. The cabin was on an isolated stretch of Alsop Lake, but it was close enough to town to get most of the food and gear she needed on short notice without having to resort to ordering anything online.

Would a wolf eat dog food? Denise stared at the selection, which was a large one considering the size of the store.

People must love dogs around here. She grabbed a can of each different brand. To be safe, she thought she should probably get some meat too.

Denise shuddered. Though a strict vegetarian when it came to her own meals, she had studied enough biology to know better than to try to impose that kind of diet on an animal. However, just because she was willing to serve meat didn't mean she had to like it, she acknowledged as she unenthusiastically ordered ground chuck from the butcher.

By the time she returned to her rental, the little wolf had shredded the blankets she'd piled together as a makeshift dog bed.

"Jesus, kiddo, what are you going to do tonight? It's supposed to get below freezing."

The cub cocked its head at her and proceeded to stroll to the door leading to the kitchen. It paused as if waiting for her to open it.

"Sorry, little buddy, you have to stay in here." The cub yipped and whined, scratching at the door. Feeling guilty, Denise took the ground chuck out of her grocery bag and put it in a bowl on the floor next to a plastic basin she'd filled with water. She rearranged the shredded blankets into a nest by the water heater and ducked into the kitchen before the little cub finished eating.

Wolves have thick fur. No matter how cold it got in the garage, the cub would be fine. Denise went to the kitchen, but she couldn't summon the enthusiasm to prepare dinner for one. Finally settling on a yogurt and a granola bar, she headed for the tiny bedroom to eat in bed.

"What the hell? How did you get in here?"

The wolf cub snorted and wiggled on the burgundy sleeping bag she'd thrown over the bed.

"Shoo! Get off there," she said, waving at it. The cub shook itself and curled up, its head resting on her pillow.

Denise grabbed the little animal, cradling it. Realizing it was a boy, she snorted. It was just like a male to cause trouble. She carried him to the garage, fishing out a few of the larger blanket pieces that were still intact. Setting him next to the heater, she wrapped him up.

“Now, *stay*,” she ordered.

The second her back was turned, the cub shot past her through the crack in the door.

Damn. He moved fast. When she caught up with him, the cub was back on her bed.

“All right, kiddo, you win. I’m too tired to fight you on this. You can stay here with me tonight, but if you eat my face while I sleep, I’m going to be pissed.”

Maybe feeding it meat earlier had been a mistake. What if it now had the taste for raw flesh? Or had it been the right move? If she made sure he was full all the time, maybe he wouldn’t decide she looked like dinner.

“You sleep at the foot of the bed,” she ordered, pointing.

Naturally, the cub ignored her, rolling over on his back and lifting his paws in the air. With a sigh, she picked him up and moved him.

The cub waited until she climbed into bed before pattering over and curling up against her head. “I’m serious. If you eat my face, I will neuter you.”

The cub yipped again, hopefully in agreement. Drained, she passed out with his furry little body warming her cheek.

Mama.

Denise’s eyes flew open. She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand and sat up.

“Mama.”

What in the world? Was that a *baby*? How could that be? She was the only one here.

Another wail. *Yes.* Somewhere in the night, a baby was crying.

Was she hallucinating? That didn’t make sense. It was too early for her biological clock to explode. There was no reason for her to be dreaming about babies. She had at least another ten years before the decision to procreate became an issue.

“*Mama.*”

Why was the crying louder now? Was this one of those freaky dream-within-a-dream things? Denise didn’t think those happened in real life.

The sleeping bag was an unbroken expanse of pearlescent cloth. *No fur pile.* The cub wasn’t on the bed. Had he rolled off in his sleep?

The crying was the cub. *Wow.* It sounded almost human.

“It’s all right, kiddo,” she mumbled, pulling back the blanket. “I’m coming.”

She scooted across the mattress and blinked rapidly at the sight that met her eyes.

“You’re not really there. I’m still asleep.”

The naked baby boy crying on the floor didn’t care what she believed. He just cared that she was awake. He held up his chubby little hands in an impossible to misinterpret pick-me-up gesture.

Denise coughed to clear her raspy throat. “How did you get in here? Where is your mommy?”

At the word *mommy*, the toddler’s volume climbed to ear-splitting levels. Wincing, Denise hurried to pick him up. Unused to small children, she imitated what she’d seen women doing on television—holding him close and patting him on the back. The baby’s sobs turned to hiccups as Denise slowly made her way around the cabin, looking for additional intruders.

Had she left the door open? Was that how he had gotten in here? Denise knew she hadn’t done anything so stupid, but checked anyway. Both the front and back door were closed, as were the windows. She was alone.

She looked down at the still-sniffling toddler. “Hell, kid, did you get here through a wormhole? Is there a tear in the universe in the closet?”

The baby didn’t answer. Quiet now, he snuggled in her arms and drowsily blinked up at her.

Was she looking at a kidnapping victim? Or maybe he’d been lost in the woods? On this part of the lake, her rental was the only cabin for miles. Maybe the baby had stumbled to the only recognizable structure in the dark. Could he have crawled inside here on his own?

What if there was someone camping nearby and their baby had wandered away? The parents were probably frantic. What was she supposed to do? Go around the lake with a naked baby until she found the right tent? To her untrained eye, the lake was big—far too large for an aimless search of the shore.

Anger roused her to full consciousness. The lost-child scenario was all wrong. A baby couldn’t have physically entered her cabin. She *had* locked up tight for the night.

Someone had broken into her cabin and abandoned a toddler. A *naked* toddler. What the hell kind of person did that?

I’m screwed. Denise couldn’t call the police. She was in possession of a stolen research animal. Wolves weren’t typical pets. Unless the police officer was especially dense, she couldn’t pass the cub off as a dog. Not even a husky.

Wait. Where was the cub?

Still holding the drowsy baby, she crouched to look under the bed. Nothing. A quick scan of the cabin revealed a startling lack of wolf cub.

Shit. Denise swore under her breath, looking around for something to swaddle the little one with. Grabbing her phone to check the outside temperature, she frowned. It was too cold to take the baby out unless he was properly clothed. Even with a blanket, the frigid air would make its way through the cracks unless she could learn to swaddle in the next five minutes.

Denise had two options. She could leave the baby asleep on her bed and take a quick look around in the dark with a flashlight...or she could wait for morning.

If she went out now, she might run into the parents or a search party looking for the little tyke. Of course, if she left and they came here to check, she might miss them.

I’m better off waiting until morning. Despite living in the cabin for over a month, she simply didn’t know the area well enough to conduct a nighttime search. She’d just take a quick peek around

the place itself in case help was nearby.

Decision made, Denise turned her attention to the problem at hand. She put the baby down on the bed and covered him with the blanket. Using her pillows, she built a makeshift fort around him.

The flashlight was under the sink. After checking the batteries, she crept out the front door before turning to go back inside.

The couch cushions. She could put them on the floor in case the baby rolled off the bed. After pulling the tan squares off the couch, she tiptoed to the bedroom. She nearly tripped over her own feet when she saw the cub was back...and it was covered by the blanket she'd used on the baby.

Her breath stuttered as she shakily inhaled.

The cub ate the baby. Yes, that was the explanation. The wolf was hungry and had eaten the baby. Because the alternative was too crazy to believe.

I have to find the boy. Despite a stern mental order to get her butt moving, she just stood there like an idiot, staring at the wolf cub. Bending over, she knelt on the ground, her eyes level with the sleeping animal.

The cub sensed her watching and opened his eyes. Then he sneezed. She blinked as a ripple of...*something*...passed over the wolf. Then the baby was in the cub's place, holding out his arms.

Denise backed away so fast she fell on her ass, hitting the wood floor with an *oomph*. The momentum rocked her into the bureau, sending a vase rolling off. The heavy ceramic piece glanced off the side of her head, striking with enough force to make her ears ring.

On the bed, the baby fussed and waved his arms. When she stayed on the floor, rubbing her head, he started wailing.

"No!" Denise scrambled to her feet. She held out her hands in a classic panic move, trying to ward off any tears. But that just made it worse. The volume of his cries climbed several decibels as the toddler screamed furiously.

Wincing, she lifted him up, holding him a little away from her body. The shrieking continued unabated. Denise squeezed one eye shut and kept the other fixed on the baby.

"What I said earlier still holds. *Do not eat my face.*" Gingerly pressing the squirming little body to her chest, she rocked him until he stopped crying.

It took the better part of an hour, but the baby finally quieted down—for like a minute. The second she stopped rocking him, he started up again.

Maybe he's hungry?

Babies needed to eat regularly, didn't they? But would this one want milk or raw meat?

She squinted at the red-faced little boy. *Both.* She'd give him both.

Balancing the toddler on her hip, she dug through her bag until she found one of the jumbo-sized syringes she always packed. They were useful in case the animals were too young or weak to eat proper food and needed to be on a liquid diet. It would have to work as a baby bottle in a pinch.

Fortunately for her, the baby took the milk. Halfway through the syringe, he passed out in her

arms. Moving like molasses, she set the sleeping toddler down as if he were made of glass. If he woke up again, she didn't know what to do.

Crap. What if he pooped the bed?

Denise tiptoed to the dresser and took a T-shirt from a drawer. She gingerly wrapped it around the baby's bare butt, wondering if he was warm enough.

With a feather-light touch, she tested the baby's forehead. It seemed hot, but maybe that was normal? It was cold here and she didn't want him to get sick. Deciding he needed another layer, she tucked a sweatshirt around him.

The baby rolled over and farted in his sleep. An exhausted and shrill giggle escaped before she could clap her hands over her mouth.

Too afraid to jostle the baby by sitting on the mattress, she settled down on the floor. When the sun came up, she was still there, watching the baby werewolf sleep.

Chapter 4

Denise scanned the aisle of the local grocery store, loading up her cart with anything in the baby aisle that was marked with a toddler stamp.

Diapers or no diapers? Would they fall off when the werewolf shifted again? And just when would he do that?

She eyed the baby, who was sitting contentedly eating raisins in the shopping cart, before throwing in a box of toddler-sized diapers. He had stayed human shaped ever since he'd woken up this morning. So far, he hadn't done anything wolfy or aggressive, not since last night. Part of her had wanted to believe it was a dream, but she knew better. There was no history of mental illness in her family.

Werewolves exist.

She had made herself say it aloud several times that morning. Denise was now acting caretaker of a toddler lycanthrope. She had spent all morning on her phone, trying to research werewolves. Most of what she'd found had been completely irrelevant. She didn't need to read werewolf erotica or watch any of the *Underworld* movies. No resources existed for her situation.

Denise had decided the unfortunate lack of how-to-care-for-baby-werewolf manuals wouldn't stop her. She would simply pretend the boy was a baby when in human form and an animal when he was a cub.

Hanging on to her practical side was the only thing that kept her from cracking up.

After spending most of her ready cash on a car seat, she and the baby headed to the cabin. "You and I are going to be okay, kiddo," she assured the drowsy toddler.

Denise wasn't as confident as she sounded, but the baby didn't need to know that. Sooner or later she was going to figure this thing out.

Whatever happens, I will protect this child-slash-werewolf, she thought, driving around the last bend on the road leading to her rental.

And keeping it away from the huge, muscle-bound man nearly bursting out of his army green T-shirt—the one currently climbing out of her cabin window—seemed like a good way to start.

Yogi heard the van's engine as soon as it rounded the bend leading up to the cabin. He jumped out the window, but the driver reversed and floored it, getting away.

All he had was a quick impression of a small, heart-shaped face surrounded by a cloud of dark hair. A woman had Oliver. Yogi hadn't seen him, but Oliver's scent was in and around the cabin. Instinct told him the cub was in the van.

Shit.

He ran to his Jeep, which was hidden around a clump of bushes.

His intention was to cut the other vehicle off before it got any farther, but the road was too narrow to overtake it. By the time he made it to the main highway, the van was already out of sight.

Damn it!

Yogi floored it, taking advantage of the empty street to fly over the asphalt. They couldn't have gotten far.

Chapter 5

Denise nearly spun the van out getting away from the cabin. Miraculously, she managed to keep all four wheels on the ground as she drove pell-mell down the unpaved road to the highway.

She'd only caught a glimpse of the man breaking into her cabin, but that brief impression was all she needed to know he was dangerous. He was *massive*, at least a foot taller than her five three. Despite the cold, he hadn't been wearing a coat—giving her an unobstructed view of enormous biceps and a barrel chest that tapered down to an enviable narrow waist.

The way he'd moved, slipping out of the widow so fluidly, pointed to some sort of military training. That or he was a professional thief. She wasn't betting on the latter. What pro-thief would target a random little cabin on a lake in Wyoming? Maybe a druggie would, but addicts did not look or move like *that*.

Was it Reliance? Had they found her? *How?*

Her van looked completely different. And if they had been on to her the whole time, why hadn't they busted down her door last night?

It didn't matter. She needed to dump this van and get a new car. Denise had more cash socked away in a safety deposit box in Cheyenne, but it was at least an hour away. Her plan had been to avoid cities while the baby was with her, but it didn't appear as if she had a choice. That money and a new car were now a necessity.

Denise had dozens of credit cards, some under different identities she'd carefully constructed over the past couple of years. Her inheritance had given her some serious advantages. However, living off the grid was the safest course of action for someone in her line of work. That was why she made it a habit to stash cash in various places around the country.

After Cheyenne, she would drive over the border to Boulder, the site of her next closest stash, to get that too. Babies were expensive...especially the ones who enjoyed a steak the size of their own head before their binky.

Scanning the traffic in the rearview mirror, Denise decided she'd lost the muscleman. She gave herself a little shake and apologized to the baby for the rough ride. However, he didn't seem to care about her driving. He was snoring softly. The baby continued to sleep deeply for the next several

hours, even when she stopped to buy a truck at a junkyard she passed on the way.

Later that night, Denise checked them into a cheap motel off the interstate. She'd taken a room on the ground floor with the stipulation there was an open parking space directly in front for her use. Everything was ready for a quick getaway in case the muscleman somehow found them again.

That's not going to happen. I definitely lost him. And Max had laughed at her when she told him about studying evasive driving techniques with a disgraced police detective... Well, who was having the last laugh now?

She settled the baby in the portable crib she'd bought for its resemblance to a dog bed, then checked the battery on her Vipertek Taser.

A girl can't be too careful. She slipped it under her pillow and lay down fully dressed, just in case. There were more dangers in the world than one mysterious muscleman, especially in a place like this.

Denise drifted off to sleep with one hand on the portable crib and the other on the Taser. A few hours later, her eyes flew open when the window opened with the lightest of scraping noises.

Reacting on instinct, she shot from the bed, stun gun in hand. The dark muscular arm reaching inside the bedroom started to withdraw as she rushed forward, but not quickly enough. Flipping the switch, she pressed the contacts to his skin and blasted it with everything the Vipertek had.

The smell of burned hair, with a hint of cooked bacon, filled the air. Whoever was on the other end of the arm swore viciously and fell back.

Heart pumping wildly, Denise grabbed her backpack and the handles of the portable crib. She threw open the door and ran toward the new-to-her truck before skidding to a stop.

The hood was open, several wires haphazardly hanging out.

Fuck. She needed another vehicle. Spinning on her heel, Denise turned, ready to sprint to the motel lobby, but *he* was there.

The hulking figure stumbled in front of her, cutting off her path to help. His frame was so big it blotted out the light from the naked bulb outside the lobby door.

Denise pulled the baby from the portable crib, hugging him to her. He was awake now, upset at being unceremoniously yanked from sleep into the chilly night air.

The baby made his displeasure known, opening his mouth in an ear-splitting wail.

That little cry compelled her to move. There was no plan, no way to escape, but she ran anyway. Denise faked left, and the man fell for it. She broke right, heading toward a four-door Jeep with a soft top.

She didn't look behind her when other shouts went up. Multiple voices were calling out. The ruckus had alerted the motel's other occupants. A crashing noise signaled something heavy being thrown—maybe a lamp. Someone must have been trying to help her, but she didn't have time to stop and thank them.

Hurrying forward, she took out her pocketknife, prepared to slash her way into the cab, but when

she tried the door, it opened. Buoyed by the stroke of luck, she jumped behind the wheel before anyone could stop her.

Sensing the danger, the baby shifted to a wolf and whined. Panicked that someone would see him, Denise shoved him out of sight below the passenger seat, stowing her backpack next to him to act as a sort of cushion. Without a car seat, it would have to do.

“Stay *down*, kiddo.”

She checked the visor and the seat around her for the keys, but there was nothing. Swearing, she reached underneath the dash, slicing and dicing wires by feel. But then the muscleman appeared in front of her, his features clearly delineated by the moonlight.

His face was sharp angles and flat planes—handsome in a savage kind of way. Even though he was wearing a jacket, she could still see he was built like a brick wall.

Denise shivered when he smiled at her. He raised a set of car keys and jingled them. They stared at each other through the windshield. The man opened his mouth as if about to say something when she finally got the wires connected properly. The engine started, transforming her adversary’s expression from smugness to shock. She threw up a one-finger salute and hit the gas.

Chapter 6

The Jeep was a war horse in disguise, but it didn't help her much when she didn't know where she was going. Denise took a blind turn, expecting to join the interstate highway, only to find the way narrowing. It unexpectedly turned into a dirt tract bordered by trees and high bushes. There wasn't enough room to turn the vehicle around, so Denise kept going. She hoped the road wouldn't be a dead end, praying there would be another turn off to the highway.

She never found out. A huge, blurry shape shot out from the trees on the left, leaping in front of the vehicle. Screaming, she yanked hard on the wheel to avoid hitting it, steering into a deep ditch on her right.

Denise tried to put the Jeep in reverse, but no matter how hard she pressed the gas, it didn't budge. She was stuck, the back wheels spinning in midair. Only a tow truck would be able to pull it free.

Hands slammed on the hood. She raised her head to meet muscleman's livid expression. Dumbstruck, Denise gaped as the now-shirtless stranger tried to incinerate her superman-style with his furious gaze.

Where did his clothes go?

A wail from the cub caught her attention. Still in wolf form, he yapped at her.

"All right," she told him, catching him in her arms. She threw open the door and shot toward the trees on the other side of the road.

Run. Don't stop.

Her feet flew over the uneven ground, stumbling over the rough terrain as she dodged tree trunks to get distance between her and the Reliance agent. Pain shot through her chest from a stitch in her side, but she held onto the cub and kept going until she was nearly doubled over, unable to catch her breath.

She didn't even hear her pursuer. The blood was rushing in her ears so loud it drowned out everything else. But something was chasing her, dogging her steps before overtaking her. It finally rounded on her in a lightning fast move—and it wasn't a man.

The wolf was deep chocolate brown with a white patch on the upper chest. Its malevolent yellow eyes were looking directly into hers...up until the moment it shook itself. A weird smoky shimmer

passed over the wolf, and then the muscleman was there. And she could see *all* of his muscles.

Frozen in place, she gaped at him as he moved toward her, his outrageously defined body glinting in the moonlight. A little snarl filled the air, making her heart nearly stop. For a moment, she thought muscleman was making the noise.

She glanced at the little wolf. His teeth were bared, and he was barking at the stranger.

“Calm down, kid,” the man growled.

Holy heavenly crap. This was a werewolf, another one. “Are...are you his father?”

The man’s brow drew down. “No. He’s dead...so is his mother.”

Denise reflexively cuddled the cub closer, an ache of sympathy welling inside her. The baby boy was an orphan too. And he was so young. At least she’d had her parents until her teens. The cub might not even remember his mother and father when he grew up.

If he grew up.

She had no idea what the stranger’s intentions were. “Are you going to eat him?”

The man looked at her as if she were crazy. “*No*,” he spat.

“Are you going to eat me? If you are—I’m a vegetarian. We taste terrible.”

The irritated Adonis rolled his eyes, his head tipped back as if praying for patience.

“Well?” If she was going to be wolf chow, she wanted to know sooner rather than later.

Muscleman put his hands on his hips. “Actually, it’s carnivores that taste terrible.”

“Really?” Denise squeaked.

“Relax, I’m a vegetarian too. Well, except for steak, but who doesn’t like steak?”

Hoping he was serious, Denise glanced down to make sure he didn’t have any weapons before quickly averting her gaze. *How did you forget he was naked?*

The stranger didn’t appear to be the least bit embarrassed about his state of undress. His blasé attitude was particularly chafing considering she was the type of person who wore a T-shirt to the pool.

“My name is Yogi. I’m here for the boy. I’m taking him back to his family.”

Relief flooded through her. “Oh, thank God!”

Muscleman wasn’t a Reliance agent. “I didn’t know what to do with him,” she said, relief making her babble. “I mean, I could probably handle a wolf cub *or* a baby, but a *combination* of the two? I was alternating steak and formula for crying out loud.”

Yogi let her go on and on, apparently deciding that letting her run out of steam was the best course of action.

When he didn’t say anything, Denise shut her mouth and rocked the cub, abashed. He had stopped growling, but his little lips were still curled up and he was showing a distressing amount of fang. Why hadn’t Oliver’s family sent someone the toddler would recognize?

“Err, do you know his people? Are they...are they nice?”

Yogi hesitated. “I only know his grandfather, and that situation is complicated. Our families have

a history. But he'd never hurt Oliver. Pack takes care of its own."

Pack. Like real wolves. She was talking to a werewolf about his pack. A naked—and ridiculously gorgeous—werewolf.

Focus. She was losing the thread here. Shifting, she rebalanced the cub's weight, turning him slightly so she could look down at his face. She knew his name now. "We haven't been properly introduced, Oliver. My name is Denise. Um... It was real nice spending time with you, but now this nice man is going to take you to your family."

Oliver whined. The sad puppy-dog eyes were killing her.

He looked so miserable, and it made something crumble in her chest. She couldn't just fob him off on someone else. The least she could do was check out his circumstances. His mother wasn't here to do it anymore.

"Maybe you could put me through to this grandfather? I'd like to talk to him."

Was it possible to get a sense of someone's goodness over the phone? Did she have a right to do that?

Doesn't matter if I do or not. She owed it to Oliver to try. At the very least, she could explain how and where she'd found the boy.

Her eyes had been fixed on Oliver, so when Yogi took her arm and started dragging her behind him, she almost tripped over her feet and dropped the cub.

"Hey!"

"Hurry up," Yogi said gruffly as he frog-marched her in the direction of the Jeep.

"Are you giving me a ride to my car?"

The grunt that followed was ambiguous, but Denise decided to stay optimistic as she quickened her pace to keep up. She kept her lips tightly shut when he nearly walked her into a tree, but scowled at him as he dragged her to a stop at the Jeep. He glowered right back when he saw the way the rear of the vehicle was in the air.

Did she owe him an apology?

It wasn't like she'd known who she'd been running from. Her only thought had been to protect Oliver. *Nope, not doing it.* He shouldn't have broken into her cabin and scared the crap out of her.

Why was he just standing there? *Um, because naked werewolves probably don't carry cell phones, idiot.*

Denise was about to ask if he wanted her to call a tow truck, but he held up a hand when she opened her mouth. He turned his head right and left as if checking to see if they were alone.

She was still wondering if she should call Triple A when Yogi put his hands under the Jeep's bumper and hauled it out of the ditch.

A low-grade buzzing like static rose in volume until she was having a problem processing other sounds. Denise swayed on her feet and blinked, holding onto Oliver a little tighter to get her bearings.

Yogi didn't notice her reaction to his show of inhuman strength—one done in the buff! He opened

the back and started pulling clothes out of a black duffel bag. He was fully clothed in less than a minute.

She was still standing there like an idiot when he turned to her, a narrow strip of plastic in his hands. Before she could blink, he had snatched Oliver and set him on the ground. He had the strip around her wrists, holding them fast together, in seconds.

Denise found her tongue then. “What the flying fuck?”

One corner of his mouth turned up in a cynical twist. “You didn’t think I was just going to let you go, did you? You know what we are now...”

Without further ceremony, he hauled her off her feet, dumping her in the back of the Jeep before whipping out a second tie for her ankles. He picked up Oliver and lowered the flap, fastening it into place.

Outraged, Denise twisted, trying to sit up. “You can’t do this,” she yelled at him as he moved around to the driver’s seat.

For the first time, he laughed. Denise ignored the thrill that ran through her at the deep rumbling sound. “I’m serious. Hell, I *saved* him,” she protested.

Yogi settled Oliver on the floor of the cab. “And I’m grateful. Doesn’t change the fact you have to come with us now.” There was a shuffle up front. “C’mon, kid, cut that out.”

There was the sound of a scuffle, and Yogi swore.

“Bite him, Oliver. Bite him hard!”

Denise found the silence that followed unnerving. What if Yogi did something to punish the cub?

“You better not be hurting him, you piece of shit,” she yelled. “I swear I’ll kick your ass into next week if you’ve hurt a hair on his head...or, you know, the fur on his head.”

There was a long, drawn-out sight from the front of the vehicle. “Will you shut up back there? You’re making it worse. And I’m serious, kid. Nip me one more time and you’re riding in the back with her.”

The engine started, and then they were moving.

Holy freaking crap. She had been kidnapped by a *werewolf*. She was on her way to God knew where, literally like a lamb to slaughter.

Well, technically, Yogi hadn’t said anything about killing her, but what other conclusion could she draw from his ominous ‘*You know what we are now*’?

Baby Oliver was going to have to manage on his own. He was returning to his people. Her obligation to him didn’t extend to being hogtied and stuffed in the back of a moving vehicle.

And you just stood there and let him do it! Granted, she’d been a little shell-shocked, but still... She had to get away.

Denise shuddered, thinking fast. How did she get Yogi to stop this vehicle?

“He’s not going to stay a cub, is he? I mean, he’s too young to stop himself from changing back in his sleep or whenever else he wants.”

Silence.

“He’s going to need the car seat I left in my truck,” she called, experimentally testing her bonds. Yogi probably would have ignored her had it not been for Oliver.

There was more rustling, and then Denise swore she heard tiny jaws biting down on flesh. The long stream of blasphemy that followed almost made her smile. Instead, she braced herself as the Jeep made a sudden sharp right turn.

He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. Yogi had taken the bait. She had to be ready.

Chapter 7

God, he hated when he was wrong.

By the time he pulled onto the highway, he knew he wasn't going to make it all the way back to Colorado with Oliver riding shotgun. The little cub hadn't stopped trying to bite him since he'd hogtied his guardian angel and tossed her in the rear storage space.

The little sucker knew where the vulnerable bits were too, not that Yogi had many...

As soon as the girl—Denise—mentioned the car seat, a plan formed in his mind.

If there was any way to get a cub that age to change back to his two-legged form, it was with food. Preferably full-sized doughnuts or candy bars, something that required human hands to hold properly. He would get the chair, then he'd stop somewhere and load up on the necessary bribes.

And somewhere along the way, he was going to find some duct tape for that woman's mouth. He didn't need to hear 'I told you so' for the next five hours, or however long it would take to get to the Avery homestead.

Yogi was determinedly blocking out what would happen when he took Oliver to Jessup Avery.

His father had blasted the Averys every couple of years like clockwork for the past few decades. If it hadn't been for Douglas Maitland's intervention, blood would have been spilled. Now his father was gone, but Yogi had no idea if the feud was still alive and well.

Don't be stupid. Of course the feud was still on. Werewolves didn't forgive or forget. The only karma they believed in was the kind that involved blood—drawing it from your enemies. Preferably in copious amounts.

Ritual battles to the death were a thing of the past—unless rogues were involved. Thanks to Douglas Maitland, Yogi was still a member of the Colorado Basin Pack, just like the Averys. Yogi could expect to make it in and out of Avery territory with all his limbs intact.

Probably.

And what about the girl? What was her deal? Her cabin had been filled with PETA literature and not much else. That meant she was one of those do-gooder types. But Denise had managed to cause him a lot of grief in a very short amount of time...and based on how quickly she'd hot-wired his car, he suspected frustration and regret was a normal reaction to meeting her.

Girl may as well have trouble tattooed to her forehead.

Of course, his misfortune was Oliver's stroke of luck. Saving an orphan cub in the woods had to be going above and beyond, even for an animal lover. How many other human women would have gone out of their way to do that?

Alternating formula and steak had been pretty smart. No wonder Oliver was so attached to her. The little cub was going to have a tough time without his mother and father. Denise finding him was probably the last break he was going to get for a while.

Although if things went as expected, Oliver might end up keeping her around for the foreseeable future...

What he'd told Denise was true. They couldn't let her go now that she knew about them. If she went running to the cops or the press, they'd dismiss her as just another crazy person making noise. But there were always a handful of true believers who needed to investigate every crackpot's claims. The pack couldn't afford that kind of attention—not in this technological age.

That reminded him of something. Yogi fished Denise's cell phone out of his pocket. He'd confiscated it when he put her in the back. He scanned the latest texts and photo roll for videos of Oliver. If videos of him shifting were now in the cloud, there would be hell to pay.

Well, he had gotten lucky there. There's wasn't any evidence Denise had photographed Oliver at all. But it seemed she had a boyfriend. Yogi eyed the skinny white guy and sniffed. The pair seemed mismatched. He didn't think such a wimp could handle the spitfire in the back.

Speak of the devil. The woman had been entirely too quiet for the last few minutes. It was probably too much to hope she'd accepted her fate and was going to go quietly with him to Colorado.

He got the answer to that a few minutes later in the form of a boot to the face.

Yogi grunted and dropped the car seat he was holding. In the minute he'd been away from the car, Denise had somehow removed the zip ties and squirmed into the backseat. When he opened the passenger door to set up the car seat, her leg flew out, a tiny hiking boot connecting with his nose.

"Fuck!"

She flashed past him, running at full speed for a human. Swearing under his breath, Yogi shut the door so Oliver couldn't follow her. And the little guy would. Despite the fact Denise was a different species, Oliver had grown very attached to her in a short amount of time.

It's the boobs, Yogi thought with a sigh as he started jogging after her. If he'd been a female, he wouldn't have these problems right now. Oliver's mother had taken him away from the pack shortly after her mate's death. The boy clearly wasn't used to males of his own kind anymore.

Poor Sheri had probably avoided the few she'd run into after leaving the pack. Yogi didn't really blame her for that. There were dangerous rogues out there. And pups Oliver's age were highly attuned to the emotions of their parents. They took their cues from them. If a parent was happy, the cubs were generally happy. The opposite was also true. If Sheri had crossed paths with an unfamiliar Were, she probably would have been afraid. Oliver would have sensed that fear and absorbed it.

This is going to be more complicated than I thought.

Up ahead, Denise managed to clear a rise. He could no longer see her, but he could hear the racket she was making as she ran from him, her footsteps pounding, leaves crunching under her weight.

Yogi stopped to take off his jeans and shirt.

His sister Sal might have had a point. Wolves needed breakaway pants. He'd always shunned them on principal. With his build, there were already too many Magic Mike comparisons. Wearing breakaway pants would simply enforce that stripper image. But it would make chases like these far more convenient.

He threw himself down, shifting to his second form with a big sneeze. After shaking his fur out, he loped ahead in a wide semicircle, cutting in front of Denise as she stumbled next to a large oak tree.

Had it not been for the expression of abject terror on her face, he would have laughed. Instead, he shifted back and grabbed her arm, dragging her behind him—her feet kicking up a cloud of dirt as she cussed a blue streak.

He whistled when she finally stopped to take a breath. “I know soldiers and sailors who swear less than you,” he informed her, trying not to smile.

Oliver's savior had a filthy and diverse vocabulary. Yogi admired that about her. In fact, he was almost starting to like the annoying little termagant—despite the boot to face. Maybe *because* of it.

“I'm. Not. Going. With. You,” she bit out, trying to pull away from him.

“Of course you are,” he said cheerfully, tugging her left so he could pick up the jeans and T-shirt he'd discarded.

She muttered something under her breath that he wouldn't repeat in front of Oliver, then she lunged. Yogi turned, his eyes flashing fire when she bit down on the fleshy part of his hand.

Denise was clamping down hard enough to draw blood, but he refused to wince. Forcing the corner of his mouth to kick up, he drawled, “You know, biting is foreplay among my people.”

She immediately opened her mouth and spit out his hand. Laughing, he swiped a bit of his own blood from off her mouth. He bent down so their eyes were level.

Staring into her hazel eyes was surprisingly...arresting. But he had to make sure she couldn't escape again. Moving very slowly, he ran his hands over her hips and around to her lusciously curved ass.

Denise gasped and slapped at his hands when he reached into her back pocket. But he withdrew quickly, tossing aside the small pocketknife hidden there. It landed far away, deep in the brush.

“You won't be needing that again,” he said before swinging her over his shoulder.

Chapter 8

Her self-defense training meant absolute shit. No matter how hard she struggled, Denise couldn't break the werewolf's grip. After one last desperate wrench to free herself, her hair tie promptly gave up in protest, snapping and letting a torrent of whiskey-colored locks loose. It spread everywhere, partially obscuring her view...but she could still see what was directly in front of her.

"Hey!"

"Yes?" The word was an exasperated sigh.

"You're naked."

"And?"

"And I'm staring straight at your bare butt!"

He stopped walking for a second before she felt him shrug—a move that nearly dislodged her from his shoulder.

"I hope you're enjoying the view."

Denise sputtered, too incensed to admit she was awkwardly bobbing up and down over what was undoubtedly the finest rear end on God's green earth.

Yogi kept her balanced on his shoulder when he stooped to pick up his discarded clothes, his arms like steel bands. Soon, they were back at the Jeep. Her captor put her down, but he kept one hand on her wrist, a hold she couldn't break, while he tugged on his pants. He shoved her into the backseat, corralling Oliver at the same time.

"Damn it, kid, go easy on the leather," he muttered, picking the pup up and dumping him in her lap.

Denise was distracted by the move, giving Yogi the opportunity he needed to tie one of her wrists to the pipe frame cage of the Jeep.

Furious, she tugged at the zip tie, but only succeeded in hurting herself. "Don't manhandle Oliver like that," she gritted out between her teeth.

Yogi scoffed. "Trust me, that was nothing to one of our kind."

"But he's just a baby."

"No, he's a Were cub. We grow up climbing all over each other and fighting—even with our friends. Trust me, Oliver is fine."

Yogi climbed into the driver seat and started the engine. They were back on the highway in a matter of minutes.

As the adrenaline wore off, Denise's anger began to chill. Feeling queasy, she shivered as her head started to pound.

Absently stroking Oliver's fur, she decided to pull the last trick she had out of her bag. "Look, I'm prepared to make you an offer."

Yogi glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "No offense, but I can get a piece of ass whenever I want. Granted, it's been a while, and most of those assess have not been as fine as yours, but I'm going to have to pass."

Her mouth dropped open. She didn't know what was more shocking—that he thought she was offering to sleep with him, or that he found her ass *fine*.

"I was offering you money, not sex."

"Oh." He paused. "Well, I'm still going to have to say no."

The pounding in her head was starting to get worse. "Don't say that until I tell you how much I'm willing to pay."

"Sorry, doll. There isn't enough money in the world."

"One hundred thousand in cash."

The car swerved slightly. Yogi coughed. "And just where would you get that kind of money?" he asked, glancing back at her.

"My trust fund."

Yogi snorted.

"Two hundred thousand."

"Look—"

"Three," she said, her voice cracking.

Up front, Yogi sighed. "Denise, it's not up to me. As children, we take an oath to do whatever we can to maintain the secret of our existence. Oliver's still too young, but when he's old enough to understand, he'll make the same promise."

Her lip trembled. "That makes it okay to drag me to your people so they can kill me?"

Yogi scoffed. "Lady, nobody's going to kill you. You're just going to be their guest for a while..."

A little knot deep in her belly began to loosen, but only slightly. "For how long?"

He was quiet a little too long.

"C'mon, tell me. I deserve the truth."

His massive shoulders rolled. "Until they know they can trust you."

She did not like the sound of that. "How long is that going to take?"

"I imagine that will be up to you."

Denise frowned. Some of her tension dissipated, but her headache lingered.

Shit. She didn't have her medication. She'd driven thirty or so miles out of her way to fill the

prescription before her heist, but the pharmacy hadn't carried her meds. They'd had to order it. She was supposed to pick it up yesterday. With the recent insanity, she'd forgotten.

The headache was the least of her problems...

"Why do you keep saying *they* like that?" she asked. "Aren't you part of *they*?"

His deep inhalation was not comforting. "I'm just dropping you and the kid off. I'll need to check in with the chief and my brother and sister, but after that, I won't be sticking around."

The knot of tension behind her temples tightened a notch. Why was the fact he wasn't going to be there so unnerving? If she could get out of this car, she'd be happy to never see Yogi or his glorious ass again.

"And where are you going to be?"

He shrugged. "I have things to do."

Yogi was going to take her to werewolf country and just dump her there?

Denise was going to be prisoner for God only knew how long—provided he was telling the truth—and this guy wasn't even going to be one her jailers.

She wanted to question him further, but the pounding in her head was starting to get worse. Nauseated, she focused on breathing in and out, closing her eyes against the weak sunlight.

In her lap, Oliver squirmed and whined, adjusting until her hand was positioned on top of his head. She patted him, wondering if he could sense her pain. Dogs were often sensitive that way. Perhaps wolf cubs were too?

The Jeep hit a rut in the road, making her grit her teeth, a move she immediately regretted because it made the migraine pain flare.

The cub licked her hand in a clear show of sympathy.

Sensitivity must be something werewolves outgrow, she thought, opening her eyes a crack to glare at the back of Yogi's head. He continued to drive, ignoring her and Oliver.

Whether Yogi was going to be with her didn't matter. There were too many unknowns waiting for her at the end of this little road trip.

Denise was going to get the hell out of this car even if it killed her—just as soon as her head stopped trying to do it for her.

Chapter 9

Yogi glanced in the rearview mirror again. Denise had closed her eyes a while ago, but the way she was slumped over didn't indicate sleep.

Her mouth was tight. Every few minutes, she flinched as the car went over a stone or a pothole.

"It's not going to work," he warned, wishing she would sit up and open her eyes.

As much as he wanted to believe his captive was faking, he was starting to suspect there was something wrong. Denise was too much of a softie to ignore a pup. But she wasn't petting him or cuddling Oliver anymore, despite his repeated whines.

"Denise."

She didn't move.

"*Denise.*"

Her lids cracked, but her gaze was bleary and unfocused.

"Are you okay?"

Denise hung her head and closed her eyes again. He swore and looked at the road ahead. Noting a sign for a rest stop ahead, he drove until he could get off the exit. After pulling the Jeep into an isolated corner of the lot, he got out.

Cautiously, he stepped around and opened the car door, making sure to stay out of range of any kicking feet. She could only play that card with him once. This time, he was ready for her tricks... except no little foot came flying at his face.

He reached in to put his hand on Denise's cheek. No fever.

"What's wrong?" he asked, giving her a little shake.

Denise's face immediately crumpled. She leaned over to one side and heaved, splattering vomit on the edge of the doorframe.

"Shit." After cutting the zip ties, Yogi unbuckled her, pulling her out of the car and laying her on the grass underneath a tree. The pup followed, pacing in front of Denise in a nervous circle.

Yogi cleaned her up with a crumbled paper napkin he found in his pocket. "It's going to be okay," he assured them, but he didn't know who he was kidding.

What the hell was wrong with her?

Denise mumbled something. He leaned down to catch her words, but she wasn't coherent enough for him to make them out.

"Are you sick?"

Nothing about her smelled of illness—aside from the vomit. But there was no hint of anything seriously wrong. His kind could pick up diabetes and even trace amounts of cancer, but whatever this was, it had no scent signature. All he could tell was that she was in pain.

"Migraine," she whispered.

Yogi relaxed. "Is that all?"

A micro-expression of annoyance tightened Denise's eyes, but even that seemed to hurt her. She covered them with her hand and groaned.

"I didn't mean it like that. But it's just a headache. A bad one, sure, but you'll be fine soon."

"Die a horrible bloody death," she whispered.

Okay, maybe that wasn't as comforting to her as it was to him. Werewolves didn't get headaches. Not unless they'd been bashed in the skull with something, which was more common than one would think. But he was genuinely relieved there was nothing serious wrong. Although...

"*Fuck.*" They couldn't continue driving. Not if every pothole hurt her. And spontaneous vomiting probably meant the pain was intense.

Yogi exhaled and rocked on his heels, accepting the inevitable delay. They would have to find a hotel or cabin somewhere off the beaten track and wait until she got better. And he would have to find a pharmacy or something. Denise needed drugs.

The sooner he got her back on her feet, the sooner he could wash his hands of her and the kid.

"No offense," he muttered as he picked up his limp captive. But this was already more human interaction than he'd signed up for.

Undoing the car seat with one hand, he threw it in the back. He laid Denise across the length of the backseat, taking care not to jostle her head too much. Oliver jumped inside and onto her stomach.

"Sorry, kid, but you should stay off for now. She's not feeling well." He set Oliver on the floor and closed the door.

Yogi leaned on the hood and texted a few pack members, including the chief, to update them and ask for a place to stay. A few minutes later, he had the address of a no-name boarding house that was currently closed for the season. One of the pack's members was an investor, so he knew where the key was hidden.

It was a short drive away. Within fifteen minutes, he was at the apex of a circular drive in front of a sprawling Victorian.

Yogi studied the classic dormer windows of the old house, surprised to find such a structure plunked in the middle of the woods. The brief text forwarded by his pack mate hadn't given any details beyond the address and location of the key, but he imagined this house had an interesting history.

Leaving Denise to rest, he explored the Victorian with Oliver at his side. The dust in the living room wasn't terrible, but it was enough to make him and the cub sneeze. Luckily, the bedrooms off the central living room were in much better shape.

The house needed a little work, but it had good bones. Despite the fussiness of the gingerbread molding, Yogi really liked the old pile. It looked like a friendlier version of the Psycho house. He'd fantasized about living in it as a child—minus Anthony Perkins, of course.

After changing the linens, he dropped a glowering, but silent Denise on top of the big California king in the master. Feeling guilty, he zip-tied her unresisting arms to the headboard.

"I'm going to go get some food and something for your head," he said, motioning Oliver onto the bed so the cub could watch over Denise.

"Get bent," she rasped.

"Yeah...that's fair."

He patted Oliver. "Keep an eye on her. I'll be back soon."

Chapter 10

Lifting the opiates had been way too easy. The mostly empty grocery store had an attached pharmacy with one young and overworked pharmacist and an obviously fake security camera. In what Yogi considered his only lucky break so far, the pharmacist happened to be single and interested. It had been simple to convince her to leave her post to go find him something from the front of the store.

He managed to get behind the counter and grab the bottle of pills in less than a minute.

Yogi didn't know the names of specific migraine medications, so he stuck with the ones he'd seen mentioned on television. He shook a small number into his pocket and was back on the other side of the counter with seconds to spare.

After picking out more provisions, he drove back to the boarding house just above the speed limit. Though it had been necessary, he felt crappy over leaving Denise alone for so long.

Alone and tied up.

He rolled his shoulders, trying to loosen his stiff neck muscles. *Just get back and give her the pills. Once she's able to walk again, take her to the Averys.*

The tightening in his throat was telling. He really didn't like the idea of leaving her with Jessup. While he knew the Avery patriarch wasn't the villainous bastard his father had always portrayed him to be, that didn't mean he could be trusted to treat a prisoner right.

Guest. She'll be a guest.

Damn. Even he didn't believe that.

I need to talk to Douglas.

Yogi wouldn't take Denise to Colorado until the chief himself assured her safety and comfort. That last was becoming increasingly important to him. And why wasn't exactly a mystery.

What wolf could resist a hellion with curves that didn't quit?

What he needed was to get away from Denise as quickly as possible. Instead, he was hurrying back like his pants were on fire. Maybe the chief could have someone else come pick up his charges now that he'd secured them?

Except Yogi wouldn't even suggest it. Douglas Maitland had stood by him and his siblings through their recent trouble. Yogi owed him his loyalty. This one favor wasn't too much to ask, even if it was

taxing his control.

Ahead, the trees began to thin as the road widened around the boarding house. He parked the car and narrowed his eyes. Outwardly, there was nothing wrong, but his instincts were prodding him. Denise was loose, and Oliver was with her. He knew it in his bones.

Yogi swore when he finally found the dynamic duo in the woods behind the Victorian. Denise had somehow managed to get the zips off again, but she hadn't been feigning her illness. Incapable of walking, she had apparently stumbled and crawled out the back door, her furry accomplice at her side.

Picking her up without a word, he dusted off her clothes and carried her to the bedroom.

"I hope you learned your lesson," he scolded Oliver, who was trotting at his heels. "She wasn't ready for prison break part two."

The pup hung his head and whined.

"Don't yell at him," Denise muttered.

He frowned at her, taking a pill out of his pocket and placing it in her hand. "Sweetheart, I wasn't yelling. Here. This should help."

"Don't call me sweetheart," she rasped. "What is it?"

"Something you can't get without a prescription. Are you going to take it or not?"

Denise grimaced, but took the pill anyway. He fished a bottle of water out of a bag and put it to her lips.

"There you go," he said after she swallowed. "Why don't you try to get some sleep? You can have something to eat after you wake up."

Her hot glare would have been intimidating if her eyes weren't glazed over in pain. In a few minutes, she began to relax as the medication began to take effect.

"You're starting to look stoned," he observed approvingly.

"Not going to tie me up this time?" she asked.

"No need. I'd catch you before you hit the door."

He smiled when she flipped him off. *She's feeling better.*

"C'mon, you," he said, herding Oliver to the door. "You're hanging with me from now on, you little traitor."

Oliver whined.

"Don't think I don't know who cut those zip ties," he told him. "I can see your teeth marks."

The cub yipped.

"Excuses, excuses," Yogi chided, closing the door so his "guest" could get some sleep.

Chapter 11

Denise Hammond wasn't rich. She was *filthy* rich.

Curious to see if Denise had the means to bribe him, Yogi had gone through her belongings. He had found an old Virginia ID among several high-end fake ones, figuring that one had her real last name. And he'd been right.

The pack's resident IT wolf, a female named Jania, had done a thorough background check. She'd dug up an article with a picture of a much younger Denise and her parents—a notice that described how the prominent couple had died.

Denise had only been sixteen.

The Hammonds had left their substantial old-money fortune to their only child. Denise had no other close relatives. Rather than going into the rich people equivalent of foster care, she had elected to spend the last few years before her majority in boarding school. There was no mention of her in the press after that.

Yogi didn't know which was worse, knowing Denise was a multi-millionaire or that she was alone in the world. Aside from the unimpressive boyfriend—the one who had just texted her about arriving safely in Africa.

He hadn't liked doing it, but it had been necessary to reply as Denise—a brief and impersonal message wishing him a good trip. He had no idea why this Max character was halfway across the world, but he was obviously a terrible boyfriend. Look at what had happened to her since he'd left town—she'd gotten kidnapped.

Ignoring the fact he was the kidnapper in question, he went to season the steaks and marinate the eggplant he'd sliced up for Denise. Afterward, he let Oliver out in the backyard to stretch his legs while he had a beer on the wrap-around porch.

He liked that detail. It reminded him of the porch around the chief's place in Colorado. This house didn't have the same hum of activity, but it was more relaxing without it. There was even a stream burbling just a stone's throw away.

Yogi pivoted at the telltale click coming from the hallway, frowning. *Not again.* He crossed his arms, debating going to investigate.

This time, the slight scratching sound was much closer. Denise had made it down the hall.

Maybe I should have tied her to the bed again. She wasn't going to feel any better if she didn't get some sleep.

Calling Oliver, he sighed and went to pick Denise up from the hall floor. She was too weak to do more than flick her thick lashes at him disdainfully.

“Here, take another half a pill,” he said, slipping the medication under her tongue. “Then sleep. When you get up, you will feel one hundred percent better.”

He hoped that sounded convincing.

Chapter 12

Denise bent over and put her eye to the keyhole. The only thing she could see was the dark oak paneling in the hallway. Keeping her balance was too much effort, so she knelt before falling over with a giggle.

It felt like eons had passed since she'd last tried to make a break for it, but it had probably been less than an hour.

Time to try again. Her head was feeling much better, although she still felt kind of loopy. Almost disembodied or drunk.

Denise didn't know what those pills were Yogi had given her, but it must have been the good stuff. She scrabbled to her knees, trying to get the doorknob to turn. It finally did on the third try. When she managed to get the door open, there was a tree wearing denim blocking her way.

Irritated at having to squeeze between the doorway and the tree, she swore a blue streak, something that made the tree chuckle—up until it bent down to help her up.

“Shit, sweetheart, you threw up again.”

“Hmm.” She had no idea what the tree was talking about. It was warm, though. Her hands were cold, so she tried to cuddle against it.

“Sorry, doll, under other circumstances, I would be all over that, but my kind have really sensitive noses.” The tree took hold of her shoulders and held her at arm's length.

Denise thought the tree was being too picky. “Can't trust fucking Ents,” she muttered.

“What did you call me?”

“Probably in league with the Orcs,” she spat at him, finally recognizing the walking tree from her favorite Tolkien tale.

Treebeard had betrayed the cause! If he had his way, he'd burn down the whole forest. *I need to get wet or I'll burn too.*

“I'm not going to burn anything, but maybe a shower would be a good idea. We can't leave you covered in vomit. Oliver won't get near you until you get cleaned up.”

“I don't smell bad,” she protested.

“You do right now.”

Denise's face crumpled, and Treebeard looked panicked. “We just need to give you a quick wash.

Oliver likes your natural scent.”

“But you don’t?” She sniffed. *Damn picky tree.*

“I like it a little too much,” he mumbled, steering her into the bathroom.

“Of course you do. I have the best pheromones,” she said, fitting the tips of her thumb and forefinger together. They tingled in response.

The tree scratched its head and turned on the shower before giving her a gentle shove toward the stream.

She stared at the sparkly water. It shone like liquid gold against the sunlight that poured through the window.

“Um...Denise?”

She reached out to touch the water, but became distracted by how puffy her hand was. She waved it in front of her face, the faint glow at the edges flaring with her movement.

Was that because she’d touched the water? Would it just make her sparkle or would it turn her completely to gold like King Midas?

“Denise, are you going to get in the shower? If you are, you need to get undressed.”

She tentatively reached out and poked the water. *Just sparkly.* That was a relief.

“Do you need help?” The tree frowned and put his hands on his head, quickly moving them in front of his face when she splashed him.

“We can play later when you’re sober. But first, you need to take that shirt off.”

The gold light of the water had attracted fireflies. She didn’t know if they needed the water to recharge, but they were getting too close for comfort. Did the fireflies bite? Was that why they were so tiny, like little gnats?

They started buzzing in her face. She started swatting them away, but that just seemed to upset the tree because he grabbed her wrist.

“You know we have to get rid of them. They could be bark beetles,” she told him. “You won’t like that—not when you’re all chewed up on the inside.”

There was a deep sigh. “Okay, my eyes are closed now. I’m just getting you started by helping you take that shirt off. You can do the rest yourself.”

Denise batted the annoying tree branch away, but it wouldn’t leave her alone until her top was snagged up and off her body.

Treebeard’s eyes *were* squeezed shut. He looked ridiculous.

“All right, that’s the most I can safely do and not feel like an asshole. Can you do the rest yourself?”

“The rest of what?”

“The rest of your clothes.”

Denise looked down, surprised to find herself in only her bra. *Ugh.* Trees were pervs. “Get out!”

The tree turned around. “I’ll keep my back turned, but I can’t leave you alone like this. You might

fall down or drown.”

Fine. It was just a tree anyway. Denise stripped and got under the waterfall. She splashed around, finding some soap. *Convenient.* She took advantage of her good fortune to wash up.

She rubbed the soap up and down, enjoying the way the soap foamed over her dark skin.

“Shiny,” she said, playing with the liquid gold and bubbles over her chest.

In the distance, the tree groaned.

Denise washed and played, glad it was warm out in the woods today. Except she was starting to get tired. Slumping over, she leaned against a wall she hadn’t noticed before.

“Okay, I think you’re done. We’ve left Oliver alone too long.”

Treebeard took a quick peek, long enough to turn off the water. When he tossed her a towel, it hit her in the face.

So rude. Denise wrapped the towel around herself, but she was tired now. Yawning, she started to lie down.

The chilly tiles stung where her skin was exposed, but she was far too exhausted to care.

This is where I live now.

“Denise, the floor is cold. You need to get dressed.” Yogi loomed over her.

What was *he* doing there?

“I showered,” she said, looking at him through slitted eyes. She didn’t care what he was about to order her to do. Moving wasn’t an option. “It was grueling.”

“You have no idea,” he muttered before tossing a second towel over her. Standing, he added a third one for good measure.

“I’m going to pick you up now. You’re going back to bed.”

Denise shivered. Her brain felt fuzzy, “Aren’t I supposed to be on my way to werewolf jail?” she asked as he lifted her.

“We’re going to have to put that off. You didn’t react well to the meds. We’ll go tomorrow.”

It was only a night’s reprieve, not a stay of execution.

Worry about it later. She closed her eyes and fell asleep in Yogi’s arms.

Distressed yipping woke her up. It was dark outside the windows, but someone had left the bedside lamp in the corner burning.

Ow. It felt as if a freight train had run over her. Or a team of little leaguers had gone at her with their tiny bats.

Despite that, Denise forced herself to stand and walk to the bedroom door. The upset puppy sounds were coming from Oliver. She had to make sure Yogi wasn’t doing something to hurt him.

She was unsurprised to find the door unlocked. Why would her captor bother when he was able to catch her so easily? Yogi could move like lightning—and the way he picked her up like she didn’t weigh anything.

The one time Max had tried to pick her up, he’d grunted and set her down immediately. He hadn’t

come right out and said she was too fat, but he'd whined about his back hurting for the rest of the night.

She found Yogi in the bathroom, but he wasn't using the steam shower this time. He had Oliver in the tub.

Denise took one look and nearly screamed. The pup was covered in blood.

"*What* are you doing?" she asked, holding the edge of the door to keep from falling. "Why is he bleeding?"

Yogi turned around to scowl at her. "It's tomato sauce. Oliver got skunked."

She frowned, blinking. The blood was a very bright, light red and slightly textured. "Skunked?"

"Yeah, as in sprayed by one." He turned around and scrubbed the tomato sauce deeper into Oliver's furry head. "As if I didn't already have enough to deal with," he grumbled, clearly put out by having to care for not one, but two people.

Denise scowled at the back of his head. "If I'm cramping your style, you could always let me go."

"As if you could go anywhere in your condition. You're only standing because you're holding onto the door. Now sit down before you fall again."

Again? When had she fallen the first time? Lying down on the bathroom floor didn't count. She had done it *intentionally*.

Denise wanted to bitch him out, but he had a point. She sat on the closed toilet with a huff, watching the bathtub proceedings with a wrinkled nose. There was a trace of skunk in the air. And didn't werewolves have ultra-sensitive noses? Where had she read that?

"Poor Oliver. How did it happen?"

"It was at the lake. We went while you were asleep."

"There's a lake?"

"There's one just beyond the trees in the back that's fed by a little stream. Looks like a good fishing area."

She sniffed disdainfully, but immediately regretted it. "Well, I'm glad you've found your next vacation spot, but forgive me for overlooking the location's many wonders. I can't really appreciate the view when contemplating life behind bars."

Yogi clucked his tongue as he rinsed Oliver and wrapped him in a towel. He thrust the bundle at her, then scooped her and Oliver up.

Clutching the cub to her, she tensed, preparing to be dropped. But Yogi didn't stumble or grunt. It didn't seem like he was exerting himself at all.

How strong is he?

"I told you, it's not going to be like that," he told her, carrying them to the living room. "In fact, given what a pain in the butt you are, I don't think your stay with the pack is going to be all that long. They'll be eager to let you go once they get to know you."

She narrowed her eyes, but her much-wished-for pyrokinetic ability failed to kick in. He moved

around the room with fluid grace, not in flames, setting them on the couch.

Well, he is smoking, but not in that way.

Denise turned her attention to Oliver, drying him with the towel he was wrapped in. “You know, this would go much quicker without the fur,” she told him, rubbing weakly around his ears.

She was still feeling like death warmed over.

If only I had a gun... she wouldn’t do anything. Even to save her own life, she couldn’t take someone else’s.

Maybe he’s serious about the pack not hurting me. If the pack was going to have her killed, Yogi could have done it already. This place was isolated enough. If he had the urge to hack her to pieces with an ax, no one would hear her screams.

Instead, Yogi had given her medicine and taken care of her when she wasn’t able to do it herself. *Plus, someone planning to do you in wouldn’t be such a complainer.*

“Shouldn’t he be changing back by now?” she asked, drying the cub’s fur as best she could.

Yogi’s pants buzzed. “Don’t worry about him,” he said, fishing the phone out. “At his age, being skunked is a rite of passage. If it’s his first or second time, he won’t change back for a while. Our young feel more secure as cubs.”

There you go. He wouldn’t be explaining things if she was going to be killed, Denise thought, deciding to be optimistic.

She would go to werewolf-land willingly and do whatever she had to in order to win their trust... except being social and charming had always been difficult for her.

Too bad there isn’t a lycanthrope version of ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People.’

That didn’t matter. She would find a way. There were too many things she had to do, too many animals that needed her.

“I don’t suppose there is a way to speed up the process?” she asked.

“What process?” Yogi asked absently, still fiddling with his phone.

“The one where I get your people to trust me so I can get early parole. No offense, but I’d like to hurry up and forget your kind exist.” She bent to kiss Oliver’s fur. “Except you, kiddo.”

Yogi put the phone down, his chin puckered in thought. “Well, there’s one, but I don’t think you’re going to be up for it...”

Yet another man who underestimated her. She rubbed the towel on Oliver’s paws. “Just spit it out.”

There was another beep, and Yogi checked the phone again. His cheeks thinned as his expression hardened. “Never mind.”

Denise rolled her eyes. “Will you at least stop texting? Do I have to remind you that you’re in the middle of a hostage negotiation?”

Yogi looked up, lips flat. “That’s not what this is.”

“You know what I mean,” she snapped. “You keep acting like this isn’t a big deal when it’s *huge*.”

I may not have family, but there will be people who'll be looking for me—a boyfriend for starters.”

Yogi threw her an uncomfortable glance. “Yeah, about that...I’m not sure you do,” he said, showing her the cell he’d been holding.

“Hey, that’s *mine*. I thought it was yours!” Denise reached over and tried to snatch it from his hand. “What the hell?”

He handed over the black smartphone with no fuss. Confused and little bit startled, she snatched it from his hand and hugged it to her chest.

“I could call the police now.”

“But you won’t.”

They stared at each other. He broke eye contact first.

“Just check your messages. There’s a couple of new texts from your *boyfriend*,” he said, emphasizing the last word with obvious distaste.

“You should dump that loser. Trust me, he’s no loss,” he added.

Denise ran her fingers over the screen. She didn’t have to guess why she was suddenly getting this advice.

Chest tight, she hit the green message icon. There were over half a dozen messages from Max. After a string of selfies in front of the chimps he’d accompanied to Africa and some random elephants, there was a rambling message. One line leapt out at her—*I think we should explore an open relationship*.

She didn’t bother to read the rest. Denise set the phone down and blinked a few times to ease the sting of tears.

Well, that was humiliating. Not unexpected, but humiliating.

As if to prove things couldn’t get more surreal, Yogi sat next to her and awkwardly patted her on the back. Oliver turned in circles in her lap, a sure sign of agitation.

Under normal circumstances, she would have fought to hide her reaction. But she was too tired... and really, Yogi could go fuck himself if he taunted her about this.

Except he wasn’t doing that. He was rubbing her back. True, it was too hard and a bit rough, as if he was unused to handling humans, but it was the thought that counted, right?

Her sudden peal of laughter caught them off guard.

Yogi’s hand froze mid-pat. “What was that for?”

It was the tone of concern that overwhelmed her. She laughed harder, the sound tinged with hysteria.

She set aside a whining Oliver to wipe her eyes. “My boyfriend is such a shit that my kidnapper is comforting me. That’s how much my life sucks.”

“You don’t suck.”

“I didn’t say *I* sucked. I said my life sucked.” She collapsed on the couch cushions, totally drained.

“There’s a difference,” she added tonelessly, too tired to reach out and stroke Oliver’s ears. Fortunately for her, he did the work for her, pushing his furry little head under her hand.

Yogi took her phone back and started typing.

“What are you doing?” she asked, only half-interested.

“I’m texting this Max loser.”

She made a half-hearted effort to take the phone back. “I don’t need you to threaten him.”

He smirked. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

The swishing sound of a text being sent jolted her out of her apathy. She sat bolt upright. “What did you just do?”

Yogi’s smile was devilish. “I broke up with him for you—you’re welcome.”

“Are you serious?”

“Like a nun.”

Ugh. “You’re your sister’s worst nightmare, aren’t you?” She could picture the poor girl—wolf—now. He’d probably chased all her boyfriends away.

Yogi’s smile was blinding. “Actually, she adores me,” he said.

Denise jerked her phone out of his hand to see what he’d written. “I don’t want an open relationship, or a relationship at all, because *I met someone else?*”

“What? It’s perfect.”

She shook her head. “Werewolves obviously don’t understand human relationships. You probably just smell each other’s butts and decide to hump in the woods. Max is never going to buy that I met someone right when he asks for an open relationship. It’s an obvious face-saving lie. Do me a favor and stop doing me favors, please.”

Yogi ignored her butt-sniffing comment, his cheerfulness unabated. “Then let’s provide some evidence.”

He pulled her into his side, hugging her to him. Positioning the phone above them, he took a selfie. “There.”

Her mouth dropped open, but she closed it with a snap. “May as well show off the biceps while you’re at it—you know, to *really* rub it in his face.”

The sarcasm was lost on him. “Good idea.”

Yogi whipped off his T-shirt, revealing model-perfect pecs and a set of abdominal ridges that stretched down into oblivion.

Denise flushed warmly when he got back into position, curving his arm around her with his fingers dangerously close to her chest. She’d never been this close to a non-beer related six pack in her entire life.

He clicked the red button on the screen before bringing the phone closer to his face. “Well, it would be more convincing if you smiled, but this will have to do.”

The send alert whooshed again. “I’m going to make dinner now,” he said pocketing her phone.

“Make sure Oliver doesn’t go out again before he’s dry. Otherwise, he’ll need another bath.”

With that, Yogi left the room.

She sat there looking at the space he had occupied. That was either the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her...or the most devious.

“It won’t work,” she called, deciding on devious. With his superior werewolf hearing, he’d be able to catch every word.

“Even if we broke up, Max and the rest of my team will come looking for me!”

She didn’t bother to add that it would be because the others ran out of money to keep their operation going.

With that depressing thought, she picked up Oliver and cuddled him to her chest.

“If they do find me dead in a ditch, smartass over there just incriminated himself *and* gave the police a way to identify him, so that’s some consolation,” she told him.

Chapter 13

You do not want Denise Hammond.

Yogi had repeated that mantra multiple times since last night. Unfortunately, all those attempts to convince himself only seemed to reinforce his desire.

It was as if Denise's scent was a living thing, like one of those tangible teasing vapors from old cartoons—the kind that wrapped around, tweaking his senses and lifting him up until he was panting and drooling.

The universe was asking for a lot if it wanted him to keep his hands off her.

Too many times, he'd pictured himself biting her sarcastic tongue at dinner the night before. By the time the meal was over, he could barely concentrate on her actual words. He was too focused on her lips to even notice she was conversationally tearing him a new one in novel and snarky ways.

After locking her in the bedroom for the night, he'd gone on a quick run, followed by a very cold shower. He promised himself that by the time the sun rose, his affliction would be gone. That it was merely an aberration.

Yogi's willpower around the opposite sex was better developed than that of his peers. He wasn't a monk, but he'd been selective in his choice of partners, so much so that it had become a game for some of the women in the pack. They pursued him so often that wagers had been made over whether he'd succumb. Usually the winning side was the one laying odds on his restraint.

Except this time, he was rooting for himself to lose.

Yogi didn't know why that scrawny idiot Max wanted to see other people, but he had been around humans long enough to know they were frequently shortsighted and unappreciative of atypical women. If a woman had curves, then she wasn't skinny enough. If she was slim, she was too thin and needed implants to give an idealized hourglass figure.

Humans didn't even put real women on magazines anymore. Everyone was airbrushed and altered to the point that they didn't even look human. Models ended up looking like the fae, with their too-perfect faces and proportions that didn't exist in nature. Sometimes, even bits that should be there weren't, just like a failed glamour. It was unnerving.

Yogi knew a few of his kind who appreciated a svelte figure. But most werewolves were attracted to women with lush curves. *Just like Denise's.*

The idea of handing her over to the Averys on a silver platter was swiftly becoming an anathema.

It has to be done. Even if he somehow managed to convince Denise there were better things to do with her whiplash tongue, Yogi wasn't ready to settle down.

Stop thinking about her damn mouth!

After serving Oliver and Denise a big breakfast, he bundled them into the Jeep and headed for the Colorado border.

A little voice nagged him to drive in the opposite direction and head for the Canadian border instead.

Shut the f-up little voice.

To his surprise, Denise was going along quietly. She even offered to hold Oliver in her lap—although the pup didn't leave her much choice.

"Have a change of heart?" he asked after a few miles had passed. "Does this mean you finally believe me that being our guest won't be so bad?"

She picked at the fur on Oliver's ears. "No, not really. I think it's going to be a huge inconvenience. I have things to do, plans in motion. An extended stay in one place will put everything on hold. But...I guess I do believe that they're not going to bump me off or anything like that."

She turned and narrowed her eyes at him. "If I'm wrong, you're the first person I'm coming back to haunt."

It wasn't exactly enthusiasm, but he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. "Everything will be fine. I'm sure you'll even be able to take care of some of your business interests from Colorado after a while," he promised before lapsing into a reverie of his own.

He was quiet so long even Oliver noticed. The pup barked at him repeatedly from Denise's lap.

"What's eating you?" she asked him, an adorable pucker between her brows.

"Nothing."

"Do you think they'll be trouble?"

He frowned at her. Had she guessed he was growing reluctant to give her up? "Trouble?"

"One of the first things you said to me was that there was history between Oliver's family and your own. I assume you meant the bad kind."

He was surprised she remembered that. Most women would only be able to recall seeing their first werewolf shift.

"Yeah, it's the bad kind, but don't worry. That won't affect their reception of you."

Denise stiffened. "Right," she muttered. "Something tells me they won't be rolling out the welcome wagon for me either."

"Oh, don't worry. Most of them will love you." Or at least, the single males would.

That was the problem.

Chapter 14

Denise felt as if Judgement day had come.

“Would you like something to drink?” Jessup Avery asked, looking down his nose at her.

The local alpha was tall and lean with a leathery face that bore multiple scars. Despite his lip service to the social niceties, his drawing-room manners did nothing to soften the impression his appearance made.

“No, thank you,” she murmured, silently counting the number of men in the room out of the corner of her eye.

Jessup’s house was a mid-sized cabin with several additions extending haphazardly off it. The central room was a massive kitchen. It opened directly onto a large dining area littered with a mishmash of tables and benches.

Everyone in Lunar Springs must eat here. That was what Jessup had called this tiny hamlet.

Denise desperately wanted to hold onto the easy bravado she’d had around Yogi, but couldn’t seem to in werewolf central. It might have been easier if there had been less men. Or if they’d been a little shorter.

Maybe the women are at work? The idea of the women bringing home the bacon to these hulking alpha males made her smile. She wiped it off her face when no less than six men smiled back at her.

To her relief, Oliver seemed to recognize many of the people. Yogi had explained in a whisper that cubs learned their pack members’ scents in their first few months—learned them and *never* forgot them. They could recognize an unfamiliar pack member from their scent even after years of absence.

But Oliver had been taken away, whisked upstairs for a nap after giving her a sticky kiss goodbye. Denise felt exposed without the comfortable warmth of his little body in her lap.

“Are you sure you don’t want to leave now?” Jessup asked Yogi, who was sitting stiffly in the chair next to her.

“I promised the chief I’d stay long enough to see Denise settled,” Yogi repeated. His face could have been carved from stone. His features were set so hard she was surprised he didn’t creak when he spoke.

“I’ll leave when she says it’s okay.”

She could feel the tension between not just Yogi and Jessup, but also Yogi and every other man in the room. Most of them were giving him dirty looks. The contempt in their eyes was chilling, but it dissipated when they looked at her.

What the hell had gone down between his family and theirs?

“I still want him to stay...” Denise trailed off as all attention was fixed on her again. “He’s the only person I know here.”

“If it would make you more comfortable,” Jessup offered with grudging grace.

“It would,” she replied quickly. Beside her, Yogi stretched, surreptitiously stroking her hand in reassurance.

Guilt and a flare of something else she didn’t want to name compressed her chest. She was starting to feel a tiny bit bad for insisting that Yogi remain with her.

“What happens now?” she asked, putting her hands flat on her lap. Now that they were finally here, she wanted to move things along.

“I don’t think I need to explain why secrecy is so important to us.”

“No.” After everything, she was crystal clear on the why. What she didn’t get was why they thought anyone would believe her if she ratted them out. Everyone would think she was crazy.

“If your kind found out about us—” Jessup began.

Denise held up a hand. “I said I get it...but this can’t be the first time a human has learned werewolves exist.”

Jessup’s smile was unnerving. “No, it’s not the first time. Each case was handled by the clan whose exposure was in question, which is why the chief has given me leave to decide what we do with you.”

“Only up to a point,” Yogi protested. “You know there are rules to this you have to abide by.”

Jessup’s mouth tightened a fraction, but Denise was starting to get annoyed too. “I already know I’m going to have to stay here until you trust me not to blab. What more is there?”

She gestured to Yogi. “He said there was a quicker way to get you to trust me.”

He turned to flash her a warning look. “Don’t go there, Denise,” he muttered from between set teeth.

Jessup grinned, acting as if she’d just handed him a gift. “I’m glad you asked...you’re unmated, correct?”

“You can’t ask her that,” Yogi protested.

“It’s not a job interview.” Jessup scoffed. “I can ask her whatever I want.”

Okay, she hated to admit it, but Yogi had been right. She didn’t want to go there.

“Nu-uh, no way.” Denise squirmed in her chair, eyeing the men with renewed anxiety.

“The chief was clear on this point.” Yogi’s tone was clipped.

“You asked for the shortcut,” Jessup said, holding his hands out expansively. “It’s a choice many women have made in the past.”

Yogi snorted. “It doesn’t work that way anymore. Forced matings are forbidden.”

“Who says it would be forced?” Jessup raised a brow. He turned to Denise, addressing his comments to her. “A heterosexual woman generally finds our kind irresistible. The average Were is strong, skilled, protective, and a good provider. It’s only the latest age of political correctness and ultramodern feminism that has made those traits less popular—on paper. In reality, a woman’s need for a strong male is ingrained. It’s biological.”

Yogi sighed audibly, but Jessup was just getting started. “You’re young and healthy. You do see yourself settling down and having a family someday, don’t you? Unless you prefer the company of females? Believe it or not, we can also accommodate that.”

Denise held up a hand, part of her unable to believe she was having this conversation. “I have a boyfriend.”

That didn’t faze Jessup. “But not a husband?”

Denise was tempted to laugh at his persistence, but this was too crazy.

“Where are your women?” she finally asked, blowing her hair out of her face with a huff.

“At their homes. But some communities are not blessed with an abundance of them. Were births skew to male. Luckily for us, we can breed with humans should the need arise. The vamps only wish they were so lucky.”

Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head. Did he just tell her vampires existed? “Holy shit,” she breathed.

“Enough, Jessup.” Yogi rubbed a hand over his face. “Denise is to be treated as an honored guest. Her discomfort—physical or emotional—is to be avoided at all costs. Those were the chief’s exact words.”

“Yes, but we both know what he didn’t say is what counts. And the quickest way out is in. *All* the way in. Besides, Denise must stay here regardless, so she may as well stay with one of the unattached males.” Jessup gestured to the men around them.

“You can bunk with me,” a big man in plaid offered with a huge grin.

“Why would she want to stay with your scrawny ass when she can stay with me?” another one said, slapping the man so hard on the back she felt the air shift.

The men continued to rib each other almost playfully. Denise’s stomach soured as she watched them. Her eyes passed over them until she glared at Jessup.

He waved at the men. “All are excellent hunters with good jobs. Pick one.”

Horrified, she shook her head.

Jessup frowned. “They’re really not so bad once you get to know them. I bet you’ll even like one or two of them. But if you’d like to see them in action—get a better sense of their attributes—then we can arrange that.”

“What the hell are you talking about now?” Yogi sneered. “Trial by combat isn’t going to impress a modern woman.”

Denise nodded emphatically in agreement.

“Actually, I was thinking something along the line of the *fortitudo*.”

Her head was starting to hurt. “What is that?”

“Part race, part obstacle course,” Yogi answered. “The oldest have puzzles and tests to get you from point A to point B. It’s basically like a scavenger hunt on steroids.”

She stared at them, horrified. “And I have to *mate* with the winner?”

“No,” Jessup assured her. “The winner merely has the privilege of being your host during your stay here. They are not allowed to touch you without your consent. Chief’s orders.”

That was still not great. “And what if this host decides to break your rules?”

“He’ll be beaten and ostracized from the pack or killed outright—it depends on the severity of his transgression.”

Jesus. Denise put a hand on the table to steady herself.

“Of course, we could skip that whole rigmarole if you pick one out now,” Jessup said, gesturing to the preening men.

Two of them edged forward, standing in front of the others as if waiting for her approval.

Denise didn’t move. She was even afraid to blink, lest it be construed as agreement.

“No?” Jessup rubbed his hands. “Then let’s get started.”

Chapter 15

“*You’re leaving?*”

Denise’s tone could have flayed his skin off.

Yogi was standing at the door of his Jeep, keys in hand. If Denise hadn’t decided to postpone checking in on Oliver after using the restroom, she would have missed him leaving.

He turned to face her, chest tight. “I was going to see the chief. My plan was to come back and see if you were okay with...”

“With whoever wins me?” she asked, a corner of her mouth curling up.

“With how things turn out,” he finished lamely. Yogi didn’t want to leave. He wanted to punch out every Avery who even looked at her. Except that would ruin all the progress he’d just made.

As tense as his reception had been, it had been a lot less ugly, and bloody, than he had been expecting. Jessup had even thanked him for bringing Oliver home. If Yogi played his cards right, he could bury this family feud now...except for one thing, of course. And it was standing in front of him right now.

Yogi put a hand under Denise’s chin so she would meet his eyes. “I need to explain something. For our kind, pack warfare used to be a way of life. Small grievances turned into big arguments. Eventually, those turned into challenges or outright warfare. Grudges got passed down for generations. The closest thing I can think to explain it would be to compare it to the feuds of the Scottish Highland clans. In fact, that’s our packs’ ancestral home.”

“And this is that big—the thing between your family and the Averys?”

He inhaled and nodded. “Truthfully, it’s not all on them. I can’t claim to be an innocent party.”

She crossed her arms and frowned. “You’ve gotten your hands dirty in this feud?”

“Well, thanks to the chief, no blood has been shed since I was born. However, there were some things—smears and innuendo I just let happen, mainly because I believed them. I don’t anymore. Now that my father’s gone, I just want this stupid thing over with. I have a younger brother and sister to think about. If I challenge the Avery’s claim for their right to ‘host’ you, it won’t be over. But I will if you ask me to.”

She sucked in a shaky breath, but she didn’t say anything.

“Denise...do you want me to race?”

She looked down, blinking rapidly. “Of course not.”

He nodded, half-wishing she had said something else. “What I can do is ask the chief to keep a close eye on the situation. If I tell him you’d be more comfortable being hosted by a female, he’ll ask Jessup to make a change.”

She wrinkled her nose and punched him in the arm. “Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

Yogi’s mouth twisted. “Because I know Jessup. After he moves you into the home of a female, a pipe will burst or the roof in your bedroom will spring a leak. You’ll have to be rehoused. This will go on until you show favor to one of the men. Then you’ll be pushed to move in with him.”

Denise’s lips flattened. “Oh.”

A call went up. Jessup waved at them from in front of a group of men. One had a remote control in his hands. At their feet was a red plastic cross with four propellers.

“Is that a *drone*?” Denise asked.

Chapter 16

Yogi was gone. He'd just gotten in his car and driven away. After that happened, it was hard to walk around with a hollowed-out pit where her stomach should be.

"Here you go." Jessup handed her a small tablet.

She took it with numb hands and looked at the screen. On it was aerial footage of herself and the men at the starting line.

"This is what the drone is for—to follow the race?"

Jessup smiled. "I admit, this kind of technology is beyond me. It's what happens when you get to be my age."

"How old are you?"

"A little over one ten."

She gaped at him. He didn't even appear to be middle-aged. "A *hundred* and ten years old?"

"We age well." He shrugged.

That didn't make sense. "But..."

"Is something wrong?"

"Why do you mate with humans, knowing they'll die so much sooner?"

"Because they won't," Jessup said, patting her hand. "Our mate bond extends the life of the women we choose, be they human or some other short-lived Supernatural species."

"How?" Denise was starting to feel dizzy as she tried to process this information.

He shrugged. "Just a few decades ago, I would have said it's magic, but now I would say it's both magic and chemistry. There are things that happen to a woman once we take them to mate—if the bond is true, that is." He turned to the men. "I believe they are ready to start."

Denise squeezed her eyes shut, trying to process all that information. "*O-kay*."

A gun went off, startling her into dropping the tablet, but Jessup caught it with a lightning-quick move. He handed it back to her.

"You still need this."

"Right," she said, taking it and trying to focus on the screen. "I'm surprised there aren't more of you out here watching."

Only a few people were with them. There had been at least four times as many in Jessup's cramped kitchen.

"They are watching, but from various parts of the course or on one of these," he said, nodding at her tablet, his gaze intent on the tiny moving figures on the screen.

She blinked. The men weren't men anymore. A pack of six wolves were running pell-mell up a hill that expert hikers would tread with care. As she watched, a black-and-grey mottled one was knocked off his feet by a larger brindled wolf.

Denise gasped as the wolf rolled down the hill.

"Don't worry. Dave will be fine."

She shot Jessup a disbelieving look. That fall had been brutal.

"See." Jessup pointed to the screen. "He's up and back in it."

He was right; the black and grey was on his feet and racing to catch up to the pack.

"They'll go up and down that mountain. At the bottom is a puzzle box with coordinates to the next location—which is across the gorge. Once there, they'll scale the highest tree to get the final route. There's a path that runs under the falls and down into the ravine. At the top of it is a flag. The one who brings that flag here is the winner."

She gave him a wooden smile. Under other circumstances Denise might have been flattered that all those attractive men were vying for a chance to be her host. They didn't even know she had money, which was the main source of attraction for most of the men she'd dated in the past.

Jessup kept throwing her expectant glances, and she wondered if he expected her to cheer.

Am I supposed to root for one of them? Seriously?

Even if she had been able to recognize the wolf form of any of the men she had just met, there was no way she could pick out an individual in that shifting and snarling mass racing through the forest.

She exhaled with a hiss, the sound blending with the sudden rumble of an engine. Her head jerked left, facing the source of the sound. In the next second, Yogi's Jeep came screeching to a halt a few yards away.

Denise's heart nearly stopped as he threw open his door. He flashed past them, shifting in midair with a deep-throated roar. She didn't see anything but a mahogany-brown streak as he raced up the hill after the pack between one beat of her heart and the next.

"Holy shit," she breathed.

Jessup clucked his tongue. "And I thought the boy was reasonable."

She grabbed his arm. "You're not going to go after his sister and brother for this, are you?"

His look was condescending. "Unlike his father, I don't punish the child for the sins of the parent. I actually think better of him for trying to get into this race. We've all smelled how he feels about you...but he'll never be able to catch up."

"How he *smells* about me?" What the hell did that mean?

Jessup started to answer, but another man came up and hailed him.

“Do you think we should send up another drone to follow Yogi?” the newcomer asked.

“Yes.” Jessup waved the man on. The teens at the starting line scrambled, getting a second propeller drone out of the back of a truck.

“Wait, you didn’t tell me how Yogi smells about me,” she said, trotting after the group.

They paid her no attention as they launched another quadcopter, scrambling to get the feed up and running. The drone zipped away, becoming a dot in the distance.

“I want to see that one,” she said, tapping at the menu of controls that bordered the camera feed in the center of her tablet.

One of the teens took the tablet and fiddled with it before handing it back. The monitor was now divided, showing the images streaming from both cameras. On the first feed, the pack had splintered, separating as the fastest and slowest sorted themselves.

Two wolves, the brindled black and a honey-colored one, were in the lead.

The second half of the screen was much harder to make out. Too many trees were blocking the way.

“Switching to infrared,” someone called out.

The tree-covered image stuttered. She could see a rainbow comet streaking across the blue and purple backdrop of the forest—it was closing in on the running form of another wolf.

“Whoa, wait. He’s much closer now,” she said, holding up her tablet.

Yogi was catching up. He was almost on top of the two wolves straggling at the tail end of the pack.

Someone whistled. “Damn, he’s fast.”

That was an understatement. Yogi was flying. He’d already overtaken half the pack. However, there was a big gap between him and the wolves at the front edge of her screen.

Jessup snorted. “Gus and Levi are still leading, but he’s determined, isn’t he? One has to admire that tenacity.”

Tenacity? It was fucking insanity. Animals had run themselves to death at lower speeds. Yogi could kill himself trying to overtake the others.

He’s doing it for you. Not only was he risking his life and health by acting like a maniac, but he was also potentially risking the safety of his brother and sister for her—no matter what Jessup said.

A few days ago, she hadn’t even met Yogi. Less than two days ago, she would have happily brained him with a baseball bat and left him in a ditch. But things were different now.

After more than a decade of being on her own, someone had taken care of her when she was down. He nursed her back to health, worried over her. He’d even sent that beefcake photo of himself to her douchebag ex so she could save face.

Denise didn’t want Yogi to give up the chance to bury his family feud. Not if keeping it going would hurt him or his siblings in the long run. It was too much.

Please let Jessup be telling the truth. The Avery patriarch had said the right things about not

punishing kids for the sins of their parents, but it could just be talk.

“Wow, he’s almost there!”

The two halves of the screen were overlapping images now. The one on the right displayed the normal aerial view. On the left, the same area was shown in the shifting blues and greens of the infrared spectrum. She could tell which wolf was Yogi because he was glowing like a bright red coal, such was his level of exertion compared to the others.

The two wolves in the lead were running down a ravine, only a few hundred yards away, but the path was so narrow she didn’t see how Yogi could overtake them.

Except...he didn’t try. At a fork in the road, he ran in the other direction—not down but up.

“Where is he going?” Even Jessup was confused.

The glowing coal ran up the ridge to the top of the waterfall. For a second, he paced there, as if eyeing the distance from the top of the falls to other side of the gorge.

“No way! He can’t jump that. It’s more than twenty meters!” Jessup and the others crowded around her tablet, each wearing expressions ranging from shock to disbelief.

“Oh my God,” she squeaked, shaking her head. *Don’t do it. Don’t.*

Denise held her breath, clapping her hand over her mouth to muffle her involuntary scream when Yogi backed up to get a running start. He bounded over the short space at the top of the falls—only a few meters—before launching himself into space.

The blood in her veins ran ice cold. She shuddered as Yogi flew in a wide arc, his body an arrow shooting for the rocky outcropping on the other side of the gorge...a foothold that seemed miles away to her horrified eyes.

It could have been the exhilarating climax of a werewolf movie, but this was real life.

At the last second, she squeezed her eyes shut, tears stinging behind closed lids. There was no way Yogi would make it to the other side. She couldn’t watch him plunge to his death.

“Hot damn! *He did it.*”

Her eyes flew open, but she couldn’t see. The image was too blurry. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she blinked to clear them until she could see and confirm for herself that he was on the other side.

Yogi was now well ahead of the other wolves—far enough to safely shift and scale a tree. Jessup touched the image to zoom in.

“He’s got it. He’s got the flag.”

Un-fucking-believable! She couldn’t believe he’d made it. That he was still *alive*.

“I’m going to kill him!” The minute he crossed the finish line, she would wring his neck for scaring the crap out of her.

Instead of backtracking as she expected, Yogi shifted back into wolf form and veered left, now leading the pack around the falls in what she presumed was another route back—one that didn’t have him trip over the contestants trailing behind him.

“How did he even know where the flag was?” she asked, brow creased.

“He could smell it,” one of the teens chimed. Out of the corner of her eye, Jessup glanced at her as if to gauge her reaction.

Puzzled, she frowned at the screen. She could see a bit of cloth in Yogi’s jaws. It was bright purple. She squinted and hit the zoom button Jessup had used earlier.

“Hey! Not okay,” she snapped, glaring at the group around her.

Jessup had the grace to look slightly abashed.

“We needed something with your scent so we borrowed some clothing from your bag.”

She bit her lip to keep from bitching him out, drawing the tablet closer to her chest.

Yogi was almost there. The path back must be much shorter than the one to the falls. With that Hail Mary leap, he’d ensured victory—taking years off her life in the process.

Any minute now, he’d cross the finish line carrying the flag in his jaws—the purple bra she’d probably never be able to wear again. Not unless she wanted to sport the peekaboo look courtesy of fang-shaped holes.

Chapter 17

*H*is muscles were screaming when he finally saw Denise and the others waiting at the finish line.

A few more steps and he was there, collapsing at her feet with her brassiere in his jaws.

Yogi had driven a little over a mile before swearing and turning the car around. He couldn't let anyone else claim Denise. And regardless of what Jessup claimed, that was what the 'hosting' was—a thinly veiled attempt to snake his mate out from under him.

Trying to let her go had ripped his heart out. He'd nearly wrecked his Jeep getting back, then had run until every cell in his body throbbed and begged him to stop.

Now he was shutting down.

Denise hovered anxiously before she got on her knees and wrapped her arms around him.

Oh, that's nice. Shifting to his two-legged form, he took a deep breath and settled in her embrace, too spent to move.

"He cheated," Levi called out. Yogi cracked his lids, fixing a baleful glare on the Avery wolves just now crossing the finish line.

"How was that cheating?" Denise's tone was incredulous. "He caught up to you despite being like miles behind and then he flew—fucking *flew*—like a goddamn psycho kamikaze over that gorge!"

Levi began to argue, but Jessup interrupted with a raised hand.

"Enough, boys. It's obvious she's made her choice."

The Avery alpha's tone wasn't exactly enthusiastic, more like resigned and even slightly amused.

Levi scoffed and shook his head. "She just doesn't know any better. He's the first werewolf she met. It's classic imprinting."

Yogi raised a hand and flipped him off.

Levi started for them, but Denise scowled at him. She crawled around Yogi to put herself right between the two men.

Jessup laughed and walked over to join her. "It's clear these two have formed a bond. While we *are* disappointed Denise won't be joining our family, even temporarily, we should thank both her and Yogi for what they did for Oliver."

Levi and the other Were, Gus, shuffled and looked away.

“Thank you, Denise,” Gus finally said after a beat too long. “We do owe you for that—big time.”

He cocked his head and smiled flirtatiously. “And if you change your mind and decide to ditch this loser, we’ll be waiting.”

Yogi was within his rights to rearrange Gus’ face for that comment, but he was still too tired.

“Anyone would have done the same in my place. Well, anyone decent...” Denise said.

Jessup’s tone was wry. “I really don’t think that’s true. Most people would have left a lost cub in the woods, thinking it was his rightful place. For a real wolf cub, that is true, but Weres require more care. We can survive like that, orphaned so young, but we would never learn to control our dual nature without guidance.”

Distracted, Denise tore her gaze away from the others. “Wait, what do you mean by *in the woods*?”

“When you rescued him, I mean. You *did* do that, correct?” Jessup asked, a note of puzzled condescension creeping into his voice.

Her lips parted. “Yes, I did, but not in the woods.” She looked down at Yogi, brow creased. “Did you think I found him in the woods, too?”

Frowning, he nodded. “Of course,” he said, voice fraying a little in his exhaustion. “At least that’s what I assumed. Are you saying that’s not what happened?”

“No!” She held up her hands.

Jessup frowned. “Wait, so you didn’t save him?”

“I *did*, but he wasn’t in the woods. He was in a lab—a place called Reliance Research. It does illegal animal research. That’s why I was there. I...I rescue animals from places like those.”

“Fuck me to the seven hells,” Yogi swore as he grabbed her hand and tried to stand.

When he looked at Denise, she was nervously glancing between him and Jessup, panic on her features.

One minute, Jessup’s face was mildly annoyed. The next, he was a beast. His face contorted with rage, he whipped around and howled.

Denise gripped Yogi’s hand tightly as every wolf in Lunar Springs poured out of their houses, shifting as they ran. Even the men who’d raced against him shifted back despite being nearly as tired as he was.

Yogi held Denise close as they were surrounded—the center of a snarling mass of wolves. Only he and Jessup maintained their human forms.

“We have a major problem,” Jessup announced to the group. “Get the chief.”

Chapter 18

Denise's eyes flitted nervously from werewolf to werewolf. When Jessup had said, 'Get the chief,' she'd assumed the man would come out to the Averys, but that wasn't how things worked apparently.

She'd been hustled into an SUV and driven to yet another cabin in the woods. Only this one was more like a log mansion.

Now she was sitting at the wide oak table at wolf central, also known as Douglas Maitland's house.

It was a smaller group than the crowd of near-rabid wolves she'd left at Lunar Springs. Jessup and Levi were here, in addition to a few other members of the Avery clan.

The chief's daughter was also in attendance. She was an intimidatingly beautiful woman named Mara.

"Yogi," Mara called, holding out her hand.

Denise ignored the little pang in her chest when Yogi and Mara hugged warmly. The two had a whispered conversation, their familiarity obvious. How close were they? Was Yogi interested in the gorgeous lady wolf?

Of course he is, stupid. Look at her.

Yogi had only competed in the *fortitudo* to help her out. She'd made it clear she didn't want to be thrown with a stranger, so he'd raced to spare her that. It was the sort of thing the stupidly noble did.

Except he'd almost killed himself to win. She peeked at Yogi and Mara from underneath her lashes. He wouldn't have done that if he was interested in someone else, would he?

Mara's almost-luminescent green eyes turned to her and Denise looked away.

Hoo-daddy. Despite being model sleek, Mara looked like she could take Levi and Gus with one hand tied behind her back. Denise had never met a more physically intimidating woman.

If only she'd found someone like that for her team, then she could have left Max at home. Snorting, Denise transferred her attention to Mara's even more intimidating father.

And I didn't think they made them in sizes bigger than Yogi. Good thing she hadn't put money on that, because Douglas Maitland, the chief, was a stunning mountain of a man. She couldn't even tell how tall he was because it hurt her neck to look all the way up at his face.

Feeling like Gimli the dwarf surrounded by elves on steroids, she hunched down at the table. But as two final stragglers trudged into the room, Douglas turned to her.

“Explain how this happened.”

Even though she had been waiting for it, the order caught her off guard. Like a deer in headlights, Denise froze as every eye fixed on her. After a few blinks, she opened her mouth, but nothing came out. It was as if her tongue was suddenly too big for her mouth.

Why the hell do they all have to be so damn big? She hadn’t experienced stage fright like this since her high school debate against the nuns from St. Agnes.

“It’s my fault,” Yogi said, coming to stand at her side.

He put a hand on her shoulder, and she quickly reached up to take hold of his fingers, a move she could have sworn made Mara smile. The brief grin was gone too quickly for Denise to be sure.

“I didn’t think to ask her where she found Oliver,” Yogi continued. “I assumed she’d found him in the woods, away from the body of his mother. But I was wrong.”

He turned to her. “This is my fault. If I’d given you a chance to explain, we might not be in this mess now.”

Denise squirmed, a little uncomfortable at having him take the blame. If she’d been thinking clearly, she would have realized they would be concerned about Oliver having exposed himself *before* she found him. It just hadn’t occurred to her.

If it had, she’d have tried to use the knowledge as a bargaining chip from the start...

She wasn’t tempted to do it now. Douglas was way too scary for those kind of hardline negotiation tactics. Plus, this mess had given her a chance to get to know Yogi.

“I’m not sure how big of a mess it is—I mean, I don’t know if the Reliance people knew what he was.”

Douglas stared at her. “This Reliance Research is in Wyoming?”

She nodded.

“And what were you doing there?”

“I was liberating some chimpanzees with my team. We had—”

“Why?” one of the hulking males standing against the wall asked.

“Why what?”

“Why were you saving monkeys?”

Denise met his eyes, but all she saw was genuine curiosity. “That’s what I do. Me and my team. We rescue animals from testing facilities.”

“Yeah, but *why*?”

No one had ever asked her that before. After floundering for an explanation for a minute, she decided to answer honestly. “Well...animals are generally nicer than people. To me, anyway. They deserve protection too. I know it’s not a popular opinion.”

“Why do you say that?” Douglas asked, his arms crossed.

“Well, most folks think I should be spending my time and money helping other people, but—”

Douglas huffed. “Denise, this is the last group that’s going to judge you for preferring animals to people.”

A few people laughed, but the chief held up a hand and asked her to continue describing that night. “Tell me about your team.”

“Three of us went into Reliance, but more were waiting to transfer the chimps to a nature preserve I own in Africa. Most of the team is there now, but the rest went home. We always split up after a job for weeks, sometimes months. Communication is discouraged in case one of us has picked up surveillance. We had already gotten the monkeys out when I saw Oliver in a cage.”

Douglas’ brow rose at the mention of her owning a nature preserve, but he let it pass. “Oliver was in cub form, correct?”

“Yes. And before you ask, I don’t know if they saw him change. We broke in after midnight. Only the security guards were there.”

Douglas tilted his head slightly. “What about cameras? Did they have any on him?”

She looked past him, trying to remember if there had been one she’d missed. “I don’t think so, but it was dark and I didn’t turn on the lights. The parking lot had one camera at the main gate, but we didn’t go in that way, so I don’t think it got us. I didn’t see any others. When we go in, most of our faces are covered so they can’t ID us even if we stumble onto a camera.”

“You told Yogi this facility wasn’t supposed to house primates. How did you learn that?”

Denise fiddled with a piece of lint. “Government records. There are lots of hoops for labs that do vertebrate research,” she explained. “The higher the animal is on the evolutionary ladder, the more paperwork is required. We compare that to a company’s purchasing records. I have a guy who hacks the biomedical supply companies for me. I get an alert when there are too many unexplained purchases.”

She leaned forward to rest her weight on her forearms. “Reliance Research isn’t licensed for anything bigger than a rat, but they were buying supplies no rodent would need. Big cages for one, and antibiotics and other drugs specific to primates. Not to mention the food they were ordering. Very little of it was rat chow.”

Douglas nodded as if that made sense. “We need to go back in and make sure they don’t have any evidence of Oliver’s true nature.”

A low rumble of agreement swept across the room.

“Should we call Connell and Logan?” someone asked.

“They’re in the middle of something,” Douglas answered. “This is on us, but we can handle a single research facility without an Elemental’s help.”

Denise caught Yogi’s eye. “*A what?*” she mouthed.

“I’ll tell you later,” he murmured before patting her hand and standing up. “Chief, I want to volunteer to take care of this. It’s my fault we didn’t know about it sooner.”

Douglas dismissed that with a motion of his hand. “If you hadn’t won Denise’s trust, she might not have confided in us at all.”

Denise blushed. The chief’s tone implied there was more between them than was actually there.

Well, maybe there was.

“All things considered, we haven’t lost too much time,” Douglas told him. “If any harm was done, it happened before you got involved. What matters now is determining the extent of the damage, if any.”

Several wolves nodded in approval, and she noticed Yogi’s shoulders drop a fraction as if he had been relieved of some burden.

“I still want to be the one to go,” Yogi insisted.

“First, we have to see what we’re up against. After the theft of so many valuable research animals, it’s likely Reliance will have increased its security measures. And if they’re aware Oliver is a werewolf, the place could very well be a fortress by now.”

It was worse than that. Denise hated to be the one to point it out, but she had to. “If they do have evidence of your kind, it’s also possible that striking this one facility is not going to help.”

“Of course it will help,” Jessup growled. “We can burn this place to the ground.”

“That would wipe all evidence of us, if it’s there,” another wolf added in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Sounds like a suitable place to start,” a man on the left chimed in.

Mara held up her hands. “Let’s not go off half-cocked. We need to be strategic about this.”

She gestured at Denise. “What she was about to point out is that Reliance might have passed on whatever information it had on Oliver already.”

Denise nodded quickly. “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. Reliance is a small facility, but they’re owned by a shell corporation. My guy tried to follow the breadcrumbs up the chain—to put a name to the parent company. However, it got too convoluted and he lost the thread. Given that setup, chances are good that a big conglomerate now has proof werewolves exist.”

They hated hearing that. One or two men even growled.

Douglas waved at them to shut up. “Calm down, everyone. If the worst has occurred, we’ll deal with it. It wouldn’t be the first time the powers that be have discovered our existence.”

Denise’s eyes nearly bugged out of her head. “Like the government? What happened?”

Mara drummed her fingers on the table. “Let’s just say certain levels of the military are aware of us. It’s an old, but well-kept, secret, one that’s been passed down certain echelons of power.”

Yogi nodded, rubbing Denise’s back absently. “Things were pretty dicey for a while. A long time ago, we cut a deal. Weres make excellent soldiers—the best in the world. If they treat us with respect, that is.”

“And if they piss us off, we make the worst enemies,” Levi added.

“Occasionally—usually when a new administration comes into power—some smartass will want to use us in ways we find...objectionable. They find out this a bad idea fairly quickly,” Douglas

finished before returning to the current problem.

“I’m going to call in some outside help on this one,” he said. “Our IT people are excellent for most purposes, but we have an unknown entity at play here and we’re going to want the best hacker we can get our hands on. One we can trust.”

Mara scowled. “You don’t mean who I think you mean, right?”

The chief’s eyes twinkled. “He’s not one of us, but he’s a known quantity, just the contradiction we need—a dependable mercenary.”

“Mercenary being the operative word here.” Mara’s lack of enthusiasm was clear. “He’ll charge us the earth and will insist on leading the op, not just being a part of it.”

“That’s not necessarily a terrible thing,” Douglas pointed out. “He has the experience to organize this. And, like a true mercenary, once we pay him, he won’t ask any questions.”

“Who are you talking about?” Denise asked.

Mara’s mouth thinned. “Another human. A total butthead.”

“*Mara.*” The chief sounded more amused than angry.

“No offense,” Mara said to Denise. “I don’t mean all humans are buttheads. This one’s a prize, though.”

Denise smiled. “No offense taken. What’s this butthead’s name?”

Yogi laughed. “She’s talking about Jack. Jack Buchanan.”

Chapter 19

As expected, Jack Buchanan *did* insist on taking charge. Having worked under him many times in the past, Yogi didn't mind, not when Jack had backed him up about including Denise in the op.

At first, Douglas hadn't wanted to let her take part. Though he appreciated what she'd done to bring the problem to their attention, Denise would be an outsider until Yogi claimed her...which hadn't happened yet despite some positive signs in that direction.

The chief had wanted Mara on the mission—insisting her combat training would be invaluable. Both Jack and Yogi had argued that point. Their goal wasn't to fight. A surgical strike by a three-person team would be more efficient.

Plus, Denise had more experience breaking into secure facilities. She was familiar with the layout at Reliance, and could point out any changes made to the security apparatus in response to the previous burglary. In the end, Denise came and Mara stayed home.

Denise was currently sitting in a van a few clicks away while Yogi did a circuit around the edge of the Reliance campus. He was wearing a camera, recording everything so she could point out any changes to the exterior of the grounds. Meanwhile, Jack was working his hacker mojo on anything and everything Reliance.

They didn't have a very big internet presence. But Jack had found out one interesting thing. Reliance was a subsidiary of the Denon Corporation, a multinational conglomerate that had been in the news last year.

His circuit done, Yogi headed to the van where Jack was waiting with Denise for his report and the footage he'd captured.

Handing over the reins should have bothered him more, but despite his upbringing, Yogi didn't feel the need to be the one calling the shots. It wasn't in his nature.

His father had detested his lack of ambition—his refusal to fight for fun or to make a point. For so many wolves, that kind of constant need for conflict was in their blood.

Yogi had always been a little different. He'd always believed that he'd probably be a lone wolf if he hadn't have had family ties.

But that was before Denise. If combat challenge over a woman was still sanctioned, Yogi would

have torn Levi and Gus apart to keep either of them from being her ‘host’. That had been the first fight he hadn’t been prepared to lose, family feud be damned.

And Denise would have fought for him as well. Remembering the instinctive way she had put herself between him and Levi when he’d been vulnerable after the race made him smile.

Plus, she desired him. He’d seen the little signs of her attraction—had smelled her arousal. Once this mess was behind them, they’d spend some time alone. Then nature would take its course...with his help.

Yogi paused halfway up the hill as the truth settled in his gut. Quite unexpectedly, he had found a purpose—his mate.

Even her cause was something he could get behind. Spending their time rescuing animals was something he could picture himself being involved in. Furthermore, it was something he *wanted* to do. When was the last time he had said that about anything?

“Are you on your way back yet?” Jack’s voice broke into the silence.

Yogi adjusted his earpiece. “Yes, I’m three and half minutes out. Are you at the van now?”

“Yeah.” There was a chuckle. “And thanks for the exact update. See you in a few.”

It was a good thing Mara wasn’t here. Jack was all business in a clinch, but the rest of the time, he was as loose as a leaf on the wind. The chief’s daughter couldn’t stand him.

Mara, while fun in her own way, was a total type-A personality, organized and serious to a fault. She and Jack were oil and water.

Yogi relaxed, slowing his pace. It was hard to dislike the merc, but Mara somehow managed. Jack was a classic California-surfer type with the tan and sun-streaked hair to match. His easygoing personality won him friends and landed him tons of women...and he was alone with Denise.

Get moving, stupid.

Quickening his pace, Yogi hustled the rest of the way to the van, an old police surveillance vehicle Jack had bought and upgraded for his domestic work.

Yogi shouldn’t have worried. The look in Denise’s eyes when he opened the van door warmed him to his toes.

It was weird how the right person filled the empty spaces inside.

“Earth to Yogi.”

His attention snapped to Jack. The man was sitting at one of the vehicle’s two computer terminals with his hand out. Yogi took the camera off and handed it to him.

Jack’s ice-blue eyes narrowed at him. “Shenanigans can wait until after the op. Don’t get distracted now.”

“Pot meet kettle,” Yogi replied as Jack turned to download the footage. Though technically Jack hadn’t been to blame, there had been more than one occasion when a woman hitting on him had messed with one of his carefully crafted timelines.

Like flies to honey. Pale, watered-down human honey.

Jack ignored him, pushing buttons to download the surveillance footage. After a burst of static, the playback started on the monitors.

A blushing Denise turned in her chair, her attention fixed on the screen. “I take it you two have worked together before?”

“We have,” Yogi answered, not elaborating. Denise didn’t need to know about that night he and Jack spent in Guatemala.

Jack snickered. “Yogi and me go way back, but not as far back as Connell Maitland and me.” He glanced at Denise, his quick eyes taking in her curves with a little too much appreciation.

He ignored Yogi’s surreptitious kick. “How did you two meet?”

Denise looked up from the monitor with wide eyes. “Er...”

“We met here in Wyoming.”

Jack’s lips turned up at the corner, his attention fixed on Denise’s hesitant expressions. “Really, when?”

“Recently,” Yogi said repressively, his tone inviting Jack to take the hint and shut up.

“And you are the one who started this animal rescue operation? Any idea why Douglas Maitland is so keen on shutting this place down?”

“You’re not supposed to shut it down,” Yogi reminded him. “Just copy their research data before wiping it.”

Jack shrugged. “Not much of a difference if you ask me. Is there a reason Papa Maitland is jumping on Denise’s bandwagon?” He directed his question to Denise, but she smiled and turned back to the screen.

So much for Jack not asking any questions. “His reasons are his own,” Yogi said, infusing a this-discussion-is-closed tone to his words.

“You and Connell. Always so tight-lipped,” Jack murmured.

“Would you rather we took our business elsewhere?” Yogi asked.

“Jeez. The entire lot of you are so touchy,” Jack grumbled. His mouth opened before abruptly closing. He nodded at the screen behind Denise. “Was that utility box there before? It looks new.”

She squinted at it. “I don’t remember it. You may be right.”

Jack hummed and typed something on his terminal.

“It’s a camera, isn’t it?” she asked. “One disguised to look like a utility box.”

“Yeah, high-end from what I can tell, but if I’m right, we can use that.”

“How?” she asked.

“I’m familiar with this model. It transmits over Wi-Fi, which means it is susceptible to my magic.” He turned his back, the sound of rapid-fire typing filling the air. “Why don’t you two go grab something to eat? I’m going to keep at this and see what holes I can find. We can meet tonight and form our entry plan.”

Yogi didn’t need to be told twice. Eager to be alone with Denise, he reached out and tugged her

from the chair. She took his hand, waving goodbye to Jack.

“See you at the hotel,” Yogi said, ignoring the merc’s knowing look. He climbed behind the wheel of his Jeep, which he’d brought along in case they needed to separate for whatever reason.

Once Denise was buckled into the passenger seat, he started down the road, spraying a cloud of dirt in his eagerness to get out of there.

“Where are we going?”

Yogi glanced at her. She looked good enough to eat in her black leggings and dark navy sweater. What he really wanted was to take her back to his hotel room, but that would have been rushing things.

“Let’s find a steakhouse.”

She groaned. “How did I not guess you would say that?”

“One with a salad bar,” he amended. It wasn’t like they’d find a vegetarian restaurant in this neck of the woods. Although if they managed to, he’d go there for Denise.

Damn. It must be love.

Chapter 20

Denise found little to laugh about later that night when Jack told her she had to stay in the van while he and Yogi went into Reliance.

“You can’t leave me behind!”

Jack’s tongue pushed his lower lip out. “From what I discovered earlier, that place has doubled the number of security guards and added at least four new cameras, one on each entrance. More of us going in means more of a chance we’re going to get caught.”

Yogi crossed his arms. “We have to go in? You can’t hack them from the outside?”

“No. It’s a closed system, networked only to the other computers in the building according to the contracts signed with their IT company—which I was able to find. The good news is that most any computer terminal inside should give us what we need. But we have to avoid those guards.”

“There’s only four of them,” Denise protested. “I’ve broken into more secure places than that!”

Jack’s bright golden features darkened. “I get that, but it’s my reputation on the line here—”

“I’ll keep her with me,” Yogi offered.

Denise beamed at him, but Jack wasn’t having it. He put his hands on his hips. “Not good enough, I’m afraid. If she goes—and that’s still a big if—then she stays with me. That’s the only way I can guarantee she won’t give us up if she gets pinched.”

“I wouldn’t do that. In fact, it’s usually *me* saying that to new team members.”

Jack cocked his head at her. “Forgive me for saying this, but I can’t take your word. Yogi, I know. We’ve worked together on and off for years. He’s vouched for you and I trust him, but I can’t blindly extend that to you. If you go in, you stick to me like a cheap suit. This way, you getting caught is not even a question.”

Denise could tell Yogi didn’t like that from the firm set of his jaw, but he eventually nodded.

“Excellent.” She smiled and went to get her backpack.

Earlier, Yogi had taken her to her rental cabin so she could grab some clothes and supplies. Opening her bag, she took out her utility belt and wrapped it around her waist, adjusting the built-in sleeve that held her lock-picking set before it slipped out.

Jack whistled. “Nice. What’s in that little pocket?” he asked, pointing.

“Gourmet dog treats. You’d be surprised how many animals will eat them. These are infused with

a strong sedative. I always carry them—in case the animals I’m trying to rescue give me trouble.”

“And that other black-and-green canister?”

“Bear mace.”

Yogi snickered. “Works for me. Let’s go.”

Jack grunted and picked up his own bag. She’d seen him stow his laptops, rope, and an assortment of weapons she didn’t want to examine too closely inside it.

Even though she didn’t need help, she let Yogi adjust the straps of her backpack before fixing her half-balaclava mask over her mouth and nose.

Yogi gave her a thumb’s-up before they moved out.

She trailed after the men, glad Jack hadn’t asked about the nondescript lipstick-sized tube next to the bear spray. That one was there in case things went sideways.

Every girl is entitled to at least one secret weapon.

Chapter 21

The interior of the building hadn't changed at all as far as she could tell. It was still a sterile utilitarian workplace for humans and a hellhole for animals.

"I don't believe this," she hissed at Jack and Yogi. "They've got another chimp!"

She was looking over Jack's shoulder as he typed like a demon on a computer in one of the lab's few offices. He'd pulled up the security feeds on the screen and had a command-line terminal floating over it.

Most of the researchers at the facility had desks in the lab spaces, not far from their work benches, but there were a few private offices reserved for senior scientists and their clerical personnel. They were in the one marked, ironically, *chief*.

The quality of the office chair told her this was where the big boss sat. Denise didn't think it was a coincidence that there was no name or personal effects. What Reliance was doing was illegal, and whoever was calling the shots was aware of that. He or she obviously didn't want their name associated with whatever they were doing.

Maybe I should have dug deeper. She should have figured out exactly what they were doing with the chimps and other animals. Just getting the records they possessed for the animals they weren't supposed to have had been enough for her to intervene. However, after seeing how carefully anonymous this office was, Denise had to wonder what other diabolical acts Reliance was up to.

I hope the spineless little worms who run this place shit their pants when the chimps went missing.

Denise gritted her teeth, eyeing the door. The hallway outside it led to the main lab space, where the lone chimp was being kept.

"Don't even think about it," Yogi warned. He was perched on the desk, looking like the world's hottest paperweight.

"But—"

"No, Denise," he said gently. "Jack hasn't turned off the cameras so we can keep an eye on the guards. Which means the security office can see what we see. If you go get that animal now, the rent-a-cops will come running."

Jack grunted in agreement. "Douglas said the data is a priority. We'll look at the cage after we're

through here, once we don't need the feeds anymore."

Denise rocked on her heels—she wasn't sure why she had to wait. The camera was above the door to the lab, positioned to get the best view of the room. If she stood directly under it, she could get a closer look at the cage without stepping into the video's frame. She could figure out which type of cage they were dealing with...

Without lifting his head, Jack swore. "There's a guard entering the building. He's supposed to be two buildings over. Not sure why he deviated routes. We may need to take him out of the picture before he stumbles over us in here."

Yogi hopped off the desk. "I'll take care of it."

"You don't mean in a permanent way, right?" Denise felt compelled to ask. Even though she wasn't too fond of the people who voluntarily worked in places like this, she understood it was a just paycheck to most of them.

"Please," Yogi said dismissively before walking silently from the room, moving quickly against the wall to avoid the hallway cam. In seconds, he had melted away into the darkness.

"That did not answer my question," Denise said, aware Jack wasn't paying her any mind.

He was still tapping away, commands flying across his screen. "Starting the download now," he murmured, his eyes fixed forward.

Denise ran her teeth over her lower lip. Yogi would kill her if she went to check on the chimp... but the lab was literally just a few steps away, in the opposite direction of the encroaching guard.

I could just take a quick peek. She would be back in less than a minute.

The sound of the clacking keyboard covered the sounds of her footsteps. She was at the door of the lab a scant thirty second later, the night vision monocular she'd borrowed from Jack in her hand.

Those fuckers! Now that she was close enough, Denise could see the cage clearly. This one was set on a bench with an oversized lock, not a digital one. Instead, it was a thick commercial-grade padlock.

That wasn't the issue. Her bolt cutters could take care of the lock. However, under the magnification of her monocular, she could see a thin wire running along the mechanism, one that had no business being there.

The damn thing was booby-trapped. If the door was opened, it would trigger something. An alarm probably. But why would they bother to booby trap the cage... *Unless they were expecting us to come back.*

Fluorescent light flooded the room as someone flipped the switch on. "Stop right there!"

Denise pivoted, coming face to face with an armed security guard.

For a rent-a-cop, the guy pointing a gun at her was massive. This guy rivaled even Yogi in height, which was the only reason for what she did next.

She dove into a forward tumble, rolling in a little ball—right through the giant's legs.

"Hey, you little bi—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence. Mid-tumble, she had grasped the first cylinder she could reach on her belt before shooting to her feet. The giant got a mouthful of bear spray before he could aim his gun.

"Argh!" The man dropped his gun as his hands flew to his neck. Coughing and choking, he bent low enough for her to get him again, this time in the eyes.

Kicking the gun away, Denise reached into her pocket for the zip ties she had snagged from Yogi's pack.

"Sorry about the shot in the mouth. If I had been able to reach with the first try, I would have only gotten your face, but you're too tall."

Darting in and out, she worked quickly to tie his hands together. He tried to kick out at her, but she was too quick for his blindly flailing feet. To be safe, Denise used one of the longer ties to bind his ankles.

If any of the other guards were near—and she would bet her fortune they were—they would have heard this guard's shouts and coughs.

Yogi and Jack were going to kill her if she'd just alerted the cavalry. Standing on her tiptoes, she checked the window built into the door before running back down the way she'd come. Denise skidded to a stop as she rounded the corner.

In front of her was another hulking security guard and a man in a suit. They were standing in front of the open office door where Jack and Yogi were, their hands held up.

Denise ducked back around the corner before peeking out again. *Of course*. Hulk number two was holding a gun on them.

Fuck-a-doodle-do. If Hulk two didn't have a gun, she was sure Yogi could take him. His speed and reflexes were supernatural.

But the guard did have a gun, so what was she supposed to do now? If she charged them, the guy might turn and point the gun at her. The distraction would give Yogi a chance to take him down, but it would almost definitely get her shot in the process.

"What are you doing in my office?"

Denise snapped her attention from the Hulk to the man in the suit. He had said that. He was the head scientist!

The man wasn't what she pictured. A spare figure in a tailored suit, he wasn't wearing glasses or a lab coat. Barely taller than she was, he stood with his hands on his hips, managing to convey his supercilious disdain despite the fact his back was to her.

He didn't seem at all intimidated by the very large men who had broken into his office. *Probably because he has his own armed muscle*.

Delaying further would just give Reliance's henchmen more time to get there. She had to act now, and there was no time to think of something better. She was out of options.

Sucking in a deep breath, Denise hurried forward, trying to move as silently as possible in her

running shoes. She only caught a glimpse of Yogi's eyes as she approached, but the warning flash they gave her was enough to let her know he did not approve.

The minute shake of his head—the one telling her to back off—didn't tip off the Reliance goons until she was almost on top of them. By then, it was too late.

Denise whipped the cylinder from her belt and jumped as high as she could, leaping to climb up Hulk number two like a tree. She latched onto his shirt with one hand, using the other to jam her lipstick Taser into his thick neck.

The security guard crashed down like the ton of bricks he resembled. He landed with a meaty thump, one that was accentuated by the staccato pings of metal hitting the floor.

Yogi dashed from the office. Before she could blink, the guard's gun was in his hand.

For a second, she was worried he would shoot the head scientist. Instead, he took out the clip and popped the bullets from the chamber. Once he was done, he advanced on the now-quailing scientist.

She was right there next to him. "Who are you?" she asked the suit. "I want a name."

The man didn't answer. He turned to run away, but Yogi picked him up by the scruff of his neck. It was far too easy for him. If he wasn't careful, he could kill the man accidentally.

"No, put him down!" She stepped up to them, yanking on the man's collared shirt until Yogi dropped him.

"What are you planning?" Yogi growled.

"This," she replied, drawing her arm back. She punched the suit with all her strength, her fist smashing into his face. The scientist crumpled to the floor next to his guard, unconscious.

Jack chuckled from inside the office. "*Dayum*, girl."

Yogi frowned. "I could have taken care of that."

"If one of you had hit him, you might have killed him," Denise scoffed, waving a hand over the bodies. "Look at the twerp! He's my size. Besides, wouldn't you rather his sins be exposed to the world? It would be a lesson to the others like him."

She turned to Jack. "Do you have their data? I'm sure there's enough dirt there to hang this guy."

"The copy is done—finally. There were a few more gigs of video files than we anticipated, so getting it all took a little longer than I calculated. Now we just let my virus scramble their system and Bob's your uncle."

She and Yogi exchanged a loaded glance at the mention of the video files, but Jack didn't seem to notice their trepidation.

"Why don't you go and grab that last monkey? I've taken care of the cameras. They're on a loop now," Jack said absently.

"Yes, please!" That was a great idea. Taking Yogi's hand, she led him to the lab.

"You took out another one?" He sounded shocked.

She shrugged. "Never underestimate a determined animal activist," she said with a frown.

The guard was still making a racket. She looked around. "Let's stuff some of those paper towels

in his mouth,” she suggested.

“No need.” Yogi knelt, taking out the roll of duct tape he’d stashed in her bag. He applied a strip to the man’s mouth. “You know, I bought this roll to use on you.”

Denise sniffed. “Lucky for you that you didn’t try.” She gestured to the man lying prone at their feet. “Just look at what happens when you cross me.”

Yogi chuckled and she forgot about the guard, moving over to the cage.

Tentatively, she handed the monkey one of her special treats through the bars. The animal eagerly took it. “The cage is wired. It’s rigged to an alarm.”

“Don’t worry about it. I did some EOD in the army.”

“EOD?”

Yogi bent and started fiddling with the wires underneath the table.

“Explosive Ordinance Disposal,” he said, flashing her a quick but heart-stopping grin. “An alarm on a cage should be cake after that.”

“Wow,” she said, her head drawing back to admire the view as he bent over.

Focus, Denise. Her hormones were already getting a workout around him, but throw in a little bomb-disposal skill into the mix and she was about ready to pass out.

Yogi finished messing with the wires and straightened. “That should do it. Getting this little guy out should be no problem now.”

“It’s a girl, but that’s okay. Here,” she said, reaching into her bag for her portable bolt cutters.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, grasping the bars on the door and yanking.

The thin metal joint in the corner bent. Putting a hand in the opening, he pulled again until the entire door separated from the frame.

Denise blinked. Then she remembered the Jeep. He’d pulled the car from that ditch without a winch or any tools. She shook her head at the wrecked cage. “I guess I’ll just have to get used to the fact that the man I love is basically the Wolverine.”

“What did you say?”

Denise looked at him blankly before her mind replayed her words. She clapped her hands over her mouth.

Yogi’s grin could have lit up the room.

Did I just...

“Yep, you said it out loud,” Yogi said, sounding way too satisfied.

A throat cleared. “Monkey is escaping,” Jack said from the door. “You know, in case you were interested.”

Mortified, Denise looked wildly around. The chimp was halfway across the room.

Yogi leaned forward. “You better get her,” he said in an undertone. “Animals can be a little unpredictable around me.”

“Oh, of course.” Denise hurried after the chimp, her cheeks flaming.

She scooped up the monkey, refusing to look at either of the men. She didn't have to see their faces to know they were amused. Their laughter was a clear indication.

Chapter 22

After what seemed like an eternity, Yogi pulled Jack's van into the empty driveway of the boarding house on the Wyoming-Colorado border. He had left his Jeep there before they headed to Reliance, intending to use it as a fallback position in case they failed tonight and needed to regroup.

He'd originally planned to take the Reliance data to the chief immediately, but there was no way that was happening now.

She loves me.

For the entire ride, Denise had kept fussing with the chimp. She was still blushing and avoiding his eyes as they unloaded their gear—which was taking entirely too long.

He felt like pumping his fist in the air in victory. Denise *loved* him. And as soon as he got rid of Jack and the chimp, he could show her he loved her back.

He studied the monkey. It looked sleepy enough for him to handle safely. Tossing his and Denise's packs on the porch, he took the drowsy animal from Denise's hands and shoved it at Jack.

"Take this and go," Yogi said before taking his mate in his arms and bending her back in a Hollywood-style kiss.

Yogi had always believed the idea of time standing still was a cliché. He knew better now. Pouring his heart and soul into the kiss, he drank deep until Denise's body was putty in his arms.

After a very long minute, he finally noticed Jack was hemming and hawing, trying to get their attention.

"What about this?" Jack asked.

Reluctantly, Yogi lifted his head to see Jack holding up a thumb drive. Yogi held up a hand, catching the drive when Jack tossed it.

"Douglas will wire payment, thanks. Go away now," he said, lifting his dazed mate in a fireman's hold that should be very familiar to her.

Yogi headed for the boarding house door. Luckily, he still had the key.

Jack laughed until he realized Yogi was seriously leaving him with the chimp. "Hey, wait. I can't take this thing! There's not even a cage!"

Denise started calling out instructions and advice from over his shoulder, but Yogi was not about

to stop and take the thing back.

“Figure it out,” he called as he opened the door, slamming it behind them.

“Yogi, he can’t handle that animal,” she protested as he set her down in the first bedroom suite he found.

“Don’t worry. Jack’s resourceful. Plus, he knows I’ll kill him if something happens to it.”

She looked at him doubtfully, but he managed to divert her attention by taking off his shirt. Yogi continued to strip. By the time he was done, he was confident she didn’t remember the monkey at all.

Chapter 23

Jack slid the second USB drive into his waistband and shook his head at the closed door of the boarding house. Yogi had been a little too trusting, not checking to see if he'd kept a duplicate copy of the Reliance data.

As if I would take that long to copy and corrupt such a basic computer system.

Shoving down the twinge of guilt, he stared at the monkey in his hands. "You're headed for the San Diego Zoo, bucko," he told the chimp.

He lived in a suburb just minutes away from it. Perhaps if he drove fast enough, he could break in that very night and leave the animal somewhere safe. His course of action decided, Jack hustled to his van.

He carried out his break-in and deposit a mere hour after hitting town. Chimp-free he drove home. He arrived at his Spanish-style house just before Douglas' payment hit his Cayman account.

Jack loaded the drive onto his desktop computer without further delay.

He knew it was wrong. Despite his closed-lip tendencies, Douglas' son Connell was one of his best friends. Yogi, too, for that matter. Connell had saved Jack's life on the battlefield on numerous occasions, and he had returned the favor once. The trust and faith of the Maitland family was something he valued. Douglas had tapped him for this job based on that confidence.

But now he was knowingly violating their trust. His curiosity about the Maitlands and their odd extended family had reached a tipping point. If what was on this thumb drive shed any light on the questions burning in the back of his brain, then he was going to look—just once—and then he'd destroy the data on the drive forever.

A few hours later, he was still sitting in front of his computer. Jack hadn't expected to be shaken by what he'd seen, but his hands were trembling a bit as he picked up his coffee cup. He put it down when he realized there was nothing in it.

Gotta change that now. He went to his kitchen for the seldom-used bottle of vodka he kept in the freezer. Pouring himself a double, he went back to his computer and replayed the way those scientists had poked and prodded the little wolf cub.

Mouth tight, Jack fast forwarded and again watched what had happened when the scientists had gone home and turned off the lights, leaving the cub alone in the dark.

After tossing back the vodka, Jack fingered the rim of the empty glass and debated getting another.

Okay, this explains a lot. For years, Connell and his ‘cousins’ had fascinated him with their quick reflexes and stunning physicality, on and off the battlefield.

He should be thinking about them, and what this revelation meant. But Jack’s racing mind determinedly focused on one thing—probably the last person he should be thinking about.

Mara.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER.

Yogi cracked an eyelid. Oliver was staring at him with a smug expression on his little face. *Uh-oh.* He knew that look. “You better not have done what I think you did,” he said, his voice like sandpaper.

The kid stuck his tongue out, not to mock Yogi, but to lick the traces of blood from the corner of his tiny mouth.

Okay, he definitely had.

Oliver was almost two and half now. Although he had accepted his cousin as a caretaker, he missed Denise whenever they were gone.

The little cub had been so distraught that Jessup took the unprecedented step of asking Denise for help, which she had been eager to supply.

“You can’t fight such strong imprinting,” Jessup had said in an aside to him, shrugging off the momentous occasion. As far as Yogi knew, it was the first and last time an Avery had ever asked an outsider for help with anything.

At first, Denise was just supposed to visit Lunar Springs on occasion. But once Yogi and Denise were officially mated, they started spending more and more time away from the pack on research and rescue missions. Out of necessity, Oliver had started to visit them. Now he came to sleep over whenever Yogi and Denise weren’t away.

There was plenty of room since they had bought the boarding house and made it their home.

When Yogi had first agreed to overnight stays for Oliver, he hadn’t realized he was signing up for weeks at a time. It was okay, though. The little punk had finally accepted that the two of them had to share Denise. The cub had even stopped biting him. Now they were friends...of a sort.

It was occasionally weird to be a surrogate father, but Yogi was a practical man. He needed the practice for when they had their own cub. Glancing at his sleeping mate, he smiled.

Speaking of which...

Oliver tugged on his arm and Yogi got to his feet, hustling the boy out of the room before he woke Denise. He settled him in the living room with a fistful of dry cereal and went out to the garage to count white rabbits. One was gone.

Not again.

He and Denise had liberated some dogs from a research facility in Kentucky a few days ago. The place's animal abuse records had been wiped by the authorities, giving the staff free rein to continue their abhorrent practices.

They had only planned to take the dogs, but when Denise had seen the rabbits, he'd sighed, knowing he was going to end up having to make more room in the van.

And now, thanks to Oliver, the baker's dozen of fuzzy bunnies they'd brought back was one short...

At least this time, the kid had tucked the remains out of sight. Knowing cubs the way he did, Yogi figured he'd probably find the bones under the house. At least, that was where he had found them the last time.

On the bright side, there was no trail of blood leading to the body. *Some of my lessons must be sinking in.*

Unfortunately, Denise's weren't. She had tearfully lectured Oliver on the importance of not eating the rescue animals. However, there was only so much tofu and soy crap a wolf cub could eat. Eventually, instinct won out.

Of course, there had only been three rabbits last time. Maybe Denise wouldn't notice one was missing if Yogi released them quickly enough. In the meantime, he would keep her busy. Yogi had become more than adept at distracting his mate.

When his friends teased him for rescuing the animals they would normally eat, Yogi shrugged their jeers off. It made Denise happy. That was all that mattered.

He went into the kitchen and started on some pancakes. By the time Denise woke, Oliver had torn through an entire stack and was working on round two.

"Did you save any for me?"

He smiled at his mate as she came out of the bedroom. Meeting her halfway, he gave her a good morning kiss. "Of course, but I had to hide them from Oliver. Your pancakes are in the oven."

"Mmm, pancakes...I'm just going to check on the rabbits first."

Shooting Oliver a black look behind Denise's back, Yogi followed her out to the garage.

"Babe, don't you want to eat now before your food gets cold?"

"Uh, yeah...wait, weren't there thirteen rabbits?"

Yogi feigned confusion. "Naw, I don't think so."

"But..."

"Come back to the kitchen," he said, holding out his hand. "We've been so busy ever since we expanded to two teams. You should sit, put your feet up. I got that Canadian maple syrup you like..."

Hunger won over curiosity. "That does sound good. I could eat a horse," she said, walking in and settling at the kitchen table. She sniffed appreciatively. "I don't know what's with my appetite lately. I practically ate my weight in waffles yesterday."

Yogi added an extra pancake to the pile as she began to eat. A growing Were cub needed a lot of

calories.

She paused with the fork halfway to her mouth. “Are you sure there weren’t thirteen rabbits?”

“Pretty sure.”

Denise narrowed her eyes. She turned to their guest. “Oliver, did you go see the bunnies today?”

Oliver beamed at her, but said nothing.

“Babe,” Yogi prodded, waving the syrup bottle at her.

Denise ignored him. “Oliver, sweetie,” she began, standing up.

“You’re pregnant,” Yogi blurted.

Denise stared at him, eyes wide. After a minute, she blinked. “Oliver ate the rabbit, didn’t he?”

Damn. “Yes. Yes, he did.”

She put her hands on her stomach. “I’m really pregnant?”

It was too early to tell with a human test, but a Were’s nose was infallible when it came to this sort of thing. “Yes, sweetheart, you are.”

Denise nodded as if that made sense, but then she wrinkled her nose. “I’m going to want steak now, aren’t I?”

“Don’t worry. I stocked up last night. I got some really choice ribeye and four *filet mignons* just for you.”

She stayed still and quiet for a little too long. “Can I have one now?”

He released a pent-up breath he hadn’t been aware of holding. This was going way better than he’d thought it would. “Steak and pancakes, coming up.”

Denise smiled and took a shaky breath. She held out her arms and Oliver scooted into the next chair, cuddling into her.

Yogi took the steak out of the fridge, sneaking a peek at the picture the pair made. His little family, and it was already growing. A small, insecure voice told him he didn’t deserve to be this happy, but he wasn’t stupid enough to reject the gifts he’d been given. Quite unexpectedly, he’d found not just a purpose in life, but love as well.

“Yogi?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you make that steak rare?”

He grinned. “Coming right up.”

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author L.B. Gilbert spent years getting degrees from the most prestigious universities in America, including a PhD that she is not using at all. She moved to France for work and found love. She's married now and living in Toulouse with one adorable half-French baby.

She has always enjoyed reading books as far from her reality as possible but eventually the voices in her head told her to write her own. And so far, the voices are enjoying them.

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CARNIVAL TRICKS

DOUBLE HELIX CASE FILES

JADE KERRION

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CARNIVAL TRICKS

DOUBLE HELIX CASE FILES

1st Place, Royal Palm Literary Award 2015

In a world transformed by the Genetic Revolution, Kyle Norwood is an honest-to-God human and proud of it. His deadly skills come from hard work and not genetic sleight of hand. An easy mission to protect two Proficere Labs scientists turns into a shoot-out that leaves a scientist and a federal agent dead. Worse, the research data the scientists were carrying disappears.

In a world where human derivatives are hated and feared, Sofia Rios is almost human. When a fight during her waitressing shift turns fatal, a dying scientist launches her into the shady world of scientific espionage. The unwilling trustee of research that people would kill to obtain, Sofia turns to the man who steps out of the shadows to protect her, even though he appears as dangerous and disreputable as the people who hunt her.

Together, Sofia and Kyle must unravel the truth behind the illicit information she carries before one or both of them are killed. Their mutual attraction sparkles, but the spark could just as easily become an explosion if Kyle ever finds out that Sofia is a despised telekinetic.

This is a standalone futuristic thriller set in the award-winning world of the Double Helix.

A NOTE FROM ZARA ITANI

Circumstances have conspired to make me seem responsible for every societal calamity since the second Genetic Revolution, which, I confess, I might have inadvertently triggered, but in spite of what you may believe, and most certainly contrary to what Danyael Sabre believes, I do not wake up every morning and stare at my to-do list with wicked anticipation, wondering how exactly to check off item one on the list, “Make trouble,” and item two on the list, “Drag everyone else around me into trouble.”

Nevertheless, increased scrutiny of my activities and those of Three Fates Agency demands greater transparency. Hence, I’ve decided to release these case files, some of which predate my relationship with Danyael. If nothing else, it should prove that the many talented mercenaries who work for me are at least as adept at creating trouble.

Zara Itani

Owner

Three Fates Agency

Chapter 1

The wooden, narrow-eyed door guardian wore a permanent open-mouthed scowl hovering on the verge of a war cry. A garish array of feathers spread over the headpiece perched on his furrowed brow.

Fortunately, no one who stared up at his head, mounted over the door, was terrified of him.

Under the frightful Zulu mask, a bored bouncer routinely checked IDs and waved customers into Zanzi-Bar.

The wine bar and nightclub in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, prided itself on its selection of South African wines, its mismatched name notwithstanding. In the dark interior of the bar, spotlights pulsed, bathing the wooden dance floor in pools of white and red. A Latin tune thumped through the loudspeakers; the compulsive rhythm set hips rocking to the beat. Leggy waitresses meandered around clusters of couches covered with zebra-skin and leopard-skin patterns.

One of the waitresses walked to the bar, which displayed an outstanding array of wines and spirits. Sofia Rios tucked a stray lock of brown hair behind her ear, leaned against the wood façade of the bar, and flashed the bartender, Stefan Agnor, her sweetest smile. “I need a Jameson on the rocks, an Eikendal merlot, a brandy, and a Sprite on the house.”

He chuckled as he set a wineglass filled with a pale pink wine on a tray marked with Chelsea’s name. “That smile’s really cute, but it isn’t going to bump you to the head of the line, munchkin.”

Sofia rolled her eyes. “For the record, I’ll have you know that I’m wearing four-inch heels, which elevates me two inches above munchkin status.” She was not going to admit to the blisters on her feet.

“So you’re what, five-foot-four now? Color me impressed.” Stefan began work on another order. His blond hair, slightly longer than was fashionable, lent new meaning to the words “artistic disarray.” He grinned at her. “How are you doing tonight?”

Sofia’s rosebud mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Had a microbiology exam this morning.”

“You aced it, right?” He turned his back on her and reached for a bottle of Absolut.

Her eyes narrowed as she focused on the ice chips beside the sink. The transparent shards quivered and then leapt, as if flicked by an invisible finger, into the sink. She shrugged. “Won’t find out for another week, but I hope so because I hauled ass on that one.”

“And such a cute ass it is too.” Stefan turned around and leered at her. “When do you get to

anatomy? I can help you with the practical exam.”

“I bet you can. Tell you what; you rush my order and I’ll bump you to the front of the line on my practical.”

“Ahead of the video game-playing geek who lives on your right and the overweight accountant who lives on your left?” Stefan snorted. “Oh, can you tell that I’m really worried about the competition?” He set a glass of Sprite down on her tray.

Chelsea, a well-endowed blonde, swung by the bar and hefted her full tray. She arched an eyebrow, and her grin was wicked. “The hot guy’s back.”

Sofia leaned to look past Chelsea’s shoulder. “Where?”

“He sat down in your section again. That’s three nights running. Maybe he’s got a thing for you. He’s not alone this time, though.”

Stefan jerked his head in their direction. “Go get their order. I’ll have this one filled by the time you get back.”

Sofia grinned. She leaned over the bar and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m moving you up to the head of the line.”

Stefan snorted. “I should be so lucky.”

As she returned to her section and to the three new customers who had claimed a large circular booth, Sofia tugged down her white shirt to cover more of her bare midriff. She blamed her fluttering pulse entirely on the dark-haired, leanly muscled man whose steady green-eyed gaze seemed to take in everything, from the small mole just over the left side of her mouth to the fact that her manicure was slightly chipped. His mouth was firm and unsmiling, which was a shame. A smile would have gone a long way toward making his rough-hewn features more attractive.

She inhaled deeply and fixed a warm smile on her face. “What can I get for you, gentlemen?”

“I’ll have a Kahlua coffee martini,” one of the man’s companions said in a reedy voice. Sofia placed him somewhere between fifty and sixty years old. His tweed jacket was too large for him, and his large brown eyes darted from side to side behind the large frames of his eyeglasses. He was definitely not typical nightclub material.

“Me too,” the third man squeaked. He seemed slightly younger, but cut from the same cloth. If Sofia mentally merged her geeky video game-playing neighbor with her overweight accountant neighbor, and then aged him thirty years, she would have expected him to resemble those two men. They seemed like professors or scientists, grossly out of place in a nightclub.

How different they were from the man who stared intently at her. He did not belong in a nightclub either, but that was because she could imagine him in military fatigues, toting a machine gun with easy expertise. He looked dangerous enough for that impression to fit.

“And you?” she asked.

“Water.”

“No vodka tonight?” She smiled. “Sodas are complimentary for designated drivers.”

“Water’s fine.”

Sofia resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Couldn’t he be friendlier? A smile wouldn’t crack his face. At least he had not sounded irritated, though his indifference was insulting. Then again, she was not in the market for another guy, so what did it matter what he thought of her?

She straightened. “I’ll be right back with two martinis and a glass of water.”

Stefan arched his eyebrows when she returned to the bar. “No hot date, huh?”

He had always been good at reading her mood. Sofia shot him a dirty look. “When do real men give me the time of day?”

He pressed a hand to his chest and managed a passably good impression of pain. “You wound me, baby. What do they want?”

“Two martinis and water.”

“Boring.”

Stefan was often right, but not that time. Sofia’s eyes narrowed. From her place at the bar, she watched the man scan the club while his two companions sat in silent and apparent discomfort. Something was not quite right, but she could not place her finger on it.



She had remembered what he ordered.

Kyle Norwood gritted his teeth. *Damn it*. Observant people were dangerous.

It probably did not matter, though. She was just a waitress, one of the regulars he recognized from his prior two visits. Many of Zanzi-Bar’s customers and employees were regulars, a fact that made the nightclub a perfect place for a drop. He did not want to be surprised by hostile parties or unexpected enemies. It had happened on more than one occasion, and the last time had left scars, physical and emotional.

“Where are they?” A thin voice, its tone whining, interrupted his thoughts.

Kyle glanced over at Alvin Smith. The lanky professor was one of the leading minds on genetic manipulation. He and his counterpart, Bert Reynard, were scientists at Proficere Labs, a research facility that prided itself on work so innovative and so cutting-edge that it would have been illegal if only the authorities knew *what* to make illegal.

Kyle would typically not have taken them on as clients, but it was not his call. Zara Itani, his boss and the owner of Three Fates, an agency of mercenaries, made those decisions, and she tended to skim close to criminal behavior. Her close connections with the government allowed her to escape without repercussions, most of the time.

As long as she extended the same courtesy to her employees, he would be happy to take on any job she offered. Zara paid well and did not micromanage. One could not hope for much more in a boss.

He continued his scan of the club, mentally checking the employees against the employment records he had downloaded from Zanzi-Bar earlier in the week. Once he confirmed that they were all longtime employees, he moved on to the customers. The three men at the bar flirting with the male bartender were regulars; he had noticed them the prior night. Young professionals occupied some of the tables in the other sections. Unless he missed his guess, and he rarely did, he pegged them for lawyers or bankers. They looked just uptight and miserable enough.

Four students in University of North Carolina sweatshirts and jackets, their backpacks sprawled in untidy heaps beneath their chairs, occupied a table in his section. The waitress stopped by their table and chatted while unloading their drinks from her tray. Laughter, warm and infectious, exploded before subsiding into muted chuckles. The students were regulars too, judging from the waitress's easy conversation with them.

What was her name? He frowned as he searched his memory of her employment records.

Sofia...Sofia Rios. She had begun working at Zanzi-Bar several months prior, typically for three or four nights a week.

Several minutes later, she reluctantly wound down her conversation with the students and headed toward his table. She set two glasses of martini in front of Alvin and Bert, and slid a glass of water toward Kyle. "That will be twenty-two fifty, including tax."

Kyle pulled a couple of bills from his wallet and tossed it on the table. "Thanks. Keep the change." His gaze darted to the entrance as three men strode into the club. They were built like wrestlers and looked like thugs despite wearing tieless suits. One of them he recognized; the thick black mustache was a point of pride for Luis Sanchez, chief lieutenant in Rue Marcha, one of Colombia's most vicious drug cartels. "We're leaving," Kyle said, his tone flat.

"What?" Alvin asked. He followed Kyle's gaze. "But he's here, Kyle."

Kyle's eyes narrowed. "He's your customer?"

Alvin nodded.

"Do you know who he is?"

Bert's lips pressed into a thin line. "He's the man who agreed to our price."

Only then did Kyle take a closer look at one of the two men who accompanied Sanchez. The man matched the photograph the scientists had shown Kyle previously, but Sanchez's presence was hardly coincidental. *Damn.* He would need all of the devil's luck to get out of this mess.



Sofia cast a quick look at the three men who had just entered the club. Zanzi-Bar attracted a wide range of clientele, including gangsters looking to move up the food chain. The three men would not have overly alarmed her if not for the reaction of the man in the booth, the one called Kyle. He looked up and met her gaze. The slight upward motion of his chin told her to leave.

She did not need to be told twice. With slow, careful steps, she backed away from the booth.

Motion flickered in her peripheral vision. Two UNC students shot to their feet and spun around, automatic pistols in their hands. “IGEC agents. You’re under arrest.”

Sofia’s eyes flared wide. What was the International Genetics and Ethics Council doing in a nightclub in Chapel Hill? Why were they pointing their weapons at the innocuous geeks instead of the suited gangsters or the man, Kyle, who so obviously exuded danger?

The men in suits reached into their jackets, the motion so smooth it was practically instinctive.

Kyle lifted the edge of the small table and flung it, drinks and all, in the direction of the three thugs.

Sofia ducked, shrieking, as bullets laced across the room. She dropped to the ground and rolled into the cover of the circular booth. The two scientists huddled beside her. One of them, hands trembling, opened a steel briefcase.

It *wasn’t* a briefcase but a cooler. A pale blue florescent light activated as the case opened. The light glowed softly over test tubes filled with translucent liquid tightly packed among cooling crystals. A mini disc, encased in a thin jewel case, was nestled in a bed of Styrofoam.

The scientist ignored both test tubes and mini discs. He reached for a circular metal tube, two inches long and no thicker than a toothpick. He wrapped his fist tightly around it and lunged from the booth. Gunfire cut him down two feet from the door of the bar.

He screamed, writhing as a pool of blood formed beneath him.

Oh, God. Ducking beneath the spray of bullets, Sofia leaned out, grabbed his feet, and dragged him back into the booth. His gaze was panicked, and his breath came in quick shudders. Blood bubbled out, mixing with the spittle leaking from the side of his mouth. He reached up, his fingers like claws, raking her shoulders as he fought to breathe. In his eyes, terror supplanted panic.

Sofia leaned over him and raised his head to elevate the pressure off his punctured lungs. She flinched as a sharp pain pierced her bicep, but it vanished instantly. He died moments later, his final breath escaping in a rattling wheeze as his eyes rolled up in his head.

Gunfire faded into smoky silence. Stunned, Sofia looked up. One gangster was dead, and the other two had fled. Three of the IGEC agents were down. One sprawled unmoving across the floor, blood leaking from a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. The other two groaned softly, injured. The remaining scientist cowered as the last IGEC agent slapped electric handcuffs on him, but there was no sign of Kyle or the cooler.

Chapter 2

Kyle walked, his pace no faster than those of the college students teetering unsteadily out of the bars and clubs on Franklin Street. The steel cooler felt heavy, a burden that stood out, stiff and formal, in a collage of scruffy backpacks and classy handbags. Training contained the urgency that dogged his steps as he wove past cheerful and belligerent drunks, leaving behind the violence that fractured Zanzi-Bar.

He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. Willpower wrapped tight spirals around the vibration of cold anger.

What the hell were International Genetics and Ethics Council agents doing at the club? Its field agents exceeded the U.S. Marshals in the scope of its operations, and its activities spread like tentacles across the globe.

Why was the council interested in a simple research transaction?

Unless, of course, there was far more to the research than he realized.

His knuckles whitened as his grip tightened on the handle of the steel cooler.

Bert Reynard swore that the transaction was just the result of a genetic screen. Kyle, too, had scanned the research transcript and found nothing more than a jumbled mess of four letters—A, T, G, and C—adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine, the four nucleobases that interlinked into a sinuous coil to create deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA, the double helix of life.

And that was where he had screwed up. In a world transformed by the Genetic Revolution, he had underestimated the power of DNA—the blueprint of life—to drive men to violent acts inspired by greed or fear.

In fact, he had more than screwed up. He had not fully understood the research transcript, and he had made the mistake of taking a scientist at his word. Those intellectual types, those doctors and scientists, could not be trusted. Doctors had killed his mother with their insistence on unproven drugs.

He was enough of a realist to acknowledge that his mother would have died anyway—liver cancer spared few victims—but the drugs had killed her, not the cancer. She had died clawing at his chest, pleading desperately for help. Her eyes were wide with terror as she fought to breathe through the viscous phlegm that blocked her air passage. She had not even realized that blood was spilling from her every orifice. The autopsy confirmed that her internal organs had ruptured. Cancer did not

kill her; the drugs did.

The doctors denied it. To defend themselves, they held up her scribbled consent, indicating that she had understood the risks of the experimental drugs.

Risk. Hell, no one had understood the risk, not until his mother died.

Kyle grimaced, shook off the past, and refocused on the present. Was anything missing from that cooler?

He stepped into a convenience store and brushed past its browsing patrons as he headed toward the restrooms nestled in the back of the building. The small room stank of hastily mopped up vomit and urine, but the glaring florescent lights reflecting off the dirt-stained white tiles were exactly what he needed. He lowered the toilet cover, set the cooler on top of the lid, and punched in the security code on the lock.

The contents of the cooler glowed pale blue under the light.

At first glance, everything seemed in place. The mini disc, the test tubes—both decoys—were untouched.

His green eyes flashed over the contents of the cooler yet again. His breath caught.

The microchip injector was missing.

He slammed the cooler shut. Damn it!

His hands clenched into fists, and he paced the tiny length of the restroom. If Bert had taken it, the microchip would be in the hands of the IGEC by now—hardly ideal—but the IGEC, at least, had a reputation for scrupulously playing by its excessively thick rule book.

But if Alvin had taken it...

Alvin Smith was dead. Was the microchip embedded in his corpse or was it still encased in its injector, perhaps lost in the debris and aftermath of the fight?

He jerked to a stop. The tracking code for the microchip had to be around somewhere.

He reopened the cooler and tore through its contents. A white card imprinted with an unlabeled data matrix code was tucked into the lining of the cooler. He pulled out his smartphone, scanned the image, and then hit the “Track” button. A map flashed onto the screen of the smartphone. A red dot blipped. It moved.

Kyle ground his teeth. The microchip tracker was live; it had been activated by body heat. Could the cartel—? No, Kyle was certain the Rue Marcha did not have the microchip. Alvin had not made physical contact with them.

The waitress.

Damn it. She was the only one who had come close to Alvin. She had held him as he died.

He had to go back for the microchip and get it out of the waitress, one way or another.



Sofia released her breath in a soft sigh of relief when the medics and police officers finally left the club, taking with them the bodies of the deceased gangster, the IGEC agent, and the scientist. She slumped down in a chair, looking up only when she felt someone crouch beside her.

“Here.” Stefan placed a steaming mug in her hands. The lightly fragrant scent of chamomile wafted toward her. “Drink. It’s good for you.”

She laughed, the sound catching on a sob. “I didn’t even know the bar carried teas.”

“We don’t. I thought you could use one and sent Harry to a store for it.” He tugged up a chair, turned it around, and straddled it. His blue eyes searched her face. “How are you doing?”

She huffed out her breath. “I’m tired of answering the same questions over and over again. Yes, he’s been here for the past three nights. No, he was alone prior to tonight. No, I didn’t see him before that. No, I don’t know his name. No, he paid cash. Ugh!” Sofia forced herself to relax her two-handed grip lest she shatter the mug. She lowered her gaze. “I’m tired, and I’ve just learned that you don’t learn enough from a semester of nursing to know what to do to help a man who’s been shot in the lungs.”

Stefan shook his head. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

“Maybe not, but he died in my arms, and I couldn’t do anything except watch.” In her mug, the tea bag bobbed in response to her frenetic thoughts. She stared down absently at it until she realized that Stefan was staring at the same.

The tea bag stopped moving. She looked at Stefan, her brown eyes wide and a lump of fear clogging her throat. “I…”

A faint smile tugged up a corner of his mouth. “It’s all right, Sofia. I’ve always known that you were the one telekinetically sweeping the ice chips off the countertops when my back was turned.”

“You did? You don’t mind?”

“Why would I?” He sounded perplexed.

“Some people don’t like mutants.”

“I’m not one of those people.”

She relaxed enough to smile. “That’s good, because I’m not much of a mutant. Other telekinetics can hurl cars and create physical shields thick enough to deflect bullets. I got the short end of the stick. I have as much telekinetic power as I have strength in my finger and thumb.” She pressed them together in a pincer grip. “It’s scarcely enough for carnival tricks.”

“It’s good enough to clean up ice chips.” Stefan leaned forward and placed a brotherly kiss on her forehead. “Come on. I’ll walk you home.”

Home was a brownstone house five blocks away. As she marched up the ice-slicked stairs to the door, Sofia wondered if Stefan would ask to come in and ruin a perfectly good friendship by trying to push it to the next level, but she need not have worried. He bid her good night in a polite though perfunctory way and continued down the road. He did not try to come in; he did not try to kiss her; he did not hug her; heck, he did not even shake her hand.

Sofia opened the door and slipped in before the warm air inside the house could escape. She closed the door, leaned back on it, and wondered why she felt so insulted. Perhaps because Stefan was, in spite of his occasionally lewd humor, an intrinsically good guy—the kind of guy she should spend more time trying to hook up with.

Or not. She sighed. She did not need the complication of romantic entanglements.

Her home, a three-story house, had been just right for her parents and her. They had passed away six months prior, but she had not been able to bring herself to sell the house. It was too full of memories, of Thanksgiving dinners around the scuffed up oak dining table, and Christmas Eves on the rug in front of the fireplace. The house was empty now, and quiet, but it retained all its memories. It was still a home.

The stairs creaked as she climbed up to the second floor, passing by her parents' bedroom. The bed was neatly made. The green bathrobe that her mother had carelessly tossed on the bed lay there, untouched. Her mother's jewelry and her father's cufflinks lay on the dresser, next to a picture of them—two people still deeply in love—their arms around each other, in front of a swirl of cherry blossoms. She had taken that picture of them in the spring, a few months before they were killed during a terrorist assault on Washington, D.C.

The three of them visited D.C. often, staying at the small town house they owned overlooking Dupont Circle. Independence Day celebrations always drew them to D.C., and she had been with them in the early hours of July Fourth when the members of the mutant terrorist group, Sakti, broke into homes and slaughtered parents in front of their children. Sakti's actions were decried as its psychotic leader's grudge against his father, but it provided no consolation for the children who lost their parents that day.

She had put the D.C. town house on the market almost immediately. Buyers had yet to show interest even though she had priced the home well below its market value. It appeared, she concluded with a grimace, that death devalued house prices.

The house in Chapel Hill, however, was still home, untainted by death, alive with memories.

She paused as she always did for a few minutes in her parents' bedroom, using a feather duster to brush off the thin layer of dust that accumulated each day. Time was determined to march on. She would have to move on as well someday.

She climbed the steep steps to her loft bedroom on the third floor. Her room had low, slanted wood ceilings, a pale green carpet, and a green-gold dusted wallpaper that evoked images of a fairy meadow. Sighing softly, she tossed her backpack on the bed and stepped into the bathroom. The tiles were cold beneath her feet, and she grumbled under her breath. The water was hot though, and soon, the small bathroom fogged up. She scrubbed shampoo liberally into her brown hair and followed up with wads of conditioner. She closed her eyes. The water ran down her face, mingling with the salt of her tears.

The scientist's terror-filled face blended with her father's. The scientist's final rasping breath

became her father's. She had held him as he died. Shaken and deeply traumatized, she had gone back to school and enrolled in a nursing program. She did not want to stand by helplessly as someone died in her arms, but tonight, it had happened again. She had stood by helplessly as another man died.

She dragged her hand across her eyes. *Damn it!*

Sofia turned off the water, stepped out of the shower, and wrapped a thick towel around her body. She rubbed her hand across the surface of the mirror and scowled at her appearance. She did not consider herself vain, but she looked like hell, her eyes swollen and red-rimmed.

It was just as well she was not trying to impress anyone. She twisted the doorknob and swung the bathroom door open. Perhaps if she—

She gasped.

The man browsing through the books on her shelf looked up.

She swept her hand out, flinging the female clutter from her dressing table into his face. Fueled and strengthened by panic, her weak telekinetic powers fluttered, sending a cloud of powder into the air. As he recoiled in apparent surprise, she dashed past him and ran down the stairs, but got no farther than the second-floor landing.

He threw himself over the third-floor bannister and landed in a crouch in front of her. She backed away in alarm.

He lunged at her, seizing her hands.

The towel fell away from her body as she pulled back, but his grip tightened. "Stop," he said, his voice low. "I'm here to help."

She stared at him, focusing on his green eyes set in a face of harsh, sculptured good looks. "Kyle?"

His eyes narrowed. "You know my name?"

"Yes...yes, the man who died called you Kyle."

"You are much too observant," he said. It did not sound like a compliment. His eyes raked over her naked body, and a smile, wicked and appreciative, curved his lips.

Sofia swallowed hard. She would have covered herself if she could get her hands free of his tight grip.

He released her, picked up the towel she had dropped to the ground, and wrapped it around her body. "Get dressed. We don't have much time."

"Much time for what?"

"To get out of here before the IGEC or Sanchez and his men show up."

"Sanchez? Is he one of the gangsters who came to the club?"

He shoved her up the stairs. "Yes. Move it."

She stood her ground. "How do I know you're not one of the bad guys?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Because I haven't hurt you. Yet."

She definitely heard the hint of a threat in his deep voice. It was, however, offset by the glint of

amusement in his eyes. “Why would—?”

“Because you’re carrying a microchip containing the genetic data that Sanchez paid dearly for.”

“A micro—” Sofia pressed a hand to her bicep. The sharp pain.

Kyle grasped her arm gently and ran his callused fingers over her skin. The sensation charged down her spine. Heat coiled in the pit of her stomach at his touch. “Is that where he injected you?” His tone was strictly business.

The man was turning her into a hormonal pile of mush, and he did not even know it.

He met her gaze, and the corner of his mouth tugged into a smirk. Perhaps he knew it, but just did not care.

She yanked her arm out of his grip and stalked up the stairs with as much dignity as she could muster, which was difficult, seeing how he had already seen her scrawny ass. At least he had the decency to wait outside her bedroom as she dressed, quickly pulling on a sweatshirt and a pair of faded denim jeans over her bra and underwear. She grabbed her backpack and stuffed into it a few changes of clothes, toiletries, her cell phone, and electronic tablet. Sofia turned around and jolted with shock to see him standing behind her.

She hissed with irritation. “Don’t you ever—?”

He pressed a finger to her lips.

She raised her head slightly and heard the soft tread of feet upon the creaky stairs.

Chapter 3

Only Kyle's training, so ingrained as to be instinctive, helped keep his mind off the small and neatly packaged female who scowled ferociously at him. He flung open the window and he was greeted by a blast of cold air. He gritted his teeth. It was a twenty-four-foot drop to the ground. He reached into his leather jacket for his handgun. They would have to fight their way out, and the only advantage he had was that whoever was in the house had no idea that Sofia was not alone and unprotected.

Sofia slung her backpack over her shoulders, tugged on a pair of sneakers, and followed. Her breath came quickly, but her composure was steady. Her hands did not tremble too visibly. *Girl has guts*, he admitted reluctantly. He pressed against the wall and caught a glimpse of a shadow moving on the second-floor landing. In a moment, it would be in view.

He fired. The pistol spit out a single bullet in a near soundless hiss, thanks to the silencer. The first assailant fell back with a cry of surprise and pain. Another pair of heavy feet raced past, dashing up the stairs. A man in black fatigues scrambled around the curve in the staircase, a pistol in his hand. His eyes widened when he caught a glimpse of Kyle.

He swung up his hand, but Kyle kicked out, knocking the gun out of the man's hands.

The man lunged for his fallen weapon.

Kyle leaped over the railing. His weight slammed into the man, knocking him down the steps. Momentum tumbled the man down two flights of stairs. His head smashed into the wooden floor. He lay there, sprawled over another man, both unmoving.

They were not dead. Kyle knew better than to hope for as much. He seized Sofia's hand, dragged her down the stairs, past the two unconscious men, and out of the door. The icy bite of the wind slapped him as he dug into his pocket for his car keys. He pressed on the remote, unlocking the doors of a dark blue BMW parked three doors down from Sofia's town house. Its headlights blinked.

The doors of a black sedan parked across the street opened, and two men stepped out. Streetlights reflected off the metal highlights of the guns in their hands.

Kyle yanked Sofia down behind a vehicle as the muzzles of guns flashed. Windows and windscreens on nearby cars shattered in a spray of glass.

Glass shards like tiny icicles dusted the black of his leather jacket as he shoved her to the

pavement and crouched over her. He threw her a glance. Her eyes were wide with alarm, and her jaw was tense, but she had not fallen apart on him yet. The last thing he needed was a fainting female.

He pressed his car keys into her hand. His other hand tightened around his Glock. “When I say go, run for the car. Get it started.”

“You want me to drive?” She sounded incredulous.

“No, just get it started.”

She nodded. Her lips pressed into a thin line.

The sound of gunfire fell briefly silent.

“Go!” Kyle shot to his feet and twisted around to fire at the black sedan.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sofia scramble away. Moments later, a car door slammed. The low hum of a BMW engine purred through the night.

Now it was his turn to run the gauntlet, without the support of cover fire.

Teeth gritted, he fired twice more at the sedan.

A sharp pop. Air hissed out of a tire.

Kyle dashed for his car.

Bullets sparked against asphalt. Shards of bitumen skittered against his denim-clad legs. A sharp pain shot through his side. For a moment, his vision flashed white before blurring into normal hues.

The door on the driver’s side swung open.

What the hell was she thinking, exposing herself to gunfire?

He lunged in through the open car door and slammed his foot down on the pedal.

Wheels screeched. The smell of burning rubber scorched the night, and the BMW accelerated away from the curb. Momentum slammed the door shut moments before he swung the steering wheel. The car swerved, skidding as it rounded a corner. His attention was focused on the road ahead, but he was vaguely aware of the tiny-framed woman huddled in the passenger seat. She gripped the edge of the leather seat, her knuckles white.

The car raced down dimly lit suburban streets, past charming row houses and charmless apartment complexes. Kyle spared the rearview mirror a quick glance. The black sedan’s flat tire promised him a five-minute head start, certainly no more. He looked at Sofia. “What’s the fastest way to Highway 54?”

She swallowed hard. “Take the next left. You’ll avoid two lights.”

He did not slow down until he swung the car onto Raleigh Road and merged into traffic. Headlights pockmarked the street. Kyle released his breath in a quiet sigh. He had doubled their lead, though ten minutes was hardly anything worth bragging about. In his experience, fortunes and lives could be lost in less than ten minutes.

Sofia threw him a sideways glance. “Was that the IGEC or—?”

“The Rue Marcha.”

“The Rue Marcha. The Colombian cartel?”

Kyle frowned. She had heard of the Rue Marcha. Granted, the Rue Marcha did not exactly keep a low profile, but he had not expected the cartel to register in the worldview of the typical suburban American, especially not one who looked like she had never before contemplated drug use in her entire squeaky-clean life.

“How do you—?”

“Dad was from Brazil, Mom from Venezuela. We were on a first-name basis with all the cartels in the area. So, this Sanchez works for the Rue Marcha? Was he one of the men in the house?”

“Unfortunately not.” Or he would almost certainly have fired his gun with intent to kill.

“How did they find me?”

“The same way I did. The microchip has a heat-activated tracking device. It’s feeding off your body heat.”

“Okay...” She drew in a deep breath. “So we get it out of me. I have a friend who’s a paramedic—”

“Smith used the latest model, the RX-27. The microchip is going to go deep, as far as it can until it hits bone.”

He did not have to take his gaze off the road to know that she had turned to look at him, her brown eyes wide and face pale. “So, to get it out, we’d have to cut through muscle?”

He nodded.

She pressed her lips together. “Take me to a hospital.”

“And go through all kinds of explanations on what you’re doing with top secret military technology embedded in your arm?” His low grunt concealed the sharp inhalation of pain as he pulled his smartphone out of his pocket and told it to connect him with Zara Itani.

It was three in the morning, but she answered on the third ring, her voice briskly professional and not in the least bit sleepy. “What is it, Kyle?”

“The drop went bad.”

“Define bad.”

“Turns out, the customers were the Rue Marcha. Sanchez himself showed up. The IGEC was there too, and at least one of its agents got killed in the firefight.”

“I see...” Her voice was cool. “I think Proficere Labs’ agency fees just climbed several notches, and its right to ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ just got revoked.”

“You’re going to have to collect from someone other than Smith. He’s dead too.”

“I’ll take it out of Reynard’s hide. Did the IGEC claim the drop?”

“No, it’s sitting in a waitress’s arm. Smith shot her up with the microchip before he died. I have the cooler with the test tubes, but that’s useless without the information on the microchip. I have to get the chip out of her. Sanchez’s goons and the IGEC will be able to track her as long as it’s in her.”

Zara was briefly silent. “Take her to the free clinic in Anacostia.”

“In D.C.?”

“The only doctor I trust is in Anacostia. The clinic is on Good Hope Road and Seventeenth. Call me when you get into D.C., and you can give me an ETA. I’ll have him meet you there, regardless of the time.”

Kyle hung up the phone and glanced at Sofia. “We have to get to D.C. There’s a doctor at a free clinic who can help you.”

“D.C.? But that’s five hours away.”

“Four. We’ll be there before dawn.”

“No, no.” She shook her head. “I want it out of me now. There are hospitals in Chapel Hill, and I have classes in the afternoon, damn it.”

She had just been shot at, and all she could think about were her classes? Either her self-equilibrium was out of the world, or she was completely lacking perspective. Likely both. “Your life is in danger. Just roll with me on this one. I can get you out of this, but not gracefully or well if you’re going to fight me every step of the way.”

“It’s my arm, damn it. The free clinics are terrible. The doctors there are terrible. They’re the ones who can’t get jobs anywhere else. You can’t just take me to a clinic so that a hack of a doctor who’s too stupid to ask questions can cut the microchip out of me.”

He did not hesitate. “Zara doesn’t give her trust easily, and if she trusts this doctor, it’s where we’re going.”

“Who’s Zara?” She frowned, her eyebrows drawing together. “What...what do you do anyway?”

“Whatever needs to get done.”

“Like shoot up a club?”

He snorted and shook his head. “It was supposed to be a transfer. Proficere Labs wanted a neutral intermediary in the transfer of goods.”

“What kinds of goods?”

“Information. Proficere—”

“Is almost as bad as Pioneer Labs was,” Sofia said. Her voice was low and firm. “The kind of genetic research it does is wrong, and worse, the scientists are proud of it. They’re always taunting the IGEC. No wonder the agents showed up to stop the transfer of whatever it was. What was it?”

He shrugged.

She turned wondering eyes on him. “You don’t even know what it was? And you work for them?”

Her censuring tone set him on the defensive. “I work for Three Fates. We do contract work.”

“You’re mercenaries.”

It was the first time he had heard of his profession spoken of with that much disdain. “Do you have something against trying to make a living?”

“Make a living, no, but you don’t seem too selective in your choice of clients.”

“Zara chooses the clients and hands out the work.”

She huffed and folded her arms across her chest. “Right. Go ahead and blame the boss. It’s the

standard cop out.”

Kyle shook his head, gritting his teeth against the sharp stab of pain in his right side. He would have to assess his injury before making the drive to D.C. If there was any chance of passing out from eventual blood loss, he would prefer to know about it sooner rather than later.

He pulled into a gas station. “Stay in the car,” he told her. Grateful that the crimson stain would not easily show up against his black shirt and pants, he stepped out of the car and started filling the car with gas. He then walked into the attached convenience store.

The young man behind the counter did not look up when Kyle walked around the poorly stocked aisles into the restroom at the far end of the store, next to a door marked Exit. The restroom was filthy, but the stall was large and had a sink, which was all he needed. Kyle stripped off his shirt and grimaced at the deep cut in his side. Fortunately, the bullet had not ripped through organs or major blood vessels. He would be all right, at least long enough to make it to D.C. Perhaps the doctor there could help.

Behind him, the door lock clicked.

What the—?

Hadn’t he locked the door?

Reaching for his Glock, he spun around. His jaw dropped when he saw Sofia glaring at him with a first aid kit in her hand.

She scowled at him. “I knew it. I thought I smelled blood in the car.”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you to knock?”

“Not when you’re hoping to catch someone butt-naked or with an injury that they’re trying to hide.”

“How did you—?”

“You walked funny. You were favoring your right side.”

That was not an answer to the question he had intended to ask. He *had* locked the door, hadn’t he? Kyle glowered at her. “Did I ever mention that you’re too observant?”

“Several times now.” Sofia washed her hands in the sink, and then leaned down to peer at the cut. “You could use some stitches.” She opened the first aid kit and carefully picked through its contents.

“I see you rummaged through the trunk of my car,” he said blandly. “It’s a good thing I didn’t have a body hidden in there tonight.”

She cast him a dirty look. Clearly, the girl knew no fear. “I can make do with what you have here.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

“There are lots of self-help videos on YouTube.” She giggled when he frowned. “Of course I do. I took courses in first aid before I decided to sign up for my nursing program. It wouldn’t do to learn that I’m queasy about bodily fluids *after* graduating. In fact—”

She paused suddenly. He did too. He had not imagined the low thud, like that of something heavy,

a body perhaps, falling to the ground. He shrugged on his shirt and pulled his gun from his leather jacket. Pale and silent, Sofia closed the first aid kit and picked up his leather jacket. She looked at him, and he nodded. It was the only assurance he could give.

He eased the door open and tried to peer out of the bathroom, but was driven back by a hail of bullets that ripped up the wooden doorframe. “Do you have the car keys?” He mouthed the words.

Sofia patted the pocket of her denim jeans.

“On my count, get out the back door and get to the car.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. He did notice that the only time she did not argue with him was when their lives were in danger. Smart girl.

“Three...two...one.” He stepped out of the doorway, ducked behind a nearby shelf, and opened fire in the direction where he had heard gunfire. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sofia, crouched low, dash out of the exit.

Cold night air wafted in her wake.

Kyle spared a quick glance out from behind the shelf. The young man who had been standing behind the cashier counter was nowhere to be seen.

Bullets smashed into the refrigerated displays behind him. Kyle brought his hands up to shield his face as the glass doors exploded into a deadly spray of shrapnel.

Damn it. Two shooters. He had to get clear, and he had to stop them both here, or they would follow Sofia.

He glanced up at the large, circular mirrors that the management of the store had installed to deter shoplifters. He could not see the shooters. It did not surprise him. The people of the Rue Marcha were more than street hoodlums; they were professional killers.

So was he.

Time to even the odds. He took careful aim at the long tubes of florescent lights overhead and blew them out with a single shot. A section of the store plunged into darkness. In that instant, he moved, racing toward the cover of another shelf.

Bullets raced over his head. Cans and packages of food tumbled from the shelves, rolling over his back. Kyle lunged forward, sliding over the slick linoleum tiles. He twisted onto his side and fired.

Someone howled in pain.

One down. Maybe.

He blinked as the glare of straight-on headlights flooded the store. The familiar purr of his car engine crescendoed into a roar.

What the hell was that girl doing?

Moments later, the glass storefront shattered to the cacophony of panicked screams.

Kyle raced past the cowering gunmen. His racing feet crunched on glass fragments. Sofia’s wide brown eyes stared at him from behind the steering wheel, her face pale in the surrounding darkness. He scrambled into the passenger seat and pulled the door closed. “Go!”

Sofia slammed her foot down on the gas pedal. Tires squealing, the BMW screeched into reverse, switched gears, and raced down the road.

Kyle looked over his shoulder. The dismayed faces of two Rue Marcha goons, who had scrambled from the ruins of the convenience store, shrank behind a cloud of exhaust. A tight grin creased his face as he turned back to Sofia. “You’re crazy, but I like your style of crazy.”

Chapter 4

Crazy?

She would have been insulted if Kyle hadn't made it sound like a compliment. Still, she took issue with his comment, and she would, at least once her heartbeat went back to normal. "That was the Rue Marcha, right? Not the IGEC?"

Kyle nodded. "IGEC agents play by the rule book. They announce themselves first and shoot later. Still, they'll be on your trail. Just a matter of time. We have to get the microchip out of your arm. Pull over."

"What?"

"I'll drive."

She shot him a narrow-eyed glance. "You're hurt."

"Yeah, well, I can still drive."

"And so can I."

"But—"

"But what? You think that just because you have a Y-chromosome you can drive better than I can?"

"Of course," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "When did you get your certification in Israeli tactical driving techniques?"

She huffed out her breath. Sanctimonious prick.

He pointed at the building on the street corner. "Pull into that parking lot."

The police station? "What? You're not serious."

"Nowhere safer. You're not a fugitive from the law, at least not yet. I'll get out. You scoot over. No point in anyone seeing you."

A chauvinistic sanctimonious prick.

Who was trying to keep her safe, or at least anonymous.

She did as he instructed and watched him as he stepped out of the car. His stride was strong, and she had to stare closely to notice that he was favoring his right side. How badly hurt was he? "You should get that treated," she said when he reentered the car.

"I will, after we put a hundred miles between us and the Rue Marcha."

“You said the tracking device is feeding off my body heat. Is there any way to dampen the signal?”

“Sure.” Kyle nodded. “We could cut off your arm and bury it in ice, but that’s not optimal, right?”

Jerk. She slanted him a glance as he pulled the car out of the parking lot. The pale golden streetlights flashing by accentuated his harsh profile. His mouth was set in a firm, unsmiling line, but his eyes did not seem as hard and unyielding as they had back at the club. He was almost gorgeous.

She ground her teeth in an attempt to refocus her thoughts. “What about ice packs?”

“An ice pack on your arm isn’t going to cool your body temperature enough to dampen the signal.”

“I meant you. You could use an ice pack on your wound.”

He shook his head. “It’s not bad. Glancing shot. Mostly skin. The bleeding’s stopped.”

She almost made a snide comment but thought better of it. Honey worked better than vinegar. “I can hold the ice pack for you while you drive.”

“I said I’m fine.”

She threw up her hands. “Fine. Just be sure to pull over before you pass out.”

A long, silent moment dragged between them, and then he chuckled, a deep rumble that caught her off guard. “Crazy, with an attitude. You’re growing on me, you know.”

“If you think comparing me to mold sounds romantic, think again.”

“I have been thinking hard. You’ve just been shot at. How is it you’re so calm? Most women would be in hysterics by now.”

“Most women?” She rolled her eyes and settled in her seat, tugging her jacket around her for warmth. With effort, she shoved away the memory of her last encounter with a gun. “You don’t get out much, do you? Ever seen a hospital delivery room? Women are plenty calm. The men, however, are basket cases.”

Kyle punched a button on the car dashboard. He had activated the seat warmer, she realized, as a cozy heat radiated from the car seat. He continued without missing a beat. “I know several women who *might* be able to kick my ass in hand-to-hand combat, but it doesn’t change the fact that most women can’t.”

“Who are they?”

“What?”

“These women who can kick your ass in hand-to-hand combat. Friends?”

His brow furrowed for the briefest instant, pain flashing through his eyes, before his expression smoothed into stoniness.

Sofia drew in a jagged breath. She had overstepped. She braced for a flash of violence; she knew, certainly, that he was capable of it.

The silence simmered between them.

Kyle was quiet for so long she was certain he did not intend to reply. “It would depend on your definition of friends,” he said finally.

The tension in his voice warned her not to probe further.

For a few minutes, she obliged. Her jaw taut, she stared out the window at the familiar scenery of fast food chain restaurants and big box stores peppering both sides of I-85N. Within a half hour, the pervasive signs of suburban America would give way to snow-dusted trees and empty fields. She rubbed her hand against her arm where the microchip was embedded. Her arm did not feel any different, but everything had changed. She turned to Kyle. “What’s going to happen when you get the microchip out?”

“You go back to Chapel Hill.” He glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard. “You might even make it to your afternoon classes on time.”

“And what’s going to happen to you? To the microchip?”

“Zara will probably use it as leverage, make sure Proficere Labs pays up before she releases it.”

“But what’s on it? Why does the Rue Marcha and the IGEC want it?”

“What does it matter?”

“It matters because it’s *in* me, Kyle. I’d like to know what the hell I’m carrying. It matters—it really does—who we give the microchip to.”

Kyle raised his eyebrows. “We?”

“Yes, I was trying to be polite. The microchip is in me; I could have said ‘I’ instead of ‘we.’”

He shook his head. A muffled sound escaped past the fist he pressed to his mouth.

“Something in your throat?” Sofia asked politely.

He dropped his hand. “Right.” The amused gleam in his eyes sharpened. “Look, you’re a bystander, an innocent one at that, caught up in something far larger than yourself. Not exactly what you bargained for when you started your shift at Zanzi-Bar. As soon as the microchip is out of your arm, you can cut yourself loose.”

“Three people died today.”

“Not a big number in the grand scheme of things.”

“What?” Her eyebrows drew together. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Lost more buddies on a bad day in Iraq.”

“How does that make what happened today trivial?”

He scowled. “That’s not what I said. I just don’t get how you’re so eager to jump into this when most people would be trying to get out of it.”

“Perhaps I wouldn’t feel the need to be so involved if you showed a bit more interest in what the microchip actually contains.”

“Look, it’s not my job—”

“And I’m sure that’s going to hold up just great in a court of law. Do you know how much genetic research is considered out of bounds? Flat out illegal?”

He hesitated, but not long enough to satisfy her. His response certainly did not. “This is Zara’s problem. She’ll take care of it.”

“She sounds as mercenary as you. Worse, actually.”

“Proficere says it’s just a genetic analysis.”

“Right, one that a drug cartel and the IGEC would kill to obtain? I don’t think so.”

“What’s with your obsession with getting to the bottom of this? What are you, some kind of private investigator?”

She inhaled deeply and waited until she was certain her voice would hold steady. Her true reasons ran deeper, their consequences devastatingly personal, but she offered the logical argument, the one that most people, including Kyle, she hoped, would buy.

“International Genetic Law is a mandatory first-year class. The professor bombarded us with examples of irresponsible research. Five years ago, in a village in Chad, a genetically engineered strain of the common flu killed twenty percent of the people it infected. Two years ago, a variant of the bubonic plague escaped or was released by a Chinese laboratory into a rural countryside. It devastated the region, killing seven hundred people before it faded out. Nine months ago—”

He waved a hand, cutting her off. “You think there’s a lot more to this microchip than a basic genetic analysis.”

“Don’t you?”



Kyle did not answer.

He mulled over her question—no, not a question. It had been a statement.

Three Fates mercenaries were known for their strict adherence to their stick-to-the-project-scope mentality. Zara had drummed it into them, which was ironic considering she was practically compulsive about exceeding the scope of *her* projects. But then again, they all knew how much havoc Zara caused when she deviated from the plan. Society was still reeling from its repercussions.

No surprise then that Three Fates contracts were written to protect the agency from legal entanglements, regardless of how borderline illegal its mercenaries’ actions appeared to be.

Like overseeing an information transfer between a genetics laboratory known for breaking rules and a South American drug cartel.

His contract compelled him to retrieve the microchip and return it to Proficere Labs, no questions asked.

Sofia demanded differently.

Kyle ground his teeth. The last thing he needed was a do-gooder with a shaky grasp on reality. Real life had a tendency to kick those people in the ass.

He just had to convince her of it.

He glanced at her. “Sofia—”

She was asleep, her head resting against the car door. Her face was serene, and her chest rose and fell with each gentle breath.

The tension locked around his heart like a clawed fist eased away. He smiled. She seemed young and fragile. No, she *was* young—an entire decade younger than his thirty-three years—and still naive enough to be idealistic, but she was not fragile. She was cool and levelheaded under fire, and apparently had the gumption to ram his car into a storefront to save his life.

None of that matched her public profile of a middle-class college graduate raised in suburban America. Who was she really?

More importantly, where did her strength come from?

Most importantly, what kind of a pain in the ass was she going to be?



Kyle let her sleep. The miles raced by, but each minute seemed to crawl. The pain in his side settled into a dull throb. The wound was not much more than skin-deep; the bleeding had stopped quickly. Surely, the doctor could look at it.

Zara's apparent trust notwithstanding, Kyle was as leery as Sofia was of the free clinics. They skimmed the bottom of the barrel as far as medical talent was concerned, but even a free clinic doctor, however incompetent, should be able to handle a simple wound cleaning and apply a bandage.

He passed the time by alternately checking the digital clock on the dashboard and his rearview mirror. As far as he could tell, they were not followed, though he was certain that the Rue Marcha and the IGEC were tracking the microchip. At best, he had a fifteen-minute to half-hour lead, and he had been squeezing the speed limit for all it was worth. It would not do to get pulled over by an overzealous police officer.

The predawn sky was still dark when he crossed into Washington, D.C. He pulled out his smartphone and called Zara. He kept his voice low. "I'm fifteen minutes out."

Her reply was terse. "All right. He'll meet you at the clinic."

He hung up and glanced at Sofia. She had hardly stirred in all that time. He reached over and shook her gently.

After several moments, she sat up and blinked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"We're almost there," he said.

She twisted around in her seat to look out the rear window of the car. "We're okay?"

"So far."

Her shoulders sagged with relief. She turned to him. "And you?"

"Still alive."

"Maybe you can get the doctor to look at it."

"Yeah, I will."

The clinic was dark when they pulled up. "Stay here," he instructed curtly before stepping out of the car. His caution was instinctive. Washington, D.C., was Zara's backyard and playground, and as a

rule, Three Fates employees stayed out of the city, but even he had heard of Anacostia. One had to be suicidal or desperate to enter the gang-controlled warzone.

He liked to think he was the latter, not the former.

The glow of streetlamps seemed too far apart, their meager pools of light devoured by the surrounding darkness. Graffiti adorned the buildings, and the windows were barred. He wrinkled his nose against the stench, a blend of cheap alcohol and urine, wafting from the gutters.

Unease tickled along his spine.

The shadows were far too deep even for someone like him who utilized them as allies and weapons. He looked up at the sound of uneven footsteps.

A man emerged out of the darkness, his features cast in shadow. He leaned heavily on the crutch under his left arm. “Are you Kyle Norwood?” His voice was a melodic tenor with an underlying sheen of polish that hinted at private schools and a life of privilege. Certainly not what Kyle expected to hear in Anacostia.

He buried his surprise with a gruff answer. “Yes.”

The man nodded. “I’ll open the clinic.”

Kyle glanced back as Sofia stepped out of the car. “I thought I told you to stay in the car.”

“Is that the doctor?” she asked quietly.

“I guess so.”

The man unlocked the door of the clinic, pushed it open, stepped in, and turned on the light. Sofia and Kyle followed. The man turned to face them. Sofia gasped. Kyle took a step back.

The man’s pale blond hair was cropped short, and it accentuated the stark perfection of his sculptured features, marred only by a nearly invisible scar on the right side of his face, from ear to chin. His eyes were dark, almost black.

He was instantly recognizable.

The stunned whisper ripped from Kyle’s throat. “Galahad?”

Everyone knew Galahad, or at least knew *of* Galahad, the genetically engineered perfect human being created by Pioneer Labs.

Sofia breathed softly, almost reverently. “No, you’re not Galahad. You’re his physical template. You’re Danyael Sabre, the alpha empath.”

It *wasn’t* Galahad. It was worse. *Far worse.*



To Sofia’s astonishment, Kyle took another step back.

Danyael cast Kyle a glance of veiled amusement. “Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you.”

Sofia tried to choke back a giggle and failed. It was ludicrous to hear a cripple say what Danyael had said to a man who was built like a special-ops soldier, but from the alpha empath, it sounded

matter-of-fact.

Where Kyle exuded an air of controlled menace, Danyael projected quiet, the kind of silence in which one could hear oneself breathe and think. Danyael did not posture; he had nothing to gain. His reputation had been made. He was not just Galahad's physical template. He was an alpha empath who could, if rumors were true, heal or kill with a touch.

And he was actually standing in front of her.

She shook her head, breaking out of her reverie. "I'm sorry. It's like seeing the tooth fairy or the Easter bunny. You're like...legend."

Danyael shrugged. "I just work here. Let's get your arm tended to." He led the way to the small operating room. "Sit." He nudged his head toward the narrow bed, and turned around to search the drawers.

Sofia hiked herself up on the operating bed. What did one say to an alpha empath to whom all emotions were transparent? *How about starting with the truth?* "I'm in a nursing program. I started last fall."

Danyael turned back to her with a faint smile. He held a scalpel in his hand. "Are you enjoying it?"

"Yes, very much. Is it going to hurt? Shouldn't you give me a jab or something, or clean the area with antiseptic?"

Danyael chuckled. The sound warmed her as if he had wrapped a soft blanket around her. "If it'll make you feel better, I can go through the motions, but no, it won't hurt, and no, you don't need antiseptic. I'll clean the wound before I close it."

Kyle leaned against the doorframe, his face set in stoic lines.

Sofia had intended to talk about her nursing program, but instead, she watched in fascination as, with gentle fingers, Danyael probed the area where the chip had been inserted and then touched the scalpel to her skin. She knew she should have felt *something* when the scalpel slid into her flesh in an incision that was as deep as it was long. Blood welled up, but the pain never materialized.

No, she was wrong. It appeared in Danyael's eyes. His jaw tensed, and he closed his eyes briefly, breathing deeply and slowly until the hitch of pain passed.

Danyael set the scalpel down, parted the incision, and with a pair of tweezers, extracted a tiny, bloody microchip. He placed it in a petri dish and looked up at her. "Done."

The alpha empath placed two fingers on the lowest point of the incision and slowly traced its length. Where his fingers touched, warmth sank into her. The sensation of flesh stitching together was disconcerting, like live worms wriggling, melding into each other. Muscles repaired as if they had never been cut, flesh healed, and finally a thin layer of healthy skin replaced the angry slash of scar tissue that had initially formed over the incision.

Sofia could not manage a word. Her jaw still hung open.

Danyael stepped back. He said nothing either. He rinsed the microchip with cleaning alcohol, and

slid it into a small and translucent plastic case no larger than a fingertip. He turned and held it out to her. “Here you go. How do you feel?”

“Great, just great.” She grinned. “Wow, that was amazing. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She stared at the plastic case containing the microchip but did not reach for it. “What do you think is on it?”

Danyael shrugged. “Impossible to guess without an analysis, but based on my limited experience with Proficere’s work, probably something cutting-edge with dangerous implications. Do you want me to give this to Zara?”

“If it’s dangerous, wouldn’t Zara be at risk if she had it?”

He laughed softly. “You’d have to meet Zara to understand.”

Kyle stepped forward and held his hand out.

Danyael did not relinquish the microchip. His dark eyes searched her face.

The choice was hers.

It had been easier to hold on to principles when it was embedded in her arm. It was a great deal harder to reach out to seize it.

Except that she remembered her father’s shuddering shoulders, his arms wrapped around Sofia’s mother. Their heads bowed over the misshapen infant they had lovingly wrapped in a hand-knitted blanket. The child’s face was waxy, her tiny body still. Her eyes had never opened.

The baby who would have been Sofia’s younger sister had been stillborn. The doctors had declared it a mercy. She was deformed, physically and mentally damaged, an innocent victim of a virus Sofia’s mother had contracted while pregnant.

A genetically engineered virus accidentally released from its sterile laboratory confines.

Sofia, then only seven, had crept into the hospital room to stare upon the face of her dead sister, the sister she had wanted with every ounce of her being.

The baby did not even look human.

Sofia’s fingers inched tentatively toward the baby, but did not make contact.

When the nurses finally removed the corpse from the room, guilt plunged through Sofia. She looked back at her mother, at her sagging belly, now bereft of child. Just the prior night, Sofia had pressed her lips to her mother’s swelling stomach. “I can’t wait to love you and play with you. I’m going to give you lots of kisses!”

She had lied.

Sofia blinked back the sting of tears and looked up. Danyael’s eyes were surprisingly gentle, as if he understood. She drew in a deep breath and took the plastic-encased microchip from him. *For you, sis.*

Danyael turned to Kyle and gestured to his right side. “Did you want me to help with that?”

Alarm flashed across Kyle’s face. He shook his head. “No, I’m fine.”

Danyael shrugged. He steadied the crutch under his arm and limped out of the operating room. Kyle and Sofia followed. Danyael met their eyes. “You should head out before Zara gets here.”

Sofia glanced past Danyael’s shoulder as a sleek black car pulled up to the clinic and parked in front of the No Parking sign.

Kyle grunted. “Too late for that.”

The driver’s door opened, and a woman stepped out onto the cracked pavement. She paid little attention to her surroundings as she opened the back door of her car and leaned in to retrieve something from the backseat.

From the alleyway beside the clinic, two figures peeled out of the shadows and stalked silently toward the woman.

Sofia grabbed Kyle’s wrist. “Kyle—”

Kyle shrugged. “She’s fine.”

Sofia twisted to look at Kyle and Danyael. Kyle looked indifferent, Danyael unconcerned. Neither man appeared inclined to come to the woman’s aid.

The thugs closed the distance. Ten feet became five. Five became two.

Sofia had to do something. She rushed to the clinic door and flung it open.

The woman stepped back and turned.

The two gangsters froze. The man closest to the woman stared unblinkingly into the muzzle of a handgun an inch from his nose.

The woman’s ruby red lips curved into a smile. “Run away, children.” Her voice was a soft purr. “I don’t have time to play, and you don’t want to die.”

The thugs pulled out switchblades and lunged at the woman.

Sofia blinked, recoiling instinctively. Gasps and thuds filled her momentary disorientation. By the time her mind sorted through the blur of motion, one man was on his back, groaning, and the other had fled, limping. The woman stood, unscathed. “Get lost,” the woman said, an undercurrent of steel in the seductive purr of her voice.

Muttering curses under his breath, the man hobbled to his feet and staggered away, his hands pressed against his crotch. The woman watched until he slunk into a dark alley and then glanced over at Sofia. “You must be Sofia Rios.”

“I...uh...”

The woman slipped her gun back into the shadows of her leather jacket and extracted a sleeping toddler from the car. With a soft grunt and a snore, the toddler settled against her shoulder. The woman turned and strode into the clinic.

Sofia got her first good look at Zara Itani.

Zara was at least half a foot taller than Sofia and attractive, the product of a mixed racial heritage. Blue-black hair framed a fine-featured face dominated by violet eyes. Her skin was the color of bronze honey.

Sofia blinked and took an involuntary step back.

Kyle was a soldier, tough and rough, but something about him seemed inherently trustworthy.

Zara, on the other hand, looked like an assassin. Her stance reminded Sofia of a tiger stalking prey. Not even the angelic blond-haired toddler dozing on Zara's shoulder could negate the sense of raw danger emanating from her.

Zara's eyes narrowed when she looked at Danyael, as if assessing him, but she said nothing. When she returned her attention to Sofia, she smiled. For a moment, she could have been just another attractive woman peddling useless luxury goods on a prime-time commercial—all welcome, no threat.

“Miss Rios, I'm sorry for all you've endured today, but I assure you, you're safe now. I'll arrange for another one of my employees to take you back to Chapel Hill.”

Sofia's grip tightened around the microchip. “What will happen to this?”

“I haven't decided.”

Sofia blinked. She had not expected Zara's frank reply.

“Technically, I'm its custodian, aren't I?” Sofia asked.

Zara threw her head back and laughed with genuine humor. “Technically, yes, but that oversight can be amended.”

Sofia's brow furrowed. Was that a threat?

Kyle crossed the small room to stand beside Sofia. His proximity braced her and stiffened her spine.

Sofia met Zara's eyes. “Do you know what's on this microchip?”

“No, not yet.”

Her voice quavered. “I intend to find out.”

“I can arrange for the microchip to be analyzed.”

Sofia shook her head. “I don't think I trust you.”

A low chuckle rumbled from Kyle's chest. “Smart.”

Zara tilted her head. Her violet eyes narrowed into cold slits.

Sofia's heart pounded. She swallowed hard through the lump of fear in her throat as Zara reached into her jacket.

Kyle yanked Sofia behind him. In that same instant, Danyael frowned and took a step forward, placing himself between Zara and Sofia. He cast the assassin a warning glance. “Enough.” His dark eyes glittered; his empathic powers flashed.

The tension in the room vanished, its heated edge dulled by the emotional equivalent of a dash of cold water.

Sofia inhaled sharply. She was not certain who was the more dangerous of the two—the assassin, Zara, or the crippled empath, Danyael.

Zara slanted Danyael a quick, annoyed look. “Stop screwing with my emotions. Stay out of this.”

“Too late. You dragged me into it,” was Danyael’s cool answer.

Kyle interceded quickly. “Leave Sofia and the microchip to me. I’ll handle this, figure out what the IGEC’s stake is.”

Zara’s gaze shuttled between Kyle and Sofia, before returning to Kyle. “You have twenty-four hours.”

“Give us forty-eight. If we hit a dead end, we’ll bring the microchip back.”

The assassin scowled.

Danyael reached for Zara’s hand, the gesture casual. Sofia, however, was immediately suspicious of his intentions. An alpha empath of Danyael Sabre’s caliber could not afford to be spontaneous or careless with touch, not when physical contact offered a perfect conduit for his empathic powers.

Sofia was right. Moments later, Zara waved her perfectly manicured hand in a dismissive gesture. “Fine.” She turned to Kyle. “You have forty-eight hours. Go with her. Keep the microchip safe.”

Sofia rolled her eyes. Good to know exactly where she fit in Zara’s grand scheme of things.

The toddler stirred and straightened in Zara’s embrace. She dragged a chubby hand over her eyes. A dazzling smile danced across her face as she extended her arms to Danyael. “Daddy!”

Daddy? Sofia’s wide-eyed gaze flashed between Danyael and Zara. She could not have imagined a more incongruous couple.

Except, their daughter notwithstanding, they were not a couple. Sofia had seen lifelong enemies regard each other with less wariness than Danyael did Zara.

Zara transferred the toddler to Danyael before walking Kyle and Sofia to the door of the clinic. “The last transmission from the microchip would have come from the clinic. How many people are tracking you?”

Sofia’s mouth dropped open. “Have I put Danyael at risk?”

Zara shook her head. “He can take care of himself—and he will, especially now that Laura’s with him. Still, I plan to keep an eye on the clinic for the rest of the day. The IGEC won’t mess with Danyael, not without authorization from the Mutant Affairs Council, so it’s only the Rue Marcha I have to worry about.”

Only the Rue Marcha? Zara had dismissed them as lightly as a forecast of brief afternoon showers.

Kyle frowned. “Are you going to call others in? It’s my mess, Zara, and I can take care of it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll alert the Anacostia gangs to hang out around the clinic for the next few days.”

“Gangs?” Sofia echoed.

“Danyael’s on good terms with all the gangs in Anacostia. He’s treated just about every gang member since he started working at the free clinic. They’ll keep him safe.” She turned to Sofia. “Where will you go? Back to Chapel Hill?”

Eventually, but not yet. Sofia needed time to clear her head and figure out what to do with the

microchip. “I have a town house in Dupont Circle.”

“It’s the first place they’ll look.”

“It’s been listed for sale for the past five months.”

Zara looked thoughtful. “I’ll have Xin hack into the property records and change the title on the town house, at least until this case is over.”

Sofia’s mouth dropped open. “You can do that?”

“Yes, and we’ll handle your real estate agent too. We’ll have to cook up a different story for her, but we’ve done it before, and it’ll be easy. With luck, the Rue Marcha and the IGEC wouldn’t have gotten around to checking your public records yet, and you’ll be able to camp out safely in the town house. I’ll suggest you still keep an eye out for them, though.”

Sofia found Zara’s matter-of-fact tone deeply disturbing.

But Zara was right. Sofia was trapped at the center of a deadly triumvirate.

A South American drug cartel.

The enigmatic and supposedly all-powerful International Genetics and Ethics agency.

Three Fates—composed of mercenaries and assassins—possibly even more dangerous and less bound by ethics than the Rue Marcha and the IGEC.

What the heck had she gotten herself into?

Her fingers trembled, the palm of her hand sweaty against the plastic casing around the microchip. Her hand moved, the start of a forward motion to return the microchip.

Kyle’s hand landed on her shoulder—warm, reassuring.

The gesture anchored Sofia enough to meet Zara’s eyes. She would figure it out somehow. Her fist tightened around the microchip.

The fact that Kyle worked for Three Fates faded into irrelevance.

She could count on him to protect her, couldn’t she?

The curve on Zara’s lips was more smirk than smile. She jerked her head at Kyle’s car. “Now, get out of here before someone actually sees you.”

Chapter 5

Kyle felt uneasy when he pulled into a narrow parking lot behind a town house complex close to Dupont Circle. He cut the engine but made no move to open the car door. With an arm on the steering wheel, he turned to give Sofia a look that he hoped was sufficiently intimidating; it had cowed hardened soldiers before. “You’ll be safer in a hotel.”

“Where hundreds of employees have a master key to open your door? I don’t think so.” Not only was Sofia not intimidated, he did not think she even realized he was trying to intimidate her.

The corner of his mouth tugged into a wry half-smile. Yeah, didn’t work, but he had to try. Sofia’s independent and stubborn streak would have given even the notoriously headstrong Zara a run for her money.

Sofia opened the car door, stepped out, and pulled her key chain from her backpack. “The place might be a bit dusty, but it’ll have everything we need.”

He followed her up the narrow steps and threw a glance over his shoulder as she fiddled with the stubborn lock on the back door. No one had followed them, but a nasty coil of tension lodged in the pit of his stomach. He had not scoped out the place, had not plotted his escape routes. He was walking in blind, and he hated it.

Sofia twisted the key. “There!”

He stopped her before she could enter the town house. “I’ll go first.”

“I don’t think—”

He pulled his gun from its holster, pushed the door open, and stepped into the darkened interior.

Sofia sighed and folded her arms across her chest. “Watch your—”

His head rapped sharply against something hard. “What the—?”

“Head.” She sighed again, but a chuckle overlaid that sound.

He ducked beneath the overhead wooden shelves that seemed purposefully positioned to smash unsuspecting foreheads. “Who put that there?”

“My dad. We were all short. He didn’t have six-footers in mind when he installed the shelves for my mom.” She followed him into the house. Her fingers brushed against the side of his body as she groped along the wall. Florescent lights flickered reluctantly to life, illuminating the kitchen in a pale white glow.

The kitchen was ordinary, even plain, its brown-tiled floors and laminate countertops worn from long use. A vase of artificial flowers decorated the island, and two place settings were set on the small round table in the breakfast nook. The cabinets were still filled with glasses and dishes; pots and pans hung from an overhead rack.

This house was not just staged. It was fully furnished. “How long did you say this place has been listed for sale? Five months?”

“Yeah.” Sofia cracked open a windowpane to air out the musty room.

“And you haven’t moved out yet?”

She shuffled her feet and looked away. “Well, sometimes, my friends like to visit D.C., and they stay here instead of at a hotel. No harm, no foul.”

Why did she sound so defensive over a simple question? Kyle frowned but tucked the question into the back of his mind as he explored the rest of the first floor. The dining room was small, but the charming living room, with its French windows that opened to the front and back of the house, more than made up for it. He peered out the window; the car-lined road was empty, but lights illuminated the town houses along the street. Within an hour or two, Dupont Circle would bustle with activity unique to urban neighborhoods—people walking instead of driving—but for now, the lack of movement was reassuring.

Kyle tugged the lacy curtains together and rolled his eyes at the lack of privacy. He glanced at Sofia. “Looks like a nice neighborhood, and the real estate market in D.C. is tight. Why hasn’t anyone snatched this house up?”

A grimace of pain twisted her lips. “It’s a long story and it doesn’t matter.” She traced the brickwork on the mantelpiece. Her touch was gentle, lingering, as if caressing memories. “The bedrooms are upstairs, and I could use some rest.” She raised her head. Unshed tears glistened beneath her long eyelashes.

Kyle frowned. “Sofia?”

She tossed her head like a restless colt, turned her back on him, and marched up the stairs.

Women.

By the time he followed her up the stairs, she had claimed a small bedroom. Though cleared of personal items, the room was prettily coordinated with a cream furniture set against rose-pink wallpaper. Sofia was replacing the sheets on the twin bed when he entered. She bent over to tuck in the sheets, displaying the shapely curve of her denim-clad butt. He grinned with appreciation but wisely held his tongue.

She straightened and turned around. “You can have the guest room next door. I’ll get you fresh sheets.”

“What’s that?” He gestured at a closed door across the hallway. “The master bedroom?”

She nodded once and said nothing else as she stood on tiptoes to pull a set of sheets from the armoire before handing them to him.

His arms laden with bedsheets, Kyle walked into the guest room adjoining Sofia's room. The pale blue wallpaper was decades out-of-date, but it warmed him with memories of his adopted mother's old-fashioned but welcoming home. The wooden Quaker-style bed, side tables, and dresser appeared even older, but were well maintained and polished into a gleaming mahogany hue. The air freshener plugged into an electrical outlet filled the room with the scent of cedar logs.

He smiled. A comfortable, albeit tiny, guest room in a lovely home beat out a cookie-cutter hotel room any day. He had spent nights in far worse places, and none of them had a cute, though stubborn and innocently wide-eyed do-gooder in the next room.

He was ten years older than Sofia, and she was, by extension, a client of Three Fates, which made her strictly off-limits. He shook his head. *She's wrong for me in so many ways.*

Stifling a groan, he shrugged off his leather jacket, and grimaced as he probed his injury. Blood caked around the wound. Carefully, he peeled his cotton shirt away from his body. Fresh blood welled up. "Damn."

Sofia's quiet footsteps stopped outside the door. "I have towels—oh my God. You're bleeding again." She tossed the towels onto the bed and seized his hand. "Come with me."

She led him to a clean, tiny bathroom across the hallway. There was hardly enough space for one person, let alone two, but she ushered him in. Reaching past him, she lowered the cover over the toilet seat. "Sit down. I'll get the first aid kit from the car."

"I brought it in. It's in my backpack in the room."

Sofia nodded and scurried out, returning moments later with the first aid kit. She glowered at him as she dabbed at the wound with antiseptic wipes. "Why didn't you just let Danyael treat you as he offered?"

"I don't like mutants."

"What?" Her head snapped up. "You..." Her lips parted. Her eyes were wide and her expression vulnerable.

His brows drew together. "What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." Her shoulders sagged on a silent sigh. "It's nothing."

Of course, it was *something*. Ah hell. Women were trouble. He opened his mouth to speak, but his voice escaped in a hiss of pain. He bit back a curse.

"Just a bit longer." Sofia applied an antibiotic cream to the injury and spread it across the angry red streaks radiating from wound. "You're lucky. This could have been so much worse." She applied a bandage and then stepped back. "Danyael would have done a better job than a first-year nursing student, but there you go."

Kyle grunted his thanks and shoved to his feet. His chest brushed against Sofia's fingertips. The tingle that sparked through him was completely unrelated to his injury.

Their eyes met.

Her unpainted lips, soft and moist, parted involuntarily.

Damn. To hell with Zara's damn principles on non-client involvement. He wanted her. "Sofia."

His voice ripped through the dreamy glaze in her soft brown eyes. She blinked hard. The vision of a young woman, on the verge of being seduced, vanished. She turned and scurried out of the bathroom before he could say another word.

Ah hell. He rolled his shoulders and stretched his back muscles. A dull pain tugged at his side, but it was bearable. A few hours of sleep would put him well on the path to recovery. Never mind that the sun was only just rising. He had been awake for twenty-eight hours. Unutterably weary, he dragged his hand over his face and sagged against the cold tiles of the bathroom wall.

Cloth rustled in the bedroom. What was Sofia doing? He left the bathroom and stood bemused by the doorway of his bedroom, watching in silence as she changed the sheets on his bed. When she was done, she turned around, her arms heaped high with bedsheets. She looked up at him, but the bright sparkle of her eyes seemed clouded and her smile was restrained.

"Go get some rest."

"Sofia—"

"Goodnight, Kyle." With a gentle hand, she stroked his cheek.

He turned his face into the palm of her hand. Her touch sent a tremor down the length of his spine. It had been too long if something so simple could turn him on. "Sofia..." His voice was husky, roughened by need.

Her eyes widened. She swallowed hard and took a step back, breaking contact. "I...should go... get laundry started."

Sofia dashed out of the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

A tight grin spread over his face as he stretched out on the bed, closed his eyes, and tried to ignore the ache in his body. He had to find a way to change her mind, *after* he caught up on his sleep.



Sofia released her breath in a shuddering sigh and fisted her hands against her eyes. What the hell had she been thinking?

That, she grimaced, was precisely the problem. She hadn't been thinking. How could she have thrown herself so shamelessly at a total stranger?

All I did was touch his cheek.

Yeah, right. Her gesture was hardly innocent; she had wanted to touch him. She closed her eyes but could not block the memory of his muscled torso quivering beneath her fingers as she dressed his injury. Surely drooling over a patient was a violation of the Hippocratic Oath.

She tensed. *Danyael.* She had even forgotten that she had endangered an innocent man by going to his clinic. An innocent man—an alpha mutant—protected by an assassin who appeared to be as cold as she was unscrupulous.

Sofia inhaled deeply and released her breath in a jagged sigh. Her mind told her that Danyael would be all right. In her heart, she still worried.

Her footsteps tapped lightly on the wooden floors of the landing as she walked past the closed door of the master bedroom, her eyes averted. She carried the dirty sheets down to the laundry machine in the basement. A dull pang shot through her as she wobbled on the unstable wooden step her father had never gotten around to fixing. The bottle of laundry detergent was almost empty—she added it to her mental shopping list—but the washer still worked, rumbling and grumbling its way through its wash cycle.

Sofia laid an affectionate hand on the machine. The town house in Washington, D.C., was as much home as the one in Chapel Hill. She knew when to watch her head and where to watch her step. She would miss the house when it was sold, if it was *ever* sold. On the advice of her real estate agent, she had cut the price three times. The house she had inherited from her parents was priced well below comparable properties, yet it didn't sell.

It was *tainted*.

She ground her teeth. Tainted was a horrible word. It negated her parents' existence, as if all the good they had done over the fifty or more years of their lives was completely undone by how they had died.

Then again, perhaps tainted was an accurate word after all. What else could explain her refusal to enter the master bedroom, the room where they had died?

The house seemed to close in, constricting like the coils of a boa tightening around her chest. She had to get out. Tears brimming in her eyes, she fled from the basement, snatched up her backpack, and stumbled out through the front door.

The blast of sunlight reminded her that the world continued to revolve, heedless of her personal troubles. She swallowed the lump in her throat and continued down the street. The familiarity of her surroundings comforted her—the promise that normality would soon return in spite of the plastic-encased microchip tucked in the pocket of her denim jeans.

She walked past adults in business suits, joggers in sweat suits, and dogs on leashes. A cat coiled on a sun-drenched windowsill yawned at her. Saigon Moon, the Vietnamese restaurant, was still around, as was the Dupont Diner. She would have to stop in for brunch one of these days. The grocer's store at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Rhode Island Avenue was not open yet, but Jose Garcia, the owner, was inside. She waved at him through the glass door. With a smile, he bustled over and flipped the lock on the door.

"Chica!" He enveloped her in a hug before stepping back. "I've not seen you in so long."

"I've been in Chapel Hill."

He nodded, his brown eyes gentle with understanding and sympathy. "How you doing?"

She shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"I heard you went back to school."

“Nursing.”

“You enjoy it?”

She mustered a thin smile and nodded. “Yeah, I do.”

He patted her on the back. “Your parents would be proud of you.”

She liked to think so, too.

Jose’s bushy eyebrows drew together. “But what are you doing here? Hasn’t school started?”

“Oh yes.” She scrambled to pull together a credible excuse. “Just an overnight visit.”

A grin split his face. “Well, good to see you again.”

“Thanks, Jose.” She glanced over her shoulder and surveyed his well-stocked shelves. “I know you don’t open till ten, but I need to stock the pantry.”

He frowned. “You’re back at the house? Are you okay there?”

“Sure,” she lied. “It’s furnished, and electricity and water’s still running.”

He shook his head. “You know that’s not what I mean.”

She laid a hand upon his beefy arm. “I’m fine, I promise.”

He sighed, but waved his hand in a gesture that encompassed his store. “Go ahead.”

Sofia grabbed a basket. Kyle seemed like a meat and potatoes kind of guy. Unfortunately for him, she was a beans and rice kind of gal. Perhaps they could compromise on gourmet pasta served over grilled chicken breast. Mouth pursed, she planned several meals as she wandered down the aisles before hauling her full shopping basket to the checkout counter.

“Wow, you having a party, chica?” Jose asked as he tallied up the bill. “Not inviting me?”

She handed him her credit card and grinned. “You party too hard, Jose. I am trying to sell the house; I can’t afford to wreck it.”

“Pssh.” He waved off her concerns. “Haven’t trashed a house in over three months.” The door buzzer went off with a violence that rattled the windows. He peered over her shoulder. “The newspaper’s here.”

“You still stock those?” she asked as he moved past her to unlock the door for the newspaper deliveryman.

“Some folks still like their news on real pages. Hey, Kent. How’s it going?”

“All good.” The deliveryman hefted a bundled stack of newspapers off his dolly and placed it in the wire newspaper container next to the checkout counter. With a tip of his baseball cap to Sofia, Kent strolled out, whistling tunelessly.

Sofia smiled at his back, but the smile drained from her face when her gaze fell upon the headlines. “Accused murderer discovered at IGEC raid of nightclub.” Finger trembling, she picked up the newspaper and scanned the tiny print. Her chest heaved with each unsteady breath. *No...that’s impossible.*

Jose’s concerned voice tore her out of her bemusement. “Sofia? You okay?”

“Yeah, I...” She folded the newspaper, added it to one of the brown paper bags Jose had packed

with her groceries, and dug two dollars out of her purse to pay for the newspaper. “I’ll see you around.” She seized the handles and rushed out of the store.

The fifteen-minute walk back to the town house seemed too long. By the time she arrived, her arms ached from carrying the two heavy bags, and her mind was in turmoil. The house was quiet. Desperate loneliness clawed at her. She needed *someone*, and just then, the only someone was Kyle.

She left the groceries in the kitchen and ran up the stairs. Without a sound, she twisted the knob of the guest room door and eased the door open.

Kyle was fast asleep. He had kicked off the comforter and was lying on his side. She stared at him, a smile inching across her face. He was gorgeous. He did not possess Danyael’s supermodel features, but Kyle’s rough-hewn features made him feel more—Sofia groped for the right word—*solid*. And when he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement, he could make her stomach twist into intricate knots.

Somehow, he made her feel safe.

Sofia reached for the blanket to tug it over his body, but the movement jostled him slightly. Still asleep, he turned onto his back. His groping hand grasped her lower arm. A vulnerable half-smile flickered across his face. “You’re here...” he whispered.

“Kyle?”

“Lydia. You came back...”

She would have to be deaf to miss the pain in his voice. Was this the same man who had so brashly thrown himself into a gunfight to save her life? And who was Lydia? She shook him gently. “Kyle, you’re dreaming. Wake up.”

Green eyes flashed open. He blinked several times. “So-Sofia?”

The acute disappointment in his voice raked her even though she had no reason to expect otherwise from a man she had known for less than twelve hours. She leaned back, a fractional movement away from him. The room was suddenly stifling; she needed space. “I have to put the groceries away.”

“Groceries?” In an instant, he was fully awake. He sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed. “You went out?” The hint of aching loss in his voice was replaced by sharp demand.

Her chin tilted up. “We needed food.”

“Are you out of your mind? The Rue Marcha and IGEC are still looking for you.”

She shook her head and scowled at him. “I needed fresh air.”

Kyle gritted his teeth. “Next time, why don’t you just hand the damn microchip over to them and be done with it?” He reached for his smartphone on the bedside table and glanced at the time. “How long were you out?”

“About an hour. A bit less.”

“Anyone see you?”

His abrasive questioning ground on her nerves. Her reply was frosty. “Yeah, about a hundred

people going about their daily business.”

“How the hell am I supposed to protect you if you don’t tell me where you’re going?”

“I thought your job was to protect the microchip.”

He sneered. “You’re an extension of it.”

She glowered at him. When he was awake, he was as much a cold-hearted ass as Zara. “When you’re done being mad at me, you can come downstairs for a breakfast we wouldn’t have if I hadn’t gone out for groceries.” She spun on her heel and stalked out of the room.

The last sound she heard coming from Kyle’s room was a four-letter expletive.

Chapter 6

Kyle's hands fisted into the bedsheets. All right, perhaps he had been hard on her, but hell, she deserved it. What had she been thinking, leaving the house unescorted, unprotected? Was he supposed to applaud her gutsiness or smack her for her idiocy?

She deserved the former, but the latter would have been a great deal more satisfying.

He settled for getting out of bed and stepping into the shower. The hot water ran cold faster than he would have liked, but it was enough to reset his sour mood. With a towel wrapped around his waist, he returned to his bedroom and pulled on a clean shirt and pants that he had dug out of his backpack. If his unexpected stay lasted beyond the weekend, he would need several new changes of clothes. He snorted. Perhaps he could send Sofia out on another shopping expedition.

When the smell of bacon wafted up to him, he closed his eyes in ecstasy. His stomach rumbled. Armed with a few hours of sleep and a marginally better attitude, he went downstairs to the dining room where a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon strips, and grilled tomatoes awaited him. He peeked into the kitchen. He did not see Sofia, but rustling sounds came from the pantry.

"Is this mine?"

"Yeah." Her voice was muffled. "There's bread in the toaster oven. Butter's in the fridge."

Admiring her efficiency and her inability to hold a grudge, he sat down to enjoy his breakfast. Idly, he picked up the newspaper—the relic of a passing age—on the table and unfolded it.

It took several moments for the jumble of words to untangle. He waited patiently; experience had taught him that stress aggravated his dyslexia. He saw no need to turn a casual scan of morning news into a frustrating experience.

His fork paused on the way to his mouth. He leaned forward to stare at the headlines on the front page. What the hell?

The newspaper article described the IGEC raid on Zanzi-Bar and announced three casualties—one IGEC agent and two bar patrons. Their connections to the Rue Marcha and Proficere Labs, however, went unmentioned. The focus of the article was on the bartender. The good-looking and flirtatious man whom Kyle had thought was Stefan Agnor, a college dropout, was actually Stefan Karel Varak, an alpha telepath and eco-terrorist accused of five assassinations in Europe and on the run from Interpol. The terrorist had apparently disappeared after the raid.

Kyle snorted. Lucky bastards. The IGEC had not been hunting for Stefan Varak, but his presence, which the IGEC agents had apparently detected after the fact, had saved them from the embarrassment of admitting that their raid of Zanzi-Bar had failed to intercept the transaction between Proficere Labs and the Rue Marcha.

Still, Stefan was a problem.

Kyle shoved back his chair and stalked into the kitchen. He flung open the pantry door.

Sofia stood on tiptoes, reaching for jars of pickled fruit on the top shelf.

Kyle reached over her head, grabbed two jars, and handed them to her. "Need more?"

"No, I'm set."

"The bartender, Stefan...how well did he know you?"

She shrugged. "Better than most. He walked me home after every shift."

"Does he know about your town house in D.C.?"

"Yeah. He listened to me grumble about not being able to sell it."

"And your do-gooder tendencies?"

Her eyes narrowed into slits. "You know, you need to stop treating basic decency and a normal sense of ethics like infectious diseases."

That would be a yes. He reached for his smartphone and called Zara.

She answered immediately. "I hope your morning has been less eventful than mine." Her businesslike tone was brisk.

"What happened?"

"We've had two Rue Marcha runs on the clinic so far. The Mutant Affairs Council is furious that someone's coming after Danyael, so they sent out a team of enforcers to protect him."

"Really? Why would an alpha empath of Danyael's caliber need other alpha mutants to protect him?"

"Technically, he shouldn't, but he balks at killing, even in self-defense. Anyway, the Rue Marcha's body count is piling up. But enough about me. What have you done on this fine winter day?"

Oh, besides screwing up a transfer between Proficere Labs and the Rue Marcha, and heading on the run with a sexy snip of a waitress? "I got two hours of sleep."

"Lucky you."

"Did you see the report on the IGEC raid?"

"Yes, and the poor sod who's taking the fall for it."

Kyle snorted. Zara had a soft spot for other assassins. "Stefan knows about Sofia's Dupont Circle town house."

"Hmm..." The crisp veneer dropped away. Zara's voice softened to a seductive purr, a sign that death, or at least havoc, was on her mind. "I'll have someone take care of it."

He frowned into the phone. "Zara, Sofia considers him something of a friend."

"He's not going to be much of a friend if he's captured and gives her location away."

“But—”

“I’ll make sure it’s as fast and painless as possible.” The next sound was a click.

With a sigh, he stared at his smartphone before putting it away. He had not yet met anyone who could effectively handle Zara Itani. Not even Danyael.

Sofia frowned at him. “What is Zara going to do?”

“She said she’ll handle it.”

She marched up to him, her hands on her hips. Kyle suppressed a grin. God, she was adorable when she was furious. Her brown eyes glowered like twin stars, and her pout, which she probably intended to be fierce, only managed to be cute. “What do you mean by ‘she’ll handle it’?”

Kyle did not think it would reassure Sofia to hear that it would probably involve lots of blood and a funeral, but Zara was right. Stefan was an issue—one with the potential to become a huge problem. The sooner the threat was neutralized by whatever means Zara determined necessary, the better. “She knows what to do. She’ll do the right thing.”

Sofia cocked her head to the side. “Really? I was under the impression that Danyael’s her conscience.”

Kyle suppressed a chuckle. “I’m going to finish my breakfast. Did you have something, too?”

“Yogurt.”

“Not much of a breakfast.”

“Not much of an appetite. Will you be done soon? We’ve got a lot to do. We need to find a scanner to read and translate the information on that microchip.”

Kyle leaned a shoulder against the pantry doorframe. “Your best bet would be a scientific laboratory. Proficere’s in Durban, but it is four hours from here; I wouldn’t recommend it. There’s Pioneer Labs in Boonsboro, Maryland, but it’s supposedly a wreck, destroyed by fire when Galahad escaped.”

“What about medical schools? They have laboratories too.”

“Lots of medical schools in the area—”

Sofia’s eyes brightened. “Johns Hopkins in Baltimore has a fantastic lab and an extensive library. It’s not far, right?”

“An hour, maybe more with traffic.” He glanced at the time on his cell phone. “I’ll be ready to head out in twenty minutes. How are you planning to get into the lab?”

“Knock on the door and ask politely, as opposed to your style, which would be to break in?”

Kyle grinned. The sweet innocence she exuded made her sarcasm that much more entertaining. He reached out and tweaked her nose. “You know, I could really grow to like you. Let me see what I can do.” He reached for his phone and hit the second number on speed dial.

“Are you calling another one of your mercenary friends?”

“Shhh. Xin’s with the National Security Agency.” He had the pleasure of seeing her eyes widen.

“You mean you actually have friends on the right side of the law.”

“Sometimes you need to be on the right side of the law to effectively get things done.”

“Wait...Xin...isn't she the person Zara was going to call to change the title on my house?”

Kyle nodded. “That’s the one.”

Sofia threw her hands up in the air. “What the—?”

“Hello?” A soft female voice answered the phone.

“Xin?” Kyle held up a hand to silence Sofia. “Hey, I need access to a genetic research laboratory, one with the technology to decode a Proficere Labs microchip. I was thinking of Johns Hopkins.”

“They should have what you need,” Xin said.

“Do you know anyone there who can help? My *client* has strong moral objections to B and E.”

Sofia’s brow furrowed. “B and E?” she asked in a whisper.

“Breaking and entering,” Kyle explained.

Xin laughed. Obviously, she had overheard Sofia. “Sounds like you have your hands full. Let me see what I can do.” She was briefly silent. “Well, I can tap into my contacts, but they tend to be suspicious, and I know you’d rather fly under the radar. Your best bet is to connect with a researcher, preferably an absent-minded one. Did you ask Danyael?”

“Danyael?”

“He got his M.D. from Hopkins. He’s probably still got friends there.”

Kyle gritted his teeth. “I’d rather not.”

“Really, Kyle.” Xin sounded exasperated. “What’s your problem? Do you dislike Danyael because he’s a doctor or because he’s a mutant?”

He fought to control his temper. “Now isn’t the right time for this discussion.”

“Fine. I’ll call Danyael. I’ll be back in touch as soon as I can.”

Kyle disconnected the call and glanced down to find Sofia staring at him with a worried expression.

“Can she help us?” she asked. “And is Danyael okay?”

“Huh? Yeah, Danyael’s fine. Go get ready. Xin can reach us on the road.”

Sofia cast him a searching look but did not probe further. She walked out of the kitchen, and he heard her footsteps fade as she climbed the steps.

Grateful for the solitude, he returned to his unfinished breakfast but found that he had lost his appetite. Xin’s casual jab had cut deeper than he expected.

He had reasons, but unfortunately, they seemed trite after his encounter with Danyael Sabre. Kyle grunted with frustration and dragged his hand through his hair. What was it about the alpha empath that made his firmly anchored worldview tremble?



Upstairs, Sofia showered quickly—Kyle had apparently used up most of the hot water—and changed,

tugging a sweater over her T-shirt before picking up her coat. She threw a final glance at herself in the mirror. The makeup she wore was a habit, or at least that was what she liked to tell herself. The fact was, she felt an odd need to make herself look attractive to Kyle.

I'm not attracted to him, am I?

He was a mercenary who was different from terrorists only insofar that he was driven by money and profits instead of some fanatical religion or philosophy.

Or was he?

He had supported her decision to hold on to the microchip even though the money dictated that she return it to Proficere Labs immediately.

She walked out of her bedroom. As she crossed the landing, her gaze fell upon the door of the master bedroom. Her breath shuddered, and she closed her eyes against the prick of tears. The deep, hollow ache in her chest stunned her.

How long would it take her to get over the pain?

She found her hand on the door handle without even recollecting the few steps she had taken to close the distance to the door.

There is nothing to see in there.

She pressed down on the door handle and pushed the door open.

Light shone in through the white lace curtains, illuminating tiny dust motes floating through the air. The room, twice the size of her own, had a king-sized bed. The dark mahogany dresser, armoire, and dressing table matched its headboard. She still remembered the hours—actually, it had been weeks—her mother had spent agonizing over whether to buy the bedroom set. Her mother had always been watchful about money. In a one-income household, she had to be.

Small. She could think of no other word to describe her family. *Small, but perfect.*

Her mother had always been around for her, walking her to and from school each day and tutoring her through her schoolwork. In lieu of siblings, Sofia had her mother for a friend. Her father had been her protector, her white knight. When she lost them both, she did not just lose her parents. She lost her entire family and her best friends.

“Sofia?”

Damn it. She had not heard Kyle’s footstep on the stairs.

Sofia swiped her hand across her eyes and spun around as Kyle walked into the master bedroom. His gaze swept across the room before narrowing its focus to her face. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Her voice trembled.

He frowned and glared around the room as if trying to find whatever it was that had offended her. She placed her hand against his arm. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah, I was waiting for you. What took so long? What’s in here?”

“Nothing, just a bedroom.”

“So what about it got you upset?”

She shook her head. “Let’s go.”

“Nope.” He sat on the bed. The quilt-covered mattress sank beneath him, sending up a small cloud of dust. “Not going anywhere until you tell me why this room has you all freaked out.”

“I’m not.”

His eyebrows drew together. “Sofia.” His exaggerated patience almost buried the underlying note of concern. “I’ve seen you look at the closed door of this room like there’s a ghost in it.”

She twitched. His words hit too close to home. Her shoulders sagged as she stared at the framed picture of a flower-covered meadow on the bedside table.

For twenty-four years of her life, the picture frame had contained a photograph of her parents on their wedding day, smiling at each other with as much love on that day as they had on the evening before they died.

There had been no smiles in the early hours of the hot and muggy summer day they died.

She turned her back on Kyle, but he caught her hand before she could make her escape. With a sharp tug, he pulled her to sit on the bed beside him.

“Okay, what’s up?” His voice was gruff, but his arm around her waist was gentle.

How could she speak through the huge and painful pressure in her chest? He did not look at her face, and for that, she was grateful. He kept his attention on the fingers that he entwined with hers.

“You know, back in the day, when I was with the Rangers, I developed something of a reputation for reading minds.”

She pulled back. “You’re a telepath?”

He shook his head. “Nope, just good at putting facts together. Let’s see. You say this house has been on the market for five months; that means it went up for sale in August of last year. Prime location, but no one has bought it. What happened in D.C. prior to August of last year?”

She tensed and tried to tug her hand out of his grasp.

He did not let her go. His large hand encompassed hers, warm and strong.

His face tightened, the muscles around his cheeks pulling his mouth into a thin, flat line. “Sakti. Sakti attacked the city on Independence Day.” He turned and searched her face.

She nodded. It was all she could manage.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. We could move to a hotel. We don’t have to be here.”

“This was...is...home.” She glanced around her parents’ bedroom. As a child, she had spent many nights curled between her parents with a large pile of books spread across the bed. Her parents—her mother voice’s sweet and lilting, her father’s deeper and sonorous—would take turns reading to her.

Sofia blinked.

Her memories of their soft voices spiked into desperate pleas for mercy and screams of pain. Her quiet sobs of desperation had punctuated her parents’ final gasps as they were executed by mutants intent on spreading havoc through the city.

The newscasters had called it “generalized terror.” To her, the terror was brutally specific. She could still feel the chafe of the handcuffs around her wrists—handcuffs she had not been able to undo. She had watched helplessly as the bullets raced through the air.

Stop it! Stop it!

Her mind fumbled. The bullet slipped past her mental fingers.

What was the point of being a telekinetic if she could not do something as simple as free herself? If she could not stop a bullet aimed at her mother’s head? At her father’s heart?

Her chest hitched, catching around a sob. What was the goddamned point of her mutant powers if she could not save the ones she loved?

Kyle’s arm around her waist tightened, an anchor through the storm of her memories. He did not rush her; he did not say anything. He waited until she broke the silence.

When she did, the words came from a mind resolute on moving beyond the past. “I’m fine,” Sofia said. “Let’s go.”



Eyes narrowed with annoyance, Kyle followed Sofia downstairs to the kitchen.

He should have known better. Women clients were trouble. Women who thought he would stay around to solve their personal problems long after he solved their professional ones were the worst kind of trouble.

Sofia, though, was different, or at least he liked to think so.

She was not a hardened mercenary, like Zara and the other women in Three Fates, but she had witnessed her share of violence.

Hell, she was an active participant in the ongoing chaos surrounding the stolen microchip, and she was not trying to extricate herself from the madness, at least not without attempting to do some good along the way.

Experience told him that do-gooders were even more trouble than women with unrealistic expectations of him, but her determined desire to solve the microchip mystery was compelling, in a pugnacious sort of way. Seeing how it was *his* drop that went bad, he owed it to her to keep her safe.

He tried not to factor in his growing desire to charm her into smiles and laughter just for the pleasure of seeing her brown eyes sparkle with good humor.

Kyle drew aside the curtains in the kitchen and scanned the parking lot. *Clear*. “Wait here until I wave you over.”

She folded her hands across her chest. “You’re paranoid, you know that?”

Ah, she was regaining her sarcastic vim, though he supposed it was not sarcasm when it was true.

He unlocked the back door and stepped out. A thin dusting of the prior night’s snowfall remained undisturbed on the threshold. Too bad the snow around the car had melted from the heat of the asphalt.

He would have liked a few more cues to confirm the car had not been tampered with.

The alleyway that provided access to the town house parking lot was quiet; the only movement came from the flutter of startled birds from an evergreen bush as he passed. No one was concealed within its pine branches. He walked around the car, checking for the subtle clues he had left behind—a nearly invisible strand of black hair positioned across the car doors, the trunk, and the hood.

No one had tried to access the car.

He dropped to his knees and checked the undercarriage.

All clear too.

He stifled a grin; he could imagine Sofia rolling her eyes at him.

Kyle pushed back to his feet and waved her over before sliding into the driver's seat. He turned the key in the ignition and adjusted the controls until heat blasted through the air vents.

Bundled in a heavy winter coat, she emerged from the town house and locked the door behind her. She climbed into the passenger seat and tossed him a narrow-eyed glance. "Did you honestly expect the car to blow up?"

"Happened once or twice before. Wasn't pretty. If you survive it, the ringing in your head lasts for days. Here, keep warm while I check the door."

"I locked it."

He ignored her. Locking the door was not the same thing as securing it against evidence of entry. He worked quickly before the tips of his fingers became clumsy from cold. He was back in the car within two minutes.

"Got everything you need?" he asked. He searched her face but could not find any evidence of the miserable woman who had sat beside him in the room where her parents died.

Sofia's eyes were clear and her mouth set in a firm line. She patted the pocket of her denim jeans. "Yup."

He programmed the address for Johns Hopkins Hospital into the GPS and pulled out of the parking lot. For several minutes, they drove in silence until Kyle broke it with, "What do you think we'll find there?"

"Answers."

He shook his head. "If we do, this will go down in history as the easiest case I've ever been on."

"Easiest? Four people are dead."

"That's a small number, considering the Rue Marcha's involved."

She pressed her lips together. "Do you think more people are going to die?"

He shrugged. Lies were easy, but he did not want to make promises he could not keep.

"I don't want people to get hurt," she said.

"I think that's inevitable now. The only question is *who* is going to get hurt." A muscle twitched in his scruffy jaw. "I won't lie to you, Sofia. It's probably going to be touch-and-go for a while until we figure out what's going on, but I'll do everything I can to keep you safe."

She turned to him and flashed a smile. “Us.”

“What?”

“Do everything you can to keep both of us safe.”

Heat crept under his skin. Did she trust him that much?

The glow in her eyes told him she did.

He nodded and said the only thing he could, even though the guilt of the lie tore at him. “Yeah.

We’ll both get out okay.”

Chapter 7

The bright and sunny day in Washington, D.C., conceded to heavy clouds by the time Sofia and Kyle arrived in Baltimore. The gray sky, nevertheless, did not detract from the majestic sight of the Queen Anne-style domed administration building in front of Johns Hopkins Hospital. Built of red brick and trimmed with blue sandstone and molded terra cotta, the core of the hospital was surrounded by towering modern buildings linked by aerial bridges. The hospital sprawled over twenty-two acres, but like many first-time visitors, Sofia and Kyle marched up the steps of the administration building and entered its bustling lobby.

Kyle dug out his smartphone to connect with the Hopkins contact provided by Danyael Sabre. Meanwhile, Sofia stared up into the serene face and outstretched arms of the eleven-foot Christ statue placed on a pedestal in the center of the lobby, beneath the apex of the dome. A woman and child paused in front of the statue. The woman genuflected, tugging the child down beside her. Her fingers tapped her head and chest in the sign of the cross; her whispered prayer was too soft to hear.

The tears that leaked out from beneath her closed eyelids, however, needed no translation.

A thin line separated hope from desperation.

The line that separated courage from stupidity was no thicker.

Sofia could only hope that it was the former and not the latter that inspired her search for the data, and the truth embedded in the microchip.

“Miss Rios?”

She spun around as a middle-aged African-American man strode toward her. His graying hair was cropped short, his stomach slightly pudgy. He wore a genial smile. “Dr. Keith Henderson.” He cast an affectionate look at the statue. “I see you’re getting acquainted with ‘The Divine Healer.’ Carrara marble. It’s an exact copy of the ‘Christus Consolator’ sculpture in Copenhagen.” With an absent-minded gesture, he rubbed the statue’s toes with one hand and extended the other to Sofia. “Dr. Sabre called and said you’re a first-year graduate nursing student.”

Sofia smiled. “Yes, I’m at UNC.”

“Excellent program. So, Danyael mentioned you’re looking for access to a genetics research terminal to analyze a microchip?”

“Yes, I am. Oh, and this is Kyle Norwood.” She turned to introduce the man hulking behind her.

The doctor offered his hand. “Glad to meet you. Please come with me.” He led the way down a maze of corridors, weaving with ease through endless streams of people headed in every direction. “And how is Danyael doing?”

“Uh, fine. We just saw him this morning. Are you a geneticist? Is that how you know Danyael?”

“Oh no. I’m head of the cardiology department and a faculty at the medical school. Danyael was one of my students. I had always hoped he would specialize in cardiology, but he chose family medicine instead.” Henderson’s shoulders heaved. His huff of breath was tinged with regret. “He was one of my best students.”

Kyle cut in. “Wouldn’t he be, just based on the things he can do with his mutant powers?”

Sofia shot him a narrow-eyed glance. Surely it hadn’t been rancor she had heard in Kyle’s voice. Why did he hate Danyael?

Henderson looked at Kyle. “You’re referring to his empathic healing powers, of course. He hardly used it in medical school. If and when he did, it was an emergency, and all other conventional means had failed. His powers aren’t without cost—he heals by absorbing sickness, injury, and pain—and he can’t handle heart and brain injuries, not without risking death himself. In cardiology and neurosurgery, we always knew it was Danyael’s skill as a physician that carried him through, and not his fancy mutant powers.”

The doctor paused in front of a door and held his key card up against the security panel beside the door. The lock clicked. He pressed down on the door handle, pushed the door open, and ushered Sofia and Kyle in.

The room contained two computer terminals flanked by small pieces of electronic equipment. Henderson walked past Sofia and flicked switches to turn the equipment on. “This is the microchip reader. The output will display on the terminal. Do you know how to use it?”

Sofia nodded.

“All right, I’ll leave you here, then. You have my number. Call me if you need anything, and let me know when you head out. Just close the door when you leave; it locks automatically.”

“Thank you, Dr. Henderson.” Sofia extended her hand.

“Not a problem. Give my regards to Danyael, won’t you?” He turned and walked away, disappearing into the crowd flowing through the corridors of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Sofia seated herself at the terminal as Kyle closed the door.

“Good, it locks from the inside,” Kyle said. “That was a lot of trust.”

“Who, the doctor?”

“Yes, leaving us alone to analyze a microchip when he doesn’t know what’s on it.”

Sofia rolled her eyes as she moved her fingers across the blank screen, activating the monitor and the terminal with a simple touch. “Not everyone in the world has paranoia honed to an art form like you do. Besides, it’s just information.”

Kyle placed his hands down on either side of her, trapping her against the computer, and leaned

down. His breath was warm against her cheek. “My darling Sofia...”

A shiver, not of fear, quivered up her spine.

His voice, pitched low, twisted her stomach into knots of anticipation. “There’s no such thing as ‘just information.’ With a strike, a blade kills once. A bullet takes only one life. Information is far more lethal, its range far wider. Once released, it can never be recalled.”

Damn. He was talking about blades, bullets, and information, and he had managed to turn her into a fluttering ball of female hormones. She closed her eyes, released her breath in a trembling sigh, and willed her toes to uncurl. “For-forbidden knowledge.”

She could feel him smile against her. “Yes. Forbidden fruit tastes sweetest. I wonder, what do you taste like, Sofia?” His mouth nuzzled her cheek.

A soft sigh washed out of her as she closed her eyes and sank into sensation. “I—”

A faint beeping noise intruded on her consciousness.

Her eyes flashed open. She drew back sharply and stared at the terminal. The screen was fully illuminated; the terminal was waiting for instructions from her.

Saved by the...computer?

She felt like smacking her hand against the computer’s cold, unfeeling surface. “I...uh...” Carefully avoiding Kyle’s penetrating stare, she swiveled her chair around to face the terminal. Her fingers trembled slightly against the computer keyboard.

“Sofia.” With a gentle hand, he tipped her face up, forcing her to meet his eyes. “Get used to wanting me. God knows, I want you.”

His words were quietly spoken; they could have been a promise or a threat.

The unfamiliar sensation of being desired forced her to draw a deep breath. She turned away and fixed upon the monitor as if its glare shone upon a safe track away from the uncertain path that led to Kyle Norwood.

It was nearly impossible to yank her mind fully off the man who stood behind her, but Sofia tried regardless. She dug out the plastic-encased microchip from the pocket of her denim jeans, flipped open the cover, and extracted the microchip before sliding it into the slot on the terminal.

The hum of the machine was the only sound in the room.

Sofia broke through the awkward white noise. “What did the Proficere scientists say they were transferring?”

Kyle’s presence behind her shifted. He stood close, much too close. She twitched and leaned forward to increase the distance between them, but he chuckled, as if he were aware of what she was doing. “Genetic analysis. They didn’t specify what.”

Moments later, a string of four seemingly random, repeating letters appeared across the screen—G, A, T, C. Guanine, adenine, thymine, and cytosine, the four nucleobases that formed DNA.

“At least that much was the truth,” Sofia conceded. She chewed the inside of her cheek. Damn, it was absurdly difficult to focus on what she was doing with Kyle all but breathing down her neck. She

shook her head and touched the screen to drag the segment of genetic code toward an icon labeled “Analyze international genomic databases.”

A message flashed across the screen, demanding proof of identity and security clearance.

Sofia frowned. “I guess we have to call the professor.”

Kyle peered over her head and pointed to another icon. His other hand landed casually, or perhaps not so casually, on her shoulder. “What about that one?”

“Local genomic databases?” Sofia tried not to give in to the thrill of pleasure that raced down her spine at his touch. She dragged the genetic code to the second icon, which accepted it without a fuss. The terminal whirred with activity. She also sent the data readout to the printer, which spewed sheets of paper covered with tiny letters.

Sofia sank into her seat. “It should be good enough. Hopkins probably has one of the largest genomic databases in the country, and we can access it locally from this terminal. The only problem is that it’ll take time to match the sequence on the microchip to samples in the database, and even then, it may not be exact.”

Kyle shook his head. “Given Proficere’s tendency to dabble in illegal research, I wouldn’t count on finding a perfect match.”

“But finding a close match on a chromosome would narrow it down, wouldn’t it? At least, it should be enough for a solid guess.”

Kyle snorted. “A guess won’t get you very far.”

“Look, I’m a first-year nursing student. I’m the farthest thing from an expert, but if we have something that looks suspicious, we can probably find some kind of expert to help us take the analysis to the next level.”

“It’s a small community of experts we’d be looking at. Chances are they all know each other’s research. How badly do you want to risk discovery?”

Sofia stiffened at the note of caution in his voice. “What are you saying, Kyle?”

“That if this looks bad, we turn it over to Zara.”

She swiveled around in her chair, folded her arms across her chest, and frowned at him. “Are you afraid?”

“You’re a student, and I’m ex-military.” He gestured to the computer terminal. “We’re dealing with genetic codes here. We’re out of our league, and that’s the fastest way to get into trouble.”

“Zara’s not a geneticist, either. What makes her any more qualified than we are?”

“Her ability to manipulate both people and systems, and her talent for getting out of trouble. She can channel resources and call in favors we can’t.”

Sofia shook her head. “I don’t trust Zara. She’s only looking out for herself. What about Danyael? He’s helped us twice now.”

“I don’t trust Danyael, so where does that leave us?”

She scowled at Kyle. “You have trust issues, you know that?”

He poked a finger at his chest. “*I* have trust issues? You just said that you don’t trust Zara.”

She shot to her feet. Standing up helped close the height difference, but he was still an entire foot taller than she was. “I have reasons. Did you hear what she said at the clinic? She brought their daughter, a *baby*, to the clinic to force Danyael to defend her if someone attacked him. What kind of mother does that to her own child?”

“What sort of man needs to be compelled to defend himself?” Kyle retorted.

“Do you read the news? They say he can kill with a touch. He defends himself, people die.”

“Do you hear yourself? You just met him this morning, and now you’re coming to his defense like you’re the president of his fan club. He’s an *alpha empath*. He controls emotions. You can’t trust what you feel about him, or anything you feel when you’re around him.”

She thought of Danyael—his tired eyes, his weary smile. The compassion she felt for him came naturally. Heck, if Danyael had tried to influence them with his mutant powers, *Kyle* would have become co-president of Danyael’s fan club. But he wasn’t.

Sofia’s scowl deepened. “You’re paranoid.”

“Zara, at least, is human. Danyael’s a goddamned mutant. You can’t trust them, any of them.”

She flinched. His verbal slap was worse than a physical blow. “How can you lump all mutants into one category? That makes you no better than a sexist or a racist.”

“Why are you defending them? You’ve seen what they’ve done to society. The mutants, and those in-vitros too, have made it nearly impossible for a naturally born human to succeed. Their unfair advantages—”

“What unfair advantages? You heard what the doctor, Henderson, said. Danyael heals at a price, and other mutants—”

The computer terminal beeped.

Sofia spun around. “It found something.” She sat in front of the terminal to read the report on the screen. Her heartbeat raced. “Actually...three sections of DNA from the microchip look similar to DNA markers on chromosomes eight, sixteen, and twenty-two.”

“Three?” Kyle echoed. “What do those sections do?”

“I don’t know yet.” Sofia tapped her fingers on the touch-sensitive screen. The image changed to display close-up pictures of chromosomes marked by distinctive dark bands. Her finger traced the summary of the analysis. “Looks like all three DNA sections are tied to heart function—”

The screen turned off.

She jerked back. “What happened? I didn’t do anything.” Sofia leaned down to confirm that the terminal was plugged into the power outlet and that none of the connections were loose. She flicked the switch repeatedly, but the screen remained black.

Kyle’s hand wrapped around her arm and yanked her to her feet. “We’re getting out of here.”

“What?”

“The database is probably monitored, and your search triggered an alarm that shut the terminal

down. You can bet whoever's monitoring the database is on his way over right now."

Damn it. She pulled the microchip from the terminal, seized the printouts from the printer, and shoved both into her backpack.

Kyle pushed down on the door handle. It did not move. He tried again—he even slammed his weight against the door—but it did not budge. He cursed under his breath. "They've sealed the door. We're locked in."

Chapter 8

Sofia stood wide-eyed and silent, clutching her backpack to her chest while Kyle searched the room. No windows. Sealed door. He looked up. The air-conditioning vent was too small for him, but not for Sofia. He beckoned to her. “Come here. I’m going to give you a boost up. I want you to stay hidden until the coast is clear.”

“What about you?”

“Your prints are on the computer, not mine. I can play dumb bodyguard and lie my way out of this.” With a low grunt, he shoved her up onto his shoulders and gripped her ankles. She straightened and pushed up on the slatted cover of the vent. “Backpack first, then you.”

Sofia threw her backpack into the ventilation chamber and clambered up. Her wriggle would have been a sexy distraction under different circumstances. He pulled wads of cash from his wallet and held them up to her. “No credit cards. Don’t wait for me; don’t try to find me. As soon as it’s clear, get out of here and back to D.C. Go to Danyael if you have to; he can protect you.”

No credit cards. *Damn.* She had already used her credit card at Jose’s grocery store. Would the IGEC and Rue Marcha use that information to track her down? Her hand trembled as she took the cash from his hand. She grabbed the vent cover he held up, fit it into place, and inched away from the opening. Her face vanished into darkness.

Kyle slumped into the chair, fixed a bored expression on his face, and waited.

Thirty seconds later, the door slid open.

He looked up. “This hospital food better be edible—” His eyes narrowed. He shot to his feet. “Hey, you’re not Sofia.”

Two white-shirted security guards exchanged nervous glances. “Dr. Henderson said he let two people into the room.”

“She went to grab lunch from the cafeteria. What’s wrong?”

A guard shook his head. “She must have walked out before the door locked down.”

“The door locked down?” Kyle echoed. “What the hell is going on here?”

“I don’t know, sir. We’ve just been told to escort you to our security office.”

Hasty footsteps echoed along the outside corridor. Moments later, Dr. Henderson looked into the room. “There you are. Where is she?”

“She went to the cafeteria,” Kyle said.

Henderson nodded to the security guards. “I’ll walk him to the security office. You two find her.”

“What does she look like?” the other guard asked.

“Uh...short-ish. Young, mid-twenties.”

“What was she wearing?”

The doctor hesitated. His eyes flicked from side to side.

Kyle jumped in with a lie. “Khaki pants. Gray sweatshirt.”

“Got it,” the security guard acknowledged. “We’ll find her.”

Kyle waited until the security guards walked away. Given their lack of urgency, they had clearly not been briefed on the situation. “What’s going on, doctor?”

Henderson shrugged. “I don’t know. The International Genomics Center called the security office—the center monitors all database activity—and said that someone was accessing secure information from this terminal. The security office tracked the terminal and then called me since it was my ID card that let you into the room. I told the center it couldn’t possibly be the case; this terminal doesn’t have access to the secure databases, but the guy on the phone insisted on speaking to you anyway. I believe he’s on his way over.”

The international agency was not tipping its hand. Well, as long as it played nice, Kyle was willing to play along. The International Genetics and Ethics Council, and its offshoot, the International Genomics Center, were like the FBI; its agents tended to play by the rule book in a plodding though persistent way that occasionally worked. They were not the bad guys, though he could not say the same for some of IGEC’s people.

But what was IGEC’s stake in Proficere Labs’ research?



The security office was clearly designed primarily for security personnel. A large sofa with faded floral print dominated the room, and the two wooden side tables were scuffed and thinly layered with dust. Apparently, the security office did not receive the same level of cleanliness scrutiny that the rest of the immaculate hospital endured.

Kyle settled on the sofa and stretched his legs out. He might as well conserve his energy. His upcoming encounter with the IGEC promised to be moderately unpleasant.

Sofia, though—

Would she be all right?

She was a nursing student. How could he shove her into an air vent and expect her to know what to do? She was skinny; he did not doubt her ability to wriggle through the narrow vent, but hell, she was so short, she would probably hurt herself when she jumped down from the ceiling.

The door opened.

He glanced up, unsurprised. Knocking was not part of the IGEC playbook.

A lean African-American man, not much older than he, entered the room. Like most G-men, the IGEC agent wore a dark gray suit of questionable fit. Kyle did not recognize him, but then again, he was much more familiar with west coast IGEC agents after spending the prior three years working on Three Fates cases in Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. He had had a few run-ins with the IGEC, though he certainly crossed the FBI far more often.

The IGEC agent flashed his identification. "I'm Agent Sinclair." He set his electronic tablet facedown on the side table and adjusted the lapels of his suit. "Where were you last night, Mr. Norwood?"

"If you know my name, don't you know where I was?"

A faint, unamused smile appeared on Sinclair's face. "Answer the question."

"Am I being charged with something, agent?"

"Accessing classified genetic information."

"That would be hard to do from a research terminal that doesn't have access to classified databases."

Sinclair sighed. "Look, we know you have information you're not supposed to have. Where did you get it?"

Kyle spread his hands. "The only reason I scraped through introductory biology in college was because I slept with the teaching assistant in exchange for private tutoring. What makes you think I know what to do with genetic information?"

"I didn't say you knew what to do with it; only that you have it."

Kyle shrugged. "Look, you're going to have to be more specific. Not saying I did, but what information did you think I was accessing? Must have been bad to get the IGEC so riled up."

The door flung open, and a slender woman walked in. She wore her long hair pulled back into a ponytail and a smirk on her face. "Considering *you're* involved, it's no surprise we're so riled up."

His heartbeat skipped, but he kept his expression bland. "Lydia, you're a long way from Los Angeles."

Her smile was thin. "That's Agent Warner to you." She sighed theatrically. "What trouble are you up to now, Kyle?"

"That would be Norwood to you, Agent Warner."

Her response was a cold silence.

He knew how to push her buttons just as she knew how to push his. A heated fourteen-month love affair that had not ended well could do that to anyone. He sank into the sofa and hoped his shoulders did not betray the tension he felt. "So, no work to keep you occupied out west?"

"The action settled down after you left."

"Double entendres, Agent Warner?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Norwood." She paced the length of the small room, her stride graceful. "I

want to know what information you were trying to analyze.”

“When is curiosity a crime?”

“When we have witnesses who might place you at a shootout between the IGEC and Proficere Labs employees yesterday.”

Might. That meant their witness was unreliable, or had disappeared. Like Sofia Rios, perhaps. He still had a shot at lying his way out of the situation. “Proficere Labs employees. You mean scientists, right? The brilliant geniuses who can explain the origin of all life in the universe but aren’t sure what day it is, or even what year? They were in a shootout with the IGEC? Did the scientists know which end of the gun to hold?”

“Were you there?”

He shrugged.

She leaned over and placed the palms of her hands on the side table.

Kyle snorted. He supposed she might have looked more intimidating if her stance were not cramped into twelve square inches of scuffed-up wood.

Her tone was quiet and cool. “A federal agent is dead, Norwood. Accessory to murder could get you twenty years.”

He relaxed into his seat and extended his arms over the back of the sofa. “If you’ve got a charge, bring it. Otherwise, you’re just probing, and we both know that won’t get you anywhere. I was trained in anti-interrogation techniques by the CIA, same as you.”

Irritation flashed across her face. She leaned back. “Who was the woman with you?”

“The one I started out the night with, the one I woke up next to, or the one in between?”

“Kyle—”

“The middle one was almost as pretty as you.”

Lydia blinked. Her gaze flashed to her IGEC partner, and for a brief moment, she was once again the young and idealistic IGEC agent he had fallen in love with twenty-four months prior instead of the hard-ass she had become.

It sucked to be reminded exactly why he had broken up with her.

She had become like Zara—worse than Zara.

At least Zara had never betrayed him.

He drew in his breath and reflexively pressed a hand against his left side. The bullet wound no longer hurt physically, but he had a scar to remind him that Lydia had used him, their relationship, and his love for her to lead his best friend, Jake Kerrigan, unwittingly into a trap.

Kyle had been slightly injured in the firefight that exploded.

Jake, the target of the IGEC’s ire, had been badly hurt.

The last he had seen of his friend was as Jake, bleeding profusely and scarcely conscious, was cuffed and dragged away.

Stunned, Kyle had pressed a hand to his bleeding side and looked up at Lydia as she walked up to

him. She commanded the team that had fired at him and brought Jake down.

With alarm, concern, and what he had once mistaken for love in her eyes, Lydia had knelt down to check on his injury. He pulled back when she touched him.

They did not touch again.

In the Hopkins security office, Lydia looked back at him, her sudden vulnerability buried behind the cold-as-ice federal agent facade. She reached for the electronic tablet, turned it on, and shoved it across the side table.

Sofia's face, likely taken from a university enrollment photograph, smiled up at him.

"Ever seen her?" Lydia asked.

"Who's she?" he asked.

She pulled the tablet away. "We think Proficere Labs has hired the Rue Marcha to provide muscle, and the girl's involved somehow."

Wrong on the first count. Right on the second.

Lydia sighed and sat down on the far side of the couch. She looked weary, as if she had been awake most of the night, which she probably had. "Vital genetic research is missing, and we're trying to track it down. We traced it to the free clinic in Anacostia, but the Mutant Affairs Council won't let us touch Danyael Sabre. Even if we could, we wouldn't be able to get anything out of him; he has insanely strong psychic shields, bar none." Her lips twisted into a scowl. "What doesn't seem coincidental is the fact that he knows Zara Itani, and you work for her. If you're involved in this, Kyle, I'd strongly suggest you cooperate. It won't end well otherwise."

"Is that a threat?"

She shook her head. "It's a caution, for old time's sake. We know the Rue Marcha is involved, and people who screw with them tend to end up dead."

Oh, he knew that fact, better than most. Zara's half-Venezuelan heritage gave her access to terrorists from that part of the world seeking a fresh start and a better life. Many of his colleagues in Three Fates were South American, and they tended to be as dangerous, or worse than the Middle Eastern ones.

He relaxed into his chair. "What kind of research is missing?"

Lydia's face tightened.

"Look. Let's both be professional about this," Kyle said. "We know you have no case against me, and interrogation techniques won't work either. Perhaps we can help each other."

"You do know that Three Fates is on the IGEC's blacklist, right?"

Kyle laughed. "Considering the amount of chaos Zara has single-handedly unleashed, I'd say it's about time, but this isn't about Zara's tendency to get into trouble. What's gotten the IGEC so riled up?"

Lydia bit down on her lower lip. A ghost of a smile flickered across her face. "Nice try, Norwood, but it's not going to work. In fact, you and I are going to camp out in here while the rest of

my team searches for the girl. We'll find her, and then we'll just see what she has to say about you.”

Chapter 9

Sofia cupped her nose and mouth with a hand as she crawled forward on her elbows and knees, but dust still tickled the back of her throat. She scrunched her nose in disgust. *Good thing I'm not allergic to anything.*

She shook her head and huffed out her breath. Why on earth was a nursing student crawling through the air ducts at a hospital? When she figured out the answer, she would have to give herself a hard kick in the rear end. It was embarrassing to realize that she had gotten herself into this fix. She could have turned the microchip over to Zara Itani and returned to Chapel Hill.

And miss out on all this fun?

The air duct twisted through turns, and at some point, she lost track of how many rights and lefts she had made. It did not matter, she supposed. She could hardly go back to the research station.

Her back ached from her crouched and cramped position as she inched forward. Her heartbeat still raced, but as countless minutes passed, she noticed it less. Up ahead, light beckoned through a panel. Sofia peered down into a nurses' station. Nurses clad in a variety of pastel nursing scrubs bustled in and out, exchanging lively conversation as they passed each other.

Darn.

She had to get out of the air duct. Among other reasons, she really needed to pee.

Gritting her teeth, Sofia pushed forward. The next air vent overlooked a crowded waiting room; she huffed in quiet frustration.

Sofia crawled over the third air vent before realizing what it was. The room beneath was dark except for a faint sliver of light slipping through a crack in the heavy curtains drawn across the windows. For a moment, she paused to listen, but heard nothing. Sofia inhaled deeply, but her racing nerves did not settle. Her fingers worked at the panel and pried it loose. She had to take a chance and hope that she was not jumping down into the psychiatric ward.

She wriggled backward in the narrow shaft and swung her feet around so that she could leap down feetfirst. She was ready—no, heck, she could never be ready to jump into the darkness without knowing what awaited her, but she would do it anyway.

Biting back a shriek, she let herself fall.

And landed on something soft.

Something jerked beneath her. Someone screamed.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry!” Sofia swung her feet to the side, scrambled off the bed, and dashed toward the door. Light burst into the room when she flung the door open. She flinched from the sudden glare but did not look back. Her feet thudded on linoleum tiles as she raced down the corridor. She skidded through blind turns around corners and almost ran into a passing orderly.

“Whoa, slow down, what’s the rush?” he demanded.

“Sorry.” A shaky grin accompanied the apology she tossed over her shoulder. She shook her head sharply and released her breath in an unsteady sigh. *Blend in.* And that meant not running as if she were pursued by the hounds of hell, or a South American drug cartel, or the International Genetics and Ethics Council.

Although, everything considered, she would settle for being pursued by the hounds of hell. Myth had nothing on reality.

She slowed her pace to a brisk walk and allowed herself to merge into the human traffic weaving through the crowded corridors. *Blend in. Get out. Blend in. Get out.* The quiet chatter of conversations around her blurred into white noise. She kept her gaze lowered and focused on the bustle of feet until the scent of flowers caused her to look up.

The hospital gift shop swarmed with customers. The garish metallic hues of “Get Well Soon” balloons outshone the sedate shades of pink roses and cream-colored lilies, but Sofia’s attention fixed on the T-shirts and sweaters that hung from hangers on a circular rack. *Blend in. Blend in.*

Ten minutes later and \$39.99 poorer, Sofia walked out of the gift shop wearing a Johns Hopkins Hospital sweatshirt. She had tucked her brown hair into the baseball cap she wore backward on her head. Her backpack was concealed in the large plastic bag the gift shop cashier had given her.

A bustle of activity drew her attention to the central foyer. Two men in suits strode under the marble statue, their sweeping gazes searching for something or someone.

Most likely her.

Her heart pounded, but she forced herself to adopt an impassive look. Her grip tightened on the handle of the plastic bag as she slipped into a group of young adults, apparently medical school hopefuls on a guided tour of the famous hospital.

The tour guide’s high-pitched voice chirped on about the hospital’s history. The two men in suits walked past the group after a cursory glance.

Sofia swallowed hard. Her pulse settled.

The group curved around the foyer and stopped next to the main entrance of the hospital.

A man in a suit stood by the massive double doors.

Another agent. *Damn.*

“And this concludes our tour,” the guide said to the polite applause of the group.

For a moment, the large group loitered in the foyer before breaking into smaller subsets of people who seemed to know each other.

“Lunch?” one of them asked another.

“Sure.” They both turned toward the corridor that would take them to the large cafeteria.

Sofia stepped forward. “You’re going to eat in here?”

The young man who had suggested lunch looked at her, confused as to who she was but apparently too polite to say so. “Why not?”

“Because if we’re lucky, we’ll be invited to spend the next four years here,” Sofia said with a laugh. “That’s four years of hospital food. The way I see it, there’s no reason to start on institutional food *this* early.”

The two men laughed with her. “Fair point,” one of them conceded. “So, did you see anything else to eat around here?”

She threw a quick glance over her shoulder at the main entrance. Her pulse skittered on a lie. “There’s a deli two blocks down that way. Looked like a mom and pop, not one of those big chains.”

The two men exchanged glances. “Works for me,” the other man agreed with a shrug. He looked at a few others in the larger group. “Sandwiches, soups, and salads?”

“Sure.” Several others broke off to join Sofia and the two men.

Chatting gaily, a group of eight young men and women walked past the suited man standing at the entrance of the building. Sofia was buried in the middle of the group, concealed as much by the crowd as by her lack of height. She forced herself to match the maddeningly slow pace of the others. The group walked down the street and turned the corner where the crowds grew thicker, providing safety in obscurity.

Sofia fell back gradually and slipped down a side road. She sagged against a brick wall. A sigh whispered out of her. *I’m not cut out for this*. She counted down the minutes that passed before her pulse returned to normal. It did not quite get there, but it settled down enough to alleviate the feeling of her heart pounding hard against her rib cage.

Several deep breaths steadied her enough to push away from the wall. *All good. Still alive*. Yesterday, being alive had not seemed too much to ask for. How quickly things changed.

And Kyle...

She bit down on her lower lip. She prayed the IGEC was the play-by-the-rules type Kyle made its agents out to be, but she had little hope of it. As far as she knew, government agencies were not above bending the rules when they thought circumstances required it.

Did they? Did the circumstances demand bending, even breaking, the rules?

Sofia reached into the pocket of her denim jeans and dug out the plastic-encased microchip. She stared at it—tiny and seemingly innocuous. Apparently deadly.

Whatever was on it was enough to provoke the IGEC into interfering and the Rue Marcha into killing.

Kyle’s words came back to her. *“Information is far more lethal, its range far wider. Once released, it can never be recalled.”*

Sofia grunted. Her small hand clenched into a fist around the microchip. Forbidden knowledge was overrated, and everyone forgot to mention the cost until it was too late.

How many lives am I going to endanger in my search for the truth?

She had to talk to someone who understood the price of standing up to the government and who possessed the conscience to do so anyway.

Danyael Sabre.

For a moment, she contemplated taking a cab back to Washington, D.C.—Kyle had given her enough money for the ride—but it would be too difficult to convince a cab driver to make the hour-long trip. Public transportation was the only viable option.

Besides, crowds offered safety.

She stepped out onto the main road and flagged down a cab driver. “Take me to the MARC Camden Station.”

She kept her gaze on the hospital entrance as the cab driver took off. The swarm of IGEC agents scrambling down the front steps of the hospital did not materialize, but the momentary sense of relief did not reduce her vigilance.

Hyper alert, she watched the traffic flow and wished she knew more about spotting abnormal patterns. By the time she hopped from the cab and onto the Maryland Area Regional Commuter train that would take her from Camden Station in Baltimore to Union Station in Washington, D.C., she was mentally exhausted.

How did Kyle do it, day after day, hour after hour?

It was crazy to live like that.

Passengers were sparse aboard the MARC train. Sofia made her way down the narrow aisle, coach after coach, until she found a seat at the back of the train.

She sagged into the chair, hugged her plastic bag to her chest as if the plastic were steel armor, and stared at the scenery flashing by the window.

Logic told her she was in over her head. What chance did a nursing student stand against a drug cartel and an international law enforcement agency in search of the microchip she carried?

On the other hand, the alternative was turning over the microchip to Zara Itani, who would likely return it to Proficere Labs.

The alternative sucked.

If there was an answer—a way out of her predicament—Sofia had no clue what it could possibly be.



The sun was low in the sky when Sofia arrived in Anacostia, but she counted on daylight to offer a slight advantage. Her careful study of the map on her smartphone paid off. Without referring to it—

and looking like a tourist in the process—she walked from the metro station to the free clinic.

The key, she reminded herself, was to look confident, as if she belonged. The problem was that she did not entirely fit in. Her sweatshirt was too new, and despite her attempt to affect nonchalance, she knew she tossed wary glances over her shoulder to scan the people swirling around her.

The good news was that the business-suited IGEC agents would likely stand out among a local populace that demonstrated a high level of affinity for leather and chains. The problem was the gang-attired Rue Marcha blended in perfectly.

She was no longer certain which one she feared more.

Sofia was grateful when the free clinic came in sight. It swarmed with activity. The men, women, and children who filed in and out of the clinic in an unending stream paid little attention to the visibly armed gangsters who loitered outside the clinic. Weapons were treated as little more than scenery, no different from the bars across the windows and boarded-up doors on the buildings on either side of the clinic.

If she needed a reminder that she was far out of her comfort zone, she had just received it.

Across the street, two men loitered in a black sedan. One of them looked sharply in her direction. Her pace faltered.

The car doors opened and two men, one in a brown suit, the other in gray, stepped out. They had to be government agents, unless the Rue Marcha had decided to invest their hard-earned drug money in cheap suits instead of yachts, seaside condos, and fast cars. One of the men held up a badge—not that she could make out its details from that distance. “Miss Rios, we’re with the—”

Panic kicked her feet into motion. Sofia ran, shoving past the startled gangsters who guarded the entrance of the free clinic and scrambling into the questionable safety of the building.

The waiting room was packed. Several pairs of curious eyes turned to her as a gray-haired woman in nursing scrubs approached her. “Is something—?” The nurse peered through the glass doors at the hubbub of tension building outside. Consternation flicked over the nurse’s face. The lines around her mouth tightened into a frown. Without a word, she scurried into Danyael’s office.

Moments later, Danyael emerged.

Sofia’s eyes widened.

The alpha empath’s face was drawn, and the pallor of his skin accentuated the shadows beneath his eyes. His hand trembled on his crutch, and he looked about ready to drop from exhaustion. He glanced at her, but said nothing as he headed to the door and pushed it open.

A black man in gang colors waved his assault weapon like an extension of his hand and glared at the suited men. “No can do. Yo ain’t got no warrant.”

The two suits kept their distance. One of them held up his hands in a placating gesture, though Sofia caught a glimpse of a firearm under his coat. “Look, we just want to ask Miss Rios a few questions.”

Danyael looked over his shoulder. His eyebrows raised in inquiry.

Sofia shook her head, her heart pounding. *Please don't turn me over to them.*

But then again, Danyael owed her nothing. He had taken a risk for her once. Why would he do so again when she could see fear in the dark depths of his eyes?

Danyael hesitated. A muscle twitched in his smooth cheek before he turned back to face the government agents. His smooth tenor cut through the heated conversation between brusque street dialects and crisp New York accents. “Miss Rios isn’t interested in answering questions at this time.”

The agent turned to Danyael. No question, the agent knew who the real threat was—not the heavily tattooed men clad in Kevlar and leather and toting assault weapons, but the unarmed, crippled alpha empath. “Look, we’re not some damned journalist looking—”

“I know who you are. Without a warrant, Miss Rios isn’t obliged to go with you or answer any of your questions.”

“We don’t want to make this difficult.” The man’s tone had a hint—more than a hint—of a threat.

“It isn’t, though it will be if you choose to escalate it. I’ve had a difficult day. Don’t push it.”

Behind Danyael, the gangsters eyed the agents. Their hands fidgeted on their guns. One of the men, obviously their leader, stared down the two men in suits. “Yo heard the man. Don’t push it. Get outta here.”

The agents cast Sofia exasperated glances, and then turned away, returning to their car. They did not drive away.

The gang leader looked at Danyael. “Want me ta get rid of them?”

“Don’t start a fight, please.” Danyael averted his gaze. “I’m tired.”

“Ain’t gonna be no fight if they just listen good.”

“When has the government ever listened to us?”

The gang leader laughed, a chilling sound. “Ain’t never, but mebbe we can help those two see the light, no?”

Danyael reentered the clinic. He looked at Sofia. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I think so.” She wiped her hands on the side of her denim jeans. “Uh, I know you’re busy but I need to talk to you.”

“Now, or can it wait until the clinic closes at ten?”

She studied the long line of patients in the waiting room. “It can wait.”

He nodded toward an empty chair. “Have a seat. You’ll be safe here.”

“Until someone comes in with a warrant.”

“They won’t. Your files are blocked.”

“They’re what?”

Danyael closed the distance to Sofia and lowered his voice to keep the conversation private. “Zara reached out to me an hour ago after Kyle called her to let her know that he’d been picked up by the IGEC. According to Zara, Xin blocked your files. Only someone with top-level security clearance will be able to issue a warrant, and there aren’t too many of those around—certainly none who will

want to get involved in something they know nothing about.”

“Xin’s the NSA person Kyle spoke to.”

Danyael nodded. “Xin works for Zara, or vice versa. It’s hard to know the exact dynamics between Zara and Xin at any point in time.”

“But why would Xin—?”

“I don’t know. That’s a question you’ll have to ask Xin or Zara.”



The minutes crawled. The free clinic officially closed its doors at 10 p.m., but the line of patients did not thin for another hour. Danyael was in the office with his last patient when Zara entered the building. The passing glance she gave Sofia was far from reassuring, but she walked past Sofia without a word and entered Danyael’s office without knocking on the door.

Minutes later, Danyael’s patient scurried out, a worried furrow on her brow.

Zara did have that kind of effect on people.

Sofia pushed to her feet and crept closer to the open door of Danyael’s office. Both Danyael and Zara spoke in the hushed tones of a couple in a private argument.

“I don’t want anything to do with your cases.” Danyael’s voice was a low hiss of frustration. “I don’t want to get dragged into the muck. I don’t want to get forced into a showdown with drug cartels or international agencies—”

Zara’s voice was a seductive purr. “Turn her over to me. I’ll take her off your hands.”

“You know I can’t do that. She’s in over her head.”

Sofia nodded. *Same thing I told myself.*

Danyael continued. “I’m not going to turn her over to you.”

“She had a chance to get out but she insisted on holding on to the microchip,” Zara said. “She didn’t have to. This isn’t her business.”

“Someone made it her business when he stuck the microchip in her. Considering what it might contain, it’s no surprise she’s holding on to it, especially when the alternative is turning it over to you.”

“What are you saying?”

“She doesn’t trust you, and I don’t blame her.”

Zara snorted out a humorless laugh. “She’s out of options. I suspect she’d rather take her chances with Kyle than risk an encounter with the Rue Marcha or count on the IGEC to be understanding.” Zara paused. “You could, of course, talk her out of it.”

A moment of silence passed between them.

Danyael sighed. “I don’t know what’s on the microchip, but I do know that sometimes, you need someone with a different perspective to change the way the story ends. The microchip...you don’t

care enough to ask what's on it, and I...I'm afraid."

Sofia winced at the ache she heard in Danyael's voice. She had not imagined the fear she had seen in his eyes.

He continued so quietly that she had to strain to hear. "I can't risk another run-in with the government. I can't lose what I have."

"What do you have, Danyael?" Zara's voice was almost tender.

Sofia heard the sound of cloth rustling. Had Zara stepped into Danyael's arms?

"I have enough," was Danyael's whispered acknowledgment.

"But it's so little," Zara said. "How can it be enough?"

Danyael's response was another soft sigh.

"Fine." Zara's response was brisk. "Keep running from reality, if that's what you want. Kyle's on his way back to D.C."

"What happened to him?"

"IGEC. Xin had to go down to Baltimore, wave her badge around, and remind the IGEC that they couldn't hunt down or hold American citizens without a warrant countersigned by the NSA, and the NSA wasn't in the signing mood. Still, there's something nasty on the microchip. The IGEC was evasive, but Xin picked up enough to raise her hackles."

"It's always amazed me how Xin picks up as much as she does without actually being a mutant."

"Yeah, well, the rest of us normal mortals learn to make the best use of our five senses. In Xin's case, her naturally suspicious attitude works almost as well as a sixth sense. Anyway, Xin bought Kyle and Sofia a bit of breathing room, but the IGEC won't be deterred. You can expect them to come down hard, and they won't try to be subtle. And we haven't even begun to discuss the Rue Marcha. They don't care about the rules. Fact is, Sofia doesn't have much time to figure out the contents of the microchip."

"Twenty-four hours?"

"Less. Much less. I have to go. I'll let you explain the hard facts to her."

Sofia pulled away from the door but could not make it back to her seat before Zara strode out of Danyael's office.

The assassin's only reaction was a smile as she walked past Sofia. The heels of her boots snapped on the linoleum tiles. She let herself out of the clinic and locked the front door behind her.

Sofia blew out her breath. Zara had style all right, along the same lines as the Snow Queen in fairy tales. How and why Danyael put up with her was mind-boggling.

From behind Sofia, Danyael asked quietly, "How much of that conversation did you overhear?"

She spun around and tried not to blush. "Pretty much all of it."

"Then you know that you don't have much time."

"Can I show you what I found?"

Danyael hesitated.

“Please. Maybe you can make sense of it. Even if you can’t, maybe you can tell me where to go next, who I can talk to.”

He looked away.

Sofia bit down on her lower lip and told herself not to plead. Danyael had his reasons not to get involved, but if he—the one person who seemed to understand her best—could not help her, then who would?

Certainly not Zara. And Kyle was still trying to untangle himself from the mess she had created by going to Johns Hopkins Hospital and searching the genomic databases.

How many more people am I going to drag into this madness? How many more will get hurt?

Danyael’s jaw clenched. He held out his hand. “Show me what you have.”

The smile of relief that spread across her face betrayed no sign of the conflict within. Sofia reached into her backpack and pulled out the stacks of paper she had spent the past five hours poring over to no avail. She spread the printouts over his desk and jabbed her finger at several salient points. “These three sections of DNA map to cardiac function, but I’m not sure what it’s supposed to tell us about the information on the microchip.”

Danyael traced a finger over the printed tangle of genetic code. “Just looking at this, I can’t tell you what the DNA sections do. You’ll need to dig deeper and find out how these particular sections differ from examples of ‘typical’ sections of DNA in the general population.”

“You think these sections are mutated?”

“It’s a possibility. In fact, you’ll need to consider the source of the code and the intended purchaser. Proficere Labs isn’t researching the cure for heart disease, I’m certain of that much, and the Rue Marcha is one of the most ruthless South American drug cartels. Why would the Rue Marcha be interested in understanding the genetic basis of cardiac function?”

Sofia pressed her lips together. “Could they be creating drugs that target specific genotypes?”

Danyael inhaled sharply. “Maybe. Possibly. I don’t know.”

His answer was vague, but she heard the whisper of fear in his voice. If their speculation was right, she was in far more trouble than she had counted upon. Was she ready to live in a world of malevolent drugs targeted to specific segments of the population based on their genetic heritage?

Like panicked sparrows, the questions fluttered through her mind. Which segments were targeted, and what would the drugs do to them?

What could she do? She was just one person. If a trained assassin did not want to get involved—if an alpha empath did not dare get involved—who was she to think that *she* could fix the problem?

Returning the microchip to Zara and consequently Proficere, who would likely turn it over to the Rue Marcha, was out of question.

She could give it to the IGEC, but Kyle was already in trouble with the IGEC. Until she knew what was on the microchip, she did not want to get him into more trouble.

Danyael’s words replayed over the recurring image of her unborn sister, her shriveled skin waxy

and gray. *Sometimes, you need someone with a different perspective to change the way the story ends.*

Zara won't, and Danyael can't. And I have Kyle to keep me alive.

Sofia stared down at the printouts. What secrets did they conceal? She steeled herself. “Where would I be able to find that information?”

Danyael looked troubled. “Your best bet? Back at Proficere Labs.”

Chapter 10

It was just a little before midnight when Sofia and Danyael walked out of the free clinic. She threw a nervous glance over her shoulder as he locked the clinic door. The two IGEC agents who had attempted to accost her earlier lingered in their car across the street from Danyael's clinic. Their baleful glares locked on her, but they made no move to get out of their car.

"Are the IGEC agents going to create any trouble for you?" Sofia asked.

"Not unless they want to cross the Mutant Affairs Council. It's never a good idea to annoy an organization filled with short-tempered alpha mutants."

"But aren't they going to follow us?" she asked.

"They don't need to. They know where I live," Danyael said. He nudged his head down the street. "Just two blocks that way. It's almost faster to walk than drive, even on a bum leg."

Sofia glanced at his left leg. "What happened?"

Danyael shifted his weight on his single crutch. "Long story." His tone did not invite additional discussion.

Sofia, however, was not any more intimidated by Danyael than she had been by Kyle. Besides, it was hard to work up an honest fear of someone who sagged so wearily against his crutch. "Aren't you getting it fixed?"

"When I've saved up for it."

Sofia's brow furrowed. It made no sense. Danyael was an alpha empath, rare even among the high-powered alpha mutants who dominated the Genetic Revolution. He was treasured, even priceless, was he not?

So why was he driving himself to exhaustion working a dead-end job in a dangerous neighborhood? Why was his obviously incapacitating injury left untreated?

Would she ever understand the murky politics that governed the treatment of alpha mutants like Danyael?

Seeking answers, she stared at his face, as perfect and expressionless as a marble statue. No, not quite perfect. It was marred by that old scar. His dark eyes, glazed with weariness, revealed nothing.

She would receive no answers from Danyael.

Perhaps she ought to be grateful that her mutant powers were so miniscule as to escape the notice

of the Mutant Affairs Council. She was too insignificant to be a threat, too pathetic to bother with.

Too weak to save the ones she loved.

Her teeth clenched against the familiar ache, the sharp pang of guilt that would never go away.

Danyael glanced sharply at her but said nothing. He had sensed her feelings, no doubt, but politeness kept him from inquiring further.

His home was two blocks away from the clinic, a small one-bedroom on the fifth floor of a walk-up apartment complex. The living area was cheaply furnished with Salvation Army castoffs. It should have been dismal, even depressing, but something about the place infused her with peace. The only reason her dazzled senses could identify was that it was Danyael's home, the only place where he felt truly safe.

Even Danyael seemed to relax as he shrugged out of his black leather jacket. "Would you like something to eat?" he asked, limping into the kitchenette.

Her stomach rumbled at her, reminding her that she had skipped both lunch and dinner. "Sure, anything will do. Do you need any help?"

He shook his head and waved her over to the two-person dining table tucked into a corner of the living room. Instead of sitting, however, she wandered around the room, which seemed dreadfully impersonal except for the two plastic-framed photographs on the kitchen counter—one of a slightly younger though no less cherubic Laura Itani, and another of her mother, Zara. The assassin's face was angled away from the camera, but her gaze was direct and held a hint of challenge, as if daring the photographer to close the distance. Her smile beckoned, offering the promise of something more.

Sofia looked up at Danyael as he moved with quiet efficiency around the small kitchenette. "Did you take this photograph of Zara?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It's a beautiful picture."

He shrugged.

"You love her, don't you?" Sofia blurted out the words before she could check herself. She clapped her hand over her mouth and shook her head. "I'm sorry." She dropped her hand, her cheeks flushed. "It was rude."

"You don't understand why."

Sofia searched for the right words before realizing, with regret, that there were none. "No, I don't," she confessed. Zara Itani was practically the dictionary definition of "she-demon." She was cold and ruthless—the polar opposite of Danyael's innate compassion and empathy.

He looked up and smiled. The curve of his lips seemed sad. "Most days I don't understand it either."

"But then—"

"Love doesn't have to make sense. The people we love don't have to be like us or live up to our internal expectations to make us want more from the relationship."

She frowned. “But you’re an alpha empath. Can’t you just...you know...?” She wriggled her fingers at him. “Use your empathic powers to change her feelings?”

Danyael shrugged again. “What I feel for Zara is irrelevant if what she feels for me isn’t real.”

Sofia had not considered it that way before. “Does she know how you feel about her?”

“I don’t know what Zara feels about anything anymore.”

“But you’re an empath. You can sense my emotions. You know what I’m feeling.”

“That’s right, unless I erect a psychic wall between us, as I did with Zara.”

“But why?”

“It seemed easier that way.”

Sofia’s eyebrows drew together. “Easier?”

“Easier than working through her emotional turmoil every time I see her.” His tone turned reflective.

For a moment, Sofia caught the sharp glitter of pain in his eyes. She swallowed hard against the matching ache in her chest. She had pushed him too far. “Here, let me help you with that.” She took the plate of pasta from his hands, set it on the table, and returned for the second plate.

The sauce for the pasta had come out of a bottle, but the meal was hot and filling. Danyael, she noted, ate slowly. Frequently, he paused, closed his eyes, and fisted his hand over his mouth, as if fighting indigestion or nausea.

She did not ask.

Truth be told, she was not sure she wanted to know.

She was a mutant, but she was not an alpha. All her life, her parents had taught her to stay out of the political and social nightmare that ensnared the alpha mutants. It wasn’t worth the attention and publicity of using her mutant powers in public. Power had a price, but mercifully, it was a price she did not need to pay.

She had enough issues on her hands. Her thoughts trailed back to the one topic that had nagged at her for the past several hours. “Do you think Kyle will be all right?”

Danyael nodded. “Zara hires capable people. You’ll be safe with him.”

Sofia’s lips parted in a half-smile. She had not voiced the real question bothering her, but she was grateful Danyael answered it anyway.

The alpha empath continued. “I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”



The drive from Baltimore to Washington, D.C., had taken hours, and had nothing to do with rush hour traffic. Kyle had employed every trick he knew and some he made up on the spot to shake the disgruntled IGEC agents on his tail.

Hell, disgruntled was too mild a term.

Lydia had been apoplectic when Xin showed up at the Johns Hopkins Hospital security office. Like Zara, but with far more subtlety, Xin left chaos in her wake.

Kyle had met Xin several times, but had never seen her exercise her talents beyond an information-conduit role. It was apparently a rare treat to see Xin throw her real weight around.

Zara would have broken him out and left bleeding bodies or a burning building in her wake. Most likely both. She had trouble expressing herself without a gun or a dagger in her hand.

Xin, a slim Chinese woman, did not even raise her voice. She identified herself, flashed her NSA credentials, and threw the rule book at Lydia.

Lydia sputtered objections.

Xin crushed it with legalese.

Lydia threatened to call the IGEC director.

Xin handed her a phone.

Kyle sat back, stifled a chuckle, and enjoyed the elaborate play.

After a terse, largely one-sided conversation that included long bouts of silence from Lydia, she had hung up the phone, her face red. The look she shot Kyle was not a pleasant one. *No big deal*. Kyle dismissed the implied threat with a shrug of his shoulders. Their relationship had hit rock bottom several months prior and had not improved since. He was not going to get tied up in knots over another new grudge she bore him.

He had pushed to his feet and followed Xin from the security office, Lydia's glare burning into his back.

"I can't vouch for how long they'll behave themselves," Xin said as Kyle escorted her back to her car. "I can keep them from arresting you, but I can't keep them from following you. You should call Zara; she's expecting an update."

His conversation with Zara had been quick, but provided all the details he needed. The trip back to Washington, D.C., however, had taken the better part of the evening.

He had worried about Sofia the entire way.

Sure, Danyael was an alpha empath. In theory, he could protect Sofia, but Kyle would not count on it. Danyael was a mutant, and mutants were self-serving bastards, using their psychic powers for their own gain and advancing themselves at the expense of normal humans.

With a grunt, Kyle shoved away the memory of Danyael extracting the microchip from Sofia's arm and healing the open wound.

Danyael might have done one good thing, but he was no different from the other mutants.

They could not be trusted.

As Zara had promised in her phone call, Kyle found Sofia waiting for him in Danyael's apartment. His knock on the door was promptly answered. Kyle nodded at the alpha empath who opened the door and walked into the apartment.

With a smile, Sofia rose from her seat at the dining table and walked into his arms. "Are you all

right?”

Her frame was small; her weight was slight, but comforting. The cold nip of fear fell away. He nodded. “Hell of a day.”

Behind him, Danyael chuckled. “Fortunately, it’s after midnight, so you can consider it a new day and get a fresh start.”

“We should go,” Kyle said. Zara had been explicit that Danyael needed his rest and was to be relieved of his babysitting duties as quickly as possible. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Danyael smiled as he followed them to the door. “Be safe.”

Kyle rolled his shoulders and released a relieved sigh when Danyael closed the door. One thing had come through loud and clear in his conversation with Zara. She did not like anyone messing with Danyael.

Kyle and Sofia walked down the stairs together, but he tugged her away from the front door of the apartment complex. “My car’s around the back.”

“Did someone follow you?” Sofia asked, alarm spiking her voice.

“Four detours and three car changes later, I should hope not. But the IGEC is camping outside the front door of Danyael’s apartment. They know not to mess with him, but all bets are off if you walk out of the apartment without him.”

Sofia sighed. “I don’t think I knew what I was signing up for when I decided to hold on to the microchip.”

“Never too late to turn it over to Zara.”

“I don’t think so. I’ve thought it over. We need to talk about what to do next.”

“Sure, we can do it over food.”

“Danyael fed me.”

“Well, nobody fed me. Is there food back at the house?”

“Oh, the food you berated me for buying this morning? Yes, there is food back at the house. Can we go back there, though? Won’t they be watching the place?”

“Not unless they follow us there. Zara got Xin to work some of her hacker magic. As far as anyone knows, your family has never owned that town house. No one can link you back to that property unless they see us walk into it.”

“Do all your friends possess such dubious skills?”

He thought about it for a moment. “Well, yeah.”

“Does that make me the only normal friend you have?”

Kyle grinned. *Friend*. Yeah, he liked the sound of that. Friendship was great progress considering their less-than-auspicious first meeting twenty-four hours prior. He nodded. “Pretty much, unless you know Krav Maga.”

“What’s that?”

“Tactical martial system used by the Israeli Defense Forces.”

Sofia interlaced her fingers behind her back and offered Kyle her most innocent smile. “Uh, no, but I can hit people really hard over the head with an umbrella.”

“That works in a pinch. You have to start somewhere. I can teach you.” He peered out through a grimy shade that covered the glass on the back door of Danyael’s apartment building. Several cars were parked under the pale glow of streetlamps. They were still empty. Nothing had changed in the five minutes it took to pick Sofia up from Danyael’s apartment. *All clear*. He unlocked the door and stepped out. His hand did not stray from the Glock in its holster.

Sofia inched out the door and followed him down the empty street. “This is your new car?” she asked, looking with skeptical distaste at the nondescript white Ford.

“It’s a loaner from Three Fates. The Ford’s just a shell. It’s nicely retrofitted underneath with an engine that can make 750 hp at 8,000 rpm.”

Sofia did not look impressed as she buckled herself into the seat. “What’s that in English?”

“It’s more powerful than a Lamborghini.”

“Hmm, sounds cool.” She looked thoughtful. “Assuming the Ford frame doesn’t fall apart when your Lamborghini engine hits its full potential.”

He cast her a startled glance. It was a surprising insight from someone who probably could not explain the difference between horsepower and revolutions per minute. Sofia understood something fundamental about cars. It was never just about how powerful the engine was; in reality, a car’s maneuverability and speed came down to the coherence and unity of the design, including its structural support—the frame.

Perfection, in cars as in life, was found in the whole, not in its parts.

He pulled away from the curb. “So, you say you’ve thought about the situation?”

She nodded. “I have, but can we not talk about it until you’ve had a bite? I’ve done nothing but think about it for the past twenty-four hours, and I want to relax for a moment.” Sofia sagged into the ripped leather upholstery and closed her eyes.

She was fast asleep by the time he pulled up at the town house.

Kyle suppressed a chuckle as he carried her indoors and up the stairs to her bedroom. She sighed as he laid her down on the mattress. Her eyelashes fluttered, and her eyes opened into narrow slits. “Kyle?”

“Yeah?”

Her voice was a sleepy mumble. “Stay with me?”

Kyle grunted. How could he refuse an offer from a soft, willing female, especially one who turned him on as much as Sofia did? He shrugged off his leather jacket and stretched out on the bed beside her.

He wrapped an arm around her, and she wriggled deeper into his embrace. She sighed, a contented sound that did little to counteract the arousal her wriggle had triggered. He fought to keep his grip relaxed. Judging from her slow and steady breaths, she had fallen back asleep.

Damn, it was going to be a long night.



Dawn was a crack of light through slits in the curtains. Sofia peered, eyes half closed, at the familiar pictures on the wall, of seascapes enclosed in wooden frames.

Home. She was home.

She yawned and stretched.

She did not even manage to sit up. A heavy arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her back, snuggling her in the warmth of another body.

His possessive motion should have irked her, but at that moment, it made her feel safe. A smile escaped her. “Kyle?”

His sleepy grunt sounded distinctly unfriendly.

“It’s morning.” She infused her tone with unnatural cheeriness to get a reaction out of him.

“Too early. G’back to sleep.”

Sofia twisted around to lie on her back so that she could look at his face. A faint dusting of whiskers covered his cheeks and jaw. He looked at peace, his face relaxed in slumber.

For several minutes, she lay in his arms, content to linger in the quiet of the early morning. She could not recall when she had slept so well in this particular house, unburdened by nightmares of her parents’ murders less than twenty feet away.

How much of her sense of security emanated from the man who had held her through the night—a man she had known for little more than twenty-four hours? But what a twenty-four hours it had been, and through it all, Kyle had protected her.

How odd that she would feel so safe in the arms of a professed mercenary.

She reached out, her fingertips not quite brushing against his cheek.

A corner of his mouth quirked up as if he had sensed the near contact. “Unless you want to go all the way, you should stop now.”

“Oh?” Apparently, he was not as asleep as she had imagined. A mischievous urge seized her. “You mean I shouldn’t do this?” She wriggled her denim-covered hip in a slow, circular motion against his groin.

He inhaled sharply. His grip tightened. “You’re running out of time, babe.”

“Time to do what?” She continued her coy grind.

“Change your mind. Hell.” His eyes flashed open. He rolled over and pinned her to the bed in a single swift motion. “You’re out of time.” His grin was wicked, but his eyes were questioning. “Last chance to say no.”

He had cared enough to ask. Relief and a giddy snap of joy coiled within her. She smiled at him. “Yes.”

Before she could get another word out, his mouth was on hers. His kiss was heated, and she returned it with equal fervor. With impatient fingers, she tugged his shirt out of his denim jeans and fumbled her way through the buttons before pushing the thick cotton material off his shoulders. His muscular torso was lightly covered with dark hair and deeply tanned, except for the white pucker of scars, including a six-inch scar on the left side of his chest.

She traced the wound. If it were as deep as it was long, it would have punctured his lung. How had he survived?

Sofia ran her hand along his arms. The large circular pockmarks on his arm, she was certain, did not come from picking at childhood scabs. "Are these what I think they are?"

"Huh?" Kyle looked down. "This came from a twenty-two, and that one was a nine millimeter. And, by the way, you're really killing the mood."

She laughed at his grumpy tone. "It's just that you're nothing like any other man I've ever been with."

Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. "Good. Keep thinking that."

For a moment, she did wonder how he undressed her so quickly, but the thought vanished when he lowered his mouth to her breast. Her head fell back against the pillow, and her vision blurred with pleasure. A tremulous sigh whispered from her lips.

He was relentless in his exploration of her body. Awash in sensation, she scrambled for fleeting touches of his body, but more often than not, she was left gripping the sheets as another wave of pleasure built, one upon another, before crashing down on her.

Her entire body shuddered. His lips claimed hers, swallowing her gasp of sexual release.

His weight against her body shifted. The arousal that pressed against her thigh assured her he was not done. Sofia ran her hand against his sweat-slicked back before reaching down to cup his buttocks.

His gaze flashed to hers. Dark eyes, glazed with desire and need, met her own.

She parted her legs in invitation.

He eased out of his jeans, positioned himself over her, and slid slowly into the slick warmth of her body. Sofia's eyelashes fluttered with the burst of sensations as she arched and wriggled to accommodate him.

"Don't." He gritted his teeth. His arm muscles were taut with the burden of supporting his weight. "Not yet."

She laughed, a low, throaty sound. To think she had that kind of power over him. It was enough to make her toes curl.

When Sofia and Kyle began moving, it was in harmony, two bodies united in a race toward mutual ecstasy. She grasped his shoulders, glistening with sweat, and arched her back in time to his driving rhythm. The pleasure climbed until she did not think she could take anymore, and then peaked in a wail of release. Her body clenched around him.

Kyle groaned, a guttural sound that rang with triumph. He shuddered, muscles trembling, as he

found his release.

He collapsed next to her and immediately drew her close into a cuddle that eased the moment from passion into intimacy.

The silence that followed was comfortable, even easy. Sofia smiled into the arm that cradled her neck. The cuddle was almost better than sex. She sighed, a contented sound. “That was good. It’s been awhile.”

“Oh?” Kyle pushed up on one elbow. “You did seem a bit out of shape.”

Her mouth dropped open. “What?”

He nodded sagely. “Practice. You need more of it. Good thing I’m willing to help out.” With a finger, he traced the curve of her breast.

Her lips quirked up in the hint of a smile. “You’re going to be my coach?”

“Think of me as a training partner. I’ve heard that varying the workout locations will keep the practice from becoming too routine.”

“Routine is the least of our problems right now.”

“Never hurts to plan ahead. So, how about we get our next round of practice in the shower?”

She glanced, askance, at the bathroom. “It’s barely big enough for just you.”

“Got to get real close, then. Think about it. You’ll get your morning acrobatics workout while showering. How’s that for efficient?”

Sofia rolled out of the bed. Hands on her hips, she glowered at him. “If someone ends up with a sprained back, you’re paying for the masseur.”

He laughed. “I’m great at massages, too. Have I ever mentioned that?”

“I’ll be sure to hold you to it.”

Their shared shower was a wet, slippery, and crowded affair. The shower stall was unforgivingly small, but it was just as well that she was light and Kyle was strong. It worked out—almost—even if he did accidentally bump her head into the shower rod.

The shower’s hot water turned lukewarm and then cold before Sofia and Kyle both emerged, flushed, smiling, and not in the least bit chilled. He grabbed a towel off the rack and wrapped it around her shoulders. “Good workout,” he said.

Sofia tried to conceal a smile. “Not too bad.” She tossed him another towel. “I’ll get breakfast started. How do you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

She returned to her bedroom and stared at the clothes carelessly tossed on the floor. Fortunately, she had a change of clothes in her backpack, but she would have to do laundry or go shopping if she wanted clean underwear tomorrow. She gathered up her dirty clothes and Kyle’s before heading down to the laundry room to run a load.

The eggs were done and the bacon was sizzling in the frying pan when she heard Kyle’s footstep on the stairs. She looked up. He was staring down at his smartphone, a hint of a scowl on his lips.

Alarm pierced her, shattering the warm and cozy feelings that had infused her morning. “Something wrong?”

“No messages from Zara. Either nothing’s wrong or everything is.”

“There’s plenty wrong, as it is.” She set two plates heaped with bacon, scrambled eggs, and hash browns on the dining table, but she had lost her appetite. She stared with envy at Kyle as he attacked his breakfast with undiminished appetite.

He glanced up at her. “Technically, this meal is yesterday’s lunch.”

That was right. She had thwarted his plans for a late dinner when she asked him to stay with her last night. She slid her plate across the table to him. “Here, have mine.”

He did not need much convincing.

She held her tongue. He did not need to be bothered while he was eating. Meanwhile, the seed of worry buried deep in her sprouted.

He looked up at her. In between mouthfuls of scrambled egg, he asked, “What’s bothering you?”

“I have to go to Proficere Labs.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You’re not serious. That’s the last place I’d take you.”

Perhaps she should have couched her request more subtly and worked her way up, but the worry, firmly lodged in the pit of her stomach, had forced her to blurt out the thought that had nagged at her since her conversation with Danyael. “Look, that’s the only place that has the kind of information we need for evidence.”

He frowned. “Evidence for what?”

“Danyael says we need to figure out what’s *different* about the gene sequence, not what’s *similar*. Proficere Labs is almost certain to have that information.”

He shook his head. “It’s never a good idea to take a stolen object back to the owner’s house unless you intend to return it. It’s an especially bad idea to break into the owner’s house after the original theft to find appraisal or insurance documents to tell you what something is worth.”

She rolled her eyes. “This isn’t a jewelry heist. The information is at Proficere Labs. In fact, that’s probably the only place in the world where we can find what we’re looking for.”

“Not necessarily.” Kyle’s eyes gleamed. “Neither you or I are particularly good at hacking a computer, so just gaining access to Proficere Labs won’t do any good unless we can crack the network security as well. Who else do you think would know what the genetic sequences are intended to do?”

“The professor who shot me up with the microchip, of course, but he’s dead.”

“His partner’s not.”

“But wasn’t the other professor arrested by the IGEC?”

Kyle nodded. “How about we go talk to him instead?”

Sofia’s eyebrows drew together. “Wait, you won’t help me get into Proficere Labs, but you’ll break into the IGEC building instead? Are you crazy?”

“Hey, you’re the one who suggested breaking into a maximum-security research lab.”

“Which sounds easier than breaking into a maximum-security international governance agency.”

Kyle shrugged. “Not a whole lot of difference in practice, except that the lab expects a break-in and is designed to counteract it, but not so with the governance agency. People are trying to break out, not break in.”

“Are you trying to make it sound easier than it is?”

“Nothing easy about it,” he confessed. “But it’s a damn sight better than breaking into Proficere. It’ll just take some careful thought, and a hell of a lot of luck.”

Chapter 11

Kyle knew he had understated the risks slightly—all right, a lot—but he excelled at keeping the clients calm while making his work look easy. A call in to Xin provided Kyle and Sofia with government-issued fake IDs. The rest was up to them.

A one-hour shopping trip later and dressed in well-tailored business suits, Kyle and Sofia marched up to the security desk at the International Genetics and Ethics Council building on Constitution Avenue. Sofia's appearance was greatly altered. Her hair had been pulled back into a no-nonsense bun, and she wore a pair of thin-framed glasses. Her makeup was light, the clean look typically wielded by professional women. Everything considered, she looked like an attorney, albeit one with a stick up her ass.

On his part, Kyle had shaved.

An imposing security desk dominated the foyer of the IGEC building. Less intimidating were the two guards behind it, who were idly leafing through magazines. Glass doors on either side of the desk blocked off the elevator lobby from the foyer.

Kyle rested his arm on the desk. "I'm Jack Trader, and this is Noreen Calis. We're attorneys from the law firm of Trader and Markum, representing Proficere Labs. We're here to see Dr. Bert Reynard."

"IDs please." The security guard's tone was perfunctory as he held out his hand for their government IDs. He slid Kyle and Sofia's fake driver licenses through a device to verify their authenticity with the Washington, D.C., Department of Motor Vehicles and checked his monitor. "You have an appointment with Dr. Reynard in fifteen minutes. You're a little early, but you can go on up." He pushed their driver licenses and two badges across the desk to them. "Please keep these on you at all times. Elevator four will take you to the eleventh floor."

The glass door buzzed as the security guard released the lock. He stood, opened the door, and escorted Kyle and Sofia to the waiting elevator. It had no buttons, but the message on the touchscreen panel installed beside the door confirmed that it was headed to the eleventh floor—no side trips permitted.

The security guard stepped away. The elevator slid into motion.

Kyle glanced at Sofia. Her face was pale but her composure was steady, even expressionless. She

had taken heed of his warning—no questions or displays of unease at any time. The entire building was monitored, and they had to play their roles without flaw. The only time they would not be observed was when they were in the interview room with Bert Reynard. Attorney-client privileges extended even to Americans held by the IGEC.

Another security desk greeted them upon exit from the elevator. The guards manning the desk were much more alert than the ones in the lobby. They scrutinized Kyle and Sofia's faces, double-checked and triple-checked their IDs and security clearances. Kyle drummed his fingers on the security desk. The studied and typical impatience of a lawyer only drew an irritated look from the guard.

Sofia's clear voice cut through the tension. "Do you need to do a body cavity search too?" The mild question, offered politely, came across more as a joke than sarcasm.

A grin flashed across the guard's face. "No, ma'am." He handed their driver licenses back to them. "Sorry for the delay. Just doing my job."

Kyle wished he could touch Sofia, give her hand a light squeeze to show how proud he was of her presence-of-mind and seemingly intuitive ability to defuse a tense situation.

The guard escorted them down a corridor lined by doors, each marked with a number, and stopped in front of room seven. "You can use this interview room. I'll bring Dr. Reynard over in a few minutes."

Kyle watched Sofia navigate gracefully around the table to claim one of the four chairs at the far end of the room, just as he had instructed her. He sat in the chair closest to the door, setting himself between Sofia and anyone who might enter the room.

The next person who entered the room, though, was hardly imposing or threatening. Dr. Bert Reynard, his wrists and ankles cuffed, was shoved into the room. His thin gray hair was in disarray and his gaunt face unshaven. He looked exhausted, but his eyes flashed wide with recognition.

The door closed on them before Bert could blurt out anything to blow their cover.

Bert's nervous gaze darted around the room. "Are we being observed?"

Kyle shook his head. "Attorney-client privilege."

"Are you here to get me out?"

"Not unless you want to live the rest of your life on the run. You're better off playing by the rules of the system." Kyle pushed out an empty chair. "Sit."

Bert looked across the room at Sofia. "Who is she?"

Apparently, Bert did not recognize Sofia as the waitress at Zanzi-Bar. Good. The longer Sofia stayed anonymous, the better. Kyle shrugged. "She's one of my associates, here to help my cover. What happened after the IGEC took you into custody?"

"Where is the cooler?"

"Safe."

"And the contents? The test tubes? The microchip?"

"Both safe."

“Thank God.” Bert sagged into his chair. “You can’t let the IGEC get its hands on them, or they’ll shut down Proficere.”

Sofia leaned forward. “What’s on the microchip?”

Bert frowned, his eyebrows drawing together.

“Answer the question,” Kyle ordered. “Your protected status as a Three Fates client isn’t all that stable right now. Zara Itani is furious about the lack of disclosure that led to the fiasco at the nightclub. If she cuts you off as a client, the cooler goes straight to the IGEC.”

“You can’t! The repercussions—not just for Proficere—but for the wider research community... The IGEC will use it as ammunition to trample over intellectual freedom. They’ve already set so many limits on what can or can’t be researched. God, they’ll drive us back into the seventeenth century, if they could.”

Sofia spoke up. “Why was Proficere researching differences in cardiac function?”

Bert smiled thinly. “What do you know about cardiac function? I’m not going to explain my work to a common mercenary.”

“Alvin Smith was the real brains behind the research, wasn’t he?” Sofia asked. “He was nominated for a Nobel Prize, but your name wasn’t nominated alongside his.”

Bert’s face reddened. He shot to his feet and slammed both fists down on the table. “I did the work! Alvin was the big name, but I did all the research. The innovation, all the cutting-edge ideas were mine, but all I got was my name on the research paper, just ahead of the graduate student who washed the test tubes. Alvin stole all the fame, the glory that should have been mine!”

“What glory was that, Dr. Reynard?” Sofia continued in that quiet voice.

“I identified racial variances in cardiac function. You’d be surprised how much some people are willing to pay for that information and for samples of chemical agents that specifically target those variances.”

“You created chemical agents that can distinguish its victims by race?”

“By their genes,” Bert corrected. “And genes are more or less prevalent in certain racial groups, so for all intents and purposes, yes, I’ve created racially targeted chemical agents.”

Kyle’s hands curled into fists. “What exactly did you try to sell to the Rue Marcha? What was on the microchip?”

Bert raised his chin. “The genetic analysis on the cardiac function of South Americans.”

“And what’s in the test tube?” Kyle asked.

“Cardorin, a chemical agent I designed to exploit those racial variances.”

“What does Cardorin do?”

“It disrupts cardiac function, causes arrhythmia, and eventually cardiac arrest.”

Kyle’s brow furrowed. “All that, just from drinking the stuff in the test tube?”

The scientist shook his head. “Cardorin is stable and more or less harmless as a liquid sealed in a vacuum test tube, but when exposed to air, it becomes a gas—colorless, odorless.”

“The perfect chemical weapon,” Sofia murmured. She looked at Kyle, her brown eyes brimming with fear. She did not move, but Kyle was certain that only strength of will held her together. “What would the Rue Marcha do with that information?” she asked.

“The same thing they’ve always done,” Kyle snapped out a reply. “Control people and governments through the threat of terror.”

Sofia shook her head. “But it’s their people. They’re the same race. The same chemical agents will affect them too, and since it disperses through the air, there’s no way to contain it.”

Bert snorted. He leaned back and folded his hands across his chest. His smile was smug. “The antidote is more than just an antidote. It is also preventative—”

“There’s an antidote?” Kyle asked.

“Of course. What idiot creates a chemical weapon without an antidote?”

“What kind of idiot creates a chemical weapon in the first place?” Kyle demanded. “You know the Chemical Weapons Convention banned production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons.”

“And yet large stockpiles exist in spite of the Chemical Weapons Convention,” Bert pointed out. “We’re surrounded by hypocrites. Like the IGEC, government organizations and international regulatory groups strive to limit what *you* can do because it allows *them* to do what they will with greater impunity.”

Sofia’s eyes narrowed. “People like you are exactly why society needs limits. You’re a hazard to yourself.”

“Where is the antidote?” Kyle asked before Bert could respond to Sofia’s scathing observation.

“Back at Proficere.”

“Wasn’t it part of the price you negotiated with the Rue Marcha?”

“Yes, it was, but Alvin had doubts about what we were doing. The Rue Marcha wanted our research, all of it. They agreed to run field tests on both the chemical agent and the antidote, and deliver the results and data back to us, but Alvin couldn’t stomach the possibility that the Rue Marcha might let people die as part of the experiment. He wanted to hold on to the antidote until he received reassurance on their research protocols.”

Could Bert Reynard possibly be *that* clueless? Kyle wanted to hit the man. “What the hell do you mean by *protocols*? The Rue Marcha is a drug cartel, not a research laboratory.”

“Research happens in the *field*. Theories and hypotheses are useless without actual data, and the Rue Marcha would have given us what we really needed. Proof. Evidence.”

Sofia’s mouth dropped open. “At what cost?”

“Cost?” Bert scoffed. “Don’t talk to me about cost. *I* understand cost. There’s a cost to *everything*, but society has been shying away from paying the full cost of scientific advancement for a long time.”

Kyle shook his head and waved Sofia back. He could not let Bert get distracted, not when he needed more information out of the man. “What did you tell the IGEC?”

“Nothing. They think Alvin was the one in charge, and since he’s dead—” He shrugged. Clearly, he was not all that broken up over his research partner’s death. “As long as they don’t find the microchip or the test tubes, they have nothing on me. Our research files back at Proficere are heavily encoded, and without sufficient evidence, no judge is going to issue a subpoena.”

“You’re underestimating human paranoia over genetic research,” Sofia warned. “Your only chance is to come clean before the IGEC gets to the files.”

“Come clean?” Bert’s eyebrows shot so high they vanished into his hairline. “I’ve done nothing wrong. I didn’t *create* genetic variances. I only found them.”

“You created ways to exploit them.” Sofia pushed to her feet and folded her arms across her chest. “I think we’re done here.”

Kyle nodded. He stood, too.

“Wait!” Bert protested. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to make sure the Rue Marcha never gets its hands on your research,” Sofia said.

“You’re not going to turn the work over to the IGEC, are you?” Bert asked, alarmed. He rose from his seat. “If you do, I’ll sue Three Fates for breach of contract.”

Kyle snorted. “Considering how many laws Zara breaks on a normal day, somehow I don’t think that threat is going to faze her much, if at all. I’d think hard about ‘fessing up to the IGEC. They’re persistent little buggers—take it from me—I spent the better part of eight hours yesterday trying to shake them off my tail.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” Bert repeated.

“Only because lawmakers and regulators never imagined anyone would be crazy enough to do what you did. Come on, Sofia.” He stepped aside and gestured to Sofia to precede him out the door. “We’re done here.”

Kyle and Sofia left the interview room. They said nothing to each other on their way down to the lobby, but he could see her distress and unease from the way she nibbled delicately on her lower lip. It was a bad habit, he thought absently. Odd how well he knew her after two days.

Proximity and stress had a tendency to do that to a person. Attraction, too.

A muscle in his smooth cheek twitched. *Bad move, Norwood.* Attraction had a way of screwing with a man’s good sense.

The elevator door opened on the first floor, and people streamed out. He followed them.

A startled woman’s voice called out. “Kyle?”

Lydia. Damn, busted.

He had run into the one person in IGEC who would recognize him regardless of what he wore or the name on his identification.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sofia walk calmly toward the entrance. In her business suit, she blended into the crowd of IGEC employees. She did not look like a graduate student, and she most certainly did not look like a nightclub waitress.

Instead of leaving the building, however, she sat in one of the chairs arrayed in the lobby. Sofia opened her tablet and idly flipped through its electronic pages with the bored air of a woman waiting for a companion. *When I get my hands on her—*

Lydia's sharp voice drew him back to his predicament. "Why are you here, Kyle?"

"You insisted I was in trouble with the IGEC, so I thought I'd come by and see just how much trouble I could get into. You know, just to help you make your case."

She grabbed his arm, swung him around, and pushed him face-first against the wall in the elevator lobby. Handcuffs snapped close around his wrists. "I'll bury you so deep in the vaults of the IGEC, Zara and your damned NSA friends won't be able to find you." She pulled him away from the wall and shoved him toward the guard desk. "You didn't come alone, did you? You brought her."

Shit. The guard would be able to identify Sofia and—

Kyle had both Lydia and Sofia in his line of sight when *it* happened. There was no denying what he saw, no passing it off as serendipity or chance. Sofia's hand moved against her tablet in a gesture that could not possibly have been related to manipulating the electronic device. In that instant, the strap of Lydia's handbag tugged sharply away from her shoulder, as if yanked by an invisible, malicious hand—a hand that mirrored Sofia's movements. The contents of Lydia's handbag scattered on the ground, among them, her Glock.

Lydia gasped and lunged for it, but it skittered away from her, as if tugged along on an invisible leash, a lure for an impatient puppy.

The handcuffs around Kyle's wrists clicked and fell away.

Across the lobby, a short, attractive woman in a business suit put away her tablet and walked out of the building.

Sofia!

Instinct and training kept him moving in spite of the shock that punched into his stomach and the curse words that set up a muffled roar in his head. *A mutant. Sofia's a goddamned mutant!*

The Glock had stopped moving. Her face mottled, Lydia reached for the gun. Kyle lunged forward and kicked it out of her reach. It spun across the polished tiles. "Gun!" he shouted, drawing everyone's attention to Lydia as she dove for the weapon.

He darted in the opposite direction and raced out the door. The plaza outside the IGEC building was crowded—perfect for his needs. He vanished into the press of bodies, Lydia's outraged shouts and orders eventually lost in the noise of the crowd.

It was easy for a man with his experience to make his way to a large office building several blocks away from the IGEC headquarters and catch a cab back to the general vicinity of Sofia's house. From his innocuous drop-off point two and a half blocks away from the town house, he carved a roundabout path to ensure he was not followed before returning to her home.

He prayed only that his caution had not cost him too much time.

He flung the door open and stormed into the house. "Sofia!"

Her voice, small and thin, called out from the second floor. “I’m up here.”

He took the steps two at a time, and within moments, found himself standing at the entrance of her bedroom, staring at a woman he *thought* he had known.

Her hands moved steadily over the contents of the Proficere Labs cooler. She tucked the plastic-encased microchip into the lining of the case. Her fingers traced the slim outline of the test tubes containing the chemical agent created by Bert Reynard.

She was packing up the case. She was going to turn it over to the IGEC.

Kyle opened his mouth and said the first thing that came into his head. “You’re a goddamned telekinetic.”

Sofia stiffened. She straightened and turned to face him. “What is it to you?”

“You didn’t tell me.”

Annoyance flashed over her face. “We’ve known each other for two days. You don’t know my mother’s name or my father’s name. You don’t know what kindergarten, grade school, middle school, high school, or college I went to. You don’t know my best friend, my favorite color, or my favorite music. You don’t know anything about me.”

He stalked up to her.

She did not recoil, though she had to tilt her head back to look at his face.

The woman was not frightened of him. If she were, she would have left the IGEC headquarters at the first opportunity instead of waiting around to see if he needed help.

She’s a goddamned telekinetic. He ground his teeth. “I hate mutants.”

His words took the stiffness out of her spine. Her eyelashes fluttered down to conceal her eyes. “I know.” Her voice was small, so tiny, like the voice of a child.

“You don’t know why.”

She shrugged and turned her back on him. “Does it matter? You obviously think your hate is justified since you’re clinging to it.”

“I— You should have told me.”

Sofia shook her head. “Why? So that you can lump me into the category of big bad mutants like Danyael Sabre, who can kill with a touch? I’m not a council-trained mutant; I’m not one of their enforcers. I’m not an alpha-level telekinetic. Hell, I’m so low on the totem pole my powers don’t even register on those machines they build to track mutants.” She held up her hand, snapping her thumb and forefinger together like pincers. “This is the extent of my telekinetic abilities. Good enough for carnival tricks and not much else, so forgive me if I don’t feel like being tossed, by people like *you*, into the category of ‘most hated humans’ just because I have a smidgen of psychic ability that I would much rather *not* have.”

She slammed down the lid of the cooler and turned around to face him. “You’re an ass, you know that, Kyle?” Her voice quavered. “The least you could have done was to say thank you before you ripped me apart.” She seized the cooler, holding it to her chest like a shield, before marching past him

and heading down the stairs.

“Damn it, Sofia. Not telling me you’re a mutant is like not telling me you’re HIV-positive before sleeping with me.”

Her footsteps halted on the steps. “You bastard! Go to hell.” Pain and rage quivered in her voice. The sound of her footsteps grew fainter, and he heard the sound of the front door opening. “And just for the record,” her voice shouted up at him. “I’m not infectious!”

He slammed his hand against the wall and left a small dent. “You fucking lied to me!”

It all made sense now. The items on the dressing table that she had flung into his face. The toilet door that he thought he had locked. Carnival tricks, she called them, but those small carnival tricks had been enough to make a difference.

She had saved his hide.

Oh, sure, he would have gotten out of his predicament with the IGEC sooner or later, but she had done so with such ease and flair.

She’s a goddamned mutant.

And she didn’t tell me.

It was not just lying through omission. She knew, *everyone* knew, that genetic heritage was as important—hell, it was *more* important than anything else. More important than race, than class and social standing. It mattered if one was human or just a human derivative—a clone, in-vitro, or mutant.

Kyle’s upper lip curled. She was a derivative.

The memory of Sofia’s voice ricocheted through his head. *“I’m not infectious!”*

She was a mutant. Like Danyael Sabre.

She wielded psychic powers as effortlessly as others wielded charm or good looks. Mutants were inherently manipulative, untrustworthy. They were thoughtless, selfish bastards, who sought only to further themselves, winning trophies and securing triumphs they could not have won any other way.

There was no place in the world for mutants like Sofia and her kind.

Yet she had stayed. Instead of leaving as she should have, as he had told her to in the event of any trouble, she had stayed.

And she had saved him.

Kyle squeezed his eyes shut. *Damn.* Tension vibrated through him, causing his clenched fists to tremble. Why? Why had she stayed?

She was only a minor telekinetic. He had seen alpha telekinetics hurl cars and raise psychic walls real and solid enough to deflect bullets, but Sofia, by her own confession, did carnival tricks. Dragging handbags from shoulders and unlocking handcuffs probably strained the outer limits of her abilities, yet she had guts enough to challenge IGEC agents.

Sofia had stayed to fight for him, to save him.

He raced down the stairs and out the door, just in time to see a cab, with Sofia in it, turn the corner. “Damn it!”

He jumped into the first available taxi he saw at Dupont Circle. “A cab just turned down Connecticut Avenue. It’s probably going to the IGEC headquarters on Constitution Avenue. Follow it.”

Keeping sight of Sofia’s cab in the perpetually heavy D.C. traffic was not difficult. The car Kyle was in was two and a half blocks behind when Sofia’s taxi pulled up in front of the IGEC building. She stepped out, cooler in hand. God, she looked so small, so fragile and vulnerable, with her coat pulled tight around her and her shoulders hunched against the bite of the wind.

He hoped she had not been crying, but if she had been, it was his damned fault.

She turned toward the IGEC headquarters, but before she had taken two steps forward, six men leapt out of two cars idling in front of the building.

“No!” Kyle pushed the car door open and raced down the pavement.

Sofia’s small body was buried in the bulk of the men surrounding her. Kyle heard only her screams as they dragged her into one of the cars.

It screeched away from the curb, and the other car followed. Kyle caught only a glimpse of the license plate, but he did not have to run it to know that the Rue Marcha had taken Sofia.

Chapter 12

Kyle rushed back to the cab he had abandoned and lunged into the front passenger seat. “Follow those cars!”

The taxi driver shook his head. His hands gripped the steering wheel. “Did you see the size of those guys?”

Yes. They looked larger than gorillas and they had taken Sofia.

Kyle ran around the front of the cab, pulled the door open, and yanked the driver out. He jumped into the driver’s seat and slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The car shot away from the curb, leaving its owner, screaming on the street. “You didn’t pay your fare!”

“You’ve got bigger issues than that,” Kyle muttered. He, too, had a hell of a problem. Following a car through Washington, D.C.’s traffic was not difficult, unless, of course, it was a black sedan. Washington, D.C., was full of diplomats, most of them driven around in black cars. He kept an eye on the two black sedans as they turned a corner and sedately flowed through traffic.

They were heading for the freeway.

He swung the steering wheel to direct the car up the ramp and onto the freeway. The two black cars were a hundred feet ahead of him, one still trailing the other.

A large eighteen-wheeler changed lanes, blocking his view. Kyle leaned against the horn, cursed under his breath, and swerved out of his lane. His gaze searched the freeway ahead of him. His eyes widened in alarm. His quarry had moved out of its linear formation. The cars had split up and now blended into the mass of cars on the freeway. He had to choose which sedan to follow.

He accelerated, weaving through traffic to catch up with a black sedan. Damn the tinted windows. Teeth gritted, he swung his steering wheel and rammed into the car.

The sedan swerved out of its lane.

Loud car honks pierced the air as drivers all around him objected to the dangerous driving.

For a moment, the sedan and Kyle’s cab raced alongside each other before the sedan accelerated sharply. Kyle pushed down on the pedal and shot forward. The taxi’s frame, or its engine—something—rattled loudly; it was not made for high speeds. His options narrowed to the category of “stupid and dangerous.”

“Come on; don’t fall apart on me yet.” His cab shot past the sedan. He twisted the steering wheel,

swinging into the sedan's lane. The other car spun to avoid a collision and screeched to a halt on the shoulder of the freeway. The front of the car pointed toward on-coming traffic. Kyle scrambled from his cab, reached for his handgun, and ran toward the sedan.

He swung the driver's door open.

A young black man, dressed in a neatly pressed suit, blinked up at him. Slowly, he raised his hands to show he was unarmed.

Damn. The Rue Marcha was South American. It did not hire blacks and its thugs sure as hell did not wear suits.

Kyle pulled open the back door. In the rear seat, a small child trembled in his mother's arms. Both were well-dressed and dark-skinned. A small and colorful child's backpack was nestled at the woman's feet.

He did not doubt that the headline news tomorrow would report that the wife and child of an African diplomat were rudely attacked and accosted while returning from the child's kindergarten program. *Damn it!* He slammed the door shut on them and looked up.

Two black sedans joined the traffic pulling off the highway at exit sixty-three.

Within moments, he merged into traffic before racing down the same exit. The two black cars stayed together, comfortably cruising down quiet neighborhood streets.

Which one had Sofia?

Trusting his instincts, he accelerated past the second car and broadsided the first.

It rammed back. The impact swung his cab onto the sidewalk, sending a mailman diving for cover. Kyle cursed under his breath. Too close. Hell, what he would give to have his finely tuned BMW instead of this piece of worn-down machinery masquerading as a car. Only his driving skills had kept him, and everyone else around him, alive thus far.

A bullet smashed through the windshield, scattering shards of glass across the passenger seat.

Kyle instinctively reached for his gun.

His car jolted forward as he was rammed from behind. The gun slipped from his grasp and slid across the passenger seat before tumbling off onto the floorboard.

Gunfire from behind sent him diving to the seat. Fragments of faux leather and polyester sprayed through the car interior. He leaned down and reached for his gun. The grip was a fraction of an inch beyond his grasp. He would have to dive for it.

Kyle inhaled deeply and braced himself. With his right hand, he opened the car door. In that same instant, he lunged forward, seized his gun, and rolled out of the car in a smooth motion. He scrambled around the car fractions of a second before the gunfire ripped up the asphalt around him.

One of the black cars raced past him.

A bitter taste flooded his throat. Sofia was in *that* car.

And he was trapped, pinned down by gunfire coming from the other car.

He crouched low, peeked around his bullet-riddled cab, and pulled off a single clean shot.

Air hissed out of the front tire of the sedan.

The familiar scream of police sirens pierced the air. Kyle threw a quick glance over his shoulder. The mailman huddled behind a large bush, fumbling with his cell phone. Thank God for innocent bystanders and their ubiquitous cell phones.

Two cops on motorcycles scrambled onto the scene. Gunfire from the car turned on the cops—the Rue Marcha members were instinctively violent in their response to law. One policeman skidded, screaming and bleeding from a shoulder wound. He tumbled onto the road and curled into a defensive position. His motorcycle slid across the road, coming to a rest beside the cab.

Kyle stared at the motorcycle's still-spinning wheels.

He pushed to his feet and raced to the motorcycle. He yanked it upright, swung his leg over the seat, and wrung the throttle. He raced down the street after the second black car.

Catching up with the car Sofia was in was not difficult. Getting it to pull over was an entirely different matter. He leaned forward, braced his arm across the motorcycle handlebars, and raised his handgun. For a moment, it wavered unsteadily in his hand before his grip tightened. His finger squeezed the trigger.

The back tire of the car popped. Rubber instantly shredded into fragments.

The car careened out of control. It swerved between the road and sidewalk before barreling at top speed toward a gas station at the junction of two roads.

No!

The thought was scarcely formed in his head when two thousand pounds of an out-of-control vehicle rammed into a gas pump. The glancing impact swung the car. Its rear squarely hit the adjacent gas pump.

Kyle's scream of disbelief was lost in the deafening sound of double explosions.

Chapter 13

Flames engulfed the car, shooting high above the square roof of the gas station. Alarmed employees scurried from the attached convenience store.

No one emerged from the car.

Shock rooted Kyle to the ground, but panic was greater and propelled him forward. He ran toward the burning sedan, but the heat of the flames drove him back. Soot and ash stained his face. His lips moved, shaping silent words. Sound followed, emerging as an animal cry of pain. “Oh, God. Sofia!”

He dropped to his knees, his lungs laboring to breathe through the thick smoke pouring into the air. His world coalesced down to the flames shooting from the dark sedan. Dimly, he heard screams around him and saw people running past his peripheral vision. He sensed a crowd forming a safe distance behind him.

He could not think, could not feel anything beyond the stunning sense of loss.

Some part of his rational mind screamed at him and told him it was impossible. He could not possibly hurt this much over someone he had known for less than forty-eight hours.

The gaping hole in his heart told him otherwise.

He choked on the acrid fumes. Sirens screamed as emergency personnel arrived. A well-meaning emergency medical technician dragged him to his feet and pulled him away to a waiting ambulance.

“Here, breathe deeply.” The EMT held an oxygen mask to Kyle’s face.

The oxygen jolted him into sharp awareness of his surroundings. He was bleeding from a shoulder wound, and his smartphone was buzzing.

He pushed the EMT away and stumbled out of the ambulance before snatching up his phone.

Zara’s voice, sultry as black velvet, purred at him. “The IGEC called and raised hell. What happened there?”

“They snatched Sofia. The Rue Marcha snatched Sofia.” He dragged a hand through his hair. It came away black with soot.

“And the microchip?”

Thanks for inquiring about Sofia. He ground his teeth. It was Zara. What else did he expect from a master assassin with a glacier for a heart? “It’s...” His voice trembled. “It’s gone. Sofia’s gone,

too. The car hit a gas station.” *I sent it into the gas station.* “It exploded. Sofia’s gone. They’re all gone.”

Zara was briefly silent. When she finally spoke, her voice was crisp. “I’ve got your location from your phone. Don’t talk to anyone. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“I’m fine. I got hit, but I’m fine.”

“Can you drive?”

Kyle stared at the motorcycle he had commandeered. The engine was still running. “Yeah.”

“I’ll meet you at Danyael’s clinic.”

“I said I’m fine.”

Her voice softened into a dangerous purr. “Be there.”

He pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it as if it were a snake. His hand tightened around the phone. If he could crush it, he would have. *Damn you, Zara.*

And damn me.

He had killed Sofia as surely as if he had fired a bullet into her skull.



The motorcycle ride to Danyael’s clinic passed in a blur of blaring horns interspersed with white noise, of other vehicles sliding past Kyle as he wove recklessly through traffic. The stabbing sense of loss made it impossible to focus through the cacophony of his chaotic thoughts.

If he had held his tongue...

If he had controlled his temper...

If he had not driven Sofia away, she would still be alive.

A car horn blared. Instinct twisted his motorcycle away from a near collision. His heart pounded, but his head was no clearer when he pulled up in front of the free clinic and cut the engine.

For a moment, he sat there, shoulders slumped. *I killed her.*

His breath shuddered out of him, a jagged sound, and he fisted his hands against his eyes.

If Danyael had not sent Sofia on a fool’s mission—

No, my fault. She got me out of trouble, and in return, I told her I hated her.

He was responsible. Just him. And he knew it.

Kyle dismounted from the motorcycle, squared his shoulders, and stalked into the clinic. He marched past several startled patients and threw open the door of Danyael’s office.

Danyael’s dark eyes swept over Kyle’s disheveled state. He turned to his patient, an elderly gentleman. “I have to take care of this emergency. Would you mind waiting in the reception area for a few minutes?”

The old man cast Kyle a nervous glance. “No, no. Of course not.” He pushed to his feet. Leaning heavily on his cane, he tapped his way out of Danyael’s office.

Kyle slammed the door shut behind the man. “Sofia...Sofia—” His voice cracked.

“Sit down, Kyle.” Danyael’s tone remained calm, so calm it was practically emotionless.

Damn him. How could he remain so unmoved, so unaffected when Sofia, the one innocent person in this entire mess was dead?

“Didn’t you hear? Sofia’s gone.”

“Last I heard from Zara, Xin’s working with the FBI to identify the remains in the car. I’d hold off on grieving until they find a corpse with matching dental records. Now take off your jacket, your shirt, and sit down.”

Danyael’s steady tone of quiet authority was far more effective than Zara’s soft purr of pure menace. Kyle swallowed hard against the heavy, crushing pressure on his chest and shrugged off his jacket. With a wince, he pulled off his shirt. Dried blood peeled off, leaving an open wound that spilled fresh blood down his left arm.

Danyael pushed to his feet and limped over to Kyle. With gentle hands, he probed around the edges of the bullet wound that marked Kyle’s shoulder. “It’s clean. The bullet went right through you. There’s bruising around the bone, but nothing’s broken.”

“Just tape it up.”

“I can do better than that.”

“I said just tape it up. I don’t want a mutant or a doctor messing around with it.”

Danyael shrugged, apparently not offended. “I’ll be a minute.” He went into the adjacent room, leaving Kyle alone.

The silence of the room closed in around Kyle. He buried his face in his right hand. Mentally, he revisited every second of his car chase, every wrong move he had made, every bad decision he had taken. He had killed Sofia with his choices, his recklessness, his—

Danyael walked back into the room. The blame and self-hatred churning through Kyle’s head fell silent, settling like restless and bickering wolves in a den calming at the return of the alpha wolf.

Kyle looked up. “Don’t do that. Stop screwing with my emotions.”

“It’s what I do,” Danyael said. “Healing is eighty-percent mental. If you refuse empathic healing, you should at least be in prime mental and emotional condition so that your body can heal itself.”

“I said I don’t want your help.”

“Most people don’t get what they want. Trust me on that.” Danyael’s quiet chuckle was ironic. “You, however, are getting what you need.” He returned to Kyle’s side and cleaned the wound before swabbing an antiseptic ointment over it. A layer of deftly applied bandages sealed the wound without limiting Kyle’s range of motion.

The alpha empath stepped back. “How do you feel?”

Kyle swung his arm cautiously. The pain was a dull ache, easily ignored.

“Over-the-counter pain medication should suffice,” Danyael continued. “But if the pain gets too bad, come back here and I can prescribe something stronger.”

The door opened, and Zara walked in. Without greeting or preamble, she said, “Four corpses. All male. Are you sure Sofia was in the car?”

Kyle’s breath caught. The quick flutter in his chest—it could not possibly be hope, could it? “I saw them grab her. She wasn’t in the second car—the one that rammed me—right?”

“Metro police arrested those four men. No Sofia either.”

His shoulders sagged in spite of the surge of relief. A silent sigh whispered from him. “They must have dropped her off somewhere, but how could they? I was too close. I would have seen them.”

“Could they have pulled a switch on you?”

A switch? Kyle’s gaze became unfocused as he tried to re-create the scene of the highway moments before the two cars exited the freeway. The freeway remained crowded with black cars, many of similar makes and models. His voice was quiet, reflective. “They knew I’d be on the lookout for two cars traveling together. When they split up briefly on the highway, another black car—a decoy—could have taken the place of the car carrying Sofia instead. More than likely, the car with Sofia never pulled off on exit sixty-three.”

His hands clenched into fists. He had fallen for one of the most obvious tricks in the book. He had screwed up and Sofia had paid the price. “Where is she now?” he asked. He fought to keep his voice even but knew that it grated with frustration. “Any idea?”

“Impossible to know for sure.” Zara propped a hip against the side of Danyael’s desk. “The Rue Marcha doesn’t operate much in D.C. There’s no dossier of past movement to draw from.”

“And the four Rue Marcha who were taken?”

“In FBI custody, but they’ve proven resistant to questioning. They’re not mutants but they have strong psychic shields. It’ll take awhile for the telepaths to break through.”

And the entire time, Sofia’s life was at risk. What choice did he have? “I’ll question them.”

Zara snorted. “And what makes you think you’ll get any more traction than a telepath?”

“Psychic shields don’t protect against physical pain. They’ll talk. I guarantee that.”

Danyael shook his head and looked away. His shoulders rose and fell on a sigh. “I can get them to talk.”

“Oh?” Zara arched an eyebrow. “I thought you didn’t want to get involved.”

Danyael did not directly answer Zara’s challenge. “It’s the fastest way to get the truth out of them. They’re probably trained to resist interrogation techniques. Physical pain may not mean much to them, but their psychic shields won’t protect them from direct contact from an alpha empath.” He looked at Kyle. “If you’re willing to accept my help, that is.”

Kyle grunted. “Sofia is the only one who matters now.” Whatever it took—swallowing his pride and accepting help from a man he despised—he would do whatever it took to save Sofia.

Chapter 14

The J. Edgar Hoover Building loomed over Pennsylvania Avenue. Kyle found himself dragging his feet as he approached the building. He had spent most of his adult life avoiding law enforcement agencies, especially federal agencies.

In fact, if Xin had not been standing at the entrance, waiting for them, Kyle was certain that he and Zara would have been arrested immediately. The Chinese woman nodded in greeting and escorted Kyle, Zara, and Danyael past the security desk. No one made him give up his handgun, and no one insisted Zara turn over the multiple guns and daggers she was likely carrying.

How much influence did Xin—supposedly just an NSA analyst—wield?

“We’ve brought them together as you requested,” Xin said to Zara as she led Kyle, Zara, and Danyael toward the interrogation rooms on the seventh floor. She stopped outside a steel door. “Are you sure it’s a good idea?”

Zara deflected the responsibility. “Danyael’s request, not mine.”

Danyael shrugged. “True horror is self-inflicted. If I do this right, I’ll only have to talk to one person, and you’ll get the truth, or at least versions of the truth, from the others.”

Kyle shot Danyael a narrow-eyed glance. Danyael and Zara—in spite of their profound differences—were perfectly made for each other, after all.

“Who’s the leader of the group?” Danyael asked.

Xin nodded. “Biggest one, though they’re all big. I really don’t think you should go in alone.”

“You’ll need strong psychic shields to survive unscathed what I’m about to do.” Danyael glanced at Zara. “You’re not going in.”

Zara snorted. “If you think I’m letting you go alone into a room occupied by four trained murderers, you’re out of your mind.”

“We discussed this earlier.”

“So we did.” Zara’s smile was thin. “But I never agreed. I’m going in with you. I suggest you find a way to keep my emotions and mind protected while you’re in there driving them mad with horror.”

Kyle suppressed a snort. Zara specialized in delivering ultimatums.

Xin’s eyebrows drew together as she frowned. “Can you do it, Danyael? Zara’s going to be worse than four trained murderers if her mind and emotions snap.”

Zara arched an eyebrow. “That was *almost* a compliment.”

Danyael ignored her commentary. “I think so.”

“You *think* so?” Xin echoed.

“Good enough for me,” Zara said. “We’re wasting time. Let’s do this.”

Xin shook her head and reached out to catch Zara’s arm. “I don’t think—”

“Danyael would never put me at risk, you know that.” She shook off Xin’s restraining arm.

Danyael blocked her entry into the room. “When I take your hand, don’t fight me.”

She glowered at him. “Why?”

“I’ll need physical contact to protect you.”

“Fine, but take my left hand. I’m a better shot with my right hand.”

Danyael nodded at Xin, who leaned close to the biometric iris scanner to unlock the door. Zara stepped in, followed by Danyael. Xin pulled the door shut behind them and gestured to Kyle. “We can watch them from in here.”

She led Kyle to the adjacent room, where a large glass panel provided a clear view of the interrogation room.

Kyle cursed under his breath.

Xin nodded, apparently agreeing with the sentiment. “Doesn’t look good, does it?”

Each of the four men in the room had at least half a foot on Danyael’s six feet and likely weighed two times more. Tattoos carved intricate patterns over heavily muscled biceps. Compared to them, the crippled alpha empath looked laughably weak.

The largest man snorted. “Who are you?” His words were thickened by his South American accent. His perfectly groomed handlebar mustache did not conceal the smirk he wore.

“If you have to ask, you’re probably better off not knowing.”

Kyle smiled in spite of the tension of the moment. Danyael had guts, that much was certain.

Danyael continued in the same quiet, confident tone he used with his patients. “Where’s Sofia?”

The man smirked. “Don’t know.”

“I’ll settle for whatever you do know.” Danyael hobbled forward, his hand outstretched. Zara kept pace beside him.

The gangster’s face paled. He retreated until his back hit the wall.

Kyle’s mouth dropped open. “What—?”

Xin shrugged. “Danyael shields a great deal of his power to blunt its effect on people around him, but when he exerts himself, it’s usually best not to be present. It’s a good thing he’s a defense-class mutant and his powers don’t penetrate physical barriers, or we’d be in trouble too.”

In the room, Danyael continued. “Your last chance to change your mind before I change it for you.”

The man shook his head, but his brow was deeply lined with worry.

The look in Danyael’s eyes was almost compassionate when he reached out and touched the man.

Danyael had made contact for no more than a second, Kyle told himself later—the briefest touch of skin against skin—but nothing could adequately describe the terror that surged into the man’s eyes; terror and fear so acute, so profound that they shredded the wall between sanity and madness. Behind the man’s psychic shields, his mind collapsed under the weight of stampeding emotions goaded by an alpha empath’s power. When the man screamed, it was the cry of an animal driven insane by horror.

His companions seemed glued to their seats, unable to tear their attention from their friend’s descent into madness. Their jaws hung slack, their eyes wide. Their faces turned ashen beneath their mocha-colored skin. When the man twisted around to slam his head into the wall, no one moved to stop him, except Danyael. He touched the man, and the man slumped to the floor, like a marionette with cut strings. Danyael turned to face the others and reached for Zara’s hand, his gesture casual. “Where’s Sofia?”

Kyle saw Danyael’s already dark eyes turn black as sin. Kyle had always known that the alpha empath was a killer in the guise of a helpless cripple, but in that moment, Danyael was almost ethereal—a demon in an angel’s body.

The truth gushed out of the three men as they stole occasional glances at their unconscious leader. Babblings of a warehouse in southeast D.C. Vague details of the armed guard that surrounded the place. Confirmation of the man in charge—Luis Sanchez, chief lieutenant in the Rue Marcha.

Danyael had turned hardened gangsters, known killers, into piles of mush in under a minute. Dimly, Kyle realized that he should be overflowing with admiration for Danyael’s brutal efficiency, but instead, all he could think of was all that devastating power wielded by a *single* man.

Kyle’s stomach churned with nausea. The taste in his mouth was sour. He had heard and seen enough. He spun on his heel, but Xin held out a hand to stop him from leaving the room.

Her brown eyes met his. “Danyael didn’t just do this for Sofia. He did it for them.”

He shook his head, dismissing her. “I have to get Sofia.” He had to do it alone. Zara, who was half-Venezuelan, could not help him.

Xin nodded. “Good luck.”

He stepped out of the room but not before he heard her whispered words. “You’ll need it.”

Chapter 15

Consciousness returned slowly. The dull ache drifting through her body coalesced into a painful throb in her head.

Sofia dragged her eyes open, and then squinted as a defense against the bright lights in the room. Spotlights glared down at her, unrelenting, merciless. She tried to bring up an arm to shield her eyes, but metal clinked at her wrists. The motion tugged at her other wrist.

Handcuffs.

Her eyes flashed open—spotlights be damned. She looked down at the steel cuffs that bound her wrists together. No big deal. She could pick the lock with her telekinetic powers, but then what? Sofia looked around a small room undistinguished by its cement walls and floor; no weird smears on either, though the latter was dusty and the air was stale. Boxes stood stacked high against three walls, leaving only the wall with the door clear.

It galled her to realize that her predicament was *her* fault. If she had not dashed off on her own, she would have been with Kyle and—

She paled. And what?

What could Kyle have done against the six thugs who snatched her off the street in broad daylight, right in front of the IGEC building? They had tossed her into the leather backseat of a car. She screamed. The last thing she recalled was struggling against the large hand clapped over her nose and mouth until darkness curtained over her vision.

If Kyle had been with her, they would have captured him too. Odds were the Rue Marcha would have perceived him as the greater threat and killed him.

Her heart skipped a beat. She swallowed painfully through a dry throat.

Common sense reasserted itself with a hard jerk.

If her hands were free, she might have smacked herself on the side of her head. She was worried for a *mercenary*, for God's sakes, for a man who had likely gotten himself into and out of worse situations.

Focus on yourself, kiddo. You're the one in trouble now, not him.

Sofia raised her hands in front of her so that she could study the handcuffs. Her eyes narrowed as she focused on the small lock. Her mind zeroed in on its target—there was no other way to describe

the odd sense of “tunnel-vision” that preceded the use of her telekinetic powers. Something almost tangible stirred in the back of her head, a motion, perhaps imaginary, perhaps not, but moments later, the lock clicked.

Sofia shook the handcuffs off. As a precaution, she slipped them into the back pocket of her denim jeans and then proceeded to explore the room. The door was locked, of course, but it was not a problem for a third-rate telekinetic. The wooden boxes and crates were sealed, but she pried the covers off and rifled through their contents. She was oddly disappointed when she found neatly packaged containers of pharmaceutical products, each labeled with the brands of well-known American and international companies. Where were the heroin and cocaine? The Rue Marcha members were drug dealers, weren't they?

Sofia traced her fingers over the unopened bottles. Her brow furrowed. She recognized many drug names from her nursing program. The crates were filled with powerful prescription painkillers, depressants, and stimulants.

The Rue Marcha was trafficking prescription drugs and fueling the epidemic of prescription drug abuse in the United States.

Sofia bit down on her lower lip. All the more reason to break out of wherever she was, find the cooler, and make her way to the closest police station. Sometimes, her curiosity got the better of her, but until she was safe, she would have to restrain her nosiness.

After all, she was on her own. Kyle would not be coming for her.

The ache in her chest was equal parts hurt and fury. He had protected her and even gotten shot because of her, but he was still a stupid ass. Couldn't he see that she was different from Danyael, from the alpha mutants? How dared he act as if he was the injured party just because she had not revealed that she was a mutant from the moment they met? *Hello, I'm Sofia Rios. I'm a mutant though you wouldn't know it because I can't do crap worth mentioning, but you should still feel free to treat me like shit just because you can't see past that goddamned chip on your shoulder.*

She ground her teeth. Damn him. *And to think I was falling in love with you, thinking that maybe you'd actually see me for the person I am.*

He was an idiot, and, everything considered, he'd gotten off easy. When she got out of here—wherever *here* was—she was going to yell at him some more.

Yelling helped drown out the silent tears inside.

Sofia pressed her ear against the door but could not hear the sound of any movement outside. She breathed in deeply to steady her nerves. *No better time.* She squatted down to study the lock. Her brow furrowed with concentration.

Metal ground against metal. The door lock wrenched back. No delicate “click” here; the sound grated and echoed through the small room.

Someone had to have heard that sound.

Sofia winced and held her breath. Minutes passed, but no one came.

She did not bother to wait until her heartbeat settled down; she had more or less given up on the hope that it would. Slowly, she eased the door open wide enough for her to peek out. The door opened onto an indoor balcony made of steel. Closed doors, which presumably led to rooms similar to the one she vacated, flanked one side of the balcony. The other side overlooked the interior of a large warehouse space, partially filled with crates.

Male voices, speaking Spanish, engaged in idle conversation. From the doorway, she could trace the play of bulky shadows moving around the warehouse floor. On the other side of the warehouse, a series of staircases led to a lighted, glass-windowed room high above the warehouse floor—an observation room, perhaps.

The exit, if there was one, was nowhere to be seen.

Her gaze fell on a clutter of tools and equipment in front of the next room. She bent down to pick up a crowbar—not that it would do much good against one of the over-muscled thugs, but holding something that resembled a weapon made her feel better—and inched forward.

She peered down the length of the bridge. At the far end, a staircase led down to the warehouse floor.

Not a good option, but it was the only one she had. It was the only way out.

Shadows swathed large portions of the bridge, but spotlights were interspersed at regular intervals, though if no one looked up, she would be all right.

Sofia crossed the first expanse of darkness but hesitated at the brink of the pool of light. It was insane—twenty feet of unrelenting brightness. If she tried to move quickly, she would likely create enough sound to draw their attention, and if she moved slowly, the greater the likelihood that someone would look up and see her, smack in the spotlight.

Think, Sofia. Think.

A distraction. She needed a distraction.

Her brown eyes searched the breadth of the warehouse space below. Bare lightbulbs hung from long electrical cords in the ceiling. She frowned. Her father, a former engineer and amateur do-it-all handyman, would have had something scathing to say about it, but under the circumstances, she was grateful for the sloppy build out.

Her weak telekinetic powers fluttered. On the far side of the warehouse, a lightbulb swayed, moving in a languid circle as an invisible hand gently swung the long electrical cord around. Shadows danced erratically, drawing cries of alarm from the men on the warehouse floor. They rushed over to that corner of the warehouse; Sofia dashed quietly across the pool of light.

She managed to get across two lighted areas before the men's interest in that innocent lightbulb faded. Another three bright areas stood between her and the staircase. She did not think another lightbulb trick would work.

Directly beneath her, under the bridge, someone screamed.

She pressed against the wall, shrinking into the cover of the shadows as men raced across the

warehouse floor. They were standing beneath her, their attention focused on something other than her.

Her heart pounded. She forced herself to move, scrambling across the bridge and racing down the staircase. A maze of boxes and crates beckoned. She ducked into its questionable safety; at that moment, its dubious cover was better than nothing.

The crates were stacked higher than her short frame. She ran until she found a corner, where she could keep an eye on both sides of the corridor of crates. From her position, sound was muffled, and she strained to catch snippets of the excited flurry of Spanish words. Something about an unconscious man. A silenced weapon.

Someone shouted out orders to search for an intruder.

Was it Kyle? Had he come for her?

Would he, in spite of everything that had happened between them?

Hope was noisy, vibrant. Her heart thumped so loudly she had to press her hand against her chest in an instinctive move to quiet it.

He would not come with guns blazing into a situation in which he must have known he would be grossly outnumbered, or at least she *hoped* he would not. Stealth. He would use stealth. He had taken on the guise of an attorney to enter IGEC. He would, she expected, dress down to match the coarse garb men used in hard labor, wear a cap, perhaps, to conceal his distinctly non-Hispanic features.

In other words, she had no chance of picking him out from a distance.

Effectively, she was still on her own. She had to find the Proficere Labs cooler, and then get the hell out of the warehouse. She glanced up. The observation room; she had to reach the observation room. If the cooler were in the warehouse, it would almost have to be up there, far away from the chaos on the warehouse floor.

The clutter of boxes and crates simplified her task. She darted from one cluster to another until she was almost at the foot of the staircases leading up to the observation room. Her fingers brushed against two large circuit breaker boxes located on the wall underneath the staircase.

The low buzz of conversation behind her assured her that the search for the intruder continued. She prayed it would keep the focus on the floor when she climbed the stairs.

She tucked her long hair inside her jacket, drew the collar around her neck and face, and walked up the stairs, affecting confidence she did not feel.

Each step drew her closer to the top.

Beneath her, on the warehouse floor, activity swirled as men searched between stacks of crates and boxes. Mercifully, no one looked up.

She continued on her way, a step at a time. She spared a quick glance down. If Kyle was somewhere down there, she did not see him. She had almost made it three quarters of the way up the stairs when a cry of alarm cut through the air.

“Allí arriba. La chica!”

Damn it. Forget confidence. Forget stealth. Sofia ran, her feet racing up the steel staircase that

vibrated with the sound of heavy boots pounding after her.

She burst into the observation room. It was empty. The switchboard panel set against the wall glowed red and green. Two metal chairs had left scuffmarks on the white-tiled floor, but there was no sign of any cooler.

Her heart sank.

She was trapped.



Kyle saw her long before anyone else. In the dusty clothes of a day laborer, his work hat pulled over his features, he had little fear of being identified as he joined in the search for the intruder—himself. He had knocked out the guard at the entrance, but the man had been found sooner than he had liked.

He knew Sofia's hand was at work when the lightbulb started swinging. Like the other men, he had raced over to investigate, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sofia's slight form scramble across the balcony when all the men's backs were turned. She darted between walls of crates.

He concealed the smile of pride. *That's my girl.*

Now, if only he could work his way over to her.

The damned woman, however, seemed determine to head in the opposite direction from the exit. Frowning, he mentally traced her heading and looked up. What could she possibly want in the observation tower?

He made his way toward the staircase that led up to the observation room, but others were closer still, and inevitably, one of them looked up and shouted an alarm.

Kyle raced up the stairs, but others were ahead of him. They were steps away from the observation room when he heard the sound of shattering glass. Sofia must have broken the glass windows overlooking the warehouse floor. What the hell? Was she going to jump?

He surged forward. He had to stop her.

In that instant, the entire warehouse plunged into darkness.



Sofia crouched by the entrance of the observation room and held her breath as the first thud of heavy boots entered the pitch-black room. It was impossible to tell how many had entered the room. She only knew that she was completely outnumbered.

Divert. Distract. Then run like hell.

She had used the crowbar to smash the glass windows on the far side of the door of the observation room. Her telekinetic powers flipped the circuit breaker at the bottom of the staircase.

Please work, she prayed silently. The combination of the shattered glass and the darkness should

lure the men to the far side of the observation room, farthest from the door, giving her a chance to make her way back down the stairs.

Her weak telekinetic powers did not lend themselves to a direct fight. She was also, just then, incapable of directing her feeble mutant powers to do anything more than they were already struggling to do. Her head hurt from the psychic effort of holding up the crowbar over the men's heads with the mental equivalent of thumb and forefinger.

“¿Dónde está?” male voices asked.

From the sound of the voices, Sofia guessed that the men were clustered on the far side of the room, gingerly feeling their way around the broken glass. Carefully, Sofia crept out of the observation room. *Now!* She blinked and let the crowbar fall.

A loud curse preceded the chaos that followed as the crowbar dropped on unsuspecting heads. Sofia scurried down the steps, the faint sound lost in the thuds and curses that filled the observation room. She had almost made it to the bottom of the stairs when the lights flared on.

At the bottom of the stairs, a heavily mustached man held the Proficere cooler chained to his wrist. He smiled, exposing perfectly even, white teeth. “Where are you going, chica?”

Sofia did not look over her shoulder, not even when she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. She had been outplayed, outmaneuvered, but she did not back down.

“That cooler's not yours,” she said.

The man smiled. “I paid for it. You shouldn't have kept it from me.”

“You don't know what—”

“Oh, I do. I know exactly what I paid for.”

Behind her, she heard the clicking of a gun, and then Kyle's voice. “You have what you want. Let her go.”

Startled, she glanced over her shoulder. Kyle stood behind her, his clothing as disreputable as the others. He held a handgun in each hand, one pointed at the man who held the cooler and the other at the men crowded on the staircase.

“I don't have it all,” the man said. “Where are the antidote and the formula for the antidote?”

Kyle responded before she could. “It's not in there. It never was. The professors didn't include it.”

“Oh.” The man raised his eyebrows. “Then you will go get it for me before I release this little chica.”

“I don't think so. Your issue is with the professors. You're going to let us walk out of here.”

The man shook his head. He opened the cooler and snatched out a liquid-filled test tube. “I drop this, and your little Latina girlfriend here dies.”

“But so will you.”

The man smirked and pulled out a gas mask. He wagged it in his hand, the gesture taunting.

“But your men. They'll all die, too.”

The man shrugged, callous and indifferent.

The nervous rustle of movement and whispered conversations convinced Sofia that the men of the Rue Marcha, at least, took the threat seriously.

The man's voice hardened. "Put down your guns or I test Cardorin's effectiveness right here, right now."

"Don't make this difficult," Kyle warned. "You can keep the cooler. Just let the girl go."

The leader of the Rue Marcha smirked. He jerked his head.

Two cartel members threw themselves at Kyle. He stumbled sideways, knocking Sofia face-first to the ground as he tussled with them. He pulled off two quick, precise shots. They collapsed, bleeding, but others jumped in to take their place.

Sofia reached out with her mind. Her telekinetic powers brushed against the side of the test tube, but the man's grip was tighter. She tugged. His eyes widened, but he did not let go. Instead, he stepped forward and swung the metal cooler at her.

Sofia brought her arms up to protect her face, but the cooler smashed into the side of her head. She screamed and coiled into a fetal ball.

"Sofia!" Kyle's shout blended into the blur of noises around her.

She raised her head in time to see a booted foot aimed straight for her face.



"No!" Kyle screamed as the steel toe of Luis's boot connected with Sofia's vulnerable flesh.

She slumped, unconscious, to the concrete floor.

Luis's chuckle, low and mocking, echoed through Kyle's head, fueling the fury that rushed through him.

The next few moments blurred into a flurry of fists and kicks. Outnumbered, Kyle fought until he too was beaten to the floor and his world plunged into darkness.

Chapter 16

“*K*yle? Kyle, are you here? Anybody?”

Sofia’s panicked voice dragged him back to consciousness. He forced his eyes open and blinked as the world wavered into focus. He looked around, uncomprehending, at the translucent walls that surrounded him. A layer of thick plastic lay over the cement of the warehouse floor. Hell, he was enclosed in the tent—an isolation chamber.

And so was Sofia.

The wooden back of the chair pressed against his spine as he rattled the handcuffs at his wrists. Sofia was seated in a chair across from him, her wrists cuffed behind her as well. Surprisingly, her eyes were blindfolded.

“Are you okay?” he asked. In that moment, he noticed the bruises on her cheekbone and the dried blood on her lips. *Stupid question*, he cursed himself. By tomorrow, the bruises would be a gory purple, assuming Sofia survived that long.

Armed men moved around outside the isolation chamber, their voices muffled into indistinct mumbles.

“What happened?” Kyle demanded.

“I don’t know. I just woke up myself,” Sofia said.

“Can you pick the lock on the handcuffs?”

“I can’t see! I need to see the lock to pick it.”

Damn it.

Sofia swallowed hard. “Where are we?”

“An isolation chamber,” he said. “A tent frequently used to contain hazardous airborne materials.”

Her voice quavered. “Like a chemical agent?”

Kyle ground his teeth. “How do you feel?”

“Like I was hit and kicked in the face, which I was.”

“Any breathing trouble? And your heart?”

“Racing so hard I can feel it pounding in my chest, but it’s been doing that since I met you and you dragged me into this hell.”

“I dragged you?” The snap of anger covered the rush of guilt. “I told you to turn the microchip

over to Zara.”

“No, you stood beside me when she asked for it and I refused to give it to her,” she reminded him. “You’ve been standing with me all the time, through every stupid and dangerous decision I made, until —” Her voice trembled and she turned her face away.

The blindfold around Sofia’s eyes dampened. Kyle had to clench his teeth against the ache in his gut. “I wasn’t prepared. You could have eased me into it more gently.”

“There wasn’t time! Don’t you think that if I could have kept it from you forever, I would have? I know you hate mutants. You say it at least once a day. You treat Danyael like he’s a piece of shit when he’s done nothing except try to help us.”

“You weren’t there. I saw him use his mutant powers. He tore the truth out of drug cartel members in less than a minute.”

Sofia scowled. “This isn’t about Danyael. It’s about you and your insistence on painting all mutants, regardless of what they can do and who they are, with the same damned paintbrush! We’re not alike. We’re all individuals, and we’re all human.”

“You’re derivatives.”

Sofia stamped her small foot. If she had not been blindfolded, he imagined he would have seen her eyes flash. “*Derivatives* is a definition coined by natural humans to make themselves feel superior to in-vitros. You’re better than that, Kyle. You’ve got so much going for you. You don’t have to push someone down to—”

The pain kicked in, sharper and more vicious than it had ever felt. “You know nothing about me! I was too stupid to keep. When my parents realized that I would always struggle to read and would never do well at school, they gave me up to the foster system and got their designer child instead. My younger brother—the *in-vitro*—was everything they wanted. He’s the CEO of Tyce Financial Systems. He makes millions a year.”

“But the CEO of Tyce Financials Systems isn’t a Norwood. It’s Robert Tyce.”

“My brother.” Kyle tasted bitterness on his tongue. “I was born Kyle Tyce.”

“Oh...”

He drew in a shuddering breath. “I changed my name to Norwood when I was adopted out of the foster system at the age of seventeen. My new mother—Cherise Norwood—sat down with me each day and taught me until I passed the GED at the age of twenty. I struggled through college, and after I graduated, I signed up for the military. It’s not as if I had anywhere else to go.”

Sofia’s whisper was scarcely louder than a sigh. “I’m so sorry, Kyle. Cherise is a wonderful person.”

“She died three years ago. Her pancreatic cancer spread to every other organ in her body.” *And I couldn’t do a damn thing to help her. I was in such a panic, I couldn’t read, never mind understand, the documents the doctors gave me. Couldn’t research alternatives because the words kept jumbling up on me.* “The doctors experimented on her, and I couldn’t help her. I didn’t

know how.”

“And that’s why you hate doctors,” Sofia murmured.

“I hate doctors, but I blame myself,” Kyle said. “If I could read, if I were normal—”

“Of course you’re not normal,” she cut in. “No one really is. You’re definitely not.”

He stared at her, aghast, but she continued as if she had not noticed, which, considering her blindfold, she probably had not. Her voice was mild, but edged with steel. “You handle a gun like it’s an extension of your body; you seem completely inured to violence, yet you’ve always treated me with gentleness. You’re a mercenary, you’re practical, you’re in it for the money, yet you supported me the entire way even though there’s nothing in it for you. You’re not in the least bit normal, Kyle, and I’m glad.”

He closed his eyes. Her words sank into him, a balm against his aching heart. “How did you get to be so smart? You had good parents, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “Yeah.” Her voice was wistful.

“And they loved you, even though you were a telekinetic.”

Sofia scowled. “Yes, they did. And you need to stop treating mutants like we’re sick, or worse, infectious.”

The harsh sound of metal grating against metal cut off their conversation. Kyle looked up as the zipper that held the door flap closed was tugged open.

Luis Sanchez strode in wearing his familiar smirk. “Glad you’re both conscious. Wouldn’t be much of an experiment if we couldn’t record what was happening.”

Sofia turned her face in his direction. “What are you going to do?”

He looked up at the one-way vent in the roof of the tent. “Pump Cardorin into the tent and see what happens.”

Sofia paled.

Kyle yanked at the handcuffs but only succeeded in slicing the edges against his already raw flesh. “You can’t do that. She’ll die.”

“That’s precisely the point. She’s of South American origin. You’re not. If Professor Reynard’s theory is correct, she’ll die and you won’t. I’m not sure how long it’ll take, but that’s part of the experiment, too.” He stepped back out and pulled up the zip.

“Kyle?” Sofia called out, her voice trembling.

“I’m right here. You have to get me out of these handcuffs.”

“But I can’t see.”

“You don’t need to see. Your telekinetic powers are like an extra hand, aren’t they? Trust your psychic touch. Follow my voice. I’ll tell you when I start feeling your touch.”

He felt it first as a light tap against his boot, and then a faint brush against the hem of his denim jeans. “You found me, Sofia. Now just keep going up. I’ll tell you when you reach my knee.”

“Okay.”

Invisible fingers crawled up his leg. The barely perceptible sensation was tantalizing, hovering on the edge of awareness. If he closed his eyes, he could better focus on it, but a hiss of air drew his attention to the vent. Nothing except the sound alerted him to the fact that the chemical agent was filling the isolation tent. Colorless, odorless, Cardorin was designed to be the perfect killer.

“Kyle...” Sofia’s voice was edged with panic.

“Keep going, baby. You’re doing great. You’re at my knee. Move forward instead of up.”

“I don’t know how long I can hold my breath.”

Damn. “Don’t worry about it. Just focus on my voice.”

He could tell she was trying, but her psychic touch faltered. Her breathing grew labored, its rhythm unsteady.

“Come on now, babe,” he crooned. “Stay with me. Keep going. You’re almost there. Curve around my back.”

“Kyle, I—” Her lips were turning purple.

“That’s it, babe. I can feel you touching the handcuffs. Feel your way around to the lock. You can do it. Get me out of this and I’ll get us both out of here.”

She slumped forward. Her touch faded.

He yanked at the handcuffs. They still held. “Sofia!”

“I’m trying—” Her whisper was barely audible. “Kyle?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I got mad at you.”

He ground his teeth against the searing ache in his chest. *Thanks, Sofia. Now I feel like a jerk and complete asshole.*

The cuffs clicked.

His handcuffs dropped to the floor with a sharp rattle, He dashed over to Sofia. His hands were frantic as he swept her into his arms and threw her over his shoulder. Her body shuddered once and then went limp. She was still alive—he could feel the faint movement of her chest—but her breath was erratic. “I’ll get you out of here,” he swore.

He yanked on the zipper of the door flap. A sharp jerk tore a vertical opening in the plastic wall of the isolation tent. On the other side of the tent, men carrying assault weapons ran away, screaming in panic for *el jefe*.

Damn. He had just released Cardorin into a warehouse filled with people of South American origin.

And Sofia was dying.

Her weight was so slight she might have weighed nothing at all. His grip tightened on her small, fragile body, and he pushed to a sprint.

No one made any move to stop him as he ran out of the warehouse. He slammed the door shut behind him. Would the warehouse contain the gas? He prayed it would.

His car was waiting where he had parked it, two blocks away. He set Sofia gently in the front passenger seat. Her skin was clammy and beaded with sweat, but she was still breathing shallowly. He climbed into the driver's seat and pulled away from the curb before reaching past Sofia to grab his cell phone from the glove compartment. He hit the first number on speed dial.

Zara picked up on the second ring. "What is it now?"

"Luis released Cardorin into the warehouse. Sofia's dying."

"And the gas in the warehouse?"

"Closed the door on my way out. Don't know if it'll contain the gas." And he wasn't sure he gave a damn. "Sofia needs help. Now."

"I'll pick Danyael up from his clinic. We'll meet you at Sofia's town house." She hung up on him.

He stared at his phone. 10:30 p.m.

The drive across town seemed to take forever. Every few seconds, he threw a quick glance at Sofia, waiting, riding each moment on the edge of agony, until he heard her next faltering breath. Helplessness clawed at him. Why couldn't he do more for her?

Kyle pulled into the driveway behind her town house. Zara had not yet arrived. Where the hell was she? How much longer could Sofia hold out?

He carried Sofia into the house. After flicking on the lights, he pounded up the stairs to her bedroom and laid her on the bed. Within seconds, he got her handcuffs off. He took her hand in his and searched desperately for a pulse. "Hang on, please. Just a few more minutes—"

Kyle glanced around sharply at the faint sound of the front door swinging open. Zara's voice called out. "Kyle?"

"Up here!" His grip tightened around Sofia's limp hand. He tried to warm her, tried to will life into her, but nothing drove the increasingly cold and clammy sensation away.

A tiny sigh eased past her discolored lips. Her body sank into the bed as her final breath escaped.

Kyle shot to his feet. "No!" He pulled Sofia to him and rocked her body. A sob wrenched its way out of him until it was a wild scream of denial and fury.

Chapter 17

A fist, driven into his jaw, rocked him back.
“Stand back so Danyael can help her.”

In shock, he released Sofia. Her body collapsed into Danyael’s waiting arms. Beside the alpha empath, Zara glared at Kyle through narrowed eyes as she massaged her sore knuckles.

Numbed by his pain and stunned by the overwhelming sense of loss over a woman he only knew for a few days, Kyle stood wide-eyed and silent against the wall. Danyael sat by Sofia’s bedside, his eyes closed, his hands wrapped around hers.

The seconds ticked by.

Sofia shuddered. Her chest moved slightly as she drew an unsteady breath.

She was *alive*. Kyle’s jaw dropped. He closed the distance immediately and reached for her.
“Sofia?”

Her face was pale, her skin clammy. Her breathing was slow and labored.

Danyael shook his head. “I pulled her back, but I can’t fix—”

“Why not?” Kyle demanded.

Zara cut in. “Heart and brain injuries are beyond his empathic healing powers. Absorbing them would kill him.”

Kyle opened his mouth to object, but Danyael said quietly, “I can keep her alive until you find the antidote.”

Kyle studied Danyael’s face, and then he nodded, his jaw tense. “How long do I have?”

“Six hours. Maybe eight. No more.”

He ground his teeth. Proficere Labs was at least three and a half hours away from Washington, D.C. *One way*. Seven hours on the road. It gave him all of one hour to break into the laboratory and find the antidote.

And it was Sofia’s only chance.

His hand was gentle as he stroked her cheek. Her chest scarcely rose and fell with each breath. One chance was all she needed, and Danyael was offering it to her. In that moment, Kyle and Danyael were two men driven apart by irreconcilable differences yet united with common purpose. “I’ll be back. Take good care of her.”

Kyle strode out of the room, and Zara followed him downstairs. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder as he stepped out of the house. “The warehouse?”

“Xin is on it,” Zara assured him.

“Fine. Let me know if she picks up Luis Sanchez.”

She nodded. “Do you need help? I can see what resources I can scrounge up. It may have to be something official, given the last-minute notice.”

He shook his head. The last time he had help on a case, he had landed up sacrificing his best friend. “I’m breaking into a laboratory. I don’t want, or need, anything official trailing along behind me.”

“All right, but don’t screw up. Three lives are riding on this.”

He spun around to face her. “What do you mean?”

“Danyael has a bad habit of pushing beyond his limits.”

Kyle frowned. Sofia and Danyael equaled two. “Three lives?”

“Yours,” Zara said pointedly. “I will kill you if something happens to Danyael.”

He chuckled in spite of the dearth of humor in the situation. “Noted.” He eyed her. “And you’ll stay here to keep them safe?”

She nodded. “Just come back soon.”



Kyle kept his foot rammed on the accelerator. Interstate 95 took him south, past dark patches of barren trees. Signs flashed by, announcing the facilities available at the next exit.

He stopped once for gas, but otherwise ignored the beckoning motels and 24-hour diners. He did not need sleep nor food. His body was too wired. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. A muscle tic set into his cheek.

All that shit over a waitress he had not even known for three days.

A waitress, a nursing student.

A bloody do-gooder. The type he had spent his entire life avoiding.

A tiny woman who stood up to the IGEC, Rue Marcha, and, hell, even Zara Itani.

How could he not respect that kind of courage? It had nothing to do with Sofia’s mutant powers. It was all heart—pure intentions, raw courage.

How could he not love that in her?

Love. Damn it.

His mind churned as he tried to recall the layout of Proficere Labs. He had visited the laboratory twice, both times to meet with the professors, and in both cases, he had never gone beyond the visitor meeting rooms set on the far side of the foyer. The guards were subtle, but present. Fortunately, Proficere did not dabble in clones and in-vitros, or the security would have been far tighter.

As it was, security was already tighter than he would have preferred. Fortunately, on his prior visits, idle conversations between the security guards had mentioned nightly pizza deliveries from a local pizza parlor.

He made it his first stop. Stealing what he needed from the pizza restaurant was like taking candy from babes.

Fifteen minutes later, he parked his car several hundred yards away from the entrance of Proficere, got out of his vehicle, and shrugged off his leather jacket. Beneath, he wore a black flak jacket. It would not do much to keep out the chill bite of the wind, but the wind was much less likely to kill him than bullets were. The clips in his two handguns were full, but he took several extras with him.

The last things he pulled out from his trunk were a white windbreaker emblazoned with the logo of the pizza parlor, a matching baseball cap, and a box containing a large pizza.

Dressed as a deliveryman, he jogged along the curved driveway leading up to the large building that housed Proficere Labs. As he approached, he could see the two guards behind the security desk chatting idly with each other.

He did not recognize them, which was a blessing. The guards from Proficere's day shift would have remembered him from his earlier visits to Proficere. He tipped the edge of his baseball cap up—it would not do to look suspicious—and tapped sharply on the glass door.

One of the guards hauled his large bulk to his feet and lumbered over. He unlocked the small door on the left side of the sealed sliding doors and pushed it open. "Where's Joe?"

"Out sick," Kyle said. "Your pizza. The works with jalapeños on the side."

"Thanks, man." The security guard held out his hands.

Kyle stepped forward, placed the large flat box on the man's hands, and reached down to pull the guard's gun from its holster.

"What!" The guard jerked away from him.

The other security guard ran from behind the desk.

Kyle snorted. The human instinct to run forward to aid a friend consistently overruled training, which would have kept the guard behind the desk, within easy reach of the emergency button.

Just then, though, Kyle had no arguments with human instinct.

He pulled his other gun out, and kept one trained on the first security guard and the other on the second. Both froze, staring at him. *Newbies*. Just as well. "That's right," Kyle said. He kept his voice low and calm. "Keep your hands where I can see them. You." He addressed the second security guard. "Take your gun from its holster. Keep the muzzle pointed to the ground. I want you to put it on the floor and kick it away from you."

His eyes betrayed a split second of indecision.

Kyle's finger tightened on the trigger.

The young man pressed his lips together.

Kyle recognized fear mixed in with brash bravado—not a good combination.

“Don’t do it,” he warned. “I’m not here to hurt anyone. I just need something from this lab, but I guarantee I can shoot faster than you can aim that gun, so don’t try.”

The man blinked hard and nodded.

Kyle did not let his relief show as the man slowly removed his gun and placed it on the ground. A half-hearted kick sent the weapon skittering over the polished tiles.

“Now back away slowly. Stand against that wall.” He jerked his chin at the far side of the security desk. Doors lined the wall—doors that led to meeting rooms.

They moved, their pace slow and their faces taut.

“Unlock the door,” Kyle said.

The second security guard swiped his security card key against the door.

“Good. Now take that card off and toss it to me. His too.” Kyle nodded toward the first guard.

The man pulled both security cards off and threw them onto the floor.

“Now, get into the room.”

Still backing away from him, they moved into the room. Without being told, they stood against the wall farthest from the door. If they could have retreated further, they likely would have. Kyle took his eyes off them just long enough to pump two bullets into the communications console.

Electronics popped and fizzed. Gray smoke hissed from the console.

The two security guards startled visibly.

“Who else is working in the lab tonight?” Kyle asked.

“Just Michael Hayes, Dr. Reynard’s laboratory assistant.”

“Where is he?”

“RS507. Research station on the fifth floor.”

Kyle nodded. “All right. Now, just hang in here and enjoy the pizza.”

He pulled the door shut, yanked a security card key from the floor, and swiped it across the terminal to seal it. The guards rushed forward and threw their weight against the door. It rattled, but did not give way.

Kyle figured he had a half hour before the guards figured out a way to break out of the room. He took both card keys with him, shoved his handgun back into its holster, tossed the guard’s pistol behind the security desk, and ran toward the waiting elevators.

Jaw tense, he glanced at his watch. He was running out of time.

Moments later, the elevator doors opened on the fifth floor, and Kyle stepped out.

He stared down the corridor. The overhead lights were dim and shrouded the corridors in overlapping shadows. The white tiles that should have glistened brightly were dull gray. Proficere Labs took on a desolate, abandoned quality at night. Kyle had walked through shattered edifices of bombed-out factories in Kosovo that had freaked him less.

Glass-enclosed research stations flanked both sides of the corridor. They were dark, except for

one at the far end of the hall. Kyle made his way down the corridor and paused next to the stations. He peered in and saw a man in a white lab coat hunched over a large desk, his back to the door, Kyle pulled his Glock from its holster and pushed the door open.

Michael did not look back. “Is the pizza here yet?”

“The guards are probably chowing down your share, but you can join them downstairs once you tell me where the antidote is.”

Michael leapt from his chair and spun around. His wide-eyed gaze immediately fell upon the gun in Kyle’s hand. “Uh, I...”

“Where’s the antidote?”

“What antidote?” Michael retreated until his back hit the wall.

“The one for Cardorin”

“Cardorin? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do. Smith and Reynard developed it.”

“If the professors worked on it, then it would be in their lab or their office. But who the hell are you? How did you get in here? What do you want?”

“The antidote.” Kyle stepped to the side and gestured with his gun. “Lead the way.”

With his hands in the air, Michael edged around his desk and walked out of the room. He cast repeated nervous glances over his shoulder at the gun in Kyle’s hand. “You don’t have to use that.”

“That would depend on you,” Kyle said. “Move it. I don’t have much time.”

Michael’s footsteps thumped on the tiled floors and echoed off the concrete walls as he led the way to a large research station. Hands trembling, he flicked the switch by the door, flooding the room with light. “This is where Dr. Smith and Dr. Reynard work.”

“Where do they store their work?”

“In here.” Michael led the way to a large refrigerator. He stood beside it, his sweaty fingers entwined in front of his chest.

“Open it,” Kyle ordered.

Michael’s Adam’s apple worked as he gulped. He pulled the refrigerator door open. Inside, a pale blue light glowed over rows of test tubes and sealed vials. Michael knelt down and peered into the fridge, carefully turning each tube around so that he could read the labels. “Nothing here says Cardorin.”

“I’m not looking for Cardorin. I want the antidote.”

Michael shook his head. “It’s not here. Whatever it is you’re looking for, it’s not here.” He swallowed hard. “I swear, it’s not—”

Kyle stared in frustration at the neat rows of test tubes in the refrigerator. He understood weapons—he could disassemble an AR15 blindfolded—but here, he was out of his depth, entirely out of it. *And Sofia is dying.* He scowled. “Is this where they store the volatile stuff?”

“Volatile stuff?”

“The stuff that kills people.”

Michael frowned. “We don’t make stuff that kills people.”

“Bullshit. Where do the professors keep the volatile stuff?”

“If not here, then in the safe room.” Michael inched slowly around Kyle and led the way down the hall to a large office marked with Alvin Smith’s name. He fumbled with a large portrait on the wall. Something clicked audibly, and the back wall slid apart.

The safe room was not much more than ten feet square. Stacks of shelves held binders and data discs. A sealed safe was anchored to the concrete floor. At first glance, nothing remotely resembled a vial.

“Unlock the safe,” Kyle ordered.

“I don’t know the code. It is the professor’s stuff. I work for Reynard, not Smith. I don’t have access to any of it.”

“Damn it.” Kyle knelt to examine the safe. Perhaps he could—

Michael darted past him, lunged out of the safe room, and slammed the door shut.

Kyle surged to his feet and threw his weight against the door. It did not budge.

“Damn it, Michael! Open the door.”

Michael’s voice sounded faint. “I’m getting security. I have to call the cops.”

“No, no, don’t. I just need the antidote.” Kyle fisted his hands against the door. “Michael, please. I just need the antidote, and I don’t have much time. Sofia’s dying.”

“What the hell are you talking about? What antidote?”

“The one Bert Reynard developed to counteract Cardorin.”

A long pause, then Michael broke it, his voice hesitant. “Cardorin?”

The words poured out in a desperate, frantic rush. “A chemical agent. It stops the hearts of people with South American genes. There’s an antidote. Reynard said he designed it, and it’s here in the lab somewhere. Cardorin is out, Michael. The Rue Marcha released it in a warehouse in Washington, D.C. Maybe the warehouse will contain the gas, maybe not, but Sofia is dying now. She needs the antidote.”

There was no sound from the outside.

“Michael, are you there?” Kyle took a step back and aimed his gun at the door lock, but before he could pull the trigger, the door swung open.

Michael, pale-faced, stared at him. “Are you certain? What you said about Cardorin?”

“Yes.”

Michael swallowed hard. “This way. I know where Dr. Reynard stores his work.”

Kyle followed Michael to Bert Reynard’s office, adjacent to Alvin Smith’s. Michael pulled out a small desk drawer. In it was a numeric keypad. He punched in a few numbers and the lower drawer popped out.

At the back of the drawer, nestled in a thick foam pad, were two sealed test tubes of clear liquid.

Michael picked one up and stared at the label. His eyes widened. “This is it. You weren’t lying.” His hands trembled as he set the test tube down on the foam pad. “I’ll get you a container to transport them.” He rushed out of the office, stumbling in his haste.

With careful hands, Kyle picked up the other vial and compared its label to the first. With focus, the jumbled letters straightened out; he had found two precious vials of antidote. The rapid pounding in his chest eased slightly and he inhaled deeply.

Michael’s footsteps sounded behind him. Kyle looked up as Michael returned with a small container specially designed to transport test tubes and vials. He held the cover open as Kyle slid the vials into the container.

Michael zipped it up and handed the container to Kyle. “Here you go.” He inhaled deeply and exhaled in a jagged rush of air. “I’ll start gathering Dr. Reynard’s research. I suppose the government or the IGEC will be coming for it shortly.”

Kyle nodded.

“Okay.” Michael pressed his lips together. His face was drawn into lines of tension, but his eyes were clear.

“You all right?” Kyle asked.

“Yeah, I guess,” Michael said. “I...” He looked up at Kyle. “My mother’s from Latin America. Cardorin...Cardorin would probably have affected her too.”

“And possibly you.”

He nodded. “Go save your friend. I’ll make sure the research gets to the IGEC so they can manufacture the antidote.”

Kyle glanced his watch. *Three hours and twenty-nine minutes.* He had just enough time to make it back to Washington, D.C., assuming nothing else went wrong.

The elevator chimed.

Damn, the guards had broken out.

Kyle looked out of the office.

A spray of bullets ripped up the carpet.

He dove for cover. Damn! Those weren’t bullets from a handgun. They were from an assault rifle on full auto.

Not the security guards.

Not even the IGEC.

The Rue Marcha.

Chapter 18

“Get down!” Kyle ordered.

Michael ducked, trembling, behind Reynard’s desk.

Kyle set the antidote container behind a metal filing cabinet and pulled out his Glock. He gritted his teeth. What was a handgun compared to the firepower wielded by the Rue Marcha? They were trapped.

“We can get out,” Michael gasped. He pointed at a side door. “It leads to Dr. Smith’s office.”

It would not have done much good; Smith’s office opened into the same corridor. Their chances would be scarcely better, though all he needed was a slight advantage.

Alone, he could get away.

Burdened with Michael, he could not.

If he escaped alone, leaving Michael to die, the Rue Marcha would claim the research. If he stayed long enough to protect Michael, he would lose Sofia.

Big picture. Small picture.

The sour taste of bile surged into his throat.

The big picture crushed the small one. Its fragments sprayed, slicing like a million dagger cuts into him. He could not let the research fall into the hands of the Rue Marcha. Not even if it cost Sofia her life.

Kyle looked up and met Michael’s gaze. “I’ll keep them occupied. Get to the computer. You have to transmit the Cardorin files over to the IGEC now.”

Michael’s eyes widened. He nodded and scurried over to the terminal. His Adam’s apple bobbed as his fingers tapped the screen, seeking files locked behind passwords and layers of network security.

Kyle ignored the sound of Michael at work. He braced himself beside the doorframe despite the splinters of wood spraying from the impact of the bullets. The hail of bullets ceased for a split second, and he twisted around to fire his gun.

Those split seconds were not enough to get lucky, but they offered him glimpses of the Rue Marcha’s position. At least four men, each armed with automatic rifles, and by the sounds of it, an unlimited number of rounds.

He had to get out of the office if he were to have any chance at all.

Kyle threw a quick glance over his shoulder. “Is it done?”

Michael nodded. “Almost. I need another five minutes.”

Five minutes in a firefight was practically eternity. He had to buy Michael more time.

He glanced up. The ceiling panels were large enough to fit through, and the ventilation ducts they concealed would certainly be larger in the modern building that housed Proficere Labs, compared to the ones at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

He turned, fired another shot into the corridor, and then scrambled back to the office. He slammed the door shut and dragged the couch over to barricade the door. “It’ll keep them out for a few minutes, but you keep your head down.”

Michael looked around, alarmed. “Where are you going?”

“To get a clean shot.” Kyle scrambled onto the desk and pushed up the ceiling panel. The crawl space was dark and wide. The injury in his shoulder throbbed when he hiked himself up into the ventilation duct. He gritted his teeth against the stabbing ache and slithered through the darkness.

The sound of gunfire died away. Damn it, the Rue Marcha was getting ready to break into the office.

Just a few more feet.

Below, he heard the sound of wood cracking.

Moments later, Michael shrieked, his voice thin and shrill.

Too late!

Kyle swung his feet around and slammed them down on a ceiling panel. It dropped to the ground with a clatter. Kyle leapt down and swung his Glock up. He fired twice. The bullets ripped through two Rue Marcha henchmen, catching them in their backs even as they were spinning around to face him. They collapsed with screams of pain. Kyle snatched up one of their assault rifles and raced toward the smashed office door.

The tight, controlled spray of bullets from Kyle’s weapon hit the two Rue Marcha men who had broken into the office. They crumpled face forward, their weapons falling from their hands.

Kyle rushed to the desk. He gathered Michael into his arms and pressed a hand against the crimson stain on Michael’s lab coat. “Hang in there. I’ll get help for you.”

Michael’s hands wrapped around his. The lab assistant’s fingers were cold and trembled as he whispered, “Files sent to IGEC. No stopping them now.”

Kyle reached for his smartphone. The digital clock flashed at him. He was out of time. *Sofia...* His breath shuddered. He pressed 911 and summoned the police and an ambulance.

Michael’s breath rasped. “Go. The antidote. Your friend.”

Kyle shook his head. “Someone’s got to keep you from bleeding to death. I’m not going until I know the EMTs have you. You did good, Michael.” A thin smile on his lips concealed the despair growing within. “You did great.”

Chapter 19

Dawn was more than a sliver of light on the horizon when Kyle arrived at the town house. He had pushed the car to its limit but he had missed Danyael's eight-hour deadline. He rushed into the house and took the steps two at a time. Zara stood at the top of the stairs, her face drawn with lines of worry.

She had not slept the entire night, he realized. Likely no one had.

"You have it?" she asked.

He nodded.

She jerked her head toward the master bedroom, the room Sofia had meticulously avoided during her stay. Frowning, Kyle preceded Zara into the room. He froze, eyes wide.

Danyael and Sofia lay, fully clothed, side-by-side on the bed, both as pale and still as death. They clasped hands, fingers intertwined. A thin strip of cloth bound their wrists together, ensuring physical contact even if they tried to pull apart.

Zara walked past Kyle to squat by Danyael's side of the bed. She stroked sweat-soaked locks from his brow and shook him gently. "Danyael?"

A full minute passed before Danyael opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Zara. He was clearly weighed down by exhaustion so deep, so profound it required a conscious act of will to respond. His dark eyes were glazed. Pain flickered in their depths.

"Kyle's back with the antidote."

A faint motion tugged up at a corner of Danyael's lips.

Kyle held up the precious vial.

Danyael's head moved. His eyes flicked toward Sofia. "Inject into her."

But Danyael was the doctor. Kyle frowned. "Can you?"

Danyael shook his head. His faint smile was rueful, even apologetic. He raised his right hand, the hand not touching Sofia's, off the bed. His hand trembled visibly. "Not steady enough. I...can walk you through it."

Danyael's halting directions were clear and simple. Kyle quivered with impatience as he filled a syringe with the clear liquid from the test tube. Each second, each minute, Sofia's life was at risk.

"I won't let her go." Danyael's voice steadied him.

Kyle stared into Danyael's pale face. He drew in a deep breath and then nodded tersely. "What do I do?"

Inserting the needle into a tiny, delicate vein was not quite the same thing as the crude violence involved with an adrenaline shot, but Kyle managed. Carefully, he depressed the plunger on the syringe and watched the antidote flow into Sofia's veins. He looked at Danyael for more guidance, but the alpha empath had closed his eyes. Danyael sank into the pillows.

Zara reached for the cloth that bound Danyael and Sofia's hands together, but Danyael whispered, "No, not yet."

Damn, the antidote isn't working.

Kyle cursed and turned away to slam his open palm against the wall, but Zara placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Give it a few seconds."

Seconds turned into minutes. Kyle counted them down, every one.

At the six-minute mark, Danyael's mouth curved faintly upward in a smile. "She's breathing on her own now."

Kyle knelt by Sofia's bedside and pressed light kisses to her face and hair. She was going to be all right, thank God, she was going to be fine.

Zara yanked the cloth away and pulled Danyael's and Sofia's hands apart.

Danyael's body seemed to collapse onto the bed, as if suddenly relieved of an unbearable burden. His breath still strained against his chest, but there was a soft sheen of relief on his face.

Zara said nothing. She stood back and watched him.

Kyle knew she too was counting down each second.

Several more minutes passed before Danyael stirred. "Time?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"Seven thirty-two."

A muscle twitched in his cheek. "I...have to go." He rolled to his side, but suddenly, his body convulsed.

Kyle raced around the bed, but Zara was already there. She snatched up the deep bowl by the side of the bed, and held it as Danyael vomited bile and clots of dark red blood. His body heaved, collapsing under the assault of self-inflicted exhaustion and pain.

Kyle stared, wordless. In that moment, he understood nature's perfect balance played out in the alpha empath as well; the devastating and deeply personal price Danyael paid for the power to kill and to heal—a power, Kyle realized now, Danyael had never wanted.

The look Zara gave Kyle confirmed that she had been through that particular scenario with Danyael many times. No wonder she was so protective of him. The anger in her eyes seemed directed at Danyael, but when she touched him, her hand was gentle, that of a woman in love.

She lowered the bowl and cleaned his mouth with a wet towel. "Water?"

Danyael shook his head. "Can't keep it down." He drew in a deep, shuddering breath and slowly pushed up on one elbow.

Kyle watched in silence, surprised by the dull ache he felt to see Danyael struggle to accomplish the simplest action.

Danyael paused, breathing heavily, exhausted by his efforts. He turned his head to look at Zara. “Can I please...get a ride to work? The bus and metro...won’t get me there in time.”

A thin line furrowed her brow. “Rest today, please.”

“I don’t have... I can’t afford—”

“You can’t stand. You can’t even sit. There’s no way you can work today. I’m paying for a doctor to cover for you at the clinic today. Don’t fight me, Danyael, please. Let me do this for you.” There was a plea in her voice.

Danyael stared at Zara, his dark eyes wary.

Kyle knew better than to interfere in a conversation that bristled with tension, but still he wondered. How screwed up did Zara and Danyael’s relationship have to be to make him so reluctant to accept any kindness from her?

She reached out to touch Danyael’s cheek, and he turned his face into the caress—a rare moment of physical intimacy between two people who made it a point not to touch each other.

Slowly, he nodded and sank into the bed, curling on his side.

Zara drew up the blanket to cover his trembling shoulders.

Danyael closed his eyes. A moment later, he was fast asleep.

Zara released her breath in a sigh that was more motion than sound.

Kyle turned to her. “The eight-hour deadline Danyael set, was that driven by when he had to get to work?”

Zara nodded. “Probably. He usually picks something completely arbitrary as his goal. A more practical person would have simply stopped when they started coughing blood four hours ago.”

“How much longer would he have been able to hold on?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.” She met Kyle’s gaze. “I would have separated them.”

“I know.” Her statement did not offend him. She would kill to protect Danyael; he understood that fact now. He looked down at Danyael. “I guess I owe him.”

“He’ll settle for a thank you. What happened out there?”

Tersely, he reported the events of the evening.

Zara listened without interruption and then nodded. “I’ll handle the media fallout. Thanks for the heads up.”

“What happened at the warehouse?”

“Xin contacted the Federal Emergency Management Agency.”

“FEMA stepped in?”

“An untested chemical agent in a warehouse in the middle of Washington, D.C.? Hell, yes, it qualified as an emergency. With the FBI, they secured and sealed the warehouse.”

“Casualties?”

“Tons, though none from the government. Anyone with even the faintest hint of a South or Latin-American background was pulled from the task force. Even so, no one’s taking any chances. Those entering the warehouse are in full hazard suits. The task force recovered at least a dozen bodies from the warehouse. Many others are in critical condition and not expected to survive the night.”

“And Luis Sanchez?”

“We haven’t found him.”

Kyle cursed under his breath. He handed the container with its remaining vial of antidote to Zara. “Can you give this to the IGEC? If I show up at the building, agents will arrest me.”

“Sure.” Zara threw a glance over her shoulder at Danyael, pale and unmoving. “I’ll take care of it, but someone needs to stay here.”

Kyle nodded. “I’ve got this covered.”

“Danyael will probably sleep for twelve hours or more, but if he wakes and insists on leaving, drive him back to his apartment and make sure he gets safely up the stairs. He’s not going to be stable on his crutch for several days.”

He nodded again, that time to Zara’s back as she strode out of the room. There was little he could say when confronted with the cost Danyael had paid to keep Sofia alive. He owed Danyael, big time, and considering how skittish the alpha empath was around any gestures of kindness, whether spontaneous or deserved, he knew he would have a hell of a time getting Danyael to accept his gratitude and his apologies for his prior behavior.

He’ll settle for a thank you, Zara had said.

With a low grunt of pain, Kyle shrugged out of his leather jacket. His shoulder wound—the one he had stubbornly refused to allow Danyael to heal—had reopened from his exertions at Proficere Labs. The bandages were stained crimson. He could change them, likely neither gracefully nor well, but he would manage.

Just as soon as he caught up on his sleep.

A sigh escaped him as he stretched out on a loveseat much too small for him, but it was comfortable. He sagged against the soft microfiber cushions and turned his head to watch Sofia sleep.

Her breathing was steady, her expression at peace. A small smile curved his lips. *Amazing*. She had taken on the IGEC, the Rue Marcha, *and* Zara Itani with nothing but courage, conviction, and a collection of carnival tricks fueled by her weak telekinetic powers. No one else he knew could have gotten as far with so little.

“I love you,” he whispered. He was grateful she could not hear him. He would have to convince her first that his stupid response to her mutant powers had been completely out of line.

Then he could tell her he loved her and wanted her. Mutant powers and all.

Chapter 20

Sofia awoke with a sharp jerk and sat upright.

The afternoon sun swamped her, pouring in through the glass windows to flood the room. The heavy quilt that had covered her slipped off to pool around her hips. *Okay, I'm not in hell.*

Across the room, Kyle sprawled on a love seat too short for his length. He snored lightly. Sofia pressed her lips together to hold back a traitorous smile. *Not in heaven either.*

She was, however, in her parents' bedroom. For a moment, she had to squeeze her eyes shut against the memory of her parents pleading for their lives. She could still see the bullet she failed to stop. It traveled, as if in slow motion toward her father. She saw the moment of impact, saw steel penetrate flesh a fraction of an inch at a time. There had been surprisingly little blood at first.

The blood came later.

The heart-wrenching pain, the guilt, lasted forever.

Her stomach churned. She had to get out of the room.

Sofia flung the covers aside, and stared in surprise at Danyael, who was lying beside her, fast asleep. Even awash in sunlight, his face was pale. There were subtle lines of strain around his eyes and mouth.

That was when it hit her.

Despite inhaling the chemical agent designed to kill people like her, she was alive.

She suspected it had everything to do with Danyael and Kyle. He had been there in the hazy recesses of her final memory before she lost consciousness. His voice, his promise, had resonated through her even when the darkness took over. "I'll get you out of here."

Her Prince Charming, bad attitude and all.

He stirred, blinking blearily. A scowl crossed his unshaven face as he dragged an arm, swathed in bandages, across his eyes.

She leapt out of bed. "Oh my God, you're hurt!"

She gently pulled his arm away from his face, and turned it so she could study the fresh bruises and cuts on his rough-hewn features. "What happened?"

"The Rue Marcha showed up at Proficere Labs." He groaned softly and eased into a sitting position.

“Why aren’t you at the hospital? You need to get those injuries treated.”

“They’re not as bad as they look. Nothing’s bleeding or broken. Danyael bandaged me up yesterday, though some hard core painkillers would be a good thing right about now.” His eyes focused on her face. “And how are you, baby?”

“Pretty sure I’m alive.”

He nodded, a smile tugging at his lips. “Things weren’t looking so good at seven this morning, but eight hours of sleep—and the right kind of drug in your veins—can do wonders.”

Drug? She looked over her shoulder. “Danyael—”

“Kept you alive while I went for the antidote. Zara says to let him sleep. He looked like hell this morning.” Kyle’s eyes narrowed. “Actually, he’s not looking all that much better.”

Sofia went over to Danyael and laid her small hand on his forehead. “He’s burning up.”

“Zara said to leave him. His pain is psychic; the physical symptoms are the least of his issues. You can’t do anything for him.”

Sofia rolled her eyes at Kyle. She was certain she could at least keep Danyael comfortable.

She went to the bathroom and returned with a damp towel that she had soaked in cold water. Carefully, she draped it over Danyael’s forehead. He stirred but did not wake. A muscle in his cheek twitched as if even that small of a motion hurt.

Across the bedroom, Kyle shrugged and stood. He rolled his shoulders and arched his back.

Like a cat stretching in the sunlight after waking from a nap. Sofia smiled at the thought. No, Kyle was nothing like a cat. A tiger was a more appropriate analogy—a muscled predator with teeth and claws, sleek and deadly.

He folded the throw Sofia’s mother had spent several years knitting and draped it over the back of the love seat before turning to face Sofia. “You must be hungry. I’ll get something started for lunch.”

How many times had her parents said those exact same words to her?

Her throat swelled with unshed tears. She needed a shower, but more importantly, she needed to get out of her parents’ bedroom.

Sofia made a dash for the door, but Kyle caught her arm. His dark eyes searched her face. They were too sharp, too penetrating. “What’s got you so freaked out?”

“I’m not freaked out.” She tried to pull her arm out of his grasp, but only succeeded in tightening his grip.

“Large eyes. Pale face. Trembling lips. One makes you concerned. Two afraid. Three definitely counts as freaked. The only time you’re not freaked is when you’re obviously thinking about someone else—like Danyael or me. Spill it, Sofia. You’ve kept the door of this room closed the entire time you’ve been in this house. You give it this...look...every time you step past it, like you’re afraid of something in it.” He waved his other hand to encompass the room. “Tell me, what’s in here that sends you into a panic?”

“It’s nothing. Just old memories.”

Kyle shook his head. “No such thing as old memories. There are just the ones that hurt and the ones that don’t. What happened in here?”

“My parents died here, okay?”

His eyes flared wide. His grip loosened.

She yanked her arm out of his. Her mouth quivered but she fought the need to turn away, the need to run and hide. “And I let them die.”

“Sofia—”

She bit down on her lower lip, spun around, and walked out of the room. She held her head high even though, deep inside, she was a weeping wreck.



Kyle had not interrupted her while she was in the shower. Like most men, he seemed to have an intuitive sense for staying out of the way of an upset woman. He gave her the space she needed to cry herself dry, her tears washing down with the water from the showerhead.

A half hour later, she emerged from the bathroom, composed. The scent of roasted chicken wafted up to her, and her stomach growled. She would have to face Kyle if she wanted her first meal in more than twenty-four hours.

If he decided to be a nosy, interfering pain-in-the-ass and ask questions she did not want to answer, she could just toss him out of *her* house.

Or not, she sighed. She did owe him her life after all.

Sofia put on a pair of jeans and a green sweater. The baseball cap she had purchased from Johns Hopkins Hospital perched jauntily on her bedpost. Had it only been two days since she bought it? So much had happened in that time, and if she were to be honest, most of the chaos and confusion was *her* fault.

I should have just given Zara the damn microchip.

Still, she could not find it in herself to regret the decision. Someone had to do something. Zara would not, and Danyael could not. And Kyle...?

Kyle had stood behind her decisions, even the stupid ones, and fought for her the entire way, even after he knew she was a mutant. In spite of his feelings toward human derivatives, he had risked his life to save her.

She was grateful—immensely grateful. The intense attraction and the early blush of love had preceded her gratitude, but were also reinforced by it. How could they not? He was sexy, and, far more important, an inherently good man beneath his gruff, gun-toting exterior.

Sofia knew she stood on the edge, peering down with suspicious eyes, into the chasm of love. Could he get over the unchangeable fact that she was a mutant, or was she just setting herself up for inevitable heartbreak?

Bracing herself, she went downstairs to the dining room. The late afternoon sun poured in through the gauzy lace curtains drawn across the French windows, obscuring but not eliminating the view of the light weekday pedestrian traffic on Dupont Circle.

Kyle had finished laying out the meal on the table. Sofia's eyes narrowed as she studied the art project on her plate. Mashed potatoes had been smeared across the plate—the backdrop for a face—and Kyle had used peas for eyes, a baby carrot for a nose, and thin strips of zucchini for a smile. It was silly and childish, but it won a smile from her, and sent her tumbling right over the edge. She looked at him, and hoped he would not notice her glistening eyes. If her parents were alive, they would have loved him too.

“I never pegged you for a food art kind of guy.”

“It made you smile, didn't it?”

“Yes, it sure did. Thank you. And thank you for not bugging me about the master bedroom.”

Kyle shrugged. “I got the gist of it.”

“How can you?” the question popped out of Sofia's mouth before she could help herself. She sat down and dragged a spoon through the mashed potatoes before popping a heaping spoonful into her mouth.

“I'm not much of a reader, but I can add one plus one and get two. You said your house has been on the market since August. I know your parents died in July. Sakti broke in here and killed them, right?”

Sofia set the spoon down and pressed her fists against the hollow ache in the pit of her stomach.

“You're not alone in this.” Kyle sat across from her. “Sakti turned many children into orphans that day—”

“Yes, but how many of those children were telekinetics?”

Kyle frowned. “What were you planning to do? Pick up the terrorists and throw them through a window?”

“Why not? Why did I get the short end of the stick? I have mutant powers, but they're wimpy, and I *still* get categorized as a potential threat with all those uber-alphas—”

Kyle leaned back in his seat. “Want to know what I see?”

She was in love, but she would not be charmed. Sofia folded her arms across her chest. “What do you see?”

“A woman who is smart enough to use ‘carnival tricks’ to accomplish exactly what she needs. You didn't need awesome telekinetic powers to draw Lydia's attention away from me. You didn't tear down brick walls in the warehouse, but you got a hell of a long way with your escape plan.”

“Until you showed up and screwed it up.”

Kyle shrugged. “If we discuss it ahead of time, we'll be less likely to screw it up next time.”

Her gaze flicked to movement outside the window. On the far side of the street, a man in a bulky brown coat walked past her house. It was odd; she thought she had seen that same man walk past

several minutes earlier. With a frown, she shook her head to dismiss that stray thought and refocused on the conversation. “There won’t be a next time, Kyle.”

“Of course there will be. You’re a do-gooder. You can’t help yourself.” He wore a faint smile on his lips. “The point is, you’re doing amazing things with your little bit of telekinetic power.”

He actually sounded...*approving*? Had she stepped into a dream? Nevertheless, the shock of his seeming acceptance wasn’t enough to melt the guilt. She shook her head. “It wasn’t enough to do what I needed *when* I needed it most. My father—” Her voice caught.

Kyle leaned forward and covered her hands with his. “What happened with your father?”

“They killed my mother first. I was too shocked to react, but with my father, I could *see* the bullet. I could have stopped it, but somehow, it just wouldn’t connect.” She squeezed her eyes shut, replaying the moment once more. “I wasn’t fast enough, or focused enough. I don’t know. I just know I screwed up, and my father...maybe he didn’t have to die.” A heavy sigh tore out of her. “I just wish I could do more.”

“And saving both our lives doesn’t count?”

“Picking a lock on a handcuff isn’t the same thing as creating a psychic wall to stop a bullet.”

“It was spectacular enough for me. You need to ease up on yourself. Staying calm is half the battle. Everything else you can make up as you go.”

“I’d be worried about my luck running out.” Sofia reached for a piece of roast chicken. A small frown twisted her lips as she studied the passersby moving past her window. Several of them were on their third or fourth rounds past her house. “Did you ever get the microchip and vials of Cardorin back from the Rue Marcha?”

He shook his head. “The warehouse is under wraps right now. FEMA and the FBI got involved.”

Sofia frowned. “But the microchip—”

“If it’s there, they’ll find it.”

“And the people in the warehouse?”

“Many died, but the FBI didn’t find Luis.”

“Luis?”

“Luis Sanchez, one of the chief lieutenants in the Rue Marcha. The one who hit you.”

Sofia’s gaze traveled past Kyle’s shoulder. Her heartbeat accelerated. “I know where he is.”

“Huh? Where?”

“He just walked past my house.”

Chapter 21

Kyle stared at the man walking on the far side of street for several moments before the blur of features through the lace curtain resolved into Luis Sanchez.

“He’s not the only one,” Sofia said. “At least three more men walked past the house several times in the past fifteen minutes, but I wasn’t sure, until I saw him.”

She was observant, but he would have to work on getting her to trust her instincts and voice her suspicions sooner.

Kyle ducked behind the curtains. “We have to get out.”

“Okay.” Sofia swallowed her fear. “Through the back door?”

“It’s probably watched as well, but it’ll be better than the front. Let’s go.”

“And Danyael?”

Kyle froze. Danyael. *Damn*. Danyael was in no condition to move, which meant, quite simply, that they could not leave unless they wanted to spend the rest of their natural lives hiding from Zara. Furthermore, Sofia’s conscience would never allow her to abandon Danyael. Kyle jerked his head at the stairs. “Go to Danyael. Do whatever you have to do to wake him. He’ll be able to protect you.”

“What about you?” Sofia demanded.

“I’ll buy you time.”

She shook her head, “No, no, I’m not—”

Hell, she had picked a fine time to start arguing with him. “Go!” He reached for his Glock. Another glance out the window allowed him to count three Rue Marcha, including Luis. Assuming an equal number coming in through the back door—

He gritted his teeth. Judging by the bulky swell of their ill-fitting jackets, he was outnumbered and outgunned. *Got to make every shot count*.

He spared a final glance over his shoulder. Sofia stared at him, a stubborn set to her mouth. He pulled her close and planted a quick kiss on her lips. “Go. Hurry.”

Something in her eyes before she turned and raced up the stairs warned him that she was not happy about being dismissed, and that if they both survived, she would have plenty to say about it.

Kyle glanced out the window again. Luis was nowhere to be seen. The remaining two Rue Marcha were walking up the pavement to the door, like two men paying a neighborly visit. They

huddled close. One fiddled with the lock.

Kyle drew in a deep breath. Not only did he have to make every shot count, he had to make sure each shot landed, and preferably stayed, in the body of the Rue Marcha. High velocity bullets could travel through walls. With a bit of luck, the town houses on either side would be empty, their residents at work, but considering how his luck had recently worked out, he would not count on it.

The lock clicked. The door swung open quietly.

He raised his gun and leaned forward.

There was nothing quiet about the bullet that smashed into the wall beside him, from *behind* him. He ducked and rolled forward. His foot slammed into the partially open front door, kicking it shut once again. He twisted around and fired at the four men emerging from the kitchen door behind him. Hell, he had counted on a warning—curses as the men hit their heads against the ridiculously low shelf—but he had not even heard them enter.

One of the men collapsed with a grunt. The others fired back as Kyle dove behind the couch.

Bullets ripped through upholstery. Puffs of polyester stuffing rose into the air.

The front door swung open. Two men entered, assault rifles set against their shoulders.

Five on one.

And he still did not see Luis.

Kyle braced his back against the wall. With both feet, he pushed against the couch, sending it sliding forward into the two men at the front door. They stumbled back.

From the side, a strong arm seized him around the neck and wrenched the gun from his hand.

He managed to flip his first attacker over him, but two others were on him before he could regain his balance. He drove an elbow into one man's stomach and sent him reeling. It bought him precious time to tackle the second man.

The man suddenly stiffened. Pain exploded through Kyle's left side.

Stunned, he stared to his attacker as the man's eyes glazed. A crimson stain blossomed across the man's white shirt. Kyle stepped back, his hand going to the bleeding flesh wound in his side as the man toppled sideways. The man was dead before he hit the ground.

Luis Sanchez stood tall in the space vacated by his henchman. He smiled at Kyle. His weapon, a bulky silencer around the muzzle, was pointed at Kyle.

The leader of the Rue Marcha shot *through* his own man to hurt Kyle.

The two men behind Luis—the same two Kyle had repeatedly thwarted in their attempt to enter the front door—muscled their way forward and wrestled Kyle to the floor, pinning him down. Two others, whom Kyle had briefly shaken off, rose to their feet.

“Where is the antidote?” Luis demanded.

“Why?” Kyle sneered. “You dying?”

“You stopped my men at Proficere Labs, didn't you? You were looking for the antidote. Is the girl still alive?”

“What’s it to you?”

Luis’s eyes glittered. Apparently, he did not like his questions answered with questions, and for that reason alone, Kyle intended to keep doing so.

A muffled sound came from the second floor.

Luis’s gaze darted to the stairs. He looked back at Kyle, his familiar smirk on his lips. “Keep him there,” he ordered his two men, and nodded at the other two. They turned and ran up the stairs, ahead of Luis.

Kyle wrenched hard, but could not pull out of the vice-like grips that held him down. “Sofia. Run!” he shouted.



Sofia struggled to support Danyael’s weight. He was Kyle’s height, though he was not as heavily muscled. Still, he was nearly a foot taller than she was, and at that moment, he was not able to stand upright.

She had shaken him hard enough to wake him from his near coma, but not even the whispered urgency in her tone jolted alertness back into him. He slumped against her, eyes closed. Every now and again, his eyes opened, but his gaze was unfocused.

The sound of gunshots cut through the silence of the house. Muffled sounds of a tussle, then male voices, edged with violence, filled the house.

A familiar voice shouted, “Sofia. Run!”

The only “running” option meant leaving Danyael *and* Kyle. Sofia’s response was a resounding “hell, no” to that order.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs.

Danyael’s eyes flashed open. His body tensed as if struck by the sudden surge of emotions from the Rue Marcha. He pulled sharply away from Sofia, then reached out and touched the first man who rushed into the master bedroom.

An expression of inconsolable loneliness purged reason and intelligence from the man’s eyes. Sofia’s mouth dropped open. She pressed herself against the bedroom wall and watched the vivid play of emotions race across the man’s face, one after another. Stunned betrayal. Wrenching heartache. Unrequited love. Endless moments of mute misery and silent despair, stretching out into forever. Ingrained distrust winning the war over a desperate yearning for human connection. The brutal silencing of his needs, of his soul.

Danyael’s soul?

Sofia’s gaze tore to the alpha empath for a split second and then flashed back to the Rue Marcha henchman as he groaned. Stripped of humanity, it was a terrible sound. The anguish that flared through the man’s eyes quivered on the brink of madness.

Without fear, he stepped over the edge.

She would never have believed that she could *see* a mind snap, but in that moment, she did. Madness drove the clinging shreds of sanity away. The man reached for his gun.

Sofia threw herself between Danyael and the man before she realized that she and Danyael were never at risk.

Without hesitation, the man placed the gun against his temple and pulled the trigger. Blood, flesh, and brain matter splattered over the adjacent wall.

Sofia cringed, closing her eyes briefly. Her mind reeled.

The hushed whispers, the rumors about Danyael were true. He could kill with a single touch. The emotional trauma he had survived, the lingering heartache he had learned to live with, amplified by his empathic powers, were devastating enough to drive others to suicide.

What she had not expected to see was the sorrow and regret in Danyael's dark-eyed gaze.

Another man ran into the room. His eyes flared wide with equal parts shock and horror.

Sofia recoiled when Danyael touched him. He stumbled back as his emotions crumbled before the dominant power of an alpha empath. He too reached for his weapon and raised it to his temple. His finger tightened on the trigger. An expression of relief, of peace flashed across his face a moment before his body joined his companion's on the floor.

Luis burst into the room.

"Danyael!" Sofia shouted a warning, but it was too late.

Luis pistol-whipped Danyael across his face. Danyael stumbled against the wall and crumpled unconscious to the ground when Luis brought the butt of his pistol down on the back of Danyael's head.

Luis turned on Sofia. His gun pointed unwaveringly at her. "The antidote. Where is it?"

Sofia's gaze darted to the empty syringe on the bedside table. "It's gone."

Luis's face mottled with anger. He seized the syringe, stared at it, and then flung it aside. It landed in front of her. "All of it? He wasted it all on you?" A moment later, a shrewd gleam entered his eyes. "It's in you, no? I take you with me, and we'll find a way to get it out of you."

Sofia shook her head. "No, you won't." She snatched up the syringe.

Luis burst out laughing. "What you gonna do with that? You and your little injection against me, my weapons, and my men?"

Sofia pulled out the plunger, filling the syringe with air.

Luis lunged at her. She stumbled back on the bed—the bed where her parents had died.

She would *not* die there.

Carnival tricks were all she could do, but sometimes, carnival tricks were enough. Sofia stabbed the syringe into the bulging vein at the side of Luis's neck, but he was faster than she expected. He slapped her arms away and raised his hand to swipe the syringe out of his neck.

Focus! Her telekinetic powers slammed into the plunger of the syringe, releasing a bubble of air

into Luis's bloodstream. Moments later, the syringe tumbled to the floor.

"Hah! You think you can hurt me?" Luis mocked. He pinned her down to the bed. His rank breath warmed the side of her neck, but she refused to turn her head. "You're his girl, aren't you?" he sneered. "What say I make you scream nice and good? What do you think that would do to him?"

She could not see the air embolism, but Kyle had taught her to trust her psychic touch. She did not need eyes to see. She understood human anatomy; she had spent hours staring at detailed anatomical maps of the arteries and veins, connecting like complex waterways, in the human body. She knew exactly how to guide the bubble of air to the brain.

Luis's hands tore her sweater off. A chill trembled over her body, but she did not react. *Almost there.*

Directed by Sofia's telekinetic powers, the air embolism bobbed in rivers of crimson, propelled up specific channels. The walls of the blood vessel narrowed. The air bubble lodged firmly, like a boulder blocking canyon walls. The gush of blood around it slowed to a trickle and then stopped entirely.

Luis's heartbeat flickered, a scarcely perceptible skip.

Sofia swung her legs up and kicked Luis away.

She should not have been able to move a man who weighed two times as much as she did, but she desperately wanted to get him moving in the right direction before the air embolism cut off blood flow to his brain and paralyzed his body.

Luis swayed. For several moments, he teetered on his heels, rocking unsteadily from side to side. His eyes glazed and rolled back in his head. He toppled backward, mighty Goliath felled by an air bubble.

"Sofia!" Kyle's cry preceded him up the stairs. He burst into the room.

Sofia shot to her feet. He wrapped his arms around her, and his stunned gaze swept across the room. "How did you—?"

She twisted around in his arms and looked at Luis. "I paid attention in anatomy class. Danyael... Danyael did the rest." As she moved, her arm pressed against a wet patch on his black shirt. She pulled her hand away to find it smeared crimson. "You got shot?" Her jaw dropped. "Again? We have to get you to—"

He grunted. "I know it's starting to seem like the standard operating procedure around here, but it's not. I'm usually better at not getting shot. I'll have to call Zara and Xin to let them know what happened here anyway. They can send a medic over to take care of me. Is Danyael all right?"

"Just unconscious, I think. Luis hit him pretty hard on the back of his head."

"Lucky for us he didn't kill Danyael, or we'd probably all be dead from Danyael's empathic super nova."

She pulled back from him and stared up into his face. "Are you sure you're okay? Are *we* okay?"

"Yeah. We're clear. The shots up here distracted Luis's men just long enough for me to break free

and take them out.”

Her breath shuddered out of her. “So it’s over?”

“Yeah, except for the paperwork, but we’ll leave that to Zara and Xin.”

“Let’s get Danyael back to the bed. I want to check his head. Maybe I can reduce the bruising and the headache he’s going to wake up with.”

“Fine.” Kyle moved away from Sofia. He hefted Danyael over his shoulder and lowered the alpha empath onto the bed. He stepped aside as Sofia, her sweater hastily tugged over her head and slightly askew, leaned over Danyael and probed the swelling knot at the back of his head. “I guess I’ll go call Zara’s cleanup crew,” Kyle said. “It would suck if Danyael woke up and felt this compulsive need to heal people and undo everything we did.”

He looked around the room. His breath caught. Sofia knew he had come to the same realization she had. The slaughter in the room was beyond Danyael’s empathic healing capabilities. Blood splattered on the walls and carpets. Three bodies lay prone in death.

Kyle’s shoulders sagged on a sigh. “Sofia, this room—”

She twisted around to look at him. “No, Kyle, it’s okay. I’m all right. There was death in here, but there was life, too. You and Danyael saved my life. Heck, *I* just saved my life.” Her smile quivered on her lips, but her eyes were calm and at peace as she stared down at her hands.

All it took was a carnival trick.

Chapter 22

Sofia quickly concluded that her highest and best use was to stay out of the way of the cleaning crew that Kyle had summoned with a single phone call. She perched on the kitchen counter and watched, wide-eyed, as six men and women traipsed through her tiny town house with industrial strength cleaners. The crew scrubbed blood from the walls and the floors. Crimson-stained carpets, beyond salvage, were ripped up and replaced. No one bothered to take photographs for evidence, and the bodies were removed without a fuss.

The law-abiding citizen in her shrank at the amount of cover-up that was happening, and wondered why no one else seemed as appalled as she was.

Trouble came, or so she thought, in the form of a small-framed Chinese woman, only a few inches taller than she was. The woman wore a black pantsuit over a white blouse. Her long hair hung loosely past her shoulders. She was clearly not a mercenary—she did not possess that predatory prowl—but she walked up the driveway with the confidence of a woman in charge.

Everything about her shrieked “federal agent.”

Sofia leaped off the kitchen counter and dashed through the house to find Kyle. He was in the living room, cleaning his weapons, and looked up as she approached. “Someone’s here,” she said. “Looks like trouble.”

Kyle peered out of the window. “That’s trouble, all right. Stay here.”

Kyle went to the door to meet the woman. They spoke in lowered voices; Sofia could not make anything of their conversation, but within moments, Kyle invited the woman in and waved Sofia over. “Xin, this is Sofia. Sofia, Xin.”

Xin? The one with the NSA? Sofia walked forward to join Kyle and extended her hand to the woman. “Hi.”

The tiny woman’s smile was warm and genuine. “Hello, Sofia.”

Xin was nothing like anything Sofia had imagined—plain where Zara was attractive, subtle where Zara was flashy. Sofia could have imagined Xin quite at home behind a computer. In fact, her pale complexion suggested as much.

“How is Danyael?” was Xin’s first question.

“He’s resting, as comfortably as possible, considering the circumstances.”

Xin nodded. “Keeping him comfortable and safe is usually the most we can do for him at times like this. Thank you for protecting him from the Rue Marcha.”

Sofia smiled, a little uncomfortable with Xin’s expressed gratitude. “The least I could do. So...do you know what happened at the warehouse? Was FEMA able to seal it off?”

“It was a near thing,” Xin confessed. “The potency of the chemical agent actually worked to our advantage. Most of the people in the warehouse passed out before they could attempt an escape, which would almost have certainly resulted in venting the agent out into the atmosphere.”

Sofia shivered at Xin’s matter-of-fact tone.

“The release of the chemical agent gave the IGEC the ammunition it needed to demand a subpoena of Proficere Labs records. Of course, the ink on the subpoena had scarcely dried when the IGEC received an unexpected e-mail from a certain Michael Hayes, research files attached. The IGEC was a little unhappy, though, when they found out that you had taken the only two actual samples of the antidote.”

Kyle frowned. “But I gave a vial to Zara.”

“And she delivered it to the IGEC, which only partially mollified them. Regardless, the antidote is now in mass production, and the IGEC is in talks with our government and the South American governments on the topic of preemptive vaccination.” Xin released her breath. “It’s going to be messy for a while. The exact threat level isn’t clear, but the repercussions, if the threat ever comes to pass, would be massive, so everyone is acting like it matters—which it does.” She glanced at Kyle. “I’d suggest keeping away from the IGEC for a while. Actually, it wouldn’t hurt to keep a low profile for a month or two. Everyone knows, logically, you’re not to blame, and most certainly not you,” Xin added, looking at Sofia. “But you’ve stepped on a lot of toes, infringed on the territorial claims of several federal and international agencies. Lots of people are pissed off, even though it all ended as well as it possibly could have. It will take a while for them to come around and admit that they’re grateful you didn’t turn the microchip over to Proficere, which would almost certainly have given the information to the Rue Marcha.”

“And did you find the microchip?”

“Luis Sanchez had it on him.” Xin glanced at the ambulance parked in front of the town house. “Not that it particularly matters now that IGEC has access to Proficere’s research.”

Sofia swallowed hard. “About Luis—”

Xin smiled. “Officially, his death certificate will indicate that he died of a heart attack. If anyone digs deeper, we’ll attribute the kill to Danyael.”

“But—”

The Chinese woman shrugged. “Five hundred and fifteen. Five hundred and sixteen. At some point it becomes a rounding error, and Danyael has more or less hit that point.” She glanced at the stairs. “Will it be all right if I look in on him for a few minutes? The NSA and the Mutant Affairs Council sent me over to make sure he was okay.”

“Yeah, sure,” Sofia said, her brow furrowing.

Xin answered the unasked question. “Danyael’s sanity and health matter to more people than just Zara Itani. Chalk it up to national security and leave it at that.” She smiled and moved away, heading quietly up the stairs.

Sofia frowned at Xin’s back. In a lowered voice, she said to Kyle, “She’s the most normal of your friends that I’ve met so far, and even then, she’s a little...” She paused, searching for the right word that would not be offensive. Unfortunately, she realized, there were none.

“Scary,” Kyle supplemented.

Yeah, scary.

Kyle continued in a cheery tone that Sofia considered grossly misplaced. “Even more so considering she’s human, as is Zara. Some of the scariest people I know are human. I hadn’t really thought about it that way before.”

Sofia looked sharply at him. His smile was rueful and slightly sheepish. She did not resist when he tugged her close, wrapped his arm around her waist, and placed an absent-minded kiss on the top of her head.

She smiled, relaxing against him. Kyle’s easy affection promised normality and offered hope for a future together.

“So,” Kyle began. “It sounds like I’m on the government’s blacklist until a couple of people get over their injured pride. I’m sure I can talk Zara into giving me a leave of absence. I haven’t had a vacation in a long time. I could see the world—”

Sofia’s smile trembled. Her dreams and her hopes had overstepped reality once again.

“—go bar hopping in Chapel Hill, stalk the nursing building at UNC, walk a pretty girl home after her classes and her bar waitressing gigs.”

“Me?” Sofia asked. She winced at the childish lilt of hope in her voice.

Kyle did not seem to notice. His grip tightened around her waist. “Yes, you. Someone needs to keep a do-gooder out of trouble.”

Sofia’s eyebrows shot up. She giggled. “It certainly won’t be you.”

“Oh, you’ll be surprised how good I can be at keeping do-gooders out of trouble if she’s the only person on my agenda.”

She snorted. “I’ll believe it when I see it.” She leaned against him, enjoying his strength and support. “Kyle?”

“Uh-huh?”

“You know, I’m an only child, and you...you act like you’re an only child, but you’re really not.”

He was silent for a long moment, and then sighed. “Robert Tyce is not legally my brother anymore.”

“You have the same parents.”

“He’s probably forgotten me.”

“I’m willing to bet not. Won’t you at least say hi?”

“It’s not that simple.”

Sofia nodded. “Of course not, but we obviously don’t do simple or we would have just returned the microchip to Proficere.”

Kyle sighed again, a long-suffering sound. “I’ll consider it if you promise not to come up with any more ideas for a week.”

That promise was good enough for her. She was almost certain she could wait seven days before stumbling headlong into trouble again. “Deal!” She looked up and smiled into his kiss.



The town house was perfectly restored by the time Zara showed up late in the evening.

“How is he?” was her first question as she stepped into the house. She shrugged off her leather coat and tossed it onto the new sofa that Three Fates had paid for.

“Still resting,” Sofia assured her. “I look in on him every half hour.”

Zara’s restless edge smoothed. Her smile was one of quiet relief.

“If you’d like some coffee, I can get a fresh batch going while you look in on him,” Sofia offered.

Zara nodded. “Thanks.” She went up the stairs, her heeled boots making no noise on the wooden stairs.

The coffee had been ready for ten minutes, but Zara had not returned. Sofia went upstairs and found her at Danyael’s bedside. Zara’s hands, long tapered fingers tipped with perfect manicures, pressed over Danyael’s subtly misshapen left hand. The expression on her lovely face was contemplative. The quiet patience in Zara’s stance told Sofia that the assassin would have willingly waited forever by Danyael’s bedside. The challenging glitter in her eyes was replaced by the soft glow of a woman in love.

Sofia drew in her breath sharply. Zara loved Danyael at least as much as or perhaps even more than he loved her.

And Danyael did not know.

Zara’s gaze flashed to Sofia. Their eyes met. Unhurriedly, Zara leaned forward and kissed Danyael’s lips, before pushing to her feet. “Is the coffee ready?”

“When you’re ready,” Sofia said. It was perfectly understood that Danyael, as a topic of conversation, was completely off-limits.

Back downstairs, Sofia handed Zara a mug of coffee as she sat in the newly furnished living room with Kyle. The blood and gore of hours past had been erased; her home was once again a haven. Memories would linger longer—memories of death but also of life. The quiet pop and crackling of burning wood in the fireplace filled in the silence. No one said much. It was enough to be alive and safe once more.

It was enough for Sofia that Kyle's arm draped across her shoulders and that his lips brushed often against the top of her head, offering kisses so absent-minded that, as a statement, they seemed downright possessive.

Sofia sat up when she heard an uncertain step on the staircase.

Zara too looked up, but made no move from her seat. The two women exchanged glances, their understanding mutual and immediate.

Sofia rose because she knew—they *both* knew—that Danyael would be marginally more willing to receive help from her. She found Danyael standing on the staircase, leaning heavily against the wall as he maneuvered his crippled leg and crutch down the narrow stairs. He smiled when he saw her and accepted her help without protest. Their progress was slow and unsteady. Danyael was still weak and Sofia too short to support him, but she, instead of Kyle or Zara, allowed Danyael to salvage whatever was left of his pride.

They made it safely to the bottom of the stairs. Sofia would have stepped away, but Danyael's grip on her hand tightened. "Just a minute." He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. His grasp was gentle, but a tingling warmth radiated from the point of contact and infused her body, bringing with it a sense of serenity, of utter comfort and safety.

Sofia closed her eyes and allowed the emotions to wash over her. It would be so easy for anyone to mistake Danyael's instinctive compassion for love, fall in love with the alpha empath, and then smash oneself in an eternity of frustration against his equally instinctive distrust of others. *Poor Zara.*

Danyael released her hand.

She opened her eyes and met his dark eyes.

He smiled again. "You're all right." His focus shifted briefly to Kyle. "You're both all right."

Those simple words were more profound than any benediction or blessing Sofia had ever received from a priest at Mass or confession. To conceal the flush of embarrassment, she looked at her watch. "You've been asleep for fourteen hours. Would you like something to eat? I have leftover pizza in the refrigerator. I can reheat it for you."

Danyael's gaze moved past her shoulder to meet Zara's. Something seemed to pass between them in that wordless moment before Danyael turned his face away. He shook his head. "No, thank you." His voice was quiet, all the better to conceal the lingering exhaustion. "I slept too long. I have to go or I'll miss the last bus."

His crutch tapped an unsteady rhythm on the hardwood floors as he limped to the front door. He paused to zip up his black leather jacket, soft and worn from age.

Kyle reached for his car keys but was forestalled by a sharp shake of Zara's head. His brow furrowed, but he deferred to Zara and slid the keys back into his pocket. "Danyael," he called.

Danyael looked over his shoulder.

Kyle pushed to his feet and walked over to Danyael. He extended his hand. "Thank you."

Surprise flashed across Danyael's face. He had obviously not expected Kyle's gratitude. He

shook Kyle's hand. "You're welcome."

Kyle continued. "When you interrogated the Rue Marcha, Xin said something odd. She said you didn't just do it for Sofia, you did it for them."

Danyael shrugged. "You needed the truth quickly. You would have put them through hours of physical pain and may not have gotten what you needed. What I did, I did in a minute."

"And after you left, he undid it," Zara added, her voice flat and cool.

Danyael reacted to the sarcasm and scorn in Zara's voice by looking away, but not before a flash of despair passed over his face—the despair of a man who did not know how to win the love of the woman he wanted.

Sofia ached for Danyael, for Zara, and for the love that lay unvoiced and unseen between them—healer and assassin, separated by a gulf too wide to bridge.

Without another word, he stepped out of the house and quietly closed the door behind him.

Kyle shook his head. "He's amazing," he said.

Zara was silent for a moment. Her face was expressionless, though her violet eyes seemed gentler, the hard, cool light gone. "He's infuriating," she added. She pushed to her feet, reached for her coat, and went to the door.

A gust of cold wind blew into the house as she stepped out, and then fell quiet when she slammed the door behind her.

For a moment, the only sound was the crackle of burning logs in the fireplace. Sofia drew back the curtains and peeked out to see Zara catch up with Danyael before he climbed on board the bus. She grabbed his arm and swung him around, steadying him before he fell. Sofia could not hear anything they said to each other, but whatever Zara said must have worked. He turned and allowed her to lead him back to her car.

Sofia released the curtain and sank back into Kyle's waiting arms.

He shook his head. "Seriously screwed up. And I thought *we* had issues."

"We do."

He grinned at her as he tugged her onto his lap. "But we have all our lives to figure it out."

EPILOGUE

Summer hovered on the cusp on fall, afternoon on the brink of evening. The cool air whisked the humidity away and replaced tension with laughter. Amused wedding guests stopped keeping track of the list of disasters that had nearly befallen the event. Everyone had held his or her breath as the three-year-old pageboy precariously balanced the rings on a lace pillow. The adorable five-year-old flower girl who danced her way down the tulle-draped aisle was applauded, much to the embarrassment of her mother who did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Kyle, standing at the front of the decorated garden grove, beside his brother, Robert Tyce, only looked bemused at the antics of his young nephew and niece.

Chelsea, Sofia's bridesmaid, blond and stunning in her hunter green silk gown, almost stole the show, but it was clear that Kyle only had eyes for his petite bride. Sofia had wisely decided not to bedeck herself out in layers of "fluffy stuff" as she called it. A heavy gown, she insisted, would likely topple her. Instead, her wedding dress was a cream satin sheath. Its hem, embroidered with lace, brushed her ankles as she walked down the aisle, leaving scarcely any trace of her passing on the grass.

Thus, on a perfect evening, at the end of summer, Kyle and Sofia's married life began. Her stomach was already gently swelling with child—*their* child, who would be loved, adored, and spoiled rotten, whether mutant or human.

By design, the ceremony was short and sweet, and the celebration was long. Sofia flitted through the crowd and introduced her nursing school friends to Kyle's mercenary colleagues, who, she had to admit, looked decidedly normal, except for the fact that they were all in top physical form and subtly armed, she suspected. She knew that many of them were alpha mutants, but no one did anything extraordinary, and the other guests were allowed to wallow in blissful ignorance.

With a reluctant frown, Sofia waved away the waiter who circulated with a tray of filled champagne glasses. She turned to Zara, who looked nothing at all like an assassin in her bright yellow sundress and straw-colored sandals.

The other woman smiled warmly. "Congratulations, Sofia."

Sofia grinned. "Thank you."

Zara continued. "Danyael sends his regrets. He had to work and could not be here, but he wishes

you—the both of you—” She looked down at the swell of Sofia’s stomach. “—and Kyle all the best.”

Sofia’s eyes widened. “That night...he knew.”

Zara nodded.

Sofia stared at the assassin. She did not know Zara well enough to presume she had any right to ask the question lingering on the tip of her tongue, but she cared enough for Danyael to want to know. “Will you and Danyael be all right?”

Zara’s eyebrows arched. “Eventually,” she said quietly. Her thoughtful expression evaporated and it was replaced by her usual arrogance. “As soon as he pulls his head out of his ass.” She leaned down and touched her cheek to Sofia’s. “Be happy.”

Sofia wore a wistful smile as she watched Zara disappear into the crowd. Kyle appeared beside her and slipped an arm around her waist. With his other hand, he caressed her belly. “What did Zara want?”

“Just to congratulate us. She and Danyael don’t appear to be on any better terms than they were six months ago.”

Kyle shrugged. “It’s probably Zara’s fault.”

Sofia laughed. “She implied it was his.”

“And that’s why it will take them years to sort it out.”

She glanced over her shoulder and found Kyle’s brother and his family in the crowd, mingling with their other guests. After many long conversations and not a little bit of conflict, Kyle and his brother, Robert, had managed to repair their relationship. “How’s the family thing coming along?” she asked.

Kyle grunted. “He’s not that bad actually. His kids are kinda charming, and his wife isn’t just a sorority-chick-turned-trophy-wife.”

Sofia rolled her eyes. Lauren Harrington Tyce had a Ph.D. in astrophysics, and she had abandoned a promising career in management consulting to homeschool her children. The Tyces were definitely going to rub a few rough edges off Kyle’s preconceived notions of his birth family. “We should invite them over for dinner after the baby’s born.”

“Sure. They’ll probably find a way to fit us between their ski trips to Aspen and their shopping trips in Milan.”

On second thought, those rough edges would take a little longer to smooth off. Sofia looked up at Kyle, a scowl and a rebuke forming on her lips.

He, however, was grinning. “Gotcha.”

She sank against him and relaxed into smile. “You’re going to make my life difficult, aren’t you?”

“Don’t see any reason to change now. You’re a do-gooder. You need something to fix, or you get twitchy. I figure my job is to keep you occupied the rest of your life.” His grip tightened around her, and he lowered his lips to hers.

“Oh, you will.” She breathed out the promise, and then smiled into the kiss as applause burst out

and the love of their friends surrounded them.

The End

Intrigued by the assassin, Zara, and the alpha empath, Danyael? Their tumultuous relationship begins in ***Perfection Unleashed (Double Helix #1)***

www.jadekerrion.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jade Kerrion defied (or leveraged, depending on your point of view) her undergraduate degrees in Biology and Philosophy, as well as her MBA, to embark on her second (and concurrent) career as an award-winning science fiction, fantasy, and contemporary romance author.

Her debut novel, ***Perfection Unleashed***, published in 2012, won six literary awards and launched her best-selling futuristic thriller series, ***Double Helix***, which blends cutting-edge genetic engineering and high-octane action with an unforgettable romance between an alpha empath and an assassin.

Earth-Sim and ***Eternal Night*** won first place Royal Palm Literary Awards in the Young Adult and Fantasy categories respectively. Readers have clamored for sequels, and Jade will get around to them when her To Do list opens up (sometime after 2020.) ***Life Shocks Romances*** features Jade's sweet and sexy contemporary romance series, which proves that, at the very least, she knows how to alphabetize books.

If she sounds busy, that's because she is. Jade writes at 3 a.m., when her husband and three sons are asleep, and aspires to make her readers as sleep-deprived as she is.

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A TRACE OF COPPER

ANNE RENWICK

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A TRACE OF COPPER

A rogue frog on the loose threatens their future.

New recruit to the Queen's agents, Dr. Piyali Mukherji is given a simple first assignment. Travel to the small Welsh village of Aberwyn and solve the mystery of a young woman's blue skin lesion. A challenging task, for the alarming infection is unlike anything she's seen before—and it's spreading.

Evan Tredegar, the town's pharmacist and the only man to ever capture her heart, knows more than he's telling. Despite his efforts to push her away, her touch reawakens old desires. As more villagers fall victim to the strange disease, he'll have no choice but to reveal his secrets, even if it means sacrificing his freedom.

Together they must move past broken promises, capture a rogue frog, and stop the infection before it spreads out of control.

Chapter 1

Aberwyn, Wales

Spring, 1885

“It bit me,” the young woman informed Piyali, hiking her skirts and rolling down her woolen hose. “Right through my stocking.” Miss Price, the shopkeeper’s daughter, plopped down on a chair and propped her foot upon a stool, pointing. “And now it’s blue.”

Dr. Piyali Mukherji leaned closer. As insane as Miss Price’s words sounded, they rang true. Her ankle was indeed blue.

Well, part of it. There was a decided lesion approximately two inches in diameter above her fibular protuberance. Piyali pressed two fingers against the blemish. She would describe it as an infection. Except it didn’t appear inflamed, and it wasn’t hot to the touch.

And it was *blue*.

Unheard of. But that was why she’d accepted the Crown’s commission, taken on the added duties of a Queen’s agent. The Duke of Avesbury, the gentleman at the head of this small, select group, had offered her a chance to be on the forefront of investigations into strange and unusual medical conditions. This certainly fit the bill.

“A frog bit you.” Piyali’s eyebrows rose, hoping she’d heard wrong. “A blue frog. With teeth.” Did frogs have teeth? And frogs—at least in Britain—were supposed to be green. Or brown.

Miss Price bit her lip. It didn’t bode well that she needed to consider her story.

Hoping for an explanation, she looked to the man who loomed beside her taking up far too much space in the small parlor. Time had turned familiar into foreign. Mr. Evan Tredegar wore his dark, tousled curls longer, no cravat wound under his collar beneath the rough shadow of his beard, and a small, curved scar cut through the edge of his right eyebrow. Under her study, a muscle twitched at his jawline, and his lips pressed into a thin line. He refused to meet her gaze. Perhaps it was just as well, for his eyes never failed to ignite a slow burn beneath her skin, and she needed to focus.

Still, a certain unease gave her pause. Once she’d been able to read his every mood and would have labeled his expression as concerned. Except the man she’d known wouldn’t withhold

information vital to a patient's treatment. What wasn't he telling her?

"Miss Price?" Piyali prompted.

The young woman nodded. "Then it hopped away and disappeared into the woods." Sticking her lower lip out in a pout, she looked up at her mother. "Is this really necessary? Besides, she can't be a real doctor. How can a *woman* hold such a degree?" With a sidelong glance at Piyali's clothing, her voice dropped to a whisper. "An *Indian* woman."

A real doctor. Piyali resisted the urge to roll her eyes. If she had a shilling for every time she'd heard that sentiment... Instead, she lifted her chin and replied, "I attended medical school at the Université de Paris where women have been accepted since 1860."

Never had Paris seemed so far away. Four of the best—and worst—years of her life. She'd earned her place there by being twice as good as the other students, most of them men. Any who had sneered at her inclusion swiftly adjusted their opinion as she collected one award after another, graduating first in her class. As to the prejudice, she no longer felt the need to justify the traditional clothing she wore. If a person could not appreciate the richness and intricacy of Indian designs, then it was their loss.

With an unsteady hand, Mrs. Price patted her daughter on the shoulder and threw Piyali a nervous look. "Lister University's choice of medical practitioner is alarming. No doubt Dr. Mukherji was all they could spare, but I have every confidence in Mr. Tredegar's ointment. The blue stain has barely spread since you first applied it. In fact, I think it's grown smaller." From the pinched expression on her face, the woman clearly wished Piyali elsewhere. "But your father worries and wanted to consult a board-certified physician in case amputation becomes necessary."

"Amputation!" Miss Price's chest began to heave, her eyes growing wide, her fingers digging into the cushion of her chair. "It's just a spot!"

"A very unusual spot." Evan finally spoke, though his words were tight and strained. "One that must be examined by someone with more expertise than myself."

Resentment sparked. His defense of her skills was unwelcome. Both by her and, judging from the deep frown upon her face, Miss Price.

Piyali glanced again at the blue lesion. Could it be no more than a stain of blue ink? Had she interrupted a hoax, a bizarre courtship trick designed to lure a handsome, young pharmacist into this parlor? For upon her arrival, her purported patient had been fluttering eyelashes and casting Evan glances drenched with unfulfilled longing. Or—she narrowed her eyes—did the fault lie squarely on Evan's shoulders? Did he toy with the young shopkeeper's daughter, making promises he couldn't—or wouldn't—keep?

For once he'd made her promises, ones she'd clung to for four long years abroad. Promises he'd failed to keep when he returned from his overseas voyage some three months ago. Upholding her own vow, she'd sent him a message, then pounced upon the daily post for days—weeks—hoping for word of his imminent arrival, but... nothing. Save a devastating silence.

Heartache must have shown upon her face, for her mother had hunted down coconuts and banana leaves before taking herself down into the kitchens of their London townhouse to personally oversee the preparation of Piyali's favorite dish, *bhetki macher paturi*—marinated steamed fish—in an effort to coax her to eat something... anything. Food wasn't her mother's only crisis response. Gentlemen of all kinds had begun to appear around the dining table. At first they were Bengali, then merely Indian. She knew her mother grew desperate when a six-foot-four, blond Swede had joined them.

"Choose a husband, Piyali," Ma had begged, reminding her that if her father were still alive, he would even now be arranging her marriage. Even Piyali's British stepfather conspired to assist Ma, making noises about grandchildren. But no other man, no matter how accomplished or handsome, could mend the rift in her life.

An acidic pain had lodged itself beneath her heart, slowly corroding all of her hopes and dreams. Though she'd buried herself in her work, establishing a research program in her laboratory while training to become a Queen's agent, nothing eased the ache.

Which was why she'd cringed when Mr. Black, the duke's right-hand spy, had handed her this first assignment. "Aberwyn, Wales?" she'd read. Evan lived there.

"Two birds, one stone." The agent's eyes had sparkled with mischief. "A competent research pharmacist and a specialist in infectious disease reconnecting over a mysterious and peculiar illness." He'd laughed. "What could go wrong?"

Though she'd wanted to cry, orders were orders. She'd packed a trunk with the essentials and boarded the first train to Cardiff, enduring lewd stares and bawdy speculations about the bedroom predilections of *exotic* young women. Aether, how she hated that word. In Cardiff, she bought a ticket for a rickety steamstage, one that had broken down twice en route to Aberwyn. There, despite her exhortations to be careful, the driver had tossed her trunk from the roof onto the muddy street where a grumbling stable boy had dragged it—bumping up each step—to a small, cramped room above the town's only tavern, *Yr Ysgyfarnog Wen*—The White Hare. Later, a short walk along the rutted main street had brought her here, to the shopkeeper's cottage.

"Are you all right?" Evan's voice was soft and considerate.

"Merely contemplating treatment options," she lied.

The long hours spent traveling had jarred every joint and coated her with a film of dust, all while doubts gnawed at her mind. But deceitful hopes kept whispering that perhaps Evan's missive had gone astray and so, though exhausted, she'd taken special pains for their first meeting in five years.

Shaking the travel wrinkles free, she'd donned a favorite green *lehenga*—skirt—with a simple, paisley embroidered border edging the hem. Buckling her corset atop the matching half-sleeved *choli*, she'd brushed her long, wavy hair to a shine before twisting a green, satin ribbon into a plait over her shoulder. But his eyes hadn't flashed with desire, his pulse hadn't jumped in his throat, and his fingers hadn't twitched—as they once had—with a need to touch her skin. Evan had barely looked at her at all.

The ache settled back into her chest. It was no use, clinging to the past. She kept her gaze fixed upon her patient, trying to anesthetize her response, for it hurt too much to gaze upon Evan's once familiar face, to fight the urge to smooth his unkempt curls and drag her palm over the roughness of his cheeks.

"Ointment?" she asked, pulling a decilamp from its loop upon her leather corset, shaking it to activate the bioluminescent bacteria within. She bent over Miss Price's foot, directing a beam of light at the lesion. There. At its center, a tiny, curved, pink line. A scratch—bite? —that had already healed. Possibly the entry point of whatever organism had invaded her skin.

"An ointment of *khu-neh-ari*," Evan replied, speaking a foreign word that likely originated deep within the Amazonian rainforest, "made from the *Caniramon divaritum*, a climbing shrub."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "Have you encountered this particular ailment before?"

"I've been unable to identify it." He shifted on his feet. "Though the outward progression of its margins is reminiscent of a fungal infection. Hence the ointment."

"Infection!" The older woman yanked her hand from her daughter's shoulder.

"Fungus!" In a move worthy of Drury Lane, Miss Price threw herself backward upon the chair and tossed an arm across her forehead.

"Possible, but—" Piyali shifted the beam of light and the lesion... sparkled? She flicked the light away, then back. For a second, the skin shimmered, flashing pink and silver. Then, once again, it was blue. Not good. "I'm going to need a biopsy."

"Biopsy?" Miss Price's voice quivered, and she squirmed on her seat. "What's that?"

Turning to her bag of medical equipment, Piyali extracted a glass aetherscope slide, a few eyedropper bottles of stain and a sterile razor, arranging them all upon the small side table. "I'm going to shave away a tiny portion of the surface of your skin so that I might analyze it beneath my aetherscope. You should feel no more than a slight pinch."

Miss Price whimpered.

With a long-suffering sigh, Evan reached out to take Miss Price's hand. Odd that he wore gloves inside the parlor. "Squeeze as tight as you feel you must."

Minutes later, the skin sample was prepped and loaded within her small, portable aetherscope. Once the light source was activated, Piyali screwed in a pressurized canister of aether, listening to the gas hiss as it filled the chamber of the device. Perched on the edge of a chair, she bent over, peering through the eyepiece to adjust focus and magnification.

"Interesting," she murmured under her breath, then changed the angle of illumination. The color shifted.

A brush of feet on carpet. The faint disturbance of the air around her as Evan crossed the room to her side and leaned close. "What is it?" The heat of his breath swept across the bare skin of her neck and sent uninvited shivers across her skin.

How was it one man could affect her so?

She took a deep, steadying breath before answering. “A pearly luster.” Still, her voice caught. He was much too close. “One that tends toward iridescence of the pink and blue variety. It could be...” She dialed in to the highest resolution and stifled a curse. As feared, the jolting of the steamstage—or the tossing of her trunk—had indeed broken valuable equipment. Shaking her head, she stood and stepped back from the aetheroscope—and away from Evan. “My objective, the one with the highest resolution? Its crystalline lens is cracked.”

She could guess, but she wouldn’t. Not even for Evan. Especially not for him. He knew something, and he wasn’t sharing. Childish of her, but now that she too knew something, she wasn’t sharing either. Resolve stiffened her spine. He could wait—they all could—until she confirmed her findings with cold, hard evidence.

“Piyali?” Evan prompted.

Mother and daughter drew offended breaths at his overly informal address of an unfamiliar and unmarried woman. Even in a small Welsh village, propriety must be maintained.

“Dr. Mukherji,” she corrected him, her voice cool and clinical. Unless Evan decided to share whatever he concealed, there was nothing more she could do today. She was tired and hungry and irritated. And a report was due to Mr. Black. “I can’t say for certain. Further tests are required.”



A light mist of rain dampened Evan’s hair as he stood in the street staring at the door of *Yr Ysgyfarnog Wen*. If only he could turn back time.

Five years and she was still as beautiful as ever. He had no right to look, no right to steal glances. But he had. Of dark eyes he’d once stared into. Of long, wavy hair he’d once twined about his fingers. Of deep pink lips he’d once kissed.

He’d done his best not to stare, not to notice how the graceful arc of her collarbone peeked from beneath the edge of her neckline, how a short corset clasped her narrow waist beneath its tooled, leather surface, how her skirt flared outward over generous hips, or how its raised hemline revealed ankles encased in laced boots.

Her corset was studded with metal loops, hooks and chains to which she’d clipped all manner of essential devices and tools. Including a government-issued TTX pistol that gave his pulse a jolt. Was there anything more alluring than a strong, competent woman? But it was the familiar, amber glass vial dangling from a chain beside her hip that focused his gaze. Wondering, he’d bent close to peer through the aetheroscope and inhaled. Essence of orange blossoms. All these years she’d kept it, the same essential oil still scenting the water that rinsed her hair. Long-suppressed desires stirred.

He closed his eyes. He had no right to such thoughts.

Not one week after he’d returned to Britain’s shores, a skeet pigeon with rust-tipped wings had

alighted upon his window sill, a brief note tied to its jointed ankle with news of her degree and the direction to her family's London townhouse. To speed his reply, she'd even included a punched return card for the clockwork bird.

With stars in his eyes, he'd sat down in his tropical greenhouse to put pen to paper. Halfway through his letter a small, blue frog had leapt onto the back of his hand. A stowaway upon one of the many lianas—climbing vines—he'd brought back from his voyage to the Amazonian rainforest. He'd thought the shimmering creature cute, adorable, delightful.

Until it bit him.

Evan rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, the soft black leather of his gloves reminding him of the moment everything went wrong. He'd never sent that letter. Or any letter. One didn't ask the woman he loved to share a slow descent into madness.

Time passed, and the vine of his silence slowly twined itself about his throat, growing so thick that only a machete could cut it free. Too late to ask her for help now. Not only did she likely despise him, she was a Queen's agent.

Nonetheless, he must speak with her. Her aetherscope was broken and that meant she would want to return to London on the morning's steamstage. That couldn't happen. He couldn't allow her to leave, not with a sample of Miss Price's skin in her possession. Here, in Wales, things could be kept under control.

Stopping her meant entering The White Hare where one Miss Sarah Parker, the tavern's daughter, would be lying in wait. He willed his feet to move, to cross the rutted road, willed his hand to wrap around the iron handle of the tavern's door and pull it open.

"Evan!" Sarah cried, her voice a confection of icing and spun sugar. Wiping her hands on her apron, she rushed to his side.

Out of the proverbial pan and into the fire.

Three months ago, Sarah and Miss Price—Tegan, she insisted whenever her mother wasn't around—had begun fighting to gain his attention, all in a futile effort to secure a marriage proposal. Their bickering was a constant reminder of what he would never have, a thorn that pricked at his conscience.

Tegan found any remotely credible excuse to throw herself in his path. Unchaperoned, she regularly dropped by his cottage—a three-mile walk into the countryside—to request more packets of headache powder and throat lozenges for the shop. Chances she sold that much were close to zero.

And Sarah? She pounced on him every time he stepped into The White Hare, always ready with a pint of his favorite ale, begging for tales of his time in the rainforest even as she tugged the bodice of her dress scandalously low. Worse, her parents aided and abetted, turning a blind eye to her blatant flirtations and not calling her to task when she ignored the other customers.

"Miss Parker," he replied. "Where is Dr. Mukherji? I need to speak with her."

Wrapping her arm about his, Sarah urged him closer to the peat fire burning in the grate.

“Upstairs,” she admitted, playfully pushing him into a chair and dropping into his lap. “But I’m right here.”

“Sarah,” he warned in a low voice. “I’ve asked you not to—”

She leaned forward, pressing generous breasts against his chest while twisting a finger into his curls so tightly it threatened to rip his hair from its roots. “Oh, *please*. All these months you’ve been without a woman to warm your bed. You need a wife, one who can help you run that pharmacy of yours in Cardiff. Tegan might know business, but she’s far too uptight to keep you satisfied after hours.”

“Stop,” he snapped, grabbing her hips and shoving her away. “I’ve no intention of taking a wife.”

Laughing, Sarah caught her balance on the sticky tabletop. “No? Then you’d best be careful. The Indian princess can’t take her eyes off you.” The lift of her chin redirected his attention.

What? He whipped his head about, catching Piyali’s narrow-eyed gaze from across the room as she descended the stairs. Guilt stuck in his throat. He’d not been unfaithful and didn’t want her to think... Did it matter? Her eyes slid away, and she turned her back, climbing onto a stool at the bar. A deliberate move to avoid any and all private conversation.

“She’s not a princess,” he said.

“Oh?” Her voice rose in a teasing lilt. “Then why do you stare at her as if she wears a crown of gold and precious jewels?”

Evan glowered. “Please, just bring me a pint.”

“Of course,” Sarah said, then winked. “And I’ll see what I can do about a little something extra.” She sauntered away, swinging her hips with each step. Tossing a quick word to her father, she jerked her head in Evan’s direction. Then, sliding onto a stool, Sarah turned her bright eyes upon Piyali. Her lips moved, and Piyali laughed. Not good. Sarah’s interference was akin to swatting a bee hive with a stick. The dull, throbbing beginnings of a splitting headache began to hammer away at his skull.

Glass banged on wood as Mr. Parker dropped a pint of frothy ale onto the table before him. “The way you’ve been handling my daughter? I think we ought to speak about calling banns.”

Evan dropped his head into his hands.

Chapter 2

“So tell me, is the all-too-precious Miss Tegan Price going to live?” The blonde, blue-eyed serving girl dropped onto a stool beside Piyali and leaned close. “Not that I wish her ill,” she hastened to add, “just that we’ve been at each other’s throats fighting over Evan.” She waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Tegan’s always fabricating one ailment or another, any excuse for Evan to formulate her a new potion.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Not only is he the most handsome man for miles around, he has a shop in Cardiff, and both of us want out of this dismal village.” A deep sigh slid from her lips. “Not that he wants anything to do with either of us.”

Piyali blinked at the sudden onslaught of unsolicited information. “I’m sorry, I can’t discuss a patient’s health,” she said. Then, reminding herself she was an agent tasked with collecting information, forced herself to sip the bitter ale and plaster on a conspiratorial smile. “But please, feel free to share any and all gossip about her with me.”

A wide grin split the woman’s face. “We’re going to be great friends,” she announced, slapping a hand upon the bar top. “I’m Sarah Parker, daughter of this humble establishment. Sorry about the shameful display of overt flirting you had to witness. What *is* your trick? Evan can’t seem to take his eyes off you.”

“It’s not what you think,” she began, but a discordant note rang in her answer. “We knew each other once, long ago.”

“And now find yourselves forced to work together to cure Tegan of whatever it is that ails her.” Sarah held up a hand. “Which you can’t talk about, but it’s good to know you’re not added competition.” She leaned forward, eyes wide, waiting. “So tell me instead, are you from India?” She continued before Piyali could draw breath. “I love the embroidery on your skirt. I’ve always wanted to travel, but the only other place I’ve ever been—not counting Cardiff—is London.” She sighed. “I miss London.”

Sensing an easily won ally, Piyali shared a bit more than she would otherwise. “I was born in northeast India, but moved here as a young girl with my stepfather and mother. Aside from the four years I studied in Paris, I’ve lived in London.” After an epidemic of diphtheria tore her family to shreds, her mother had resisted remarrying, choosing to support them by selling the stunning *kantha* shawls she hand stitched, until a chance encounter with a British textile importer had brought her

stepfather into their lives. Ignoring the many yelling and pleading aunties and uncles, they'd married and moved to England. Her mother had found a second chance at love... could she?

"Paris!" Sarah's eyes grew hazy. "I'm so jealous. It's awful here, but my father lost his job over a bar fight and decided he'd open his own tavern. Here. In Wales." She rolled her eyes. "I've no idea why. It's so remote. And forget about learning Welsh! It's impossible to wrap the tongue about. Just try to say the name of this tavern."

Piyali made her best attempt, and they both dissolved into tears of laughter.

"See?" Sarah said, then lowered her voice to a whisper as she waggled her eyebrows. "Thing is, I understand it just fine. Makes it fun to listen in on all the gossip."

"Sarah!" Mr. Parker yelled, beckoning his daughter. "Enough. Back to work."

Feeling as if she'd struck gold, Piyali pressed a hand atop Sarah's. "You'll tell me more about this town later?" Perhaps it was a path to nothing but renewed pain, but she needed to know about Evan, about what he'd been up to since his return.

"Only if you tell me more about India. And Paris."

"Agreed."

Sarah hopped onto her feet and turned back to the customers.

Sensing Evan's stare between her shoulder blades, Piyali took a deep breath and turned. Sad blue eyes met hers. Why hadn't he answered her message? Perhaps he'd fallen in love with another? Her chest constricted. They *had* been apart far longer than they'd been together.

Her heart had almost healed. Almost. Not that she would be giving him a chance to tear another hole by squabbling with Sarah and Tegan. It didn't matter what kept him silent. He'd made his choice.

His eyebrows drew together. Good. He ought to feel guilty about never answering her message. If he'd changed his mind, it was simple decency to inform her that she no longer fit into his life plans.

Difficult as it was, she needed to speak with him. She needed to know what he knew about the blue lesion and, to meet the bare minimum requirement of her mission, she needed to deliver Mr. Black's invitation.

She spun on her seat to face the bar and waved Mr. Parker over.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"No." She placed a punch card, a rolled parchment in a tin canister and two coins upon the bar. "Rather, I'd like to charter your skeet pigeon." The clockwork bird didn't look particularly airworthy. She frowned. "If it's in working order."

"Tends to malfunction," he warned, his voice suggesting she wasted perfectly good money. "Even on a good day, doesn't make it much past London."

Worth a try. It was the only bird in town, and she hadn't seen any telegraph wires. If Mr. Black couldn't arrange to have a new crystalline lens objective shipped, she'd take her sample back for analysis in her laboratory at Lister University. Waiting a few days for an answer would give her time to keep an eye on Tegan's lesion. "Good enough."

He pocketed the coins and, as he turned to tie the tin canister to the bird's ankle, his wife burst through the door, a bloody rag wrapped about her finger. Glaring at her husband, she pushed past him and plunged her hand into a bucket of soapy water all the while muttering under her breath about stupid plans and unreasonable men.

"What happened?" Sarah asked, handing her mother a clean cloth.

"It's nothing." Mrs. Parker dried her hands. "I scratched myself on some thorns by Seren's Well."

"The fairy well?" Sarah hissed. "You didn't. Tell me you didn't."

The steam in her mother's answering stare could make the nearby copper teakettle whistle. "I did it for you," she snapped.

"You can't," Sarah spat back. "That's the whole point. Do you know what the other girls will say if they find out?" She stalked away.

As Sarah's mother struggled to bandage her finger, Piyali offered, "I'm a doctor. I can look at it if you'd like."

Mrs. Parker's head jerked up. For a long moment, she stared at Piyali, her face expressionless. "More than a doctor, I'd say. Everyone knows what the Price Family is up to, pulling strings to drag you all the way here from London." Her mouth twisted. "Bet they were mightily disappointed when a woman arrived. And a foreigner at that. Nothing they'd like better than to see their precious daughter wed to a man of influence."

Piyali sucked in a sharp breath of air. She *was* a citizen, granted as a royal prerogative when she joined the Queen's agents, an offer only extended by special invitation. By working as a British spy, she had done—and would do—far, far more to serve this country than most natural born citizens. All this, however, was not something one announced, particularly in a Welsh tavern.

"Elena," her husband growled in warning, "there's no need to air the dirty laundry of others."

"*Hmphff*." Mrs. Parker snatched a rag and set to wiping the far end of the counter.

A hand touched her shoulder, and Piyali jumped.

"It's me." Evan's voice was hushed. "We need to speak. The rain has stopped. Perhaps a walk?"

Given the hostile glances the tavern owners hurled at each other like poison-tipped darts, Piyali was all too happy to flee. "I'll grab my overcoat."



"What's this about a fairy well?" Piyali asked him.

Lines of irritation pulled at the corners of her mouth. Insulted by the Parkers, most likely. They were experts at open hostility and masters of harsh insults. How they'd managed to conceive a daughter, he'd never know.

"*Ffynnon y Seren*. Seren's Well. A bit of local tradition and legend," he answered, happy to let more serious topics wait until the dark cloud lifted from her face. "A pretty little spot just outside the

village. Come, I'll show you."

Evan didn't offer her his arm. He wasn't a gentleman, and she wasn't a lady. Besides, it was better if they didn't touch. He wouldn't want to let go.

Despite all they had to say to each other, they walked in silence beneath the gray sky, following a narrow, winding path into a wooded gully. As they neared the well, he waved her ahead of him, not wanting to obscure her view of the ancient holy site. A small pool edged by rocks collected the upwelling of water beneath an old tree. Its roots had twisted and turned, invading the crevices of the ruins that stood beside the well. Overhead, scraps of cloth tied to its branches fluttered in the wind. Rough stepping stones led downward to the cool, clear water.

"It's beautiful. And so very peaceful. Like a *pabitra pukur*..." She trailed her fingers over the moss-covered stones of a low wall. "What was this?"

"An alter? A shrine? A chapel?" He shrugged. "No one recalls. But," he couldn't suppress a smile at the ridiculous legend he was about to share, "tradition has it that one can cure epilepsy by bathing in the pool at midnight while holding a duck beneath one's left arm."

"A duck?" Her face lit up as she laughed. "Are there any other odd traditions?"

"Too many to count. All invocations involve an offering of a bent steel pin to the *gwragedd annwn*, the water-sprite, who lives here. Most requests are for healing various ailments. Warts. Leprosy. Toenail fungus."

Her eyebrows rose. "Skin lesions?"

Ah. It seemed they were done with pleasantries. "I've no idea what causes it."

Only a partial lie, but it wasn't like he could hand her the frog. The blasted critter had leapt from his workbench and disappeared into the tropical plants and vines that grew in his greenhouse. He'd searched for hours—days, weeks, months—but had never seen the creature again. He cancelled all visitations to his greenhouse, all the tours he'd promised of the strange, wonderful plants he'd shipped home, unwilling to expose another person to its bite. Now he was a recluse, fast becoming the village eccentric.

Unfortunately, forbidding anyone to enter his greenhouse had the opposite effect, generating ludicrous rumors that he'd brought home man-eating plants and snakes that could swallow a child whole. Soon adventure-seeking boys had arrived, peering through the condensation-fogged glass, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever lay hidden inside.

He'd ordered a lock—the 3XR CinchBolt—but it arrived too late. A little over a week ago, Evan awoke to find the door to his greenhouse ever so slightly ajar, the plants nearest the crack struggling to endure the cold spring morning.

Though nothing obvious had been stolen, his first thought had been of that blue frog. Had it escaped? It seemed so. For not three days later, Miss Tegan Price had knocked on his front door, begging an ointment for a strange rash. This time, she'd not been pretending an illness.

Plying Tegan with questions, he'd discovered that the frog had bitten her while she walked upon

the foot path that led to his front door. After compounding a jar of ointment and sending her home with promises to call on her soon, he'd searched the path, the shrubs lining it, turning over every rock and fallen log he could reach, until finally resigning himself to failure. Instead, he turned to the desperate hope that the tropical frog had perished with the early morning's frost.

But he couldn't be certain. And now Piyali was here—the last place he wanted her.

"I owe you an apology," he said, speaking past the lump that blocked his throat. "I wanted to write... but things changed. I'm not the same man I was when I left." A gross understatement. He wasn't sure exactly what he was anymore, but according to the folklore the *Kayapo* shaman had shared, eventually he would no longer be human. Myth? He hoped so, but he couldn't be certain. With Tegan now facing the same fate...

"Did you meet someone?" Hurt shaded her voice as she searched his face. "Another woman?"

"No." His hand rose, reaching for her, but he forced it back to his side. "There will never be another woman for me, Piyali. I'm simply... unfit."

"An injury?" She glanced at his groin.

Blood rushed to his face, and he nearly choked. "Not that."

"Then what?" She placed a hand upon his arm, sending a fierce jolt of hunger through his body. "What is it that you feel you can't tell me? Once we shared... everything."

His eyes fell upon her rosy lips. He wanted nothing more than to pull her soft curves against his chest, to thread his fingers through the curls of her midnight-black hair that seemed to shine with its own light and pull her mouth to his. Kissing her would solve everything. And nothing.

The air between them shimmered with memories. At a fateful symposium—*Herbal Extracts and Their Use in the Treatment of Parasitic Infestations*—held at the Pharmacological Society of London, he'd lost awareness of all women but one. The attraction had been mutual, and a courtship had begun. Shared glances, touches, whispers over the course of several lectures, all culminating one fateful day in the shadowy recesses of the society's cloakroom. His pulse jumped at the memory of his mouth moving over her smooth skin, of linen and silk sliding to the ground, of her legs wrapped about his hips urging him closer, deeper.

He'd proposed the very next day on bended knee, asking her to come with him to South America. But her own dream had become reality, and with tears in her eyes, she showed him an acceptance letter granting her admission to medical school. In Paris.

Unwilling to let her go, he'd promised to ask her again in four years and begged her to wait for him.

Looking now into the twin dark pools of her eyes, he knew that with a few words, with a simple touch, she could be his once more. But at what cost? Her career. Possibly her life. He'd given her an apology, but he could not give her an explanation. Under no circumstances could he allow the British government to become aware of what had transpired. Nor would he inflict his future upon her.

The air was thick with regrets, making it hard to breathe.

“Evan?”

He dragged his eyes away, forcing himself to study the dappled light that filtered through the leaves above the surface of the spring. “You saw something through the aetherscope,” he said. “If it’s not a fungal infection, the ointment I compounded won’t cure her. Perhaps you ought to excise the lesion.”

“Perhaps.” Piyali moved out of reach, her boots tapping softly across the stepping stones. “Her skin, the basal layer, is blue. While that’s odd enough, it also color shifted when I changed the angle of illumination.” She lowered herself onto the low wall beside the water. “I’ve sent a skeet pigeon to London requesting my laboratory to send a replacement aetherscope lens without delay. Before I set a course of treatment, I want to collect more data.”

“Why not simply excise the lesion?” he asked, hoping she didn’t find his insistence too presumptuous.

“Excision would prevent its spread, but once removed, the tissue—and anything that has invaded it—will die.”

Exactly as he hoped. But she intended to investigate. Already, she’d dispatched a skeet pigeon to London. As his plans crumbled before him, Evan struggled to present her with a blank face. So much for his hopes of sending Piyali back to London without a sample. Still, if he could locate that blue frog, this disaster could be contained.

“Bet I can catch it first!”

“I’m faster!”

With a shout and a laugh, two boys ran up the pathway, skittering to a stop in the leaf litter at his feet.

“Simon,” Evan greeted one boy, then the other. “Aron. Glad to see the skin’s clearing up.” He glanced at Piyali and murmured, “I’ve written a paper and plan to send my findings to the Pharmacological Society soon.” They’d have to publish it, for he wouldn’t be speaking in public.

The boy yanked his collar away from his neck. “Almost all gone,” he said. “And no more itching.” His face twisted as he stuck out his tongue. “But the tea is... blech.”

Piyali stood and nodded a greeting. “Pleased to meet you both.” She peered at the boy’s face and neck, both impressed and incredulous. “You found a treatment for eczema?”

“From a shaman in the rainforest,” Aron answered, his eyes wide and sparkling.

“If you’re already cured,” Piyali replied with a smile, “what brings you to the fairy well?”

“Mr. Tredegar told us all about how the natives hunt in the rainforest. With blow guns and poison darts,” Aron said, snapping a branch off a nearby tree, whittling its end into a sharp point. “We’re gonna do the same, soon as we find that blue frog.”

“A blue frog,” Piyali said. “What a coincidence.” Her voice told him she knew it was anything but.

Biting back a curse, Evan closed his eyes. The creature’s skin secretions might not be poisonous

—not like the boys foolishly hoped—but its bite was a different matter. He had to catch that frog. Now.

Chapter 3

Evans had bundled her back toward the tavern, reaching its door just as the sun slipped over the horizon. He'd refused to enter, refused to discuss the frog situation, muttering something about stoking the greenhouse stove as he turned away.

Bewildered, she stood there in the street as his form disappeared into the twilight. That he'd found an effective treatment for eczema was... amazing. Test, analyze, report. Since his return from Brazil, he'd sent a number of groundbreaking reports to the Pharmacological Society of London, and its members were all enamored of him. When this paper arrived, they would extend him a speaking invitation, but given he'd yet to visit London, she doubted he'd accept.

Was it because she lived in London? Or did it have something to do with this frog?

He'd almost kissed her there by the spring. She'd read the intent in his eyes. Dark and intense, it was the same stare he'd fastened upon her that first day their eyes caught in the lecture theater. Not the stare of hostility most women who dared step into the male stronghold received, but one of intrigued attraction. One he'd underscored by taking a chair beside her own. Then, as now, desire had rushed like liquid heat throughout her entire body.

If there was interest, was there still hope? Possibly. But this infection—and apparently a frog—stood between them. Love thwarted by an amphibian. Absurd.

Stomach growling, she stepped into the smoky tavern, hoping Sarah might be inclined to indulge in a bit of gossip. Perhaps she might know something about this elusive frog. Alas, she was busy carrying pints of ale and side-stepping the wandering hands of men who believed a compliment was best delivered by pinching a woman's rear. That they dared to do so in her father's presence said something about the man, casting him in a most unpleasant light. A father ought to defend his daughter's honor, *consistently*.

Among this cohort of men, one particular set of eyes with an arrogant gleam turned in Piyali's direction as she strode to the bar—back straight and chin held high—but the man's vanity refused to recognize her discouraging demeanor. His mouth widened in a manner suggestive of all kinds of improprieties as he rose from his chair.

A woman alone. An Indian woman alone. A young Indian woman in a skirt with a hemline that exposed her booted ankles... and escorted by no man.

Somehow this was an invitation. Once, such blatant interest unsettled her. Now, she viewed it as an opportunity to realign his priorities.

As he approached, his gaze shifted downward, raking over her body with an air of speculation, and she pulled back the edge of her overcoat, giving him a glimpse of her government issued TTX pistol in its holster. *That* snapped his drifting eyes back to a more acceptable location, and he dropped back into his chair, scowling. A most gratifying response. She allowed herself a small smile.

“Hungry?” the innkeeper asked as she settled onto a stool. “Got stew and Welsh rarebit.”

“Rabbit?” she asked, her brow wrinkling.

A long-suffering sigh escaped his mouth. “Cheese on toast.”

She could see the stew bubbling on the stove. Gristly beef and overcooked rutabagas in a fatty broth. Her throat constricted in protest, and her stomach also threatened to rebel. “The rarebit, please. And,” she stopped him as he turned away, “the skeet pigeon?”

“Liftoff went as expected.” He raised a shoulder and stepped aside as his wife slammed a pint of frothy, overflowing ale onto the bar before Piyali.

“Don’t even think of drawing your weapon in my establishment,” Mrs. Parker warned with narrowed eyes. “Next steamstage leaves at sunrise.”

“I need to keep the room a few more days,” Piyali said, ignoring the unnecessarily strong hint. “Bit of a problem with a frog, I’m afraid.” She leaned forward eyeing the bandage wrapped about Mrs. Parker’s fingers. “Is it infected?” Recalling Sarah’s reaction to her mother’s visit to the fairy well, and Evan’s comments about offerings to the water-sprite, she added, “Did the bent pin you stuck yourself with happen to be rusted?”

Mrs. Parker stiffened. “What do you know about Seren’s Well?”

“I know much about many things, such as a duck is a useful fowl. That two boys are on the hunt for a blue frog.”

“Blue?” The innkeeper snorted, setting a plate of rarebit before her. “That’s but a fairy tale to go with a fairy well.” He gave his wife a hard stare. “What were you doing out there? Dipping your fingers in the sacred waters to rid yourself of warts?”

With a glare, his wife turned on her heel, tossing a few final words over her shoulder, “Keep it up, old man, and you’ll find yourself outside sleeping in the steam cart.”

Sarah leaned close as she passed behind Piyali. “See why I’m so desperate to marry? It’s a rare moment they’re ever in agreement about anything. But what’s this about a blue frog?”

So much for her source of gossip.



Her mind unsettled, Piyali tossed and turned all night on the lumpy mattress and, by morning, she was convinced it was stuffed with hay—not feathers—and infested by creepy-crawlies with an inclination

to bite. She'd had sleepless nights before, but always—even in Paris—her fingers had been able to trace the embroidered motifs of her *kantha* quilt, the various flowers and birds stitched into the fabric by her *dida's* very own fingers. During such restless nights, she allowed herself to remember a very different life, one she'd lost long ago. Such memories were the force that drove her to study infectious disease.

Before the sun had fully crept over the horizon, she was dressed—this time in a subtle coppery-orange *lehenga*—and pacing the rough boards of her room. A mythical fairy well, a blue frog and two boys on a quest to locate it in the undergrowth surrounding the pool. All had sounded like nonsense until Evan had turned her around and marched her away from said spring as fast as their feet would carry them, a muscle jumping in his clenched jaw.

Grounds for further investigation.

She glanced at the pocket watch that hung from her corset on a silver chain. The general store would be open by now. Miss Price, pampered daughter though she was, might be minding the counter with her mother. Perhaps if Piyali could draw her aside, she might coax forth more details.

With a quick check of her TTX pistol—men waking from a drunken stupor were often irate—she shrugged on her overcoat, picked up her doctor's bag and stepped from her room. She exited the tavern into the cool, fresh air that promised a beautiful spring day.

"I'm Dr. Mukherji, here to check on your daughter," she said, nodding a greeting to Mr. Price as she entered the store. He stood behind a gleaming brass till, tying on an apron as he prepared for the day's business.

"Heard about you." Mr. Price stared back at her, his eyes flat and unwelcoming. "Heard you were a woman. Trained in Paris, no less."

Would she always be greeted with such venom? Quite probably. Not that she would let that stop her. She pulled back her shoulders and met his gaze directly. "With a specialty in infectious diseases." She stood silent, letting that detail sink in, waiting to see if he was prejudiced enough that he would risk his daughter's health.

His jaw slackened. "Is it..."

"I've no idea," she answered, happy to have his complete attention, his grudging respect. "But I want to monitor her condition carefully."

Miss Price was presented without delay.

In a snit, Tegan flounced into the room. "This isn't necessary," she whined. "Mr. Tredegar is a renowned pharmacist."

"So he is," Piyali agreed, quietly wondering if anything more than the promise of financial security drove her interest in Evan. "But all men and women of science consult their colleagues. What two minds can accomplish together is far more than the sum of their individual work."

"Sit," her father commanded.

With a huff, Tegan sat upon a nearby chair.

Piyali knelt to unwind the gauze from Tegan's ankle. Much to her relief, the blue lesion didn't appear to have spread. Neither, however, had it decreased in size. Perhaps Evan's ointment had had some effect. Except, without an untreated lesion for comparison, no true scientific conclusion could be reached. Not that this was something she wished to test on a young woman. Or any other person.

"Where in the woods were you bitten?" If she could catch the creature, the minute her lens arrived she could analyze its saliva beneath her aetherscope.

Tegan shrugged. "On a path." But her eyes slid away.

Piyali dropped her voice to a mere murmur. "Might this unfortunate event have occurred beside Seren's Well?" A soft gasp from her patient. "The location of the attack—" A frog attacking. The very phrase sounded ludicrous. "Shall remain between us. Doctor-patient confidentiality."

"You—an outsider—have no business at our fairy well." Tegan crossed her arms and pursed her lips. "Who told you about it? No. Let me guess. Sarah. She'd do anything to win."

"Win?" What on earth could the spring have to do with the two women's matrimonial designs upon Evan?

"Don't pretend you don't know," Tegan huffed. "Your flashy dress and exotic, dark looks might draw Evan's glances, but he won't marry you." The spiteful use of his given name was not lost upon her, and it stung, the implication she was nothing but a pretty plaything to be used and tossed aside. "You wouldn't fit in. Not here. What he needs is a true Welsh woman to look after him."

Tegan thought her the newest competitor for Evan's romantic attentions. While Sarah had all but welcomed her to join the game, Tegan refused her admission outright. Yet once, Evan had asked Piyali to share his life. Not so these village girls, not even after months of shameless pursuit. "You'd rather lose a limb than confide the location of the frog?"

Hard eyes glinted at her and, when she spoke, her voice was hushed, staking an intimate claim. "If you *must* know, I was bitten on the path just outside Evan's front door whilst returning from our usual rendezvous." Her patient leaned closer. "We have spent time together behind closed doors. Frequently. His mother's opal and diamond ring *will* be mine."

That did it. She would not tolerate such disrespect. Slamming shut her bag, she stood. She was under no obligation to coddle Tegan's misguided hopes. And so Piyali left her there, perched like a queen upon her throne, to reapply Evan's *miraculous* ointment on her own.

Striding down the street, fingers clenched about the handle of her bag, Piyali searched the edge of the woods, hunting for a break in the vegetation, for the path that would lead her to Seren's Well. Either Tegan was lying or the frog had hopped through the woods until it found a likely location to establish a new home. She would find it, and she would analyze it, dragging it back to London as her small, blue hostage if necessary. With or without Evan's approval.

Evan. Good grief. Sarah and Tegan were poised to claw each other's eyes out over the man. But neither of the young woman knew—or cared—anything of his heart. Tegan wanted nothing but economic security attached to a handsome man. Sarah wanted all that and escape from her parents

with the promise of a touch of adventure.

Piyali wanted him for himself.

Yes, Evan's physique was impressive. Particularly after spending four years deep in the rainforest. He had sharper edges now. His body was tougher, harder, as if his muscles were forged from steel. She couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like—now—to be wrapped in his strong arms. His gray-blue eyes held a depth that hadn't been there before, and yet his gaze still sent blue flames ablaze across her skin. Yet she craved more than his physical touch. She missed his impressive mind, his advanced thinking, his adventurous spirit, his kindness, his directness... though that last trait now seemed lacking.

She sighed. He was holding something close to his chest and—setting aside her hurt, anger, jealousy, and disappointment—she was nearly certain he was trying to protect her. She frowned. But from a frog?

Her eye caught upon a break in the underbrush. The packed dirt of a path. She ducked beneath a branch and entered the forest.

Whatever ate at Evan's conscience, it must be serious, or even now his ring would be on her finger. Opal and diamond. His mother's ring. The ring he'd presented her on bended knee all those years ago. She'd wanted to accept, to announce to all the world that they would be husband and wife. But the dreams they both pursued were about to drag them into separate hemispheres for four long years. Any number of things could happen to drive a wedge between them.

And, indeed, something had.



Evan had nearly caught the blasted amphibian twice. The first time he'd been too slow, the second time his net had snagged upon the underbrush. Half the night he'd sat awake upon the cold, hard stone wall, staring into the bubbling spring. Pointing his bioluminescent torch at one likely crevice after another, he'd tried to search out the wee beastie's new home. Then, like an ember jumping from a freshly stoked furnace, it struck him hot and burning between the eyes. He was an idiot.

Tree frog.

He'd turned the beam of his torch upward, searching the overhanging branches. The frog must have been snoozing comfortably, tucked within a cluster of dew-damp leaves, for it wasn't until the first rays of sunlight fell upon the leaf canopy that he caught a glimpse of something blue and shimmering.

Scaling the tree, he wriggled out onto the branch, holding the handle of his net tightly as he stretched his arm ever so slowly and carefully toward the frog. But despite his stealth, the amphibian turned about, blinked at him—once, twice—then launched itself into the pool.

Grumbling about frogs and trans-Atlantic voyages to vacation at a mineral spring in Wales, Evan

dropped back to the ground. The cold shock of the water must have been too much, for the critter now hopped about in the weeds edging the water. Evan lunged, almost catching him.

Now the blue frog was somewhere between the stones of the low wall. On hands and knees, he crawled through dew-damp grass, peering into one crack after another.

“Much as I can appreciate the posterior view you present,” Piyali said behind him, her voice full of smothered laughter, “wouldn’t it be easier to admit you need help catching a certain blue frog?”

Evan scrambled to his feet, nearly pitching himself into the pool in his haste. He dragged a gloved hand over his hair, then cursed silently, remembering he’d just been on all fours in the dirt. Closing his eyes a moment, he swallowed his pride. It was for the greater good. “Will you help me?”

“Fine.” She set down her bag and picked up a long stick. “But if I find him first, I won’t share unless you tell me what’s going on.”

“No.” Absolutely not. Under no circumstances could the frog be allowed to leave Aberwyn. The poor creature would have to be destroyed.

“No?” she scoffed, poking into a crevice. “You’d rather see the frog dragged back to London, poked, prodded, its every secret extracted? That lesion of Miss Price’s? Still there, your ointment notwithstanding. What becomes of her if I don’t discover the cause of her skin infection?”

“The lesion needs to be excised,” he stated. The ointment would only slow the spread of the discoloration, not eliminate it. Better a doctor perform the surgery, but if necessary he would lift a scalpel and do his best.

“Oh?” She threw a challenging glance over her shoulder. “What brings you to that conclusion? Such a surgery risks an infection of another kind.”

The sunlight filtering through the leaves overhead accentuated her thick eyelashes, the curve of her cheek and the graceful arch of her neck. *The pistol at her hip.* She was a Queen’s agent now. Even if he told her everything, her loyalty was to Britain first, him... at best, second.

But if he didn’t tell her, she was going to keep digging. If that frog bit her... if what had happened to him, happened to her... His gut twisted. He couldn’t bear it. She could help. Together, they might just be able to solve—

The air shimmered. Odd. Nothing sat there upon the rock wall. Or did it? He swept his net across its surface and felt something catch in the mesh. A small weight, about that of a small, shimmering tree frog. Quickly, he tied off the opening.

“Did you catch it?” Piyali asked, crossing to him to stare into his net. “There’s nothing—”

There was. Tiny and thrashing and barely visible, the once-blue frog reflected the light of the forest around them. A near-perfect camouflage. No wonder he’d had such a difficult time locating the creature.

“I’ve a glass terrarium,” he announced, partly to her, party to the frog. “No more hopping about biting the ankles of young women.”

“Evan,” Piyali’s voice was soft as she wrapped a hand about his wrist. “You have to tell me

what's going on. Don't make me summon Mr. Black."

"Mr. Black," he repeated. He'd met the man only once, but once had been enough to cement the man in his mind. If Mr. Black was involved, the situation was worse than he thought. "He sent you?"

"He did. I'm to solve the mystery of the blue lesion and evaluate your competence."

"For?" Worry twisted in his stomach.

With a deep breath, she dropped an artillery shell, exploding his calm resignation to his fate. "Mr. Ranunculus has taken ill and is not expected to recover. They're searching for a new Director of Tropical Plants to work in the Lister Botanical Gardens and Greenhouse. Your name was put forth."

"Mine." The depth of resources they possessed alone was enough to turn his head. To be a member of that institution—one that collected the greatest minds and the most obscure botanical specimens from all over the globe—would be an honor. To become one of its directors? He hardly dared hope they would ever consider him. His pulse jumped despite the impossibility.

Piyali shifted closer and the silver, metallic threads sewn into her bright skirt shimmered. Only then did he realize how overdressed she was for a walk in the woods. The moment he'd met her, his life had exploded into vibrant color. Without her, the intensity had slowly washed away... until now. He yearned to accept the offer, both her unspoken one and the directorship.

"I'm told your papers on the medicinal value of Brazilian flora are groundbreaking," Piyali cajoled.

They were, but he would never pass the interview process. They would note his reluctance to remove his gloves, to dig into the dirt with bare hands. No, he'd not be offered the position. Instead, he would find himself installed in the biological research laboratories as a specimen himself.

His stomach churned. He could not allow them to discover his secret. Notes scribbled as the shaman spoke about the curse indicated that Evan had a year. Perhaps two. In that time he needed to make arrangements for the support of his sister and grandmother, to explore the medicinal properties of the eighty-one novel plants he'd so carefully transported to Wales. To publish his results. He would not survive the intense scrutiny of Lister Laboratories.

As if she read his mind, Piyali said, "I'm afraid the clamor for one particular pharmacobotanist is loud. If you refuse, they may insist."

Imagining an entire suit-clad committee arriving in Aberwyn to inspect both him and his greenhouse painted a grim picture. His secret would be discovered. Better to trust one particularly insistent Lister University physician. He barked a laugh. Was defeat inevitable? "Come then, Piyali. Grab your bag."

Chapter 4

The moment Piyali entered the greenhouse, humidity began to curl the tendrils of hair that had escaped her braid during the frog hunt. Moisture gathered at her temples. “It’s amazing.”

She’d stepped into a traditional Welsh cottage of stone, through the large room—kitchen and living space—barely taking note of a large desk stacked with texts and papers, of a table and shelves covered with glassware and plant cuttings and chemicals. She’d hurried through to the back of the cottage, intent upon seeing the greenhouse Evan had described when they’d strolled the streets of London beneath the moonlight, speaking to each other of their pasts, of their hopes to balance careers and family in the future.

Slowly she turned about, staring in amazement. Great sheets of glass supported by an iron framework let in the fading beams of afternoon sunlight, and in the center, a leviathan of a stove burned large blocks of peat, churning out heat, intent upon defying the chill of a Welsh spring day. All about her, trees stretched their branches upward as vine upon vine twisted about their trunks, also stretching toward the sun. Exotic bushes and shrubby plants covered every inch of the ground, all but a narrow walkway that meandered between them. It was a lush, tropical paradise. Particularly as it came without the usual accompaniment of biting insect life. Her enthusiasm was dampened only by the knowledge that this must be where the blue frog with the toxic bite originated.

“It’s far more wonderful than you ever described.” She reached out with gentle fingers to stroke the soft petals of a beautiful, orange flower.

Catching her fingers, Evan shook his head in warning. “This one is safe. But remember my assignment was to collect potent flora. Not everything here is harmless, even to touch.”

“Much like its curator.” Her heart jumped as her eyes fell on his rumpled cravat, and her fingers ached with the memory of the last time she’d untangled its knot, pulling on its loose ends to bring his lips to hers. Did she dare? She lifted her gaze to his face. The corners of his mouth twitched with a suppressed smile. Progress.

“You smell of orange blossoms.” His gloved fingertip touched the glass vial that hung from a loop on her corset. “You kept it.”

Now was the time to revisit the past, before darker topics stole the moment. “Always,” she said,

moving closer to rest her palm against the hard plane of his chest. “It’s my favorite scent. Ever since you gave me my first vial and informed me it was an aphrodisiac.” She tipped her face upward. “Is it working?”

“Too well.” His gloved hand tightened about hers. “It’s driving me insane.”

“Once you wouldn’t hesitate.” They’d shared stolen kisses in shadowed alcoves at any and every opportunity. She walked her fingers up his chest. “What happened? What could possibly be so awful that you would rather chase me away than confide in me, a woman you once asked to share your life?”

“Piyali,” he growled. “I can’t make promises anymore.”

“I’m not asking for one.” She slid her hand over the rough stubble of his cheek, its rasp triggering a flood of cherished memories. “Just a confidence, perhaps a kiss.”

Something deep inside him seemed to snap. Cupping the base of her skull with both hands, he dropped his lips to hers. Soft, warm, sweet. A gentle kiss that spoke of a longing ache finally satisfied. Then she parted her lips and reminded him that for too long, their hunger, their thirst for each other had gone unsatisfied.

His tongue dove into her mouth, devouring her, consuming her. Wrapping her arms about his waist, she pulled him closer, moaning encouragement as she pressed her breasts tight to his chest until she could feel his heart pounding.

Sparks flew. Five long years with an ocean between them. Not a single man compared to Evan. Not one of the many men who once pursued her had managed to hide his horror at the idea of a working wife. Not one had eyes that saw into her soul, causing her breath to catch, her heart to race in anticipation. *This* was why she’d waited.

“God, I’ve missed you,” Evan rasped as his mouth left her lips, trailing kisses along her jaw, her neck, sending shivers across her skin and a rush of warmth between her thighs. He slid his hands down her back to fall on her hips, yanking her tight against his own. Whatever it was that had kept him from her, it wasn’t a lack of attraction, for there was *firm* evidence of that.

Encouraged, she smiled against his neck. “We’ve waited forever,” she whispered, “to be alone like this.” She nibbled his earlobe. “Perhaps we could try a bed this time?”

A low rumble sounded in his chest. “Piyali, it’s near impossible to refuse you.”

“Then don’t.”

His hands loosened on her hips as he took a step backward, refusing to lift his eyes to meet hers. “We can’t. Not until—”

A loud knock sounded, and his head swiveled. Piyali wanted to scream in frustration. Not merely because she wanted to explore the advantages of a feather mattress with Evan, but because he’d been about to tell her what was wrong. If she knew what was broken, perhaps she could make repairs. She caught the edge of his chin in her palm. “Tell me. Until what?”

More knocking, this time louder and more frantic. “Mr. Tredegar!”

“Don’t,” she pleaded even as he turned toward the door connecting the greenhouse to the more

traditional Welsh cottage.

“It’s Tegan,” he said. Regret softened his voice. “I can’t ignore her. The frog bite, it’s my fault. Or perhaps there’s been some injury to another within the village... Stay here. Don’t let her see you.”

Her face burned. “I won’t have what’s between us hidden away, Evan. Not this time.”

“I’m not ashamed,” he said. “I never was. But she’s a spiteful girl, always has been. Would you have the whole village know of our past before we sort out if there’s to be a future? It would compromise your entire investigation.”

Bang. Bang. “Evan!”

His fault. He’d said the frog bite was his fault. “You’ll tell me everything?” she asked.

His mouth opened, then closed. “I promise.”

For all that was worth.

Managing a tight nod, she conceded his point. “Fine.” She spun on her heel and moved deeper into the foliage, hiding like a shameful secret.



Evan opened the front door, and Tegan pushed past him, stomping into the small cottage. “What can I do for you, Miss Price?”

“A headache powder for Mrs. Lewis,” she answered, pacing about the room, stopping before his worktable to stare at the miscellaneous equipment—flasks, alcohol burners, glass distillation tubing, among others—gathered together, along with a number of various compounds extracted from tropical plants, ready for his next experiment. She waved at a mortar and pestle. “No, make that two.” Tegan pressed her hands to her temples.

Worry flared. He closed the distance between them to study her face. She seemed rather flushed, her eyes shadowed. What if the infection had spread to her blood? “Are you sick? Feverish? Does your ankle pain you?”

“I’m fine.” She waved a hand. “What pains me are the games we play, Evan.”

A whisper of worry snaked its way down his spine at the use of his given name. Rouge, not fever colored her cheeks and lips—and was that coal dust upon her eyelashes? Immediately, he regretted unlatching the door. “Games?” he repeated. “Miss Price, this is most improper.”

“It wouldn’t be improper,” Tegan fluttered her eyelashes in what must be an attempt at seduction, but only served to remind him that she was barely old enough for long skirts, “if you’d drop to one knee and offer that opal ring to me.”

He bit back a curse. “I—”

“I know you intend to offer for me.” She lifted her face. “You’ve been so patient, so solicitous of my fragile health, rushing to my side with a special ointment when that awful creature assaulted me in the woods.”

The bite of a frog was an assault? It sounded ridiculous, but given how the blue blemish would spread...

A strangled snort from the greenhouse had him reaching for Tegan's shoulder to steer her away from its entrance. "I'm sorry, Miss Price, if I've given you the wrong impression, but—"

"I'll make you the perfect wife, Evan." She lunged, flinging herself at him, and he was forced to catch the girl in his arms. "We shall run the most prosperous pharmacy in all of Cardiff. The sooner the banns are read, the sooner we can be together."

Aether, he'd sorely misjudged the love-sick glances she'd tossed him, chalking them up to a youthful infatuation that would pass. Gripping both of her shoulders firmly, he pushed her away. "I've no plans to marry. We cannot be together. You ought to go now, unless you still require headache powders?"

Her eyes filled with tears. *Tears!* How could he fix this?

"No," she sniffled. "No powders. Unless you've one for heartache?"

"Er."

Tegan ran for the door, flinging it wide. "When you realize your mistake, I'll be waiting. Waiting for you." With that dramatic aside, she ran from his cottage into the woods.

Strangled laughter burst from the greenhouse. Two dark eyes peeked around the door frame. "Oh you cruel, cruel man. How could you turn down such an impassioned plea?"

"Not funny." He ran a hand over the back of his stiff neck. "How am I to ever present myself at the town store again? Let alone examine her lesion?"

"You won't have to." Piyali glanced about as she stepped into the one large room that served as kitchen, living space and laboratory. What must she think of his primitive cottage? Of the uneven flagstones upon the floor, the cast iron stove crammed into an ancient hearth, little furniture beyond a desk, a rough wooden table and chairs? "I'll examine her lesion," she said. "And you need not stay in Wales. I hear there's a position available for a pharmacobotanist in London. That it's practically his for the asking."

She looked at him from beneath long eyelashes, and his mind flashed to his thick, feather mattress. There was nothing he'd rather do more than slide an engagement ring onto Piyali's finger, carry her upstairs to his bed. Then leave with her for London on a hunt for a special license followed by a visit to Mr. Black to accept the invitation to interview. Once she saw his hand, however... His stomach hurt as if he'd swallowed a solution of quicksilver salts.

Two paths lay before him.

Refuse to confide in her, and Piyali would summon Mr. Black. That would bring him under intense and unwanted scrutiny. It would, however, leave him time to excise Tegan's lesion and destroy the frog.

Or he could reveal his secret and beg for her help and silence. He lifted his eyes to meet her watchful gaze. Trained at the Université de Paris in infectious diseases, handed her own laboratory at

Lister University and recruited to the Queen's agents, she was an expert in her field. If anyone could solve the mystery, he had no doubt it would be her.

He gave a stiff nod and, eyeing the terrarium where a certain shimmering frog crouched, tugged off his leather gloves. First the left—nothing unusual to see there—and then the right.

"It's blue!" Piyali gasped. "Your hand, the entire thing. Blue!"

That was the color of the moment. He rolled back the cuff of his shirtsleeves.

"Schistosomiasis!" Her hands clapped over her mouth as her impossibly wide eyes took in the disaster that had transpired. "How far has it spread?"

"Far," he said, yanking off his cravat and unbuttoning his collar. He tugged it aside so she could see how its tendrils crept across his shoulder toward the base of his neck.

"Does it hurt?" Her hand darted forward, then stopped, fluttering, uncertain if she should touch.

"No." Not physically. The anguish was entirely mental. "The infection is completely painless. A tiny bite by our tiny blue nemesis, and the next day I awoke with a lesion a half-inch in diameter. A day later, one inch. It had encompassed my entire hand and wrist by the time I compounded an ointment—the one I shared with Miss Price—that slowed its progress."

"Slowed," she repeated. Grief and heartache mingled on her face.

"So far I've only managed to delay the inevitable. There's a myth among the natives I studied with, it translates roughly as the 'Tribe of Invisible Devils'. Once bitten by the blue—sometimes invisible—frog, the curse overtakes the body, one limb at a time. Legend claims that when the disease consumes them, madness sends a man—or a woman—running into the rainforest never to be seen again. Many choose to take their lives rather than face that fate."

"And when it... consumes the entire body?" Piyali pressed a shaking hand to her throat as the full implications of his situation registered.

"Banishment." Wisps of a black fog began to cloud his mind as he stared down at his hand, at this now alien piece of himself. It was a daily struggle to reconcile himself to his future. "They can't allow a man—or woman—to remain within the tribe because with extreme or heightened emotion, the skin begins to glimmer, to color-shift and reflect the world about it."

"Making him—or her—invisible."

She had a beautiful, quick mind. "Exactly. And the tribe won't tolerate something it can't see. Ghosts. Devils. Call them what you will, they can no longer be a member of society. That is my fate. And the reason we can't marry. I may last a year, two." He lifted a shoulder, not wanting to upset her further by revealing his distress. "Perhaps five. But once the blue crawls up my neck, I'll no longer be fit for British society."

"Can I touch it—you?" she asked, reaching out again. "Is it contagious?"

"If it were, I'd never have allowed you to examine Miss Price." He held out his hand.

She cupped it gently in her palm, turning it over to study it from all angles. Determination injected steel into her voice. "I'll find a way to fix this. We'll find a cure. Together."

Hope had long since died. It lay, black and shriveled in a dusty, forgotten place. All that was left was to save others from a similar fate. He kissed her on her forehead, then dropped the other shoe. “You can’t tell Mr. Black.”

Jerking back, she released his hand, taking away the comforting warmth of her touch. He dared not reach for her. Not now. Emotion needed to be set aside. “But—”

“Imagine what Britain would do with such knowledge. Men—agents—would be purposefully infected, sent across borders. God forbid the technique fall into enemy hands. All because a small, blue frog hitched a ride on one of my plants. I’m begging you, Piyali. Better to destroy the frog and leave me—and Miss Price—to our ends.”

“Ends...” Wrapping her arms across her chest, she shook her head, unwilling to accept such a scenario. “It could take years. How do you propose to cope as whatever this is overtakes the both of you?”

“Excision of her lesion would be my first choice. Failing that, I could marry her.” Tegan would find it a bitter life. There’d be no romance, no pharmacy in Cardiff, no social interactions of any kind. Eventually, even her family would not be able to visit. “Hide her from society. You heard her, she’s amenable and already considered in fragile health.”

Piyali’s mouth tightened. “Yet you declined her.”

“I did.” Tegan was a constant thorn in his side. The only woman he *wished* to marry was Piyali. “But if it saves lives...”



“Unacceptable,” Piyali cut off his words. If anyone was to marry him, it ought to be her. How dare he suggest such steps? Tegan’s overt manipulations had been amusing until Evan raised it as a feasible option. But such messy emotions must be shoved aside; there was no time for them. They needed to take advantage of every moment left. “I refuse to abandon you to an uncertain fate.”

She spun on her heel to face the scarred wooden table that served as his workbench and studied his makeshift laboratory. A scale. Boxes and jars and tin containers filled with powders and oils and emollients. Bottles and flasks. Tubing and corks. All manner of titration and distillation equipment. An excellent chemistry setup, but not conducive to microbiology.

Evan followed her and began to clear one end of the table, his features set in stone. “Tell me what you need. If it’s not here, I’ll find it.”

She thought of the frog inside the terrarium. Calm, in safe and secure surroundings, it had returned to its lustrous blue color. She *had* to find a cure; the alternative was unacceptable. Gears spun in her mind. If infection was transmitted through a bite, that meant the contagion was contained within its saliva.

Ducking into the greenhouse, she retrieved her black bag and dug into it, pulling out a number of

glass aetheroscope slides and cotton-tipped sticks. “To begin, we’ll need to swab the inside of the frog’s mouth—and biopsy its skin. Given its camouflage capabilities, I suspect the amphibian harbors the infectious agent throughout its entire body.”

“I’ll do that,” Evan stated. “Carefully. While wearing heavy gloves.”

So like him, always looking out for the welfare of others, putting her safety above his. But today it left a bitter taste in her mouth. If only he’d answered her message with the truth of his terrible situation. “I’ll set up my aetheroscope here.” She moved to the large desk, setting aside stacks of books and papers to claim a corner. “We’ll also biopsy your skin. Near the initial bite, further up your arm so that we might see if cell morphology alters over the progression, over the spread of the disease. And for comparison to Tegan’s biopsy.”

“The broken objective?”

“Will hinder our progress.” She pressed her lips together. Odds that Mr. Black would be able to send one in their direction any time soon were low. He’d made some quip about selkie trouble in the north and needing to travel to Scotland. His mission could take a day... or it could last for weeks, and she hated to leave Evan alone lest he take some drastic action. “Is there any chance of finding a replacement in Cardiff?”

“There is,” Evan answered. “Today, we collect evidence and, tomorrow, we’ll travel to Cardiff to gather necessary supplies?”

“Agreed.”

Piyali turned away, her grip tightening upon the swab she held. Conflicting loyalties battled in her mind. In Cardiff, there would be reliable skeet pigeons to hire. As a Queen’s agent, she was bound to report this development to Mr. Black, but what did she have beyond a fanciful tale of a rogue Amazonian frog prone to bite? Besides, this was Evan, and Mr. Black was likely still in Scotland. A few days of investigation would provide her with more data, more evidence. Her report could wait a few days.

Chapter 5

Piyali's wide smile set Mrs. Parker grumbling. Despite Evan's revelation, the prospect of spending a day at his side—this time in the open air and beneath the sunshine—had floated her mood into the upper aether, as if a curse placed upon them by some wart-nosed witch had lifted.

Yesterday, their heads together, they'd taken turns staring through her aetherscope at slide after slide after slide, until their eyes began to cross. The frog's saliva provided no answers. No visible micro-organisms writhed or wriggled beneath their view at which they could point fingers. All skin biopsies appeared—more or less—the same. Including that of the frog.

Nonetheless, they'd set up a number of cultures, using what was available from Evan's meager bachelor's kitchen stores, in an attempt to coax any infectious agent to grow and multiply.

Piyali had a favored hypothesis, but until she could obtain a higher resolution with her aetherscope, it was no better than wild speculation. If the organism responsible was intracellular, a replacement objective—along with a few additional specialized stains—would disclose its presence.

A grunt of irritation jerked her back to the moment, and a plate of oatcakes was slammed onto the table before her along with the tavern's ubiquitous ale. Mrs. Parker's expression suggested she hoped her breakfast guests would choke.

"For breakfast?" Piyali asked, eyeing the frothy, unfiltered drink.

"I suppose you're used to drinking *tea*." Mrs. Parker snarled the last word as if the beverage derived from a chamber pot. With a sneer, she dropped a copper tea kettle onto the range with a loud clang. "We aim to serve."

"Well, yes. Thank you." It was then that Piyali noticed Mrs. Parker's bandage was no longer confined to her fingers. It now wrapped about the entirety of her hand. Moreover, she pressed her hand to her waist as if its use pained her. "Perhaps I should look at your injury?"

Mrs. Parker's answering glare vibrated with barely-suppressed hostility.

"Mother." Sarah's voice cajoled as she crossed the room, "let her look. She *is* a physician. If it's infected, her attentions are better than Father's." She rolled her eyes. "Though I'm certain he exaggerated when he offered to lop off your finger."

The villagers seemed overly concerned with amputation, though the Parkers needled each other at

every possible opportunity. Why on earth they'd chosen to marry was beyond her comprehension.

"I'm sure amputation won't be necessary," Piyali began diplomatically, "but infections shouldn't be left untreated. Mr. Tredegar is a competent pharmacist, Mrs. Parker. Today we are traveling to Cardiff, to his store. If you require an antibacterial—"

"Cardiff?" Her eyebrows arched toward her hairline. "Together? Alone?"

"Yes," Piyali answered. "I'm in need of supplies."

"No. That will not do. Sarah, get your bonnet. You must accompany them for propriety's sake."

Sarah's eyes brightened, but she glanced at Piyali and demurred. "I don't think my company is desired, Mother."

"Nonsense." Mrs. Parker waved her bandaged hand and winced. "I'll draw up a list of required items." She strode away before any further objections could be voiced.

"I'm sorry," Sarah sighed. "She pressures me daily to win Mr. Tredegar's regard. I promise not to be too obnoxious. Would it help if I promise to make myself scarce once we arrive? There's a book I wish to purchase at the booksellers and—wafts of aether—what I wouldn't do to escape Mother if only for a day." A mischievous look lit her face, and she leaned close, adding in a conspiratorial whisper. "I have to admit Tegan's jealousy would sweeten the trip just that much more."

Only rigid determination kept Piyali's shoulders from slumping. To invite Sarah along meant hiding—yet again—her rekindling relationship with Evan. A relationship that wouldn't have a chance if they couldn't concoct a cure. She wanted time with him, but maintaining Sarah's friendship and good graces was important. Particularly as her mother had acquired her infection at the fairy well before the Amazonian frog was apprehended. How else would she be informed about village affairs? And she had to admit, she liked the young woman. "Very well," she conceded, "but only if you answer one question about your mother."

"Oh?" Sarah looked as if facing her mother's irritation might be preferable. "What is it you want to know?"

"Nothing much. I'm a physician and can't help but care." More she was curious. "Her wound, is it blue?"

"Blue?" Sarah's face scrunched up as she thought. "No, not exactly, but it is spreading rather quickly. Her skin has taken on a rather odd appearance. I only glimpsed it, but I'd say it was pink and shimmery. The wound itself has mostly healed."

That fit. Mrs. Parker was nearly always in a foul mood. Shimmery and pinkish when feelings ran strong.

"Is that what's wrong with Tegan?" Sarah leaned closer. "The reason you're here? Is she—for once—truly sick?" She gasped. "Don't tell me her ankle is *blue*!"

Secrets in a village. One in exchange for another. Sharing that information went against all her medical training, but not necessarily that of the Queen's agents. "Cultivate the locals" was one of Mr. Black's favorite expressions. She needed to play along. Besides, Sarah had guessed. Was it wrong

that deep in a corner of her soul she was enjoying this moment?

Pressing a finger to her lips, Piyali too leaned forward. “*Shh*. I never said a thing. Don’t let this become public knowledge.”

“Sarah,” Mrs. Parker bellowed. “Your bonnet. No daughter of mine shall freckle in the sun.”

Sarah winked, then hurried to her mother’s bidding.

A few minutes later, after forcing down a dry oatcake with weak tea, Piyali waited as Evan handed Sarah into the crank wagon. Resignation and reproach tugged his lips into a frown as he glanced at her sideways.

“I had to,” she whispered, noting how Sarah sat in the middle of the rough board that formed a seat. “An exchange of favors.” She pretended to stumble, bringing her mouth to Evan’s ear. “She doesn’t realize it, but her mother has also been bitten by the frog.”

He cursed under his breath. “You have Sarah spying for you?”

“A necessary step,” Piyali breathed back. “Mrs. Parker is refusing any and all treatment.” She hesitated. Much as she wished to dismiss this professional duty... “We ought to check on Tegan.”

“Already done,” Evan replied, taking Piyali’s medical bag to place it inside the cart. “Her condition remains unchanged. Now up, we’ve a long day ahead of us.”

As they drove away, a curtain twitched, and Piyali caught a glimpse of Tegan’s vexed face pressed to the window of the village store. Her pursuit of Evan was far from over.



The road to Cardiff was rutted and rocky, and Sarah—who had planted herself between him and Piyali—took every advantage to bump against him. Shoulders, hips, legs. Even her hand slid from her lap to press the side of her pinky finger to his thigh. Evan supposed he ought to be grateful that she didn’t outright climb into his lap. So much for enjoying the pleasant spring day with Piyali. His fault, he supposed, for refusing to reveal their relationship. From the amused press of her lips, she knew exactly what Sarah was up to. At least Miss Parker wasn’t demanding a proposal.

Relationship. He swallowed hard. A mistake. But with that kiss, a seed of hope had germinated. The oppressive feeling of doom and gloom had lifted—ever so slightly—as he unburdened his secrets. Still, there was a lingering feeling of melancholy, a certain pessimism that even if they managed to uncover the cause of his infection, they wouldn’t be able to formulate a treatment.

All night, he’d worried about bringing her into his confidence, not at all certain he had made the right choice. Now, with the unwelcome revelation that the frog had another victim, the situation threatened to grow out of hand.

He forced himself to listen to the women’s chatter.

“What book are you hoping to find in Cardiff?” Piyali asked Sarah.

“Well, I’m not certain.” Sarah fiddled with the ribbon at her chin. “Not exactly. Though I hope to

find an intelligent husband,” she fluttered her eyelashes at Evan, “I thought I might follow your example and become a self-sufficient, career-minded woman.”

“Oh?” Piyali raised her eyebrows.

“I adore babies,” Sarah said, then addressed her next comment to him. “While I work to convince a handsome, young man to start a family of his own,” her eyelashes fluttered again, “I’m aiming to attend a woman’s college. There’s a school opening in Cardiff, and I mean to apply. Perhaps someday I might manage medical school. I hear there’s an entire field of medicine involving childbirth—obstetrics and gynecology.” Her brow wrinkled. “But first, I have to pass an entrance exam.”

Evan cleared his throat. “Hence the bookstore.”

“Yes. I won’t keep you from your errands, but perhaps you might recommend a few titles?”

Piyali rattled off a few, and it brought a certain measure of relief to know that Sarah was taking control of her future, beyond plaguing him with endless flirtations and shameless suggestions. Even though his ears began to burn as the two women discussed childbirth with much candor and detail. He squirmed on his seat.

He dropped Sarah off at the booksellers—with great relief—before continuing to his own store. “Was that necessary?”

She smiled and fluttered her eyelashes in imitation of Sarah. “Better than discussing the making of babies, was it not?”

Now he could think of nothing else. Could his face grow any hotter?

Ears burning, he redirected the conversation. “I hope you don’t mind, but I do have customers who will wish to consult a pharmacist. And, if you’re willing, a physician.”

“Of course.”

They rattled to a stop behind his store. Several long weeks had passed since he’d last visited his sister and *mamgu*, his grandmother. It was hard making constant excuses for his gloves but, when the worst came to pass, the business must support them, and for that, more preparation would be required. Only when he had no choice but to confide in them, would he reveal his blue appendage.

The moment his sister Megan realized it was him, not some delivery cart, she rushed from the service door. “Evan!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms about him. “And who is this?” she asked, knowing damn well exactly who Piyali was.

He hugged his *mamgu*, then performed introductions. “This is Dr. Mukherji, who has agreed to see a few patients. But don’t waste her time, make certain first that they are willing to trust in the expert advice of a woman.”

“I’m happy to assist in any way I can,” Piyali said.

His grandmother’s gnarled hands gripped Piyali’s. “*A’i hon yw hi?*” she asked. *Is this her?* His *mamgu* had insisted they learn the Welsh language when she came to live with them after diphtheria stole away most of his family. “The woman whose hand ought to wear opals and diamonds?”

Evan cleared his throat, replying in the same language. “Yes. Perhaps. There are complications to

resolve first.”

His sister’s eyes widened.

Piyali turned to him with raised eyebrows. Unfair, using Welsh to speak around her in this manner.

“We have much to talk about, Dr. Mukherji,” Megan said, switching the conversation back to English. “The moment word gets out, our shop will be overrun today by people seeking your combined expertise. Evan, did you bring more of that miraculous eczema cream? One child in particular is in desperate need.”

“I did. Among other things.” He reached into the bed of the wagon and handed her a jar. “Before I tie on an apron and set to work, I need to escort Dr. Mukherji across town. She’s in need of a specialized piece of medical equipment that might prove difficult to find.”

“Oh, no you don’t, Evan,” Megan chided as she untied her apron and pressed it into his hands. “The list of items you need to attend to here is longer than my arm. Step to it. I’ll take Dr. Mukherji to Colonel Pickering’s. If anyone’s likely to have medical devices, it’ll be him.”

His sister would spend the entire trip quizzing Piyali about... well... all things related to that opal ring. He opened his mouth to object, but Megan gave him no choice. She slid her arm through Piyali’s and dragged her down the street peppering her with questions.

Though Piyali glanced back at him over her shoulder with pleading eyes, she was a trained Queen’s agent. With a pistol on her hip. He had every confidence she would survive the interrogation. Better her than him.



“While we hunt down this aetheroscope attachment piece,” Megan said, her arm tight, offering Piyali no illusion of escape as she turned into a delightful shopping arcade, “might we discuss weddings?”

Her stomach dropped. If Evan had mentioned her, that he planned to marry, that conversation lay far in the past. A wedding was not at all a certainty now, though she desperately hoped to one day call Megan her sister.

“You’re engaged?” Piyali deflected, as a touch of panic crept its way up into her throat. “Many congratulations! Who is the lucky man?”

“Not me,” Megan laughed. “Though I’ve suitors aplenty, I’ve yet to find one who makes my heart beat faster.” She squeezed Piyali’s arm tighter. “Yours. To my brother. He teased us before leaving for Brazil, telling us only that his future bride was an Indian woman born in Calcutta. I’ve studied the wedding traditions. A red gown—a *sari*—embroidered in gold is traditional, correct? Will you arrive in a *palki*?”

“A sedan chair? Through the streets of London?” Piyali cringed in horror, though she wouldn’t put it past Ma to try to arrange such an event. A quick simple ceremony in the front parlor would suit her much better. She looked at Megan’s face, so full of excitement, and sighed. Perhaps a small,

traditional ceremony. Oh, who was she kidding? Small meant hundreds of people, even if her mother was forced to confine the event to the ballroom of her London townhouse. None of which would happen if she couldn't save Evan. "I'm afraid we've rather a serious obstacle in our path. I can't share the details with you. Suffice it to say we need that aetherscope objective badly."

"Are you ill?" Megan's eyes widened. "Is Evan?"

"Something like that. I'm sorry. I'm sworn to secrecy." By the Queen's agents, by Evan himself. Pulled in two directions, Piyali had a nagging suspicion her loyalty to both would soon be put to the test. Always, her career was a wedge between them.

She pressed her hand against a Babbage card tucked into a pocket, a card that could send a skeet pigeon winging in the direction of Mr. Black. Guilt weighed heavily upon her, but to send a message so soon would be disloyal to Evan. Three months he'd struggled on his own. She could give him a few more days. Then, if they still had no answers, she would have no choice.

"I'm doing my best to help him. If all goes well..."

For several steps, Megan was silent. "I can't lose my brother. He hates to speak about it, but illness is what carried away our family."

Evan had confided the story to Piyali one dark night as they walked through Hyde Park. Her heart squeezed at the memory of his tale. He'd been fourteen years of age when his father, mother, two brothers and a sister all died within the space of a month. He, Megan and his grandmother alone had survived.

"My family suffered a similar fate. I lost an older sister, a younger brother, and my father to diphtheria as well." *Baba*. She'd been so young—all of five years—that they were no more than a fuzzy memory. Was it better—or worse—to have crystal clear memories of how it had once been? "For a while, it was awful." She remembered Ma's grief. "Then my mother met my stepfather who brought us here. He's given me everything, including two little sisters, and the love of a father."

Megan reached out and squeezed her arm. "I'm sorry."

Piyali gave a tight nod. Their losses were the reason for both Evan's chosen profession and for her own, for the drive that pushed them both to seek to cure all manner of infections. She changed the subject. "How did you convince Evan to accept the grant to travel to Brazil? He almost turned the committee down, he was so worried about leaving you and your grandmother behind, unprotected."

"Yes, always worried for my future," Megan scoffed. "How? I threatened, at the age of sixteen, to wed a man twice my age to ensure my so-called security. As he did not care much for Mr. Jones, after much heated discussion, he agreed to leave me with Grandmother." She rolled her eyes. "For the sake of appearances, a cousin looked in on us during his time abroad, providing that all-so-necessary male authority."

They shared a knowing look as they came to a stop before a shop. Emblazoned across the storefront in gilded lettering: *Colonel Pickering & Company's Scientific Gadgetries and Curiosities*. Dusty, dark and dimly lit. Piyali squinted through a window pane and came face to face

with the stuffed head of a quail sewn onto the neck of a squirrel. The chimera wore a miniature tiara. Such... décor did not provide her with much hope for scientific equipment, at least, not equipment that *functioned*.

“He keeps the legitimate items in the back, away from sticky fingers,” Megan said, reading her mind. They stepped inside. Useless oddities of all kinds were mounted upon display counters, the better to lure in the gullible. But in the back, boxes upon boxes were stacked from floor to ceiling. Perhaps there was some hope. A man emerged from a back room. “Colonel, we have need of a...”

“Crystalline aetheric objective,” Piyali finished.

“Right this way, dearies.” The colonel’s eyes twinkled behind a mass of grizzled facial hair, and she suspected he grinned at the thought of lightening her pockets by several pounds.

Chapter 6

After a long day of patient consults of ailments ranging from croup to toenail fungus—during which mild suspicion of her origins had been overcome by the promise of pain relief and treatment—Piyali was exhausted and all too happy to climb back onto Evan’s crank wagon and head for Aberwyn. This time, he arranged for her to sit between him and Sarah.

Not that such a maneuver stopped the other woman. Setting down a stack of thick, paper-wrapped textbooks, Sarah exclaimed, “Oh, no! My gown!” Her fingers fluttered over a dark smudge upon her bodice, drawing attention to its low-cut neckline. “Mother will have a fit!”

Beside her, Evan sighed. He tugged a handkerchief from his waistcoat and passed it to Piyali. “Here. Save her from her mother’s wrath.” He kept his eyes carefully focused upon the road before them. “Please.”

“It’s probably only a touch of dust, most likely from the bookstore,” Piyali said, using the square of linen to brush at the smudge, but her efforts only seemed to grind the dirt into the pale, pink fabric. “Um.”

“Let me.” Sarah snatched the handkerchief from her and made far better progress. “Did you find what you needed?”

“We did,” Piyali answered. In a dark, dusty recess of Colonel Pickering’s storage room. She’d all but given up hope. Just as they’d been about to try another store, the wizened old man had stumbled—coughing—out from among a pile of dusty boxes holding aloft a small box. Inside, an older model of the objective lay nestled in cotton batting. With luck it would be adequate. She clutched it in her lap now, wrapped and padded against the rigors of traveling over rock-studded roads.

After a few more awkward moments during which Sarah made several unsuccessful attempts to flirt with Evan, Piyali—tired though she was—attempted to buoy her spirits by suggesting a tutoring session. Gleefully, Sarah unwrapped one of her books—a chemistry text—and by the time they arrived at the tavern, they had explored John Dalton’s atomic theory, the periodic table of the elements, and the concept of whole-number ratios forming chemical compounds.

“I predict a successful admissions exam,” Piyali said, impressed. “You’ve a sharp mind and will go far.”

Sarah drew her shoulders back at the compliment. Had anyone ever praised her for her mind?

Given her buxom milkmaid appearance and the bar's clientele, the likely answer was no. "Mother would be furious if she learned of my plans, so tell no one. Better she believes I'm reading penny dreadfuls. You go in first, I'll scurry behind and hide these textbooks away."

Evan, who had been largely silent the entire ride home, spoke. "Dr. Mukherji shall accompany me to my laboratory." He walked about the wagon to offer the young woman a hand down. "We've a bit of a mystery to unravel."

Sarah tipped her head. "As in experimental?" Piyali nodded and Sarah's face grew somber as she hopped from the cart. "I admit, I'd love to see Tegan fall face-down in a mud puddle. But not die from some obscure infection. Is it serious?"

"It is," Piyali said and pressed a finger to her lips. "*Shh*. Not a word to anyone." After moment's hesitation, she added, "Keep an eye on your mother."

Frowning, Evan climbed back onto the cart. He gripped the steering wheel and released the break, setting the crank wagon lumbering along the road. "She's a terrible gossip."

"She guessed," Piyali defended. "And knows nothing about the frog."

They drew up before his stone cottage with its moss-covered slate roof. She barely spared it a glance as she waited for Evan to unlock the door before hurrying to her aetherscope at his desk. Time was of the essence. A remedy was desperately needed, and, if she could solve this quickly and present a cure, perhaps Mr. Black wouldn't relieve her of her weapon and consign her to her laboratory.

Conscious of the Babbage card she'd elected not to employ, Piyali wasted no time replacing the broken objective. She had a glass slide prepped and ready before she noticed Evan was not at her side. She looked up to find him frowning at the shelves that held jars and boxes of his chemicals and concoctions. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Someone has been here in our absence," he stated, gloves clutched tightly in one hand. "The *nah-puh-de-ot* ought to be next to the *o-ko-ne-de-kuh*, in clear alphabetical order. Look," he pointed, "this jar, it's been rotated such that the label is not easily readable."

"Theft?" Piyali had no idea what those plants were, but if he was concerned... "But the cottage is locked." Her forehead wrinkled. She'd seen the advanced lock he'd installed, both on the greenhouse door and the cottage door. "Quite securely." An agent might be able to break it, but it wouldn't be easily cracked by someone in search of free medication.

"So it is." Evan lifted each jar, examining its contents, replacing it upon the shelf. "I've not a clue who would go to such lengths. I've always reduced—or outright refused—payment if a client couldn't afford it." He set down the final jar with a grimace. "The minute a medication proves successful, I provide as much product as the plant's growth will bear."

"Has anything like this, anything unusual, occurred before?"

His brow furrowed.

"What is it?"

“Last week, the night before Tegan was bitten, I found the door to my greenhouse ajar. I installed the lock the next day, but I expect it’s how the frog escaped.”

“Frog!” Piyali jumped to her feet and ran into the greenhouse, Evan following close behind. The frog still crouched in its terrarium, safe, happy and blue. “Thank goodness.” The frog was not involved. She dug for an explanation. “You have a number of projects underway, all experimental. Have you boasted of initial success to anyone in so much as a simple letter?” Piyali went still as her words loomed between them, a specter from their past. She swallowed nervously.

“I’m sorry,” Evan said, his gray-blue eyes softening as they focused upon her. “I didn’t know what to say... I didn’t want to drag you into this disaster, and then I decided it was best if I didn’t write at all. I should have replied, I should have said... something. Can you forgive me?”

Could she? All too easily. But if they couldn’t solve this... problem, if she reported it to Mr. Black, could he forgive her? “Of course,” she whispered.

His hand glimmered with heightened emotion, and he reached for her and caught her hand. Heat shimmered in his eyes. “Come with me, upstairs.”

“Not yet.” Her entire body—ablaze with heated anticipation—objected to her words, but her brain insisted. “First, I want answers.” The question would nag at her until it was answered. She smiled coyly. “Only then can I give you my *full* attention.”

“Work before play.” He stroked his thumb across her palm, sending a shiver down her spine. “I gather the new objective is installed and ready for use?”

“All I need is a fresh biopsy,” she stuttered.

“Then grab your razor.” His voice rasped across her skin. “At the moment, there’s only one thing I’d like better than a definitive diagnosis.”

Minutes later, perched on a chair before the desk, she slid the prepared slide into the aether chamber and screwed in a canister of compressed gas. The seal popped and a low hiss indicated the chamber was filling. Staring through the eyepiece, she first brought his skin biopsy into focus using the lower magnification objectives, finally spinning in the new high-powered lens and carefully adjusting focus.

There lay the answer. But only part of it. She stared, not quite able to believe her vision wasn’t playing tricks upon her. This shouldn’t be possible, not in a mammalian species.

Evan cleared his throat, then spoke with an unsteady voice. “What is it?”

Piyali lifted her gaze to his. “It’s your melanocytes.”

He shook his head. “I only know plant histology.”

“Your epidermis, the top layer of your skin, is comprised of several layers dominated by keratinocytes—layers upon layers of flattened cells. Tucked among the cells in the basal layer—the deepest layer of the epidermis—are cells known as melanocytes. These are the cells that produce a protein responsible for skin pigmentation called melanin. Normally, the pigment is of a brown or black color.”

Understanding dawned on Evan's face. "Are you telling me that my affected skin has blue melanin?"

"Not exactly," she hedged. "It's iridescent, and I wouldn't call the pigment melanin. In any case, that's not what the cells are making, not anymore. They're producing an entirely different substance."

Running a finger beneath his collar, he asked, "Do you know what it is?"

"Yes. I've seen this before, but never in humans. Guanine crystals appear to have replaced your normal pigment."

"Guanine crystals." Confusion creased his brow.

"You've seen the effect before, in fish most likely," she said. "The silvery flash of scales as they swim. More tropical varieties can produce stunning shades of a variety of colors—blues, reds, yellows. It's also common in reptiles and amphibians. Normally, however, the colors are static. In your case, however, the angle of the crystal can change, altering the color of light that is reflected back."

Evan swore and stabbed his fingers into his hair. "I'm a bloody chameleon?"

"Of course not. But your comparison is apt in that you do possess the ability to color shift. Some scientists hypothesize that the flat, plate-like crystals are stacked, one upon another into a kind of lattice that can be actively adjusted."

"Which would explain why the infected members of the tribe, when angry or upset or afraid, would *disappear* into the rainforest." He threw a hand in the air and began to pace. "They were simply mirroring all the colors around them."

"I expect so." Her mouth tugged into a frown. How to break it to him?

"I don't like your expression, Piyali." He closed his eyes for a brief moment. "I'm not going to like this, am I? Maybe I should just look."

"Wait." She put her hand over the eyepiece. "There's good news and bad news." Evan groaned. "I've found the organism responsible. You have an intracellular parasite. It's not transmissible because it's creeping along beneath your skin at the basal layer."

"A parasite?" He grimaced, rubbing his shimmering hand. "Please tell me that's the bad news."

"I'm afraid not," she said. "The bad news is that I've never seen—or heard—of anything like it. But now that we can *see* it, we'll be able to quickly determine if any of the chemicals and drugs are taking effect."

"Let me see if I have this straight." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "An intracellular parasite entered my skin via a frog's bite. This tiny creature worked its way into my melanocytes, somehow altering the chemical makeup of my melanin—or replacing it, turning it blue."

It was more than simple replacement, but the description was apt. "Unless you're affected by strong emotion as you are now," she reminded him, recalling the first time she'd seen his hand color shift. It was the moment she'd realized there was still hope for them.

"At which point I shimmer pink and silver like a soap bubble." His lips twisted and his voice

was wry. “How very lovely. If we manage to kill this parasite—”

Reaching out, she placed her hand on his arm. There was nothing she wouldn’t do to solve this, to find a way to stop this parasite. “We will.”

He raised an eyebrow in doubt. “If. Will my skin return to its normal color?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Perhaps, if the presence of a living parasite is necessary to provide the melanocyte with whatever code is necessary to produce guanine crystals... or it might be permanent. Either way, if we stop it now—”

“At least my face won’t turn blue.”

As long as he was hers, Piyali didn’t much care what color his skin turned. Not that such a declaration would bring him any relief. If brown skin placed one on the edge of respectability, blue skin... Well, who wanted to be treated like a carnival side show?



When Evan finally peered through the eyepiece of Piyali’s aetherscope, he could hardly believe that such small, cigar-shaped creatures were the cause of all his problems. The biopsied melanocytes collected from his hand contained but one or two parasites, but those cells collected closer to his shoulder—where the infestation continued to spread toward his neck—were teaming with the creatures, all creeping toward the front edge poised for migration.

He imagined them crying out, “Onward and upward!” It seemed the only thing slowing them down was the ointment he’d concocted. Some component of that compound contained toxins. If they could isolate it, then concentrate it, perhaps there was a chance of ending—if not completely reversing—this nightmare.

Only then could she again be his.

Grabbing a machete, he stalked into the greenhouse to cut down one of the many *khu-neh-ari* lianas tangling through overhead branches.

“Evan,” she said quietly, following him. He could tell from her voice that she was about to broach an uncomfortable topic. “I know you wish to keep this secret—and why. I’ve not contacted Mr. Black, but if we can’t devise a cure and soon, I’ll need to let him know. With all of Lister University’s resources, with all their chemists working on this, progress will be fast.”

She wanted him cured. Given how his heart ached at the thought of a life without her, he understood. Not enough, however, to place a powerful, infectious biological agent into the hands of the government. It would be misused. Of that he was certain.

“A few days,” he hedged, slicing through the fibrous vines of the climbing shrub, a liana, and handing her a segment. With luck, perhaps they could avoid this argument. “This is the *khu-neh-ari* plant, the one I used to make the ointment.”

As she studied the leafy vine in her hand, lines of worry carved themselves between her

eyebrows. “How do we go about this?” she asked. “Sorting one component from another.”

“Chromatography. Extraction and isolation of components. Distillation. Testing—over and over and over until we find the right dose, the right combination.” He cut free another branch and handed it to her. “I was taught to boil the leaves for two days, adding a handful of large stinging ants. I have a limited supply of those in dried form.”

Piyali gagged. “Along with eye of newt and wing of bat?”

He grinned. “The ointment works, doesn’t it?”

“Not quite well enough.” A determined look was back in her eyes. Cure him she would.

God, I hope so.

A glimmer of moonlight fell upon her cheek. Instead of reaching for another branch, he stroked her skin, that silky, smooth slope, with the back of his finger. “I never stopped loving you, Piyali, not once. Every night I would climb into my hammock beneath swaths of mosquito netting and think of nothing but returning to you.”

Pressing his hand against her face, she looked up into his eyes with such sadness. “Then why hide this from me?”

“I didn’t know if it was contagious. I didn’t know how fast it would spread, how quickly it would consume me. Like me, you watched your own family die, one person at a time. I didn’t want you to have to endure that again, watching a loved one die, unable to do anything.” It was why he’d tossed his reply to her into the fire, abandoning all hope of a wife and family. “It was hell.”

“But you wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere but at their side. When you didn’t answer, when the skeet pigeon didn’t return, I thought...” A tear slid from the corner of her eye and Evan’s heart almost broke, and his lungs felt heavy, as if they might fail to inflate. “I thought you’d realized I was a mistake, that you’d come home to find a Welsh girl from your childhood had grown into the woman of your dreams.”

“Never.” He threw aside the machete and brought his other hand to her face. “You are everything to me. I thought it better if I simply disappeared from your life.” His thumb brushed aside a new tear. “You have so much potential, so much talent, hiding here—with me—in the forests of Wales would be the world’s loss. I was so proud when I heard you’d won a laboratory of your own at Lister University.” He smiled. “And now you’re a Queen’s agent with a pistol on your hip... it makes you irresistible.”

An answering smile tugged at her rosy, full lips. “Irresistible?”

The experiments could wait. Evan pulled the cut branches from her hands and tossed them in the general direction of the cottage door. He hauled her up against his chest and kissed her exactly as he’d dreamed about doing all those nights alone in the rainforest. She tasted soft and sweet—of everything that meant home.

Moaning, Piyali parted her lips and ran her hands over the linen of his shirt, making appreciative sounds as she explored the shape of his muscles. As his tongue delved deeper their kiss grew

hungrier, touching a match to dry tinder.

Heat shot down his spine, gathering low. Kissing her wasn't enough. He needed her silky, bare skin sliding against his own, and there would be no focusing on anything else until such primal demands were met.

He dragged his mouth from hers. "Not here."

"Why not? The cloakroom didn't stop you." Her voice held a breathless note, as her fingertip traced the blue tendrils that radiated from his shoulder across his chest and about his neck. "You've no need to hide anything from me."

Even at his most vulnerable, laid bare before her eyes, she made him feel whole. Scooping her into his arms, he carried her back into the cottage and up the stairs. "Those walls weren't glass, and this time I want to see everything."

Chapter 7

Everything.

Nervous embarrassment hovered in her eyes, but she was no innocent. Their encounter in the Pharmacological Society's shadowy cloakroom—their joining desperate and frantic and wonderful—had seen to that. He'd clung to that memory, a memory he'd unsuccessfully tried to cram into a dark corner of his heart and lock away. His groin throbbed with need, but as much as he wanted to be inside her again, this time he wanted to *see* her.

He set her down on the edge of his bed and knelt before her to unlace her knee-high leather boots, but the way she bit her lower lip made his fingers pause as conflict gripped him. "I can only promise you today. If that's not enough, we'll stop." Though he might explode with the effort.

"I'm not asking you for forever." Piyali threaded her fingers through his curls and tipped his face upward. "Don't stop. Even if everything falls apart, I want this. Here. Now."

"Good. Because I don't think I can manage to wait much longer." He yanked the boots from her feet and threw them aside. His own shoes joined them. Without bothering to fully unbutton his shirt, he dragged it over his head. She shifted to unbuckle her corset, then, unclasping hooks, she slid her *choli* down her arms, leaving herself bare to the waist.

He let out a low whistle. "I knew I was missing out last time. So beautiful," he murmured, sweeping his palm over her breast as her nipples puckered under his gaze, "and begging for attention." Dipping his head, he caught the tight bud between his lips and sucked. With a moan, she gripped his head, holding him close.

Her back arched. "Oh, Evan!"

Cries of pleasure that had haunted his dreams fell from her lips, and he lapped in each one even as an unwanted thought crept into his mind. She was not his to keep. Not yet. Perhaps never. This explosion of longing, these shared moments of intimacy might be their last. All the more reason to treasure every one. Inhaling her sweet scent, he sent his hands wandering over the dips and curves of her body.

Hands. Hers were on his shoulders now, sliding over his biceps, then gripping his muscles. With the edge of his teeth, he scraped the tip of her nipple and was rewarded with a tight gasp—and the sharp bite of her nails into his skin. A heartbeat later and her fingers trailed over his chest, landing on

the top button of his trousers, loosening it. He wanted this to last, but it wouldn't. Not if she wrapped her hands around his hard length. With a gentle push, he sent her falling backward onto the thick, down-filled mattress.

"You first." Bending over, he slid his hands over her soft skin, catching at the drawstring of her *lehenga*. A quick tug with his fingers, and the garment loosened. With a gentle kiss to her navel, he whisked away the satiny garment and lay her bare to his view. But before he could return his mouth to her skin, she rolled onto her side, propping herself on one elbow. Her long braid fell over her shoulder, and she toyed with its end, unfastening the tie that held the plaits in place.

"Take them off," she said, her eyes slightly unfocused. "You're not the only one who wants to look." She ran her fingers through her hair, freeing its long, silky lengths. "Take them off and join me."

All too happy to oblige, he yanked his trousers off and climbed onto the bed, stretching out beside her and skimming his hand over the curve of her hip. "So soft."

"So long," she said, her voice sultry as she traced his length. He clenched his jaw, wanting her touch but desperately trying to maintain control. His member throbbed as her slender fingers wrapped about him. "So thick and hard." Her flashing eyes teased. "Remind me how we fit together, for it doesn't seem possible."

"No?" He caught her wrist. Much more of that and he wouldn't last long enough to slide inside her. Encircling both wrists with one hand, he rolled her onto her back—then lifted her arms above her head, thrusting her gorgeous breasts upward. "Let me remind you." He brushed a finger across the soft curls at the apex of her thighs, then slipped a fingertip along the seam of her wet heat. Her well-kissed lips parted and her breath came faster as he circled her center. "Remembering now?"

Eyes closed, her dark lashes fanned across her cheeks. "A glimmer," she breathed, tipping her hips and parting her knees. "But I recall a bit more *depth* to your explorations."

Nipping the delicate skin of her neck, he laughed against her skin, then slid a finger deep inside her hot, wet channel. "Like this?" he asked, pushing slowly in and out of her. He watched, greedy for the vision of her pleasure. Their first time together had been one of touch and taste—he'd missed the sight of her hips flexing against his hand, her back arching, her heels digging into the mattress.

"More," she gasped. "All of you, Evan. Fill me."

In no frame of mind to deny such a plea, he rolled, dragging her with him, across him, crushing her heavy breasts to his chest. Her hips to his. Needing to be inside her, he guided her leg over his hip.

"You want me... on top?" She rose up onto her knees, straddling him, lowering herself onto his throbbing member. Long, dark hair fanned about her face and over her shoulders, its ends a gentle tease against his hot skin. His breath caught as she flexed her hips, gliding her wetness over his arousal. "Like this?"

He groaned, and his answer was strangled, but he managed a retort. "Exactly that way, but with more depth." It was her turn to laugh as he reached for a paper package upon his bedside table and pressed the sheath into her hand. No good pharmacist should be without one. He'd snatched a box at

the store, hoping... “Cover me, then take me inside you.”

Sweet torture, her soft hands moving over his stiff rod. He dug his fingers into the sheets, fighting a need to surge upward. At last, she notched him against her opening and took a few inches of him inside. Slowly, she pulled away before easing him back into tightness and wet heat.

“Oh, yes,” she said, spreading her thighs wider, sinking onto him and finally, finally, finally taking him fully within her. “This is the delicious fullness I remember,” she said, her voice a low purr.

With a growl, he jerked his hips upward. “There’s more moving involved.”

“Is there?” she teased, holding perfectly and painfully still. She leaned forward onto her hands and took his lips with hers. A deep, soul-shattering kiss. He let go of the bed and pulled her face to his. As they kissed, her hips began to move, slowly at first, rising and falling upon his length until he tore his mouth away on a groan.

Reaching between them, he pressed a thumb to her swollen bud, and her hips bucked, taking him deeper. “Yes!” She threw her head back. Waves of hair tumbled over her shoulders as her back arched, tipping her breasts upward. Piyali, wild and beautiful. An image he’d never forget. “Oh, God, Evan. Don’t stop.”

His body tightened, tension coiling at the base of his spine, but he held back, wanting to wait until she found her pleasure. He clenched his jaw, trying to hold on, but he wasn’t going to last much longer. She was so perfect and it had been so long. Too long. He gripped her hips, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her buttocks, and buried himself in her.

“Yes!” she cried.

Her hips jerked against his, and her sheath clenched about his shaft while her face contorted with pleasure. At last, he let himself go, diving deep to bury himself within her. His climax tore through him, his heart pounding wildly as he plummeted over the edge.

She collapsed onto his chest, her hair falling about them like a curtain, shutting out the world so that only the two of them were left. He wrapped his arms about her waist, holding her tight as their ragged breaths slowly returned to normal.

“I love you so much, Piyali,” he whispered, brushing a strand of hair from her face. Long ago he’d professed his love, and he’d not hold it back from her now. Not when it was the only thing he could give. He couldn’t promise her forever, not yet, but she should know that she would always have his heart.



She loved him too. But the words wouldn’t pass her lips. Suppressed anger that he’d not called upon her for help the moment he’d known something was wrong? Or the nagging feeling of disloyalty to the Crown? It was a most uncomfortable position. She ought to report her findings concerning the origins of the blue lesion. But to do so was to betray Evan’s confidence.

Or was it simply that she could only offer such words to someone who promised her forever, no matter how short forever was? A promise he would not make. Not yet.

Lying here curled in his arms, body and emotions laid bare, she couldn't bring herself to speak, to destroy the illusion that all was well. But even now, even as his glimmering fingers traced a slow, seductive path over the dip of her waist, the curve of her hip, her mind puzzled over how the infection might—at the very least—be stopped in its tracks. For it had to be stopped. This intracellular parasite could not be allowed to steal away her heart's desire.

"We need to get back to work," she said, breaking the silence. She rolled away, reaching for her discarded *lehenga choli*. "At some point, Mr. Black will take note of my failure to report." While she was willing to delay that particular missive, she would not compose an outright lie.

Evan groaned, but he too pried himself from the mattress and stood, discarding the sheath. "The minute we solve this problem, I'm dragging you back to bed—and we're staying there. For hours, if not days."

Glancing over her shoulder, she treated herself to one last glimpse of his toe-curling physique. Her heart leapt at the dark and sultry look he cast in her direction, a contemplation of all manner of erotic activities. The muscles of his broad shoulders, of his defined pectoral muscles shifted as he tugged on his shirt. Tempting, to reach out with her fingertips and trace the ridges of his stomach that marched downward toward a resurging interest in bedroom activities.

"Then let's begin." After dressing, she padded down the stairs and crossed to the iron stove, adding a block of peat to the fire and setting a pot of water onto the range. "Boiling leaves and dried ants. Primitive. My mentors would recoil in shock and horror." But not her *dida*. How many times had Piyali watched her grandmother boil *methi*—fenugreek—to make tea for settling her stomach and balancing her blood? Though in this particular case, *dida's* bottle of neem oil might prove more useful as an anti-parasitic.

"Back to the basics, with refinement to follow." Evan's voice rumbled over her skin, a sensual distraction she forced herself to ignore—until he caught her in his arms for one last kiss, leaving her breathless, her determination to resist his charms cracking and crumbling. "I'll gather the *khu-neh-ari* branches," he said, then took himself off to the greenhouse.

Fanning her hot face with her hand, Piyali examined the shelves of his supplies, contemplating a variety of options. Pharmacology was not her specialty, but she knew the basics, and so—braiding her hair and knotting a string about its end—began to gather any and all supplies that held even the faintest promise of a cure. Bottles and jars accumulated: black drawing salve, boric acid, calamine, castor oil, chaulmoogra oil, copper sulfate, gentian violet, iodine, mercurous chloride, sulfur, turpentine...

Hours later, glass Petri dishes covered the table's surface. Each held a small sample of biopsies of Evan's blue skin to which a variety of treatments—botanical and chemical—had been applied. Including the leaf and ant concoction. Conditions weren't perfect, but it was the best they could do

without a fully outfitted laboratory. The heat of the stove would keep the cultures warm, if not exactly at body temperature. Piyali clung to the hope that one of their makeshift experiments would yield results.

Now they waited.

“Evan,” she said, slipping behind him to wrap her arms about his waist and press the side of her face to his broad back. She choked out words her heart advised against. “It’s nearly midnight. I need to go back to the tavern.” By now Sarah—and the entire village—would have taken note of her failure to return, and she did not wish to antagonize them.

“Stay.” He wrapped a strong hand around hers.

“I shouldn’t. You know as well as I that gossip will be bubbling. If you want to conceal our relationship, that isn’t the way of going about it.” Agreeing to the here and now hurt, but if it was all they’d ever have, she would grab it with both hands. However, there was his sister to consider. Though she hesitated to broach the topic, she forced the words past her lips. “Without a wedding on the horizon, gossip will wend its way to Cardiff and impact Megan’s future.”

He sighed, but nodded. “I’ll walk you back.”

Ignoring the ache in her heart, Piyali lifted her bag and followed Evan out onto the moonlit path that wended its way down the hillside. Halfway, a flickering glow illuminated the forest glen and the fairy well it cradled.

Swearing beneath his breath, Evan came to a sudden stop. His arm looped about her as she stumbled into his solid form.

“What is it?” she whispered into his ear.

“It’s Seren’s Day.” He turned her around. “We’ll need to take a different path.”

“Wait.” Curiosity pricked, and she stepped past him, creeping closer to the well, taking care to stay well-hidden behind a nearby tree.

A number of young women—including Sarah and Tegan—gathered in a circle about the pool of water, looking remarkably serious. Each held a flickering candle in their left hand and pinched something between their right forefinger and thumb. With a glint of silver, one girl tossed her offering into the well, murmuring something—Welsh from the sound of it—and peered into the moonlit pool. There was a collective inhale, a holding of breaths, then a giggle, a blush and the announcement of a name. “Luc.”

“What on earth are they doing?” Piyali whispered as the next woman stepped forward. A time-honored ritual, but to what end?

“Tonight’s the night when a maiden can toss a bent pin into the well to ask the *gwragedd annwn* to show them the face of their future husband.”

“*Gwragedd annwn*?” Piyali tried to wrap her tongue around the strange Welsh words and failed.

“The water-sprite, a kind of fairy, that lives in this well. A few would even have you believe that a woman can—with the right words and offerings—coax the water-sprite into delivering the man of

her choice into her arms.” He scoffed. “Sheer nonsense.”

“They seem quite serious,” Piyali observed, intrigued by the age-old custom and the seriousness of the ceremony.

“Mmm,” Evan answered.

Sarah’s turn arrived. She mouthed the words, tossed the pin, but instead of bending over to look, tossed in a scrap of cloth.

“That’s cheating!” Tegan accused, rounding on her. The harsh tone of her voice shattered the sacred silence. “You stole that handkerchief from him.”

Him. *Evan’s* missing handkerchief.

Smirking, Sarah gave a half shrug. “*You* snuck up here days ago, trying to coax the *gwragedd annwn* to do your bidding. *That* is cheating. At least I’m open about my wishes.”

“I did not!” Tegan pointed a finger. “You sent your mother to appeal to the sprite on your behalf.”

There was a collective gasp from the group of women. “Shh,” one admonished. “You’ll frighten the *gwragedd annwn* away.”

“At least I’m not creeping about Evan’s greenhouse,” Sarah said, “peering in windows or throwing myself at him with any number of ridiculous and fictitious afflictions. I hope your entire leg turns blue and falls off.”

With a howl, Tegan launched herself at Sarah, grabbing her by the hair and dragging them both into the shallow water. Both of them screamed, clawing at each other with their fingers, splashing and thrashing, each trying to hold the other’s face beneath the water.

“Stop!” The women cried out, leaping away from the brawl. A few—those who had yet to make their appeal to the water-sprite—burst into tears.

“That’s enough!” Evan bellowed as he stepped from behind the tree. “Stop this nonsense immediately. Home, all of you.” There was a slight hesitation as horrified faces turned in his direction, and then the women began to move, running down the pathway. He reached over the low stone wall and hauled Tegan away from Sarah.

“Ow!” Sarah cried as she crawled to the muddy edge of the pool, clutching at her lower leg. “I think it’s broken!”

“Now who exaggerates!” Tegan yelled.

“That’s enough!” he barked, scooping Sarah into his arms and leaving a sour-faced Tegan sitting half-submerged in the pool. “Once you manage to control your temper, Piyali will assist you.”

Reluctantly, Piyali extended a hand, but Tegan only narrowed her eyes. Several long gashes reddened where fingernails had streaked down her face. “You,” she spat. “You’ve ruined everything.” Thrashing about, the young woman dragged herself from the pool, and set off down the path behind Evan.

Chapter 8

Evan kicked the tavern door open and stepped into its smoky, alcohol-steeped interior. A number of men whooped to see him carrying Miss Sarah Parker, her arms wrapped tightly about his neck and her face pressed to his chest. Picking her up was a mistake he'd immediately regretted, but what was the alternative?

"What are you doing with my daughter?" Mr. Parker barked. "That's it, I'm calling the—"

"I'm *not* marrying her." A statement he made *every* time he walked through this door of late. He plopped Sarah's sodden form down on the nearest chair and pried her arms from his neck. Her torn bodice gaped. "Dr. Mukherji and I found her—and others—at Seren's Well. Miss Price and Miss Parker had an... altercation. Miss Parker has injured her ankle."

This announcement drew forth another round of whoops, including table slapping along with a number of ribald comments and speculation as to who had won the catfight. Congratulations were called out to Sarah, who wore a satisfied smile at all the attention.

"What happened to Tegan?" he asked Piyali softly.

"She refused my hand," she muttered. "And called you a number of creative names as she stumbled home."

He cringed. "I'm sorry, but we shall have to pay her a visit later." It was the last thing she wished do, but it was the *right* thing to do.

She jerked a nod. "Let me see to Sarah's leg first."

Dragging up her wet skirts, a whimper escaped Sarah's mouth. "There's a reason we call her two-faced Tegan." A deep, bloody gash cut through her stocking and into the skin of her calf.

Piyali set down her bag and bent to examine the wound. "That's going to require stitches." Painful ones. "Where is your mother? You should change into clean, dry clothes before I employ my suture kit."

"She's not available," Mr. Parker said, placing a hand on his daughter's shoulder, pressing her into the chair. "Stay." He nodded at Piyali. "Much obliged if you'd sew her back together."

"Your wife, is she ill?" Evan asked, recalling the accusation Tegan had hurled at Sarah—and Piyali's report that Mrs. Parker had also been bitten by the blue frog. Much as he disliked the woman, he couldn't ignore the possibility that she too might have need of treatment. His initial "rash" had

spread all too fast. “I’ve heard reports that she’s favoring a hand. Shall I take a look at her injury?”

“She’s fine.” Mr. Parker’s words were gruff, leaving no doubt in Evan’s mind that he would never, ever, under any circumstances be allowed to attend his wife. His daughter’s injury, however, couldn’t be dismissed.

After much drama involving screams and tears and shots of gin to calm a much-distressed patient, Mr. Parker carried his now-contrite, inebriated daughter to her room.

A heavy sigh met his ears as Piyali followed him out of the tavern. It was well past midnight. “Tegan?” she asked. Her hand sought his, and he grasped it tightly, squeezing. A small comfort. But it wasn’t enough.

“Her injuries were minor,” he answered. “Better to call upon her in the morning.” With a tug, he pulled Piyali into his arms and out of sight of the tavern’s dirt-streaked windows. He slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her until she melted against him, until he nearly threw propriety to the wind and hauled her back to his cottage. Gossip be damned. Reluctantly, he released her. “Go. Sleep. We’ve much to do tomorrow. Today.”

“We do.” She lifted a hand to drag her palm across the stubble on his cheek. “I’ve missed you so much, Evan. We will solve this...”

The silver embroidery upon the hem of her skirt glinted in the moonlight as she stepped back into the tavern. She’d left a few words unspoken, but he’d read her unspoken thought in her eyes, and they sent a shaft of pain deep into his chest.

Whatever the cost.

The cost might very well be calculated by Queen’s agents and the scientists who kept Britain’s security at the forefront of their minds. Even Piyali struggled to rank him above her loyalty to the Crown. He’d know the minute she tossed a skeet pigeon toward London; guilt would scrawl itself across her face as if written in red ink, for she’d be unable to hide such a decision from him. At which point Tegan’s lesion would be excised, and he—and the frog—would disappear from Wales and from her life. Forever. He desperately hoped it wouldn’t come to that.



Long before the first rays of sun lightened the sky, Piyali tapped softly at the door to Sarah’s chamber. Something about the young woman’s wound nagged at the back of her mind. Only examining it, studying its ragged edges and finding nothing abnormal would put her at ease.

The door cracked open and a pair of sleepy eyes set in a drawn face peered out.

“May I come in?” Piyali asked. “I want to make certain there’s no infection.” Of *any* kind.

Sarah waved her in, dropping back onto her bed and stretching out her leg. “It hurts, but only a little.”

“Was it worth it?” she asked as she unwrapped the gauze.

“Even if Evan wants nothing more to do with me, he’s at least met the real Tegan. Such a brat.” Satisfaction stretched Sarah’s lips wide.

Agreeing with her mildly vindictive patient seemed unwise, even if Piyali’s heart hummed a happy tune at Evan’s inability to resist her charms. For years he’d waited. For her.

“No sign of excessive redness,” she said. But neither had Tegan’s ankle shown any normal signs of infection. That stray thought had her reaching for the torch at her waist. Not possible. Was it? Better to know than to leave any lingering doubt. Shaking the decilamp, she pointed the beam of light toward Sarah’s calf.

A glimmer, a flash and a nightmare unfolded. The edges of the wound—a tiny fraction of an inch—were iridescent. Guanine crystals.

An iron band tightened about her chest; air scraped its way in and out of her lungs. This was a disaster. With the frog in captivity, it could mean only one thing. Whatever parasitic organism lived in the amphibian’s saliva, it did not require its host to survive. Despite its tropical origins, the parasite had managed to colonize the cold waters of Seren’s Well, entering Sarah’s skin via the open wound.

Tegan.

Piyali’s stomach clenched. Sarah had dragged four fingernails—four *wet* fingernails—down the side of Tegan’s face. *Her face.* “Keep it clean and rest today,” she said, careful to keep her voice steady as she wrapped the wound once again. “I’ll have Mr. Tredegar prepare a salve. Be certain to use it.”

Outside Sarah’s room, Piyali fell against the closed door, pressing a hand to her chest. Her heart pounded against her ribs. What to do? Stepping back into the common room of the tavern, she searched out the rusty skeet pigeon, perched once again upon its shelf, returned from its last delivery. Hers. Odd that Mr. Black had sent no reply. He must still be in Scotland, her message languishing among his extensive correspondence. Not that her note mattered. More than an objective was broken now. An entire well was contaminated, one frequented by the local population. Disaster loomed.

She could delay one more day. If the experiments didn’t provide a cure within the next twenty-four hours, she’d have no choice but to write to the head of the Queen’s agents, the Duke of Avesbury himself.



This was a complete catastrophe.

Evan stared at the four blue streaks that raked down Tegan’s face. Tears ran from her eyes as she blew her red, puffy nose. “I’m going to die!” she keened.

As always, Tegan was completely self-centered. She offered not a single word of apology for instigating the fight, nor showed any concern for how Sarah might have fared. *Sarah.* He ran a hand over his eyes. If Tegan’s scratches were so affected, what of Sarah’s wound?

Her mother stood beside her, wringing her hands, looking to him with pleading eyes, but all he had to offer her were false promises and an imperfect ointment. Tegan might not die, but the quality of her life was definitely on a downward spiral unless he and Piyali found a cure and soon.

In the doorway, Mr. Price cleared his throat. “Dr. Mukherji has arrived.”

Mouth open, Piyali stepped into the room, yet her expression wasn’t one of surprise, rather one of horror at the verification of her worst fears.

A ball of lead dropped into his stomach. “Sarah?”

A grim nod was her answer.

There was nothing more they could do here; their time was best spent searching for a cure. Mouthing useless words of encouragement and instructing Mrs. Price to continue to apply the ointment, he grabbed Piyali by the elbow and steered her toward the shop’s door. “We’ll be back to check on her tonight.”

Piyali shook her elbow free. “If I might purchase a jar, Mr. Price?”

“A canning jar?” Mr. Price’s voice was incredulous.

“Yes.” She dropped a coin into his hand as he handed her the glass container. “Thank you. It’ll do.”

Evan kept his lips pressed tightly together until they had traveled several feet down the rutted road, exiting the village. “It’s not the frog this time.”

“No,” Piyali agreed. “It’s not.”

“The experiments are a failure.” Ice slid through his veins as he presented a cold and bleak report. “As you predicted, without proper incubation the cultured skin cells died. Even more worrisome, I examined a drop of the culture media beneath the lens of your aetherscope and,” he took a deep breath, “the parasites broke free from the dying cells and are now free-swimming.”

Pain, not surprise, crossed her face as she lifted the jar. “In the water of Seren’s Well too. It appears they require a wound, a laceration of the epidermis for direct access to the basal layer. Sarah’s fingernails digging scratches into Tegan’s face. The sharp edge of a stone wall cutting Sarah’s ankle.” She dragged in a ragged breath. “Evan, I need to write to Mr. Black. The water is contaminated. If anyone seeks the well’s healing waters, anyone with so much as a tiny scratch, they too might become infected.”

An entire town slipping into madness. There would be no hiding such a crisis. No longer could this be kept a secret. They turned off the main road, following the narrow path upward into the forest, winding their way toward the fairy well. Soon the small, sleepy town of Aberwyn would be overrun with agents of the Crown.

He, Tegan, Sarah—and quite probably her mother—would be quarantined, his sister and grandmother notified. He cringed. For the mental and physical safety of them all, separate—locked—cells would be required. Once the government realized the potential powers behind the side-effects of a blue frog’s bite... No, he could not allow himself to contemplate such a bleak future. Not yet.

“One more day,” he pleaded, stopping before Seren’s Well. Its once innocent waters now teemed with tropical parasites that had colonized an entirely new habitat. “One more day to find a cure.”



From the slight sag of his shoulders, Piyali knew it would cost him much to relinquish control. Though it was time to summon assistance, neither was she ready to admit defeat. A small concession was in order. “We’ll sample the water,” she said. “Confirm our suspicions. We’ll set up another round of experiments, and then I’ll compose a report. Maybe the parasites will prove easier to kill outside a host.”

She lifted a stick from the ground, threading it through the wire handle of the canning jar, and dipped it into the water. Sample collected, she stepped back onto the path, careful to hold the vessel steadily before her.

“Let’s hope so,” Evan said, his jaw set with determination.

Once the Queen’s agents became involved, quarantine was a strong possibility, and they might well judge the situation a security risk, refusing to inform his family of any specifics regarding his health or whereabouts. “If it comes to it, I’ll see to your sister and grandmother.” Whatever it took.

He managed a stiff nod.

They returned to his cottage in painful silence, neither one of them wishing to speculate as to what the future held.

Soon she was perched once again upon the chair at Evan’s desk and bent over to peer through the eyepiece of the aethroscope. Her skin crawled. Wriggling in the water droplet on the glass slide were hundreds of microscopic organisms.

Evan took one glance and cringed. “Perhaps we ought to consider a more toxic approach, with the primary intent of cleansing the well.”

“Chemicals?” she said. “Sodium hypochlorite would bleach the well. It might work, but it will also kill anything else living there. And once the bleach breaks down...” She shook her head. “The well would need to be monitored on a long-term basis. We don’t know the life-cycle of this parasite. If it forms a cyst—a tough, protective capsule—in response to environmental insult, it could return the moment conditions are once again favorable.”

“We would need to go back to Cardiff to obtain sufficient quantities of bleach to begin treatment. I’ve only enough here to destroy these samples. As to the problem of potential cysts...” He ran a hand through his hair. “We could post warning signs at the well, inform the entire village, but it won’t stop a determined individual from sneaking there in the dark of night and making offerings to the *gwragedd annwn*.”

Reaching out, she took Evan’s glimmering hand. Frustration had shifted the guanine crystals. She squeezed. “We proceed as planned.” She lifted her gaze to his tight eyes and pulled her shoulders

back. “Now is not the time to concede defeat, but to redouble our efforts. You were up all night. What components did you manage to extract from the *khu-neh-ari* plant?”

“You’re right, of course.” Evan drew himself straight. “I’ve evidence of naphthoquinone...”

They gathered together another collection of plant extracts, chemicals and organic compounds. She reviewed each Petri dish, each test they’d assembled the night before, hoping to find something they’d overlooked.

She didn’t.

Piyali set up a dilution series, testing the effectiveness of the few extremely toxic chemicals Evan kept on hand. At last, weary from work and the previous night’s events, there was little to do but stare at each other across the table, across a wide selection of Petri dishes, containing well water and a new range of potential anti-parasitic pharmaceuticals. With luck, a few hours from now re-examination would reveal a solution, a chemical and its necessary concentration to eliminate any and all life stages of the parasite. But neither their diligence nor their patience was rewarded. Bleach killed off the parasite, but only when used in unusually large quantities.

“Scrofula!” She slapped her forehead and jumped to her feet. Lack of sleep had fogged her mind. “Sarah! She has no ointment. And, really, I must see if there’s a way to convince her mother to allow me to view the bite to her hand.”

Evan handed her a small container of his ointment. “She needs to apply it four times a day.”

He kissed her forehead, and she wanted nothing more than to wrap her arms about his waist, lay her head on his chest, close her eyes and listen to the steady beat of his heart. Instead, she rose on to the tips of her toes and gave him an all-too-brief kiss. “I’ll be back soon,” she promised.

Chapter 9

Back at The White Hare, Piyali found Sarah up and about, hoisting trays laden with stew and ale. She tsked. “Eleven stiches warrant a day off.”

“Father says there’s no place for loafers in our family.” Her eyes lifted to the blackened overhead beams of the ceiling, and her next words were louder. “Not that I’ve seen hide or hair of Mother since I was gravely injured doing *her* bidding.”

“*Her* bidding?” Piyali tipped her head.

“I told you the first night you were here.” Sarah swatted a hand in the air. “They want me to marry Evan. They’ve been plaguing and pestering and nudging me in his direction ever since he returned from Brazil.” She wiped down a table. “Handsome as he is, wealthy though he might one day be, not once has he offered me any encouragement. Still, I dutifully stole his handkerchief as instructed and tossed a bent pin in a pool of water, mangling some ancient Welsh blessing. And what happens? Tegan, mad as a hatter, drags me into the water, and I end the night with you sewing my leg back together.”

“How is your leg?”

“Crusty and sore, if in a sparkling sapphire kind of way.” Sarah tipped her head and lifted an eyebrow. “You could have told me. I’m not the type to faint or fret. I do, however, expect you and Evan to provide a cure.”

No one could sum up a situation quite like Sarah. With a bitter laugh, she handed Sarah the ointment and gave her instructions. “Your mother ought to use the ointment as well.”

“It’ll hardly be enough,” Sarah said, pulling a face as she slipped the jar into her pocket. “It’s spread clear up her arm now. I told her to let you look at it. But no—”

“Sarah!” Mr. Parker yelled from behind the bar. His lips were a harsh, bloodless line and his eyebrows formed a sharply pointed V. “Hush your mouth. I’ve raised you better than to gossip about family.”

Sarah opened her mouth, thought twice, and snapped it shut. Piyali touched her elbow in silent sympathy. With a sidelong glance that spoke of the trials she endured beneath the thumb of her father, Sarah hefted a stack of dirty dishes and wound her way through the tables and chairs to the kitchen.

Curious that Mrs. Parker pushed the centuries old Welsh custom upon her daughter. Wanting Sarah

to marry well was understandable, but Piyali wouldn't have pegged Mrs. Parker as the superstitious type.

Now was clearly not the time to press for a visit with Sarah's mother, so Piyali made her way to her room. She'd compose that letter to Mr. Black, then approach Mr. Parker about sending another message. Perhaps that would be the best time to inquire after his wife.

In her room, she placed pen to paper, then stopped. *A frog attack?* Her account read like a fairy tale gone horribly wrong. There had to be a better way to relate the odd events that had occurred in Aberwyn. She scratched out her words and tried again. And again. Tossing aside her fountain pen, Piyali fell backward upon the lumpy mattress. Describing the process by which the man she loved was slowly turning invisible simply was not possible in the small square of parchment a skeet pigeon could carry. Her mind was too muddled. She'd rest her eyes a few minutes, then make another attempt.

The sun was low on the horizon when she pried her eyes open. *Schistosomiasis!* She'd slept away the afternoon. No more time to dally, the evening rush would soon be upon the tavern, and Mr. Parker would only grow more taciturn and gruff without the aid of his wife.

Hastily scratching off a report to Mr. Black containing nothing but bare facts—and trying not to reflect upon how ridiculous it all sounded—she rolled the note into a narrow cylinder, slid it into a tin casing and sealed the end. She bent over her trunk, hunting for another skeet pigeon punch card.

Gone. They were all gone. Her hands stilled as she scanned her belongings. Nothing seemed out of place, and the trunk had been locked. Though, admittedly, her lock was not particularly secure, a mild deterrent. Someone wanted to keep her from contacting headquarters. But who?

Only one person knew she possessed such punch cards. He also happened to be the proprietor of this tavern and inn. Was it Mr. Parker? His wife?

Sarah?

Had her first missive ever reached London?

She slid the message into a pouch hanging from her corset and took a moment to inspect her TTX weapon. Overreacting? No. Her training had taught her it was better to take precautions when one's nervous system sent out an alert, and from the way the hairs on the back of her neck quivered... The Parkers were an odd bunch, but Piyali could think of no obvious reason they would wish to interrupt her communications.

Hand loosely poised by her hip, she slid down the stairs. Only a few bleary-eyed regular drunks occupied a dark corner beside the peat fire on the hearth. Sarah leaned on the window sill, staring out at the street. Her parents were nowhere to be seen. Careful to move silently, Piyali ducked under the countertop and crept on her toes toward the Parkers' private quarters. If challenged, she would insist Mrs. Parker required medical evaluation. For now, she listened at the door, to the cadence of what became increasingly hostile voices. Ever so carefully, she nudged the door ajar.

"What more do you want me to do?" Mrs. Parker grumbled. "I have it."

“What of the plant?” the innkeeper challenged.

Mrs. Parker huffed. “A cutting.”

“Not good enough.” Contempt laced his voice. “We need roots.”

“They’ve killed every live sample we’ve sent,” she snapped. “What good are roots? This time will be different. *We* take them the vine. *They* send a botanist to the rainforest to dig up an entire plant. We need to go. Now.”

“No. Not with Sarah injured,” he objected. “Besides, there might be further instructions.”

There was a long silent pause in which Piyali imagined they glared daggers at each other.

“You want her cured,” Mrs. Parker accused. “Yet you’re quite happy to leave me to my fate. After all these years together, you’d sacrifice the queen to save the pawn?”

“I’m not the one who declined treatment.”

“I overheard them. The ointment merely slows down the inevitable. Excision is the only cure. With that woman set upon recruiting help from London, we need to leave.”

“Then shall I sharpen the knife?” Bitterness honed his words. “For amputation at your elbow is now your only opinion. The more natural joints you preserve, the better the prosthetic will function.”

Mrs. Parker snarled back, her words too guttural and mangled for Piyali to understand. No, she realized, not distorted at all. The Parkers now argued in Russian.

Scrofula. They were both spies. Russian spies! Here. Living in the countryside of Wales—according to Sarah—for some years, establishing a cover, raising a daughter, biding their time. Realization dawned. If Mr. Black and Lister University wished to recruit Evan, so too would the Russians. Encouraging—*forcing*—Sarah to pursue him as a husband was a most excellent strategy.

Mrs. Parker must have been the one to break into Evan’s home, leaving the greenhouse door ajar, rearranging shelf items. Sloppy of her. But what, exactly, had they taken? They’d had three long months since Evan returned from Brazil. The list could be quite long, even if they’d taken pains to steal only small samples of his specimens and tiny fractions of his supplies.

Piyali swallowed hard. They must know she was more than a physician. Why else steal her punch cards? This cast Mr. Black’s silence in a different light. Had the tavern’s rusty skeet pigeon ever taken flight?

Slowly, carefully, silently, she backed away. Evan’s worst fears were about to become reality, but not at all via the channels he’d expected.

She needed to tell him. Now.



Evan scraped his hand through his hair.

Over the past several hours, a gnawing sense of desperation had overtaken him. The latest development—free-swimming parasites infesting Seren’s Well—had escalated the situation beyond

anything he could hope to control. If he couldn't produce a solution, a cure, there would be no choice but to agree to summon Mr. Black and his agents, a most unwelcome conclusion to his struggles. While Lister University might be able to develop a cure, his secret would be in the hands of the British government.

He tried to imagine a positive outcome, but none of the scenarios his mind constructed ended well. Blue-skinned men—or women—with the ability to become invisible, an uncontrollable ability that was entirely subject to the whim of their emotional state. The government would ignore this unfortunate fact and try to mold such individuals into agents, to employ them for the greater good of the British Empire. But when inevitable madness resulted, what then? These agents would go rogue and disaster would result.

No. There was no alternative. A remedy had to be found.

“Copper,” he announced to the empty room as a flash of insight struck.

Turning on his heel, he stared at the bottle of blue vitriol—copper sulfate to be exact. Though it was a substance often used to treat skin diseases, it hadn't proven equal to the task of eradicating the parasite. Neither had a *khu-neh-ari* preparation optimized for maximum naphthoquinone content.

However, analysis of the *khu-neh-ari* vine had also revealed the liana possessed an unusually high copper content. What would happen if he supplemented, rather than reduced the copper content of the new ointment?

Minutes later, an alcohol lamp burned at the base of a ring stand beneath a beaker containing the *khu-neh-ari* preparation, a yellowish, gel-like substance. Above the flask, a clamp held a glass volumetric burette filled with blue copper sulfate.

Evan stirred the ointment in the beaker with a glass rod until it melted. Then, slowly, he turned the burette's tap, allowing a drop of the blue liquid to fall into the yellow solution. Drip by drip, the *khu-neh-ari* absorbed the blue vitriol, gradually turning a reddish-brown as the mixture became more acidic.

Time to place his hypothesis to the test. After pipetting a measure of this new mixture into a Petri dish containing contaminated well water, there was nothing left to do but wait.

Staring at the hands of his pocket watch, he paced the flagstone floor—and lasted all of ten minutes. If this worked, if he could exterminate the parasites in the fairy well, then Mr. Black would not need to be summoned. That would win him additional time for further experimentation, time to determine a method by which to kill the creatures that crept beneath his skin.

But he was getting ahead of himself. First things first.

Recalling how Piyali had operated the aetherscope, he prepared a slide and slid it into the aether chamber. A hiss. A process of focusing upon the specimen, gradually increasing the strength of the objective until the parasites came into focus.

For a moment, he forgot to breathe. Not a single one of the unicellular parasites moved, all floated motionless inside the small drop of fluid. A number of the wee creatures had lysed—burst—and

fragments of their intracellular organelles were strewn about the field of vision.

Heart pounding, he leapt to his feet, knocking over the chair behind him in his haste to return to the solution-filled beaker. With a shaking hand, he lifted an eyedropper to extract a single drop of the anti-parasitic solution. He forced himself to take several long, steadying breaths—in and out—until his shimmering hand returned to a regrettable, yet familiar, blue.

He touched a drop of solution to the skin on the back of his hand and stared intently, praying, hardly daring to hope that it might penetrate the many layers of his skin to eradicate the creatures that burrowed within. Shock, then euphoria, rippled through him as a circle of blue color began to fade, slowly returning to a more normal, flesh-colored shade.

Whooping, he leapt to his feet, a wide grin stretching across his face as he strode across the room toward the door to snatch his coat from its hook. He needed to find Piyali, needed to pull her into his arms, spin her about and make plans for their future.

But before his hand could wrap about the handle, the door burst open and Piyali herself rushed into his cottage, wide-eyed and frantic. Her clothes were rumpled and several strands of hair had pulled free from her normally sleek braid. She slammed the wooden door behind her and fell backward against it, dragging in long, ragged breaths.

“What’s wrong?” Worry shoved excitement to the floor.

“Spies,” she panted, staggering forward. He caught her by the shoulders. “You’ve been living in a nest of them.”

“Spies?” He lifted an eyebrow. “In Aberwyn, Wales?”

“The Parkers,” she said.

As he listened to the rush of words that poured from her mouth, Evan began to pace. Her discovery reframed every interaction he’d had with them these last three months. As the proprietor of The White Hare, Mr. Parker had received and signed for every single item he’d shipped from Brazil during his expedition. Many of those crates had arrived before he himself even set foot on the dirigible that had carried him home to Britain. He’d not have noticed a few missing grams of dried Tawari tree bark or a few milliliters of Wasai extract. And his plants... Once he’d begun to propagate them here, a missing seedling or two he would have overlooked as a failure to germinate or root in British soil.

Evan turned on his heel. An inventory of his stores, of his plants, might reveal discrepancies, but how could he—at this late date—hope to pinpoint exactly what was stolen? “Wait.” His mind finally caught up with Piyali’s words. “Did you say they pushed Sarah to seduce me?” Her constant flirtations, her wandering hands and the ever-present overflowing bosom accidentally brushing against him at any and every opportunity.

She nodded. “Though I don’t think she knows her parents are Russian. I think she went along with the plan to wriggle out from under their thumb.”

“Instead it would have tightened the noose about my neck.” He strode to the tabletop, slapped a

small square of paper upon it and lifted a fountain pen. “We need to send Mr. Black a message. Inform him of the spies and request backup. But whatever you do, don’t mention the frog.”

“What? We can’t. Weren’t you listening?” Her voice rose in volume.

“I’m sorry. Too much, too fast.” His mouth fell open as she repeated herself. “Even if we trusted Mr. Parker to toss the clockwork contraption into the air, he has stolen all my pre-punched direction cards.”

He looked pointedly at the pistol strapped to her hip. “Then we handle this ourselves.”

“I suppose I could shoot them both, then bind them hand and foot,” Piyali grumbled. “Heave them both in your crank wagon and haul them to Cardiff. From there I could contact headquarters, send them a cryptogram over the wire.”

He snorted. “Dr. Piyali Mukherji, bounty hunter.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrows rose. “You don’t think I could?”

“I don’t doubt it for a minute. I’ll help. But first we ought to cure this infection.”

“Evan,” she said, shoving a few loose strands of hair behind her ears. “We’re out of time. If they escape your village and turn this over to their handlers—”

“Let me rephrase,” he interrupted. “While you slept the afternoon away, I found the cure.” He no longer felt as if a spotted jaguar hunted him in the night. Once again the future held promise of happiness.

“A cure!” She rushed to the table, but its surface was clear. “What is it? What worked?”

“Copper,” he answered, pointing to the aetherscope upon his desk. “Take a look.” As she bent over to peer into the aetherscope, he explained. “You were right to suggest chemicals. Blue vitriol added to a *khu-neh-ari* preparation optimized for maximum naphthoquinone content. Neither works alone, but together, the copper multiplies the effect of the ointment.”

She straightened. A wide smile lit up her face, her eyes. “This means we can treat the fairy well.”

“Not quite.” He waved a hand at his shelves. “I’ve not a fully-stocked pharmacy here,” he reminded her. “Just a small bottle of copper sulfate. We’ll need to make more.”

“Simple enough. A couple copper farthings, some sulfuric acid, hydrogen peroxide, a little electricity courtesy of a strong battery...”

“Exactly. For now, the resulting preparation is rather watery, more of a tonic than an ointment, but there’s more.” He lifted the eyedropper. “Watch.”

Holding out his hand, blue but for one small spot, he touched another drop of the solution to the skin on the back of his hand. Piyali stared intently, her eyes widening as a second circle of blue color began to fade, slowly returning to a more normal, flesh-colored shade.

“A biopsy,” she demanded, breathless. “We need unambiguous confirmation. Have you performed one?”

“Not yet.” He handed her a scalpel.

Piyali took a deep, calming breath, performed the procedure and inserted the slide into the

aetheroscope. A moment later she pressed a hand to her heart and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “Cured,” she announced, then flung her arms about his neck, hugging him tight.

His—their—entire future, saved.

He wrapped his arms about her waist, ignoring the various attachments of her stiff leather corset that jutted into his skin. “With the entire fairy well infested, we’ll need more of it than I have on hand in this bottle, but I’ve copper and acid and the *khu-neh-ari* liana grows quickly... with a touch of effort, we should be able to generate enough for our needs without traveling to Cardiff.” He slid his hands lower, spreading his fingers wide over the curve of her backside. Her soft breasts pressing against his chest made it impossible to concentrate. “Perhaps, before we set to work, we could celebrate.”

Chapter 10

“Oh, is there something in particular you’d like to do?” Piyali kissed the rough edge of his jaw in encouragement. Now was not the time to speak of their future, but instead to celebrate that they once again had one, one that they would share together. Applying her fingers to the buttons of his shirt, she spread the coarse linen wide and hummed in appreciation as she ran her palms over the strong muscles and crisp hairs that lay beneath.

“As if you need to ask.” He unfasted the metal buckles of her corset and stripped away the leather barrier that encircled her waist. Sliding his hands beneath the hem of her *choli*, he skimmed his palms over her rib cage before pulling the garment down her arms and dropping it to the floor. “I’ve not been able to stop thinking about you, about us.”

She stood still as he caught a loose strand of her hair between his fingertips and drew its silky length forward across her shoulder. The backs of his fingers caressed the curve of her breast and her nipple tightened under his appreciative gaze. Then something in his eyes shifted. “I should have written sooner. The time we’ve lost...”

Brushing the pad of her thumb across his lips, she said, “I should have sent another skeet pigeon. And another. Until an entire flock pecked at your windows and compelled a reply. Forgive me?”

“Always.”

Catching his lips with hers, she poured every ounce of her love into her kiss. Barriers crumbled between them, but Piyali refused to allow the tears that pricked at her eyes to ruin the pure joy of this moment. She held still as he pushed her away, tugging the string free from the end of her braid. He ran his fingers through her hair until it fell in loose waves, covering her shoulders and cascading down her back.

Only then did she step forward to peel back the collar of his shirt and press her lips to the soft skin of his neck where his pulse throbbed and tendrils of blue skin glimmered. “I’ve a request,” she said, her voice once again light and teasing.

“Anything.” His hands encircled her waist, urging her closer until the hard column of his shaft pressed against her stomach.

“A final request of sorts.”

Worried eyes lifted to hers. “Final?”

“A final... performance for your hand.” Her face burned at the erotic image that rose to mind. “I want to see it—or not—as it moves over my skin.” Watching and not seeing, as if surrendering to a sensual dream.

His answering laugh was a low rumble. “Look down, then. Watch.”

She lowered her gaze as his work-roughened left hand—in all its iridescent beauty—slid upward over her ribs to lift the weight of her breast in his palm. Something scraped the tip of her nipple—his fingernail—but she saw almost nothing. Everything was pure sensation. The roll of her flesh between his invisible thumb and forefinger. A delicious pinch sending a jolt of heat through her core.

“Evan!” she cried out as heat flooded her center, and her hips bucked against his. Then his mouth descended upon her other breast, sucking its tip deep into wet heat. “More,” she demanded.

His hands left her breasts and cupped her buttocks. In one smooth motion, Evan lifted her into the air and strode across the room. Her backside landed upon the scarred, wooden table. He yanked the slippers from her feet and dragged off her skirt. “Not once did I ever imagine you spread like a feast upon my table.” His eyes glinted darkly as they raked down her body. “But now that you’re there...” He spread her knees apart, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “Don’t forget to watch.”

An unseen hand swept across her thigh, his finger slipping along her wetness, gently circling her nub. “Aether,” she whispered, falling back onto her hands and arching her back when he plunged an invisible finger inside. In. Then out. And in. Her eyes fluttered shut.

“You’re forgetting to look,” he said, dark laughter in his voice. She forced her eyes open. The pressure inside her increased—a second finger joining the first—and then the base of his hand pressed hard against her mound.

Her hips bucked. *Enough.* Clawing at his waistband, she unfastened his trousers and shoved them down over his hips. “I want you inside me.”

“So soon?” he asked. “I thought—”

“Now.” Encircling his thick, hard length with her fingers, she drew forth a groan.

The pressure from his fingers slid away. A moment passed as he dug into his pocket, then a paper wrapper tore, and he covered himself. Rough hands dragged her hips to the edge of the wooden table. She lowered herself backward onto her elbows and wrapped her legs around his bare backside, urging him closer.

The head of his cock notched against her center. He gripped her hips and took her with one powerful thrust of his hips. *Yes. That.* That was the pressure she craved. Filled, stretched. Claimed by the man she loved.

“God, you’re perfect.” He retreated, then surged forward again. Over and over.

It wasn’t enough. She wanted him closer. Needed him. She caught the free edges of his shirt and dragged him down on top of her. The crisp hairs of his chest rasped against her nipples, sending a tremor across her skin. The table beneath her grated against the floorboards, shifting with each passionate thrust, a potent expression of desire.

“Yes, Evan,” she cried. “Don’t stop.” She lifted her knees higher, tipping her pelvis and twining her legs about his thighs to pull him deeper.

He grasped her hips, increasing the angle of his thrusts to rub harder against her center. His hot mouth fell against her neck, a gentle bite that left her mewling.

“Piyali,” he rasped. “Come for me.”

Her nails dug into his backside as a desperate tension built inside her and at last burst free. “Evan!” She cried out as tremors rolled over her, muscles clenching around increasingly frenzied thrusts. With a yell, he stiffened, driving himself into her one last time.

Sense returned slowly. Slowly, lazily, she opened her eyes and smiled. “How many feet did we travel?”

Laughing, he stabbed his fingers into her hair and gave her a long kiss before straightening. “Three?” Lifting her into his arms, he carried her upstairs to his bed, laying her upon its soft surface. “Tables might have their points, but beds...” He climbed in beside her, and she draped an arm across his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. His fingers trailed through her hair and she let her mind drift away as he murmured into her hair. “Once we eradicate this parasite, the Queen’s agents never need know about any of this.”

On the edge of sleep, his words shattered her euphoria. “What?” She bolted upright, clutching the sheet to her chest. “You still think there’s no need to inform Mr. Black?”

“Exactly that,” Evan replied.

“It’s too late to hide what happened. Besides, he has ways of making people talk. When I bring them in, the Parkers will tell him everything. As will Tegan and her family. I’d look like a fool.” Her career would never recover. How could he ask this of her? She climbed from the bed, wrapping the sheet about her. “Impossible.”



“Why?” he countered, missing her warmth, even though the blaze of her narrow-eyed stare threatened to incinerate him. “Without the parasite, there’s no risk of further infection. Once we treat the pool...” He trailed off, knowing they were at an impasse.

“Not so. Even after it’s treated, the contaminated well water will need to be monitored on a regular basis to be certain the parasite does not take on a cyst form. Some unicellular organisms can survive months in cold water in such a state. To do that, my laboratory will need to know what to look for and how to identify the particular organism involved. I’ve no choice. Mr. Black must be informed.”

She was right. Even if she agreed to hide the events of the past few days, Mr. Black would learn of them during an interrogation of the Parkers. He asked her to jeopardize both her career as a Queen’s agent and the laboratory she’d been granted at Lister University. Not something he had the

right to do.

“No.” Piyali sliced a hand through the air. “I’ll have no part in concealing this.” She shot down the stairs.

The sheet from his bed made a soft *swoosh* as its loose end trailed downward. He yanked on a pair of trousers, grabbed a clean shirt and followed. “If we can wipe it out entirely, it won’t fall into the wrong hands,” he entreated.

Already she was half-dressed and pulling on her slippers. “Better to make a full report in the event that someone—hostile or friendly—encounters this infection again.”

“Government has a way of abusing scientific advances,” he countered, buttoning his shirt then reaching for his boots.

“True.” She buckled her corset about her waist. “But who’s to say the Russians haven’t already been informed of this blue frog and the effects of its bite? Or whether or not they take the Parkers’ reports seriously? Even if they don’t have a sample yet, they’re going to know where to send their people to look. Tracking your movements through Brazil can’t possibly be that difficult. We take the frog into custody and record the cure. Better to be prepared, than to be caught unawares.”

Evan pressed his lips together. They would never agree. Though he didn’t relish the task, better for the blue frog to die, than to fall into the hands of Lister’s research scientists. Not that that would stop herpetologists from hunting out more of its kind in Brazil. Perhaps he could simply soak the creature in the cure and deny this entire incident? He grabbed the flask of copper and *khu-neh-ari* extract. Pouring a generous amount into the palm of his hand, he began to rub the solution over his arm.

Piyali lifted an empty, lidded jar and strode into his greenhouse.

“Leave the creature here,” he objected, following in her wake. “You can’t possibly apprehend two Russian agents and keep the frog safe at the same time.”

“If I leave it here, will you guarantee the frog won’t disappear for good?” she asked, her expression growing suspicious.

Guilty intentions made him glance away. He’d make no such promises.

“I didn’t think so.” She bent before the terrarium squinting through the glass, searching for a hint of the frog. Unable to locate it, she heaved a sigh. “Can *you* see it?”

“Rather the point of being invisible, isn’t it?” The greenhouse door was closed, secured with the 3XR CinchBolt. Still, he too stared through the glass. Not with the intent of handing it over but worried the frog had somehow escaped once again despite the heavy pharmacology textbook he’d placed on the terrarium’s lid. He saw nothing blue. Nor was there a telltale pink and silver shimmer. Not even a frog-shaped blob reflecting the green of the terrarium’s plant life. A cold tendril of fear wrapped around his spine.

“Stand back.” If anyone was going to be bitten again, it was going to be him. Setting aside the textbook and shifting the lid, Evan reached inside. He felt nothing. When was the last time he thought

to look for the frog? Yesterday. Before he plucked Sarah from Seren's Well. "What *exactly* did Mrs. Parker claim she'd taken?"

A faint knocking began at his cottage door, one that grew more frantic by the moment.

"A plant cutting. But she also said, 'I have it.' Do you think she meant the frog?" Piyali clamped a hand across her mouth, her eyes wide. "*That's* why she was unavailable last night to attend her daughter. If they've been watching you—us—then they know our every move. Mrs. Parker must have stolen the frog while we dealt with the aftermath of the fairy well altercation."

A trained agent would be able to pick his lock. It was a probable scenario. His heart crashed into his ribs, then took off at a breakneck speed. "Yes." Sweat gathered at his temples. "I've no intention of handing over this frog to the Crown so they might seek out more of its kind. But I won't have the Russians run away with it either, and I'm ninety-nine percent certain it's not in this terrarium. They must have it already."

A face pressed up against the window of the greenhouse wall. Sarah. She slapped her palm repeatedly against the glass, shaking the metal frame. "Help!" she yelled. Tears streamed down her face. "You have to help me!"

Evan darted to the greenhouse door, unlocking and yanking it open. "What is it?"

Sarah fell into his arms, sobbing against his chest.

"Beginning to be a bit of a pattern, all these girls throwing themselves at you." Piyali's lips twisted as she reached out and pried Sarah free, steering her by the shoulders into the cottage. "Come sit. Mr. Tredegar has a new treatment to apply, a guaranteed cure. Your ankle will be fine." She pushed Sarah into a chair. "In the meantime, I have questions." She reached for Sarah's foot.

For months, the flirting had been relentless. Sarah and Tegan were too self-involved to realize his heart was sworn elsewhere. But Sarah wasn't one to cry crocodile tears. "It's not her ankle," he said with gut-twisting certainty.

"It's my mother," she keened, dragging in great gulps of air. "He killed her."

"Excuse me?" Piyali's hands froze on Sarah's stocking. "Explain."

"My father," Sarah cried, dashing away tears that would not stop falling. "They were fighting. It was awful. Worse than usual." Large glistening eyes blinked up at Piyali. Gasping for air, she struggled to control her breath enough to speak. "My mother was yelling about you being more than just a doctor. About how they were going to be locked away and tortured. She grabbed the teakettle from the kitchen range, shaking it at him and said something in a strange, foreign language. I've never seen my father look so angry. He raised his fist and struck her." A fresh deluge of tears poured down her cheeks. "Her head hit the corner of the table." A rattling gasp. "Blood. There was so much blood. And she didn't move. Father yelled at me to ready the steam cart, but I ran here instead."

"He needs to be stopped." Piyali's hand landed on her TTX pistol. She tugged it free, checking its readiness, before returning it to her holster.

"First we treat her ankle," Evan ordered as he lifted the bottle of copper and *khu-neh-ari* extract.

The situation was escalating out of control. He wouldn't have this infection leaving his village. In any form. "It will only take a minute."

Piyali threw him a narrow-eyed glance, but yanked down Sarah's stocking and unwrapped the bandage about her ankle to reveal a glittering laceration. He soaked a cotton ball with the copper-liana tonic, then swabbed the liquid along the length of the suture. Corking the bottle, he shoved it into his pocket and yanked Sarah to her feet. "Grab the gauze," he ordered Piyali. "We'll bandage her later."

After running from the cottage to a nearby shed, Piyali jumped into the passenger's seat as he heaved Sarah into the bed of the wagon. Furiously, he cranked the vehicle to life.

"Hang on!" he yelled. Then, leaping into the driver's seat, he jerked the break free and rammed the driveshaft into full forward. The crank wagon took off like a shot, its wheels clattering over the many stones that studded the packed-earth lane that led down the hill and into the village.

Chapter 11

Her teeth nearly rattling out of their sockets, Piyali clutched the edge of her seat while Evan took the corner onto the main street on two wheels. There, in front of The White Hare stood a steam cart, puffing as it idled with Mr. Parker at its side. He took one look at their approaching vehicle and flung the valise he held into the cart before climbing behind the wheel.

“Father, no!” Sarah screamed.

Mr. Parker didn’t so much as glance over his shoulder. The cart sprung to life, tearing down the muddy, rutted road. Villagers scattered, shaking their fists and cursing.

Evan followed.

Mr. Parker’s loaded steam cart rattled and clanged as he fled, its loose contents bouncing above the rim, tossing the occasional paper-wrapped parcel onto the grassy verge of the road. One item jolted loose, but didn’t fall free: Mrs. Parker’s heavily bandaged arm. It hung limp, swaying and jerking with the motion of the vehicle, a grim reminder that Piyali was in pursuit of a man not deterred by death. Did he seek to hide his crime? Or was the corpse of his wife no more than a sample of an infectious disease to be delivered to his superiors, a gruesome commitment to his orders?

Sarah cried out in distress.

Piyali drew her weapon, but they were too far away. “Closer!” she yelled.

“This wagon doesn’t go any faster,” Evan yelled back. “But he’ll have to slow down to take an upcoming turn. If I leave us at full speed, we can overtake him just before we run off the road. If we pursue him, we’ll likely lose the race.”

In short, the wagon’s fully loaded steam hopper would allow it to outrun a crank cart. She couldn’t take the chance. “Don’t slow down,” she yelled back.

“Get ready!” He gripped the driveshaft with white knuckles.

Ahead the road reversed course in a tight hairpin turn, a turn necessary to descend the steep hillside. The steamstage had slowed considerably with its approach to Aberwyn; Mr. Parker barely engaged the brakes.

Bouncing down the rough road on iron-rimmed wheels, Piyali raised her arm, sighting along the length of her TTX pistol. Three darts were loaded. One to stun. Two to render a man unconscious. A third would kill. Mr. Parker was a large man, and she prayed only a single dart would be required.

“Now!” Evan yelled.

Time seemed to slow as they shot past the steam cart. Careening about the tight turn, Piyali squeezed the trigger. With a whoosh of compressed air, the dart shot forth, striking Mr. Parker directly between the shoulder blades. He howled in anger.

The front wheels of Evan’s wagon ran off the road, jolting time back to its proper speed. The vehicle bucked, tossing Piyali free. Hours of training had her tucking into a roll. She hit the ground hard, and her body exploded into pain. Despite the screaming protest of every joint, she forced herself onto her feet and began to run across the muddy grass, back onto the road, pistol firmly in hand.

Mr. Parker’s shoulders sagged forward, his hands sliding down the driving wheel as the cart careened down the hillside. Lungs heaving, heart pounding, she chased after him, grateful for her raised hemline. Though the sharp edges of gravel stabbed into the soles of the soft slippers she wore, she could not stop now.

She slid to a halt and gasped for air, trying to steady her arm as she took aim. She fired. The second dart grazed his neck. *Schistosomiasis*! If any of the neurotoxin had entered his system, a third would kill him. Still, better to chance it. To let him escape was unthinkable.

Planting her feet firmly upon the ground, she fired a third and final dart into his arm. Mr. Parker slumped sideways on his seat, then fell, disappearing from view. *Excellent*. Evan ran past her, hauling himself into the cart and yanking on the breaking mechanism. By the time she arrived, he had already dragged Mr. Parker—still breathing—from the cart.

Sarah collapsed at her father’s side in a heap. “Will he live?” she asked as Piyali unhooked a pair of manacles from her corset and shackled his wrists.

“Yes.” For now. Once Mr. Black took him into custody, she could make no promises.

Face contorted in a mixture of anger and concern, Sarah lifted a shaking hand then laid it upon her father’s chest. “And my mother?”

“Dead,” Evan answered her simply.

Leaving Sarah to struggle with her grief, Piyali took a deep steadying breath. There was no avoiding it. Mrs. Parker must be examined, the contents of the wagon bed searched. She pulled herself onto the running board. It was impossible to pry her eyes from Mrs. Parker’s ghastly remains. The back of her head was caved in, clots of blood matted her hair. Her arm was wrapped in yards of dingy gauze that took Piyali several long minutes to unwind. Exposed to the light of day, Mrs. Parker’s arm was not only a scintillating blue, but her hand had swollen to twice its normal size. Untreated, blood poisoning—septicemia—had also taken hold.

Beside her, Evan let out a low whistle. “Murdered, yes, but even so, there’s little chance she would have reached Russia alive.”

“The frog,” she said. They needed to secure the creature.

Evan pried the lid off one of the many crates. Inside, padded with straw, lay several glass jars

labeled with his own handwriting. A second crate held dried plant cuttings carefully pressed and wrapped in paper. He dug through a third, then a fourth. All filled with a variety of materials stolen from his greenhouse and laboratory. “Quite the collection they made this past year. To think that I never suspected a thing until the blue frog escaped.”

Frantic, Piyali dug through the remaining crates. “It has to be here...” A soft, plopping sound came from a copper teakettle tucked into the straw. Why would anyone pack a teakettle whilst fleeing for Russia? Frowning, she plucked it free. The teakettle was heavier than it ought to be, far heavier than could be accounted for by the addition of a small frog. As she shifted the kettle and reached for its lid, something inside scraped noisily across its base.

“Wait!” Evan cried. He dug into the straw and then emptied a glass jar of its contents. “Slowly and carefully.” He held the jar close as Piyali pried free the kettle’s lid and peered inside.

At first glance all she saw was a thin film of water and shards of the white ceramic pot she’d handed to Sarah, the container of *khu-neh-ari* ointment. But then the light glinted off two small, beady eyes. A dazed and confused frog. She tipped it gently into the glass jar. It looked exactly like the one they had trapped at Seren’s Well.

Except it wasn’t blue.

“It’s green,” Evan said, eyebrows knitting in confusion.

“Cured?” And then all the tension melted away as she began to laugh. Gallows humor, perhaps, but the two Russian spies had managed to steal so much, yet botched it in the end. “So close to success, but...” She examined the kettle, then held it up. “A copper teakettle to provide a damp habitat for the frog—not the worst plan. But add in a jar of your ointment and a rough wagon ride through the Welsh countryside...”

“And the frog itself is cured,” Evan finished.

Had the Parker’s plans not been disrupted—with more time to pack and pad the stolen goods—they might have reached the port of Cardiff with intact specimens. With a ship ready and waiting, there was a small chance the spies and a blue frog would have reached Russia. And then...

No. It didn’t bear thinking about.



Evan braced as Piyali straightened and dragged in a deep breath. “The Parker family must be delivered into Mr. Black’s custody along with any documents found in their private apartments.” Her voice held an edge that informed him she would tolerate no further objections.

“Agreed.”

Surprise lifted her eyebrows. “But concerning the blue frog and my report...” She set down the teakettle and brushed a piece of straw from her tunic. “I propose a compromise.”

“Go on,” he prompted. He wanted to reach out and gather her into his arms, but knew he could

not. Terms were being set. There was no avoiding Mr. Black or his men now. A lump of coal burned in his stomach. What kind of future could they have together if they could not find common ground?

“Before the Queen’s agents arrive, I propose we soak Mrs. Parker’s arm in the copper-liana solution. We treat both Tegan and the water in Seren’s Well. If this works, if we can eliminate all traces of the parasite, I will petition Mr. Black to allow me to personally monitor the pool for the next several years. Mr. Black and the Queen’s agents would receive nothing more than a report about the parasite itself, excluding its origin. I won’t include a single reference to the frog.” She cleared her throat. “It will, of course, mean convincing everyone that Tegan fabricated the story concerning a certain blue amphibian.”

Dark eyes met his. Was Piyali holding her breath as she waited for his response? Did she envision a future which included him? What an amazing woman, one who could be his if he too made this small concession. The infectious parasite would not be preserved, living or dead, but it would be carefully documented along with its cure, a cure he would quietly share with the shaman of the village that had hosted him in Brazil. The Crown would *not* be provided with the means to create semi-invisible men, but neither would Lister biologists be left with no identification or treatment particulars should the intracellular parasite ever resurface.

“Tegan will never speak to me again, but I’ll manage.” With a light heart, he caught her shaking hand, pressing it between his palms. “If I augment that report with a living specimen of the *khu-neh-ari* liana, will you personally recommend me for the position of Director of Tropical Plants in the Lister Botanical Gardens and Greenhouse? I’ve a sudden desire to relocate to London.”

A wide smile brightened Piyali’s face. Her eyes sparkled as she answered, “Absolutely.”

“Curing unknown tropical diseases, uncovering entrenched Russian spies, firing poisonous darts with deadly precision.” He drew her close. “What other mad skills have you acquired these past years?”

Her smile turned coy as her arms slid around his waist. “I’m afraid you’ll need government clearance to find out. Have you ever considered working for the Queen?”

“I believe I could be persuaded,” he said, then lowered his lips to hers.



The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Sarah, alternately weeping over the death of her mother and railing at her father, was returned to her room at The White Hare. Although they took the precaution of locking her door, neither he nor Piyali considered her a flight risk. Mr. Parker, however, was kept securely restrained and administered regular doses of laudanum to ensure he remained subdued.

Tegan was promptly treated. Clutching his hand and pressing it to her heart, she swore her undying love and loyalty. Until he mentioned that he expected to join Dr. Mukherji soon in London and wished her—and her parents—all the best here in Wales. At that unwelcome and unexpected news, her face

soured, and she threw his hand back at him with a frustrated howl.

Together, he and Piyali searched the Parkers' living quarters, finding both her original message—still sealed in its tin cylinder—as well as the punch cards stolen from her trunk. Lips pursed in annoyance, Piyali dashed off a brief message informing Mr. Black that she had apprehended a Russian spy and required backup.

The White Hare's skeet pigeon, though rusty, had taken to the sky easily enough, winging its way to London. A strong response arrived the next day in the form of a silver-ballooned dirigible. The entire village turned out in the rain—jaws hanging open—to watch the unprecedented arrival of a hawk-class vessel descend from the sky and settle in the mud before the tavern.

Two men leapt from its compartment; neither were Mr. Black. With a glance of apology, Piyali left Evan's side, secreting herself behind closed doors to present her report. Disappointment tightened his chest, but he was not an agent. For the moment, he was nothing to the Crown but an importer of a biological hazard. Step one toward their future involved Piyali arguing on his behalf.

Several hours later, they emerged. Precious few words were exchanged as they began the process of loading evidence—including a potted sample of his liana—into a secure storage compartment of the airship's gondola. A few minutes before their scheduled departure, one of the men led Mr. Parker and Sarah in shackles from the tavern to securely bolt them into their seats.

Mr. Parker's lips pressed into a thin line. He stared stoically into the distance, refusing to acknowledge anyone or anything.

"How is it possible?" Sarah asked, her eyes red and swollen. Gone was her usual ebullience, squashed beneath the truth of her parents' lives. "Russian spies!"

"It's a lot to take in." Piyali placed a hand on her arm. "Cooperate. Answer all their questions truthfully and, if—when—you're cleared of all wrongdoing, I shall do my best to help you start a new life in London. I'll see your textbooks delivered to your cell. Focus on your studies to pass the time and improve your future prospects. When this is over, I'll do what I can to arrange for you to take the entrance exams for Girton's College."

As the airship departed, as all faces turned upward to watch its departure, Evan asked, "Is all well?"

"Mr. Black agreed to my proposal," she answered, tugging him by the hand down the main road and away from the crowd. "The pool is now your—our—responsibility."

Together, they slipped away into the woods. Piyali folded her arm through his as they came to a stop before Seren's Well. Its waters glistened a turquoise blue from all the copper sulfate they had poured into the pool, and branches from the *khu-neh-ari* liana floated on its surface.

Traditions transformed and evolved with time, and another step forward needed to begin today. While Piyali spoke with fellow Queen's agents, he'd spoken with Mr. Price, impressing upon him the need to return his supply of steel pins to the manufacturer, to request that only copper pins be sold in the village store. Even better if Evan could convince the villagers that the *gwragedd annwn* desired

payment, not bent pins, in the form of copper farthings. The more copper introduced to the pool, the better.

“I’ve been granted three days leave,” Piyali said, breaking the silence. “Three days to convince you that both you and your plants belong in the Botanical Garden of Lister University.”

“Done,” he said and reached into his coat pocket. Heart pounding, he lowered himself onto one knee and held up his grandmother’s opal and diamond ring, a ring that had burned against his chest all day. “That leaves me three days to convince you to say yes. Dr. Piyali Mukherji, I cannot envision my future without you in it. These years without you nearly killed me. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

A tear slid down her cheek as she slipped the ring on her finger. “Yes.”

Her answer dispelled the gloom that had descended upon his life some three months past. Intensity of color rushed back into his life, leaving him breathless. Evan leapt to his feet and scooped her into his arms, turning toward his cottage. “How shall we spend the next three days? Planning a wedding? Packing the laboratory and the contents of my greenhouse...”

She tugged on his arm. “Anticipating wedding vows.”

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Though Anne Renwick holds a Ph.D. in biology and greatly enjoyed tormenting the overburdened undergraduates who were her students, fiction has always been her first love. Today, she writes steampunk romance, placing a new kind of biotech in the hands of mad scientists, proper young ladies and determined villains. Anne is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. She lives in Maryland with her family.

Anne brings an unusual perspective to steampunk. A number of years spent locked inside the bowels of a biological research facility left her permanently altered. In her steampunk world, the Victorian fascination with all things anatomical led to a number of alarming biotechnological advances. Ones that the enemies of Britain would dearly love to possess.

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WARRIORS OF SURTU

LISA LACE

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WARRIORS OF SURTU

The one thing she couldn't do was fall in love.

TERRA

I've been preparing for this day my entire life.

For sixty years, Earth has been getting ready for their return. The first time they came, they killed our men and took all the women. That's not going to happen again. This time, we're ready. My unit looks unassuming, but we have degrees in kicking alien ass. They're not taking us without a fight.

So why can't I stop thinking about him?

JIDDEN

I've been preparing for this day my entire life.

Sixty years ago, we found what we were looking for: an entire species that we could successfully mate with. It's taken us this long to make sure the offspring were viable. I've been selected to be part of the initial mission to claim the women as our own, and it's my key to promotion. The one thing I'm not allowed to do is touch an Earth woman.

So why can't I stop thinking about her?

Chapter 1

TERRA

The Surtu were out there.

I could see their ships from my tiny window in the kitchen where I worked as a porter on the Fortuna space station.

I thought their ships would be more hostile looking, intimidating or depraved perhaps, like the Surtu themselves. But as I took a rag from over my shoulder to dry a glass, I couldn't help but think that the ships looked like glow flies out in the distance.

The view would have been romantic if we weren't worried that the Surtu were going to kill us all.

We knew the Surtu were going to come. It was a war Earth had sixty years to prepare for. Now that war was about to begin, and I was part of Earth's first line of defense.

My home, the Fortuna, was one of many military space stations constructed after Earth learned that the Surtu were out there, and we had to be ready. Unlike the other space stations, it was disguised as a spiritual sanctuary. We looked like a sisterhood, where women of the cloth were ready to welcome alien visitors into the gardens and marble halls under the pretense of peace.

Setting the glass down, I snickered at my own thoughts, more out of tension than any humor.

Nothing about the Fortuna was peaceful. Every woman on board was as lethal as a cobra. From one generation to the next, the women chosen for the Fortuna were taught the art of warfare with precision, as if it were a school subject like algebra or English. Earth never knew when the Surtu would come, but we knew why the Fortuna was built. We were the furthest station away from Earth. Fortuna was a deathtrap, meant to lure the enemy in, learn its weaknesses, then eliminate them.

Our time was now.

"Gallia wants to see you," Lucina announced brightly as she bounded into the kitchen, grabbing an apple from a nearby bowl. Lucina Whitmore was my best friend. Like me, the petite blonde had been primed to join the Fortuna since she was little. Our mothers had done a tour of duty here together before they returned to Earth to marry and have children.

All women assigned to the Fortuna were given the name of a Roman goddess, which was used proudly like a badge. Lucina and I were different. We had been given Roman names since birth, our destiny already decided by our mothers.

I'd known Lucina since I first beat half the boys in our kindergarten class at arm wrestling. We knew more about each other than our own families back on Earth. I didn't know one thing though. How she managed to stay so bubbly and upbeat, even with danger looming close to us, was beyond me.

"Did Gallia say what for?" I asked, deciding whether or not I should finish my duties in the kitchen before heading to our Commander's office. Lucina twirled the apple on her finger before taking a huge bite. "No," she said, her mouth full, "but I'm assuming it has something to do with the alien race that's about to attack. The ones with the big fangs and hollow eyes."

I was surprised. "Is that really what you think they look like?"

"We grew up listening to stories about the monsters in space. It's hard to know what to expect." Lucina shrugged.

"Those who escaped the attack on the colony all those years ago said the Surtu were humanoid."

"Even devils are humanoid," Lucina pointed out with a wide smile as if she enjoyed the prospect of standing her ground against creatures so unholy. Being pretty, small, and blonde, she was like a militant angel.

Unable to share her enthusiasm, I once again looked out the window at the glow flies in the dark sky, ignoring the girl with the mousy hair and earthy brown eyes faintly reflected in the glass. I was not a warrior, not like Lucina, or Gallia, or any of the other women on the Fortuna.

I mean, I had skills. I was perhaps one of the most skilled fighters on board, but I considered intellect a stronger weapon than a spear. And I was an optimist. We didn't know what the Surtu wanted, or why they were hell bent on attacking us, but I believed there was still a way to work our differences out before a war began.

Such sentiment was why I was in the kitchen, and Gallia was in command.

I turned toward the door, dropping the rag on the counter. "I guess I better go see our Queen Sister," I said, using the name Lucina and I secretly thought of for Gallia. "Maybe she wants a chance to yell at me one last time before the Surtu attack."

"Probably," Lucina supposed. "She better start yelling now. Based on the formation of those ships out there, we don't have much time left."



"Terra Lynch, how old are you?" Gallia asked as I entered her office. Like me, she was dressed in a skin-tight, plain white jumpsuit. It was the standard uniform on the Fortuna, regardless of rank.

One of many differences between Gallia and myself was that her jumpsuit complimented her raven black hair and green eyes, which were both reckless and wise simultaneously.

"Twenty-four," I answered.

She didn't seem pleased. "You're a little young, but it still might work."

A little young? Gallia wasn't that much older than me. Few women on the Fortuna were. Many left in their thirties, ready to fall in love and start a family after serving their time like my mother had.

"I've watched you train, Terra," Gallia stated. "You're one of the most skilled warriors on the Fortuna, but you have no bite. Why is that?"

"I think weapons should be the final solution, not the first," I said truthfully. I was confused as to why I was there.

Gallia frowned. "Even when the enemy already has their weapons pointed at you?" she asked.

"That's when your mind will catch them off-guard," I said earnestly.

"That sounds like fancy bullshit to me," she returned. "Why are you here if you won't fight? The whole reason for the Fortuna's existence is to fight."

I was getting nervous. Gallia's words suggested dissatisfaction with my performance. Was she thinking of sending me home?

I hoped not.

"The Fortuna is my legacy," I said, choosing my words carefully. "I've trained to be here since I was a little girl. It has always been my destiny. This space station is everything I know. I never said I wouldn't fight to protect it. I understand our purpose here. I just think we have to fight with our heads and our hearts as much as our fists."

"There's no heart in war," Gallia imparted. "You're naive to think so."

"Please don't send me home," I begged. "I'm an asset to this station."

She seemed amused. "Enlighten me."

"The girls trust me. They turn to me for support. They need me, especially now."

Gallia wasn't fazed. "That's why we have Bellona. She's here to provide counsel."

I thought of Bellona, the fiery priestess on board. "She's here to play a role. Her counsel is that of a superior. Mine is that of a friend."

I was panicked. I couldn't let Gallia send me home, no matter what the danger of staying here was. Although I did not want to fight, my life had a purpose on the Fortuna.

My last remark caught Gallia's attention. "You think Bellona is playing a role?"

"Bellona is an assassin before she is a priestess, able to live in the shadows, her first strike her last. Her counsel is sensible, but it's not always comforting. I mean, we're all playing a role here, right? I'm no kitchen porter. I can barely pretend to be one. I wish the Fortuna had a library. A real one, not the one with all the forged spiritual text. That's where I belong. I like to learn."

"And you're also a trained warrior," Gallia said thoughtfully.

"Yes, that too. Please don't send me away."

"I'm not sending you home," Gallia revealed, her expression softening. "You're right. You are an asset to the Fortuna, despite your own personal philosophies on warfare. That's why I'm making you Commander."

"Commander?" I asked, baffled. It didn't make sense. Why would Gallia put me in charge?

“Where will you be?”

“Right here beside you. We’re all playing a role. As far as the Surtu know, we’re women of the cloth, living in peace within a spiritual sanctuary in space. That’s why, unlike the other military stations that surround us, we have no guns or obvious weapons. There are no fighters like on the nearby base. Assuming the Surtu have long-range sensors, the last thing we need is for them to pick up on a storage room full of ammo. Our weapons are much more discreet.” Her lips curled into a proud, knowing smile. “And much more deadly.”

I thought of our last training session, where we learned to kill a man with our bare hands. We may not be armed with guns, just spears and daggers made up to look like religious artifacts, but we were as prepared for this war with the Surtu as the rest of the military stations set up to protect Earth.

None of this explained why Gallia was making me Commander. “Where does that leave me?”

Gallia folded her arms across her chest, surprisingly patient. “The problem with our facade is that women of the cloth are meant to be serene and insightful. Some would say even polite. I am none of those things, but you are all of them.”

Oh, now I understood. I wasn’t actually going to be in command. I was going to pretend to be in command, but this meant the task of collecting intelligence on the Surtu while Earth listened in would fall down to me.

Strangely, I was comfortable with the responsibility. Encouraged, even. Perhaps if I could discover what the Surtu really wanted, a war could be avoided.

Before I could work my mind around it further, Gallia added, “The Surtu have made contact.”

“With Earth?”

“Not Earth. With the Fortuna.”

That was shocking. “Why would they make contact with us first? We’re just a space station, and as far as they know, we’re not even military.”

Gallia shrugged. “Does it matter? It falls right into our plans.”

“I guess,” I conceded. “Did they say why they’re here?”

“No,” Gallia replied, “It wasn’t exactly a conversation. They sent a message directly to our satellite receivers – a galactic voicemail. They don’t want to hurt the women on board. They want the Fortuna intact. An envoy ship will land here tomorrow to negotiate our peaceful surrender.”

“So they’re buying it. They really do believe this is a sanctuary.”

“And we want them to continue to buy it,” Gallia insisted. “At least until I receive the signal from Earth to attack. We knew this day would come. As the one in charge, you’ll have to greet the envoy ship and its Lead Officer. You will be Earth’s first diplomatic contact with the Surtu. Everyone will be watching. Can you handle it?”

“Yes, Commander,” I answered in reflex.

“Not anymore. That’s your title from here on out. From now on, I’m just Gallia.”

“Yes, Gallia,” I corrected.

A shadow of concern passed across her face. “Remember, Terra, the only reason the Surtu are able to communicate with us in our language is because of what happened sixty years ago. They attacked an Earth colony, slaughtering the men and taking the women and children as slaves. They’ve had time to learn about us. We haven’t had the same luxury. We know very little, except for this – they’re not here to make friends. Neither are we.”

“Understood,” I said. I didn’t need the history lesson. Every Earth child knew the horror stories of the Surtu. The chances of negotiating a peace were small. But still...

“Good,” Gallia said. “Then it’s settled. I’ll tell Bellona to spread the word. Terra Lynch is now Commander of the Fortuna. Let’s hope you aren’t commanding the ship in her final hours.”



“I can’t believe they made you Commander,” Lucina gushed as she followed me down towards the docking bay. “I mean, you’re now the Queen Sister.”

“It doesn’t exactly come with privileges,” I reminded her.

“No, but it does come with a hideous costume,” Lucina said, laughing. “Gallia never had to wear that.”

I looked down at the pale blue Roman-inspired gown I wore. It was soft and billowy, meant to represent a woman of the same demeanor. It wasn’t hideous, it was quite exquisite, but I knew what Lucina meant.

I looked like a doll Earth had played dress up with. I guess in many ways, that’s exactly what I was.

“Are you scared?” she asked, keeping pace beside me.

“Yes,” I admitted. “You?”

“Yeah,” she answered, her smile weakening. “I’m trying to focus on the task, but this is too momentous. An alien race flew all the way across the stars to destroy us with God only knows what type of technology, and we’re about to welcome an entire ship of these Depraved onto our station.”

The Depraved. It was what Earth called the Surtu, usually in our folk stories. I hadn’t heard the term spoken since leaving Earth, but I had often thought it.

Lucina continued. “When our mothers sent us here as teenagers, I never imagined it would actually be us—”

“Shhh,” I warned her. “The envoy ship isn’t far. If they’re somehow listening in, they don’t need to know everything we did as teenagers.”

That’s what I said out loud. What I meant was, “They can’t know the three hundred women on the Fortuna are an army, not a sisterhood”.

But Lucina understood.

Outside the docking bay, a small reception gathered. Those in attendance had been handpicked by

Gallia, either for their grace, their charm, or their ability to kill a man before he knew he was dead.

“Priestess,” I said in greeting to Bellona. Beneath her wild red hair and amber eyes, she showed no fear.

“Commander,” she returned, eyeing my dress smugly. “You look nice.”

“Then my ladies have done their job.”

My ladies was code for Earth, and right now, several of my ladies were watching and listening through a satellite feed. The surveillance on board the Fortuna was discreet, but I felt as if I had the eyes of a million men and women on me.

“The envoy ship is approaching,” Gallia told us, forcing all our attention on the transparent floor-to-ceiling divide that shielded us from the harsh conditions of space when the docking bay opened. “They land in five minutes.”

I nodded, getting myself ready. “And what of the other sisters on board?”

“Safe in their rooms,” Gallia answered. “Preparing.”

They would be sharpening their weapons and practicing for combat. We didn’t know when Earth would give the signal to attack, but it was likely a few days away at best. Right now, the priority was to garner intelligence and learn everything possible about the Surtu. Then we’d strike, launching the first of many military initiatives set up by the leaders of Earth.

“You ready?” Bellona asked. “Remember, you’re not Gallia. You’re you. That’s why you were chosen.”

“I’ve got this,” I assured her.

“Good, because here goes everything,” she said. Her eyes looked like hot steel as the docking bay shook with the arrival of the envoy ship. From behind the divide, I watched as the massive hatch to the docking bay opened, allowing a medium-sized craft to land within. It was angular and of a glossy silver element unnatural to Earth.

I guessed it could carry around a hundred people, as long as the Surtu were not fat giants or larger than the ancient elephants, as some of the legends told.

No one knew for sure. The survivors who escaped the Surtu attack on the colony were rarely seen in public. They were too traumatized to relive the events.

As the hatch closed, my body began shaking. I could not control it. Lucina had said it well. This was momentous, but for terrible reasons.

“It’s time,” Gallia instructed, pushing me closer to the divide. “The hatch is shut.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you,” Lucina stated, always my cheerleader.

It was the boost of confidence I needed. Taking a deep breath, potentially my last as a free woman, I signaled to Gallia to drop the divide.

The Surtu ship sat eerily quiet. It looked like a masterpiece next to the much smaller cargo ships parked nearby.

I stepped further out into the docking bay, my entourage behind me. Adrenaline pumped through

my body, and I was on edge. If this didn't go to plan, we wouldn't have time to wait for Earth's signal. The war would start now.

Suddenly, a white light filled the docking bay, taking away our sight. I held my hand against my head as if shielding myself from the sun.

Behind me, I heard Gallia move forward, but I reached out and blindly grabbed her arm. "Wait," I urged. "We don't know what this means. It could be harmless."

"It *is* harmless," a deep, almost musical voice said from somewhere in the light.

And then the light was gone, and we could see again.

My hold on Gallia's arm tightened, but this time for my own benefit. I needed to steady myself.

The dozen or so men who stood before me were not alien in the way any of the stories from my childhood told me. They looked completely human. Their height and build were slightly larger than the average man, and their eyes were much rounder and almond-shaped, almost elfin, but other than that, I was shocked by how human they looked.

It was hard to associate their physical appearance with the idea of the Depraved in my mind. This was the alien race who planned to destroy Earth?

"Are you the Commander of this space station?" one of the Surtu asked, stepping forward from the troop. He sounded like the same man who had spoken earlier, only now there was nothing musical in his tone. It was completely rigid and formal.

Game time.

"I am," I said, letting go of Gallia's arm as I straightened myself, the shock wearing off. "And who are you?" I asked, meeting him straight on.

Now face to face, I was taken aback by how attractive he was. His hair was so black. It was almost blue, matching perfectly with his eyes, a shade before midnight with flecks of white light around the pupil.

So. The aliens were hot.

Who cares, I thought, forcing myself to focus on my mission. It doesn't change anything.

"I am Jidden, the Lead Officer of this ship, under the command of my Fleet Captain," he answered.

"And I am Terra Lynch. The women here are under my care, along with our Head Priestess," I said, indicating Bellona behind me.

Jidden barely acknowledged her. "But you are the one in charge?" he confirmed.

"Yes," I said.

"Then I have no time for anyone else. She is not important to me."

Behind me, I heard Lucina snort. Bellona liked to live in the shadows, but she didn't tolerate disrespect. Everyone on the Fortuna knew it. Bellona maintained a diplomatic posture, but I could feel her seething.

Someone just made it to the top of her hit list.

“You have come here to negotiate our surrender,” I stated, trying to sound like an authority figure. “We have many terms to discuss, but you will not be met with resistance while you’re here. We wish for nothing but peace and open our doors to you freely.”

“Do you?” Jidden asked, raising a dark eyebrow in suspicion. “Because I have a hard time believing that.”

And then, to my horror, he ordered his troop of men to surround us.



When I was a teenager, I was obsessed with Earth’s past. What was the world like through the eyes of a girl my age? I read plenty of novels from eras long ago, and I was dismayed by how many predicted a dystopian future. Did people have so little faith in humanity back then?

The Earth was not a wasteland. As a child, I ran freely around the warm desert sands of a southern climate, usually carrying with me a long fighting stick so I could practice my combat skills against the Depraved, just like my mother had taught me.

Back then, in my childhood imagination, the Depraved were giant monsters, but I still kicked their ass.

Then, one day, I tripped over a stone while running. Though I fell in some sand, I still hurt my arm.

“Don’t cry, my little Terra,” my mother cooed, carrying me in her arms. “This is just a test to prove how strong you are.”

“A test?” I asked in my innocence, momentarily ignoring the pain. “Who’s testing me?”

“The Earth,” she replied. “That’s why it caused you to fall. It wants to know if you’re strong enough to protect it.”

“But my arm *hurts*,” I whimpered.

“Of course it does,” my mother acknowledged lovingly, and she squeezed me tight. “And I’ll take you home so we can mend it. But the test isn’t whether you are in pain. It’s whether you’ll get back up and fight.”

At the time, I just thought my mom was being weird, maybe even a little mean. But after coming to the Fortuna, I realized she had been preparing me for whatever my destiny held.

And as it turned out, she was right.



It’s a test, I thought, as Jidden and his troops surrounded us. If he really doubted our motives and knew we were warriors, the fleet would have fired on us. They wouldn’t have sent an envoy at all.

Trusting my instincts, I raised my hands in surrender. “We cannot fight back,” I claimed. “It goes

against our moral code. We are peaceful women. Even if we wanted to, there are no weapons on board this ship to fight with.”

Unless you counted the stashes of daggers, spears, fighting sticks, and whatever else each woman had hidden away.

“Yes,” Jidden said, eyeing me carefully. “Our scanners showed only trivial weaponry. Nothing sophisticated. But why? Even a sisterhood is entitled to protection.”

“There’s nothing we need protection from,” I answered, praying the other girls didn’t make a move. “We’re alone on this station. When we need supplies from Earth, we fly down on cargo ships and collect the supplies ourselves. Regardless, our sisterhood is universally recognized. We don’t need protection from anyone because we are protected by everyone. Unless, of course, you mean to hurt us.”

“No,” Jidden said, and his men stood down. “Our Fleet Captain will not allow it.”

I dropped my arms, but I did not fully relax. Jidden’s words sounded compassionate, but they were spoken with great indifference. Clearly, his concern was the orders of his Fleet Captain and not the welfare of the women who called the Fortuna home.

What a jerk.

A stupid, gorgeous jerk.

On Earth, they must have been scrambling around trying to process the information they were receiving. Now they knew what type of guns the Surtu carried, their hierarchy of command, and that they were modest, dressed in uniforms of black and dark purple – the colors of a panther.

Again, it was all so humanoid. The line between our two species was very thinly drawn.

Acting submissive seemed to work, so I continued the charade, hoping to earn his trust. “How do we proceed from here?” I asked, dropping all sense of authority from my demeanor.

“The remainder of my men will disembark from the ship and take control of the station,” Jidden told, clearly more at ease now that I had given him command. “As long as there is no trouble, the women of this station will be allowed to continue on with their normal routine.”

“Will other ships be landing?” I asked, and then I quickly added, “Because we have plenty of room on the Fortuna if you wish to accommodate yourself. You will find our marble halls to be quite—”

“No,” he said, cutting me off. “All men who visit the Fortuna will remain housed within their own ship. We will be patrolling the station, but that is all.”

He didn’t directly answer my question, but his response was revealing. It sounded like other ships planned to dock. That was good news for me. It meant the signal to attack would be prolonged even further.

“And what of our negotiations?” I asked. “I have requests regarding our surrender.”

It was clear by his expression that Jidden felt no obligation to hear out any requests. To him, the surrender had already taken place. And in many ways, it had, but he complied. “Fine,” he said through

gritted teeth. “I will hear you, in private. Name a place.”

In private? Alone? I had not expected that. My heart began to flutter, both in fear and for other reasons I refused to admit to myself. “The gardens,” I said, slightly off key. “Near the willows.”

“I will meet you there in...what is it you humans use...an hour,” he said. “Now leave us. I need to speak with my men.”



“I don’t like this,” Bellona declared, struggling not to walk ahead of me as we made our way towards the Grand Hall. “We have given them too much.”

“For now,” Gallia said, using her soothing voice to help calm Bellona.

“It could be worse,” I said.

“How could it be worse?” Bellona cried. “They have total control over the Fortuna.”

“They *think* they have total control,” Gallia corrected. “Terra is right. It could be much worse. You know the stories of the colony that was attacked. What they did to the women...My biggest fear going into today was that we were going to have to abort our mission in order to protect our integrity. At least, for now, that’s something we don’t have to worry about.”

That’s why I respected Gallia, despite the fact that she had never warmed to me. She had her flaws, but she would never expect us to give up our bodies freely, not even for the sake of intelligence.

“It’s a shame they are so damn hot,” Lucina chirped beside me. “When the time comes, it’ll make slitting their throats a lot more depressing than if they had fangs or slobbered everywhere. Did you see the way their eyes sparked?”

“I don’t mind a little fang,” Gallia divulged. “There’s no pleasure without danger.”

For the life of me, I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

“We shouldn’t be having this discussion in the open,” I suggested, afraid the Surtu were somehow following our conversation.

The women around me went silent in agreement, until Lucina said, “You did good, Commander, dealing with their Lead Officer.” She smiled as she called me Commander. It was awkward, even for me. “But you don’t have to meet him alone in the gardens. We’ll come with you.”

“I think he’ll talk more freely if she’s alone,” Gallia objected, whispering.

“I’ll be okay,” I assured Lucina. “Thanks, anyway.”

The truth was, I didn’t know what to expect. The only thing I could gauge from my conversation with Jidden was that he couldn’t care less what happened to anybody on board the Fortuna. I saw nothing but disdain in his eyes.

I wanted to ask Bellona what I should say to him regarding the negotiations. She would give me wise counsel. When I turned towards her, she was gone, having disappeared into the shadows.

Chapter 2

JIDDEN

“Did you see the little blonde?” Kalij asked from his seat on an ammo box while he polished his blaster. “I bet I could please her in a way no human man could.”

I immediately went over to him and yanked the blaster from his hands before shoving him in the gut with it. “You know the Fleet Captain’s orders. The women are to be left alone.”

“The women are why we’re here,” Kalij sputtered between breaths as he held his stomach.

If I had it my way, the men could do what they wanted to the women. It made no difference to me, but I wasn’t going to let the redheaded bastard steal my shot at a promotion.

“You touch her, you die,” I warned. “The lives of these women are worth more than your own. Our planet has plenty of soldiers. Don’t make the mistake of assuming you are irreplaceable.”

“What about the light bond?” Kalij asked, recovering.

I wanted to smack his ruby head, but the other men around us laughed, humiliating him for me.

“You’d never light bond,” one of the soldiers alleged, chuckling. “One woman for the rest of your life? You’d rather have ten ugly ones than be stuck with that blonde the rest of your life.”

Kalij merely grunted.

Unable to tolerate any more of the heathens, I went to my quarters. I looked forward to the day I was promoted and no longer had to play big brother to a bunch of thugs.

Being Lead Officer of a ship was impressive, but there were other, more profitable titles to be had – titles where respect wasn’t earned, it was mandated. Securing the Fortuna nearly guaranteed me a promotion if everything went according to plan.

My one doubt about the plan was the Commander of the station, Terra.

Thinking of her made me ache like a man, but I pushed it aside. She was superb, and she worried me. There was an intelligence within her, so strong it was mesmerizing. I could see it in her doe-brown eyes – a soul that was much older than the twenty-odd years she appeared to be.

Women like that – they didn’t run off to join a sisterhood. I could believe that she was in charge of the Fortuna, but I knew there was much more to her than some spiritual nutcase.

And that made her a threat.

Too bad beauty was so dangerous...

I shook my head, hoping the physical action would take the thought in my mind away. Claiming a

woman was not in my plans. I wanted a promotion. I wanted power. That was what mattered.

So why couldn't I get Terra out of my mind?

Chapter 3

TERRA

Around me, the soft branches of the willow trees touched to the ground, sweeping lightly against the creek that ran through the gardens. On a normal evening, the gardens were my favorite spot on the station.

This was no normal evening. Normal no longer existed, thanks to the Surtu, not since their first attack on the colony.

Earth had only a few colonies that inhabited foreign planets. They were not favored. The expeditions to the colonies cost a great deal of money, and a large percentage of the ‘explorers’ died on the journey or the new planet, usually due to some technical glitch like a busted air mask.

Florentine was different. It was the one colony *everyone* on Earth was excited about. The atmosphere on Florentine was comparable to Earth’s. No air masks were required, no heavy space suits. It was a second home, and it was a backup plan for our species.

Should anything happen to Earth, humanity would not perish. We would live on.

Then the Surtu attacked. Until the attack on Florentine, alien races were still a myth. Scientists hypothesized that they could exist, somewhere out there, but no contact had ever been made.

If only that were still true. Then all the women and children on Florentine wouldn’t have been taken as slaves. And the men wouldn’t have been slaughtered.

And the Fortuna wouldn’t have need to exist.

I looked up at the stars through the transparent roof, made of the same unbreakable material as the divide in the docking bay. Among the stars was Florentine, now isolated. I wondered if any of the people taken were still alive. If they lived, where were they?

I didn’t know how the handful of survivors escaped the attack on Florentine, but thank God they did. Otherwise, they never would have been able to warn Earth about the Surtu. We wouldn’t have been prepared.

The problem was I didn’t *feel* prepared. I’d been thrown into the role of Commander the way a baby bird is tossed out of its nest into the air and expected to fly.

I was willing, but I wasn’t ready.

That didn’t matter now. Jidden was here, in the gardens. Lucina led him to where I waited, and then she left, leaving us alone.

He had changed into a navy blue uniform that highlighted his dark features. The uniform was sharp and sophisticated, matching Jidden well. I wanted to hate him, his uniform, and everything they represented, but I couldn't, not until I heard what the Surtu needed.

As children, we may have whispered over campfires about the Depraved – monsters that roamed space – but my heart told me the Surtu were not barbarians. If their plan was to simply annihilate Earth, they would have already done so.

They needed something from us. I was sure of it.

“Don't look at me like that,” Jidden said, forgoing any formal greeting. “I'm not a specimen to be studied.”

“Then tell me why you're here,” I prompted, hoping he would reveal information Earth was looking for. We may look alone, but there were ears listening in.

“You'll know, in time,” he said. “You may be the Commander of this space station. I may be the Lead Officer of my ship, but there are people above both of us who will decide when that conversation takes place.”

So he had a reverence for hierarchies. It might work to my advantage. “As a Commander, I pull rank over you. I'd appreciate it if you weren't so evasive.”

Oops. Bad mistake. He was indignant, to say the least.

“And as a Surtu, I pull rank over you,” he snapped.

“That remains to be seen. You haven't conquered Earth yet.”

“But I have taken over this station.”

“We surrendered.”

“Because you had no choice.”

Terra, stop it! I scolded myself. I didn't know why I was arguing with him. The plan was not to anger the sexy alien. I had to earn his trust and get him to talk.

But something about his gorgeous body and mythological eyes...

I took a deep breath. “Yes,” I said, smoothing the edges of my pale blue dress. Unlike Jidden, I had not changed clothes. “We had no choice. We are a peaceful sisterhood. We do not want war. No one profits from war, no matter who wins. Everyone suffers.”

“Finally, I hear something legitimate from you,” Jidden said. “That's probably the first authentic thing you've said to me since I arrived.”

He was right. My thoughts on war were my own, but it alarmed me that he could read me so well. If he had suspicions that I was not being truthful, I had to squash them.

Everything depended on it.

So be truthful, I told myself. It's the only way you'll earn his trust.

“I'd like to show you something,” I said, and I waved my hand to the side. “Hologram,” I instructed. “Earth.”

“What are you—” Jidden began to ask, but he stopped when a magnificent blue marble appeared

above us – a perfect replica of Earth.

With a further wave of my hand, I spun it around. “I know you can see Earth from your ships. By now, you’ve probably mapped it out in fine detail.”

He didn’t deny it.

I continued. “But I want to show you a special part of Earth.”

With several swipes, the hologram zoomed onto a small house in the middle of the desert. It was a humble structure, but it was warm and welcoming. For a moment, I forgot I was on the Fortuna. I was a child again, running around with my brothers while our parents chased us beneath the blazing sun.

“This is where I grew up,” I told Jidden. “This is my home. The image was taken last year when our satellites were last updated.”

For once, Jidden’s indifference disappeared. He seemed genuinely interested. “Where is everyone?” he asked, studying the image.

I had asked the same thing when I first saw the hologram. But I soon learned the answer. “Inside drinking lemonade,” I said. “That summer was particularly hot. My youngest brother – he still lives at home – planted a lemon tree the year before. No one believed it would actually grow in the desert, but somehow my brother managed it. My family spend the entire summer indoors drinking his miracle lemons.”

A thought occurred to me, and I spoke without thinking. “Do you honor family where you come from?”

“My planet is Surt. That is why we are the Surtu, and yes, we honor our family. We are very similar, humans and the Surtu. It is because of these similarities that we are here.”

Oh yeah. The war. I’d almost forgotten.

Jidden had just exposed something significant. I wanted to ask more, but I didn’t, afraid of breaking the momentum. He seemed to speak more freely when it was of his own accord.

Instead, I zoomed in closer to my house, all the way to the porch steps. On the side of the steps was my messy scribbling.

Love is intelligence.

“I wrote it when I was little,” I reminisced. “After reading it in a book. It sits there today.”

“What does it mean?” he questioned. “It doesn’t make sense. Love is an emotion. Intelligence is void of emotion.”

“Intelligence is many things, but void of emotion is not one of them. When I see an old man begging for food, my heart breaks because I have the knowledge that there is enough in the world to feed everyone, and the intelligence to understand that it will probably never happen.”

He frowned. “I’m not convinced. I’ve seen people in love. They’re idiots.”

I flicked the hologram so that it zoomed back out, showing Earth in its entirety. Then I zoomed further, revealing the hundreds of millions of stars in our galaxy. “Love is a connection, and we are all connected. There’s no higher intelligence than that – the understanding that everything is

connected, including the Surtu and humans. Am I right?" I asked.

Jidden was confused. "That love is intelligence?"

"That the Surtu and humans are connected." The time for being coy was over. "You need something from us. Why else would you be here?"

He seemed surprised by my insight. "Maybe we're just bloodthirsty," he said.

"Or maybe you're stalling, waiting for more ships to arrive so you can take whatever it is that you need."

It was a risk. Jidden did not like being usurped.

Unfortunately, the risk didn't pay off. "I'd like to share a story with you," he said, retreating away from the direction the conversation had taken. "Will we walk as I tell it?"

"Okay," I agreed, trying to show him my trust, hoping to earn some back in return.

We strolled side by side along the creek, the willows brushing our shoulders. We walked for a while before he spoke again. "A popular goddess amongst the ancient Surtu was Nelti, a woman of great beauty with auburn hair and eyes without color, only flecks of light. She was a dark warrior, showing no mercy to her enemies. However, her ruthlessness was only to protect that which she loved. The ancients worshiped her because they believed she watched over their homes and their families. They considered her ruthlessness a gift."

His story of Nelti made me feel apprehensive. It sounded too much like the women of the Fortuna, so I went on the defense. "I don't think I understand what your point is. Are you saying it would be better if I was ruthless rather than peaceful?"

"I'm saying there is already something ruthless about you."

We were deep within the depths of the gardens now, in a spot where nature had run wild, claiming part of the space station as its own. Among the trees and wildflowers, I did not believe even Earth had surveillance.

We were utterly alone.

"Why haven't you made any demands for your sisters regarding their surrender? Isn't that why we are meeting this evening?" he asked, his voice full of authority, but his indifference from our first encounter waned, replaced with a hint of emotion.

It made me weak. It was easy to deal with him when he was cold. But to see any warmth in him at all made my heart flutter again. He was so exotic and strong...

"I was trying to earn your trust so that when I did negotiate our surrender, you were more likely to accept my terms."

It was a half-truth.

He moved closer to me. Too close.

My God, he was intoxicating.

I wanted to back away, I knew I should back away, but I couldn't.

"And what do you wish for your girls?" he asked.

“Their survival. Their freedom.”

“I can guarantee their survival,” he said, “but nothing more.”

“That’s not enough,” I told him.

Why did I suddenly feel like a teenage girl again, the night I gave myself to Gerard Dalton? I was full of the same anticipation now as I was back then.

It’s the gardens, I surmised. I’m not thinking clearly.

I turned to head back to where we could be seen and heard again, but Jidden grabbed my arm. His touch was gentle but insistent. “We have more to talk about,” he said. “Tell me what you’re hiding.”

“Tell me what you have planned for the Fortuna,” I countered, but I didn’t move away. “And the women on board.”

He wouldn’t. I already knew that. His silence confirmed it.

“Then tell me why you insisted we talk in private.”

This caught him off-guard. “I thought it would be better,” he answered after a moment.

He’s not sure why, I realized. Cold, indifferent Jidden had acted on impulse.

“At least tell me something real about you,” I pushed. “Anything.”

“I’m an orphan,” he answered, surprising me, and I think he surprised himself. “My mother died from the disease when I was young, and a few years later, my father was killed in a military training accident. He was a celebrated soldier, so his Captain took me in and raised me. The military is all I know. I don’t know what it’s like to have a home out in the middle of the desert. Or to drink lemonade. All I know about are ships.”

There was a real sadness when he spoke. It appeared neither of us was winning this game of tug-of-war between us, each trying to draw the truth from the other without revealing too much of our own.

“I’m sorry to hear it—” I began, but before I could say anything further, he kissed me.



Kissing Jidden was wrong. I knew it. I was a traitor to my people, but I couldn’t stop. During our time in the gardens, we had revealed more to each other than either of us meant to. I had enjoyed sharing images of my home with him. It felt compulsory to do so as if we were connected by a force much greater than our flawed selves.

And his kiss...It was firm and passionate and impossible to turn away from.

It was strange kissing an alien, but not in a bad way. It was like tasting a new exotic fruit – sweet and tantalizing and, in Jidden’s case, extremely dangerous. But it was the danger that made it all the better.

Gallia was right. There was more pleasure where there was danger.

Jidden pulled me tighter into his arms, and his kiss became more urgent. He had no intention of

stopping, and I didn't want him to. My body was already responding to his touch, and his to mine. I could feel his cock growing as we kissed. Jidden may be an alien, but he was all man.

I pulled him back beneath a tree, using a thick, low branch as support. He was tall and broad, much more so than the average human male. I could handle the weight of his muscle as he leaned into me, but only barely.

"I want to know what a human woman feels like," he said, his voice deep and powerful.

"Go ahead," I permitted, feeling myself grow wet in anticipation.

He gently positioned me on the branch so that I was sitting down and his hand disappeared beneath my dress. His hand was strong as it traveled up my thigh, pushing the pale blue fabric of the dress away as he edged closer to my center. My eagerness to know his touch caused my core to pulse, and my heart to race.

Finally, his hand reached me.

Exploring me, I felt his fingers lightly circle the edges of my folds, lingering on the outside, causing me to swell.

"You're not wearing any garments under your dress," he observed.

"No," I said, breathless. Willing his hand to explore deeper inside me, I secured myself on the branch and opened my legs wider.

With a smug smile, he complied, pushing two of his fingers in. I moaned and arched my back, letting him explore.

"You're so ripe and healthy," he said, moving closer into me. "You feel fantastic."

I couldn't respond. His strong, ardent touch blew my mind. His fingers moved inside me like a key turning a lock, hitting all the right places, sending chills of rapture across my body. I shuddered, and he responded by exploring further, caressing his fingers in and out of me as I grew wetter, soaking him.

"I'm going to come," I warned, feeling a glorious heat build within my core. "You're going to make me come."

He didn't stop. Instead, he thrust harder, rocking my body. "I want to watch you," he said, plunging his fingers deeper inside me. "Come for me."

I did. I couldn't control it. A fury of ecstasy overtook me as I rode the sweet release, falling further into his touch, taking all of him in.

Even after I came, his hand lingered, readying me for more.

He wasn't through.

And neither was I.

My core pulsed again, craving more. I reached down and took his cock into my hand. It was large and thick, much like the branch I sat on, but his cock was also warm, like a furnace. I wanted to know what that furnace felt like inside of me.

Jidden closed his eyes as I removed his uniform, exposing him to the wilds of the garden. His

cock looked as massive as it had felt in my hand, but despite its enormous size, it was normal. Human-looking.

“Tell me you want it,” he demanded.

“I want it,” I said with the greatest of truth. “I want your cock inside me.”

With much more force than before, he grabbed me around the ass with both hands and pushed me in close to him. Then he raised me slightly off the branch and slid me over his cock.

The fullness of it sent electric shocks surging through my body. I felt complete. It was almost sentimental, if not for the excruciating pleasure that came from his deep, lingering thrusts. I laid back on the branch, allowing him to drive deeper into me, as much for my benefit as his.

His movements were slow. His cock caressing me much like his fingers had, but when I began to moan as the heat built inside me once more, like a tidal wave of power, his thrusts became more urgent, igniting me from the inside in a way I had never known before. I floated from my body, swimming in agonizing bliss until I could bear it no longer. I went supernova, becoming like the stars in the sky, releasing my joy all around me.

With one final thrust, he joined me, calling my name as he came, as if I were his last wish. Together, we experienced just how closely connected a Surtu and human could become.

When he finished, I sat up on the branch and held him as he collapsed into my arms, our sweat mixing together as our bodies tangled, breathless and recovering.

Chapter 4

JIDDEN

*A*s I leaned into Terra's arms and breathed in her scent, which was earthy like cinnamon, I realized what a fool I was.

I had disobeyed a direct command. I risked not only my promotion but my life, and still I did not care. Terra had a hold on me that went against my will. She was an elixir I could not help but drink from, both potent and healing.

That made her even more dangerous than I originally thought.

Yet still, I could not pull away from her, even though I knew it meant I risked everything I had worked for.

I wanted to stay like this, just the two of us.

And then I remembered the plan – what was happening as I distracted the Commander of the Fortuna.

And I knew once she found out, Terra would never forgive me.

Perhaps it was for the best. I was just a soldier. Even if I wanted to claim a woman, to light bond with one, it could not be her. She was a Commander and above my station.

Reluctantly, I let go.

Chapter 5

TERRA

I have to go. The men are expecting me back on the ship to count out the ammo.

I bit my lip. My mind replayed Jidden's last words to me before he slipped away, and I returned to civilization – what was left of it with the Surtu in charge.

Now that I was alone in the gardens, the full reality of what just happened hit me. I was ashamed and conflicted. I wanted to believe our intimacy had meant something, that it wasn't a careless act, and I had not betrayed my people. I was having a hard time casting my guilt away, especially after the way Jidden left so suddenly.

There was no connection between us, I realized. I had imagined it, trying to justify my lust.

That made me a traitor.

Standing up from the branch, finally regaining my strength, I tidied my dress, then went to the creek to splash water on my face. I withheld the tears that threatened to pour out of my eyes by focusing on what Jidden had said.

Count out the ammo.

We had surrendered peacefully. Why would they still be concerned about how much ammo they had? Unless they were planning another attack, perhaps on the neighboring space station.

Is *that* why they wanted the Fortuna? Were we hostages of the Surtu's new command center?

Jidden and his ship were no envoys. I was sure of it now. We had been playing each other.

I rushed back, following the creek away from isolation, back to where the lights of the space station guided my path. I had to get to Gallia. She could help me warn Earth. The time for recognizance was gone. We had to strike. If we didn't take back control of the Fortuna, more ships would land and it would be more than we could handle.

Suddenly, I was grabbed from behind and dragged back towards the shadows. I would have fought back, used the skills I'd fostered since childhood to defend myself, but I didn't need to. I knew who took me. I had been dragged around by her many times before in combat training.

It was Bellona.

"I need to leave," I said when she released me.

Suddenly, the ground shook. Another ship had landed. With luck, only one.

"Like now," I added.

“It’s too late,” she asserted, her fiery amber eyes lost somewhere between anger and sorrow. “They’ve already attacked.”

I fell against a tree, willing myself to stay calm. I had to focus. Otherwise, I was no help to anyone. “They attacked the Fortuna?”

Bellona nodded, her anger winning out. It was almost scary how red her eyes became when they were ablaze.

I had been wrong. The Surtu weren’t using the Fortuna to attack our neighbors.

They were attacking us.

They must have figured out who we were. Or they had always known.

That meant Jidden...

I didn’t want to think about it. It didn’t matter. He didn’t matter, right now.

“Are our sisters fighting back?” I asked.

“Of course,” Bellona snapped, scowling. “This is what we trained for. We’re Earth’s first line of defense. But our weapons...compared to theirs? I thought it was smart, training us to be stronger than a blaster and how to use our agility to our advantage. But I was wrong. It wasn’t smart; it was suicidal. What was Earth thinking?”

“Maybe the Fortuna was never about combat,” I speculated. “Maybe we were only meant to be intelligence. The first line of defense wasn’t weaponry; it was knowledge.”

Great job I did, allowing the enemy to distract me when I should have been gathering more information for Earth.

Bellona must have read my expression. “Hey, don’t do that. Don’t let them defeat you. You did what you could. In the short amount of time you had, a lot of information was uncovered. Their ship was scanned. We learned about the Surtu hierarchy. It all helps Earth build a stronger guard. We may be the first line of defense, but we aren’t the last. Even if we fall, Earth still has a good chance of surviving. And so do we.”

“How?” I asked. “How can we possibly survive this? You said it yourself. It’s a suicide mission. We can’t compete with their blasters.”

“That’s what’s strange,” Bellona said, baffled. “They haven’t killed anyone. Not yet. They’re rounding the women up. It’s more of a siege than an attack. I’m not really sure what’s going on. That’s why I’m keeping to the shadows. The more we know, the better chance we have to save our sisters.”

The weight on my shoulders lifted. It wasn’t by much, but it allowed me some composure. “So no has died?”

Bellona allowed herself to smile. “No woman has.”

This was good news. “And how many ships have landed?”

“Just the one other, from what I can tell.”

“But it makes no sense.” I worked the siege around in my mind like a math equation. “We had surrendered peacefully. Why are they suddenly acting hostile?”

“They were always hostile. We just didn’t know it.”

“No,” I said. “I mean, yes, they were likely always hostile. But something else is going on here. Okay, let’s assume they know we’re not women of the cloth but actually a space station of femme fatales. Why not attack upon arrival?”

“They needed time to scout.”

She was right. I could see it. They wanted to gain our trust so that they could scout the station for our weaknesses before taking our weapons. “This isn’t about executing the women,” I concluded. “This is about disarming us. They must have known we meant to attack.”

Damn, Jidden was good. The way he had called our weaponry trivial, the way he had tested us in the docking bay to see if we would resist or play the game. It was all a ploy.

As was the way he had distracted me.

“I’m such a fool,” I said under my breath.

Bellona stared out into the distance, towards the inner station where our sisters battled against the Surtu. I could tell it was taking all her will not to go and fight, but she was right – the more we knew about what was happening, the better chance all the women on board the Fortuna had at surviving.

“They’re going to take us as slaves,” Bellona announced. “That’s why they’re not executing us. We’re going to be like the women on the colony. That’s what they need us for.”

It hit me then, exactly what all of this was about. The revelation was strong, sending me into shock. “What they need us for,” I echoed, closing my eyes, imagining the women on the colony being shipped off to some unknown planet like cattle. “That’s why they’re here.”

“Go on,” Bellona encouraged. I had her full attention.

“The women. They need the women. I don’t understand why, but I’m sure of it. Think about it – on the colony, they killed all the men. Only the women and children were taken as slaves. That’s why the Surtu didn’t attack the Fortuna. That’s why they’ve gone through all this trouble to strategize a way to take the station with as few casualties as possible. And it’s why they haven’t attacked Earth with their fancy technology. They can’t risk hurting the women. They need us.”

I knew Bellona agreed. I could see it in the way the flames in her eyes jumped from anger to rage. “One of them has Lucina. I’m afraid of what he’s going to do with her.”

My heart stopped. “What?” I asked.

“While our sisters were being rounded into the Grand Hall, one by one as they fell, I watched as a man with hair a much dirtier shade of red than my own grabbed Lucina. He didn’t take her to the Grand Hall. I don’t know where he took her. I lost sight in the rampage.”

I had trained to be a warrior since I was a little girl. I don’t know when my mind flipped against war or when I began to believe that there was a better solution. It had probably occurred while I was reading, when my adolescent mind was full of ideals, preferring the joy of peace over the tragedy of combat.

But that changed the moment Bellona told me about Lucina. An animal instinct took over and

overwhelmed my intellect. I marched away from the gardens, towards the inner station.

“Wait!” Bellona called behind me. “You can’t save her, not without getting caught. I need your help.”

“You are like a shadow,” I said, more serious than I had ever been before. “If anyone has a chance of escaping capture, it’s you. But I’m not meant for the shadows. I need the light. If something happened to Lucina, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I understand,” Bellona said solemnly.

Before I could say anything further, she slipped back into the unknown.

I charged ahead, towards my quarters where I had hidden several weapons. Even if they had trashed my room, the Surtu would not have found them.

I had hoped that amongst the fighting, I could slide towards my quarters without being noticed. A warrior with a sword was worth much more attention than a mousy brunette treading quietly against the wall. But as soon as I entered the corridor of the inner station, I realized my mistake. Few women still fought, and their numbers dwindled quickly.

There was a rhythm to the battle. Soldiers with blasters would cause a distraction while others came from behind and disarmed the women. It was like watching poachers capture a rare cat, handling the creature carefully so as not to harm its coat.

“Stop there,” a soldier yelled behind me. I kept walking, praying he was talking to someone else, but then he grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. His face had the same mythological quality to it as all the Surtu, but his smile was grotesque. “Look, it’s the pretty Commander. I think I’ll claim you for myself.”

“You can’t claim her,” Jidden proclaimed, appearing beside him. “No soldier can. She is a superior, she is extremely intelligent and has a high rank. She’s not meant for soldiers like us.”

A small part of me was relieved to see him. The bigger part of me wanted to slap him.

He’d used me.

I’d let him.

“I never heard that before,” the soldier said, refusing to move. He had me pinned in a corner, and he knew it.

“Do you really think the Fleet Captain and his financiers will approve of a light bond between someone like her and someone like you?” Jidden challenged. “Do you think they’ll just give her away that easy when they could have her?”

The soldier faltered. It was the hesitation Jidden was looking for. He knocked the blaster out of the soldier’s hand. It would have been my moment to run, but there was nowhere to go. More soldiers filled the corridor, blocking my path. All I could do was watch as Jidden and the soldier started to fight.

Please be okay, Lucina, I thought, feeling sick at the idea of her locked away with one of these monsters.

The stories from childhood were true. The Surtu were monsters. They were the kind that stole the souls of women in the middle of the night.

I didn't want Jidden's help, but I knew I was safer in his hands than any other, so I was horrified when the soldier pulled a knife from his boot. The hilt was encrusted with a crescent moon. It was one of ours, taken from the hand of one of my sister warriors.

With the knife firmly in his hand, the soldier took a swipe at Jidden, but he missed. He tried again, but Jidden kept dancing around him, much quicker and more capable.

When the soldier lunged forward one last time, Jidden dodged and caused the soldier to stumble. The move ended the fight, but not in the way either man intended.

The soldier fell straight into me.

I felt the blade go through my abdomen, but I didn't feel any pain. I was in too much shock. The hilt glowed against the florescent lights of the corridor, calling my destiny out to me. I was mesmerized by the glow, reminded of how I thought the Surtu ships looked like glow flies out in the distance from my kitchen window.

Then the glow wavered, dimming as I bled.

I remembered Jidden picking me up in his arms, but that was the last thing that went through my mind.



The light hurt my eyes.

I struggled to wake up, unsure of where I was. A thick fog clouded my mind, and the glare around me blinded my eyes. What could I remember? I had been talking to Bellona in the gardens of the Fortuna, the space station I was now Commander of. And what about Lucina?

Oh God, Lucina!

Bellona had informed me that while the other sister warriors defended the Fortuna against the invading Surtu, Lucina, my best friend, had been taken captive by some redheaded mutt of a soldier. I had gone to look for her, intending first to go to my quarters and retrieve my hidden weapons – weapons I thought I'd never use.

And I had been stabbed.

Wide awake now, I pulled up the shirt I was wearing. There was a bandage around my waist which covered the stab wound, but I wasn't in pain.

"Our medicine is far more advanced than yours," Jidden said from across the room, "but even our medicine has limits. You're lucky the knife missed your heart."

I hadn't even asked a question. He was reprimanding me, but I barely noticed, suddenly realizing that I was no longer on the Fortuna. Nor was I in my clothes. I wore a gray thermal-looking top over white shorts. The clothes were too small to belong to Jidden. I had no idea how these garments

appeared.

I wasn't even sure how long I'd been out.

"Where are we?" I demanded, looking around at what appeared to be sleeping quarters of a mental asylum. The walls cold steel with no decor, unless I counted the tiny window above the bed where I sat as interior design. A narrow closet and a desk lined the wall to my left, but there was little else.

"We're on my ship," Jidden replied, pulling off his top.

I briefly lost focus as I tried not to stare at his hard, chiseled physique, but I couldn't help myself. Jidden was many things, and unfortunately for me, sexy was one of them. The Surtu were a mesmerizing race – almost completely humanoid except for their broader height and elfin eyes, but Jidden was something special altogether. There was a depth in his dark blue eyes, which had flecks of light around the pupils. He was unaware of how mesmerizing his eyes were.

Ashamed, I thought of how intimate we'd been in the gardens, of his hand sliding up my thigh, exploring me.

I shook the memory away. It didn't mean anything. He'd wanted to distract me while his soldiers sieged the space station, so he'd seduced me. It was strategic.

Why do you have to be so hot? I thought, praying he would magically turn into some hideous creature. When that didn't work, I willed him to put his shirt back on so that I could hate him properly.

He didn't.

The ship shook, and I nearly fell off the bed. "Are we moving?" I gasped. Panicked, I stood and pulled up the metal shade covering the window.

"Yes," Jidden answered, but I didn't need him to. I could see the Fortuna growing smaller in the distance. We were heading deeper into space than I had ever been before. "I'm taking you to my Fleet Captain."

He was irritated. I didn't understand why. I was the prisoner being transported, handed like cattle from one owner to the next.

I didn't fear for my safety. Jidden wouldn't have saved me only to kill me later. He was cold and calculating, but he wasn't sadistic. I was scared for my integrity, however. I refused to be a slave like the women from Florentine, the Earth colony the Surtu had attacked sixty years prior. The Surtu slaughtered all the men, and the women and children were taken captive.

"You can't do this to me," I said earnestly, hoping to appeal to the gentler side of him, a side he kept hidden. I'd seen it, out in the garden. "You can't turn people into slaves. We may be human, but we're still people."

Jidden reached into his closet and pulled out a fresh top. It was black, similar to the uniform he'd worn when he first arrived on the Fortuna. "You fight well, but you were never a match for my soldiers," he said, pulling the top over his head. "You were fools to think you could defeat us."

He left the room, locking me in.

“It’s not over yet!” I screamed at the door, hoping the entire ship heard me.

Chapter 6

JIDDEN

I had nowhere to go when I left the room. I just needed to get away from her.

I preferred Terra when she was asleep. She had looked so beautiful lying in my bed, her wavy brown hair falling over the sheets in a way that made me ache to touch her again.

Seducing her in the gardens had not been part of the plan. I had meant to distract her while my men sieged the space station, but what happened in the dark of the wood?

That was spontaneous.

I couldn't let it happen again. I wasn't some low-class gunner ruled by my lust. I was better than that. I was disciplined and the Lead Officer of my ship. I needed to set an example for my men and not be captivated by some human woman, no matter how fascinating she was.

Even if I did want to find a mate to light bond with, it couldn't be Terra. I hoped she would forgive me for deceiving her, but she was an elite mate. She was Commander of a space station, and she was intelligent. Those who outranked me would claim her before I could. I had to oblige.

I was still just a soldier. For now.

Chapter 7

TERRA

I couldn't get Lucina out of my mind, even as our ship docked, attaching itself to another larger ship like two pieces of a puzzle. Out the window, the Fortuna was a mere dot and hardly noticeable against the backdrop of stars.

The rage I'd felt hearing about Lucina being taken captive lingered within me, even as I realized all of the women of the Fortuna were now hostages. A tiny part of me still did not believe a war was the answer. With war, humans and the Surtu equally risked destruction. There had to be another way.

My instincts told me the Surtu were here for the women. It made sense.

On Florentine, they'd only killed the men. And when they invaded the Fortuna, they tried not to hurt my sister warriors, as if we were prizes in a game of hide-and-seek. Jidden had said it himself.

I can guarantee their survival, but nothing more.

I simply had to figure out why they flew across the stars for us.

Jidden returned to the room. The air around him could freeze a polar bear. None of the affection he had showed me before remained.

"It's time to go," he said firmly, leaving no room for me to object. "Captain Fore, the man in charge of this fleet, is waiting."

I obeyed, not because Jidden intimidated me, but because all I possessed at the moment was my dignity. I didn't want him dragging me out.

"Thank you, by the way," I said, passing by him briskly as I entered the long corridor. "For saving me. I appreciate it."

He seemed surprised by my thanks, but it did not change the frigid atmosphere between us. "The soldier who cornered you was out of line. Better men put a claim on women like you."

"No one's putting a claim on me," I muttered. "Least of all who your kind deems worthy."

We continued our walk in silence. I had questions, and I wanted to get answers. Now was not the time for that. I needed to focus and take in everything I could about the ship in case I was able to escape and contact Earth.

I will escape, I thought to myself. I need redemption. I let the Fortuna fall.

We passed beneath a giant metal arch. I assumed it was where the ships met. Soon after, we arrived at the Fleet Captain's office.

The office was functional, not decorative. Like Jidden's sleeping quarters, it was sterile and efficient, furnished only by the necessities. Though it was small, great power radiated from a man behind the desk at the center of the room. Wearing the same black uniform as Jidden, he looked to be in his sixties, his hair tipped with gray. The flecks of light in his eyes crackled with vitality.

"Your charade was clever," he told me, his voice booming across the room. Polite greetings seemed to be beyond the Surtu. "But it wasn't clever enough. Did you think we'd believe you were holy women or that the Fortuna was a sanctuary? Not only did you have military arms, but you also had a fight in your eyes. We knew that you were bait."

"Then why siege the ship?" I asked. "We'd already surrendered."

"No, you hadn't," Captain Fore argued. "You *pretended* to surrender so that you could learn about us before it was time to strike, just as we did to you when we pretended to send an envoy ship."

"We played each other," I concluded, not for the first time.

Captain Fore smiled. "But the Surtu won."

"For now," I said, forcing an unnatural confidence into my tone. I may have only been made Commander of the Fortuna because I was the most believable, but I still had a role to play and information to gather. "So why are you here?"

"For you," Jidden answered. He was standing behind me and refusing to be forgotten.

"For the women of Earth," Captain explained. "Two centuries ago, Surt was hit by a large meteorite. It did not alarm us. The damage was minimal. If anything, it was a scientific curiosity. But then our women began to die, taken by a mysterious disease."

It was terrible to hear, but I was intrigued. It explained many things.

"In the decade that followed, the population of women on our planet rapidly diminished. Thankfully, some were genetically immune to the disease, and others fought it and survived, but my people knew it was only a matter of time before we faced total extinction. We sent expeditions into space in search of an alien race genetically compatible with our own."

"The universe works in patterns. All the races are similar, no matter what their origin is. A flower on one end of the world is similar to a flower on the other end, requiring the same minerals to grow and the same air to breathe. Although we found many races that were close to our genetic profile, we couldn't find a race that we could reproduce with."

"Until we came upon Florentine."

It was a lot to take in. The Surtu were the first alien race Earth had encountered, but from what Captain Fore told, there were an indefinite number of alien races out there, beyond human reaching.

My emotions were mixed up. I felt compassion towards the Surtu. They were fighting for their survival, but I was not naive. Their method of survival was intolerable. It was uncivilized. The Surtu needed human women, but they didn't take them because they had no other choice. They took them because it was the easiest choice.

"So you stole us," I said bitterly. "Because we're a genetic match."

Jidden stepped forward. “The laws of the universe don’t care about morality.” he stated coldly. “We take what we need, or die.”

Captain Fore nodded. “We make no apologies for what we do. We know the implications our actions have on Earth, but we stand by them. After the expedition had returned with the human women, we waited an entire generation to ensure the women were capable of producing Surtu children, and that the children grew up healthy. They did, particularly those conceived within the light bond. Many are still alive today.”

“Our search is over.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by a light bond, but I had more important questions to ask, the answers of which I hoped to feed to Earth. “What about the disease? If the disease is gender-based, aren’t human women vulnerable to it as well?”

“No, they are not, and neither are their daughters from what we can tell so far, but we are aware that by sharing blood, the same vulnerabilities in our genetic code may present themselves. That is why not all the Surtu soldiers will be returning home. They will remain here on Earth with the women they claim.”

It was a shock, but I tried to keep my composure. “Are there human Surtu within the fleet?”

“No,” Captain Fore asserted. “To keep the Surtu bloodline strong for as long as possible, only full Surtu are allowed to mate with humans. No one here is half-human.”

Their tribulations tugged harder at my heartstrings, demanding absolute empathy, but then I thought of Lucina, and the inner rage I had been carrying returned. “If you’re thinking about making me one of your playthings, then you’re dead wrong,” I told him, letting my rage show itself.

Captain Fore laughed. “I’m not thinking about you like that at all. My mate is of the Surtu, immune to the disease. She is the only type of woman in this universe more valuable than a human. You’re here because I want you to tell your people to surrender.”

“You have already captured the Fortuna,” I reminded him.

“I’m not talking about the Fortuna. I mean Earth. We are the first fleet to arrive, but we are not the last. More will come. Trust me when I tell you the Surtu are more powerful than you could imagine. Earth has two options – either the men can live out the rest of their days in peace, or they can die.”

“Either way, the women belong to us.”

“Why must it be war?” I demanded, before glancing over at Jidden, who stood as still as a statue. “I’m sure it’s possible for a Surtu man and a human woman to fall in love if the two races were to integrate peacefully, without force.”

“Love cannot be controlled,” Captain Fore replied coolly. “We need control. There are very little Surtu women left. We’re not here to ask permission. We’re here to dominate.”

To hell with that, I thought, but I didn’t say it out loud. Captain Fore had offered me an advantage. I wanted to take it.

“I’ll do it,” I said. “I’ll try to convince my people to surrender.”

I had no authority on Earth. If I asked the leaders of Earth to surrender, no one would listen to me. Agreeing to do it would give me the opportunity to tell Earth everything I had learned from my conversation with the Fleet Captain.

He seemed pleased. “Good. You know what you need to do to protect your people, as do I. That’s what makes us leaders.”

I was hardly a leader, despite the false title I’d been given, but Captain Fore didn’t need to know that.

“I will protect my people, whatever it takes,” I concurred, hoping it came out as the threat it was meant to be.

Finished with me, Captain Fore dismissed us. “Take her back to the Fortuna,” he ordered to Jidden. “Set up communication with Earth.”

“Sir,” Jidden said, bowing his head. Then he added, “And what of my promotion for overtaking the space station?”

I thought it audacious of Jidden to ask, but Captain Fore didn’t seem to take offense. “We’ll discuss it when we return to Surtu after the war.”

Jidden objected. “I can be of use to you here.”

Now the Captain was annoyed. “You’re as much use to me as I say you are,” he said, pulling rank. “We’ll discuss your promotion back on Surt, but in the meantime, you will remain in charge of the Fortuna, even as other ships land. And you may have your choice of women to claim.” He looked decisively at me.

“Just remember, no soldiers are to mate with the women unless they are light bonded. We’re here to save the Surtu race, not parade our cocks around. Applications for a light bonding ceremony can be made directly to me.”

“Yes, Captain,” Jidden conceded. He placed his hand on the small of my back and gently guided me away.



“You’re upset,” I noted, feeling Jidden’s tension through his hand. “You expected you’d be walking out of his office with your precious promotion – the one you would do anything to get. Do anyone to get.”

“I won’t talk about it,” he said, his voice low and surprisingly calm. “Especially not with you.”

I was outraged. “And what is that supposed to mean? You’re the one who seduced me in the garden.”

Swiftly, he pinned me against the wall of the corridor, his hand across my mouth. “You can’t speak of that here,” he decreed. “Don’t speak of it anywhere. No one can know. Understood?”

He wasn’t hurting me. Quite the opposite, his touch felt almost protective, his weight like a

shelter. It sent a shiver through my body, kindling the same anticipation I had felt in the garden when he explored my core with his fingers, preparing me for when he entered my body.

But that was crazy. Jidden wasn't protective. He had made his intentions clear. He wanted to take his place among the leaders of the Surtu military. That was important to him.

I looked up, realizing we were standing beneath the arch that held the ships together. One step over and I'd be back in his command. I didn't look forward to it, but he was the lesser evil.

Unable to speak with his hand over my mouth, I nodded my understanding.

Relaxing, he let me go. "What happened before can't happen again," he told me, taking my hand as we returned to his ship. "We are not light bonded, nor will we ever be. Women are a distraction. They make men weak. I'm not looking for a mate."

"What does that mean – light bonded?" I asked.

His grip on my hand tightened. "I hope you never find out."



To an outsider, it would be impossible to tell that the Fortuna was under siege. Now that their weapons had been confiscated, my sister warriors moved around at will.

Juventas, a burly street fighter, regained control of the mill pantry; the sweet scent of her bread floated through the South lounge. The gardeners were out among the trees with their buckets and spades. Others walked idly around, unsure of how to fill their days on the space station now that our training had stopped.

It was all quite normal, if not for the men who stood guard at every corner, their blasters raised high for show. With my new knowledge, I knew the blasters weren't the real weapons they used to keep the women in line.

The true weapon was fear.

They were in control, and the women knew it.

Even if we tried to run, we didn't have anywhere to go. The only escape from the space station was through a ship, and the few clumsy cargo ships we had once possessed were now under tight lockdown in the docking bay.

Having been released from Jidden's custody, I searched the space station for Lucina, but I could not find her.

It was my hope that Bellona had somehow found a way to save Lucina from the redheaded soldier that had taken her captive, and that they were out there waiting to strike. Two assassins were out stalking their prey. But it was unlikely.

"Terra!" I heard someone cry out.

It was Gallia, the true Commander of the Fortuna. I had taken her place as a ruse. She was the one destined to lead us.

“I failed,” I said, holding back tears that wanted to fall. Warriors didn’t cry. “I was useless. They knew all along.”

“You didn’t fail,” Gallia told me sternly, and then she hugged me, her raven-black hair cascading around me.

The embrace wasn’t to comfort me. “Do they know who you are?” she whispered, holding me close.

“No, they still believe I am the Commander. They’re allowing me to call Earth later.”

“Good,” she said. “Keep it that way. I’ve taken your place in the kitchen. Being a kitchen mouse gives me the opportunity to listen in when the men are eating. I’ve learned a lot.”

“So have I,” I revealed. I was so quiet a dog would have a hard time hearing me. “Is there a place we can meet and discuss what we’ve learned?”

“In the temple, there’s a hidden—”

A soldier appeared, his blaster pointed towards us. “Break it up, lovebirds,” he ordered.

Regretfully, I pulled away. “Be brave,” I coached, playing my role in front of our audience, knowing very well Gallia needed no inspiration. “Our destiny has not been determined yet.”

“I hope not,” she said, glaring at the soldier. “Because it stinks.”

I waited until she disappeared in the direction of the kitchen before I continued to my quarters. I could feel the soldiers in the corridor watching.

Once inside, I leaned against the door, and I looked down into my hand. Before releasing me from our embrace, Gallia had given me something.

Emblazed on the top was the crescent moon – the symbol of our space station. The moon was feminine and divine, watching over the women of the Fortuna.

I wish I knew what the key was for or where it led.

Chapter 8

JIDDEN

Letting Terra leave and releasing her to the heathens reporting to me, had been harder than I'd thought. They couldn't touch her without the light bond. I took comfort in that. The soldiers knew the punishment if they disobeyed the Fleet Captain's orders. It wasn't pretty.

But I worried that one of the others would claim her and reserve her for himself while he sought permission with Captain Fore to hold a light bonding ceremony.

I would claim her for myself, but my pride had already won that inner struggle. I had no place for a mate in my future, especially with a war about to begin. Captain Fore was a fool to disregard me like he had. I had been useful before. Now, I had to prove that more than ever.

Kalij passed by me as he entered the ship. I grabbed his arm and held him back. "You're meant to be on patrol," I barked, having no patience for the soldiers today. They would feel my rejection, especially this dirty redhead.

He objected. "I'm tired. I was up all night making sure none of these other bastards tried to steal away my girl."

"Guarding her is all you better be doing; you know the rules."

"Unfortunately," Kalij grumbled. "Don't worry, we haven't mated. Yet."

"Don't worry, Sir," I corrected with my full authority.

Kalij looked like he was going to be sick. "Don't worry, Sir," he said, obeying me. "I'll wait until we're light bonded before I make her carry my sons."

"You should be praying for daughters," I told him, letting go of his arm. "Go patrol. And if you disregard your assignment again, you'll have nothing left to make sons with."

I knew he had something smart to say back, but he held his tongue.

Wise decision, I thought, and I stepped away, more worried for Terra than before. The pretty little blonde had certainly infatuated Kalig, but the Fortuna was now full of soldiers just like him who longed for a bite of the station's soft Commander.

Chapter 9

TERRA

I was glad to be in my quarters and away from the leer of the soldiers. Unlike the sleeping quarters on Jidden's ship, the rooms on the Fortuna were much more appealing. Like the skintight white jumpsuits the women wore back on the ship, there was no discrepancy in our quarters because of rank. My quarters were the same as when I first came aboard, despite being Commander. I didn't need anything more. I liked what I had.

A rich plum fabric covered the walls, and it warmed the room. My bed was comfortable, full of Persian inspired pillows that I had brought with me from Earth. When I lay upon those pillows and looked up, I could see the stars. The sun shone from time to time, its next rising due shortly, but we spent most of our time under the stars.

I moved beneath those stars now, first to turn off the light then to reach my hand behind my bookcase. I didn't dare open it, afraid of who may be watching, but when I removed my hands, I felt the dust sticking to my fingers. It had not been disturbed. My weapons were still safely hidden within the trick panels.

Staying beside the bookcase, I reached for my encyclopedia and stuck the key Gallia had given me inside. The bulk of the book hid it. Finished, I sat upon my bed, embracing the dark. I should have changed out of the top and shorts Jidden had dressed me in. The outfit was no longer appropriate since I was back on the Fortuna, but I was too tired to change.

It had been a long day or night. I couldn't tell which anymore.

I felt the bandage around my waist, and I remembered the way Jidden had picked me up in his arms before I blacked out.

I had faith in my people. I believed the women of the Fortuna would soon be free. Hundreds of military space stations surrounded us, smooth spheres that protected Earth like an army of giant bullets. Someone would come to our rescue.

But if they didn't – if we met the same fate as the women on Florentine – then I couldn't bear the thought of any other man claiming me other than Jidden.

It wouldn't come to that, I determined. Most of our weapons had been confiscated, but we still had our intellect. And our training.

If no one else would free us, then we would have to free ourselves.



The sun was too bright. It shouldn't be that bright.

I left my room and went to stand in the gardens alongside the rest of my warrior sisters though it was almost unbearable to do so. The heat from the sun that radiated in through the transparent roof was scorching. The temperature continued to rise as the sun grew brighter.

“What’s happening?” the women around me cried.

Gallia joined us, the green in her eyes a contrast against the golden light around us. “Do something,” she pleaded to me.

It wasn't like Gallia to beg. “Save us.”

There wasn't enough time. As we stood among the oaks and wildflowers of the garden, the sun pulsed with a surge of solar heat and the Fortuna lit up like a supernova before turning to ash.



I sat upright in my bed, sweating. Quickly, I checked my timepiece on the bed stand.

I still had another hour to go before my call to Earth.

Unnerved by the nightmare, I needed to move and burn off some of the adrenaline searing through me. I changed into a clean jumpsuit, taking comfort in the way it clung to my body. It was a second skin meant to protect me from harm. It also allowed the women who wore it to move during combat without restraint.

Leaving my quarters, I went to the gardens, satisfied when I saw the stars shining peacefully above. The sun wouldn't rise for a while longer. For now, there was only the tranquility of a very long night.

Because the Fortuna was designed as something spiritual – to disguise the fact that it was a battle station, like our neighbors – it had a temple in the center of the gardens. I went there, remembering that Gallia had mentioned the temple before handing me the key.

The key was still tucked safely away in my encyclopedia where no one else could get it, and it was important. I had to figure out what it was.

The temple was not large, but it was breathtaking, made of aged stone and covered with green ivy that cascaded around it. Like many details of the Fortuna, it was a replica of an old Roman temple, rectangular in shape with four columns encasing its doors.

I walked around the temple looking for a keyhole or anything that seemed out of place. I couldn't see anything, so I went inside. The ceiling contained a shade of pale blue which represented Earth's sky.

I hadn't seen such a sky in years. Within the blue were frescos of the goddesses of Rome – our

namesakes. In the middle stood Fortuna, mighty and proud, the deliverer of good fortune. In one hand she held the Earth, and in the other the crescent moon, gracing us with her power.

The stone within the temple was a dusty rose color, feminine and warm. Space was open except for a slab of stone in the center – a ritual altar. Before the Surtu had invaded, the altar was decorated with artifacts, including a sword and two daggers. It was all for show. The artifacts had no meaning, but we could use them against an enemy.

Now the altar was empty and a reminder of a plan gone horribly wrong.

I checked the altar first, certain I would discover something related to the key, but there was nothing there. Nor was there anything of interest within the walls of the temple. It wasn't a dead-end. I knew Gallia had mentioned the temple, but it was a mystery I couldn't solve. Not right now. Earth waited.

Leaving the temple, I heard a rustle in the woods around me, and I thought of Bellona. She was out there still, a breeze in the night waiting to help us.

As I made my way back towards the inner station, I prepared what I would say to Earth. I wasn't sure how much I could communicate. The Surtu would be listening to everything.

When I entered the corridor, a soldier ran straight for me. In fear, I jumped against the wall and closed my eyes, haunted by the image of the soldier who stabbed me. I hadn't thought I'd been so affected by my stabbing, but the memory was a scar, causing my heart to pound in my chest as I waited for the soldier in the corridor to attack.

He ran right by me, in a hurry to get somewhere. More soldiers followed him with their blasters drawn. They spoke to each other in their language. It was a strange, musical language that calmed me, the same way the chords of a piano did, even though nothing about the situation was calm.

Jidden expected me in the Grand Hall, but I had to know where the men were heading. No doubt it involved my warrior sisters. So I followed the soldiers as they rounded the corridors of the Fortuna, halting once they reached the south lounge.

Designers on Earth created the lounge for our recreation. It contained multiple leather sofas where we could watch movies when the nearby hologram room was full. We would chat here, gazing at the Earth outside, reminiscing of home.

Until the Surtu arrived, the lounge was hardly used. We were more likely to be found on the boxing mats or in the archery room. That's where our friendships grew; we were warriors united in a common cause. The Surtu had changed that, locking down our training centers. Now the lounge was in full use.

Earlier, upon leaving Jidden's ship, I'd seen the women gathered within, whispering in its corners, trying to figure out what the next move was without the soldiers on patrol overhearing them. They waited for their Commander to lead them.

They waited for Gallia.

As did I.

The lounge was as busy as it had been earlier, but a man lay on the floor with a pool of blood growing around him. His throat had been slit clean. He wouldn't have had time to think, let alone act before he was dead on the ground.

I knew whose handiwork this was. The Red Assassin. Bellona, the fiery priestess who only sacrificed things that threatened us.

She wasn't a priestess, just as I was not a Commander, but her skills as an assassin were so good, they were sacred.

The soldiers rounded up the women in the lounge, but they would not find the one responsible. Bellona had left a message – a warning to the Surtu, and now she was gone.

“Finally, someone's taking action,” a woman said nearby. “I can't stand another moment sitting around.”

The women around her chatted in agreement until Jidden entered the lounge. His presence silenced everyone within. Jidden went to the dead soldier and examined him.

“Why didn't he save himself?” he asked out loud.

“He didn't have time,” the soldier closest to him answered. “None of us had time. We didn't hear anything or see anything. He just fell.”

Jidden nodded and looked around the room, his eyes settling on me last, surprised that I was there. “No one here did this,” he resolved. “All I see is fear, confusion, and joy. But no pride. Whoever did this has escaped. Take the soldier back to the ship. Clean him up. We'll send him off properly.”

Finished with his orders, he turned to leave. “You,” he said when he reached me. “Come with me. You have a call to make.”



Jidden marched in front of me as we made our way to the Grand Hall. I had not known him long, but in the time I had, he had never been this angry. His hands clenched at his sides as we walked, and I sensed it took all his self-control to not punch the walls around us.

For reasons I did not want to admit, not even to myself, it pained me to see him so upset.

“Jidden,” I called, setting a hand on his shoulders, feeling the heat rise from him. “Stop for a minute. Talk to me.”

“I have nothing to say,” he said, ignoring my touch.

“Did you know him?” I asked, dropping my hand.

Abruptly, he turned to face me. I could feel his fury. “No, I didn't know him, and I didn't want to. We are soldiers, Terra. We came here willing to die. I find his death tragic, but it does not devastate me. It does, however, reflect poorly on my ability to command this station and the women within.”

The women within. He meant me.

“You think I did it?” I asked, unsure of how that made me feel. They trained me to be a warrior. I should be proud he thought I could do it, but felt something else instead. Shame.

“Did you?”

“No,” I told him, shaking my head. “I was on my way to meet you when I saw the soldiers running. I followed them to the lounge.”

He studied me, his mind working. “But you know who did.”

I crossed my arms and looked away, unwilling to speak. My loyalty to Bellona and the Fortuna was far greater than any loyalty I was building with Jidden.

“So be it,” he said, and he continued walking.



Unlike the lounge, the Grand Hall was almost empty. With its marble flooring and high pillars, it was by far the masterpiece of the space station. It was primarily used to initiate new warrior sisters as they made the Fortuna their home.

A massive video screen had been set up within the hall, in front of which was a table full of communications equipment. There was no time to waste. Four of Earth’s leaders – two men and two women – waited expectantly on the video screen.

“Commander Terra Lynch.” One of the women, President Bentford, greeted me as I took my place in front of the screen. “I’m glad to see that you are okay.”

“We all are,” I told her, still trying to figure out how I could say everything I needed to without the Surtu disabling the call.

“So there are no casualties?”

“None on our side.”

She smiled, but she did not look surprised. I realized Earth had probably been monitoring the Fortuna all along. Still, there was information their surveillance could not have picked up on, such as my conversation with Captain Fore.

“I spoke with their Fleet Captain,” I said, instantly gaining the full attention of all four diplomats. I glanced over my shoulder at Jidden and the two soldiers on guard, and I quickly added, “The Surtu want to take over Earth. They want our women.”

I expected the screen to go blank and for Jidden to reproach me for revealing such information, but he didn’t flinch.

They don’t care what Earth knows. It doesn’t matter to them.

President Bentford kept a straight face. It was impossible to tell if the news shocked her, but that was how she’d earned the seat she currently held – she was stoic with her emotions and direct with her commands. People loved her or hated her for it.

“I see,” she said. “And what is it about our women that have brought them so far?”

“Their women are dying from an unknown disease. We’re the next best thing, genetically speaking.”

“And how do they plan to take our women?”

How are they going to attack Earth? That was what she wanted to know. She wanted me to tell her the Surtu’s strategy.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “More fleets will arrive soon – that’s why they gave me this opportunity to speak with you. The Surtu have given Earth an ultimatum. Surrender so that the men of Earth can live, or let them die in war.”

“I see,” President Bentford repeated. She didn’t bother asking me my opinion on the matter. “And do the Surtu have anything else to say?”

Meaning, did I have any more information to share. I had loads, but I wasn’t sure how much time I had. “When the Surtu ships connected, I didn’t have much time to speak with the Fleet Captain. The Surtu sent me back to the Fortuna, where at least three ships have landed.”

This time, Jidden cleared his throat behind me – a warning. Good. It meant I had revealed something important.

“Thank you for calling us,” President Bentford said. Her face revealed a terrible sadness I had never witnessed before.

“We will get back to you, our fallen.”

“Until then,” I said, and the screen went blank.



I couldn’t stop thinking about what President Bentford had said. Our fallen. It was bizarre and too poetic for the abrasive, in-your-face politician. I had to find Gallia. I wanted to tell her about the call, and I had information to share. I also wanted to know why I had this key! Gallia would have the answers I needed.

Thankfully, Jidden didn’t follow me when I left. I headed towards the kitchen where I guessed Gallia was, but I stopped when I passed outside Lucina’s quarters. I still did not know where she was or if she was okay, but I took a chance and knocked on the door.

Someone on the other side moved, and then to my relief and joy, I heard Lucina speak.

“Go way,” she said faintly through the door, none of the usual cheer in her voice. “Kalij isn’t here.”

“Lucina, it’s me, Terra.”

“Terra?” She sounded as if she was going to burst into tears. “Thank God it’s you. I thought you were a soldier. Are you here to save me?”

I was now. “Quickly, open the door,” I said, looking over my shoulder to make sure there were no soldiers on patrol nearby. “I’ll take you to the gardens. That’s where I think Bellona is hiding. She’ll

come for you.”

“I can’t,” Lucina said weakly. “Kalij has put a mechanism in the lock. I can’t open it.”

I thought of the key Gallia had given me, but it wasn’t a match. The doors of the Fortuna did not require keys. They had punch codes.

I knew Lucina’s punch code by heart, as she knew mine, so I tried it, but it was of no use. Lucina was trapped.

Defeated, I leaned my head against the door. I could hear her shallow breaths on the other side. “I’ll figure out a way to get the door open,” I promised her. “I’ll save you.”

She didn’t respond. It broke my heart. Lucina was my best friend. I couldn’t leave her like this, but I had no choice.

“Has he...hurt you?” I asked.

“Not my integrity. That’s intact. But he is violent. He’ll grab me, full of desire, but then he’ll push me away, ranting about some light bond. Do you know what that is?”

“No,” I answered. “Not exactly. I think it’s a union ceremony. That’s why the Surtu are here. They want to mate with us, to reproduce, but something about the light bond makes the children healthier. The men are not allowed to mate unless they light bond with a woman first.”

“I should be thankful he can’t touch me yet,” Lucina said, choking up, “but the idea of bearing his children repulses me. I’d rather die.”

I knew by her desperation that she meant it. “Listen to me, don’t lose hope,” I said, my hand against the door. “I’ll find a way to get you out of here before any light bond takes place, whatever it is. Okay? I will save you. Just hold on.”

“I will,” Lucina said half-heartedly, her will defeated.

“Swear it,” I begged.

“I swear by the pinky ghost, you are the one I honor the most,” she recited, echoing a song from childhood.

“I will save you,” I promised in return. “I swear by the pinky ghost, you are the one I honor the most.”

“You better go,” Lucina murmured. “Kalij will be upset if he finds you here. I don’t think I can handle any more of his moods.”

“Okay,” I relented. “I’ll be back.”

I stepped away from the door, losing patience with my pacifism. If I had it my way, I would take the mini-crossbow I had hidden in my bookcase, and I would show Kalij my mood – straight into his heart.

Not yet. I had to find Gallia.



Gallia was not made to be a kitchen worker. Even as she washed the dishes, wearing an old apron that was water-stained, her tall and elegant stature made her look more like a cat than a mouse. It was hard to believe that only a few days earlier it had been me holding the dirty dishrag. I had never liked being a kitchen porter, but I liked being the Commander even less.

“You almost look like you’re enjoying yourself,” I remarked, joining her near the sink. On impulse, I grabbed a spare rag and picked a dish out of the soapy water to dry it. Our methods were old-fashioned on the Fortuna to conserve our limited energy supply.

“I am,” she confessed. “I hate sitting in an office.”

I wanted to laugh. I had yet to spend any time in the office, but it wouldn’t have been appropriate to find even the smallest amount of humor in our situation. It was grim.

“Did you hear about what happened in the lounge?” I asked. “It was pretty gruesome.”

“It was necessary,” Gallia maintained, looking over her shoulder towards the soldier that stood near the kitchen door.

We seemed to spend a lot of time doing that these days – looking over our shoulders. We watched the soldiers almost as much as they watched us.

“I’m glad she’s out there,” I said, putting the dish away. “It gives the women hope.”

“Hope is good, but it isn’t going to free us. Has Earth given you an indication of what they plan to do to help us?” she whispered.

I shook my head. “No, but I think they’re still monitoring us. They must be planning something.”

Gallia set down the plate she was drying and pressed her lips together. I knew there was more she wanted to tell me, but this wasn’t the place. “I haven’t prayed in a while,” she said casually, stretching out her arms. “I think I’ll head to the temple later tonight and pray. Would you like to join me?”

“If I have time,” I answered, fully aware that the soldier at the door was listening. “We’ll see.”

“They say prayer is the key to surviving hardship,” she affirmed as she reached for another plate. “I hope to see you there.”

Taking my cue, I left Gallia in the kitchen and stopped by the garden to collect a handful of wildflowers. I walked towards the last place I ever thought I’d willingly go – the docking bay, now enemy territory.

From the reception area outside the docking bay, I looked upon the Surtu ships, wondering how we’d allowed three to land so easily on the station. The men moving in and out of the ships seemed complacent in their duties, but I doubted they all were happy about their placement. Men went to war for many reasons. The reasons didn’t always align with the desires of their superiors.

The dead soldier came to mind. He was the reason I was here. The soldier wasn’t the first soldier on the Fortuna to fall, and he wouldn’t be the last. We were enemies, but enemies could still honor each other’s dead.

I tried to enter the docking bay, but a soldier with dirty red hair and a snarl on his face stopped

me. By the description Bellona had given me, I instantly knew he was Kalij, Lucina's captor.

"You don't have permission to be here. Step back," he ordered.

I wanted to kill him. He was the only person I'd met who I felt deserved death. If I killed him, I could free Lucina.

"I'm not here to cause trouble. I am the Commander of this space station, and I'd like to honor the dead soldier. It is within my right."

He laughed. "Says who? You have no rights. You're just a bitch leading her pack."

I thought quickly. "I am light bonded to one of your men. Your people are now mine. Let me honor the soldier." As proof, I held up the flowers in my hand.

"To who?" Kalij demanded. He was outraged. "I was told all light bonding ceremonies are on hold."

"We haven't announced it yet, but I spoke with the Fleet Captain this morning. He oversaw the ceremony. We talked for a long time about your customs. He was very proud to tell me his mate is a pure Surtu woman immune to the disease – the only type of woman more valuable than a human. Those were his words."

Because what I said had truth in it, Kalij let his guard down. Perhaps he simply lost interest. I was clearly no threat on my own.

Lucky for you, I thought, as he let me pass. I'll see you again. And when I do, you're not going to like it.

"Where do you keep your dead?" I asked a man leaving Jidden's ship.

"The first deck," he answered, pointing to the ship, and then he marched off. He was even less interested in me than Kalij.

It helped that I had been on the ship earlier. I recognized many faces from our brief voyage to see Captain Fore, which meant they recognized me too. They barely glanced my way as I passed, assuming I had permission to stay on board.

The ship was large and the hallways long, but I managed to find the dead soldier. He was alone in a chilled room that was as sterile as the others on the ship. The blood from his throat had been cleaned, and he wore a white uniform unique to the other uniforms I'd seen the Surtu wear.

It bothered me that he was alone. No one should be alone, not even in death. I placed the flowers across his chest, and I mourned on behalf of his family, wherever they were.

The death of the soldier showed why it was intolerable for Earth and the Surtu to go to war. Both sides would lose. And why? Because the Surtu believed love wasn't reliable? I did not know what type of man the soldier had been, but it was entirely possible he could have won the heart of a human woman and started a family with her – organically, without coercion.

Part of me still believe we could avoid the war and make a treaty, but neither side trusted each other. That was the tragedy of treaties – we only signed them after much bloodshed. Realizing how much death the future held, I decided it was time to pray.

“Goodbye, brother,” I said. “Be at peace.”

After I had left the docking bay, I intended to retrieve the key, and then meet Gallia at the temple so we could talk. I didn’t get that far. Gallia waited for me outside my quarters.

“Would you like to come in?” I asked.

“No,” she declined. “None of our rooms are safe. Let’s go to the south lounge instead.”

“And what of our prayers?” I asked.

“The temple has been disturbed. A soldier sleeps in the corner. I let him be. I’m not sure the Red Assassin will do the same. He’ll be lucky if he wakes.”

“They’re all lucky if they wake,” I said, thinking of Kalij, and I followed her to the lounge.

As soon as we entered, I understood why she’d chosen the lounge to speak. Once again, it was packed full of our sister warriors, their chatter loud. It would mute our conversation and allow us to hide in plain sight.

We chose a spot against a window that looked out at Earth. I thought of my family and wondered if they knew that the Surtu attacked the Fortuna. Probably not. It wasn’t information the leaders of Earth would freely circulate. Morale would suffer, as would the public opinion of the leaders’ capacity to lead the fight against the Surtu.

“Tell me what you know,” Gallia said. “Quickly.”

It was hard to know where to begin, but I told her everything, from my conversation with Captain Fore to finding Lucina locked in her room.

“Bellona is working on a plan to save her,” Gallia informed me. “She’s working on a plan to save all of us.”

“You’ve been in touch with her?” I asked. “How?”

“Haven’t you?” she returned, equally surprised.

“Only during the siege,” I told her, still unclear how long ago it was. One night. Maybe two. Jidden had never told me how long I was out.

“I assumed she had made contact with you before she killed the soldier.”

“No,” I said. “I had no idea what she had planned.” Then I remembered the rustle in the woods when I’d left the temple earlier. “Well, maybe. I visited him,” I admitted. “The soldier who fell.”

The soldier who fell. The fallen. It reminded me of what President Bentford had said. *We will get back to you, our fallen.* I repeated it to Gallia.

“No,” she said, taking a step back, her face suddenly pale.

“What is it?” I asked. I was frightened. If Gallia was worried, there was a reason for it.

Shivering, she stared out onto the Earth before answering. ““Our fallen’ means Earth is going to destroy the Fortuna and everyone on board.”



“They wouldn’t do that,” I said incredulously. I refused to believe it. “Are they that callous?”

“It’s strategy, not sentiment,” Gallia said. “Think about it. They’re trading three Surtu ships for one space station. There are hundreds of military bases guarding Earth. We are nothing. I see that now. I thought they chose us because we are strong. Our strength is expendable. We are just bait. We were always just bait.”

The Fleet Captain had said the same thing, that we were bait, but that didn’t make it true. Yes, we were meant to fool the Surtu into trusting us, but we were also supposed to kill them. The plan was never to destroy the entire space station.

“I still don’t buy it,” I said. “Earth wouldn’t do that. I think you’re mistaken.”

Gallia took my shoulders, shaking away my disbelief. “Listen to me, Terra. President Bentford was speaking in code. She was trying to tell you to prepare yourself and the women. I was given a list of codes when I became Commander. She has set the plan in stone.”

“You knew?”

“Of the code, yes, but there are many codes. I thought they’d only use this one if most the women were dead or if our cause was hopeless. I never thought they’d use it when we still lived. It’s still possible to free us.”

So it was true. We had lost the fight, and now we were destined to die. I closed my eyes. I refused to look at the beautiful blue planet below. I had been a traitor for sleeping with Jidden in the gardens, but the decision to destroy the Fortuna felt like a stab in the back.

“How long do we have?” I asked.

“They’ll likely strike at sunrise when the sun temporarily blinds the space station. They’ll send a nuke. It’ll be over before we know it.”

I still couldn’t come to terms with it. “Are you sure there isn’t a way to contact President Bentford? Can we reason with her? We’re still an asset.”

“Can you think of a way?” Gallia asked. “All the communication equipment is on lock down, and sunrise is in a few hours. We don’t have the time. Even if we did, I doubt President Bentford would change her mind. Once the codes are set, they’re set.”

“So we’re just giving up?”

“I’m not giving up,” Gallia said. “I’m accepting what cannot be changed. I don’t want to die.” She spoke with a vulnerability she had never shown before, and I knew it was hopeless.

But if we could not save the Fortuna, we could at least save the women.

“What if we told the Surtu?” I asked. “They might be able to get most of the women off the space station by then.”

Gallia had been horrified by the news of the code, but my suggestion sickened her. “Is that how you want people to remember you?” she hissed. “As a traitor? If you tell the Surtu, you prevent the destruction of three ships. You give up Earth’s advantage. My teacher trained me to be a warrior, Terra. We came to the Fortuna knowing we may have to sacrifice our life for the protection of Earth. I

did not envision my death like this, but it is still an honorable one.”

I wanted to reason with her, but at that moment, Jidden stormed into the lounge, silencing the crowd for the second time that day. This time, he went straight to me. “I need you,” he commanded, and he grabbed my arm, pulling me away from Gallia.

His hold on me was not as gentle as it usually was. It would normally have frightened me, but I had bigger things to worry about right now. “Where are we going?” I demanded. He did not answer.

I found out soon enough. He took me to my quarters, using a key card to override the punch code.

“You can’t just lock me in here,” I said, assuming that was what he intended to do, but then he pushed me against the wall and began kissing me. He was forceful and unrelenting.

“Jidden, stop,” I urged, during a break in the kissing, and I tried to push him away. “Don’t do this.”

He refused to let go. Instead, he turned me around so that he pressed my head against the wall, and he unzipped the back of my jumpsuit.

“Please, stop,” I begged, but I knew it was useless. Jidden wasn’t going to wait for my permission. He was going to take me.

I could fight, but that might make it worse. So I relied on my intellect, the way I always had. “No Surtu man is allowed to touch a woman unless they are light bonded,” I reminded him, nearly shouting.

“That didn’t stop us before,” he proclaimed.

“I should have known you were no better than Kalij,” I said with as much menace as I could muster. “You’re worse. You disobey commands. You break the rules. No wonder you didn’t get your promotion.”

I shouldn’t have said it. I risked igniting his anger. He was already in control. His anger would not benefit me.

But the risk paid off. He stepped back, letting me go. “I’m not a heathen,” he expressed, conflicted.

Seeing an opportunity, I moved away from him and sat on the bed. If I couldn’t escape him, my bed was a good place to defend myself. Within the timepiece on my bed stand was a long screw I could use as a weapon, if necessary.

Jidden didn’t follow me. He had a look of disgust on his face as he realized what he’d almost done. “I’m sorry,” he said. He backed up to give me some space. “I just – I don’t know what I was thinking. I saw the flowers you left for the dead soldier, and I knew I had to have you. On my terms.”

“That’s no excuse,” I snapped, also feeling conflicted. I wanted him to leave. His actions were unjustifiable. It hurt me. I had trusted him, but anger was not what I wanted to carry with me if these truly were my last hours alive. If anything, this was a time for forgiveness. All of our souls should be at peace.

“Promise me you’ll never do that again,” I demanded. After sunrise, he would never have a

chance to, but I still needed to hear him say it.

“I promise on my mother’s grave,” he said. “There is no greater promise to the Surtu. What I did was unforgivable.”

The room filled with silence. I looked out at the stars. I couldn’t see the Earth from my quarters, and I was glad for it. The Earth had betrayed us, but Gallia was right – we still had an obligation to protect it. So in silence I would remain.

I made a decision.

“Claim me,” I said to Jidden, standing up to confront him. My emotions were running high. I was irrational, and I didn’t care. I took control of the situation. Whatever happened next, it would be on my terms.

I stepped out of my jumpsuit, revealing my undergarments. They were nothing special, but I saw the way Jidden’s cock responded to my exposed flesh. “Make me yours.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, struggling to keep his distance. “I don’t think you’re—”

“I’m done thinking,” I announced. I wanted this. I wanted him. Hours from death, there was no reason to deny it any longer. Jidden was cold and arrogant, but he had an inner depth. That depth was genuine.

“Claim me,” I repeated, and I reached forward to grab his cock, massaging it with my hand.

Unable to resist, Jidden moved in closer to me and kissed my shoulder, his lips like petals against my bare skin. “I claim you,” he murmured as he let the strap from my bra fall. “How can I not? You’re beautiful.” He moved his kisses to my neck, sending a pulse down my body. “And you’re intelligent. And kind. I claim you.”

The pulse that ran down my body settled at my core, which was wet with pleasure. “And I claim you,” I said in return.

To show Jidden how much I wanted him, I massaged him harder, pleased when I heard him moan. With hunger in his eyes that matched my own, he undid my bra and flung it away. Then he knelt down and pulled off my panties, which were complete soaked.

Remaining on his knees, he kissed my thigh, slowly making his way to my center. Before his tongue touched my soft folds, he picked me up in his arms and placed me back on the bed.

“I’ll never hurt you again, nor will I ever let another man touch you. I’ll protect you,” he vowed.

Spreading my legs apart, he cupped his arms around my thighs, pulling me in close so that he could taste me. His warm, moist tongue circled around my flesh and caused me to ache with ecstasy.

He pulled me in even closer, licking my clit, drinking me in. A fire engulfed my body, and I was eager to explode.

Knowing I was ready to come, he removed his uniform, exposing his hard, thick cock, and he plunged his cock inside me, filling me up. It was almost more than my body could handle. I moaned loudly and folded my legs around him as he continued to drive into me, his need to come as desperate as my own.

I couldn't hold back. I released myself, riding the tidal wave of bliss, drenching his cock with my affection. Jidden continued to thrust, his cock growing harder until he also came, jerking deep inside me. We rode the wave together, our souls meeting as our bodies released themselves.

Exhausted and sticky with joy, Jidden collapsed beside me, and I held him, enjoying the way he stayed inside me, refusing to disconnect. Lying in my arms, he fell asleep. His head nestled against my breast.

I could not sleep. As I caressed his hair, I gazed at the stars. My stomach tightened as the first rays of sunlight began to pour into the room, illuminating our flesh.

It was time. Time to become the fallen.

I wrapped my arms tighter around Jidden, finding solace next to him. I was glad that of all the people on the Fortuna, I was with him.

When I heard the explosion, I knew our lives were over.

Chapter 10

TERRA

An explosion erupted across the Fortuna.

I closed my eyes, waiting for the fire to consume me and the lover I held in my arms as the sunlight shined on us.

Vesta was a goddess of fire. She protected the home and the hearth. Were we not dead, she would have made a great namesake for daughters born during this war. Though she ruled fire, she refused to take a lover. She was wise. Her passion would have burnt too strong, destroying all around her, the same way the Fortuna was being destroyed now.

Soon, we would be nothing but ash.

Jidden woke and jumped out of bed when he heard the explosion. He was confused and his muscles tight like a lion ready to pounce – a dark haired lion with flecks of light circling around his elfin blue eyes.

My alien Surtu lover.

Perhaps he was no alien. Perhaps he was a god. A flawed, self-absorbed god here to mate with mortal women, like me.

“Terra,” he called, pulling on his black uniform. “We should go.”

“Why?” I asked as I lay naked on the bed, embracing the warmth that poured in through the ceiling of my sleeping quarters. It had been so long since I’d felt the sun. Day and night on the space station were not like how it was on Earth. “You’ve claimed me,” I sang, “so come and take what’s yours.”

I tempted him, but he resisted, throwing my white jumpsuit at me instead. “I don’t know what dream you’re living in, but it’s time to wake up. There was an explosion.”

“I know,” I said, rolling over in the sheets. “We’re dead. The Earth blew us up – one space station for three Surtu ships.”

Jidden froze. “What are you talking about?”

“My sister warriors and I – we are the fallen. Instead of saving us, the Earth decided to blow us up, killing the Surtu with us. Well, some of you. So now we are dead.” I giggled as if it were a joke. I think I was becoming hysterical.

“Terra, wake up. We’re not dead. We’re very much alive.” He began to pace, his temper rising. “Did Earth think they could destroy us so easily? We prepared for this. Our scanners must have

picked up whatever the hell Earth launched our way. That explosion must be our weapons stopping yours.”

I blinked. The sunlight suddenly felt harsh. It lost its warmth as I crashed down from my fear-induced high. We were alive. “I thought...”

“I know what you thought,” he said. There was nothing comforting about the way he spoke. His anger blazed. “You knew about this?”

“Yes,” I admitted, feeling sick.

Following Jidden’s lead, I dressed, the skintight jumpsuit suffocating me. I was glad to be alive, but I wasn’t prepared to face it. Hours earlier, I had told Jidden to claim me, thinking we were about to die. Now what?

“Don’t you realize what this means?” he yelled, interrupting all thoughts I had of what happened earlier. “Captain Fore won’t let this go unanswered. The war has begun.”

The war. If I wasn’t wide awake before, I was now. My daze was completely gone, like a fog lifting from a naive, trusting sea.

“Why are you so upset?” I demanded, matching his anger as my heart shattered. I realized how many people would die in the war – a war I failed to prevent. “That’s what you came here for, isn’t it? You started this. You should be elated.”

I went to the door to leave, but Jidden stopped me. Standing close to him, I could see anger wasn’t all he was feeling. I had hurt him as well. “You were willing to let everyone onboard die?”

Yes, I was. Or I had been. Not only had I been willing to sacrifice myself unnecessarily, but I was going to let Jidden die as well. Worse, I was ready to sacrifice the women of the Fortuna, women I was supposed to protect, even if my title as Commander was false.

After Gallia told me what Earth was planning to do, I should have warned Jidden so that we could evacuate the space station. But once again, I’d failed. My allegiances shifted, resting solely with my sisters. We were warriors, not pawns. We would die to protect our families at home, but that didn’t mean we had to do so on the whims of our so-called leaders on Earth.

We were worth more than three Surtu ships.

I didn’t tell Jidden this. I refused to tell him any of it. We were at war. Our positions on the opposite ends of the chessboard felt greater than ever.

My lover was my enemy.

“I was protecting Earth,” I defended bitterly.

He softened, feeling me pull away. “You shouldn’t have,” he said, brushing a piece of my messy brown hair away from my face. “Earth does not hold value. It does not have you. You can’t let yourself die, Terra. I won’t allow it.”

My defiance weakened. “We are at war, and I am Commander of this space station. You may not be able to control what happens to me.”

As the reality of our situation sank in, Jidden took me into his arms and held me tight. “I promised

to protect you,” he said. “That promise remains.”

To seal his words, he kissed me, and I kissed him back, feeling renewed. I thought my life was over. Perhaps it soon would be, but for now, a new power ran through my veins. The source of that power was deep within me, pulled forward by Jidden’s touch. Soon, our clothes were on the floor once more.

“That didn’t take long,” I remarked as Jidden guided me towards my desk in the corner of the room where the light was brightest. He pulled out the desk chair and sat on it, his cock fully erect, ready to pleasure me.

“Make yourself come. Let me watch,” he implored, refusing to let go of my hand.

With a sly smile, I indulged him, using my free hand to rub a finger against myself tenderly. I remembered how he’d grabbed my thighs and lowered his head between them. His tongue had felt so good licking my clit, drinking me in like a cowboy thirsty for water.

Reliving the sensation, I moaned out loud and rubbed myself harder, growing wet with anticipation. His hand tightened around mine, sending a shiver down my spine. I wanted to feel his cock slide into my wetness. Aching for more than just my touch, I straddled him on the chair and threw both my arms around his shoulders. I teased him, cruelly circling myself over the tip of his cock, enjoying the way it massaged my inner flesh.

He had no objections. He teased me back, sucking on my breast. He took it completely into his mouth as my nipple hardened with joy, matching the pulse inside me. My entire body was on edge, burning with an electricity that reminded me how alive I was.

Slowly, I slid myself fully onto his cock, claiming him and becoming whole. As I grated my hips feeling his shaft moving within me, we kissed, losing ourselves in our ecstasy. His hand found my breast, taking over where his mouth had been. Very lightly, he caressed my nipple, igniting my body further.

I bobbed harder on his cock, feeling it rise deep within me. It filled every inch of me. Taking his hand from my breast, I stuck his finger in my mouth, sucking on it the way I wanted to suck on his cock. He moaned as he grew further within me, ready for release.

“Let me watch you come,” he gasped. “I want to see your face.”

Hearing him, I sucked harder on his finger and clenched myself around his manhood, feeling his full firmness within me. He pushed himself further, and I came, crying my pleasure out loud. He came as well, his finger still in my mouth as he shook and released himself. He held me close with his other arm. Our bodies were pressed together, joined physically as well as emotionally.

Out of breath and soaked in sweat, he kissed my breast. He bruised it earlier, while we were fucking. “You are the beauty where there is war,” he murmured. “And you are mine. I have claimed you.”

I rested my head against him, almost too tired to speak, but a thought invaded my happiness, one I couldn’t push aside. “We are not light bonded,” I said, remembering what his Fleet Captain had

ordered. *No soldiers are to mate with the women unless they are light bonded.*

“No,” Jidden acknowledged, full of remorse. “We are not.”

“What does that mean for you if your Captain finds out?”

He didn’t answer.

“Jidden, tell me,” I insisted, looking him straight in the eyes, searching for an answer. The flecks of light around his pupils dimmed.

“Death,” he finally replied. “This is wartime, and a war that could save the Surtu from extinction. The punishment for disobeying the Captain’s orders is death.”



No one knew.

That was my first realization as I made my way through the embellished corridors of the Fortuna. No one knew how close we’d come to all of our demises. At least, not the women who gathered in the south lounge, impatient to fight back against the Surtu who occupied the station.

Warriors didn’t adjust well to being under siege. The Fortuna had become a snake pit, and there was venom in the women’s fangs.

I left the inner station and went to the temple in the gardens, ignoring the soldier who stood outside. For once, I was not going for appearances or to find someone. I did need a moment of quiet and inspiration. My head ached with doubts.

In the temple, the painting of the goddess Fortuna looked down on me from the blue ceiling, resembling the sky on Earth. I could feel her judgment.

I had failed.

My mission as the false Commander had been a simple one – collect as much information about the Surtu as I could. It was an intelligence mission and something that should be my specialty. But I had not realized that the Surtu knew about our plot to strike and that the envoy ship was as much a lie as the Fortuna advertising itself as a spiritual sanctuary. Nor did I have the courage to protect the women of the Fortuna when I knew of Earth’s plan to blow up the space station.

And I was sleeping with the enemy. I was a traitor – not to Earth, but to my sisters around me.

Worse of all, I didn’t care. I mean, I cared about betraying my sisters. But I didn’t care that I shared a bed with Jidden. Nothing about our time together felt wrong. It felt like sunlight.

In Fortuna’s hand above her, she held the crescent moon, the symbol of the space station. It was both divine and feminine. I wasn’t supposed to honor the sun. I was supposed to honor the moon.

I jumped when I sensed another body near me.

“Here you are,” Gallia proclaimed, joining me inside the temple. “I’ve been looking for you.”

With her raven-black hair and stern green eyes, Gallia belonged here among the goddesses on the ceiling. She was one of them – strong and relentless, like a leader should be. Standing up to her was

going to be difficult.

“We shouldn’t have risked it,” I said, looking up at Fortuna. “Earth was wrong to send the nuke, and we were wrong for not protecting the people who look up to us here. We should have told the Surtu to evacuate the station.”

She didn’t agree. I could see it in the way she carried herself. There was no remorse. “We live. There’s no point dwelling on the past. We have to figure out a way to get back to Earth and join the fight there. Out here, we’re useless. Our training is going to waste. The last week has proven it. We have to return to Earth.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Bellona said, sauntering into the temple. Against the dusty rose stone, her red hair was more aflame than ever, as was the smolder in her amber eyes. Her features were but one of many reasons she’d earned the name the Red Assassin.

“How did you get pass the guard?” Gallia asked.

“He won’t be a bother,” Bellona purred. “He sleeps in the heather.”

I doubted sleep was the accurate term, but it didn’t bother me as much as the first soldier she’d killed. The first soldier I knew about, that is. Plenty of soldiers had died during the siege but exactly how many and by whose hand I didn’t know.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

“In the shadows.” She replied as if it were something I should already know. “I hate how bare the temple is. It feels defenseless.”

Before the Surtu invaded, when we disguised the Fortuna as a sanctuary for women of the cloth, we covered the large, stone altar in the middle of the temple with a sword and daggers. They were weapons dressed up to look like artifacts. They had been Bellona’s toys. We all had weapons cached in secret places.

Now the stone altar lay empty, like the rest of the walls and tables throughout the space station.

“Can you at least tell me what the key is for?” I pressed.

Bellona looked over at Gallia. “You gave her a key?” She wasn’t upset. She was curious.

“She’s earned the right to know,” Gallia answered.

“I agree,” Bellona said. “She should have been given one a long time ago, before any of this. The women look to me for my wisdom, but they look to her for support and compassion. They always have.”

I appreciated the sentiment, but I still needed answers. “What is the key for?”

“Tunnels,” Bellona revealed, the secret burning in her amber eyes. “The Fortuna is full of underground tunnels.”

Gallia went to the entrance of the temple to stand guard while Bellona pushed the stone slab of the altar. The slab moved with ease, exposing a wooden door lying flat inside it. The door had a keyhole.

“It’s so primitive,” I uttered.

To my dismay, Bellona quickly moved the slab back into place. “It has to be. Anything

technological risks being picked up by scanners. Very few people know the tunnels exist. There aren't many entrances. Just the temple. And the docking bay. And the kitchen."

"The kitchen?" I asked, surprised. I'd spent a lot of time in the kitchen working as a porter. I couldn't imagine where a door could be hidden.

"The bread oven," Gallia said, reading my mind. "The door is at the back of the bread oven, behind a metal panel."

I sat on the altar trying to process everything. "How does this help us?" I mused.

"As Gallia was saying, we have to get back to Earth. The only way we can do that is if we steal back our ships," Bellona told me. "The tunnels give us access to the docking bay. There are plenty of cargo ships we can use."

"But they're heavily guarded."

The way her face twisted told me she needed no reminding. "I'm working on that."

"Do we want to go back to Earth?" I asked without shame, thinking of the other women. "They tried to kill us."

Gallia scowled. "Not us – the Surtu. We're warriors. We came to the Fortuna—"

"We came to the Fortuna knowing we may have to sacrifice our life for the protection of Earth," I finished for her, having heard it before. "I know, but we didn't die in battle. We didn't go down fighting. We almost died as bait. You said it yourself – we were always just bait."

She couldn't argue with what she had said, but she didn't back down either. "I'm no traitor, and I hope you aren't either."

Bellona held a hand up before I could respond. "No one here is a traitor, Gallia. Let's not go there. We need each other." She turned to me. "I understand where you're coming from, Terra, but think of your family, of your parents and your brothers. They need your protection. All of our families need us. To hell with whatever President Bentford's intentions are. Our families are why we must go back."

"Of course," I sighed, unable to argue, thinking of the humble little house in the desert where I grew up. "We have to find a way to get to the ships."

"That is the plan," Bellona said again, but none of us had a plan. It would be difficult to do. There were almost three hundred women on board the Fortuna. We couldn't exactly sneak away, not even with the tunnels.

The Surtu had us trapped.

I thought of Lucina, a captive in her quarters after being claimed by the brute Kalij. She was unable to break free from a mechanism Kalij had installed into the lock of her door. The Surtu were far more technologically advanced than we were. Who knew what other tricks they had up their depraved sleeves?

"In the meantime, we have to free Lucina," I decided. "Kalij can't touch her integrity, so he pushes her around. She can't survive his abuses much longer. I don't think she has the will to."

Bellona clenched her fists. “The bastard is on my hit list, but I can’t get to him, not without revealing myself.”

“I can. He patrols the docking bay. I have permission to be there. I can kill him.” I spoke without thinking, but I stood by my decision.

“You?” Gallia asked with disbelief. “Miss ‘I think weapons should be the final ultimatum, not the first,’ Can you do it?”

“Lucina needs help. I have the skills. I just never wanted to use them. If there are no other options, but if we want to save Lucina, there is no better way.”

“You are one of the best,” she agreed. Gallia looked satisfied. “But you’ll have to be fast, like Bellona. Move in the shadows. Can you do it?”

Once again, I glanced up at Fortuna on the ceiling. “With a little luck.”

“Luck won’t cut it,” Bellona sniped. “Meet me in the tunnels after dinner. You’re a fine warrior, Terra, but I’ll teach you to be an assassin.”

I nodded, remembering how broken Lucina had sounded when I last talked to her. Before Kalij claimed her, she shined brighter than the sun. “I’ll be there.”

Gallia clapped her hands together. “This is progress. Terra, access to the docking bay is invaluable. Don’t lose it. First, you’ll free Lucina from the swine who holds her, and then you’ll free us all.”

Chapter 11

JIDDEN

I claimed her. Terra was mine. No other man could touch her.
I felt like a fool – weak, like a human. Or worse, like Kalij.

When I'd gone to the lower deck to check on the dead soldier, I'd seen the wildflowers she'd left for him. They had to be from her. Flowers were not of our custom, and no other human would have been allowed past my men.

Her reverence for the dead man was honorable. I couldn't control myself. I wanted her. I had to taste her again. Our time in the woods had not been enough to satisfy my appetite for her.

But I was never meant to claim her. It was a promise that would go unfilled. I cared for Terra. I preferred her company over any other, but I could not light bond with her. Light bonds led to children. I couldn't be a father. I didn't have the will or the time, not with a war to fight and a promotion to earn.

I could not shake the disquiet I felt when she looked at me like I was her enemy. We did not consider human women our enemies. They were a prize and necessary for survival.

I was no prize to Terra.

I was her destruction.

"Sir," Kalij called, finding me near the dead soldier where I was checking on him once again. I'd come here for privacy so that I could think. Dead men did not interrupt my thoughts the way the living did.

"What?" I barked. Of all the soldiers, Kalij was the least tolerable.

For once, he didn't seem to mind my authority. He was smug like he had won a victory. Against who was anybody's guess. "I received a communication from Captain Fore's office. My light bonding ceremony has been approved."

Right. I'd received the same communication. With the exception of Terra, I cared little for the women on the Fortuna. They were a means to an end. I pitied the little blonde claimed by Kalij.

There was nothing respectable about him.

"It'll be historic," he added. "The first light bonding ceremony on Earth."

"We're not on Earth," I corrected, offering him no glory.

He ignored the comment. "After that Commander bitch lied to me about being light bonded, I

thought the Captain had denied me my rights, but as it turns out, she tricked me. There was no light bonding ceremony.”

He had my attention. “What about the Commander?”

“She told me she had light bonded with a Surtu man and she was now one of us.”

That didn’t make sense. “When did she tell you that?” I demanded.

“When she brought those disgusting things,” he said, pointing at the wildflowers. “They make my nose itch.”

That explained how she’d gotten onto the ship. Kalij was a useless soldier. He didn’t care about order or authority. He only thought of himself. He would throw one of his fellow soldiers into an incinerator if he benefited from it.

“So you believed her lie?” I asked. I emphasized that there was no truth to it, for both our sakes. “Because that’s all it was – a lie to fool the idiot guarding the docking bay.”

Kalij’s face began to show a sneer, but he showed an uncharacteristic self-restraint. “I’m glad it was a lie. It means I’m the first.”

“Very well,” I said, wanting him gone. He was no longer of interest to me. “We will send our dead off properly, and then you can have your light bonding ceremony.”

He was indignant. “I have to wait for a corpse?”

“Just be thankful it’s not you on the table.” If Kalij had died, there would be no table for him. I’d leave him on the floor.

“Yes, sir,” he said, standing down. “But I will be the first?”

“Stay out of my face, and you can have your ceremony the day after next.”

He smiled. It was grotesque. At home, the women thought him handsome, but his looks could not compensate for his foul nature. “Thank you, sir,” he said, and he left the room.

I pitied the girl whose life I had just signed away.

Chapter 12

TERRA

The encyclopedia was heavy in my hand as I pulled it out of my bookshelf. Inside was the key Gallia had given to me. The handle of which was a crescent moon, similar to the moon shining in the sky. The sun was gone by now. Our hours of sunlight were rare on the Fortuna.

I tucked the key in the cleavage of my jumpsuit just as there was a knock on the door. It wasn't like Jidden to knock. Worried he would see the key, I pushed it down further.

"Hello," I said, opening the door to my quarters.

It wasn't Jidden.

"Terra," a woman with curly chestnut hair greeted me in return. It was Minerva, from the winter plains on Earth. "Is this a good time?"

It wasn't, to be honest. I was supposed to meet Bellona in the tunnels, but I could see how upset she was. "Come in," I allowed.

Minerva sat on my bed, about to crumble. "There's a rumor going around the station that the explosion we heard earlier was a nuke sent from Earth to destroy us. Is it true?" She was disgusted.

"We're not sure what it was," I lied. I'd done a lot of that lately – lying, but I didn't mind. Minerva needed consolation. "But if it was a missile, it was only sent to protect those we love."

Minerva shook her head. "I never trusted President Bentford. She would sell her soul to the Surtu if it meant keeping her seat." Then her face fell into her hands, crying. It was a rare sight to see on the Fortuna, rarer than the sun. Warriors did not cry. But we were human, and we were all reaching our breaking point.

"I can't take this anymore," she sobbed. "All this uncertainty. Are we going to be slaves? Are we going to be set free? I feel like I have no purpose. I'm just equipment."

I sat down on the bed next to her and put my arm around her. "You're a valuable person here. We all are." I dropped my voice. "I don't know what Earth's intentions are, but I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to make sure we escape here, one way or another."

Her tears dried, but she didn't look convinced. "So none of the neighboring military stations will help us? Everyone will leave us to fend for ourselves?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "If they don't, we'll figure it out. No one is going to be a slave. We have Fortuna on our side. She watches over us."

I finally reached her. She smiled. “We’re an army of goddesses.”

“Yes, we are,” I agreed.

“Then I’ll wait for your orders, Commander,” she said, rising. “I’ll follow you.”

“We’ll follow each other,” I said, seeing her to the door.

She left, and I fell against the wall. My hand was on my chest where the key was, wondering if I was capable of living up to Minerva’s expectations.

The door opened again.

“Did you forget something?” I asked.

This time, it was Jidden.

“I see you had company,” he remarked. “Is she a friend of yours?”

“I’m her Commander,” I replied. “And we’re all friends here.”

“Apparently, that includes the Surtu. You’re one of them now, due to your light bond.” He studied me, but he wasn’t angry.

“You talked to Kalij,” I guessed.

“I did. You’re lucky no one pays attention to him. Otherwise, there might have been trouble.”

I shrugged. “I did what I had to do.”

“No, you did what you wanted to do.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Come here,” Jidden urged, smiling as he held his hand out to me. “I have nowhere to be right now. Let me show you just how much trouble you cause.”

I wanted to go to him more than anything. In his arms, I forgot the war rising around us, but I couldn’t let him find the key, so I held back. “I’m not feeling well. I think I better lie down for a while.”

“I can help with that,” he offered.

A few days earlier I had been stabbed in the stomach. The wound was fully healed now, and only a scar remained. Surtu medical treatment was wonderful, but this time, I had nothing to cure. “That’s okay. I’ll be fine. I just need to lie down.”

“Okay,” he said, yielding. “I’ll leave you be, but first I’d like to invite you to a send-off tomorrow.”

“A send-off?”

“For the dead soldier.”

I was touched. “You want me at his funeral?”

“Yes, very much so. You should learn the ways of the Surtu.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that statement. I had no intention of ever stepping foot on his home planet, but I accepted his invite. “I’ll go.”

My words pleased him. “Rest tonight, and I’ll escort you in the morning.”

“See you then,” I said, stiffening when he came to kiss me on the cheek, afraid he would see

the key.

“Goodnight, human,” he teased. His mood was light.

“Goodnight, alien.”



I was late. Very late. Dinner had ended hours ago.

I hoped Bellona still waited for me in the tunnels. I wanted to learn everything she had to teach. Of all of us, she was the only one to evade capture. Every day, she avoided the Surtu and did as she pleased.

The temple seemed empty. I looked out upon the heather before entering and thought about the guard from earlier, wondering if there would be two send-offs tomorrow.

There was no light within, but I used the darkness to my advantage, allowing it to mask my movements in case a soldier patrolled nearby. I didn't care if Jidden discovered my empty bed. Saving Lucina was more important to me than Jidden's trust, but I didn't want anyone to find me in the temple.

No one could know about the tunnels. They were our only chance of escape.

Retracing Bellona's efforts from earlier and using the moonlight from the entrance to guide me, I pushed the stone slab away from the door with surprising ease.

There was nothing special about the door. The maker created it from plain wood and did not add a handle. The keyhole to the side was barely noticeable; its purpose was to conceal. If a passerby ever discovered the door, it could easily be mistaken as part of the low structure that supported the altar.

I opened the door with the key and discovered stone steps that descended into the tunnels. Eager to meet Bellona, I followed the steps down and let the door fall back into place. Behind me, I heard springs move, like those in an old clock. The stone slab became an altar once more, casting impenetrable darkness over me.

I could see nothing.

I didn't let it stop me. Using the wall for support, I continued down the steps. Eventually, the rough stone beneath my hand smoothed, and I was touching metal. Lights flickered on around me, illuminating the tunnels. My movements had activated the lights.

Now that I could see, there wasn't much to my surroundings. The walls were plain and glossy, like walking through a tin can. It reminded me of the cold and sterile environment of the Surtu ship. The lights above were dim. I would have found it dreary if not for the noise above me. Footsteps from the ground above me echoed through the tunnels, like a heartbeat.

There was only one way to go – straight ahead. “Bellona?” I whispered as I walked. “Are you here?”

There was no answer. Afraid those above could hear, I went silent, following the path until it divided into two.

Now what? I thought, irritated. Bellona should be here.

I chose the path to the right, working out that it led to the docking bay. If I became trapped, the last place I wanted to risk coming out of was the bread oven. Burnt flesh was not a good look.

Partway down the tunnel, someone grabbed me like a ghost appearing out of nowhere.

“And you’re dead,” Bellona said flatly, throwing me against the tunnel wall. “Another name checked off my list.”

I hadn’t heard her approach. Her footsteps were lighter than air, and her flames consumed the oxygen around her.

“Nicely done,” I praised. I needed to learn. “When did you start to follow me?”

“I approached you when you chose the expected path. I knew you wouldn’t risk the bread oven. Always know what path your target will choose. Observe your target before you strike. Don’t leave it up to chance.”

“Surprising someone with an attack is easy. How to get away is the difficult part,” I said.

“Not for me,” she boasted. “As long as you aren’t seen killing your target, you can walk out of a crowded room. I did.”

The dead soldier; she’d left him as a warning to the Surtu. “How?” I asked.

“I was quick, I was precise, and I knew my escape route. It only took me a second to slit his throat, and then I was gone. It was a mercy killing. He died instantly. There are much more enjoyable ways to kill someone.”

Kalij came to mind, my target. “As much as he deserves to suffer, I don’t think I’ll have time. The docking bay is full of soldiers. How do I kill him without being seen? None of the guards recognized you in the south lounge when you killed the soldier, but I’ll be the only woman in the docking bay. I’ll stand out.”

Bellona considered the problem. “You’ll have to kill him quietly.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Poison him. We have plenty of herbs growing in the garden, herbs with special properties.”

It made sense. Slitting his throat in front of the other soldiers wasn’t a possibility. I could inject him with a poison – something that would cripple him from the inside, so there was no risk of contaminating Lucina if he touched her.

“I need something with a delayed response. It can’t be obvious that it was me. When no one else is around, I can pretend to run into him, and then I’ll inject him.”

“Know his path,” she reminded me.

“I’ll be in the docking bay tomorrow. The Surtu invited me to the ceremony for the soldier you killed.”

“Which one?” she smirked, but she knew the soldier I meant.

“While I’m there, I’ll do as you say. I’ll watch Kalij, study his behavior.”

“Do you have anything you can inject him with?”

“I’ll think of something covert.”

Bellona indicated to the tunnels. “This is the Fortuna. Secrecy is our specialty. Now, let me teach you how to strike a man dead before he knows what hit him.”



I was exhausted after my session with Bellona. Striking with the deadly precision of an assassin was no easy task. Bellona may move with the grace of a ballerina, but she was as strong as a bear. I didn’t even know I had muscles in places that hurt.

I didn’t let my fatigue stop me from going to visit Lucina. I wanted her to know she wasn’t alone. Using the skills Bellona had shown me, I snuck up to her door and listened.

Unfortunately, Kalij was inside. He was yelling, but I didn’t know why. “Jidden is a fool! How dare he give dead men preference over me? He treats all of his soldiers like we’re no better than dogs, and he wonders why the Captain won’t promote him.”

“You *are* no better than a dog,” Lucina lashed.

There was a scuffle, and I heard her fall to the floor. “Then what does that make you?” he screamed.

If she replied, I couldn’t hear her.

Unable to stand listening any longer, I stepped away from the door, turning to find Gallia watching me from nearby.

“Is she okay?” she asked.

I shook my head, letting my expression speak volumes.

Gallia hardened. “Soon,” she said. “Soon.”



“Wear this,” Jidden said, handing me a formal black dress from my closet. It was one of many outfits supplied to me when I was meant to be the Commander of a spiritual sanctuary, not the Commander of a secret battle station. Like the pale blue dress I had worn when I met Jidden, the designer fashioned the black one after what the women of Rome used to wear.

“Is black a color of mourning for you as well?” I asked, taking the dress from him. I didn’t want to wear it, but I also didn’t want to disrespect his customs.

“No,” he said, perplexed. “We do not have a color for mourning.”

“Then why black?” I asked.

“It matches my uniform.”

He answered so formally, so matter-of-fact, that I almost burst out laughing. “Fine,” I said, and I slid the dress over my head.

“I’m glad you’re feeling good this morning,” he said. “I wish I called on you earlier. Then I could have made you feel even better.”

His suggestion made my center tingle. The last time I had worn a dress like this, I learned for the first time just how good Jidden and his cock could make me feel. “Good thing you didn’t,” I decided, smoothing down the billowy fabric of the dress. “Otherwise, we would have missed the send-off.”

“We still can,” he teased.

I knew we couldn’t. As Lead Officer of the Fortuna, he had to be there.

“Do the men know you’ve claimed me?” I asked.

“They’ve been told not to go near you,” he said, eyeing me over. “And with good reason. Terra, you’re like starlight.”

I smiled awkwardly, unaccustomed to such compliments. The flings before my placement on the Fortuna had never meant much. I wasn’t sure what Jidden and I had, or how long it could last, but it meant something to me for now.

I was glad he hadn’t said anything to his men. I didn’t want my friends to know either, especially not Gallia. She wouldn’t understand. If his men knew, the women would soon find out. Word spread across the space station faster than the winds of a hurricane.

When we were ready, we went to the docking bay. Kalij was on guard again. I wasn’t happy to see him. If I could kill him here, I would. But I was glad for the opportunity to observe him, especially when Jidden excused himself to take a call from his Captain.

Kalij wasn’t often alone. That was a problem if you wanted to assassinate him. The bastard was popular with his comrades. Virtue didn’t win friends if you were a Surtu man. Ego did.

“I’ll still find a way,” I vowed.

“What was that?” Jidden asked, returning from his call.

“I’m just plotting to kill your men,” I said as sweetly as possible.

“You and every woman here,” he returned, taking no offense. “But you won’t succeed.”

“What did your Captain have to say?” I asked, diverting the conversation.

He refused to answer. He couldn’t. Likely, they were talking strategy, planning the moves to take over Earth. Once again, the chessboard divided us.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Not right now.”

In reality, it did matter. Everything about the war mattered.

We gathered in a plain room. I had been onboard the Surtu ship before, where the furnishings were minimal. This room was no different. The walls were completely bare.

The only color in the room came from the wilting wildflowers resting on the dead soldier. But he was not alone. Bodies lay at the center of the room, each dressed in a white uniform and lying on his steel table.

See, I wanted to say. See what the price of war is.

Jidden addressed the small group of men who joined us. “The life of a soldier never goes to waste. Because of the men here, we are closer to saving our people. They were born free, and they died with honor. There is no better way.”

“There is no better way,” the men around us echoed.

I waited for Jidden to go on, but that was it. He had said everything he meant to say. So I waited some more, expecting the men to move the bodies, perhaps to be cremated or sent out into space.

Nothing happened.

“Jidden—” I began to ask, but I was cut off when a blazing white light filled the room. It blinded me. Its brilliance was harsh but beautiful.

When the light faded, the bodies of the soldiers were gone, including the wildflowers I had left. Only the living remained.

I had stood within the light once before when Jidden and his men first came to the Fortuna. It was how the Surtu arrived. And how they departed, as I learned.

I couldn’t speak. In the tragedy of war, what just happened stood out in my mind. It was something powerful and special. I hadn’t thought the Surtu were capable of it.

“What was that?” I asked Jidden as the others filtered out of the room. “Where did the bodies go?”

“Elsewhere,” he answered. Once again, he didn’t want to tell me. Jidden had his secrets, just as I had mine. But one thing was for certain – we couldn’t underestimate the Surtu. Their abilities far surpassed our own.

That doesn’t mean humanity will be defeated, I reassured myself. We still outnumber them.



I returned to my room to change. I couldn’t walk around in the black dress all day, playing dress up with the enemy. Standing in my undergarments, I prepared to hang the dress back in my closet. The dark fabric appealed to me more than I realized, so I placed it on the back of my desk chair instead.

Back in a fresh jumpsuit, I went to the kitchen to update Gallia on everything Bellona and I had discussed. The soldiers had started a new patrol, leaving us a few minutes to chat unsupervised.

As soon as I walked in, she threw a plate at me.

“Hey!” I cried, throwing my arm up in defense as the plate shattered against the wall. “What was that for?”

“For not telling me a Surtu claimed you!” she shouted as she picked up another plate.

Oops.

I remained near the door in case she went on a rampage. “How did you know?”

Losing her vigor, she slumped forward, dropping the plate into the soapy waters of the sink. “It’s

true then. Terra, why didn't you tell me?"

My heart broke as I realized she wasn't asking me as my Commander. She was asking as my friend.

"Who claimed you?"

"Jidden," I confessed. "I'm not even sure what it means that he claimed me, only that no other man can have me."

"The Lead Officer in charge of the siege?"

"Yes," I said, and I joined her at the sink. "But it doesn't change anything, does it?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "If he's watching you, I'm not sure we can risk you going anywhere private. It has to stay secret."

She meant the tunnels.

"He won't find out," I promised. "He's not like Kalij. He doesn't chain me to my room. He's too busy to do things like that."

"Then why did he claim you?"

Because I told him too, when I thought I was hours from death. Of course, I couldn't tell her that.

"The Fleet Captain gave him permission to claim whoever he wanted. I guess he thought a Commander was a good choice."

It was mostly true.

She huffed. "He should count himself lucky that he didn't end up with me. Otherwise, I'd scribble him onto Bellona's hit list myself."

"That's not necessary," I said quickly. "He doesn't hurt me. And it's useful. It's why I have access to the docking bay."

"Smart," she said, relaxing. "That's smart."

"How did you know Jidden claimed me?" I asked again, hoping rumor hadn't spread.

"Being a kitchen mouse has its advantages. Earlier, I was cleaning up after a group of soldiers following their meal. They mentioned that you, the Commander, wasn't to be touched. They also said they saw you on a ship this morning to attend a funeral. I put the pieces together."

It wasn't good news. Rumors would soon sprout like weeds. Then everyone would know.

"Have you told anyone?"

"There isn't anyone to tell, except Bellona...and I'm guessing by the look on your face you don't want me to do."

"I would rather no one knew," I said truthfully.

"That's your prerogative," she replied. "Did you meet Bellona last night?"

"I did. I'm going to inject Kalij with poison."

"When?"

"As soon as I can. I still have to find the right herb, but it'll be soon."

"Good," she said. "The sooner the task is finished, the sooner we can focus on how to escape."

I was tired, but I fought my fatigue and went to the gardens. Plants were not my strong point. It was a shame I couldn't reach my mother. From the orchards to the plains, she knew everything about the flora that nourished us, and the flora that killed us.

I wasn't in the garden long before Gallia found me again. What she threw at me was much worse than any plate.

"Come quickly," she urged. "It's Lucina. She's in a bad way."



Sitting on the carpet of her sleeping quarters, I cradled Lucina in my arms. She was sobbing. We had been like this for hours.

Earlier, Kalij had found her collapsed on the floor. He thought she tried to kill herself, so he'd called in the Surtu medical officer, who was eating in the dining hall at the time. Gallia had overheard everything, and so she summoned me.

Lucina hadn't tried to kill herself. Overcome with grief, she'd blacked out.

"This doesn't change anything!" Kalij had shouted at her as the medical officer showed him out of the room. "Our light bonding ceremony will go ahead tomorrow as planned!"

The light bond. That was the cause of her grief. I still wasn't sure what a light bond was, but I knew what it implied. She would be his forever, at least in the eyes of the Surtu.

"I can't go through with it," she heaved through her tears. "I refuse to be bonded to him in any form."

My stomach felt sick thinking about it. Once they were light bonded, Kalij could do whatever he liked with her. He would take away her integrity.

I wanted to promise her it wouldn't happen, but I couldn't. It would be another broken promise, just like the one I made when I said I'd free her.

Maybe if I'd spent less time fucking Jidden...

I was angry – at the Surtu, at Kalij, and at myself. I'd been selfish with my time. I had failed Lucina.

"Here, take her," I said, passing Lucina to Gallia. "The night is fading. I don't have much time."

"Where are you going?" Gallia asked, stroking Lucina's hair.

"I made a promise, and I plan to keep it." Before leaving, I whispered to Lucina, "I swear on the pinky ghost, you're the one I honor the most." Then I was gone.

Chapter 13

JIDDEN

“The ceremony will continue,” I told Kalij, hoping it would shut him up. It was late, and I had a long day ahead of me, starting early the next morning. It wasn’t just because of the light bonding ceremony though that played a part.

Tomorrow, my people planned to attack.

“As long as the girl is conscious, she’ll be there.”

“And what if she sneaks away tonight?” Kalij argued, pacing in front of my desk.

“Where will she go?” I asked. “We have the station covered. If it makes you feel better, I’ve already ordered extra soldiers to stand guard near her quarters.”

My words didn’t make him feel better. “It’s the soldiers that worry me. I see the way they look at her. They’ll sneak in and take her. And they’ll also take that bitch of a Commander you’ve been protecting.”

The little patience I had ran out. “Listen,” I charged. “You are not to go near that girl until we bring her to you in the Grand Hall tomorrow. If you disobey me, there will be no light bonding ceremony. There will be no Kalij. Now get out of my face before I break yours.”

He left, grumbling. As he turned down the corridor, I thought I saw a shadow.

It’s nothing, I thought, but my gut told me to follow it. My instincts had never served me wrong before. They were a large part of why I’d gotten as far as I had in the military. I turned down the corridor in the same direction Kalij had left.

It was a good thing I did.

Outside the bathroom, I found Terra with a knife in her hand, waiting to strike. I only saw her back. I assumed Kalij was inside.

You should have followed him in, I thought. Good thing for me you didn’t.

I grabbed her hand, making her drop the knife before I spun her around and pinned her against the wall.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I hissed.

“I’m saving my friend before you cast her into hell,” she spat.

I now saw a side to Terra I had not known. Behind her benevolence, there was a darkness to her. It pulled me to her closely, stronger than the wildflowers. If she had it her way, she would kill Kalij.

If I had it my way, I would watch, and then I would take her to my bed.

Neither of us would get our way tonight.

Chapter 14

TERRA

I wasn't scared. The way Jidden grabbed my arm and dragged me back down the corridor told me I should be, but I wasn't.

I didn't care that Jidden caught me. My only regret was that I hadn't slit Kalij's throat beforehand. I wouldn't have made it quick. I would have let the blade linger, the way the bruises lingered across Lucina's body.

It's not like they were going to kill me. I was a woman. To the Surtu, I was sacred. They wouldn't punish me. They wouldn't punish any of us. We were already being taken as hostages, betrayed by our leaders, and forced to face the possibility that, one by one, we would all be light bonded to a Surtu man.

Except possibly me. Jidden cared for me, but he still cared for his career more.

"What is a light bond?" I demanded when he pulled me into his office.

He let go of my arm, unamused. "I'll ask the questions," he snapped.

"No, you'll answer them," I said, confronting him. "You haven't won this war yet. You're not in charge. I'm sick of all the secrecy and evasion. If my women are meant to be light bonded to your men, then we deserve to know what the hell we're getting into."

I had him. He looked down, gathering his thoughts.

"Surtu are beings of light as well as flesh," he said. "So are humans. You don't know it yet because you can't control yourselves. We can use our minds to control the atoms in our body, to become like light or to stabilize into physical form. You don't have the same control over your body, but you have the ability change. We've seen it. During a light bonding ceremony, a couple alters into light together. It's a transcendental experience, uniting mates together forever."

"And is such a light bond always required before mating?"

"If you're asking if I've broken some moral code by sleeping with you, I haven't. All the soldiers here have known Surtu women. But many of those women are barren after fighting the disease. A light bond is required for a human mate because the children are healthier when parents conceive them. Healthy children are what my people need."

I remembered Captain Fore telling me something similar. "How does the light bond work for humans if we don't know anything about it?"

“When a Surtu man shares a light bond with a human woman, he alters her state for her, turning her into light. It’s brief but powerful.”

“It sounds beautiful when you describe it,” I told him. “But it’s not. Nothing about this light bond is wholesome if a male forces into it against her will. Let Lucina go. Call off the ceremony tomorrow.”

I was trying to appeal to his inner depths.

“I won’t,” he said, returning to his cold indifference. “This is why we’re here – to mate. The ceremony will go ahead.”

“Then you’ve just sentenced your first woman to death,” I warned. “Her soul can’t survive it.”

“She’ll have to try,” he replied. He was unmoved.

I was no longer angry at myself. He was the focus of my rage. “I never should have told you to claim me. It was a mistake.”

He moved behind his desk and allowed space to build between us. “You should return to Lucina,” he said, refusing to acknowledge me further. “She needs your support right now but don’t think about running. I’ve strengthened the patrol around her quarters.”

We’ll see, I thought to myself.

When I returned to Lucina, she was with Gallia, and she was a lot calmer than before. Her sobs had stopped, and she seemed almost hopeful.

“I failed.” It was heartbreaking to tell her. Lucina was the last person I wanted to fail. “But Kalij has been ordered to stay away. If we—”

“It’s okay,” Gallia said, cutting me off. “She’s ready.”

“I am,” Lucina assured me, a wisp of a smile turning her lips. “I’m ready to show Kalij everything I have to offer.”

“I don’t understand,” I stammered, stunned at Lucina’s transformation.

“You’re not meant to,” Gallia answered for her. “Just let it be.”

Lucina smoothed out the tangles of her blonde hair. “It’s okay.”

“All right,” I said softly, throwing my hands into the air. “I don’t know what this is, but I won’t intervene.”

“You’ve been such a good friend,” Lucina said, taking my hand. “Thank you.”

Her praise should have comforted me, but it left me unsettled. It was like watching a tree grow upside down. “Is there anything you need?” I asked.

“Just you with me, by my side. Stay here tonight. It’ll be like when we were little girls. Who says adult women can’t have slumber parties?” She turned to Gallia. “I want you both to stay.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but Gallia looked embarrassed. “I’ve never been to a slumber party before,” she admitted.

The night wasn’t much of a party, and there was very little slumbering. We stayed up chatting about our lives on Earth, of what we’d go back to if we won the war. I didn’t see myself staying in the

desert with my parents. My brother already took care of them. I would likely head north to the winter plains where the big cities were. The liberty of living in a city would be comforting after so much discipline on the Fortuna.

“You wouldn’t remain in the military?” Gallia asked, appalled. “All your training will go to waste.”

“This is what I trained for,” I reminded her. “This war. I never thought we’d be the generation to fight it. I always thought that after my service to the Fortuna, I’d return to Earth and do some good in the world.”

“But you are doing good in the world. You’re one of the best we have,” Gallia claimed. “You’re spectacular.”

It was a rare compliment, gifted on a strange night that pulled our emotions out of us. I was touched, but I didn’t agree with Gallia. “If you knew everything, you wouldn’t think so,” I said. “I keep failing.”

“Failing?” Lucina was incredulous. “At the eleventh hour, you were thrown into the role of Commander. With no preparation, it fell on you to meet the Surtu and learn of their intentions. A lesser woman would have caved from the pressure. You haven’t failed.”

“I agree,” Gallia said. “By taking on my responsibilities, you’ve allowed me to stay undercover in the kitchen. Your position was temporary and for show. You were never going to succeed, and yet somehow you have.”

“How?” I argued. “How have I succeeded?”

“You stayed alive,” Lucina said.

“And you learned valuable information,” Gallia added. “Like the fact that the Surtu ships can connect into one, and that they abide by a hierarchy, and that their race is near extinction. Every scrap of information is an advantage.”

I couldn’t see what they saw. “But it’s so little.”

Gallia sighed and looked up at the stars. “When you’re fighting an unknown enemy, a little is a lot. Stay true, Terra. You’re doing well.”

“Isn’t this great?” Lucina chirped, watching as a meteor shot across the sky. “We should have done more stuff like this before the Surtu arrived.”

“You never told us what you’ll do once we win the war,” Gallia said. “I’ll stay in the military. Terra will go be a rogue angel. What will you do?”

I already knew the answer. Since we were girls, Lucina wanted to teach little ones and start a family of her own. But that was not the answer she gave.

“We’ll see what happens tomorrow,” she said. “Then I’ll tell you.”



The Surtu delivered a uniform for Lucina early in the morning. It was dark blue, stiff, and lacked any embellishments.

That was a good thing. The last thing Lucina needed was a white dress with flowers in her hair.

We weren't at a celebration. It was an insult to all of humanity.

A knock on the door signaled it was time to leave for the Grand Hall where Kalij was waiting.

"Are you sure you can go through with this?" I asked Lucina one last time.

"Positive," she said. She possessed a strange and awkward confidence. "I can do it."

Knowing she'd made her decision, I opened the door. I was annoyed to find Jidden standing on the other side.

"I had to make sure you didn't run off in the middle of the night," he said.

I assumed he was joking, but I wasn't in the mood. "I take it you're officiating."

"No," he answered, taking a step back as he realized he'd receive no warmth from me. "I'm not. I'm going to miss the ceremony. I have a call to take."

"You have a lot of calls."

"We're at war, remember?"

With nothing left to say, I let Lucina take the lead, resisting the urge to pull her back as we made our way to the Grand Hall. It was no secret what was happening. The women of the Fortuna looked upon Lucina with pity, but they saluted her properly as we passed, honoring her.

We entered the Grand Hall, greeted by a handful of soldiers who waited for us. There was no decor, but none was needed. The Grand Hall was magnificent on its own with marble flooring and colonnades. The tiling on the walls formed a mosaic of all of Earth's natural wonders – the rainforests and the white-capped mountains.

Until today, it had been one of my favorite places on the Fortuna, second only to the gardens. Now it felt like enemy headquarters.

At the front of the hall was Kalij with his dirty red hair and a smug smile. I didn't know how Lucina could act so brave when destiny stood before her looking so terrible.

I soon found out.

Lucina went to meet Kalij. He reached his hand out to her, but she did not accept the hand of the Depraved. Moving quickly, she let a hidden dagger drop from her sleeve, and she plunged it into his chest. Kalij stumbled backward, clawing at the dagger.

Instantly, two guards grabbed Lucina's arms, but she hardly noticed. Pleased with herself, she smiled broadly, a smile she'd learned from Bellona, the smile of an assassin.

Gallia ran to her.

It should have been over. Lucina did what I could not.

But it wasn't over. While I watched with frightened awe, a light shone from Kalij like a bright rage. He pulled the dagger from his chest as the light healed him, mending his wound like an invisible seamstress.

When the light disappeared, only his rage remained.

“Can you see?” he bellowed, waving the dagger in the air. “We can’t be defeated. We are your destiny.”

To my horror, he turned to Gallia. “You,” he seethed. “You with your eyes like green poison. You convinced her to do this. She would never have thought of this on her own.”

Gallia stood tall and refused to be intimidated. She said nothing.

Twirling the dagger in his hand, he stepped closer to her. “I can survive this,” he said, flashing the dagger at her. “Can you?” he asked, and he stabbed her in the heart.

“No!” Lucina screamed as Gallia fell in front of her. She struggled against the soldiers who held her.

I have to get Jidden, I thought, trying not to crack into pieces as Gallia bled to death on the marble floor. He can save her, the way he saved me.

But I didn’t get a chance to leave.

“And you, Commander of bitches,” Kalij yelled, removing the dagger from Gallia’s heart. He stared deeply into my eyes.

“You’re next.”

Chapter 15

TERRA

“*No!*” Lucina Whitmore cried, struggling against the soldiers who held her arms. At her feet lay Gallia, blood pouring from her heart where Kalij had stabbed her.

The Surtu could heal themselves. They were beings of light as well as the flesh, but the light seemed to be the higher power within them, allowing them to heal both their bodies and others.

Jidden could save Gallia. I needed to get to Jidden – my alien lover.

But I could not. He was in another part of the space station on a call and Kalij blocked my way, flaunting a dagger in front of me. The tip of the blade was stained with Gallia’s blood.

“You lied to me, Commander,” Kalij hissed. “You told me you had light bonded with a Surtu man, but you didn’t. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Yes, I wanted to say, but I knew better. Frantically, I looked around at the handful of other soldiers in the room. “Someone save her!” I shouted, pointing at Gallia, not caring if it set Kalij off. “Claim her if you have to, but save her.”

No one moved. Kalij laughed. It made me sick. “They won’t betray me for you. Now beg, Commander. Beg for your life.”

I wouldn’t beg, and he knew it. I followed Gallia’s example. I would face the same fate she did.

I straightened my shoulders and held my head high, allowing the disdain I felt towards the dirty redhead to radiate from me like the blast from the nuke that almost destroyed the Fortuna.

“Very well,” he said, pleased. “You made your choice.”

He flicked his wrist, ready to strike me down, but he wavered when Jidden – the Lead Officer in charge of the siege on the Fortuna – burst into the hall.

Apparently, not all the soldiers were loyal to Kalij. One of them must have snuck out to summon Jidden.

“Enough, Kalij!” Jidden ordered. “Let her go!”

I was far from saved. I saw the wild look in Kalij’s eyes. He was going to kill me, regardless of who was in the room.

Jidden must have seen it too. He threw his hand out in front of him, and the dagger twisted out of Kalij’s grasp as if handled by an unknown puppet master.

It was a power I never knew the Surtu had. What else could they do, and how would we defeat

them? They had masked it well from their enemies. When the dagger clattered to the floor, I quickly kicked it towards Jidden, and then I elbowed Kalij in the face, feeling his nose crack.

It was not like me to get joy from violence, but hurting Kalij in any way possible satisfied a dark part of me.

“Seize him!” Jidden yelled as a troop of soldiers stormed into the Grand Hall. “Seize them all.”

Except for Kalij, the other men in the hall surrendered quietly. Kalij was having none of it. “What of my light bonding ceremony?” he demanded, turning his attention to Lucina, who had collapsed at Gallia’s side, weeping. “She belongs to me. I’ve claimed her.”

Ignoring him, Jidden went to Gallia. He set his hand over heart. A bright light momentarily blazed across the hall then disappeared, taking my hope with it.

Gallia did not move.

I didn’t think Jidden was capable of regret until he looked at me with an unspoken sorrow. Gallia was dead. There was no bringing her back.

I went to her slowly, in shock. Sitting on the floor next to Jidden, I didn’t care that Gallia’s blood stained the knees of my white jumpsuit. I smoothed away a piece of her raven-black hair, hoping that there was a special kind of heaven for women who sacrificed themselves as bravely as Gallia.

Devastated, Lucina threw herself into my arms, and I held her.

“There will be no light bonding ceremony today,” Jidden announced, loud and definite.

“You can’t do that!” Kalij screamed, inciting a cluster of guards to surround him as if they were trapping a beast in his cage. “It’s my right! Captain Fore gave his permission.”

“Captain Fore will agree with my decision,” Jidden said, standing to confront Kalij. “The life of a human woman is worth more than the life of a soldier. We are at the risk of extinction. You betrayed your people, Kalij. The Captain will punish you accordingly.”

“You are mine!” Kalij yelled to Lucina as the guards escorted him out of the hall. “I will come back for you! We will be light bonded! I should have taken you when I had the chance!”

After Kalij had left, Lucina shuddered in my arms.

“Are you okay?” Jidden asked me, his tone much softer than when he had spoken to his men.

“No,” I said, looking at Gallia. “I’m not.”

He addressed the soldiers once more. “This will be a day of mourning,” he declared. “We will mourn for the woman and the Surtu children she would have borne. And the children they would have borne. And the children they would have borne. Especially their daughters. The greed of one man will destroy an entire line of our people.”

“What will happen to Gallia?” I asked, remembering the way the Surtu sent off their dead – by summoning a light that took their bodies. It was beautiful and powerful, but it was not what Gallia would have wanted. She was loyal to her people. She had died for them and given her life to the Fortuna to protect them.

She would want an Earth burial.

Jidden understood this without me having to tell him. “She will be placed within your temple. You may mourn her as you like.”

“We bury our dead,” I told him. “If someone dies while they are in space, their body is sent home to be laid to rest.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said, sounding uncertain. “After today, I doubt Earth will accept any ships from the Fortuna, not even a cargo ship.”

“What does that mean?” I challenged.

He didn’t answer.

Chapter 16

JIDDEN

What had we become?

This was not the Surtu way. We were honorable soldiers. We killed to serve a purpose, not kill out of self-indulgence.

At least, not in the time of my father. My father had been honorable, a well-respected soldier. That was why the military was eager to take me when he died. He had served my people well. But he was only a soldier, like me. Promotions in the military didn't come easy.

The men at the top were in an elite club. They didn't share their power with just anyone.

But they were still honorable, unlike the next generation of soldiers – soldiers like Kalij and his heathen friends. They were my age, but I lived in the old world while they lived in the new. They refused to work hard, believing their uniform alone entitled them to take what they wanted.

Maybe it was true when it came to human women. A Surtu man could claim the woman of his choosing, as long as a superior approved the match. But any man who would kill a woman so recklessly, the way Kalij had, was corrupt.

The question was – had Kalij always been corrupt? Was it inherent within him, or was his failure a consequence of being trained to take without remorse?

Either way, it was not honorable. My father would never have tolerated it. And neither could I.

I did not care about the fate of the women of Earth when I believed them to be nothing more than a means of survival. My time with Terra had changed my views. Along with our survival, they could offer us intellect, art, and humor.

We needed to mate with the human women. That could not be changed. However, we could allow them some dignity in the process.

We could offer them more than a generation of entitled heathens. We could offer them more than a dagger in the heart.

I sat at my desk in my office, my head in my hands. I was conflicted. I wanted to serve my people the way my father had, but I was not sure if I could.

How could I teach a pack of dogs integrity?

The light on my communicator came on. I watched the small circular device buzz on my desk, wishing it would disappear. In frustration, I picked it up and threw it against the wall.

It didn't break. Of course, nothing about the Surtu was breakable.

"Sir, the Captain is waiting to resume your call," the soldier in charge of communications informed me, poking his head into my office.

"I know," I grumbled, and I stormed to the communications room where Captain Fore waited on the video screen.

"What the hell was so important you had to leave your Fleet Captain waiting?" he roared, speaking in our native language, which was much more fluid than the languages on Earth. "We attack Earth today!"

"A woman has been killed," I told him. "By the hand of one of our soldiers."

Captain Fore instantly went still. There was no worse offense than killing a woman. "Who is responsible?" he asked calmly. He was still angry, but now it was like ice.

"Kalij, the soldier who was to be light bonded today, claimed she tried to stab him with a hidden dagger before the ceremony. To punish her, he killed her friend."

"And why didn't anyone stop him?"

"Because some of the soldiers forget why we are here. They believe this is a joy ride, like a raid on a candy store."

"Then bleed the corruption out," Captain Fore instructed. "I didn't get this far by playing fair. I earned everything I have by being a tyrant. My men tremble when I'm near. Yours should do the same."

"I have already sent Kalij to you on a glider," I said, speaking of the small vessels we used to transport goods between ships. "I'll take care of the rest."

Captain Fore had already lost interest. "The remainder of the fleets will arrive within the hour. Soon after, the light out will occur. It will blind the Earth, including the useless military stations that guard it. During that time, our ships will land on the planet. The takeover should be quick."

"It's best not to underestimate the humans," I warned. "My time with them on the Fortuna has taught me they are capable of much more than we realize. Their will is resilient."

"I never doubted they were resilient," Captain Fore said. "But a lamb cannot destroy a wolf, no matter how hard it bites."

I thought the conversation was over, but he added, "You've done well, Jidden. We were only the vanguard fleet, meant to assure the safe arrival of the other fleets. Not only have you secured a command center for us, but you did it without harming the women we came here for. I won't hold the actions of Kalij against you. Rest assured, when we return home, your promotion will be discussed."

"I'm pleased to hear it," I said, trying not to let my surprise show. Captain Fore rarely acknowledged success so formally.

"When should I expect the light out?" I asked.

"By the end of the day," he answered. "Be prepared."

Chapter 17

TERRA

“And so we bid goodbye to our dear sister,” Bellona said to the women of the Fortuna. We were all gathered outside the temple. Beside her, Juventas held Gallia in her burly arms.

Gallia’s wounds had been cleaned, and she wore a fresh jumpsuit, but her face appeared restless even in death.

I couldn’t believe Gallia would ever be at peace until Earth was safe.

The temple was usually a place of great beauty, with ivy cascading down the small Roman structure. As I looked around today, I only sensed a terrible sorrow. The sadness ripped through me as I stood at the back, listening to Bellona say farewell to our Commander.

Lucina could not bear it. She slept away her grief in my quarters, unable to return to her room after being trapped there for so long. I wanted to hide away with her and exchange the nightmare around us for the bliss of slumber, but I couldn’t.

Bellona needed me. We needed each other. We were barely holding it together. I knew what she was thinking because I was thinking it too. We had to kill the Surtu and rip them apart one by one.

It didn’t matter if we died in the process. It was better than letting them win.

“...as brave as the solitary moon. Let us leave our sister with the goddesses she now walks beside. She will be another star to light our path.”

Juventas turned and entered the temple with Gallia to lay her on the altar, followed by Bellona. Slowly, the women filtered in to say their individual goodbyes to Gallia before returning to the inner station. I watched them leave, understanding the cloak of anger and sorrow they shared.

I wore it too.

I was the last to enter the temple. When it was only Bellona and me beside Gallia, I ran a hand across the altar, afraid to touch our fallen Commander, knowing there was no warmth left in her.

“Some of the soldiers saw you,” I said to Bellona. “They stand guard on the edge of the wood.”

“There are three hundred women on this station. I’m sure they’ll forget my face soon.”

I doubted it. Her fiery red hair and amber eyes made her a rare beauty, even when those amber eyes held an assassin’s chill.

Standing next to her with my mousy brown hair, I felt like wood next to a flame.

“I think the Surtu are about to attack Earth,” I said.

Bellona didn't flinch. "It was only a matter of time. We have to escape before Earth succeeds in shooting us down."

"We don't have to make it to Earth. Not initially. We just have to make it to the next military base."

"True," Bellona said, and paused to think.

"We have to take back control of the cargo ships in the docking bay. I don't think we can use the underground tunnels to sneak away, but we can use them to launch a sneak attack. We'll find some way to distract the soldiers on the Fortuna, and then we'll raise the divide that cuts off the docking bay. That leaves fewer soldiers to fight. We can use the tunnel that leads to the docking bay to attack."

"Once the hatch is open, anyone not on a ship will be swept away into space. Some women may have to sacrifice themselves."

That included us, but I didn't argue. We were never going to be able to save everyone.

"We'll get to that," I professed. "First we have to figure out a way to distract the soldiers on the Fortuna so that we can access the tunnels."

Bellona nodded, distracted by her grief. She went to Gallia and slid her fingers down Gallia's already closed lids. "Will they send her to Earth to be buried?"

"I don't know."

"Then we must take her with us."

"Of course."

A tear trickled down Bellona's cheek, the first and only I had ever seen from her eyes. "I'll miss her. She was tough on us, but it made us better."

"We will remember her," I promised. "As our friend and as our Queen Sister."

Bellona smiled a sad, broken smile. "Our Queen Sister. I like that."

Suddenly, the Fortuna trembled, indicating the arrival of another ship. "We better get out of here soon, before the entire fleet lands," I murmured.

Bellona looked at me with heartfelt resolve. "Be prepared," she said. "You are the one the women will follow. You really are our Commander now."



The moon was almost full. With the limited sunlight on the Fortuna, the moon was like our sun. Sitting alone on a stone wall that surrounded the wildflowers in the gardens, I embraced the moon and absorbed its feminine power.

I was not the same woman I had been before the Surtu arrived. I felt a darkness brewing in me and boiling my blood black.

It wasn't because of my relationship with Jidden. With his dark hair, a strong body, and flecks of light dancing around his blue elfin eyes, his touch was the one thing keeping me from shattering. The

way he ran his hands lightly over my bare skin sent shivers down my spine.

If anything, Jidden was my light.

At least, he had been at one time. I wasn't sure if I could forgive him for feeding Lucina to the beast that was Kalij. I had pleaded with him to call off the light bonding ceremony, and he had refused.

Now Lucina was devastated, and Gallia was dead.

I could not blame Jidden for the hatred transforming me, I blamed his people – the Surtu. They threatened everything I loved. My sister warriors on the Fortuna. And my family back home.

The Surtu deserved their extinction.

Chapter 18

JIDDEN

From the trees, I watched Terra as she sat on the wall in the gardens. Her expression was complicated. I could tell that rage twisted within her.

She had always been beautiful, but with the moonlight streaming down upon her, illuminating the curves within her skintight jumpsuit, she was more exquisite than ever.

She had me. I had claimed her, but I wanted more. I wanted to bring her into the light.

I doubted that would ever happen. Now, more than ever, I was her enemy. As much as it was in my right to do so, I could not take her against her will. I would not force her to light bond with me. If I did, I would lose her forever.

We remained enemies. The only thing I could do for her was to let my love harden into an anger of my own.

Chapter 19

TERRA

“Come with me,” Jidden ordered, finding me in near the wildflowers. “We need to talk.”

Whenever Jidden summoned me before, I had obliged.

Things were going to change, starting now.

“I’m not going anywhere. If you think you’ll get any action from me, you’re mistaken.”

“I don’t,” he said coolly.

“If you have something to say, just say it.”

He turned to leave, appearing unimpressed with my attitude. Suddenly he snapped back around. “What have you done to me?” he demanded, losing his composure. “I was grounded until I met you. I was in control. Now I constantly feel like I’m falling.”

I struggled with his words. Every part of me gravitated towards him, but he was a black hole. He was my destruction. This morning had proved it.

“I haven’t done anything,” I uttered. “You’re the one who claimed me.”

“Because you told me too!” He began to pace, running a strong hand through his dark hair. “You’ve weakened me.”

“Your obscene morals weakened you. It’s not my fault if your conscience finally outgrew your cock.”

“Don’t say that,” he said. “You know you mean more to me than our time in bed together.”

I did know it, but I wasn’t in the mood to let him off easy, not with Gallia dead in the temple. “I thought your career meant the most to you.”

“I’m not sure about that anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“You call us the Depraved. Soldiers of the past would never have allowed the life of a woman to spill across the floor. Now we kill what is precious to us. We travel to the stars to find love, only to corrupt it. There’s no reason to claim women. Look at us. We’ve mated freely, haven’t we?”

“Yes,” I admitted, my mood softening. “We have.”

Jidden came to me, and we kissed, sealing our loyalty together under the moonlight. The kiss started tender, but it soon turned passionate. Without breaking the kiss, he reached behind my back to unzip my jumpsuit, using the stone wall for support. I let him, wrapping my legs around him, feeling

his cock press against me through his uniform, but then I remembered Gallia.

“I can’t,” I said, pushing him away. “Not today.”

He understood. “Of course,” he said, stepping back. “You need time to mourn.”

Torn between my grief and my need for him, I looked up at the moon. It inspired me. “Tell me again about the Surtu warrior goddess with the auburn hair,” I implored. “The one you told me about before.”

“Nelti,” he reminded me. “With her auburn hair and eyes without color, only flecks of light, her dark beauty was incomparable. She was a merciless warrior and ruthless to protect those she loved. She had lovers, both men and women, but her love was cold like a starless night.”

He stopped, a thought troubling his speech. I saw the conflict waging within him. “There’s something you should know,” he said. “Earth will soon be invaded.”

“I already suspected. I didn’t know it was today, but I knew it was coming soon. How will it happen?”

“A light will blind out Earth and the surrounding space stations. Your technology will shut down. It will be brief, but our ships only need a moment to land on Earth.”

He was transparent, and it made me wrestle with a confession of my own. “I can trust you, can’t I?” I asked.

“I hope so,” he answered.

“I’m not the Commander of this space station,” I disclosed, my heart racing. “It was Gallia.”

Instead of trading lies, we were trading truths.

“I would never have guessed,” he replied, neutral, making it impossible to tell how he took the news. “You have such a high intellect. You’re a natural Commander.”

A day earlier, I would have disagreed with him, but there was no more time for self-doubt. “We need to do something.”

He agreed but didn’t have a direction. “We can’t save Earth.”

“No. But we can save the women of the Fortuna.”



My grief and rage ebbed and flowed like the tide of the sea. I wanted to fight, beginning with the scum who had terrorized Lucina and killed Gallia – Kalij.

Bellona, the Red Assassin, was able to move with the shadows. She often spoke of a hit list. I don’t know if she kept one or not, but I had mine, with Kalij at the top.

It was a shame Jidden had returned to the inner station to do whatever it was the Lead Officer of a ship did. Otherwise, I would ask him what became of my target.

I had not followed Jidden inside. As he asked, I stayed out in the gardens with no intention of going to my quarters. I did not want to wake Lucina nor did I want Gallia to be alone in the temple.

Bellona was with her now, but she couldn't stay all night if she wanted to continue avoiding the guards.

Bellona was like the warrior goddess Nelti. She ruled the shadows though her heart was full of inner light. Her state of mind was alluring.

An impulse propelled me to the herb section of the gardens. My knowledge of herbs wasn't great. My mother had tried to teach me, but it was a subject that didn't interest me. There were so many other subjects I wanted to explore, like geography and cosmology. I recognized a few herbs, including the perse-thistle with its reddish-purple leaves.

As I picked the perse-thistle, I looked over and spotted another something else. A root. I couldn't remember its name, but I knew its properties. Something that could prove useful in the future.

As I reached for the root, a bright light blinded me. It lit up the Fortuna like a solar flare. I don't know how long it lasted. When I could see my hands again, they were clenching the root. I barely noticed it as I was caught up in the implications of the light.

The Surtu had invaded Earth.



"Drink this," I said to Jidden later that evening, handing him a mug of tea. It had taken me a long time to find him here in his quarters on his ship. The tea was starting to go cold.

He smelt it then suspiciously pushed my hand away. "No," he refused. "It smells like the hair of a burkey."

"What's that?" I asked, swirling the hot yellow mixture around in the mug.

"It's like your human horses."

It didn't know what a burkey smelled like, but the tea smelled nothing like a horse. It was much worse.

"Drink it," I insisted. "Trust me."

He sat on his bed. It was the only comfortable furnishing in his small, efficiently sterile room. "You look too eager to trust."

"My appearance is exactly why you should trust me."

"That makes no sense," he replied, but he took the mug from me. He spit out his first sip, but he managed to down most of what remained.

"That tasted vile," he seethed afterward, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his uniform. "What was it?"

I still couldn't remember the name of the root, so I made one up. "Pest control."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

There was no need to answer him. He passed out, falling unconscious on his bed.

"Nighty night," I said with a little wave, and I looked over at the timepiece on Jidden's desk.

“And the clock starts now.”

As I waited for Jidden to wake, I went to his closet and began searching through his uniforms. Most were black, but a few were dark blue. One was white. The white one was what his fellow soldiers would dress him in to send him off if he died.

It was chilling to think that to the Surtu fleet, death was part of the standard issue outfit.

Jidden didn't have much in the way of possessions. I didn't expect photos, not on a battleship, but maybe a trinket or two that revealed what his life was like on his home planet. There were only boots and uniforms and bed sheets.

And then I remembered Jidden had grown up in the military after his parents died, each in their tragic way, and I found the emptiness in Jidden's room terribly sad.

He woke sooner than I expected. “What the hell did you do to me?” he demanded groggily.

“Damn,” I muttered. “The amount of pest control I gave you would have knocked a human out all night.”

“I was your test dummy!” He was equally outraged and intrigued. “What if your tea had killed me?”

“I would have found another drug to try on someone else,” I said easily as I slid the door to his closet shut.

He studied me carefully, mistrustful. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“I didn't give you the tea to snoop. It was an experiment. You were out for over an hour, almost two. That's how much time I have to get everyone where they need to be.”

“You're going to drug my soldiers,” he concluded. “How?”

“As Gallia said, being in the kitchen has its advantages.”

“But you're not part of the kitchen staff anymore. Whether you accept it or not, you truly are the Commander of this space station.”

“I accept it. That's why I have to find a way to help the women escape.”

“Where will you go?” he asked.

“As close to Earth as we can get.”

His face fell. “Maybe you shouldn't give me the details. It's better that I don't know.”

A knot formed in my stomach. It was my turn to study him. “Do you plan to betray me?” I asked.

He was indignant. “No. Of course not.”

“Then why aren't you coming with us?”

He was conflicted. It was funny how the war did that – caused people to confront themselves. “I'm not sure I can abandon my people,” he said truthfully. “Allowing you to leave is one thing, but leaving with you is another.”

I sat on the bed next to him. “How long can you go on here, just watching? You despise your soldiers and think they are heathens, as we do. Is this a life you can continue to live? Is your promotion that important to you?”

“No,” he determined, and he took my hand. “Not without you. I’ll leave with you. I’ll help ensure your women make it to safety. They will charge me with treason, but I have already acted against the Captain’s orders. If anybody finds out we have mated outside a light bond, I could be executed.”

It was momentous to hear. I dropped my eyes and swept my hand over his. “I thought you were my destruction when all along I was yours.”

“You are my salvation,” he said. “You are setting me free. But escaping does have its dangers. It’s possible we won’t survive this.”

It was true. War did not guarantee life. “It’s possible none of us will,” I added, my heart heavy.

“When a couple alters their state of being during a light bond, becoming light out of flesh, what do you feel like afterward?” I asked, curious to know.

“From what they have told me, during the light bond, it’s like sharing one soul. You are completely exposed to each other. After, you feel connected with the person. Your instincts about them are heightened. If they are in pain, you know. If they are happy, you know. If they are making love to another person, you know. Distance does not matter.”

“So the light bond connects you, but it doesn’t necessarily make you loyal to your mate?”

“No. Sometimes, the soul you see in the other person can be repulsive. You gain an understanding or compassion for why they have become who they are, but it does not mean you can tolerate it. Your little blonde friend was right to try to kill Kalij, she would have been miserable.”

“But it can also be an exhilarating experience,” I speculated. “Especially if two people love each other?”

He squeezed my hand, his dark eyes serious, even as the flecks of light within them brightened. “Yes, it can.”

“Then let’s do it,” I proposed. “I want to light bond with you.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “You have my loyalty regardless.”

“Are you sure?” I returned, wondering if he had his doubts.

In answer, he kissed me, powerful and hungry, causing me to fall across his bed. His weight on top of me was a comfort and my armor in this war. I moved my body beneath his muscles as he kissed me, grinding my hips to an internal rhythm. I ached for him, greater than I had before.

I was his claimed. I was his destiny.

The Fortuna trembled, announcing yet another ship landing within the docking bay, but it did not halt our passion. If anything, it made us more hot-blooded than before.

He kissed me harder. His desire was uncontrollable.

Somewhere between our kisses, he managed to unzip my jumpsuit in the back. Gently but swiftly, he pulled it off my arms and down my waist, leaving me topless. Tossing my bra aside, he took my breast into his mouth and flicked his tongue over the soft skin of my nipple as he began to grind against me.

Feeling the hardness of his large cock through our uniforms and the pleasure of his warm tongue

on my nipple caused my sex to soak. He continued to awaken my body with his mouth as he pulled off the rest of my jumpsuit, leaving tender, desperate kisses down my stomach and my thigh. He stopped only to remove his uniform, leaving us both naked across the bed.

No longer were we human and Surtu, defined by the uniforms we wore. We were just Jidden and Terra, undefined lovers.

“You are my light,” Jidden whispered to me, cupping my head in his hands. The flesh of his body was hot on my own. “You will always be my light.”

He entered me, his cock sliding into my wetness. I moaned loudly, enjoying the pain of his largeness, and I spread my legs open wider, inviting him to fill me completely, to make me whole.

Normally, fucking Jidden had an edge to it. That wasn’t necessary tonight. His hips grating against mine was enough. Feeling him thrust in and out of me was enough. It was all more than enough. As his cock massaged the inside of me, I felt a wave of euphoria build within me. My body felt numb with pleasure, then jolted with ecstasy that increased with every thrust of Jidden’s cock.

I could feel myself starting to come, a wave of bliss shaking me down to my soul.

And then it happened.

Plunging himself deep within me, Jidden grabbed my hands, pinning them to the mattress above my head, a look of complete bliss about him, and my body altered. I was pure light, as was he, two beacons shining brightly amongst the stars. I could feel Jidden as if he were a part of me. I knew his pain from losing his parents, his need to impress his superiors because they were the only family he had, and his rejection of what the new generation of Surtu soldiers had become.

More than anything, I felt his absolute need to protect me.

Together, we shined bright, embracing our flaws and our strengths, finding compassion in each other. And love.

I was light, but it was a love that left me breathless.



I slept beside Jidden for as long as I could, refusing to leave his side. I was content within his arms.

I knew the Surtu invasion had changed me, but when my being altered into light, not only did I see Jidden’s soul, but I saw my own. It was only for a brief moment of timelessness, but there was a complexity to me. I was neither light nor dark, good nor bad. Outside the light, it was hard to understand, but it lingered in my memory, like wisps of a ruined dream.

When the moonlight disappeared from the room, I had to leave. Lucina needed me much more than my mate. Slipping out of Jidden’s shielding arms, I left his ship and returned to the Fortuna, watching the docking bay and looking for weaknesses in the patrol that guarded it.

In my quarters, Lucina continued to sleep. Her pale blonde hair matted against my pillow as her body trembled with heartache. She still wore the Surtu uniform forced on her before her ill-fated light

bonding ceremony. The uniform caged her to her terror.

I would have removed it, but I did not want to wake her. Whatever horrors she faced in her dreams would multiply when she woke.

Moving quietly, I grabbed the perse-thistle from my dresser. The herb-stained my hands blood-red as I carried it into the bathroom.

Later, when I emerged from a long shower, I stripped out of my white jumpsuit, and I put on the black Roman-inspired dress that lay across my desk chair. I had worn it previously to the Surtu remembrance of their fallen soldiers, but I had not wanted to put the dress back into my closet.

Now I knew why.

Leaving Lucina, I went to the temple, the dress billowing behind me. I walked through the gardens past the wildflowers and into the shelter of the woods where the temple was.

Bellona was inside, still keeping Gallia company. When she saw me, her eyes opened wide in surprise. That said a lot. It was hard to surprise an assassin. She no longer saw the Terra Lynch she had earlier that day. She saw a woman with auburn hair dressed in black – a warrior goddess. A Commander.

“You’re like nightshade,” she commented, but there was a mistrust about her. She looked at me as if I were of the Surtu.

“We have a war to fight,” I told her. “It’s time I accepted that.”

Her eyes burned. “And what side will you be fighting on?”

I didn’t understand. “The side of the Fortuna,” I answered.

“Yes, but for the women or the men?”

I was offended and confused. I watched Bellona move around Gallia, a snake about to strike. “I don’t believe I have to answer that question.”

“I think you do. I saw you by the wildflowers with your Surtu man. You seemed to be enjoying yourself on today.” With sorrow, she touched Gallia’s hand.

“If you were playing spy, you should have opened your ears,” I chided. “Then you would know that he is on our side.”

“I heard everything you said, but we can’t trust the Surtu. They use us. Was your Surtu lover truthful when he claimed to be the Lead Officer of an envoy ship? Was he truthful when brought you out into the gardens to negotiate the terms of our surrender while his men took our weapons? Don’t be weak, Nightshade. He’s using you by filling your heart with false promises.”

Her fears were valid, but I knew the truth. “Except that we mated before we were light bonded. He risked death to be with me. He still does.”

She stopped cold. “You are light bonded?”

I lifted my chin. I was not ashamed. “Willingly, but without his Captain’s approval. His sentence will be death for disobeying his Captain.”

Her mistrust turned to pity. “And what if his Captain knows already? What if this is all part of

their game?”

It was impossible to explain the light bond to Bellona. I had seen Jidden’s soul. I knew he was truthful. She wouldn’t understand without experiencing it, so I appealed to her reason. “What would he have to gain? The Surtu already have control of the Fortuna. They have moved their efforts to Earth. The light that blinded us earlier – that was their attack. They have invaded.”

“I know. I heard you speak,” she reminded me.

“Then you know he spoke the truth.”

“I refuse to trust him,” she asserted. “But I will trust you. The Fortuna is our home no longer. More ships land. Apparently, the Fortuna will become a center for their command. Get us off this space station, and I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

Her loyalty meant everything to me. “I’ve found a way to distract the soldiers,” I informed her. And I filled her in on my plan. The longer I spoke, the more she smiled, her humor cold and lethal.

“It’s good,” Bellona said. “We have to do it soon. Tomorrow, if possible, before more ships land.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Tomorrow. And we’ll bring our Commander with us,” I said, indicating Gallia. “She will have the Earth burial she deserves.”

Bellona could be wise and compassionate, but right now she was only vengeance. “The Surtu should get ready. They’re about to see what happens when you mix a Red Assassin with Nightshade.”



In the underground tunnels of the Fortuna, at the intersection where all three tunnels met, I aimed my mini-crossbow at the target I had created out of pillow shams and weeds. The target was named Kalij.

Like many of the women on the Fortuna, I had hidden weapons where no one could find them. My cache was in a trick panel on my bookshelf. We were all one big trick, a trick that failed.

Not anymore. Failure was no longer an option. This time, if we failed, we died. Or worse, we would be mated to those we despised.

Imagining that Kalij stood in front of me with his grotesque smile, I pulled the trigger of my crossbow. The arrow landed deep within what would have been his heart.

Damn it.

Then I shot again, this time hitting his groin.

If only he stood before me in real life, and I was not practicing on a makeshift target. I had never killed someone before. I was not capable of it before, but I would gladly kill Kalij and his friends. I would kill every single soldier that stood and did nothing while Kalij plunged the dagger into Gallia’s heart. Not only did they fail to stop him, but they refused to heal Gallia afterward. Her blood was as much on their hands as the target before me.

All of their names were on my hit list.

Unable to sleep, I spent the remainder of the night in the tunnels, practicing my aim with the crossbow. I was satisfied every time the arrow met the target. I barely missed. I had always been skilled. Now the Surtu would see how skilled I was.

“You’ve changed,” Jidden remarked, joining me from the tunnel that led to the docking bay. “You’re more you.”

He presented the key I had left him. It was Gallia’s key. I hope she understood my decision, wherever she was.

I didn’t take the key back. Instead, I crouched low and swept my leg out, trying to force him down by attacking his knees. My dress caught on my foot, and I slipped.

“You can’t wear that tomorrow,” he said, holding a hand out to help me up.

“It shouldn’t matter,” I declared, taking his hand and pulling him to the ground. He stumbled, but he did not fall. He was too tall and strong, much larger than an average human man. “My ability to fight shouldn’t depend on what clothes I wear.”

He held his hand out again, and this time I let him help me up. “Let me show you how to strike a Surtu soldier.”

I could hear the pain in his voice as he spoke. Jidden was taking a difficult path. He would not betray me, but he had betrayed his people. While justified, it ate at him like an infection.

He lifted the top of his uniform, revealing his hard abs beneath. “We are flesh, like you. Remember that. You won’t be able to knock us down, so you’ll have to strike while we stand. Aim here, between the ribs.” He pointed to where his muscles covered his rib cage. “If you hit here, you’ll knock the air out of us. That’s how you can hinder us.”

I attempted to punch him in the gut where he pointed, but his reflexes were fast. He grabbed my fist, stopping me. “Nice try.”

I smiled. “If I had you on the ground, you wouldn’t be complaining about what I’d be doing to you.”

Immediately, he dropped my fist. “Be my guest.”

I was all talk, but he wasn’t. Before I could step away, he grabbed me and held me close. “Hello, my light bonded,” he said before kissing me, harder than he ever had before. His lips left bruises on my own. I liked it.

A reckless urge ripped through me. The light between us had brought peace, but it wasn’t dormant. It was wild and overpowering. Jidden felt it too.

Roughly, he spun me around and bent me over. There was no time to remove our clothes. Our desire for each other was too strong. He flipped my black dress up and grabbed the ends of my now auburn hair, forcing my head back as he unzipped his uniform and drove his cock straight into me.

It hurt, but I liked that as well. I opened my legs wider and arched my back, allowing him to penetrate deeper inside. My body shook as he pounded me, his love excruciating. I rocked with him,

breathing hard as the pain turned to pleasure. I soaked his cock with my wetness as I began to climax. He grabbed my hips and drove into me harder, unrelenting, until we came together, our puddles of love blending into a hot, sticky mess.

As we came, he pulled my head back further, and then he turned me back around and kissed me, breaking my soul completely.

“I love you,” I told him. “I always will.”

“I love you too,” he proclaimed, his inner depth finally winning over his flawed ego.

I was full of bliss, but there was a weight to our confessions. With our escape only hours away, it felt as if we were saying goodbye.



“What about Lucina?” Bellona asked me as we covered Gallia’s body in the temple with a white lace cloth. “She’s not fit to fight.”

“I gave her some tea,” I revealed. “She’ll continue to sleep. Jidden will take her to the ship as soon as the soldiers are in the dining hall.”

“Why him?” she snapped.

“Because when the fight begins, he is the only one who can carry her past the soldiers without her being harmed.”

Bellona couldn’t argue with my logic, so she said nothing.

“Trust me, Jidden won’t betray us.”

“He won’t reveal *you*,” she said. “We are another story.”

“I thought you were going to trust my decision.”

She sighed, wrapping the final corner of lace around Gallia. “I do trust you. That doesn’t mean I like it.”

It was morning on the Fortuna. It was hard to tell with the stars still shining through the entrance of the temple. In the starlight, we lifted Gallia off the altar. With a quick look behind us to make sure no guards were checking in, we pushed the stone slab of the altar back, revealing a flat wooden doorway beneath – the entrance to the tunnels. One of three, including the docking bay and the bread oven in the kitchen. I used my key to open the door.

“I’ll leave her next to where the tunnel exists at the docking bay,” Bellona recited, going over our plan. “That way, when we come through, we can bring her with us.”

I nodded, our plan finalized. “This is it.”

“This is it,” she confirmed.

“I’ll see you on the other side, sister.”

Leaving her, I made my final round through the Fortuna. It had been my home for the last few years. Lucina and I had been so excited after we were given our assignment close to the stars. We

expected long days chatting, to train hard and to become warriors, and to leave happy knowing that we had served our people well, making our mothers proud. The Fortuna was our legacy.

We never expected to be the ones fighting the impending war with the Surtu. We never expected to die. Others might have, possibly Gallia, or maybe even Bellona. But not Lucina and I.

We hadn't viewed the Fortuna as our coffin. We barely even thought of it as a battle station. We thought it was another home for us.

We were wrong.

Leaving was bittersweet. The happy memories we had of our lives onboard were marked by the hardships of the last...what was it...a week? I couldn't tell anymore. It felt a lot longer.

In the mill pantry, I found Juventas. She was brawny, with short brown hair and tattooed muscles that gave her away as the street fighter she was. But she loved to bake. It was a passion of hers. And we loved her for it, often stopping to inhale the scent of her sweet bread, waiting for the dinner hour to arrive.

There would be nothing sweet about the bread she baked tonight or the soup we'd be serving with them.

"Commander," she said, greeting me. "Is it time?"

I placed my key on the counter in front of her. "It's time."



"Why are we all dining together?" a soldier protested nearby. "I know I stink. I don't want to sit next to a bunch of others who do as well."

I went to fill his bowl of soup. "Your Lead Officer said we have a blackout scheduled for tonight. You either eat now, or you starve until tomorrow."

The soldier wasn't impressed. "We have kitchens on our ships. And why are you serving us? Aren't you that Commander bitch? The one that got Kalij sent off to the Captain?"

"Nah," another soldier said, looking up from the bread he was chewing. "The Commander is meek. This girl has some gall. You claimed yet, sweetheart?" he asked, grinning hungrily.

I shoved bread at him. "Fortunately, yes," I said truthfully. "Now shut your ugly trap and swallow. We don't want the food to go to waste."

The soldiers were eating. That was good, but it wasn't good enough. They should have been drowning in their soup by now. I hurried to the kitchen. "Are you adding enough pest control?" I asked the girl at the stove.

"We've used all that we have," she said. "The longer it cooks, the more the sedative must wear off."

"Then we'll have to serve it faster," I called to the girls maneuvering in and out of the kitchen. "Get them to eat as quickly as possible. We want them all down at once. Brace yourselves. As soon

as the first man falls, the others will be alert.”

I worried about my warrior sisters around me, but I shouldn't. We were not weak; we were all well trained. This was the real fight we had prepared for, though if we managed to escape, it wouldn't be our last battle.

“Funny that a root from Earth is going to be their demise,” the girl at the stove said whimsically, humming as she stirred. There was no fear in her at all.

I sighed, recalling what Jidden had told me of the Surtu's strategy. “Sadly, it won't be the demise of all of them. The ships that have landed on the Fortuna are a drop in the bucket compared to the fleets that have arrived.”

The girl pointed the spoon at the soldiers already asleep in the corner of the kitchen, where they patrolled. We had fed them first, as much as they could eat. “But there's still something satisfying about seeing the big bad Depraved snoring like teddy bears, completely at our mercy.”

I couldn't argue with that. There certainly was.

Juventas pulled another tray of bread out of the bread oven – one of two. The other oven, the important oven, was cold as ice. “More pest control, at your service,” she sang.

Whatever the original name of the root was, it was lost forever to the women of the Fortuna, exchanged for one much more appropriate.

A commotion in the dining hall sounded like an alarm throughout the ship. All of our waiting, all of our fears and our hopes, had led to this moment. I nodded to the girl at the stove. Immediately, she abandoned her spoon in the soup and helped to lead the women towards Juventas, who escorted them into the tunnels.

I returned to the dining hall. To my relief, most of the men were dropping. The few that remained standing were dazed, swaying around as they reached for their blasters. Some waved their hands, causing forks to fly off the tables. They were dangerous, but they were soon taken care of by my sisters. Some of whom fought while the others ran to the kitchen, wave by wave. Fight, then leave.

Out in the gardens, Bellona was leading a battle of her own. The women fought the guards on patrol and then escaped into the tunnel through the temple. They were heading towards the docking bay where Jidden waited, having sent the soldiers in their ships away.

If all had gone to plan, he was on his ship with Lucina and the divide between the space station and the docking bay was already up, keeping the Surtu men out.

“Why do we have to go through the tunnels?” a woman complained as she passed by me. “Can't we just go straight to the docking bay?”

“We don't know how long the soldiers will be out, there are still many left to fight. We were able to convince a majority to come to the dining hall, but there are more Surtu than women. As long as those of us still fighting can keep the soldiers away from the kitchen and temple, the tunnels are our best hope.”

“My sword is my best hope,” she grumbled. “They're lucky they managed to take it off me during

the siege.”

I felt underneath my dress for my mini-crossbow. It was still there, strapped to my leg, as well as a dagger. I took the knife out and handed it to her. “It’s no sword, but it’ll have to do.”

She was delighted. Instead of heading towards the tunnels, she returned to the dining hall to fight.

Knowing the battle around the kitchen was won, I headed towards the gardens to help Bellona, stopping by my quarters first to make sure Lucina was gone.

No one bothered me. My sisters were doing well. With great contentment, I realized no one would have to stay behind. As long as everyone went to the tunnels, we would all make it out.

My quarters were empty. That was good. Jidden had done his part. Saying my goodbyes, I looked around at the home that was once mine – the Persian-inspired pillows on my bed, the warm plum-colored wallpaper, and the plush carpet. Here, I had been Terra Lynch, a pacifist trained as a warrior. Once I left the station, I would be known as something else completely. I would be Nightshade, a deadly poison.

JIDDEN

Soldiers filled my ship, but they were not men. They were women, an army of Roman goddesses dependent on me to set them free. I did not know if I was their hero or their fool.

I didn't care, not as long as Terra was among them.

I waited for Terra at the loading door of my ship, holding Lucina in my arms. I promised Terra that I wouldn't let her friend go and see her safely from the station. As my ship continued to fill, I was tempted to drop the little blonde and search for my mate, but I couldn't.

I wanted to earn Terra's trust.

I wanted to earn all of their trust, including the fiery priestess who was going to pilot the ship out of the hatch and away from the station. I had warned Bellona that piloting a Surtu vessel was not like piloting the lowly cargo ships gathering dust in the corner of the docking bay, but Bellona insisted she knew what she was doing.

I hoped so, for all of our sakes.

Convincing the soldiers to leave the docking bay, including my fellow Lead Officers, had not been as difficult as I anticipated. That was the beauty of the Surtu hierarchy. Captain Fore had put me in charge of the Fortuna until he arrived to transform it into the new Surtu command center.

At the moment, he was busy starting a war. Since I was in charge, the men had followed my orders. They had no choice. The punishment for disobeying the orders of a superior during wartime was death.

Death was what I faced if the men found their way through the divide that I'd raised. They gathered behind it now, watching the exodus of women boarding my ship. I had stolen their claimed ones they hoped to light bond with. All of the women were now under my protection.

You can lower the divide, a part of me told myself. Tell your men you knew of the plan, that this was a trap to break the spirits of the women warriors for good so they knew who was in charge.

The double betrayal tempted me. If it were me on the other side of the divide, I would want me dead. But I had to be true to my integrity, to my father, and to Terra. I was not turning my back on my people. I was going to look for another way. I was an honorable Surtu man.

I would make sure that when historians wrote about this time and when whispers of we saved the Surtu from extinction was passed around, the children of our children would speak with pride.

Terra finally came into view, rounding the last of the women into the ship like a dark shepherdess. In the distance behind her, the doorway to the tunnel was sealed.

“How did you manage to keep the divide up?” she asked when she found me.

“I seared the wiring,” I answered. “It was a simple solution, but they’ll be looking for something much more complex.”

“Good,” she said and made a call over the communicator I’d given her. She instructed Bellona to close the loading door to the ship and open the hatch of the space station.

“I can’t!” Bellona shouted through the communicator. “We’re on a Surtu ship, remember? They don’t have the remotes on board to close the hatch!”

“It’s okay,” Terra told her. “We’ll figure it out.” Quickly, she glanced at me, and then added, “Whatever happens, you leave. Understand?”

“Yes, Queen Sister,” Bellona confirmed. “Make sure you’re on the ship when I do.”

Terra turned to me, her mind working. “Can you activate the hatch with your mind?”

“I can, but it’ll take time. I’m unfamiliar with your technology. Melting a wire is easy. I did that with my hands. Using my mind to shift through the electronics of the hatch will be much more complicated.”

“We don’t have time,” she proclaimed. “I’ll have to do it by hand.”

I did not see any problems with her plan. The command desk within the docking bay was not far from us, so I let her go.

It was a mistake.

As Terra ran down the loading door of my ship with her black dress and auburn hair flowing behind her, a brilliant light appeared, blinding us.

I instantly knew whose light it was. The soldiers under my command did not possess the training to travel as light through the unbreakable material of the divide. Though we were beings of light, we were much denser than the light of the stars around us because we had to bring our physical forms within us.

The material of Surtu ships was easy to pass through by design, but it took a special kind of training to go through the toughest of Earth’s elements. The type of training a Fleet Captain had.

Captain Fore appeared within the docking bay. Terra saw him, but she didn’t turn around. She couldn’t when the lives of her women depended on the hatch being opened. I set Lucina down so that I could help, but before I could move, the loading door closed, and I felt my ship start to hover.

The door was no barrier. I began to transform into light, but a hand grabbed my ankle. “Don’t leave,” Lucina pleaded. “We need you.”

What the little blonde said was true. The women could make it out of the station without me, but what lay beyond – that was another story.

“I can’t leave her,” I whispered, agony building within me. “I love her.”

“Then honor her,” Lucina said. “Let her be the Commander. Terra would not want you to

abandon us.”

She was right. If I left, it would mean sealing the fate of the women as slaves to the Depraved. If I allowed it to happen, Terra would resent me all the days of her life. I had to see her women to safety, and then I would come back for her. My soldiers could take her captive a thousand times, and I would always come back for her.

I knew heartbreak. I’d felt it when my parents died. And now I felt it again. A tear rolled down my cheek, the first in many years. Lucina stood, swaying slightly, and she wiped it away with the sleeve of her Surtu uniform.

TERRA

I ran to the command desk of the docking bay, playing the codes I needed to enter in my head so that my fingers would not stall. I didn't have much time. If Captain Fore lowered the divide before the ship left, we would all be ruined.

Luckily, Captain Fore had as much trouble with the seared wiring as the other soldiers. I reached the command desk, and I opened the hatch. Moments later, the ground shook as Jidden's ship lifted out of the space station and disappeared into the relentless night.

My heart broke watching them leave. I would never see them again. Not Jidden. Not Lucina. They were lost to me forever. But I was glad they had left.

Jidden had remained true to his word. He had not sacrificed us for his gain, even if that gain was me.

I loved him more for it.

I did not have time to grieve my losses. Captain Fore grabbed my arm and pushed me against the divide. Without turning to face the soldiers I had insulted, I could feel their anger.

"Women are sacred to the Surtu," the Captain raged. "But for some women, there is only death."



Four months had passed since the women of the Fortuna had escaped the leering clutches of the Surtu soldiers. They had been led away by Jidden, my alien mate with whom I was eternally light bonded. I missed my sister warriors, especially Lucina Whitmore, my best friend since childhood. And I missed Jidden.

It had been hard to believe that I would never see him again, but I had finally accepted it for my sanity, especially now that I was a slave onboard the place I once called home.

The Fortuna looked nothing like it had before. The Surtu had taken over completely, making it their command center as they fought a war against Earth. The gardens were overgrown, and the temple abandoned. The inner station had been gutted out, distorting the sleeping quarters into dormitory-style housing for the Surtu soldiers. Masked as a spiritual sanctuary, the Fortuna had been built spacious and harmonious, but now it was crowded and loud, the marble floors marked with the

heavy traffic moving in and out.

There were many soldiers on the Fortuna. Although the Surtu were larger, stronger, and they had an ability to heal themselves, they weren't invincible. Plenty had died at the hand of my sister warriors. The key was to strike a fatal blow before they had a chance to recover. It was a lesson Earth had likely learned the hard way.

I should be dead, as the soldiers my sisters killed were. I had led the escape of the women from the space station. That was three hundred fewer women the Surtu men could use for baby factories. With the Surtu facing extinction and their females dying off from an unknown disease, my crime was punishable by death.

I had been sentenced to die, but Jidden had saved me. I wonder if he knew that his love had saved my life.

We were light bonded. We had shared the act of altering our state of being into light, becoming one beacon and one soul. It had been brief, but it had united us forever. It was because of the light bond that I knew Jidden lived. At times, I could sense him, feeling his anguish and hopelessness, usually when I was close to sleep.

After being imprisoned on his ship and sentenced to die, Captain Fore had come to visit me. He put his hand along the back of my neck. The neck was the only part left exposed by the Surtu uniform I had been forced to wear. I thought he was going to take away my integrity and force himself on me, but that was not his intention.

"So the rumors are true," he had said. "You are light bonded to the traitor."

The traitor was Jidden. "Yes," I'd admitted, feeling no shame, but I was confused. The only person I had told was Bellona. She'd had no contact with the soldiers – except to assassinate them before they knew she was even there.

"When the murderer Kalij petitioned for his light bonding ceremony, he was outraged that another man had been allowed to light bond with the human Commander before his appointed time. He wanted to be the first. I told him no such service had been approved, and a woman tricked him."

"I did lie to him," I said, refusing to allow the scum Kalij any merit. "I wanted access to the docking bay. The light bond Jidden and I share – that came later."

"I see," the Captain said. "You are light bonded to a traitor, but that does not change the fact that you are one of us. Our light shines in you. It is against the law to kill a human woman unless she has committed an unforgivable act of treason. You have done that, by the way, but you are no longer merely human. You are part Surtu. No Surtu woman is put to death, no matter what her crimes were. Your light bond saves you from death, but I plan to make your life a living hell."

I had imagined the worst. In my fears, the soldiers made me their concubine, but another Surtu law was that no man could touch a woman who was light bonded. It wasn't because of morals, but to ensure the health of her children. When it came to human-bred Surtu children, those birthed from bonded parents were healthier and survived longer.

To the Surtu, survival overshadowed every decision.

Captain Fore couldn't kill me, and he couldn't make me a plaything for his soldiers. All he could do was condemn me to servitude, making me wait on him and his fellow elite officers whenever they beckoned. When I refused, which was as often as my strength allowed, I was beaten or starved.

The Fortuna had been my home, but it was now my prison.

For now, I lived. As long as I lived, there was still a chance for escape. Jidden and my sisters couldn't save me, but maybe I could save myself.



"...even more traitors," a High Commander said to Captain Fore as I served them coffee in the Grand Hall, the nucleus of the command center. The Captain was no longer the big dog. With the arrival of the other fleets, he now had to report to his superiors.

I poured the coffee slowly as my interest increased. I often listened in on their discussions. From them, I'd learned that the takeover of Earth cost them more time and resources than they'd planned and that President Bentford refused to surrender, no matter what guarantees they offered her.

After learning President Bentford and the other leaders of Earth had tried to blow up the Fortuna, I had been resentful, but I was beginning to understand that there were no easy decisions in war.

It was fortunate they forced themselves to learn human languages as part of their integration program. Humans weren't capable of producing the musical qualities of the Surtu languages. Captain Fore hated it, which gave me great pleasure. The order for integration had come from a High Commander, so he had to obey.

"They've been away from Surt for too long," another Fleet Captain said, speaking of the traitors. "And they're desperate to mate. That's why some of the soldiers are turning and siding with their human mates. It was always our plan to leave troops here, and the soldiers know it. Their allegiances are mixed."

"For now, it's only a rumor," the High Commander stated. "Let's try to keep it that way."

Captain Fore saw me smiling. "That's enough," he said to me, and he dismissed me out of the room.

Pleased with what I'd learned, I went to the gardens. The herbs and the vegetables had become overgrown, becoming as wild as the woods that surrounded the patches. Walking through the tall grass, I went and sat on a low stone wall near the wildflowers. It was here where I first knew Jidden loved me. He'd always had a depth to him, and he'd finally acknowledged it. It turned out I had found my way into his soul.

"Hologram," I ordered. "Earth."

A blue image of Earth appeared before me. I swiped my hand, zooming into my family's modest little home in the middle of the desert. The satellite images were old. With the war going on, it had

been quite some time since they were last updated, but I preferred to look at the past. I was afraid to see what the images may show me of the present.

Had the desert been conquered? Was my father dead, my mother a captive, and my brothers fighting for revenge? It was a strong possibility, and it broke my heart.

I had to escape. I had to help them. But until escape was possible, I felt uplifted staring at the image of my home as I remembered it.

A soldier stumbled out into the wildflowers. With his dark hair and wide elfin eyes with flecks of light swirling around the pupil, I could almost imagine he was Jidden coming to save me, but he wasn't. His skin was much paler than Jidden's, and his eyes were green, not blue.

"I need a woman," the soldier said.

Oh boy.

He reeked of whiskey. The soldiers weren't supposed to drink, not even when they were off duty, but clearly they'd found a way to smuggle alcohol onboard the command center from Earth.

My body tensed, ready to fight. They treated me like a slave, but I was still a warrior inside. "Why don't you sleep it off in the temple like the other soldiers?" I told him.

"Relax," the soldier coaxed as he stumbled closer, "I'm not going to touch you. You're not my type. I like big, meaty girls, and burying my head in their breasts. You've got curves but not enough fat."

"Then why are you here?" I demanded though I could hear the amusement in my voice.

"I told you," he said, leaning against the wall next to me for support. "I need a woman. I miss the company of a woman, and you're the only woman here. I was in love once with a full-blooded Surtu vixen. She was giant, but she could not borne children because she was infertile."

"From the disease?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Probably. I didn't care. I wanted to light bond with her, but officials wouldn't approve it. They said there were plenty of human women who needed a young, fertile man like me, so they drafted me into the military as part of the infantry that would stay on Earth for good. I'll never see her again."

It was rare, but this enemy warrior had earned my sympathy. "What's your name, Soldier?"

"Telki."

"You have any more of that whiskey, Telki?" I asked.

"Nope. You have to drink it fast before the rest of the dogs find it."

I laughed. It was short, but it was the first since being made a slave to the Depraved. "You sound like my light bonded, Jidden."

"Everyone here knows who your light bonded is, little Commander." He spoke with a surprising disdain.

"He's not a traitor," I said quickly, coming to Jidden's defense. "He didn't turn his back on his people. He's searching for a better way."

“That’s not the way the men tell it. I don’t like being here, I miss my love back at home, but I know what the consequences are for my people if we don’t win this war. There will be no children. There will be no Surtu.” He was starting to sober up.

“If someone had reversed the roles, what then?” I argued. “What if it was your love being ripped from your arms, forced to light bond and mate with a human man? Wouldn’t you want to find a path where Surtu and humans could come together freely?”

“I never said our current course was ideal,” Telki said. “But I don’t think my people have any options left. Some humans may fall in love with Surtu, but we need more than some. The human line won’t go extinct, and neither will the Surtu. We’re coming together and forming a new race. Hopefully a better race.”

“And what of the Surtu women and human men? What of them? We can’t toss them aside like broken toys.”

He looked up at the stars through the transparent ceiling. I imagined him searching for his home planet, thinking about the love he left behind.

With the greatest of remorse, he said, “We already have.”



My discussion with Telki had inspired me. If he could speak with such remorse, then the rumors of Surtu soldiers fighting for the humans must have some validity.

Jidden wasn’t alone in his cause. And neither was I.

I couldn’t wait any longer. I had to escape. The only way to do so was to sneak onto a ship headed for Earth and pray the Surtu didn’t blow me out of the sky in the process.

I had to get to the docking bay.

It would be difficult because Captain Fore had given strict orders not to let me anywhere near it. I had tried several times before, and they always caught me and punished me. I had to be bolder and more clever.

The tunnels were no longer an option for me after the Surtu discovered them. Once a means of escape, we used them for storage now. It was a shame, but I wasn’t too discouraged. The tunnels served their purpose by leading three hundred women to freedom.

I thought about seducing a soldier. I could give him my integrity in exchange for a favor, but my heart wouldn’t let me. I could probably learn to live with myself afterward. At least it would have been my choice.

I couldn’t do it to Jidden. Once light bonded, we were always connected, it’s how I felt his despair when I was close to sleep. The Surtu said if a person who was light bonded slept with another, their mate could tell. If I seduced a soldier, Jidden would know another man had touched me. He may even know I had given myself willingly, but he wouldn’t know why. That would

devastate him.

I couldn't use the tunnels, I couldn't use my body, but there was another way. There was always another way. I just had to find it.

In the end, it was Telki who led me to my freedom.

In the weeks after meeting Telki, I ran into him a few times. We didn't speak as long as we had out in the garden, but he acknowledged me, which was more than I could say for the other soldiers. They looked at me with both desire and hatred as they refused to speak to me.

Telki would call me the little Commander, especially when he was drunk. His drinking got worse as time passed. He only had liquid to fill the hole in his heart. Usually, he would sleep it off in the gardens, but occasionally I found him passed out in the corridor. For his protection, I would put him in the mill pantry or another hiding place somewhere nearby.

I was strong, but the Surtu were larger than the average man. It was impossible to drag Telki far.

One evening, I spotted him walking in front of me. He was moving slowly, like a slug. I assumed he was drunk again, so I followed him. He turned down a corridor where the lights were dimmed so low; it was like walking in a faint shadow. A Lead Officer had complained of faulty wiring in this corridor.

Telki turned into a room that used to be sleeping quarters. I could only guess what it was now. I waited near the door, listening to the voices of his fellow soldiers. When there was none, I slid it open manually. The punch code had been removed.

The room was pitch black and the light from the stars shut out. As soon as I entered, my leg bumped into a crate, and I heard the sound of glasses shaking against each other.

"Telki, is that you?" someone hissed.

I froze.

"It's me," Telki answered, quiet but angry. "Next time, don't say my name. What if it was a superior checking in?"

The other man grunted. "The whiskey is running low. I'm going to take these empty bottles with me on my next run. The distillery isn't far from the northern base."

Telki didn't seem interested in the logistics at all. "Don't tell me I risked coming here for nothing. You said you had a bottle you could sell me."

"I do," the man said. A smuggler. I heard him move around. How he knew where he was going was beyond me. The room was dark, and I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. "Here. What will you give me for it?"

"You can have my ration of steak. I don't have much of an appetite these days. Only a thirst."

Fresh meat was difficult to come by on the Fortuna. Soldiers were only awarded it for a particular deed. I didn't know how valuable the whiskey was, but the trade was likely a fair one.

The smuggler accepted, and I heard Telki take the bottle. He opened it immediately and gulped down a swig.

“Don’t break the glass,” the smuggler warned. “The bottles are hard to come by.”

Hearing heavy footsteps, I quickly moved aside. I pressed my calves against the crate I had bumped earlier. Telki swished passed me, already smelling of alcohol, and then he was gone.

I stood in my place, breathing shallowly as the man in the room continued to move around. The clanking of the glass helped to mask my breathing. Only when I was certain he was gone did I inhale properly.

I felt around the room. The Surtu used it for storage. With the wiring out, it wasn’t much good for anything else. The smuggler had drawn the shades on purpose to block out all incoming light in case a superior checked into the room. The dark was easy to hide in, as I had just learned.

It was the dark that would save me.

From my exploration of the room, I found three wooden crates full of empty bottles. The bottles were in a neat line divided by placeholders that felt like cardboard, probably recycled from old boxes. Like everything the Surtu did, it was efficient.

A stack of blankets to cushion the glass was on top of each crate. The blankets were coarse and smelled of sweat, but freedom did not have to be pretty. I tucked myself beneath one of the blankets, ignoring the discomfort of the glass bottles beneath me, and I reached out to slide the top of the crate over me.

I hoped the smuggler was part of the cargo crew that would be departing in the early morning. If not, then my absence would be noticed as soon as I failed to serve Captain Fore his breakfast. They would search, and they would ruin my chances of escape.

Trying not to think about it, I fell into an unsettled half-sleep, dreaming of a pack of stray dogs chasing me, foam dripping from their fangs.

A jolt woke me up, but not my own. The crate I was in was moving.

What if I was making noises in my sleep?

Perhaps I had, but it didn’t seem to matter. The crate continued to jolt, moving on a motorized trolley. Light filtered in through the cracks in the wood of the crate, as did a white noise I had never been conscious of before. The buzz of the lights overhead. The purr of the motor from the trolley. There was noise, but there were very few voices.

Good. It was still early morning. I wanted to feel hopeful, but I knew better. This was not a time for sentiment. This was a time to listen, think, and stay on my guard. I took solace in knowing that to the smuggler, the secret in the crate was one worth keeping. He did not want anyone to discover his cargo was empty whiskey bottles.

And one stowaway.

I knew the moment we entered the docking bay. Here, the noise was prevalent as soldiers readied their ships. They shouted at one another, loading their cargo.

“The boss assigned me to glider 3A,” the smuggler told someone from his seat on the trolley. “I have five crates to load.”

I heard fingers tapping against a tablet only inches from me. “Right,” a soldier said. “You’re on time. Report to the command desk first. We’ve randomly selected you for screening.”

The smuggler was indignant. “What does that mean?” he snapped.

“It means our superiors are tired of soldiers poisoning their bodies with human contraband,” the soldier sniped back. “We have to keep everyone’s bodies healthy for war and for our children.”

“Fine,” the smuggler grumbled, and the trolley backed up.

The little hope I had evaporated.

I thought the crate was going to be my escape, but it was a cage.



“Glider 3A,” the smuggler said at the command desk.

There was a squawk of a scanner, and I heard footsteps walking around the stack of crates.

I wasn’t sure where I was in the scanning process or what cargo the smuggler carried in the containers that weren’t bottles, but I knew my heat waves would be picked up on the scanner. The question wasn’t if they would catch me. The question was, what was I going to do? Did I run, did I fight, or did I give in to the sentence the Depraved had given me?

Capture wasn’t an option. I could not take being a slave any longer. I would rather die.

Captain Fore had said death would not be a sentence for me because of my light bond, but I was sure that if I killed enough of his men, I would make it an option. I had never taken a life, but I was willing to, now more than ever.

“It looks like you’re carrying extra cargo,” the soldier who scanned the crates said.

“It’s harmless,” the smuggler replied confidently.

“How harmless?”

“A steak’s worth?”

The man huffed. “Not for this. What you’re carrying is big.”

“How big?”

I expected him to give me away. Instead, the soldier replied, “All the whiskey I want. And a box of chocolates. Two boxes.”

“I can’t get chocolate. That’s not my department.”

“You better, because if you come back empty-handed, I’ll tell Captain Fore what I saw here today.”

“Fine,” the smuggler mumbled. “I’ll get what you need.”

The soldier slapped something against the side of the crate. “It’s about time someone took out the trash,” he said. “Staring at it day after day is bad for morale.”

“Whatever,” the smuggler replied. “Can I go?”

“You can go,” the soldier said. “But don’t come back unless you have my whiskey and my

chocolate.” Soon after, I was on the glider – the smaller ships the Surtu used to transport goods.

We took off, heading to Earth and freedom.



The northern base smelled as bad as the blankets in my crate. The Surtu appeared to maintain it as efficiently as the command center, but the men here sweated twice as much. They weren't completing the relatively easy tasks in war, like loading cargo or preparing ammunition.

They were out on the front lines with their blasters – invading, killing, claiming and conquering. The Surtu took the Fortuna peacefully, but not Earth.

Indentations from laser guns riddled their armor, mechanical suits that looked like armorers created them from heavy metal. I'm sure for every dent in their armor, they fired back a dozen more carefully placed shots. The Surtu tried not to kill women. We were the prize for which they had traveled across the stars. It was not an easy task, especially when half the soldiers who fired back on the Surtu were the femme fatales they wanted to claim.

After the glider had prepared to land on Earth, I snuck out of the crate and hid in a vent. I waited for the glider to be unloaded and abandoned with the other vessels before crawling out. Using the skills Bellona had taught me, I found cover in the shadows and made my way out onto the base without inhaling too deeply.

The base was a network of colossal canvas structures. I didn't know where we were, but I could see skyscrapers towering nearby. The Surtu were trying to break a major city. The frontline would be near the city borders, so my best shot at freedom was to leave in the opposite direction. That's exactly where I started off, but a tent full of women stopped me.

The guards had chained together these women, some in earthly military uniforms, some in house clothes. All were of childbearing age. I recognized the desolation they carried in their hunched posture and sad eyes. I had experienced the same feelings when I was a slave.

I couldn't allow it.

The tent had no sides, leaving the women as exposed as cattle at an open market. Quietly, avoiding the guard at the front of the tent, I hid behind a stack of boxes on the far side. “I can set you free,” I whispered to a brunette woman nearby. She wore a military uniform and looked lost in thought. I hoped she was the type who could lead.

She glanced over at me and immediately dropped her head down. “Mmmhmm,” she hummed.

Good. She knew better than to draw attention to me.

“Are you all chained together?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Is the chain connected to a pole or any other anchor?”

She didn't answer. That was a no.

“Perfect,” I said. “My name is Terra Lynch. I was Commander of the Fortuna before it fell. You can trust me. I’ll be back soon. Be ready.”

“Mmmhmm.”

Retreating to my glider, knowing the smuggler was out gathering whiskey from the distillery, I gathered my thoughts. It wouldn’t be enough to free the women if the Surtu would just capture them again. I had to get them to safety, but I didn’t know how or where. We were deep inside the base.

I leaned against the wall of the glider. The situation seemed hopeless. It would take a miracle to get the women out. I tapped my hand against the wall, thinking, and then I stopped.

Maybe not a miracle. Maybe just a glider.

I hurried to the dashboard of the glider, my mind racing. The ship was small, the size of four buses, maybe five, but it could accommodate the women in the tent. I was no pilot, but learning to fly had been part of my training for the Fortuna. The glider was Surtu designed, but the science of flying was the same everywhere in the universe. Physics didn’t change from planet to planet. Bellona had flown Jidden’s ship out of the Fortuna with ease. I had to try, and I had to do it now, during the day, while there was the distraction of the war.

Preparing myself, I took a moment to study the dashboard. The technology was very simple. It made sense. In war, pilots didn’t need to be distracted with buttons. They needed to focus on their mission, be it hauling cargo or firing down on enemy lines.

“Nelti, help us,” I said, realizing the irony of praying to a Surtu warrior goddess. I did not want to pray to the goddess Fortuna. I had failed her. She would not grant me her luck. But now that my light bond with Jidden made me of the Surtu, I hoped Nelti would listen, because all hell was about to break loose.



I lifted the glider off the ground and hovered above the rest of the ships inside the Surtu base. The glider swayed slightly, tilting the way Telki had when he was drunk. Below me, a soldier waved his hands frantically in the air and mouthed imbecile. He must not have been able to see who was piloting otherwise he’d be doing a lot more than waving his hands. After some maneuvering, I stabilized the glider and circled above the base until I spotted the tent with the women below me.

I lowered the glider over the boxes next to the tent, assuming it was a warehouse, and I opened the loading door. The women were ready. They ran to me as quickly as their chains allowed. The soldier guarding the tent pointed his blaster at them and yelled for them to stop, but he didn’t fire. I knew he wouldn’t. Women weren’t to be killed. I lifted away as soon as the last woman was on board; the loading door was still open.

Other soldiers came and fired on us. They tried to disable our ship, but I flew high and fast, further than their blasters could reach. From my vantage point, I saw a nature reserve in the far

distance. I steered there with the aim of setting the glider down in the thick woods.

I heard a loud thud from the back, and the woman I had spoken to earlier joined me at the dashboard, swinging a piece of chain around her wrist. “Are you Terra Lynch?” she asked.

“I am,” I answered.

“I thought you were dead.”

I huffed. “Ghosts can’t pilot gliders.”

“No,” she agreed, turning to the monitors. “They can’t.”

“Is anyone following us?” I asked, my focus on the nature reserve ahead.

“Strangely enough, no.”

It didn’t worry me. I considered it fortunate. “The pilots are probably too busy fighting on the front lines. A major city won’t fall easily.”

“No,” the woman said with pride. “It won’t.”

“What happened to you?”

“There’s a small town not far from where the Surtu base is. My unit was in the middle of evacuating the town when the Surtu invaded. The women here – we were claimed and placed in that purgatory of a tent.”

“And the men?”

Her face turned to steel. “Gone.”

“The children?”

“The soldiers sent them away, but I don’t know where. I’ve heard a rumor that the Surtu have set up schoolhouses where they’re indoctrinating children to the Surtu propaganda. The boys will grow up to become loyal slaves, and the girls will grow up to become brides.”

“At least they’re alive. It’s better than the alternative.” A thought came to me. “You said you thought I was dead. Do you know where the Fortuna women are?”

“No,” the woman answered. “I know of you because there is a story going around.” She hesitated.

“Go on,” I urged.

“I’ve heard that the women of the Fortuna escaped with the help of a Surtu soldier who turned on his people. A soldier who was light bonded to the Commander.”

“The story is true,” I said, wondering how the word had spread so quickly. It gave me hope that my sisters had landed safely on Earth. Maybe they had spread the tale.

The woman was astounded. “So you are light bonded?”

“Yes.”

“You are the only one.”

It was my turn to be in shock. “But you said they claimed some women.”

The woman continued to flip through the monitors, scanning for other ships that may be trailing us. “I said we were in purgatory. I don’t think the Surtu thought Earth would resist as much as we have. They’ve realized that many of their men may die. They do not want women to be light bonded to a

dead soldier, so they have postponed all light bonding ceremonies until after the war.”

“Are we winning?” I asked, unsure if I wanted to hear the answer.

“No,” the woman said solemnly. “We are resisting, but we are not winning. The Surtu have powers that we do not. They can heal themselves.”

“And they can move things with their mind,” I added.

“I didn’t know that,” she said, but she didn’t sound surprised.

We arrived at the nature reserve. I dropped the glider down into a meadow and let the women off, a new plan forming in my mind. “I’m going to continue flying,” I told them. “If they trace the glider, it will set them off-course. Find safety. You’re in good hands.”

“May Fortuna smile upon you,” she said before guiding the women into the cover of the woods.

Flying away, I realized I hadn’t learned her name. It probably wouldn’t be the first time. War was like that – people passed in and out of each other’s lives like fingers strumming down the strings of a harp. Names weren’t necessary in war, just the safety of the people who bore the names.

I flew for the remainder of the day and through the night, finally landing when I saw the dawn illuminating more wilderness at the base of a mountain, far from where I’d left the women. Tired, I set the glider down for the final time, and I stepped out into the early light, my feet surrounded by tall grass and wildflowers.

Since tucking myself away into the crate of empty whiskey bottles, my mind had been focused on my escape, and then those of the women in the tent, but now I could embrace the moment. I was finally free.

And I was back on Earth. Strangely serene, I looked up at the blue sky – the beautiful blue sky. I hadn’t seen it in years. Why did people always turn to the stars for beauty when there was so much of it on Earth? I inhaled deeply, taking in the fresh air. It felt good, a lot more wholesome than the recycled air of the space station.

I started to walk, needing to build distance between myself and the glider. The slippers of my Surtu uniform sank eagerly into the soil as I trudged along. If I could live the rest of my life like this – a recluse out in the woods – I would. It would be a happy life.

But I couldn’t. I would not let my training go to waste. I would honor Gallia by doing my part to save my people. Maybe along the way, I would find the others.

And Jidden.

Thinking of him made my heart ache, so I focused on my trek. I did not know where I was or where I headed. I simply followed the creeks and springs away from the mountain, watching the narrow waters trickle downhill. In time, I came upon a patch of perse-thistle. I crushed the fresh purple leaves in my hand and sprinkled water over them, forming a paste that I spread into my mousy brown roots. An hour later, I washed it out, flipping my hair against the radiance of the sun.

I was no longer a slave. I was Nightshade once more. Even with Bellona’s nickname, I was still me. I was just more me than I had been before, summoning a fierceness from within.



My feet hurt. The slippers I wore had fallen apart long ago. Their soles were barely able to keep away the twigs and rocks of the woods. I continued, knowing I did not have much further to go before I broke through the tree line. The brush was becoming less dense, and the leaves on the trees were dry, having no shield from the sun.

I didn't know how long I had walked. A week, maybe? That seemed right. I had eaten nuts and berries and drank creek water. The night was a blanket, the day my inspiration. Survival in the woods was inconvenient but manageable. However, I was relieved when I pushed aside the last tree branch and stepped out into the open.

My relief was short lived. Voices echoed across the grassy field before me, and I scurried back behind the trees and ducked behind the brush, watching the area through the thorns. A pair of Surtu soldiers patrolled the area. Their voices drew closer until they stood before me, wearing black uniforms that matched my own. Theirs were clean and starched. Mine was worn and muddy. This camp was not at the front line of a battle. If a base was near, it was for intelligence and preparation, not fighting.

I held my body still, becoming one with the woods around me. Thankfully, my eyes were as brown as the thorns that shielded them and my hair as dark as the leaves of autumn. Still, my camouflage wasn't enough against the powers of the Surtu mind. They had powers I was still trying to grasp. They had kept them well hidden on the Fortuna so Earth would underestimate them when they attacked.

"I sense something near," one of the soldiers proclaimed.

"It's probably just a deer," another said, a skinny male much smaller than his companion. "There's no one out there. No one knows we're here."

"No, I can—"

"You can keep walking is what you can do," the skinny soldier said, and he pushed the other forward. "I'm starved."

"You always feel hungry," the other grumbled. "You eat, but you have no meat."

"My mother got the disease when I was still in her stomach. I may not be a fatso like you, but I'm strong. And I need food to feed my muscles, so move along!"

"I'm no fatso," the other soldier protested, but they resumed their patrol.

I remained frozen, trying to push down my paranoia. As they walked away, I was certain the skinny soldier had glanced behind his shoulder and looked directly at me.



When night came, I climbed to the highest tree branch. I needed to see the stars, but I did not want to

risk the open field. Based on the constellations in the sky, I was close to the winter plains, within reach of the big cities but far from the desert where my family lived.

As much as I yearned to go home, it wasn't the time to do so. By now, Captain Fore would have learned of my escape from the Fortuna, and he would have heard of the women saved from the northern base. They would track me. If I went home, I'd lead the Surtu, and their vengeance, straight to my family.

I would have to wait for a safer time if such a thing existed during the Surtu occupation.

There were more than stars above me. Little lights spun around the oily sky. They were ships in the heat of battle. Hundreds of space stations circled the Earth. They were fighting the Surtu from the sky while we fought on the ground.

Smoke rose nearby. The Surtu base was closer than I thought. It was useless backtracking into the woods. I had to move forward. That would mean snaking along the base. It would be difficult to conceal myself when there was nothing but grassland around. The night provided the best cover, so I climbed down from the tree and stepped out into the open field, the shadow of darkness my only protection from the Depraved.

I moved swiftly, my footsteps silent, my ears open. I made less noise than a breeze as I glided across the grass. When I saw the first lights near the Surtu base, I swerved to the right, heading away from it. Unfortunately, the path took me straight to a cliff.

I'd have to travel closer to the base than I wanted. Using the lights of the base as my guide, I stayed far away, orbiting the base like Pluto did the Sun, a being of ice trying not to get burned.

The trouble with the night was that, though it masked my movements from the Surtu, it also masked their movements from me. I did not see the soldier on patrol, nor did I hear him until he turned on the light of his torch, illuminating me from several feet away.

"Stop!" he commanded, but I ran off.

He followed me, yelling into his communicator. I continued to run, but in the grassy field, there was nowhere to hide. I was agiler than the soldier chasing me, but I couldn't outrun the hover bikes that cut me off. I turned, prepared to face the chasm over slavery, but a soldier on a hover bike grabbed the back of my uniform and jumped off his vehicle to pull me to the ground.

"Got you," he said gleefully. "And it looks like I'm not the first." He turned to the other soldiers. "She's wearing our uniform. She's a runaway."



I had been wrong about the Surtu base. It was no base at all. It was a camp, a mechanical side venture where the fixed hover bikes and repaired armor. No wonder the soldiers here were clean-cut. They had only tasted grease, not blood.

Just like on the command center, I was once again the only woman around. Without the glory of the

front lines, these soldiers had no one to claim. Not yet. They were probably waiting for their fellow soldiers to die off in battle so that they could find their mates. To them, women were pieces of meat for vultures to feed on.

“It’s my lucky day,” the soldier said. He pushed me into a tent. “I’ve been itching for a ride.”

“You can ride yourself,” I spat. “I’ve been claimed.”

I did not want to say light bonded. If what I’d learned was accurate, Jidden and I were the only alien pair light bonded since the human women from the colony were taken hostage sixty years earlier. If I told the soldiers I was light bonded, it would give away my identity. They would take me straight back to Captain Fore, whose punishment would be brutal.

“Like I care,” he said, stepping towards me.

His comrade grabbed his arm. “It’s against the law. She’s not worth your life.”

“I’m sick of this! We came here to mate with the women, but we’ve been here for months, and not one of us has been allowed to pull his cock out.”

“As soon as we win the war, that’s all we’ll be doing.”

It sickened me to listen to them. It reminded me just how much Earth had to lose if we lost. Our men would be dead. Our women would have their integrity stripped from them. And our children would grow up brainwashed, believing that cruelty was in everyone’s best interest. Our military needed a new strategy.

The skinny soldier I’d seen in the field earlier suddenly appeared in the tent. He looked at me as if I were something vile, as if I were the Depraved.

“Send her to me,” he instructed, rubbing his nose. “I’ll get her to talk.” Then he left.

“I hope you like having your fingernails pinched off,” the first soldier said smugly. “Kist is known for his personal brand of torture.”



They led me to a chair tucked behind a graveyard of vehicles destroyed by the war. Kist waited for me. A table of tools was laid out before him; he appeared to be a doctor preparing for surgery. I may be Nightshade, but I wasn’t invincible.

Watching Kist handle the tools made me tremble with fear. I tried to hold it in and remain brave before my enemies, but I was shaking in my chair. I knew the Surtu would do everything in their power not to kill women. I never considered they’d find torturing them acceptable.

Tell them you’re light bonded, that you’re one of them, I pleaded with myself. Then they can’t hurt you.

I remained silent. The torture might hurt, but it was better than life as a slave to Captain Fore.

Kist turned around, a pair of pliers in his bony hands. “Leave,” he instructed the soldier who’d brought me here. “You know I like to work alone.”

“Gladly,” the soldier mumbled. “It’s torture to watch.” He laughed as he left, finding amusement in his joke.

I did not see the humor.

Kist moved slowly towards me, taking his time. As soon as he knew the soldier was gone, he set the pliers in the palm of my hand. “Scream,” he ordered.

“I won’t play your sick game,” I protested, unable to take my eyes off the pliers.

“It’s no game,” he said. “If you want your freedom, scream.”

He wasn’t speaking from a place of insanity. He was quite serious, almost pleading. So I obliged. I thought of every beating Captain Fore had given me on the Fortuna, and I screamed. It felt good, if not for my current circumstance.

Kist shook his head. “Damn, girl. That was good.”

To say I was confused was an understatement. “What are you doing?” I whispered, realizing the soldier was more than he seemed.

“I’m saving you,” he replied.

My trust didn’t come that cheap. I was suspicious. “Why? I can’t offer you anything.”

He didn’t answer me directly. “Who are you?” he asked, returning to his table. “We do not dress our claimed in our uniforms. Not down here. You are someone special.”

“I am no one,” I told him. “I am of no interest.”

“You are of great interest,” he said, picking up a crowbar then setting it back down. “Tell me who you are, and I will set you free.”

It must be a trick. There was no other explanation for Kist’s odd behavior. “I am a human woman. I am a person with a soul. That alone entitles me to my freedom.”

“In an ideal reality, yes,” Kist said, “but this is not an ideal reality.”

“Then what kind of reality is it?” I asked, turning the interrogation on him.

He sighed and sat on a tire near me. “It’s the type of reality where a granddaughter who loves her grandfather and her grandmother very much must one day learn that her grandfather is a heathen, and her grandmother is a slave. She discovers her purpose in life is to grow healthy and bear children. She is treated like glass, unable to swim in the sea or climb the trees. As an adult, she must choose a mate before she is twenty-five. Otherwise, one will be selected for her. She runs away, altering her appearance look like a boy. She tells the military recruits that the disease disfigured her while she was in the womb, when, in fact, her only disfigurement is being a woman.”

“You’re a girl?” I hissed under my breath, unsure of how to react. I felt compassion for her, but I was even more confused than before. I could not understand her decision to join the military and force upon other women what she had experienced herself. “How can you do this to us?”

“I came here to rescue them,” she declared, keeping her voice low. “I am the destiny of Earth if this war is lost.”

I repeated her story in my mind, and it struck me. The grandmother she spoke of was of the Earth

colony that the Surtu attacked sixty years before. Kist was not fully Surtu. She was part human.

It was hard to tell. She had the same elfin eyes as the rest of the Surtu, and the same flecks of light around her pupils.

“You’re not here to fight?” I confirmed.

“I can’t fight. My size won’t allow it. That’s why they put me on mechanical detail with the fatsos and the lazies. But if I were on the frontlines, I’d protect the women the fleets are seeking. That’s what I came here for.”

I wanted to trust her, but it was difficult. Torture came in many forms, and so did great actors. “Why did you tell me your story?” I asked.

“Because like me, you are more than what you seem.”

“What makes you say that?”

She stood, remembering the role she was meant to play. “Scream again.”

I did, but it wasn’t half the performance I put on earlier. “Who do you think I am?”

“You tell me.”

My situation was desperate. I needed someone to trust. “Lift up your shirt,” I demanded.

“I’m not that kind of girl, but thanks.”

I rolled my eyes. “Show me that you truly are who you say you are.”

Understanding, she lifted up her shirt. A nude cloth was wrapped in layers across her chest, binding her breasts.

I relaxed. “Good thing the Surtu uniforms are thick.”

She nodded but didn’t speak, waiting for me to say more.

It took me a moment to form the words. I knew once they were out, I wouldn’t be able to take them back. My efforts to hide the glider far from the northern base would be lost. “I am Terra Lynch,” I confessed. “I am light bonded to Jidden, of the Surtu.”

I didn’t know what she expected to hear, but that wasn’t it. Her eyes went wide with awe. “I knew Jidden and his mate had rescued an entire space station full of women, but I thought you were dead.”

There seemed to be a pattern forming. I did not realize everyone knew about our escape from the Fortuna. “Have you heard anything about my sister warriors?”

Kist glanced past the graveyard of vehicles, making sure no one was near to overhear. Then she came to me and pressed her lips close to my ear, working the ties around my hands as she spoke. “Earth is lost. The Surtu will win. It is inevitable. I belong to a network of Surtu who are helping humans to flee to a secret location – men, women, and children.”

The news was hard to take. “Is it that bad?” I asked.

“It is,” she said gravely, pulling away the last of the ties. “While it is still night, I will take you back to the woods. I’ll tell the others you died during torture, so I buried you. Find your way to the waterfall. I’ll have a messenger meet you there. It may take a few days. Whatever you do, don’t get caught again.”

I flexed my wrists, allowing the blood to return. “Can’t you tell me more?”

“No. It’s not safe,” Kist said adamantly. “The messenger will tell you more.”

I was uncomfortable with the secrecy. Everything was out of my control. But I had no choice. I went with her on her hover bike back into the woods, glad to be as far from the Surtu camp as possible.

“Thank you, Kist,” I said when I jumped off. “I hope we meet again, victorious in our cause.”

“It’s Kista, actually,” she admitted. “I changed it to Kist when I entered the military.”

“Thank you, Kista,” I corrected.

With a nod, she was gone, leaving me in the wilderness once again.



The waterfall was beautiful, especially in the daylight, but it was cold and isolating. I’d spent too many hours alone since watching the escape from the Fortuna. I wanted to find my friends, more than anything. I hoped that the messenger coming to help me would finally give me the news I longed to hear – that their ship had landed somewhere safe.

For days, I waited by the waterfall, watching the waters tumble like tears of the Earth. I almost gave up, believing no one would come, but I forced myself to stay.

He came one night while I was sleeping, shaking me gently awake. When I saw him, I thought I was still dreaming. Had the moonlight cast a spell? Was I projecting my heart outward.

It was Jidden.

Realizing I was awake, and he was beside me, I threw my arms around my alien lover, holding him tighter than I’d ever held him before, as he did to me. For the first time since Gallia’s death, I cried, overwhelmed with my love for him and the sense of safety he brought.

“I missed you,” he murmured, smoothing back my hair as I sobbed. “My life is empty without you. I love you, Terra. I love you more than I can say.”

I didn’t reply in words. I kissed him, my need for him great. My journey back to him had too many bruises and too many fears. Right now, all I wanted to feel was the bliss of his touch. I took off my Surtu uniform, resisting the urge to throw it over the waterfall. I helped him remove his clothing, sliding my hands up his hard abs and down the muscles of his arms, taking him in as if it were my first time with a man.

My sex was wet and ready to feel him inside me. Like a woman starved for too long, I pulled him onto the ground and wrapped my legs around his firm, naked body. He put his hand behind my back, lifting my hips up slightly, and then he entered me, his cock warm and thick inside me. Moving slowly, he began to gyrate, cherishing the joy of our lovemaking, in no hurry to let me go.

Every lingering thrust sent a jolt of ecstasy through me, making my body tingle with electricity. Jidden continued to take his time, sliding his cock in and out of me, savoring me. His lingering was

deliberate. He was building my fire, touching me from the inside as his cock massaged my pink flesh.

“I love your smell,” he whispered into my ear, his breath hot and delicious across my neck, arousing me even more.

I began to moan, panting with every thrust, feeling a charge crackle across my body that sent shock waves of pleasure through me. I didn't want him to stop. I wanted to feel his cock inside me like this forever.

Finally, my body could take it no more, and he unleashed a fire within me. I grabbed his hair and screamed out his name as he pushed further into me, giving me an extra charge of pleasure. I felt as if I had once again transformed into light, but I hadn't. I was blissfully aware of every sensation running across my flesh.

His cock remained hard inside of me. I had come, but he had yet to. Hearing me scream his name set him off, and he began to drive harder into me, growing inside of me, causing my blood to flow back and making me ache for more. I grabbed his backside and rocked my hips, pushing him deeper into me, uniting our bodies as one.

My hands moved down his backside and over the base of his cock, which was sticky with our love. He continued to thrust as I massaged his cock, and the fire returned, shaking my body with an agonizing rapture. Euphoric, I came again, this time with Jidden. He plunged into me one final time, his cock expanding, and then he released his love, spilling into me.

Our bodies hot despite the chill of the waterfall beside us. Jidden fell beside me, holding me in his arms, refusing to let go. I hoped he would never let me go again.

JIDDEN

I had finally found her – my light bonded. Being apart from her all of these months had been agony. I knew she lived. The connection we shared had told me so. I also knew she was suffering. She wouldn't admit it, but her time as a slave to Captain Fore and his men had wounded her. Only revenge could heal this wound.

There was no time for vengeance right now. Earth was losing the war against my people. Soon, nowhere would be safe. The only option we had left was to break away from the war and rebuild in a secret refuge far from Earth. I had searched a long time to find Terra, not knowing if she was still on the Fortuna or made it to Earth.

Now I knew. I only had regret in my heart. I could have gotten to her so much sooner. I owed the network a lot. It had saved Terra and brought her back into my arms.

There was also no time for regret. We had to get to the rescue ship before it left. They timed departures accurately. It was the only way the network could ensure the safe passage of those we rescued. We ran. I held her hand as we raced across the grassy plains. I wouldn't let go again.

A sudden blast caught our attention. Ahead of us, a Surtu craft landed beside a boarding school for young women. For the Surtu, it was like hitting the jackpot. The blast had been a warning shot, scaring the girls out from their hiding spot in the cellar of the school. We watched as they emerged from the cellar doors with their hands raised high.

Three men exited the craft, their blasters out. They wouldn't shoot, but the girls didn't know that. They trembled in their long nightdresses, dropping their arms to hold each other.

Terra stopped and looked at the girls, her face twisting in anger.

"We don't have time," I told her, trying to pull her away. "We can't save everyone."

She didn't respond, caring little for her rescue. I knew then that I'd lost her to the cause. But Terra was my everything. My love for her was absolute.

If she were determined to die right now, then I would die with her.

Chapter 23

TERRA

I crept behind the barn of the boarding school with Jidden by my side. There were only three men, and none of them wore armored suits. They were vulnerable, easy targets.

Before the Surtu invaded, if I had imagined myself in this situation, I would have thought I could save the teen girls by reasoning with the men. It was almost laughable.

There was no reasoning with the Surtu soldiers. They had come to dominate Earth. The only way to win against them was to kill them first.

I entered the barn to search for weapons, not expecting to find a group of men, women, and children cowering behind the hay. On instinct, I pushed Jidden back before he could follow me in, not wanting to scare the people inside. There was more than a boarding school full of girls at stake. There was an entire community, likely farmers and their families from around the plains.

Holding a finger to my mouth, signaling for them to stay quiet, I picked out a rake from the tools on the wall. I thought it my best option, but a man approached me with a set of daggers in his hand. Grateful, I accepted them, and then I returned outside.

The soldiers had lined the girls up, no doubt choosing their favorite. It was repulsive. I waved Jidden back, indicating for him to cover the barn, and I went to the well at the side of the boarding school. It was the closest I could get to the soldiers without being seen.

Daggers could not kill soldiers. I had witnessed that firsthand the day Gallia died. But daggers could disarm them, even if only for a few seconds. That's all I needed – a few seconds.

I threw a dagger from behind the well. As I intended, it landed in a soldier's throat. He dropped his blaster and fell to his knees, choking on his blood. The two remaining soldiers immediately had their guard up, but I was Nightshade. They were fools. I threw two more daggers, and the soldiers went down.

Knowing there was only a little time before they healed themselves, I went to the first soldier and picked up his blaster. I pointed it directly at his head. I had never killed a person before. I never thought I could do it, but I did not hesitate as I pulled the trigger.

A blast echoed across the plain.

You cannot use your mind to heal if you have no mind to use, I thought, and I moved on to the other two soldiers to do the same. Two more blasts. Two less Surtu soldiers to claim the innocence of

the young women.

I threw the blaster down and signaled Jidden to watch over the girls. “You can trust him,” I told them. “Don’t be scared.” Then I went to the barn and coaxed out the families inside. “We have to hurry. A rescue ship waits.”

“But our town – it’s just west of here. We managed to escape when the Surtu invaded, but we have to go back and save the rest,” a woman explained, grabbing my arm.

From my time as Commander on the Fortuna, I had learned that there was a time to fight, and there was a time to sacrifice. We had fought, and now we had to go. “They’re lost,” I told the woman. “We have to head to the ship. It’s your decision if you follow.”

Tears of sorrow spilled down her cheeks, but she nodded her understanding.

With Jidden leading the way, we continued to run across the plains. It was no longer just the two of us. Most of the rescued followed, but some had stayed behind to go back and fight. They would likely die, but at least they would die honorably. I respected their decision.

We arrived at the ship just as it was about to take off. It hovered over the ground, but the loading door was still open. Jidden and I lifted the people onto the ship one by one until only we remained. The stronger of us, Jidden jumped on first, and then he reach his hand down to me. “This time, we stay together, or we leave together,” he said.

I wanted to continue the fight on Earth, but I knew people needed me elsewhere. I grabbed Jidden’s hand and allowed him to pull me onto the ship. “Wherever we go, it will be together,” I promised, and I sealed that promise with a kiss.



With great sadness, I watched from the ship as the Earth grew smaller and faded from sight. Jidden wrapped me in his arms, feeling my pain through our light bond. Earth was lost. The growing number of military space stations floating in darkness told me so. The war against the Surtu was a war we could not win.

But I found comfort in Jidden’s arms. The Earth may be lost, but hope wasn’t. I looked forward to the refuge. My sister warriors waited for me there in a secret place where humans and Surtu lived together in freedom and love.

“Are you ready?” Jidden asked, caressing my cheek.

We would not be traveling at warp speed. The Surtu ship could move much faster than our own.

“I’m ready,” I said, and I braced myself for the light.

The End



Continue the Warriors of Surtu Series in book two, Kidnapped by Surtu.

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Lisa Lace is a bestselling sci-fi romance author and lives in northern California with her spouse and five children. Her stories have:

- 1) Good-looking aliens
- 2) Strong, independent Earth girls
- 3) Happy endings

Read More from Lisa Lace:

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I AM HUMAN

MELLA AMADE AND MICHAEL TROZZO

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I AM HUMAN

All he wanted was an employee of the month placard. He didn't ask to be treated like a god or hunted by an assassin.

In 2017, the year Charlie Richards made his universe changing discovery, mankind had become content using their most significant technological advancements primarily to share videos of cute cats. Which is why when Charlie wrote the computer/genetic bridging code that would give birth to a whole new race, its importance was noticed by no one. Not even by Charlie Richards.

At least, not until he met Jade.

Jadyn of Crowley, your run-of-the-mill hybrid assassin from the future, arrived in 2017 intent on bringing Charlie to her time no matter the cost. She needed him. Her people needed him. The hybrid race, the race that Charlie Richard's code would one day create, was plagued with a disease only he could solve.

Fixing the code he had invented could be the answer to at least thirteen of Charlie's problems. It could get him out of his humdrum day job, make him a hero of the future, and win him a woman he probably didn't deserve and most certainly couldn't handle (see: hybrid assassin.)

Or, it could get him killed by the megalomaniac COO, Warren Relic, who's looking for a way to take control of the hybrid industry, the city, and possibly even the world. All Warren needs is a gullible programmer who can fix the code and that no one will miss once he flips the kill switch.

And all Charlie Richards had wanted was an employee of the month placard.

Chapter 1

There lived in the Topeka of Kansas, in the seventeenth year of the 21st century, an unremarkable young man by the name of Charlie Richards; confirmed unremarkable by all associates, relative or not. To others, he was a man who lived beneath his possibilities. A brilliant computer scientist who used his talents to make an application reminding cat owners to feed their feline friends (aptly named Feline Friend Feeder™.) To exasperate the situation, he didn't even like cats. So, it was pointedly remarkable that unremarkable Charlie Richards, of Topeka, Kansas, would make the discovery, which would change the world in greater ways than fire, gravity, online commerce and quantum theory combined.

In the year Charlie made this discovery, technological advancements had become increasingly senseless. The 21st century began with such titillating promise. Human innovation was on a roll, falling face first into the computer and virtual age. Nonetheless, somewhere along the way mankind decided to use these tremendous advancements to find different ways to share videos of cute babies and/or puppies. Sure, breakthroughs such as Wii Tennis or the automated-cleaning iRobot were important for generations to come, but they didn't come close to fulfilling the potential humanity possessed. So, when Charlie, eighty-sixth ranked computer programmer (out of eighty-nine) at Bandicoot TechSmart Corp. wrote the code that would create the most important bridge ever constructed - a bridge to bond computers and genetics; a bridge to birth the hybrid race; a bridge to alter life, death and everything in between - its importance was noticed by virtually no one. Not even by Charlie Richards.

At least, not until he met Jadyn (Jade) of Crowley.

To say Jade stuck out like a sore thumb, as she stood there at the end of the bar inside the Lonely Tree Tavern, was a grave understatement. She stuck out like a throbbing red thumb covered in sirens and strobe lights. There were several obvious signs. One would be the sheer black leather clothes, which made her look like a sci-fi character from another planet. Another might have been that Charlie could guesstimate that her height and muscle tone put her somewhere in the range of "she could break him in two" and "she could break him in four." Her physically intimidating strength was complemented by physically intimidating beauty, which surely had caused many a bar fight. She had sleek black hair that came to the shoulders. Her high, strong cheekbones ran under wide eyes of green.

Or, usually green, occasionally they seemed to shift in color. All this made the woman stick out, but the simplest and most obvious reason was this was the Lonely Tree Tavern, and she was a woman.

Charlie quickly averted his eyes.

One could kindly describe Charlie Richards as “not polished with the opposite sex” and rudely call him “a god damn loser with women.” Either way, they both were valid points. Instead, he stared into the series of numbers and letters he was scribbling on his bar napkin. Scrawling code was something he did anytime he was nervous (note: often.) He wrote furiously, drank his beer furiously, and averted his eyes furiously.

“What you wanna to talk to him for?” The voice, thick with drink, could only belong to one man: Sal. Charlie cringed at the sound of it. Most people here just left him alone. To them, Charlie was just some weird guy who sat at the end of the bar jotting in his notebook and drinking fancy foreign stuff. Some of the regulars here were even nice to him, and wondered where he was if he didn’t come around a night. But Sal, when he had too many beers (note: often), he would become a right asshole. Charlie could generally just ignore it, but not always. Once, Sal took his notebook and Charlie flipped out. Long story short, while Charlie ended up losing the fight, he did get his notebook back.

Charlie couldn’t help but look up and see Sal standing beside the woman, both looking at him. Then, the oddest thing happened. One of the woman’s eyes went ablaze in red, and a smile came to her lips. She was smiling at him. Charlie. A woman was smiling at Charlie Richards.

“Don’t waste your time with that one,” Sal said gruffly. “Guy is off his rocker. Just sits there writing gibberish.”

At the far end of the bar came some grumbles and murmurs and a hoot. Sal’s cronies stood by a pool table, enjoying their favorite part of the evening when Sal caused some trouble. Time for another round.

The woman turned to Sal. “Don’t speak that way about such a man.”

Charlie blinked twice. Wait. What?

Sal chuckled. “Why don’t you come have a drink with me. I promise, you’ll have a much better time.” He placed his hand on the woman’s shoulder. It was one of the three worst mistakes Sal had ever made, in contention with the ’96 Dodge Ram he bought with a fucked-up transmission and his six DUI’s (that collectively counted as one mistake).

In a blinding blink of an eye, the woman’s eye went from green to black. She grabbed Sal’s wrist, twisted it, and broke it with ease. Sal fell to one knee, screaming in pain. The woman grabbed his shirt and, like throwing a twig, tossed Sal across the floor where he hit the wall next to the pool table. It was, on any universally known scale, totally badass. And intimidating.

Dan the Man, the heavy-set bartender, knew it was in his job description to tell patrons that throwing people across the tavern was absolutely not allowed. Though Dan the Man was a sturdy man and no stranger to bar fights, as he approached the woman his face went from threatening, to considering, to something just north of fear. “Please,” he mumbled. “No more throwing customers.”

The woman gave a slight bow. "Of course."

It was subtle, but Charlie could sense laughter behind her words. Sal crawled to his feet and yelling some derogatory words as he slunk away to join his cronies and no doubt plot his revenge.

The woman then did the one thing Charlie feared most. She looked at him, smiled, and made her way towards him. Charlie's face remained blank, but his stomach was filled with a vast prairie of butterflies, including a purple one. The woman pulled out the barstool next to him and sat herself down. "What are you drinking?"

Charlie Richards had been coming to this tavern several times a week for, well, it had been quite some time, and the total number of female voices that had asked him what he was drinking totaled one. His mother. She had rudely stopped by and asked the question in an accusatorial tone. This was not the same tone. This was not his mother. This woman was, by any past, present, or future scales, hot. She also, it should be remembered, had just thrown Sal Thompson across the bar. While time is relative, no one could deny that Charlie spent a long time looking stupidly at the woman with no words coming out of his mouth. Finally, the answer to her question came to Charlie. "Um, it's an Amstel Light."

After a long pause, the woman finally asked. "Well?"

"Um, well...what?"

"Aren't you going to buy me a beer? It is the custom of the times, right?" The woman smiled a beautiful smile. She held out her hand in friendly greeting. "My name's Jade."

"Oh. Oh, yes. Right." Charlie ignored her hand, slapping nervously at his pockets for his wallet, before realizing he had a tab open. He waved Dan the Man over, still not making eye contact with Jade. "A drink for, um, the lady."

Dan the Man was at a complete loss as to what was going on in this world anymore. He looked at Charlie. Then at Jade. Then at Charlie. Then at Jade. He knew this Charlie, he was a regular - a regular loser (zing!). He was the guy who just sat at the end of the bar and work in his notebook, scribbling down random numbers and letters. This woman, on the other hand, was so hot you could fry an egg on her at midnight and she could tear anyone to shreds. This did not add up.

"I'll have what he's having," Jade said, breaking the awkward silence. Dan the Man stood up straight, eyeing them suspiciously a second longer. "Sure." He nodded an incredulous an alright I'll play along. "Sure thing."

Dan left to pour a draft and Charlie sipped his beer to avoid having to talk to the woman. It was clear Jade would have to lead the conversation, and she did so in the most surprising way.

"You're Charlie Richards," she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Charlie's eyes grew wide. "What?"

"I can't believe it." Jade grinned, shaking her head in the classic 'I can't believe it' shake. "I - me! - am sitting next to Charlie Richards." Forget bar fights, empires have contested over smiles like the one which graced her face. "Charlie Richards."

Charlie's mind was doing poorly orchestrated gymnastics. Who the hell was this woman? Why was she talking to him? How did she know who he was? How had she thrown big ass Sal like a peanut? How much was he going to have to drink to get over how awkward he felt? He decided to tackle the final question first and gulped down half his beer.

"What are you working on?" Jade asked.

"Huh?"

"Charlie, you're a genius. It wasn't a difficult question." Jade pointed down to the open notebook in front of him where the writing scrawled to the edge of the page and onto the bar napkin next to it. It was pure chaos on paper, zeroes and ones and dollar signs and such. It was the ramblings of a drunk man at the end of the bar.

Jade pointed to the end of the page and a bunch of text. "See, this is where it gets good." It read in part:

```
1.//Loop and create individuals
```

```
2.For ($i=0, $i<count($this.people); $i++) {
```

```
3.$new person = new individual ();
```

```
4.$new person > generateIndividual(count(fitnessscale;$solution) );
```

```
5.$individual = person ($new hybrid);
```

"It's nothing," Charlie deflected. "Just some random thoughts I had in my spare time."

"Those are some specific random thoughts," Jade said, the smile never leaving her face.

"I assure you, it's pretty random."

"Right now, yes, but just wait. It will be the most specific 4,282 characters ever written."

Charlie looked up from his beer. This was going from awkward to weird to what the fuck super-fast. "Excuse me?" he said, this time not timidly.

"I mean, I wish I could change a few characters, would have saved us a lot of heartbreak. And probably I could have been taller. But if I told you what to change it would have drastic effects. Still, all things considered, it's the most impressive 4,282 characters the world will ever see."

"Who are you?"

Jade finished off her beer and eyed him playfully. "No, Charlie. That's the wrong question."

Charlie didn't respond.

"The question, Charlie Richards of Topeka, Kansas," Jade continued, "is who are you?"

Chapter 2

Who was Charlie Richards of Topeka, Kansas? Well, he wasn't much of anything. Not yet, anyway. We could start with this fact, the most cliché trait of mid-30's loserdom, he lived in the basement of his mom's house. His life at this point had all the makings of a bad joke. A hot woman walks into a bar, beats up the rough and tough regular, and sits down next to guy who lives in the basement of his mom's house. Charlie wasn't sure what the exact punchline was, but he was sure it involved him.

He cringed as Jade looked at him. Could she tell he'd only had sex three times in his life and two of those times were historically awful, with crying involved... and the crying was him. The highlight of his life thus far was winning a free trip to the Grand Canyon to look at a giant hole in the earth. He even bought a fridge magnet to memorialize the trip.

But then there was this; he knew in his brain of brains that something was different about his mind. And he hated himself for it. He just wanted to be one of the cool kids. All through school he just wanted to throw a kegger and get laid, but instead all he could think about was building machines, or how to improve existing technology. In college, he'd invented a way to store information remotely on servers instead of individual computers, but he didn't do anything with the invention. Years later, of course, the term "cloud" was everywhere. Charlie could have made millions. But it wasn't who Charlie was meant to be. Charlie had studied genetics at Georgetown. One of his instructors, Professor Deakins, said he had the most brilliant medical mind he had ever known and he could be in the forefront of genetic engineering. This alone inspired Charlie to drop out. Charlie was not about to be at the forefront of anything.

Charlie took an online class in programming and became a Bandicoot employee. The company's ranking system helped ensure Charlie kept himself ranked close to last so that no one would bother him. It would be less stressful. This was his style.

And he wasn't about to change his style just because some kick ass demigoddess walked into his watering hole.

"Right," Charlie said, "Let's focus on my question. Asking who you are is quite valid. You seem to know things. You beat up Sal. You're talking to me at a bar. You're, um, quite pleasant looking."

They had downed about six beers each at this point and Charlie was getting loopy. Jade, on the

other hand, was her same twinkling-eye, smiling self.

“You don’t seem the Lonely Tree type, if I do say. In fact, you don’t strike me as from Kansas at all.” Charlie shrugged.

Jade looked around at the dark walls and crooked frames of the Lonely Tree. “Well, Charlie, you don’t really seem the type either. Not from what I’ve seen in the museums.”

Charlie blinked blankly eleven times.

Before now, the oddest conversation Charlie had ever had was in a park. It had been with a duck. They had argued over Mr. Duck stealing a piece of bread out of Charlie’s lunch bag. The duck had quacked back, thus defining it as a conversation and not a lecture. They had earned some peculiar stares when Charlie starting quacking angrily back at him. It was an odd exchange. Still, it was roughly 1.2 lightyears behind the oddity of this conversation.

To be fair, Jadyn of Crowley was a bit surprised at the conversation herself. Here’s a tip: when one travels through time, leave your expectations in your present. Print out this fortune cookie wisdom and tape it to your time machine. Then highlight it. I will make this whole-hearted promise, that no matter how many Renaissance Festivals you’ve done research at; your expectations are wrong.

This was a lesson Jade should have heeded upon meeting Charlie Richards. Here was the god of hybrids. In a few centuries from now, monuments would be built to this man. Jade was from those centuries and knew it to be true. It would be said that Charlie was a mountain of intellect, an ocean of knowledge, a lightning bolt of invention. Also, that he had adequately large biceps. Upon meeting Charlie, however – suffice to say, leave your expectations in your present.

But she needed him. Her people needed him. And Jade of Crowley didn’t fail her missions. She didn’t fail her people. She didn’t fail herself.

Vooosh!

A loud rumble boomed through the air and shook the bar. Several bottles of liquor fell to the ground, crashing and sending liquid and Dan the Man across the floor. Jade held her fingers to her temple and closed her eyes tightly. Charlie regained his seating and looked around at the patrons in the bar, mumbling in wonderment of what caused the noise. When Charlie looked back at Jade, her face became anxious.

“What was that?” he asked.

In a flash, Jade’s face went back to its charming self. “Why don’t we get out of here, Charlie? I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

“Why don’t you tell me right here?” Charlie said with a slight drunken slur.

“You will become the most important person in the world, Charlie.”

Charlie knew this woman was clearly insane. However, he didn’t seem to care at the moment. If she thought Charlie was someone else and, even better, that he was important, well who was he to argue? He didn’t get many chances at this, crazy girl or not.

“Come on, Charlie.” Jade continued with a mischievous grin. “I’ll show you everything you want

to see.”

“Intrigued...”

Jade’s delightful smile came out in full force. “I’ll do things you’ll appreciate.”

“Dan the Man!” Charlie yelled to the bar drunkenly. “Close out my tab, good sir!”

They left quickly. Charlie sensed it was important to this woman, but he also knew he had to take the opportunity before she changed her mind.

They stepped out into cool Kansas night. It was late fall, Charlie’s favorite time of year, and the stars were particularly bright this evening. *Ad astra per aspera*, Charlie thought. To the stars through difficulty. His state motto was fitting tonight. The stars teamed up with the moon to cast significant blue light over the streets.

“Jade,” Charlie said, smiling. A drunken smile. This whole night had been fun. Mostly because it wasn’t ordinary. And all of Charlie’s nights for as long as he could remember had been ordinary. “Tell me, what do you want with me? I don’t think I’m who you think I am.”

“The code in your notebook says differently,” Jade pointed at the book with Marvin the Robot on the cover. “We need the code. You said so yourself, four pages before you wrote it.”

Charlie’s brows furrowed as he looked up at her aquiline features. What the hell was she on about? How could she know what he’d written four pages before what she saw? Had he even written that? He opened the book to his bookmark, then turned back four pages. This is the most important code ever in the history of codes and/or humanity.

Charlie looked up from the notebook to Jade. “I was probably drunk when I wrote that.”

Jade shrugged.

“Wait, how did you know that was there?” Charlie asked slowly. “Did Nate tell you about this? Did he send you? This is all a joke, isn’t it?” He motioned at the city, where he knew his co-worker Nate was probably off in the middle of some cosplay heaven. “Well played, sir.”

“Where I come from,” Jade spoke quietly in the dark evening air, “universities and hospitals are named after you.” A small smile warmed Charlie as she looked at him. “You know, there’s even a fish and chip restaurant on the corner of the street I grew up on named after you. Weird, right? Charlie’s F&C it’s called.”

“That’s my favorite food.”

“Everybody knows that.”

Charlie frowned but grabbed onto something that made sense. “I don’t think you’re from Kansas.”

“I need your help, Charlie.”

“Sure. But if it’s for a ride we should probably get an Uber. I’ve had a bit to drink.”

Jade grabbed Charlie by the shoulders and her left eye distorted while her dark right eye watched him closely.

Her left eye was clear as glass.

Charlie jumped back. He could see through her eye! He could see the blood vessels and

mechanical parts behind it.

“Take a second to process this,” Charlie muttered. “Blood vessels and mechanical parts ... What the hell?”

“You invented my race, Charlie.”

Charlie wasn't quite freaking out, but it was safe to say he was on the edge of a cliff and ready to tumble. “A race to...?”

“To three centuries from now, Charlie,” Jade said. “Where we need your help.”

Good, Charlie thought. She's just insane. That's not so bad. “So, you're from the future,” he smiled.

Jade ignored him. “You're the only one who can help. The code linking genetics and computers, your code, needs you.”

Varooosh.

The roaring rumble returned with a vengeance. Charlie stumbled around as it shook the ground. Then two and a half blocks over, a white burning light shot into the air. It wasn't just light though, it was full of energy and fire. It was unlike anything Charlie had ever seen. Silhouetted in the light stood a giant figure. Its proportions were not human. It was like a mechanical Hercules.

Jade closed her eyes and touched her temples again. He could see the glass eye moving around under the lid. When she opened her eyes, there was a strain running through them. “I have to go, Charlie.”

“Um, yeah.” Charlie stammered. “You're right, it is getting late and I really should be going-”

“Charlie.” The twinkle in Jade's eyes dimmed. Her charming smile faded. Her eyes grew dark and serious, her lips strong yet desperate. “Charlie. You created us Charlie. And we're dying.”

“Enough,” Charlie's speech slurred and he reached towards Jade. He sucked with women and he was going to try and at least suck with this one, too. He was a little shocked when he let her catch him.

“It's the code, Charlie,” she said looking down at him. “It's evolved. It's changing us.”

“Shhhhh,” he murmured, reaching up to place a hand over her lips. Damn she was tall.

“We need someone who knows the code and can restore it. We need you. I need you!” Jade moved in for a passionate kiss. Charlie had to stand on his toes to kiss her. It made him wobbly and it made the brush of his lips just as much a fail as every other female encounter he'd had: epic. His pursed mouth stumbled across her cheek before they tripped on her lips and fell off.

She looked at him kindly but stepped away, her eyes looking warily at the light blowing up the sky. “Meet me here tomorrow night with all your research. Someone's followed us. I have to take care of that before we can go back.”

Before the words were even completely out of her mouth, Jade was gone into the night, rushing in the direction where the strange white light had been blowing up the horizon. Charlie stared after her, his fingers pressed against his lower lip. Then he did what any drunk loser would do... he puked all

over his white sneakers.

Chapter 3

Charlie arrived at the family-owned rancher on MacVicar Avenue, full of tumultuous emotions. There was a gallon of elation, a pint of doubt, a dash of fear, and all sorts of anxiousness. Stirred with ice, it culminated in a general sense of bewilderment. It was unfathomable that the night had actually happened the way he was remembering it.

His brain stumbled over bits and pieces he didn't understand, selectively discarding them so he didn't have to check himself into a crazy ward. It started with everything Jade had said. He discounted those as crazy rantings. Forget the part where a giant white beam from some future world shot into the air and shook the ground. Doubly forget the lurking futuristic figure. The mind needed to focus on what was important; a very attractive woman threw away (literally) Sal Thompson and came over to him, HIM, and said he was important and she needed him. Focus on that, Charlie. Forget the crazy stuff.

"Well don't you have just the biggest smile on your face."

Charlie's mother sat on the couch watching Jeopardy and, more importantly, the love of her life, Jeopardy's host Sir Alex Trebeck (while not officially knighted by the King of Canada, Sir Alex should have been by now and thus deserved to be addressed with the appropriate title of honor.) This wasn't just Jeopardy airing after the evening news. Charlie's mother, Marie, had all four thousand hours of every single episode on tape. It was the only thing she ever watched, twelve hours a day. The entire run of the show ran on a 334-day loop. Ask the woman anything about a State Park or a Potent Potable and Charlie would bet all the money in his pockets she would know the answer.

"It's been an interesting night," Charlie said, chucking his notebook on the counter.

"How much did you drink?" Marie asked, muting the television.

"I dunno, a few?" He shrugged. "Seven?"

Marie shook her head. "We agreed, two beers at the most. You have a very delicate system."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Yes, mom."

"What's got you drinking like a fish? It's only seven o'clock!"

"Well, I met this woman--"

Marie was up on her feet in a flash. She wasn't old, early sixties and in good shape despite all the Jeopardy watching, and quite nimble. Any signs of her being upset with Charlie vanished into thick

air. “A woman?” She asked the question with glee.

“Settle down.” Charlie waved his hands. But clearly, he didn’t want her to settle down. He was enjoying seeing her excited. As excited as he was. Since he had already mentally blocked the craziness, leaving behind a kiss, he was already pondering where they would buy their house with the white picket fence. “I just met her.” He smiled knowingly. “So, we’ll see.”

“Well, I think it’s just great,” Marie said wrapping an arm around him in approval. “But” she wagged a finger at him, “you shouldn’t be drinking so much around a lady.”

“Alright, alright.”

The doorbell rang and they both turned to look at the door and then at each other. They had few visitors here, mostly just one, and that one was who Charlie feared had just rung the bell.

“Who is that?” Charlie asked hesitantly.

“Your sister. Invited the family over for dinner.” Marie said, bounding to the door.

Charlie sank into the stool by the kitchen island, lowered his head to the marble, and began to pound his head on it. This night had been going so well.



The dinner table was set with an ample-sized ham and steaming side dishes of peas and green beans and butternut squash. When it was just Charlie and his mom, dinners generally consisted of anything microwaved under three minutes. There was, after all, Jeopardy to be watched. But when his sister’s family came over, Mom went all out to impress.

Charlie sat next to his ten-year-old nephew, Alex, and across from his teenage niece, Autumn.

Autumn clicked away on her phone, clearly wishing she was somewhere else. At one end of the table sat Charlie’s mom facing an empty chair at the other end. This is because Charlie’s sister, Tabitha, was pacing in circles in the kitchen yelling into her cell phone. No doubt some assistant of hers was getting an earful over some minor infraction. Tabitha was the C.E.O. at Tradigital Blazer, the most successful, and profitable, marketing agency in Topeka. The city’s famous “To peek into Topeka is to peek into heaven” tagline was all her doing. The city had loved it. It made her the favored child of the whole damn town.

Charlie despised it.

Alex fidgeted in his seat, clearly uneasy about the yelling, but Autumn just tapped away at her phone, clearly a well-adjusted-to-chaos teenager. Conversation wasn’t going to be easy, but Charlie was going to attempt it.

“So, school’s almost out.” He nodded towards Autumn, even though she didn’t look up. “What are you doing for the summer, Autumn?”

She startled when he said her name and gave a half-shrug. Her eyes quickly flitted to her uncle before returning like a boomerang to her phone. “I dunno. Probably go to south of France or

somewhere else boring like we always do.”

Oh, the humanity. “Poor thing,” Charlie muttered. “I hope you can survive the dreadful crepes and baguettes you’ll be forced to live off.” His sarcasm fell on deaf ears. Autumn was already deep into some random flicking of Snapchat.

“Uncle Charlie?” Alex tugged on Charlie’s shirt. “Did you hear how Taborlin did at Robofest?” Taborlin was Alex’s robot he’d been working on for years. He took it to all sorts of competitions. Taborlin was already a legendary robot on the youth robotic competition circuit. Taborlin was so great Alex had to compete with high school kids. “He won three golds and a silver. He even broke the Kansas record for clearing the Mount Doom course!”

“Whoa!” Charlie was genuinely impressed. “That course is nearly impossible!”

“I know!” Alex was beaming with pride. “The programming you helped me with was amazing. I even got my photo with the mayor!”

Charlie’s mom gave a proud gasp. “The mayor, Alex? Where’s the photo? I need to have the picture on the fridge.”

Tabitha finished her call and sat down with an audible sigh. “Seriously, I can’t believe building robots is part of the school curriculum. Whatever happened to getting a scholarship the old-fashioned way; throwing a football well.”

Alex sagged visibly and ran his fork through his mashed potatoes. Charlie looked from one to the other. Tabitha was oblivious to Alex’s dejection. He was obviously smart, but his sensitivity must be a trait he got from his dad. He just needed one person’s approval, and she was already back to checking work emails on her phone.

“Well, I think it’s amazing.” Charlie reassured Alex, who gave a weak smile.

“Humph.” Tabitha snorted. “You would think that,” she said.

Here we go again, Charlie thought. “It’s good to see you, sis. How’s work?”

Tabitha did not compute the sarcasm. She liked nothing more to go on about how important her job was. “Deadlines. So many deadlines. I’ve got three Fortune 500 companies who need material stat-” Charlie zoned her out for a while. She would talk all night about her work and her company. She was a C.E.O., which meant she was a chief, which meant responsibility, which meant she was important, which meant what she was saying was important. On and on it would go until it was time to leave. There was never a conversation with Tabitha. There was only ever listening. And Charlie would always let her. He never had anything to say. But Charlie was feeling different today. It had been an interesting night. He had met a girl unlike any he had ever met. There had been sparks, and energy shooting into the sky. Not real? He wasn’t sure. What Charlie Richards was sure about right now is he was tired of listening about his sister’s work.

“Hey Tabitha?”

She ignored him.

“Tabitha.”

She kept right on talking.

“Tabitha!” Charlie slammed his palm down on the table and everything stopped. Tabitha cut off mid-sentence, his mother took the glass away from her lips, Alex’s eyes grew wide and Autumn even looked up from her phone and stopped her incessant tapping. “Why don’t we let someone else talk tonight, shall we?”

All eyes turned to Tabitha. She was white hot with anger.

“Really, Charlie? You want to take over this meeting?” She asked.

“This is a family dinner.” Charlie pointed to the people and food on the table.

“You have some important experiences to bring to the table? Please, by all means, let’s hear them.” She threw out her hands widely, a classic boardroom meeting technique. “Let us all hear it. Did you, perhaps, go to work, stare at a screen, go to a bar, come home to eat dinner with your mother? Hopefully, if you play your card rights, later tonight you can watch Jeopardy and sneak in a few more beers? I mean, unless you’re drunk right now?”

Charlie gritted his teeth. This is why he never spoke up to her. It never went well. And, well, he was still a little drunk.

“Do tell, Charlie.” Tabitha continued. “I’m sure it was quite different then every other day for the last fifteen years.”

“Oh, shut up.” Charlie snapped. It was a snap. Not a great wood splintering rip, just a snap of a twig. But for Charlie Richards and the people in this room, it was loud. Tabitha’s faced danced between anger and amusement. “Nice balls, Charlie,” she drawled.

“Actually,” Charlie’s mom interrupted. “Charlie met a girl!” His mom beamed with pride.

Charlie did not beam with pride. Charlie cringed and sighed. This was not what he wanted brought up at this table. His sister would seize her greedy talons into this topic. His mom beamed with pride.

Tabitha’s face creased in glee. Well, this was going to be entertaining. “Realllly?” The word drawled out of Tabitha’s mouth with laughter. “Do tell.”

Charlie had been waiting for something to brag about to his younger sister since he was six years old. The then three-year-old Tabitha had already grasped a stronghold on the titles of Cutest, Most Worthy of Attention, and Consistent Overachiever. They were titles she went on to hold for the next thirty-one years. No one could deny, then or now, Charlie was the smarter one. It was the only title Charlie held over his sister (at least, the only positive one.) But that’s not to say his sister wasn’t extremely smart. This fact grated on Charlie’s nerves.

To add further insult, she always seemed to use every iota of her intelligence to get ahead in life. Charlie used his gifts to become very good at video games, both playing and making them. She was a born marketer, and even in childhood knew how to play the game. Charlie could solve the same puzzle Tabitha did in less time and it wouldn’t matter. Praise was lavished on her because of how charmingly she did it. Blasted marketing.

Except for his mom. She would always point out to Charlie how special he was and how he would change the world one day. She was the only one, though.

So, he had been looking forward to any chance to brag to his sister, and a hot girl on his arm fit the bill nicely. Problem was, the girl believed she was from the future and he could save the world. By legal definition, Statute 153B, that was grounds to declare her certifiable insane.

“Charlie?” Tabitha’s shrill voice cut through Charlie’s thoughts.

“Huh?”

“You’re staring into space again. I’ve asked you three times, what’s her name?”

He couldn’t let his sister get hold of the narrative. “It’s nothing, really.” He stared into his plate hoping the subject would be dropped.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed, Charlie.” Tabitha’s tone was as sincere as the day was long. “I’m sure she’s very nice.”

Trap! Charlie knew that tone. Marketing. Tabitha knew how to get what she wanted.

Trap!

Just don’t say anything.

“Her name is Jade!” Charlie blurted it out unnaturally loud. It startled the entire table.

“Jade’s a nice name,” Charlie’s mom chirped in.

Tabitha smiled just slightly. To others it surely looked charming. Charlie knew it was full of danger. “Where is Jade from?”

Charlie had to think. Where was she from? Oh, right, she was from the future! Of course, she was. That’s exactly what he should say. Oh sis, she’s quite nice. She from hundreds of years from now.

“Iowa,” Charlie mumbled instead. Charlie Richards was a smart man, but Tabitha always got to him and he had trouble thinking straight. It was hard to think straight and avoid verbal land mines at the same time. Where the hell did Iowa come from?

“Iowa?” Tabitha said, intrigued. “Interesting. What’s she doing in Topeka?”

Charlie knew he needed to stop lying. It never went well. A slippery slope, and all. “She’s hear to attend a convention.”

Whoops.

“What kind of convention?”

“Sci-fi.” Charlie chuckled at his own little lie. Good, if they ever did meet Charlie could just say she was role playing. Point Charlie.

“Charlie.” Tabitha paused dramatically, as if deciding what to say. “She sounds nice. I hope we get to meet her. You know, before she has to go home to Iowa.”

“Me too.” Charlie let out a deep sigh of relief. It could have gone worse. He lurched up from the table so fast a glass rattled against his plate. “I’ll get the dishes,” he muttered, reaching forward a trembling hand to steady the platter.



Tabitha Richards-Dunkin was one hell of a good younger sister.

Poor Charlie.

He was a good older brother and she loved him very much, but sheesh, he couldn't help but be a handful sometimes. I mean, he was so smart, how did he not know Tabitha was the most important marketing consultant to the city of Topkea? If there was a convention in town, Tabitha would know about it.

Poor Charlie.

This was bad even for him, making up meeting a girl. She had spent most of her life going out of her way to make Charlie a better person. She thought she was doing a good job at it. Apparently not. Her eyes slid to her daughter, Autumn. "Put your phone away." She was always on the phone. Good thing she was so pretty.

Poor Charlie.

She decided it was time to step up her game. It was time for her to set him up with somebody. Not her friends, of course, they were a bit out of his league. But she was a titan of marketing. She could sell anything. Surely, she could sell her own brother. Tabitha needed to save her brother from a life alone. Tabitha was one hell of a good sister.



The dishes were done, and Charlie sat on the outdated living room carpet with Alex. They were playing a card game involving magic and hit points and numbers. It was not an even match, Alex was clearly the superior player.

"You see this one here?" Alex pointed the character on the card. He was a knight, his lance roared with flames and his helmet glowed blue (apparently with magic ice powers.) "His name is Halidan. He is savior of the realm, like Taborlin the Great. If he is played when your city has been destroyed, he rebuilds it. He's my favorite."

"Seems like a pretty good card," Charlie smiled, leaning forward to gain a better view of the great but unrecognized by title, Halidan.

"He's totally hard to find. I had to trade my bike to get him." Alex stroked the card lovingly with his thumb.

"Your bike?!" Charlie nearly fell backwards. "For a card?"

"Of course," Alex gazed up at Charlie, his eyes full of worship. "He's the ultimate hero."

Charlie's shock melted. "You're a good kid, Alex." Alex flashed a huge smile, then blushed and looked down. He wasn't one to get compliments often, Charlie imagined. He knew who his mother was. The kid just wanted someone to notice him. To see how important a card was to him. Charlie

could relate.

When Charlie went into the television room (as they named it), he discovered Tabitha had achieved the unthinkable; Jeopardy had been turned off. His mom was wringing her hands and chewing on her lower lip. Charlie frowned. Jeopardy wasn't about Jeopardy; it was about things being as they should be. If Jeopardy was on, life was fine. Ever since Charlie was five and his father disappeared, his mother had brought Alex Trebek into the home, making sure Charlie knew Scipio Africanus the Elder was the hero of the Second Punic War. Instead, the news was on. Charlie glared at Tabitha. In the news, life was never fine. People got into car accidents in the news. Food was poisonous in the news. Dogs bit people in the news. People killed each other for no real reason in the news.

But today in the news, there was a twist. Apparently, there had been sightings around town of some giant beam of light shooting into the sky.

"The city says they believe it was a blown power generator," Tabitha was apparently going to be the commentator.

"Absurd," Charlie muttered. "Generators don't make random giant beams of light shoot up into the sky.

"Shhhh," Tabitha said. But the news team was buying it hook, line and even sinker. They were interviewing a local man named Damian who swore he saw what he saw, and he wasn't lying. "I'm telling you what I saw!" Damian exclaimed. "There was a big flash of light. Then I saw a giant metal figure!"

Jillian Davids, the reporter, nodded along with her best "sure you did buddy" nod. Two years of journalism classes for this. "You think this person caused the generator to--"

Damian cut her off. "It wasn't a person. And it wasn't a generator. It was a robot, I tell you! And I think a killer one!"

Jillian sighed. Why did she always get the crazy ones? "Okay, we are going to head back to the studio--"

"I'm telling you what I saw!" Damian reiterated. "Then I looked down the street and there was another robot. A red one! Topeka is infested with robots now!"

Jillian stepped in front of Damian and tuned to the camera. "Up next, is your puppy eating enough protein? Stay tuned."

The newscast cut from the scene and showed some lovely video of puppies rolling around.

Charlie stared at the television a long time. If he was crazy, at least he wasn't the only one. He did see what he thought he saw.

Good, because he had started to doubt it.

Charlie looked back at the card of the knight. "I like the card."

"It's the best," Alex said proudly.

"Everyone needs a hero in their deck." Charlie nodded to himself. He was given a mission

tonight, to gather his work and to meet the mysterious Jade. She was crazy, but so was the world. The news just proved that. What the hell, he thought. It at least made life interesting. It was worth a shot, in case there was truth in her words, and he could be the hero in the deck. Charlie was going to have a fun day at work tomorrow. There was a mission, and it needed a hero.

Chapter 4

The next day began for Charlie like every other Monday to Friday had (excluding holidays) for the last fifteen years; one seven-minute snooze from 6:08 to 6:15, one fifteen-minute shower, one six-minute tooth brushing session (say what you will about Charlie, but his teeth were spotless), one Star Wars branded shirt worn, a bowl of Pops cereal, and a nine-minute commuter to Bandicoot TechSmart, a mid-sized software company in Northwest Topeka.

It was a mid-sized office building, and Bandicoot took up the top floor. For Topeka, being on a sixth floor wasn't far from being atop a skyscraper. The office's views of downtown, through fifteen-foot-high floor to ceiling windows, were quite nice. It was one of the few things Charlie enjoyed about coming to work. Charlie lowered his head as he entered and made his way to the elevator. Another day...

The euphoria, and the alcohol, of the night before had worn off. Charlie felt anxious, which isn't completely negative since he was familiar with this emotion. After a good night's sleep, doubt about the truth had seeped back in. As he sat in his cubicle he realized what Jade had wanted wasn't him, it was the code he had been working on, a side hobby to this day job. Here's the thing, though. The code was rough, the ideas hadn't been fleshed out, but even one as humble as Charlie knew there was something unbelievable and groundbreaking in its concept. The future of technology was the intermeddling of human and machines, be it software or hardware. Biological intelligence and digital intelligence would one day be merged. It's how memory would one day be flawless and accessible, how we would expand the length of lives, and how, most importantly, we would listen to the space-age pop music without a stereo. This was already being worked on in Silicon Valley, but Charlie's code took it a step beyond. It was a draft of not just how body and machine would interact, but how they would evolve together.

"You dropped down to 88th."

Charlie turned to see Nate pointing to large digital signage on the walls displaying the ranking boards. It scrolled through the rankings of every programmer at the company, all eighty-nine of them. Charlie was now ranked only ahead of Matthew Weikers, who had only shown up for work one day in the last week, for a total of two hours. This company wasn't Charlie's dream job by a country mile, but there weren't many options in town if you were a programmer. Charlie had one goal while

working here; he wanted to work alone. So, he took a job no one else wanted, fixing bugs in their accountant software (yes, it was as exciting as it sounded.) Charlie had written code to automate the entire process, but didn't bother to tell his superiors. So not working with anyone else on the team and looking like you aren't working much, is the perfect way to get ranked 88th out of 89th, right above Matthew Weiters.

"Well, it could be worse," Charlie shrugged.

"You looked stressed, Charlie." A tinge of concern flitted across Nate's face. While Nate, at least in his assessment, wasn't particularly close to Charlie, it was close enough a tinge was the proper amount of concern to have for him.

"How so?" Charlie stalled.

"You broke your pen in half."

Charlie hadn't even realized it, half a pen in his right, half a pen in his left, and ink dripped onto his desk.

"Also," Nate continued. "Your shirt's on inside out."

Charlie checked. Yes, indeed. It was true.

"Don't worry, they aren't going to fire you. No one else wants your job."

"Yeah," Charlie sighed, throwing the two halves of the pen on the table. "It's not that."

For Charlie, Nate was his best friend at the company. Which is to say he was his only friend at the company. Which is to say it was his only friend. And so, Charlie told Nate about meeting Jade. Well, he told him a story similar to what happened. He left out all parts about her super-human strength, her thinking she was from the future, her saying he was her people's messiah, you know, all the parts that made her sound crazy. Which was a lot of parts, roughly about eight parts out of ten.

"So, what's the problem?" Nate asked, properly inflecting the what's wrong with you in the words connotation. "She sounds hot. And amazing. You've never hooked up in the entire time I've met you. What's the problem?"

"Well...she's not from around here."

Nate stared blankly at Charlie. Finally, "What, are you already picturing getting married and a white picket fence?"

"No!" Charlie said a little too defensively.

"Then just meet up with her and have some fun."

"Yeah." Charlie gave a cool man shrug. "Well, I mean, of course I'm going to do that," Charlie laughed sincerely insincere. "Of course, I'll meet up and have some fun. Ha. I mean, yeah."

Nate shrugged. Charlie was his weird old self. Abby Chestnut walked through the corridor towards them. Abby was cute in the next-door neighbor kind of way. Not in the Hollywood girl-next-door way, but in a Topeka neighbor cute way. She was also incredibly intelligent and good with computers. There were a few guys at the office with crushes on Abby, she was quite the catch in the ninety-percent male dominated office. Put all those crushes together, roll in a giant ball, then double it

three times, and it wouldn't be half the crush Charlie had on her. What was worse to Nate is he never admitted it. Which made it all the more painful, because Charlie would do all these little things to try and express it without being noticed by anyone and all it achieved was being noticed by everyone except Abby. Nate twisted Charlie's chair so he could see Abby coming their way. Charlie looked like a deer in the headlights and spun the chair back around.

"Hey," Nate said loudly to Charlie. "You should bring this girl around. Maybe it will make Abby jealous."

Charlie slouched lower in his chair avoiding Abby and the light laugh she made as she walked on by. Just another day at the office. Charlie's supervisor, Taylor Monahan was close on her heels. He had the look of a man who fifteen years ago was a good athlete, and fifteen years later he was still a good athlete who also enjoyed donuts and beer.

Taylor stopped when he reached Charlie and Nate. "Charlie, I need those four deadlines met today. Project approval is dependent on delivery and quality assurance."

Charlie eyed his supervisor with as much distaste as he could without it being noticed. Taylor had no idea what he was talking about when it came to I.T. It's like the guy had collected some key phrases and jumbled them together so he could kind of sound like he knew what he was talking about. Charlie's best defense was to use keywords back. Words intended for no other purpose than to confuse Taylor.

"I patched a series of nested divs rendering the server-side DOCTYPE to kern the analytics of the CSS framework in a hover state. Everything should be good to go." He threw in a submissive smile to really sell the package. Taylor eyed Charlie back a long time, his mind racing between knowing he was being toyed with and not knowing if Charlie was actually the genius some said he was. "Okay, then. Well, I'll pass the info along. But if it's not what we need..." He pointed a finger sternly at Charlie. "You'll be the first to know." His finger trailed to the big board of rankings, more precisely, at Charlie's ranking. "And, to go."

Charlie nodded his comprehension.

A ground-shaking rumble rumbled through the office. Fourteen pens, two coffee mugs and lots of paper fell from employees' desks. It had seemed as if Topeka had a very rare earthquake from the feel of it. Some of the employees, those not worried enough about their ranking to keep working, rushed to the windows. They began to mumble and point.

Charlie ignored it. He was so good at ignoring things, it was better described as an art. Nate was looking at the window but Charlie returned his attention back with a snap of his fingers. "Look, there was a reason I wanted to tell you."

Nate stood, trying to see past the mob and out the windows. "I think something is happening out there."

"Why I wanted to tell you about the girl, Nate," Charlie said, exasperated. "Stay with me." "Who?" Nate asked, his eyebrows knitted together as his head briefly swiveled to Charlie.

“The girl!” Charlie let out an exasperated breath. “The whole thing we’ve been talking about!”

“Oh, right.”

“There was one strange thing.” There were a lot of things strange, of course, but Charlie wasn’t going to say anything about most of them. However, he did need help understanding one thing. “She knew about my work.”

The whooping blades of helicopters rhythmically beat outside. Sirens blared in the background. Seven dogs began to bark. Nate again tried to see what was outside. Some coworkers were stabbing at Facebook on their phones trying to figure out what was going on. Some videoed the choppers.

“Your job?” Nate asked, half paying attention. “Great. It’s a good job. I wonder what...?”

“No.” Charlie said the next words with hushed importance. “My work.” “Your work?” Nate paused at Charlie’s serious expression. It dawned on him. “Ohhhhh!”

“S!” hissed Charlie. He had told him about the code before. Nate understood about 30% of what Charlie had told him. Charlie was many things, few of them impressive, but there was no denying somewhere in there lay a genius.

Or he was full of shit.

Regardless, it had sounded convincing. Nate’s area of expertise was hacking. He was a hacker and he stopped hackers. If someone random knew about his code, either Charlie had drunk too much one night or – “What did you tell her?”

“I didn’t tell her anything. She told me.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ve never told anyone but you. She just...knew about it.”

“Let me guess, she wanted a copy of it.”

“Well, yes.” Charlie wondered where this was going.

“How many encryption levels do you have on those files?”

“Fourteen.”

“Are there other references to the code on anything besides your secure hard drive?”

“Maybe.”

“Sorry Charlie, but what’s the more likely scenario; this girl is really into you, or she knows about the code and wants access to it. She probably works for some billionaire-backed startup in Silicon Valley.”

Charlie thought on it for a moment and with each passing second his paranoia rose. If she knew about the code, and wanted the code, it was more likely she worked for some company with a dropped vowel from its name (Flickr, Tumblr, Scrbd, etc.) There were bits and pieces and references to it all over the place on his computer. Jade was just trying to get the whole thing. Her far-fetched story was overkill, but hey, you do what you gotta do. The beam of energy shooting into the sky and the weird robot looking figure was a nice touch too. Got to give those rich Silicon Valley people credit, they had creativity. There was no doubt though, she was trying to get the code.

The huge bolt of energy that shot through the air. The figures. For the first time, he looked around the office. Something was happening outside. In Topeka, Kansas, where nothing happened. There were helicopters; in Topeka, Kansas. This was not feeling right. Charlie took out the keys to his desk and opened the bottom drawer. There, amongst notes of random musings and numbers, notebooks, old library cards (not related, but they were there.) He threw it all into a backpack. He lifted the false bottom inside the drawer and removed a small box with a finger imprint. Charlie pushed his finger on it and the box popped open to reveal a small piece of quartz about the size of a dime. The inscription, in hologram form between the layers of quartz, was the word Pontus. He stuffed it into his bag.

The power to the building shut down, inspiring exasperated gasps from the people who hadn't hit control S in time. Charlie was gripped with fear. Through the left-most towering window closest to his cubicle, he saw a red figure; red as the sun. Said sun was reflected harshly off the metallic, long and slender being. He was hovering in the air, his feet aglow in a blue energy. The red as flame figure landed softly on the ledge outside the window and looked at Charlie. This straight-out-of-a-movie, sci-fi, Iron Man doppelganger looked at Charlie. His fingers were sharp as Ginsu knives (add deadly to the list). Charlie was right to be gripped with fear.

The figure swiped the window with its Ginsu knife fingers and the glass shattered into 639,253 pieces.

Chapter 5

Shards of glass slid across the floor with poetic grace. The employees of Bandicoot Computing greeted it with a collective gasp, which was followed by a larger collective gasp when the flying red robot blasted through the broken window. The room fell silent as with each step, the glass crunched with irrational intensity, echoing through the still office. Well, mostly still. Jim Zepeda, of course, was crying, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” But that’s just Jim Zepeda for you. He’d have the same response to a cockroach.

The red hunk of metal stopped, a blue light shining from its eyes.

“It’s a death ray!” screamed Jim Zepeda.

Office workers scrambled away, clumping in a corner as the azure beam scanned over them. The robot’s appendages now ended in rounded, five-fingered, human shaped metal hands that still looked like they could crush four buses. All at the same time. The robot continued examining the group of humans until he stopped, locking onto Charlie's feet, which were glued to the floor with the strong adhesive of fear. So, when the figure approached with large, heavy steps that shook the floor, all other workers had the good sense to part while Charlie stood still. Almost still; he was shaking in his boots. He was actually wearing loafers, but the shaking part was thoroughly accurate. Charlie clutched his brown satchel bag, which held the code to the future tightly. He knew he should run, his legs just seemed to disagree. Besides, this robot was one athletic looking machine and Charlie had no doubt it could start as middle linebacker for the Chiefs, and even more easily, run him down.

The robot came so close to Charlie that had it been programmed to breathe, Charlie would have felt it. Charlie thought about crying, but even he knew it wasn’t a good look to go out on. He did find some solace, however, in his certain final moments. He was glad last night when he met Jade she wasn't just a crazy woman; this robot was proof of that. And if she hadn’t been crazy, what she said about needing him to save her wasn't crazy. Point Charlie.

The robot’s arms shot out in perfect 90-degree angle from its body. The crowd gasped. Charlie held his breath. The robot’s right hand shot down to its stomach, and he bent forward with a bow so textbook, a noble of any royal court would weep with jealousy.

“Charles Richards, of Topeka, Kansas?” His voice had a slight aristocratic accent and complete courteousness. “I am Angelo, and I am at your service.”



It is generally accepted in the 24th century that there are three distinct races: humans, hybrids, and bots. The argument could be made that a bot wasn't a race since it wasn't a living organism. But of course, Proposition 183-22B had passed. In truth, a rare fourth classification could be made between hybrids and bots. The Magnes PB EXX was not an official designation, but it was referred to as such in the dark top-secret hallways where it was developed. The reason Magnes were rare was because, except for only the most limited and significant circumstances, they were illegal. Blake Crowley himself, of course, had three of the six in existence. The two others were kept on lockdown in a secret location. The final one, Angelo, belonged to Jade Crowley.

While there is room for debate, Angelo didn't necessarily have feelings, but he understood them. He processed the feelings of fear, of love, of hatred, of loyalty. The third level of Angelo's programming was to be outrageously courteous and enormously charming. This was to hide who Angelo was, so to speak. The second level of programming was to be loyal to his owner. Not in a mere "do as commanded way," Angelo was much more sophisticated than that, he was a Magnes PB EXX after all. He was loyal in a deeper sense that transcended mere acts, and operated his own decision-making processes in her best interest. This is a major part why they were illegal; if everyone had such a powerful bot working this way, it would be chaos. Angelo's top level of programming was "all other programming must honor the common goal of protecting his owner's interests." This meant kill anything and everything in his way.



From outside the office down the hall came shouts. "Move, move, move!" The sounds of a SWAT team swept through the walls and closed in on the office.

A cacophony of shattering glass filled the air.

Charlie jumped as the window adjacent to the one Angelo came through was smashed into another 639,253 pieces and a formidable black figure burst into the room. Angelo was formidable himself, but what stood amidst the glass shards, its massive black head surveying the room, was an eight-foot-tall ebony pillar of a robot. Its arms and legs thick, its chest a tank. This robot looked like it hit the robotic gym at least ten hours per day. Its head was the shape of a sizable tear drop, its eyes a green strip of light. This must have been the figure Charlie had seen the night before.

Angelo, and the rest of the crowd, turned to face the intruder.

"Mister Genesis," Angelo said, maintaining all the charm and courteousness. "I dare say you could have used the window I just broke. It would have saved these poor people some cleanup."

Genesis's slit for an eye seem to glow with anger. "Mission objective: Charlie Theodore

Richards.” Genesis' voice was deep and strong. It didn't sound robotic in tone, but it did in language.

The doors to the office burst open and a team of SWAT, police, and a few underpaid security guards stumbled through. They froze like everyone else at the site of the two killer robots facing off against each other. They did their best to yell and posture threatening poses to intimidate two killer robots. It didn't, on the surface, do any good, but it did turn Genesis's attention.

Angelo tilted his head to Charlie, who clutched his bag like a very useless shield. “I think it would be a good time to get out of here, sir. Please, if you wouldn't mind terribly, bring the bag.”

It was smart advice, considering all hell had broken loose.

Humans fled the room, urged by the cops who, like the actors in a Transformer's flick, had realized they were greatly out of their depth.

Angelo stared down the black-as-night bot across the room; Genesis. A destroyer bot of unmatched strength. Angelo crouched into a defensive pose. His fingers connected, split, and sharpened, creating hands of laser blades. His eyes glowed. He was programmed to be charming and unassuming for a reason. Angelo, ProtectoBot (P.B.) of Jady of Crowley, was one of the deadliest bots in existence.

Unfortunately, so was Genesis.

Opalum is hard material. That's a vast understatement, it is otherworldly hard. Literally. It is found and mined from Titan, one of Saturn's moons. It is roughly two-thousand times as hard as a diamond and can withstand heats up to twelve thousand degrees, or double the temperature of the center of the Earth. All of this makes the material an extremely expensive commodity in the 24th century. Otherworldly expensive. Leaders-of-the-world level expensive. Prince Jabir of the United Empire was said to have a yacht made of one, though rumor has it was just opalum plated.

Unless you happened to have a nuclear reactor and liquid oxygen, opalum was virtually indestructible.

The bot, Genesis, was made of this material. This was not usual. Genesis was the P.B. of someone very wealthy and powerful.

Charlie crouched as a beam of light shot from the slit across Genesis's face. Angelo's arm sprang up, instantly transforming into a pizza box shaped shield. (Charlie was hungry, which is why he associated the shape. Others may have thought it was merely a square shield.)

One never knows how they will handle the unexpected until it is happening and, well, it's never quite what you expect. Abby stood to one side, staring agape at the two robots, not moving a muscle. Nate was frowning at them as if they shouldn't have gotten past security. One guy wearing a Dr. Who t-shirt ran forward, his arms outstretched and screamed, “Chose me!” But as a whole, most people were screaming and making a mad rush towards the door.

The SWAT team wasn't really, well, SWATing. They weren't trained to combat killer robots from the future and, let's be honest, they were human, and humans get stunned sometimes. The Brick, that was what everyone on the team called him because he always hurled himself into the fray, knew this

was his time to shine. He jumped up, yelling wildly, as if he was going to scare these programmed bots, and fired a round of bullets at Genesis. He fired a few shots at Angelo. Neither robot so much as looked at him. He threw his gun and it clattered harmlessly to the floor. It wasn't enough. He was a brave man and this was his moment. He ran screaming at the red bot. After all, when you're going to take on a killer robot, you should at least start with the smaller of your two choices.

Without taking his sensors off Genesis, Angelo held out a hand and a needle shot out of his palm. He stabbed it into the center of the Brick's forehead. The Brick fell like one.

Charlie stood quietly watching the entire scene as if it was just some event on the screen. Except for one small thing ... he felt no emotion. Often, he would laugh or tense up or even on the odd occasion get a slight tear in his eye during a movie, but standing here in front of these about-to-duel robots... he felt nothing. His feelings were completely gone. Unless, of course, you want to include complete denial as an emotion, then he was extremely emotional. Otherwise, nothing.

Angelo and Genesis returned facing each other old west style. Then, they attacked. Metal and metal collided in sparks of fury (fun fact: Sparks of Fury is the name of the comic book this event one day inspired.) Metal on metal, as discussed, wasn't accurate – nano-matter on opalum was correct. Angelo's shield-like arm glowed with a pulsating red energy. The energy pressed forward into the space between the two robots and pushed Genesis back, ever so slightly. The massive black robot lowered its head to charge. It was hard for Charlie to tell, glancing up at the shining red robot that protected him, if Angelo was worried or not. But Charlie most definitely was. His emotions had begun to return.

Angelo must be programmed to sense human emotions, because he noticed the shift in Charlie. His free arm shot out, grasping Charlie protectively. His eyes glowed fiercely red like the shield that protected them.

Genesis extended the thick, black columns of his arms on either side of Angelo's shield and began to squeeze the pulsating red light as if it was an enemy to be vanquished, which it was.

To Charlie's horror, the glowing red shield began to compress under Genesis' onslaught.

Angelo's eyes burned brighter, his chin lowering a bit as he focused all of his processors on keeping the shield between Genesis and Charlie.

But it wasn't enough. With a dying squeal, the glowing shield was extinguished. But it was worse than that. So much worse. With a resounding clangor, Angelo's forearm snapped off and plummeted to the ground, severed from his body.

"No!"

Charlie started at the familiar voice. Jade was by far the most badass woman he had ever seen yesterday, but today she was tenfold. In the near dark of the powerless room, he could just make out the outline (nice outline) of her body. The aquiline planes of her face were stunning, but her eyes... they were ice. She pointed a black device the size of cop's baton directly at Genesis. From one end, long lasers of white light sizzled and cracked like a dozen of electromagnetic whips.

Nate was the last to go. Backing up quickly towards the door, he screamed at his friend, “Charlie, I don’t think she’s from Silicon Valley!” As if that information was somehow useful in this situation.

The black pillar of Genesis stepped resolutely towards Angelo. Angelo jumped sharply to his left to Charlie. With a giant shove of his remaining hand, Angelo sent Charlie sprawling. He crashed into the corner of a cubicle on the far side of the room. But the action backfired. Charlie’s bag, with all the prize code in it, flew from his hands, landing with a resounding plop right in front of the steadily approaching Genesis. In an instant, a black beam came out of Genesis’s hand, scanning the contents, before he snatched the bag up.

Jade let rip the electromagnetic whips out of her black baton. They struck Genesis with a loud sizzle, seemingly dazing the giant machine and sending it crashing to the floor. Seizures captured the giant black robot’s body as electro sparks danced from his head.

Behind Genesis stood Jade, weapon in hand.

“Not so fast,” Jade said, reaching down and grabbing the bag out of the trembling robot’s hands. “C’mon.” She strode to Charlie as the sparks around Genesis’s head began to subside. “Get your hustle on. The stunner is brief.” She glanced at Angelo’s arm, a frown rolling over her face. Whipping a different device that looked a lot like a remote control for a television, she aimed it at Genesis’s head.

Angelo grabbed her arm and pushed it down.

“Don’t waste your power. It won’t work on him.”

For a brief second, Jade looked like she might do it anyway, but instead, she grabbed up Angelo’s severed arm and motioned for them to roll out. There was no way Charlie was going to be left behind. Then he saw it.

The notebook. His prized, most recent notebook... the one with the code in it that Jade had known about in the Lonely Tree Tavern... it had slid out of the bag and was lying, almost hidden, under the black monster’s armpit.

Without even stopping to think, Charlie was going in. He darted forward, snatched the notebook with a fierce tug and turned to flee. He made it half a step when his forward motion came to an abrupt halt and he cried out in agonizing pain. Genesis had regained some motion and had clamped a claw-like hand around Charlie’s ankle. Mostly likely he was squeezing very lightly for a destroyer robot, but it was shattering Charlie’s ankle.

“If you don’t mind, sir,” came a polite voice. “I request you to please let go.”

Charlie screamed louder as the black robot’s grip tightened. Angelo jumped roughly one high jump world record (21st century) into the air and smashed down on Genesis’ head. It did no damage, but it distracted the robot just enough that he loosened his grip.

Jade grabbed Charlie and slung him over her shoulder, a fact Charlie would forever deny and Jade would begrudgingly leave out. But the fact remains, he was bouncing unceremoniously over her shoulder as she sprinted towards the shattered windows.

Genesis had recovered. He hurled Angelo against the wall like a rag doll. Genesis's goal wasn't Angelo, though, it was Charlie's code. Genesis sprinted with lightning speed towards Jade and Charlie.

Jade knew there was no out-running an eight-foot opal bot. She was going to have to use the last power of her electro-whip. The bolts of electricity snapped out and snaked around Genesis. The power of her custom-made, top-the-line electro-whip, which was so experimental it hadn't even been branded yet – its code name was Jade's Whip – would have destroyed most bots, but it just pushed Genesis back a smidge.

That was all Angelo needed. He crashed into the bot's side and they went spiraling like a red and black tumbleweed over the shattered glass on the floor of the destroyed office space.

Jade dropped Charlie at the edge of the six-story open window and stared down. Charlie didn't like the hesitation. He had no idea what Jade was capable of, but the fact that she didn't seem to like the thought of a six-story jump meant Charlie didn't like the thought of a six-story jump, which he'd never even thought about before.

Jade glanced over her shoulder looking for Angelo. "No!" she cried. Genesis had Angelo pinned down and was crushing him, about to snap him like a wishbone.

"Don't worry, my lady." Angelo's voice was strong, but it trembled underneath with weakness and fear. "I insist you fulfill our mission. Please." He added the last word as Genesis snapped Angelo's remaining arm off.

"No!" Jade cried.

Charlie could see she was about to go back and take on the giant black bot again. The bot that was destroying their killer bot and, once he was done, would surely focus on killing them. Charlie placed a hand on Jade's arm as Genesis ripped off one of Angelo's legs. "We have to go!" he shouted at her. "He'll come for us next!"

Jade's ice-cold eyes turned on Charlie and he shrank back slightly, but he knew he was right. "We have to fulfill your mission!" Genesis tossed aside Angelo's body parts and riveted his deadly attention on Jade and Charlie. The sensory strip of his eyes seemed to glare in anger.

Jade glared back at him.

Charlie tugged at Jade's sleeve. "Your mission!"

Her eyes flitted to him and for a moment he snapped her out of the deadly duel she was about to engage in. It was enough. "Charlie," she said, as if she had known his name her whole life and it meant something. In a lightning-fast move she wrapped her arm around his waist and hurled them both over the six-story ledge as Genesis came blasting towards them.

Chapter 6

Charlie screamed all the way down. He was hoping she had some futuristic gadget buried somewhere in her tight black outfit, but as they hurtled forward towards the concrete, that seemed ever more unlikely.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Was the only expression Charlie could manage as he clung to Jade, acting as a dead weight to their fall. Charlie would object to the term dead weight. He didn’t deny he needed to lose twelve pounds, but hopefully it made him softer.

Only nothing was going to stop the bone-crushing impact they were about to have with the sidewalk.

At the last possible second, Jade pulled Charlie in tight and curled around him in a ball. She twisted herself, angling her body with precision so only her left side slammed into the concrete, taking the full impact as she rolled forward, the sound of metal still clanging in Charlie’s ear.

They rolled for what felt like forever until Jade unraveled, letting Charlie slide away until he was lying flat on his back waiting to see if his lungs would breathe again. When they did, the ripping ache of his rattling breath was almost too much for him to bear. A moan escaped with his gasp.

But he was alive.

How the hell had they survived the fall? It didn’t compute. And what was the metal cacophony he’d heard when Jade hit the concrete? His head twisted sideways. Despite the tension that ran through her face and the slight grimace she displayed as she walked towards him, Jade was already up and moving.

“Come on!” she yelled, not allowing him respite.

With a flash of understanding, he knew exactly why. The black monstrosity of a robot had not been defeated, he had merely slowed for a moment to tear apart their protector. Now he stood on the edge of the six-story building, looking over the ledge, preparing to jump. Had he been human, Charlie would have guessed his expression was something of a leering pleasure at the thought he would soon be tearing both apart.



Terrance Bantam was a fifteen-year-old sophomore at Topeka High (Go Bulldogs!) On this day when all the crazy explosions were happening around town and helicopters seemed to be the norm, he was not being a sophomore at Topeka High. He was cutting class. Who wouldn't? Something big was happening and he wanted to know what it was. He slipped behind police lines (it was surprisingly easy to do) and hid behind one of the police cars surrounding Bandicoot Techsmart's main headquarters.

Luck would have it, he was in the perfect place to capture with his cracked iPhone 5 a woman jumping out of a building with a man on her back. He wasn't happy it was an iPhone 5. Like his friends, he'd been saving for an 8, but anyway it was fine, he got the shot. Mostly, he was thrilled with the million views on YouTube he was totally about to get. Because the video was badass. I mean, a woman clutching this guy jumped from a six-story high building and landed in the neatest little tuck and roll on the concrete. That's badass! Stuck the landing too, 9.2 from the Russian judge. It was unreal. Sure, it would be the subject of CGI accusations, since it did look like a scene out of a movie (although it did not have the cool dust and smoke land the movie version would have had.) But who cares? The CGI controversy would drive up the hits. He was going to be a YouTube star (well, probably the woman who jumped out of the building would be, but he'd be able to do interviews on how daring he was to get the clip.) For sure. This was going to happen.

The police began to move in, attempting to corner the woman and the man who were now on the move, merely seconds after their death-defying jump. Terrance was being brushed by cops carrying loaded weapons and dressed in riot gear. His perfect spot was looking imperfect. He was in real world danger, not movie danger, and Terrance didn't like actual danger.

Ducking his head and tucking his phone deep in his front pocket, Terrance took off. He had what he needed to rock YouTube.

Unfortunately for Terrance, if YouTube hits were the goal, he had made a huge error. While his video would reach the million hit mark, had he kept filming when the eight-foot black-as-death robot jumped out of the window six-stories above ... he very possibly could have owned YouTube, for at least twenty minutes.



Jade and Charlie ran like a killer robot was behind them (note: there was a killer robot behind them.) Their problems included, but were not limited to: a gaggle of police barricaded behind their cars in riot gear intent on stopping Jade and Charlie while simultaneously being shit scared of the mammoth black robot pursuing them, Jade's injuries that became more apparent as she moved, the fact that Angelo was destroyed, and Charlie was devastatingly hungry.

Jade wasn't a stranger to being in tight spots. This wasn't near as bad as when she was sent to take care of the Chief Executive Leader (C.E.L.) of Paladin Group, a rival company stealing

technology from her employer, Mr. Crowley. She and Angelo had been up against thirteen ProtectoBots (P.B.s). While they weren't as advanced as Genesis, they were incredibly dangerous. They were down enormous odds, 18 to 1 officially, and while Jade still had a scar from hip to neck that she wore proudly today, they came out the other side victorious. It wasn't all good news though, as Angelo had destroyed seven of the PBs' to Jade's six – a fact Angelo still mocked her with to this day.

Angelo.

He was gone.

One may have a difficult time understanding the connections humans and hybrids could have with their PBs'. There was a 21st century study conducted about human's connection to Roombas; how they would give them names, call it "he" or "she" rather than "it." They would worry when the Roomba made a distress call. They would treat them like a pet. Often when the Roomba would break, people would forego the cheaper option of simply replacing it. Instead they would prefer to fix "their" robot.

This basic connection, magnified over centuries, exhibits the deep connection humanity would embrace with bots. PBs' were expected to be at every to traditional family event; parties, graduations, marriages, even births. They were often by a person's side on their deathbed. And a surprising thing would happen in return. As technology developed emotional adaptor processors, bots would change from these interactions with their human counterparts. It was not uncommon for a bot to have to go to reprogramming from depression after losing their associated human. To magnify this even further, there was Jade and Angelo. Jade's profession made her trust of and dependence on Angelo not a luxury, but a necessity. She could do what she did because she had Angelo. She worked in a world where danger was around every corner, including her colleagues and friends. Often, she was isolated from her parents, the very people she was working so hard to support and save. But her life was essentially a dangerous game where the only thing she could rely on was Angelo.

Quite simply, she loved him.

Shards of glass rained down as Genesis smashed through a window above. (Seriously, why he didn't use an already broken window was one of his rare programming glitches.) The thought of Angelo roared through Jade.

"Charlie!" she screamed. Charlie was looking upwards in frozen disbelief.

"Momaw Nadon!" Charlie screamed. He had the habit of yelling random words when stressed to the nines.

Jade grabbed him and pushed him forward, not out of harm's way, but out of the way of being crushed by the black metal monster. Genesis landed hard on the concrete with movie-level dust and debris flying all around. He didn't need to worry about his foot hurting. He was too big. Too fast. Too strong. Bullets bounced off him like hail off cobblestone. His massive arm reached for Charlie.

Jade watched in horror.

Angelo, she thought, we have failed.



Alan Frasier didn't particularly like being a cop. He joined out of boredom. It also, in all fairness, was the best job prospect he had. His dream job was to be a landscaper, but he couldn't find work and didn't have whatever "it" was you had to have to start a successful business. (Pro-tip: don't mention that your dream job is to be a landscaper to the rest of the force.) But he did his job sufficiently, never less, or more, for that matter, than was asked. However, we all have limits. He soldiered through the methed up junkie who spit in his face. The pit bull that bit him in an unfortunate place, all part of the job. But he had limits. His, apparently, was a giant robot jumping out of a building.

He panicked like the dickens (devil, not Charles), reached for his holster and shot at the giant black figure. Except he hadn't reach for his gun. While his colleagues were firing assorted fire arms with bullets that bounced off the monstrous robot, Alan had mistakenly reached for his Taser. After firing, he turned and ran away from the police force. Forever. He headed to Greener Pastures (that was the name of the landscaping company he hoped would hire him.)

Because he never looked back, Alan missed the most amazing effect of his panicked taser attack and his one in a million shot.



Genesis lunged for Charlie Richards of Topeka, Kansas (known as Subject 1184 to Genesis.) Specifically, his neck. The intention was to squeeze it with unparalleled force. It worked really well on humans.

Two electrodes with Death Star destroying precision shot through the slit on his face. Genesis's world went black. It was a one in a million shot. Outdated technology he hadn't been bothered to be protected from hit his primary orbital chip, a direct shot, and the chip sizzled and fried and died.

Very unfortunate.

Still, Genesis had twenty-two backup systems. It quickly rebooted, bypassed Ctrl+Alt+Del, and Genesis was back online. Humans surrounded it, pointing almost laughable archaic weapons that made a lot of noise. There were helicopters, the predecessor to heliocrafts, overhead. There was fire and smoke and broken glass and shouting filled the air.

However, Genesis's target, Subject 1184, was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 7

“*It’s kind of disappointing?*” Charlie frowned at the machine in front of him.

“It travels through time, Charlie.” Jade flicked her shoulder-length black hair back behind her ear. “You need to find a way to be impressed.”

“It’s just...it looks like my mom’s refrigerator.” Indeed, it did. Just a simple, rectangular box about eight-feet in height. Very unimpressive for a time travel machine. “Where do we sit?”

“We don’t sit. This is just the container for the DarkM’attr™. You’ll see.”

They were at an old, abandoned warehouse. A dilapidated sign stood out front touting the owners as Crowley Industries. The sign had swung back and forth with a small groan as they’d entered the dusty building. This was the perfect setting for the gang of Scooby Doo to investigate a murder. Charlie eyed a few metal boxes near the wall, but besides these and the silver rectangular box that Charlie still thought was a refrigerator, the warehouse was empty. The boxes had a thick layer of dust on them, obviously they hadn’t been touched in years. But strange thing was, they didn’t look like old boxes, despite the dust. Under the dust, their metal sheen glowed and the boxes themselves, well, they strangely seemed to ... move. Not the entire box, but the metal that made up the box. It just sort of shifted around. Charlie stared for a moment before hopelessly shaking his head. He had to find something to tell himself that would make this all make sense and for now, the story that worked for him was that this was a psychological experiment with doctors watching him behind tinted windows, nodding and saying “interesting” a lot. The bruises he’d received from the daring jump from the window sure felt real, but he figured the best thing was just to play this out for the joke it was.

He nodded at the rectangular DarkM’attr holder. “How does it get to eighty-eight miles per hour?”

“Just so you know, where we are going we do still have roads.” It wasn’t quite a smile, but something torqued up the corner of her mouth.

Charlie’s eyes opened wide with surprised. “You got the reference!”

“We still watch Back to the Future,” Jade muttered, turning her attention to the metal box. Apparently, it had dials on the side that needed some turning. “It’s like the way you still watch Shakespeare.”

“Good. That makes me feel better about going there.”

“There’s a problem.” Jade’s shoulders sagged as she twisted another dial again. Her frantic

twisting turned to slapping. “We can’t go without Angelo.”

Charlie blinked at Jade.

“Tall robot? Red? Very polite? Saved your life?”

“Ah.” Charlie nodded. “Yes, the red robot.” Charlie’s strategy of making light of the situation to stem off insanity had been working so far. But the sadness that filled Jade’s eyes at the mention of Angelo, gave him pause. “Look, I’m sorry about your robot friend,” he murmured.

“We can’t go without him,” Jade said simply.

“Look, I know he probably maybe meant something to you but-”

Jade rolled her eyes at Charlie. “I mean, we can’t go without him. Physically. The force of the DarkM’attr will tear us apart. Angelo is designed to protect us from that.” Jade kept touching her temple and throwing her arm down in frustration. It was a rather odd gesture.

Charlie was at a loss for words. He’d gotten himself all psyched up to go to the future and now, well, now he was traveling through time one second at a time, just like normal.

Shit.

What would happen if he stayed here? His phone was blowing up with news alerts and texts. They’d made it on CNN, Fox News and Topeka Channel 5. He wasn’t exactly a fugitive, but there would be questions he didn’t have answers for. There was a good chance he was going to lose his job. And he had just started thinking about getting a place of his own.

“So, um, what do we do?” He could see she was stressed, but flapping her arm around her ear wasn’t really going to solve the problem.

“Let me think,” Jade said dismissively.

Charlie complied for at least fifty-two seconds, but then he did what he did best; asked questions. He was in the legal right to do so. A lot of weird shit had just happened. Jade answered each with quick, measured responses; she was not really in the mood. Why didn’t she just take the code back with her? There’s more work to be done. All scientific questions were met with “I’m not a scientist or a programmer. I just follow orders.” Questions of how people in her time live (eat, politics, religion, play sports), who sent Jade and who sent Genesis were all met with the same “you’ll see.” She did have an answer for the first night. “Why Genesis didn’t just find Charlie at his house and do away with him? And the kiss. The kiss they’d kind of shared had provided a DNA trace, which gave Jade positive proof he was Charlie Richards. That was kind of deflating. While good intentioned, the kiss was nothing more than a ploy.”

“Why didn’t the black robot just destroy the machine?” Charlie asked, waving towards the fridge.

“Even Genesis isn’t strong enough.” Jade continued to stare straight ahead, not looking at Charlie. She would periodically bring her fingers to her temple.

“What if I just left right now? Would you mind?”

Jade stood up and stared Charlie straight in the eyes. Charlie took a step back. Jade’s David Bowie changing eyes were black and cold as ice. “Charlie, you aren’t going anywhere except with

me.” Charlie gulped. “Now stop asking so many questions.”

Boards and metal rained down. Jade threw Charlie to the ground and covered him as debris showered onto her. When the debris settled, the reality only got worse. Genesis loomed above them.

The long day just got longer. Genesis’s massive arm swung through the air, clocking Jade upside the head. She flew a record breaking long jump distance in the air before plummeting down and crashing hard into the cracked concrete of the warehouse floor.

Charlie flinched. That’s gotta hurt. Blood streamed from the left side of Jade’s face where it had skidded along the jagged cement floor. Charlie peered closer.

What the hell?

The blood was flowing out the deep gash of her cheek and Charlie thought he could see down into the bone, only...as he leaned closer he saw, her bone wasn’t white like, well, like a normal human. The bone that structured her high cheeks and dangerously good looks wasn’t bone at all, it was some type of bright, shining metal.

She was some kind of robot, too.

Charlie lurched back, his hand slamming into the unforgiving, cold metal foot of Genesis. The killer black bot leaned forward, its hand outstretched, ready to grasp Charlie’s neck.

In seconds, this was going to be over. Charlie’s gaze darted to Jade, he wasn’t even going to be able to say goodbye to her, or anyone.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to drown out the sound of Alex from Jeopardy saying “Being choked in half a second by a killer robot from the future.”

What is the death of Charlie Richards? Charlie’s brain screamed at him.

But he couldn’t die right now, right? Hadn’t Jade said he was going to invent the future? Didn’t they need him? Or did they just need the code? What was it she had said?

And, suddenly, Charlie realized, he wasn’t being choked by the killer bot from the future. He opened one eye just in time to see a flash of a MagnoMetal-based fist thunder through the air and crash against Genesis’s face.

“Angelo!” Charlie screamed, never feeling more grateful to see anyone or anything in his entire life. “Jade!” he yelled at the woman who until this moment had been still. “He’s back! Angelo’s back!”

Jade stirred slowly, very, very slowly. Angelo was pretty beat up. He was missing an arm and a leg, but somehow, he had mastered balancing on a single leg and even developed some killer maneuvers. Having gotten Genesis’s attention with a swift punch to the head, he now crouched like a loaded coil of bright red fire. Genesis didn’t gauge the trap. As he accelerated against the polite yet deadly red bot, Angelo sprung into the air achieving impossible heights as he reached the beams of the warehouse ceiling. Genesis jumped too, but he was weighed down by his appendages and missed grasping Angelo’s foot by a fraction of an inch before gravity yanked him back to earth.

Jade, bloody and bruised, stumbled to her feet, holding up a small black box. Shooting from it

was a red beam. When Genesis hit the beam, it was like he hit a wall; a wall that also pushed back. He shot across the dusty floor of the warehouse.

Angelo released from the ceiling and landed in perfect position right next to Jade. “Good to have you back, Angelo,” she said.

Angelo bowed, B-grade graceful, but he was forgiven seeing as he only had one leg. “The pleasure is most certainly mine.”

Genesis rose to his feet, pissed. Robots get mad, too (also the title of a country song in the 24th century.) His black armor pulsated. A rumble came from components inside him, sounding like a growl. Holes opened all over his chest and blue flakes of light shot out like bullets. Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. The puffs of blue light shot through the warehouse to each corner. When they hit Angelo and Jade, the two of them seized up. It was like how people recounted being abducted by aliens, their chests stuck out, arms go limp and they are incapacitated. That was exactly what happened to Angelo and Jade right then.

Nothing happened to Charlie.

He frowned at Jade and Angelo. It must be their technology; technology Charlie didn’t have. Charlie took a deep breath and did what was best for all parties involved; he ran.

He made the door in world record Charlie time. This was going nowhere. He may be needed in the future, but he knew there was no future for him if he died. Period. And he still had a lot of living to do. There were games to be played with his nephew, a job to get fired from, a girl to not notice him, a bridge code to finishing building. Lots and lots of living to do.

He slowed down.

None of which sounded very appealing or as urgent as the problem in front of him right now.

He turned to face the warehouse and considered his options, his face shrouded in the blue light Genesis emitted. Genesis was approaching and he had one mission: to kill Charlie. Genesis would certainly be on the FBI’s most wanted list, but Charlie doubted he was going into hiding (glasses and a fake mustache probably wouldn’t make Genesis inconspicuous anyway.) But Charlie hadn’t seen anything that could stop him.

Still, what could he do? Besides the only thing he was good at. Charlie dropped to the ground and whipped out his laptop, still miraculously unbroken from today’s events. The advanced technology he was dealing with was surely well beyond his grasp, but outdated tricks can sometimes lead to surprising results.

The blue light had poured over Jade and Angelo and froze them in time. Whatever its technology was, it wasn’t a light Charlie cared to bask in. Genesis locked on Charlie. He advanced, ready for a kill.

Sweat poured from Charlie. His eyes bulged in fear as Genesis approached. He typed away frantically. He was into the Genesis content file. Genesis’s code poured in front of him with a complexity the likes the world had ever seen. Charlie didn’t always know how to build the best code,

but he did know how to mess it up. He had been responsible for cleaning up a disgruntled ex-employee's last act of sabotage. Erase some database records, change some global variables, and you have an unstable system. However, since this programing was much more advanced, it wasn't quite as easy to locate such things. But thankfully, it was easier than that. An old trick the most basic of programmers could have solved. Simply add @echo off\Programs\virus.bat into the code and voila! This futuristic programming was so evolved they had moved on from worrying about such simple tricks.

Suddenly, the blue in the room dissipated and the warm light returned.

Charlie let out a victorious squeal.

"Ha! Take that!" Though, there wasn't much to take. It didn't slow down old Genesis in the slightest. He sprinted at Charlie, who had no time to react, fists joined and raised like an opalium sledgehammer. It rained destruction down on Charlie Richards.

Except, Charlie wasn't there. Jade, in a streak of unbelievable speed, had tackled Charlie out of the way just in time. Left behind was a five-foot-deep hole and a whole lot of dirt in the air.

Genesis turned to Jade and Charlie who lay on the ground mere feet away. Charlie grabbed his laptop and went back to work. As Genesis approached he suddenly veered to the left. Then more left. Then more. Until he completed a perfect circle.

"Ha!" Charlie cried.

Genesis continued left. Again, going around in a circle. The way to attack a computer in the 21st century was to make it go around and around in its code, create a hopeless cycle that it can't break free from. Apparently, this was still going to be the case in three hundred years.

Jade gave Charlie a brief nod. "Good work."

Angelo landed before Jade and Charlie, hard but perfectly balanced on his one leg, his single arm held forward. He bowed as Genesis circled around to face Angelo.

"Good to..." Angelo began. Genesis went around. "See you..." Genesis went around. "Again." Around. "Good sir."

As Genesis went around one last time Angelo's upper half began swirling around in a blazing tornado. Genesis came by and Angelo's fist struck Genesis with a huge clash. Part of Genesis's face dented slightly.

"No," Jade cried. "We gotta go."

Angelo crashed into Genesis with 328.854468 metric tons of pressure (max calibration in case Angelo ever needed to make a diamond.) Like a football punted by a mid-level NFL punter, Angelo flew into the air 47 meters, crashing through the side of the warehouse and out into the world beyond.

Angelo, for his part, was just north of being a scrap of sheet metal. His face was virtually flattened, he had one limb and it was a badly damaged leg, and wires sparked out of his stomach. Still, he crawled towards Charlie and Jade.

Jade could have cried seeing Angelo. But there wasn't time. There was a mission to fulfill.

Genesis would be back. They were needed back in the present (her present.) Jade and Charlie ran for the machine. Jade grabbed hold of a piece of dirt by the time travel fridge and lifted. The hatch flung back revealing a large, sterile white underground room. Two silver circles on rods outlined the room, slowly moving in opposite directions.

“See!” cried Charlie. “I knew there was more to it.”

Jade put her eyes up to a scanner on the DarkM’attr container. Below, the silver circles began to spin. Faster and faster.

Angelo crawled closer and closer. “I dare say, my Jade, I am ready to go home.”

Jade smiled at Angelo. “Me too, Angelo.”

Faster and faster the wheels spun. Energy filled the white room below, a white sheet of power spread across the room. Angelo began to glow, white as an angel. The white light from Angelo covered Jade and Charlie. Genesis lunged at the figures but he found nothing but air as Charlie, Jade and Angelo fell into the machine below and into the future.

Chapter 8

Blake Crowley - the pioneer in hybrid technology, the C.E.O. of C.I.A. (Crowley Innovativeness Acquisitions), the city founder - sat in a Telpher-skinned chair (quite rare, very expensive) watching a plethora of monitors. One would not guess that he was pushing seventy, due to a full black beard, strong jaw line and access to the best ageless drugs and cosmetics a man could buy.

Behind him, military orders were being shouted in the background; officers barked, scientists pleaded, Warren (we'll get to him in a minute) shouted at someone. Throughout the control center buzzed humans, hybrids and bots in frantic importance. The wall in front of Blake was covered with hundreds of monitors, showing every nook and cranny of the city of Crowley.

Blake crossed to the huge windows overlooked the bustling capital. Blake- controlled drone ProtectoBots raced around the air, watching the citizens below. (Humans and hybrids were allowed citizenship. Bots had to earn theirs, but since bots did whatever programmed to do... it never happened.) The drone PB's came in and out of the large man-made electric clouds covered the sky. The ominous dark clouds sparked by angry electric currents matched Blake's mood just perfectly.

Jade had been gone for an entire day. The scientists with their science had said they'd be gone no more than a few hours. Things were not looking good. Blake looked at Warren Relic and frowned. Warren was an impeccably dressed fellow with narrow cheeks and a slick air of power and ruthlessness. This was Blake's right-hand man (if you want titles, there are lots of C's for Chief: COO, COS, CAO, etc.) Warren didn't look worried at all. He was flanked by his PB Genesis, a black opalum bot. Blake looked at Genesis closely; something was off. The eye slit was slightly narrower.

Warren didn't look worried, and that worried Blake. He pushed the thought aside. There was a lot on his plate. A plague haunted his hybrids, the Lowsmiths (rebel human forces that weren't a fan of Blake or his company) kept invading the south walls, and Jade, a major player in his corporation/government and an expert at taking care of things Blake didn't want to, was lost in time. He didn't have time to start being paranoid about Warren.

A young nervous-twitching twenty-something marketing kid came up to Blake. "Sir," he said, "I have the latest copy you requested."

Blake took the marketing pamphlet and looked it over. They had a huge marketing campaign

focused on converting the Lowsmiths to his side and avoiding an all-out war (note: he was going to go to war with them no matter what.) It was something to keep his mind off all the problems. He was just too rich to have so many problems. Life was unfair.

He read:

“Hope. Sanctity. Mechanical organs. A chance at a hybrid life with near immortality. All is possible in the city of Crowley. Its doors are open to any (please see rules, regulations, and fee structure below to qualify.) Come be part of our city. Our family.”

Blake looked up at the kid and nodded. “Not a bad start”. Blake read on.

“The age-old question of who the most important figure in human history was, or is, has led to age-old arguments. It has spawned wars, bar-fights, and pipe pointing in fancy libraries. It has beleaguered religions, historians, scholars and philosophers. In consideration were Gods, inventors of online commerce, the founder of the United Sea Nations, the discoverer of pain elimination medicine; the list goes on. But they are not in the same league as the one man who ends this argument for good: Blake Crowley.”

Explosions boomed through the control room. On one of the monitors, the South Wall had collapsed and Lowsmiths were filtering in. They were quickly met by a bot army and...dealt with. This was par for the course over the last few weeks.

Blake ignored it and finished the pamphlet.

“Blake Crowley - the man patented the code linking the languages of genetics and computers, creating the Hybrid technology enabled us to live on when the human body fails. He is the man who gave humanity hope. Blake Crowley – the man built this utopia of Crowley; a vast, beautiful city where humans and hybrids live together in peace. Best of all, the city is open to you. We are here to say, ‘Come in! Come in! Come to the majestic city of Crowley and its hope, sanctity, mechanical organs and hybrid life. Together we will live on for centuries in paradise.’”

Blake lowered the pamphlet. His eyes bored deeper into Mr. Marketing Guy’s soul. “This is a first draft, right? Tell me this is a first draft?”

“Um, actually, it’s the fourteenth. We tried to incorporate all your notes...”

“You didn’t even mention my impressive bot collection! You buried the lead!”

“I’m sorry, sir! We of course can do a fifteenth draft and really spice it up. you got it, an army of bots!”

“No, no, no. Don’t say army. I’m trying to defuse a situation, not incite a war!”

“I’m just not sure if this will get the Lowsmiths – it’s just, they don’t want to be hybrids.”

“That’s why we need to appeal to their intelligence,” Blake said. “They have a place here. We just need them to see it. They need to know a human did all this.” He gazed proudly out at the city. “If I can just get them on board, this whole rebel nonsense can stop.” The marketing kid looked at him blankly. “Never mind, you wouldn’t understand. Go on get out of here.”

The boy nodded and quickly scampered off, apparently happy to be out of the situation. Most of

Blake's conversation ended this way, a fleeing scamper and the thrill to be gone.

Warren Relic made his way to Blake, his crisp patent boots clipping out a rapid pace on the metal floor. His P.B., Genesis, a sign of wealth, power and status even beyond the types of shoes one wore, followed behind.

"Sir," he addressed Blake. "We have a problem."

Blake's shoulders dropped. He had had it with problems. So many problems, lately. He was too rich to have so many problems.

A high-pitched scream echoed through the massive control room. One of Blake's hybrid workers who had been studying the monitors that covered the southeast outer walls, fell forward, landing on his knees, his hands clutching his head. All the humans and hybrids stood stock still, watching. Only the bots carried on with their work, happy and oblivious. Blake eyes narrowed. He didn't know the worker, but he knew the symptoms.

"Shit," he muttered, seeing the hybrid's eyes clearly, even at this reasonable distance. The symptom was there, staring back at him. The pupils and whites of the hybrid's eyes were melted away and only flashes of electrical current remained.

The hybrid suddenly lurched to his feet, twisting manically around before his gaze zeroed in on Blake. Blake didn't flinch. He knew exactly what was going to happen next. The screaming hybrid charged at breakneck speed towards Blake, but Blake planted his feet in the ground. He wasn't going to move. He didn't have to.

A flash of light filled the control room and he went motionless. The hybrid worker fell to the floor with a thud. Within moments two MediBots were there to cart the hybrid onto a steel table and take him away for urgent care and maintenance.

Blake turned to Warren. "My office, now," Blake clipped the words out.

Blake's office was elaborately decorated in a vintage 21st century style. It was the century of rapid technological growth that had created the foundation of his business, so he always had held a strong affinity towards it. A retro personal computer sat underneath his desk. On a cabinet near the wall what was known as an iPad played the melodic guitar riffs of a band named Muse. Blake went behind his desk and turned to Warren.

"The third time," Blake's voice was low, which was more dangerous than when he was yelling. Warren wasn't a naturally nervous man, but this tone always put him on edge. He folded his arms across his chest, gripping his biceps, making sure he remembered how strong he was. "The third time this week, Warren."

"We are working on it, sir."

Blake pointed to a monitor that was showing feeds from around the city. "And what is with all the trash again, Warren? I thought we solved this?" At first glance, the city of Crowley looked pristine, but the truth was in the smaller side streets, where random bits of metals and papers and waste was beginning to pile.

“The SBs are on the fritz again.”

Blake let out an exasperated sigh. The SB Warren was referring to the SaniBots, one of four classifications of bots legally allowed in Crowley. “I thought we had a backup plan for this. You had me buy all those 23rd century garbage trucks for a reason.”

“Yes, but finding humans to run them has not been easy.”

Blake eyed Warren. He knew what he was referring to. The Lowsmiths were turning more and more humans against his people. What mess. The problem is, Blake knew what Warren wanted to do about that. “We are not to that point, yet.”

Warren stepped forward. “Any human that is currently inside our city could be saved. We wouldn’t be wiping them out.”

Blake shook his head.

Warren stepped back. “Okay, I could just have Deltas do it.”

Blake shook his head even harder. “Don’t be ridiculous. We won’t stoop that low.” The Deltas may be the working class of hybrid’s, but they were still hybrids. He wouldn’t see his beloved race start picking up trash. “Just get the SBs fixed.”

Before Warren could answer, a hologram of a conservatively dressed male assistant appeared in the corner of the room. The entire group turned to look at it, but he addressed only Blake. “Sir. Message.” The hologram quickly disappeared.

“Not now,” Blake protested. He held a finger to his temple and the message appeared in front of Blake. As he read, he eyes went dark and dangerous. The message was not good news.

Blake turned back to Warren. “But back to the most pressing matter at hand. This plague infecting the Deltas. Hybrid technology is the centerpiece of this empire. They make up sixty-five percent of our population.” Blake motioned at the opalum bots standing guard, both his and Warren’s. “What do you think pays for your big-ticket bot standing outside this door?”

“I know the business we are in.” Warren remained void of emotion, more robotic than a bot.

“What happens if Jade doesn’t return with Charlie?”

“We will have a solution.” Warren’s voice was even and cold.

Blake ran his fingers through his hair. Becoming a hybrid was how the wealthy lived on for hundreds of years. It was the most profitable business in the known universe, and Blake controlled it.

“You better,” Blake said. “We’ve managed to keep reports of this virus to the ‘this really isn’t that big of a deal’ level. But if what just happened in that control room starts happening on a bigger scale, it will destroy everything I’ve built.”

We, thought Warren bitterly. We built. No one ever gave credit to the man behind the scenes, the one who kept the whole thing going even before they knew exactly what the whole thing was. It was Warren who should be running things. “Of course, sir.” Warren gave a slight nod and headed for the door. “Your bidding will be done.”



Blake's residence was on the one-hundred-eighty-first floor of the Crowley Tower, catching the dying rays of the sun daily as they faded behind Apex Hill. The red mountains were cast in a deeper shade of scarlet as light faded from the utopian walled city. Lights of the drone PBs hovered above the city walls, working to protect the perimeter. With the Lowsmiths being so bothersome lately, Blake had ordered an increase in security.

Blake's penthouse was white on white on white, with sharp white lights making the massive open space feel like a blank canvas. It helped Blake think. He stood in the quiet kitchen pouring himself a white wine. He used to hate the stuff, but Robin loved it and now, well, now he found himself having a few glasses every night. It was quiet. He had hoped it wouldn't have been so. He had hoped he would have been greeted with a human hello. He had hoped. A tall skinny ServBot on treadmill wheels swept into the open kitchen and took Blake's coat and shoes. It scooted away with nary a peep. As Blake approached the living room, a hologram of a pretty young lady popped up.

"Hello, Mr. Crowley. What would you like to do this evening? May I suggest some entertainment and dining for you and the missus?"

"Go away, Mira" Blake said bluntly.

"Certainly, sir." The hologram disappeared promptly.

"Actually, I'll take another glass of the Corsica wine," he said.

"Certainly, sir." Mira reappeared and signaled to the ServBot who quickly went to a cabinet and poured the drink. One small ice cube, as was his custom.

"And, Mira," Blake called. "Play some classical alt-rock."

"My pleasure!"

Music filled the room. It was a song from the late 20th century, called Ordinary World. That was a rather boring thought. An ordinary world? What would the point be? He still couldn't believe they had tried to send Jade back into the past. It's a shame it appeared to have failed. He liked Jade, but more importantly he could have made so much more money had it worked.

Blake collapsed into his Telfair couch as the ServBot brought him his wine. Blake held a finger to his temple and the wall in front of him transformed. On it now was another room, all in white. An old analogue clock was all that hung on the wall; an antique she cherished. White nursing MediBots sped around ushering medical supplies. Lying on the bed in the middle of the room was Robin.

Blake spoke. "Robin? I'm here Robin."

Robin's hand twitched. It was a sign she knew he was there. He and his wife built this empire. They defeated death. They were this city. They would not be defeated by some plague to the hybrids they created. The hybrid Robin was.

Blake, alone in his penthouse, began to silently cry. "It's alright, Robin." His voice was strained, dry. It held his heart. "Help is coming. I can feel it."

On cue, an urgent message came onto screen. Blake touched his temple again and the room where Robin lied vanished, replaced by the cold features of Warren Relic in the control room.

“This had better be important, Warren.” Blake sat up as he said it.

“It is.” Warren’s emotion never wavered.

“Tell me it’s good news.”

Warren nodded. “It is. Jade, she’s back. And she has company.”

Warren drank the rest of his wine in one big gulp. Considering Corsica wine costs as much as most houses, it’s not recommended you drink it in one gulp, but times dictated it needed to be done.

Jade was back. There was work to be done.

Chapter 9

Three bloody, bruised and damaged bodies fell from the center of spinning metallic circles onto a concrete floor. Charlie grasped his back in pain as he landed.

“Ahhhhhowww,” he cried. “Why did they put this so far off the ground?!”

Jade simply shrugged.

“Greetings!” The deep voice echoed through the sparse concrete room.

Collectively, the three figures’ five eyes (Angelo was short one) swiveled in the direction of the booming voice. A giant holograph of Blake Crowley’s head floated in the cavernous space as the speakers blared his voice. “Charlie Richards! In the flesh!” Blake wore a charismatic smile to end all charismatic smiles. “Your reputation precedes you. I assure you, you will be treated like a king among men while staying in my kingdom, so to speak. I mean this isn’t really a kingdom, though you probably don’t know much about this time period. But we, we know a lot about you.”

Charlie nodded dumbly. “Thanks.” Holy shit, he was in the future!

Blake turned his attention to Jade. She was one beat up woman, but Blake had seen her through worse. “Jade, would you be so kind to escort our guest to see me.”

Jade motioned over at Angelo. “I need to stop by the Pavilion first.”

A smile remained plastered on Blake’s face, but underneath it was something unpleasant. “Jade, surely you understand, there are more important issues to attend to first.”

Jade was about to say something, then nodded. Charlie glanced at her. In the short time that Charlie had known Jade thus far, he had concluded that she was not one to take to being told what to do. This guy Blake was obviously quite a big deal. Pretty hard to guess considering this entire city is named after him.

Blake’s gaze returned to Charlie. He smiled and nodded, “See you soon, Admiral Richards.” The transmission cut out.

Charlie puffed up with pride. “I’m an Admiral!”

Jade rolled her eyes. “Don’t let it go to your head. Just trying to impress you.”

“So, who is he? What’s his deal?”

The broad white wall to their left slid open to reveal a platoon of red and white ProtectoBots. They parted as the wall opened and through the gap stepped a tall man wearing a tight black uniform

like Jade's. His face was grim as he offered a slight bow to the group. "I am here to see you make your next appointment."

Jade sighed. This was Monfils. Blake sending Monfils was not a good sign. It said "I trust you Jade, but I don't trust you." She didn't want Blake getting paranoid. Especially since she had literally just travelled through time to do his bidding. Still, she nodded respectfully back. You don't want to get on Monfils's bad side.

Jade motioned to Charlie to follow. "I'll tell you on the way."

"Mr. Monfils." Angelo bowed as best he could on one leg. "You look as deadly as ever, good sir."

Monfils laughed. "I know I do, Angelo."

"Where are the Lowsmiths?" Jade asked Monfils.

Monfils shrugged. "Scavenging outside the walls like usual, is my guess."

"It's just, when we left, they were overtaking the city."

"Pft." Monfils waved at a hand at that. "No Lowsmiths can overtake this great city of ours. We beat them back handily soon after you left."

Jade nodded. She didn't share in his confidence. She had seen the truth of things, and they had been close to breaking through.

The group stepped onto a patio overlooking the city of Crowley. Charlie's mouth went agape at the city of the future. "Jade?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes, Charlie?"

"I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

"Wizard of Oz?"

Charlie looked at her, impressed. "Good pull. If there is ever a time to use that line in life, this would be it."

Charlie had returned, not to the state of Kansas, but to a state he felt comfortable in nonetheless: disbelief. This place was only recognizable by the surrounding red mountains, the Luxor Pyramid and Caesar's Palace (renamed Crowley's Palace, but he recognized the building.) He knew where he was. "Are we in Vegas?"

Jade smiled. "It used to be."

Charlie looked out over futuristic Vegas approvingly. When Charlie had won his free trip to the Grand Canyon, he got to spend a day in Vegas. He lost three hands in blackjack, went to a club because they told him he was a V.I.P., stood in a corner awkwardly for ten minutes and left, then went to his hotel room and read some Carl Sagan. The Grand Canyon was much better. But the city had changed, as one might suspect to happen over centuries. The city skyline was a series of glass buildings (he assumed it was glass, but wasn't technically correct) towered high into the sky. The sky – something was off. He couldn't put his finger on it at first, but it didn't feel real. Finally, he realized it was because the clouds weren't real. They looked convincing, but when he saw hatches open and

drones coming and going from inside, he took a closer look. The clouds were a collection of white receptor panels.

Charlie felt a shove from behind and spun to look.

“Please, sir,” Monfils said, waving his hand like he was scooting a dog along. “I imagine you must need time to soak this in, but time is short.” The push and words in themselves were not threatening, but all the same, it was a clear Monfils expected Charlie to pay heed. Charlie caught Jade’s eye. She gave him a slight nod. It said, it was best to listen.

Monfils was joined by his two PB’s, Felix 1 and Felix 2 (no relation.) The group made their way to a platform of the ConleyTransit (VIP line, no waiting). Angelo hopped on one leg. Monfils wanted Felix 2 to carry Angelo, afraid he would slow them down.

“Good sir,” Angelo said politely. “If they touch me, I will have to destroy them quickly and effortlessly.”

Monfils looked at Angelo, then at Jade.

Jade nodded. “Pick your battles wisely, Monfils.”

Monfils dropped the subject. And, as beat up and broken Angelo was, he did not slow them down one bit.

On the platform, a small yellow pod awaited. It was attached to overhead tracks that ran throughout the city. They all got in, and went for a ride through the town.

Charlie had 348 questions off the top of his head, and another several thousand off the bottom. But he recognized the situation for what it was. The man who he had seen when they first arrived was who summoned him, and he wanted Charlie fast. All he knew was that his code played a role in this, and they needed Charlie. He liked it better when he thought he was needed, but not actually needed. Charlie’s breathing shortened as he remembered he was sent here to save the world.

“Who was the guy who summoned us?” Charlie asked.

Jade shot a quick look at Monfils, confirming they were on shaky ground to reveal too much. “We are in the city of Crowley. The guy talking was Blake Crowley, which kinda says it all on how powerful a man he is. And he’s my boss. And he made his trillions off the code in your notebook.”

Charlie slowly nodded. “Do I get any royalties, at least?”

“I’m not going to tell you your future. I will say, your brilliance was, unfortunately, not realized until well after you were gone. I will give you some good news.”

“Yes, please.”

“You do eventually move out of your mom’s house.” Jade gave Charlie a small smile.

Charlie wasn’t sure to be embarrassed or happy, so he changed the subject.

“The clouds. What’s their purpose?”

“To be a beautiful beacon of hope that blends technology and nature.” Jade said it with a rehearsed cadence.

“Oh, come now.”

“Just reciting the pitch. It’s what powers the world. Not only does it give us wireless power, it’s what powers 42% of the world. Crowley controls more power, literally and figuratively, than any other corporation.”

They turned on to what was once upon a time, in the 21st century, known as The Strip. It was now called The Crowley Strip. Not that creative, if you asked Charlie. Where once mammoth casinos stood now sat even more mammoth not-glass buildings. On the outside of the buildings, nanobots raced around their windows. At the end of Crowley Strip, there was one building that rose above the rest. Written across it, in fabulous black opal letters, was the name “Crowley.”

“I’m just wondering,” Charlie mused. “You think this Crowley guy has an ego?”

Jade laughed. Charlie was glad for this, he wasn’t sure how humor translated to the future. Monfils, however, did not laugh. In fact, a scowl was presented.

Below them on the streets Charlie watched the figures come and go. Some were robots, some were people, and they seemed to move effortlessly between each other. “So, there are humans living here and robots? And hybrids? Sounds complicated.”

Jade shrugged. “I suppose so. Yes, it is.”

“Who outranks whom?”

“It’s complicated.” Jade paused a moment before continuing. “Crowley is the only predominantly hybrid city in the world. To the east, are all-human cities. To the west are robot cities controlled by the man we are going to see. But Mr. Crowley is rapidly expanding hybrid technology worldwide as, obviously, there is a market for extending your lifespan. Which is why this plague is not good news for his bottom line. Not to mention our lives.”

“And all the hybrids are being infected with a virus in their code.” Charlie left that as a statement, not a question. He knew why he was here.

“No.”

Or maybe he didn’t.

“There are two types of hybrids,” Jade continued. “Gammas, the leading class of hybrids. They are hybrids that have been mechanized but keep their brain clean and intact. There is only a select class of Gammas.”

“If that’s the leading class, then why aren’t more hybrids Gammas?”

Monfils looked up at Jade. This questioning was walking on thin ice. Still, Monfils knew that Charlie needed to know what he needed to know to fix the issue. Plus, Blake was surely listening and would stop it if need be. He had eyes and ears everywhere.

Jade did indeed know this, and not being stopped, continued. “The approval process to be a Gamma is...very stringent. The rest of us are Deltas. We are various levels of percentage human-to-machine but what we have in common is that our neurosystems are mechanized. This, generally, is a requirement to become a hybrid.”

Charlie nodded in understanding. “And that’s the code being affected?”

“Yes. Just some of us, so far. But it is spreading.”

“Are there humans here?”

“Yes. Bots have taken most of the duties in the city. There are four legal categories of bots. The PB’s, ProtectoBots. All personal protection and city protection.” Jade waved at the three bots in the pod with them as an example. “There are ServBots you will find meet all your service needs. Repairs, waiters, sex, you name it.” Jade looked at Charlie at the last example but he didn’t react. “There are SaniBots for all cleaning. And MediBots for health. All are patented by Crowley.”

“Is anyone purely human here?”

“Besides you?”

Charlie nodded apprehensively.

“Yes,” Jade confirmed. “The city has six boroughs. One of those, Trenchtown, is where the humans live. There are many jobs that still require humans to perform, and that are below the class of Deltas to do.”

Jade’s voice sounded even, but Charlie picked up on resentment when she said it.

Monfils shifted uncomfortably. “For now, anyway.” His voice was full of anger. “We are working on that.”

Charlie took Monfils’s tone to mean this discussion was over. He was a genius after all, or so they say, so he could at least read that correctly. He looked out the window of the passing city. Between the buildings, Charlie could see to the vast edges of the city. Everything looked pristine and upscale. Police PBs walked the streets bringing a feeling of safety. At the edges of town arose a colossal metallic wall. Above it, the drone PBs shined down their lights just beyond the wall. The entire wall glowed a faint blue light, as if powered in some way. The city had obviously gone to great lengths to keep someone out.

Charlie couldn’t help but say as much. “Who’s the big bad wolf beyond those walls?”

Jade moved to answer but was cut off by Monfils. “Some people, Mr. Richards, can’t accept progress.”

Jade smirked. “You mean, can’t afford it.”

“I mean,” Monfils said with a sneer, “they not only don’t accept it, but they want to stop it. And you, Jadyne, should know better than anyone how important progress is.”

Monfils’s and Jade’s eyes met each other with force. Tensions were high. Angelo seemed to sense this too and was crouching slightly.

Finally, it was Charlie who relieved the situation. “What’s the pizza situation in this century? What’s popular?”

Monfils continued to stare at Jade for a moment, before finally breaking eye contact. “Pepperoni,” he said, relaxing slightly. “You’re right, not all progress is needed.”



Monfils was a hybrid. His father, Simon, was a first-generation hybrid. His father was beyond reproach. He fought in the Pacific Wars and was a decorated hero. A lot of ornaments on that man's tree. He was injured badly, critically, and what was then new technology saved his father's life. Progress. Progress should always progress.

Thanks to progress, his father was still alive and could expect to live on another hundred years or so. Thanks to hybrid technology, he had his father. Thanks to hybrid technology, his father, whom had invested heavily in the industry and Crowley Enterprises, was rich and, by extension, so was Monfils.

He was fine with pure humans (he used to be one.) They lived in this city beside hybrids and bots. Though inferior, it wasn't their fault. Most strived to make enough money and/or influence to become a hybrid, for it to even be a possibility, and that helped make the city run smoother. Motivation.

Yes, there were those, outside those walls, who aimed to destroy progress; the Lowsmiths. The human rebels' pathetic excuse as to why they revolted was hybrid technology should be available to everyone, not just the rich.

Because that's how the world has ever worked.

Sure, there was a bit of an issue right now with some hybrids getting sick, going insane, or both. But progress always had such problems, and progress always makes it through to the other side.

He just hoped this human in front of him was the one they could count on. Before the Lowsmiths broke into the city and tried to ruin everything.

On cue, the electroshield on the southeast wall went down.

"Quickly, let's go." Monfils moved the group along as he looked back at the southeast perimeter. The wall would still hold without the electroshield. Probably. Still, these attacks were increasing. Warren Relic, who oversaw defense and was his father Simon's direct supervisor (and his indirect,) wouldn't be bested by any Lowsmiths.

Still, this wasn't progress.



"We are stopping here." Jade said it strongly, ready for a fight.

"We are going to see Blake immediately," Monfils shot back. "Orders."

Jade turned aggressively towards Monfils. "We are stopping here. Angelo needs help." Monfils met her gaze.

Jade's expression softened. "Besides, it's a short walk to headquarters after."

Monfils looked at her a good long moment. "Fine. But make it quick."

The pod opened and they stepped out onto the platform. Charlie looked up at the sign: Richards's Circle. Reality continued to be unreal. Richards's Circle.

The group walked down the street towards the circle and the surreal nature of the universe kept getting more surreal. They walked past towers of glass buildings. It began with a few people leaning

out windows. Then a few people came down to the street. Then some followed, with awed whispers. They were looking at Charlie.

Charlie was not a fan of this attention. He just didn't quite understand it. He became very self-conscious of his clothes. It must be what they were laughing at, his 21st century wardrobe. Guess he stuck out rather poorly to have all these people come down to the street and gawk so.

But then he heard an "It's him." And then, "Is that Charlie Richards?" He remembered what Jade had said. In the future, he was a hero. He was a revolutionary thinker. He was a god.

Charlie Richards put his shoulder up and walked with more confidence than he ever had before. He walked liked a god (for the record, Jade gave a significant eye roll at this, but luckily for Charlie he didn't notice.)

If Charlie had reason to have his ego inflated, he hadn't seen nothin' yet. When he rounded the Sinatra Tower, which opened to Richards Square, his ego blew up to almost the size of the city. There stood Charlie looking at Charlie, or rather a thirty-foot statue of his likeness. At least, there were similar traits, but this Charlie was one handsome devil. He lost some weight, pumped some iron, and his hair went from shabby to flowing. In his hands, he held a scroll of code, Charlie's Code, and on his face a giant smile. The code was wrong, but beyond this it was a very nice statue.

By now, a substantial crowd had formed and chants of Charlie! Charlie! echoed through the square. Charlie drank it in like a draft of Amstel Light.

Jade turned to Charlie. "I'll be back in a minute. Stay by Monfils. He's a bastard but he'll take care of you."

Monfils nodded at Charlie, confirming. Jade left with Angelo towards the Pavilion. The medical center for bots and hybrids was behind Charlie's statue. It was impressive, an entire city block. As Jade and Angelo reached the front of it, MediBots came to Angelo's side to help him in to see the "doctor." But Angelo shrugged them aside. Angelo, PB of Jadyne, was going in on his own one foot.

Charlie noticed another building in the square that caught his attention. The Hybrid Technology Museum of Technology (terrible name.) Charlie crossed to its windows and starred inside. Inside he saw his image and work everywhere. There were the inside of hybrids and how the technology was making a better place. There was even a picture of Nate, who apparently provided Charlie with help on the code at some point he hadn't gotten to in his present day. A young kid with his mother was looking at a hologram of Charlie writing his famous code. The kid turned to see the real Charlie standing at the window. Then he turned back to the hologram. Then back to look at the real Charlie.

Then he freaked the fuck out.

Charlie stepped back, both amused and overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, things were about to take a turn for the worse.

Chapter 10

With a rebel yell, thousands of the red-shirted humans, flooded into the city. All the drone PBs in the sky made a beeline for the breached wall. They numbered in the thousands, like a globular cluster of stars. The clouds themselves began to shift direction, moving towards the breach.

The skies opened and destruction rained down upon the Lowsmiths. The drone PBs fired HEL (high energy lasers) through the masses. The clouds hatches opened and streams of black ShinobiBots darted to the ground in front of the Lowsmiths offering their deadly defenses.

Hundreds of Lowsmiths died in minutes. But they weren't done for yet. Not by half. Lowsmith ballads were written about this day. The day that would be known as The Eruption was in fact the first day of what would come to be known as Trekon's Revolt.

Charlie Richards, of Topeka, Kansas in the 21st century, knew nothing of the political reasons why any of this was happening. All he knew was he came to a future that was in the middle of the war. He didn't want to be in the middle of the war. He liked being at the ends of things, like the end of long days, the end of several brews, or the end of the rankings in at Bandicoot SmartTech.

"Get behind me." The ruffled voice of Monfils floated down to Charlie. He stared intently at the battle scene before him. They were a good distance off, a few miles, but Charlie wasn't well versed in the technology of the age yet. They probably had inventions to wipe out planets by now, considering the rate they were going even back in the 21st century.

Monfils turned to look again at Charlie, this time with more intent. "I said, get behind me. I may not be as smitten with your legacy as most, but you may be the man we need to save our race. As such, I have no intention of letting you die."

"I appreciate that. Please, let me buy you a beer when this is over." Charlie stopped himself before Monfils rolled his eyes.

The biggest indication of how big an issue the battle was, was how citizens were reacting. It wasn't good, as many were panicked. That said, they didn't run around in fear, they ran around in preparation. Bots had shown up and were handing out weapons of some sort. Charlie cursed at Jade's timing to leave his side. He couldn't trust anyone in this world, including Jade, but still she was the closest shot at it.

As more bots filled the streets and with the citizens moved towards the battle scene, Monfils and Charlie stayed back. Monfils said it was because Charlie was too important to risk, but didn't seem thrilled at not fighting. Above them, there were no drone PBs to be seen. Everything was engaged in the battle on the south wall. Monfils needed to get Charlie to Crowley tower. He looked around, figuring out the best course of action.

Charlie took the moment to also check his surroundings. Things had been chaotic, to say the least, and he was still processing. To the east, a large pristine river cut through the city, an unnaturally bright shade of turquoise. Fish and sea life of all sorts could be seen underneath, but they didn't act quite natural. They swam faster than they should, were bigger and stronger. Perhaps his technology was even used on Mr. Duck. He had no doubt he would have lost the argument back in his day with Mr. Duck had he been a hybrid duck.

To the east were hangar-sized buildings (he wasn't sure he wanted to know what was inside.)

Something caught Charlie's eye. Figures were coming over the walls. "Mr. Monfils?" Charlie did his best to keep his voice calm.

"Not now, Mr. Richards."

"I know. I'm just askin', would people storming the castle be of interest to you?" Monfils turned to Charlie. "What are you-?" Monfils stopped, seeing Charlie looking the opposite direction. He followed Charlie's gaze to the figures coming over the walls. They were not in red like the others, these were dressed in black shirts with leather bands around their arms. Monfils whispered, "The Yakuza."

"The Japanese mafia is here?"

"What?" Monfils said, annoyed. "No. I think they just liked the name. All the same, they are the elite of the Lowsmiths." Monfils turned his attention back at the war raging to the south. The battle continued, but clearly the bots and hybrids had the upper hand. The human Lowsmiths were taking heavy casualties. "The attack. It's a ruse. Should have known. Typical."

Charlie looked back to the east. "You know, they seem to be moving closer quite quickly. Should we be doing something?"

Monfils sighed. "Unfortunately, your survival is the most important thing."

"How unfortunate," Charlie agreed.

Monfils ignored him. "Let's get you to safety."

Monfils touched his fingers to this temple. He looked out to the east, concentrating.

There was a rumble in the city. Up above him the Crowley building started to shake. The outside of the building began to transform, darkening in color. An armored shell began to melt over the building. One of the clouds above them began moving back towards the Crowley building. A few dozen of the drones engaged in the battle to the south came back to the east.

Charlie was impressed. "You did all that by touching your temple?"

Monfils didn't answer. He took Charlie by the arm and they were on the move. As they headed up

the non-yellow-brick-road yellow brick road, several more GuardBots joined the group.

“Don’t you think we should wait for Jade?”

Monfils scoffed. “Don’t worry about her.”

“I thought humans live in this city, too? Why are some humans trying to destroy it?”

“Let’s save the questions.”

They quickly made their way up towards the Crowley Tower. However, it was about to become a more difficult trip.

A ship landed in the middle of the street ahead of him. Charlie wanted it badly to look like the Millennium Falcon. He had hoped in the future when such technology existed, designers would pay homage and throw in an Enterprise or Battlestar Galactica look to their ships. Instead, this looked like a propeller-less oversized News Channel 13 (Dedicated, Determined, Dependable) helicopter. Charlie doubted this thing could even make it to space. *Lame*. Out poured dozens of redshirted Lowsmiths from the craft. To the west, the black-shirted special forces Lowsmiths advanced. They were about to be attacked on two sides.

A hatch in low cloud above Charlie opened, sending down samurai-looking ProtectoBots towards the ground. Six bots immediately encircled Charlie and began ushering him to the side of the street and towards a large arched opening to a nearby building. Several people were there at the doors waving Charlie to hurry in.

The Lowsmith army advanced and clashed with thunderous results.

Monfils was just behind Charlie and the bots as the Lowsmiths closed the gap.

Charlie was ushered inside the building but Monfils stayed just outside. He shouted at the bots. “Get him to Crowley at all costs.” The bots blinked affirmative. Then Monfils considered the command and reconsidered. “Not at all costs. He needs to be alive.”

The room began to darken; it was the glass of the building, being covered by the same material as the Crowley building. But before it went totally dark, Charlie watched through the darkening glass as Monfils took out five red shirts with three succinct moves. The black shirts looked to be more difficult, but Monfils knew how to hold his own.

The room was dark, except for the flashing lights coming from the surrounding ProtectoBots. Slowly, light began to grow from huge chandeliers above (though no bulbs, they just glowed.) They were in a huge concrete terminal and the architecture brought him comfort. It was in the style of a 1920’s capital city train station. Though that was the only thing 1920’s about it, robotic workers ran around frantically. This was a factory of some sort, though he had no idea what was being manufactured.

“So,” he asked to any of the six bots surrounding him. “What do we do now?”

One of the six, apparently the leader, answered. “We take you to Mr. Crowley. When it is clear to do so.”

“When will that be?”

“Calculations: sixteen minutes.”

“So, we just stand here until then?”

“If this is too boring for your human brain, I could sing or play any game from your generation’s time.”

“Uno!”

They never got to play because suddenly, every bot in the entire place fell to the floor. All one hundred and thirty-eight of them. Several flying bots crashed near him with a thud. Slowly, the light dimmed.

“Charlie Richards?” The voice was deep and booming. He turned to peer through the dimming light of a burly man, about six-foot and most likely pushing three hundred pounds, stood with some sort of weapon raised. He wore the black shirt of the elite Lowsmiths he had learned of. This wasn’t good.

“That depends. What are you going to do if I am? Because my answer is probably I’m not.”

The man shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe they did it. It works.”

“Question. If you guys have technology to incapacitate these robots, why don’t you just use it on the whole city?”

“You have a few trillion in gold we can borrow? It works for a very limited time. We have to go.”

“I don’t think I should be going with the enemy.”

“I don’t think you know who the enemy is. And it wasn’t a request.” The man held up his weapon at Charlie.

“Will that thing kill me?”

“If you’re lucky.”

The man lumbered towards Charlie.

From the shadows, or rather just a dark corner, a figure lunged. Jade. As the man fired, Jade knocked it from his hands. It hit one of the ProtectoBots on the ground and created a huge hole in the bot’s stomach (so, yes, it would have killed Charlie.)

Jade subdued the man with ease and had his hands behind his back in seconds. She quickly strapped a wiry band around his wrists that locked up immediately.

The man looked up at Charlie. “Know your enemies, Charlie. Don’t help them.”

Jade kicked the man and turned to Charlie. “Don’t listen to the human, Charlie.”

Charlie nodded. The bots began to stir. Soon, they had their escort back. The windows of the building began to clear and Charlie could see out over the bots and hybrids and bodies of Lowsmiths. The winner was indeed clear, and it wasn’t the humans. It was time for them to go see Blake Crowley.

Don’t listen to the human, Jade had said. Easier said than done, Charlie thought. I am human.

Chapter 11

In the early 24th century, the Global Nations (G.N.) voted on the Innovative7Wonders of the World. Four of those were around in Charlie Richards's era (Great Pyramid of Giza, Machu Picchu, Taj Mahal and significant parts of The Great Wall of China.) The other three newest members joined this elusive club in the year since.

One was a machine proposed back in the 21st century (at least, the first model), the Clock of the Long Now 5. It was a clock built to last for ten millennia with minimal maintenance and interruption. It was built inside a manmade titanium pyramid on the site of what once was a seventh wonder in its own time, the Mayan pyramid of Chichen Itza (it's being built at site had led to plenty of controversy.)

Another wonder was Atlantibot Island, a ninety-two-mile man-made floating island. The 23rd century island was the first to be staffed entirely by bots. It catered to the world's elite as the ultimate getaway. The island itself would drift with enormous speed, but with advanced turbulent cancelling technology even the roughest waves and at top speeds, guests could feel virtually no roughness at sea. So, if you could afford it, every morning its guests would be greeted with a new sunrise at a new location around the world (it could do Hawaii to Italy in three hours flat if it had to.)

Finally, there was the Crowley Tower.

It wasn't its sheer size; at 3,500 ft. it was merely the eleventh tallest building in the world (at the time it was built, it came in at 3rd.) The building was a blend of what Charlie would consider futuristic, modern and classical architecture rolled into one. Blocks and blocks wide, the building was full of parts. The building was a city unto itself, with high parts where hanging gardens descended to the lower parts, there were majestic archways, and sections resembling a medieval castle. Some areas looked like a 21st century NYC skyscraper, yet another area had a space-age shuttle landing pad and juice bar. The cherry on the top was not a cherry but a laser beam of light shooting up into the heavens. It was a mess of different periods design, but it was no doubt a wonder.

Charlie, flanked by Monfils and Jade once again, as well as a handful of ProtectoBots, reached the building with awe. The sheer vastness of the building up close was one to behold. Charlie wasn't the most material of people, but if his work helped this Crowley guy build this building, well that just wasn't fair at all. He had better be getting at least a luxury spacecraft out of the deal.

The rest of the trip to Crowley Towers had gone rather smooth, at least in comparison to the battle. The Lowsmiths had been neutralized, the majority having retreated through the breach in the walls. Already ServBots were working on repairs. There were the remains of destroyed bots through the streets as well and SaniBots were clearing the streets of the debris. Many Lowsmiths had been captured on the day of The Eruption. Groups of prisoners were being lead, hands bound, through the streets and off to the huge buildings to the east. Charlie had watched as the big burly man had cornered him not long before joined the group and was led away.

Charlie wasn't sure what to think about what the man had said. Clearly, everyone was not getting along smashingly. He just had no context yet, the world still too new. Fortunately, he was about to get plenty of context as he was to meet the leader of the city.

They were lead into the control room by two hulking red and white ProtectoBots. Charlie was greeted to the sight of a man bordered by many other men (or hybrids, he wasn't sure.) The man in the middle, presumably Mr. Crowley, smiled generously as Charlie entered the room. The room was high up in the building and full of glass. Monitors were everywhere; eyes around the city.

Blake was a strong looking man, but his age was hard to guess. Looked like the type of man who could buy his good looks, if he needed. He wore a suit that smelled of money.

"Charlie Richards!" he cried, throwing up his arms. "The man. They myth. The hero!"

Blake was flanked by roughly thirty people who looked important. Among them were many in military uniform, appearing to be high ranking generals. There were scientists, politicians, advisors, advisors to advisors, associate advisors to advisors, right hand men and left-hand men. Many smiled at Charlie, but those smiles looked forced. The ones who didn't looked tired and stressed. It was only Blake who played the part well. The man to the right of Blake, an impeccably dressed man with sharp features, held a slight grin but not a warm one.

Charlie and the group approached. Blake stepped forward, his hand extended. Charlie looked over at Jade, whose face was twisted with anger. It was an anger he had never seen in her, and that was saying something considered they had almost been killed three times in their short time knowing each other. It worried him. But he looked back at Blake and they shook hands.

"Charlie." Blake gestured to the world around him. "All of this can be traced back to your work. I owe you gratitude that can't possibly be repaid."

Charlie nodded. "But you can try, right?"

Blake laughed a deep, honest laugh. "Oh, I will. I will. In this world, you'll be able to have anything you desire."

Charlie again nodded.

"We just need your help with one little thing. I am not sure how much you've been told," Blake shot a quick glance at Jade. The first signs of Blake being uneasy flashed across his face for an

instance, upon seeing Jade's rage, but was gone just as quick. "The future of humanity, what it has evolved into, you helped create. But it has a problem. One we think you might be able to fix."

Charlie's eyes darted around the room. The uneasy faces peered back at him. They had, after all, just been attacked. It would make anyone uneasy. But there was something else. They were scared. Jade had said there was something wrong with the original code, and whatever that was doing to them was making them scared.

"What do you say, Charlie?" Blake turned Charlie's attention back to him. "Can you help us out?"

There was only one answer. Even if there was another, this would not be the time to try it out. "Of course."

Blake smiled wider and leaned back. "Good!" He patted Charlie on the shoulder (hard.) "Trust me, when this is all over, I will make sure your dreams come true. I will make sure you will live for hundreds of years and with unlimited money. You will be able to do as you please."

Okay, Charlie thought, that was the best pitch yet.

Blake turned to the sharply dressed man. "Mr. Relic here will fill you in on all the details. Warren, see to it."

Warren nodded. He would see it done.

Charlie winced at a sudden movement. Jade's anger boiled over. It was hot, and it was fierce. She moved in whirlwind speed at Warren. "You bastard!"

Monfils, who had stood on the other side, had seen this coming and was in front of Warren in a flash. Warren, for his part, did not react one iota.

It was Charlie and Blake who reacted the most. Both jumped back from the fray as fast as they could.

Jade pushed Monfils's hands aside, freeing up Warren. "You sent Genesis to kill us! To kill Charlie!"

Warren looked on in (mock) shock at the accusation. It was convincing.

Jade swung hard at Warren. Monfils moved to protect him from the blow but it was too late. Her fist flew at his face and...mere inches away it was stopped by a strong black hand. Jade turned to see an eight-foot robot of sheer black beside her.

Genesis.

"Whatever do you mean, Jade?" Warren said evenly and coldly. "Genesis is right here by my side, where he belongs."

Jade struggled to get free from his grasp but was unable to. She looked at the robot again. It looked like Genesis, but she knew it wasn't. The eye slit was slightly wider, his arms slightly skinnier. "That's not Genesis."

"Come now, Jade." Warren gave a pitying smile. "You know how many opalium PBs exist in this world."

"Enough!" Blake stopped everyone in their tracks. "In front of our honored guest, no less. We will

discuss this later!”

Genesis (if it was indeed Genesis) let go and Jade relaxed slightly. But only slightly.

Blake turned to Charlie. “I do apologize.” He waved to the city, the monitors and the destruction from the battle of the day. “It’s been a long day for us, so you’ll have to excuse us. We are generally much more cordial.” He said “cordial” with a sneer, directed at both Jade and Warren.”

Charlie nodded, unsure. “Of course, I understand.”

Blake nodded back. “Good,” he said with a small grin. “I just knew you would.”

Charlie looked one more time at all the faces in front of him, thick with tension. No one seemed to be having a good time. The future was not looking good.



Warren stepped into the Situation Room, eyeing the men across the table. He sat down easily in Blake’s exotic leather chair. He pushed a button and out came a glass of 22nd century Corsica. The wine’s bubbles rapidly rose to the top. It was, by accounts from eight of the thirteen most respected wine journals in the city, the finest drink in existence.

Warren took a small sip. “Would you like a drink?” When he didn’t get an answer, he shrugged. “You don’t get an opportunity to try a Corsica unless, well unless you are me, really.” He took another small sip.

Across from Warren sat Monfils and a young-looking kid with long hair, Dustin. He had the classic young-hot-shot-programming-genius-that-didn’t-care-how-smart-he-was-just-about-his-angst look.

Dustin spoke up. “I’ll have a shot.”

Warren didn’t respond. “You know how I got to where I am today? I’m a human, yet I recognize my own race’s worst enemy is succumbing to emotions. That’s the problem with these rebels. Bots don’t have emotions, but they also aren’t good at adapting to the moment. That’s why hybridization is such a good solution. If only we can perfect it.”

Monfils looked up at Warren and nodded. “I don’t like doing business with you any more than I have to. But this disease is killing my people. We have over five million infected and we both need this to stop.”

“Agreed,” Warren nodded. “We all know just Charlie isn’t the answer. There were problems with the hybrid technology from the get-go. Now is the time to perfect it, not take a technological leap backwards.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“I have been working on that for quite some time, Monfils. I just need you to keep Jade out of my way. And keep this Charlie fellow from messing with the code we are creating. Keep Blake focused on the rebel Lowsmiths. We have more important wars to be fighting.”

Monfils nodded. “In return?”

“In return, I save your people.”

Monfils nodded. But he wanted more.

“And,” Warren conceded. “And when I am a member of the newly perfected hybrid race, you will have a seat at the table. You will no longer be indentured to the House of Crowley, I promise you that.”

Monfils nodded. Hesitant, but agreeing. “Anything else?”

“No.” Warren nodded to the doorway. Monfils looked around suspiciously, rose, and headed for the door.

Dustin lifted an eyebrow to Warren. “You trust him?”

“Of course not,” Warren laughed. He poured a glass of Corsica and handed it to the boy. “But I don’t trust anyone.”

Dustin was taken aback. “Moi?!” They laughed.

“You asked for a shot of Corsica, the most expensive liquor in the world.” Warren took a small sip of the wine as Dustin stopped short. The kid was about to drink it all in one gulp before the comment.

Warren stood and went to one of the hundreds of monitors in the small room. He gazed at the ruined south wall, the bodies of the Lowsmiths in the streets, and the bodies of sick hybrids in the quarantine wings of the medical center. Things were proceeding nicely.

Warren Relic, currently the second most powerful man in the city of Crowley, and 48th worldwide, was moving up fast. Warren Relic, who was once born to simple parents who surely never tasted Corsica or resided in the walls of the richest city in the world. The city where hybrid technology was at the forefront of reinventing the world.

A world he would one day control.

“So, Dustin, how close are you to being the prodigy everyone says you are?”

“I am that prodigy. And lest you forget that you are asking me to solve the most complicated code ever written.”

“And you will be paid royally for it. Don’t let me down.”

Warren motioned for Dustin to leave. Dustin downed his drink in one giant expensive gulp.

Dustin slowed as he reached the door. “Still,” he said to Warren. “I need what Charlie has in his bag.”

Warren didn’t turn. “I know. Don’t worry.”

Dustin exited the Warren pushed a button and another bottle of Corsica sprang up. Everything was working out nicely. He had tried to thwart the mission to bring Charlie back, but in a fortunate turn of events, he failed. Now the original code, the missing pieces he could fit into the gaps of his improved version, came to him wrapped nicely in a backpack.

Now the code was going to be his to control.

Now the hybrids would be his to control. With one simple command.

Now the city was going to be his to control. The Lowsmiths would be no more. Blake, no more.

Warren Relic was about to

Chapter 12

Charlie was tired. It had been a long few days/centuries. He also realized that when he left it was night, and when he got to this day of age it was morning so.... he lost his train of thought.

He was exhausted.

Still, there were things to do before he could mercifully sleep. With Jade by his side, they made their way into the lobby of a sleek, state of the art building; The Advanced Health, Mechanical and Hybrid Sciences Pavilion.

Jade needed to see Angelo. To get Angelo back. But also, she needed to see the effects of the hybrid plague. More importantly, she needed Charlie to see it. It wasn't so easy, though. There was very tight restriction on hybrid contact these days.

A receptionist bot came to greet them, almost human in appearance, but with the distinct diamond-shaped metallic brand on her cheek all bots were required to have. She held up a hand and out came a holographic info sheet. The first requirement for any visitor was to scan your finger chip to identify which of the three races they were. "Input data, please" said the robot. The voice was kind, but there was no room for small talk.

"I need to speak to someone in charge," Jade replied. There was strict restriction on access these days, with the hybrid plague going about. Jade might be able to throw her name around, but it didn't work well with a robot.

"Input data, please," the robot replied.

Jade looked at the robot's nametag. "Elaine 4618, I suggest you let us speak to someone in charge."

"Input data, please." Apparently, ServBot Elaine was a stubborn one.

Jade eyed an ashen-faced man in a suit, staring at her with one-part anger, one-part horror, and one-part annoyance. He scampered over quickly, practically knocking Elaine Bot out of the way (not really, Elaine Bot was significantly stronger of the two.) "Thank you, Elaine, I will take it from here."

Elaine Bot blinked unnaturally, once. "Yes. Sir." The timing of the two words were oddly spaced out. Jade thought she must be a very old model. Budget cuts were no friends to the healthcare community. Elaine turned and rolled away.

“I’m Mr. Birmingham,” the man said with a slight nod and extension of his clammy hand. “How may I be of assistance?”

“My name is Jade—”

“Of course, you are,” Mr. Birmingham cut her off, bowing his head slightly and holding his hands up. Everyone knew who Jade was. “Whatever can I do for you?”

“I was hoping to get a tour.”

“I see. Tours are general scheduled months out through the proper channels. What, may I ask, were you hoping to get a tour of?”

“The Hybrid Center.”

“Well, surely you have seen. You are a hybrid, ergo you have been there for your procedure.”

“I’m not looking for the normal tour.”

Mr. Birmingham looked around nervously. He didn’t like where this was going. There had been special instructions from the Office of Crowley himself, certain patients were to be quarantined and no one, unless cleared by Blake himself, was to be allowed entrance.

Mr. Birmingham’s gaze shot around the building, as if he had received a literal shock. A moment later, a small ding chimed from his processor. He touched the side of his temple. His eyes glazed over for a moment as he looked at an incoming message. Releasing his fingers, a smile spread across his face. “Of course,” he said cheerily. “Right this way.”

Jade knew there was no sneaking around this city. It was a little-known fact, like less than a dozen people in the world knew, that the Crowley Clouds installed worldwide for power were also equipped with millions of microscopic cameras. As was every inch of every building built in this city. With an I.D. chip in every human, hybrid and bot, all Blake had to do was input a name, sit back and watch.

She was sure he was watching them now.

First, they went to get Angelo. The Melinda and David Briskin Center for Bot Therapy (The Bot Center) was bustling with MediBots racing around with programmed urgency. The majority of bot operations were done by other bots, as such there were only select hybrid humans working there, distinguishable by a small chip on the right earlobe.

Mr. Birmingham went over to one of the hybrids in a white coat. Charlie couldn’t tell what was said, but it seemed like a small argument ensued. Mr. Birmingham eventually got his way and the doctor, Milligram (not his real name, it was a nickname he got in med school and it stuck,) came over to Jade. “He’s not ready yet. But come with me.”

Jade nodded and she and Charlie were lead to an urgent care room. When the door opened and they peered inside, Charlie caught a tinge, just a tinge, of emotion come to Jade.

Angelo was in bad shape. He was hooked to monitors and monitors to monitor the monitors and all sorts of noisy machines. He was suspended by two poles that hung from the ceiling, and sparks flew into the air as bots worked on him. His smashed face was thankfully repaired (though one eye

was bigger than the rest.) His limbs, however, were replaced by a gray metal that didn't match the rest of his body.

Dr. Milligram stepped next to Jade. "Angelo is made of a very rare nitrate mineral, one we don't have access to readily. We have temporarily given him titanium arm and leg replacements."

"Is he operational?" Jade asked, her face stony.

"His circuits were badly damaged. We've manage to do basic maintenance that will allow him to operate, but he has so many complicated and advanced features--"

Jade cut him off. "I need him now. If he can operate, it's time for him to go."

"Now? I'm afraid it's impossible. It will take months to--"

"Now," Jade cut him off again. The word left for no argument. "Boot him up."

Dr. Milligram turned around to Mr. Birmingham, who nodded. Dr. Milligram shrugged. "Suit yourself, I get paid the same either way." He barked out orders to the MedicalBots to boot up Angelo.

Charlie had to give his important few cents in. "Can you at least spray paint his arms and legs red to match?"

"I'm sorry," Dr. Milligram said with a head shake. "I'm afraid it's not covered by insurance."

Charlie rolled his eyes. Some things never change.

Angelo was released from the Mechopedic Medical Poles (they were just poles but you could charge more for them with a fancy name) and booted up. His eyes blinked on and off quickly. Charlie could hear Jade holding her breath. Would it be the same Angelo?

Angelo came to life and spun quickly to Jade. It wasn't the same Angelo, his eyes seemed to not recognize her. He stepped forward. Charlie was worried he may attack her.

But Jade remained calm. "Angelo," she said quietly. "It's Jade."

Angelo's eyes blink rapidly again. Then, they seemed to grow softer as they recognized the face in front of them. Angelo made a grand, beautiful, legendary bow. "Of course. It is, my Jadyn of Crowley. I am, as always, at your service.

Jade let out a deep breath. As did Charlie, who didn't even realize he had held his own.

Angelo was back.



The Hybrid Center was like a vast town unto itself. Each district was made up of the different disciplines required to provide Hybrid medicine; human medical care, mechanical engineering, electrical repair, computer programming, and on and on. The usual patients filled the medical ward, but wasn't what Jade was here to investigate. She wanted to know how bad the code defect was, what happened to the victims once they had their outburst and were brought here.

She wanted to see what could possibly happen to her.

Mr. Birmingham personally escorted our heroes through a total of nine security doors. At each

one, ProtectoBot guards of varying impressiveness stood watch, from small darting ones to ones that could crush a tank between their hands. As they went on, it wasn't just bots that stood guard. Hybrid warriors, many mostly machine, stood watch. They all seemed to eye Charlie with a mix of hope and distaste. He guessed they didn't care for humans, but they did care for someone to fix the problem.

Finally, they passed the last massive portal and entered a vast hall of chaos.

A sea of sick hybrids lay before them, filling a gigantic, sealed chamber. There weren't just cots covering the floor, there were five-story bunk beds lined in tight rows as far as the eye could see. In each bunk was a moaning hybrid in various stages of illness, but many had the burnt-out eyes Jade had seen before. A complicated array of machinery, scientists, doctors, computer programmers, nurses, assistants and caregivers frantically ran up and down the aisles, up and down ladders, trying to provide relief and help to the hybrids. Even though hybrids contained so many different parts, the people who helped them understood what the hybrids themselves knew: they were still human.

"This is the ward for hybrids within their first two hours of illness," Mr. Birmingham said.

"All these hybrids became sick in the last two hours?" Jade asked in disbelief.

"Well, in this district," Mr. Birmingham nodded. "There are four other primary response units in other districts."

"How many are sick?" Jade asked slowly. If these hybrids all became sick in the last two hours, the numbers must far outweigh what she'd heard in the situation room.

"We don't know exactly," Mr. Birmingham said. "The numbers have tripled in the last eight hours. All types of hybrids have been infected."

Jade was rarely at a loss for words, but this was one of those moments. If this was spreading fast, and mutating with each victim, this would be apocalyptic for her species. This plague wouldn't just lower their numbers, it would wipe out every single one of them. It was just a matter of time.

Time.

Jade closed her eyes, blocking out the cacophony of the ward.

Their only hope was time.

Chapter 13

“Paris, what’s the last time the Royals won the World Series?” Charlie looked at the attractive brunette hologram he named Paris with a mix of amusement, fascination and, if he were to be honest, desire. Sure, she was 60% transparent but the other 40%...

“The Royals have won once since the 21st century, in the year 2,245. It was a magical run. Shall I play game 7 for you?”

“Paris, you know me. You don’t even have to ask. Put it on!”

The entire wall in front of Charlie lit and transformed into a baseball game. Charlie was happy to see that despite all the advances in this world, baseball was still pretty much the same. It comforted him watching it. Some things don’t change, the Royals’ royal blue uniforms, the lazy pace of the game (though there was a pitch clock now), how boring and perfect baseball was. Some things don’t change.

But pretty much everything else had. A prime example was the room around him. He was in a lovely suite on the 87th floor of the Crowley building. Mr. Crowley had seen to it he would get a very nice room. Jade and Angelo had dropped him off about an hour ago and told him to get some rest, tomorrow was a big day.

Seriously? Tomorrow was a big day?

Today he had been attacked by a killer bot at work, travelled through time, been part of a war, witness to a plague, and told he had to help fix it. No, today was a big day. Tomorrow had to be nanometers in comparison.

Tired, he was. Like he had never been in his life. Except for that one time his sister demanded he run a 10k in the middle of a Topeka heat wave. But no. Not even then was he as tired as he was now.

Still, he couldn’t go right to sleep after he met the lovely girl hologram, Paris. The suite he was in had all sorts of usefulness. There was a ServBot butler who had gotten him a very nice tasting beer. Unfortunately, it had appeared that Amstel Light didn’t exist any longer, but the Crowley-brand lager was quite good. Spectacular windows let him look out over the city. It was still buzzing with life, as thousands of PatrolBots did what they did best, patrolled. He imagined that with the attack today, they were more numerous than usual.

Paris was a wealth of information, and Charlie was in the dark about the three-hundred-year gap

in between his time and now.

“Paris, why are there no more restaurants?”

Paris began explaining the demise of brick and mortar restaurants in the city as Charlie watched a player named Telmond hit a 500-foot home run. Royals 3, Pirates 1. The first thing Charlie had asked Paris when he first arrived was an obvious one. Tell me about Charlie Richards. He was pleased to find history thought of him fondly. The realization of the capabilities of hybrid technology was a recent one, in the last century or so. His code had been theorized throughout the centuries, but it was Blake Crowley, already a self-made billionaire as the leading supplier of wireless power worldwide, who developed it into a business and made himself a self-made trillionaire.

“Paris,” Charlie mused, “any wars happen in the last century?” Paris told Charlie about the Damascus Wars in the 23rd century that had changed the global landscape as Charlie sipped his beer and watched a double play.

Positive things had happened as well. Apparently, we had attempted a colony on Mars (an epic fail it turned out, so maybe not positive, but we had made a serious attempt at it-yay,) cured pain, admitted global warming was real and solved it, and had been greeted by an alien race, gotten along, and even exchanged citizens as part of a complex galactic exchange student program. Apparently, some of these aliens still lived here today, though their numbers had dropped significantly due to some political difference between the civilizations.

It was clear these were trying times. Hybrids, people, were dying and war was knocking on the door. He didn’t want to do it, but he had to. He told Paris to turn off the game and tell him about the plague.

“Rumors of the Hybrid Plague, also known as Devolve, or Richards Disease, are unsubstantiated. We assure you, it doesn’t exist.” While Paris’ expression hadn’t changed, it felt like it did. Her tone felt colder, and flat. It was unfortunate, they had been getting together so well.

Charlie, of course, knew better. They might be denying it to avoid a panic, but Charlie had seen it with his own two eyes. It had been a lot harder on Charlie than he would have thought possible. Charlie was no god. While he didn’t feel responsible for what was happening to hybrid race, he did. Kind of. There seemed to be a feeling that hybrids and humans were separated not just by race, but by being different beings altogether. He didn’t know how it had happened, but he knew the shape of the world, and this just wasn’t true. Just because one has mechanical parts doesn’t mean they aren’t human. Humanity is in the soul and no mechanics would replace that.

Charlie hadn’t done anything, yet this was all his doing. He had to have the power to change it. They hybrids were dying which meant, to him, humanity was. He remembered playing a card game with his nephew, Alex. Holy crap, that was yesterday! The hero, Haladin, could rebuild the city. This was exactly what this century needed right now, someone to rebuild.

Charlie said good night to Paris and headed for bed. Jade had been right about one thing, tomorrow was going to be a long day.

Chapter 14

Ding dong.

Charlie's eyes flittered open with regret. He had no idea where he was, and felt like he could sleep another three centuries. His eyes burned like he had drunk eleven beers (only two, he promised.) Charlie stared up at the ceiling. The room was white as snow. Where was he? When was he?

Ding dong.

Relief came to him. Everything had just been a dream. There were no robots trying to kill him and traveling through time. All a dream. His proof? The doorbell went ding dong. Do you really think in the 24th century doorbells would still go ding dong?

Ding dong.

Above Charlie appeared a figure, and Charlie's stomach dropped. "Hello, Paris."

"Good morning, Mr. Richards. There is a lady by the name of Jadyne of Crowley at your front door. She is accompanied by a mostly red robot. Shall I have them go away?"

Charlie let out a deep sigh. It wasn't a dream and he wasn't going to be allowed to go back to sleep. "No," Charlie said dejectedly. "Let them in."

Charlie got into the turbo shower (not the real name of it, but he called it that because it took ten seconds.) After, he shuttered at the thought of putting back on the clothes he just travelled through time with, and so went to the closet. As miniature ServBots gave him a shave, cut his hair, and did other manly grooming things, Charlie opened the closet to find a surprisingly full wardrobe. He expected futuristic type shirts, or sterile all-white ones, but what he found was very 21st century and very expensive looking. They were Armani suits, fourteen of them virtually identical, save for hue, fourteen ties, fourteen dress shirts, and fourteen black shoes. The suit looked very much like the one Mr. Crowley was wearing when they had met. He wondered if he had this stocked for him or if this was just another room he owned.

Well, if Charlie Richards was going to play the part of hero, he was going to have to look the part. To his pleasant surprise, they fit like they were tailored to every inch of his body.

“Whoa.” Even Jade couldn’t hide her surprise.

“Not bad, eh?” Not bad indeed. He had chosen the ash grey suit and a nice light blue (go Royals!) tie. He looked like a new, GQ-cover-worthy man.

“I do say, good sir.” Angelo nodded approvingly. “You look simply dapper.”

“Thank you, Angelo. So!” Charlie clasped his hands together. “I figured it was going to be a pretty light day. Was thinking of catching a movie?”

“Huh?” Jade said stupidly. A combination of not getting what he was talking about and still being surprised to see Charlie.

“Okay, then.” Charlie said seriously. “No movie.”

They took the elevators (yup, elevators were still the most widely used technology for traveling between floors) down to the fourth floor. It turns out Blake Crowley was a huge fan of classical 21st century architecture and design. Signs of it were in the hallways, the design of the elevators. It also explained his suit and why the doorbell in his room went ding dong.

The elevator came to a stop at some unmarked floor. As the door slid opened, Charlie was greeted with a thousand audible gasps.

Charlie saw Blake waiting for him first. He had a huge charming smile like usual. Then he looked out beyond him at a sea of people staring at him in amazement. The technology had changed, but he knew a room full of programmers when he saw it. “My people.”

Jade smiled. “Your work is now their work.”

“Charlie!” Blake exclaimed excitedly. “Good to see you again. And my, don’t you look the part in that fine suit. I’m glad you found it. Now, you ready to get to work?”

Blake led the way, prompting the group to follow him through the programmers towards a huge main control bank at the far end. Treating him like a god is indeed how the people he passed reacted. He heard whispers of excitement and pointing and oh my god, it’s him. One person even reached out to touch him and looked like he was going to faint after doing so.

It was a mammoth programming room. There were the thousand or so programmers in the room, as well as hundreds of bots running around doing various tasks (they did not stop to gawk at Charlie.) There weren’t computers or keyboards he could see, just pieces of glass for the programmers to swipe at. It all seemed to feed into the large main control bank, code projected across it like the New York Stock Exchange. Within the room was doors to another room that was guarded by colossal ProtectoBots. Out of that room came a kid, early twenties, impeccably dressed and walking with a planet’s worth of ego. He came up to meet them.

“Dustin,” Blake said to the kid. “Meet Charlie.”

Dustin held out his hand. “It is an absolute honor,” though his face betrayed the words. All the other programmers in the room had a look of awe upon seeing Charlie, but not this kid. And Charlie

knew that look, he worked with programmers all the time. It was the look when they thought they knew everything and others knew nothing. It was not a rare look in the programming world. Charlie hated this type more than anyone. Anytime one was hired at Bandicoot in management level, they threw out the current ways of doing things and declared themselves the smartest person in company.

Charlie was quite sure they weren't going to get along.



Dustin was quite sure he and Charlie were not going to get along.

Look, Dustin wasn't an asshole. Just ask Dustin. He appreciated Charlie's work. It was pioneering stuff at the time.

But come on, Blake! What the hell was he thinking? Charlie's knowledge base is from centuries ago! You think some guy with a three-century old knowledge base and intelligence was going to come here and show him what to do? The current code was billions of lines long, they were written in a program that didn't even exist in Charlie's time, they involved genetic sequencing and an evolutionary user interface design. Come now, Blake. You're the most powerful man in the world, but not the smartest. That's why he had hitched his wagon (very antiquated phrase but he liked it) to Warren. Warren could see the way of things. Even now, hybrid technology's possibilities were being vastly underutilized. Basically, it was there to make rich man Crowley even richer. Yeah, people could live hundreds of years, but it could be so much more. People could be stronger. Smarter. Run faster. They were just scratching the surface of possibilities. The plague was what it was, just a bug they were working on, which they would soon fix. If some hybrids die, it is what it is. Just think of the future. Not think "let's go back hundreds of years" and use that code. Forward, not backward.

Warren would be running things one day. Dustin was sure he was one of the five smartest people on the planet, and he knew where to put his chips. If Warren was going to be the most powerful man, he was going to be the second. And with the possibilities of hybrid technology opened, they could rule and live nearly forever.

He wasn't about to have some 21st century digitally-aged man ruin it.



"Alright," Dustin said with a large grin. "Let's begin."

They were in the inner core room that belonged to Dustin. Just Blake, Charlie and Dustin. Jade was left behind in the main room.

Dustin began to explain as fast and as complicated as possible. Charlie wasn't sure if it was intentional or not, he imagined it was, but he was completely and utterly lost. It was overwhelming, to say the least. The code he one day began was only slightly recognizable. Panic gripped him. He

needed a beer at The Lonely Tavern. He needed to sit alone and think. Dustin was going on and on about how the code evolves using hereditary PLNA links...blah blah blah. There was absolutely no way he would be able to do this.

The panic elevated. No one seemed to notice the cold sweat forming at his brow. But maybe they did notice. Dustin talked faster and faster and seemed to be enjoying every minute of it. Numbers and characters flew across the screen at lightning speed.

What would happen when he told them he couldn't help? Would they send him back to the past? Was he still in the past or is he just a missing person now? Does his work continue if he's not there? Would Blake even let him go or would they send Genesis, the sequel, after him? His head was swimming. It was too much to take.

"Charlie?" Blake asked, concerned.

"Huh?"

"I said, do you think you could help us?"

He felt Blake's eyes on him. If he said no, then what? Would they just send him back in time? Was he just stuck here? Was he...useless to Blake?

"Of course," he said with a shaking voice.

Blake nodded.

"Excuse me." Charlie turned and ran out the door. He ran into out into the main room past the eyes of thousands of programmers. He rushed past Jade and Angelo and out into the hallway. He didn't know where he was going, he didn't care. He just needed to get out of there.

Chapter 15

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were on the 23rd floor of the Crowley building. Charlie couldn't find his way out of the Tower, but at least he found some fresh air. The gardens were designed just as he had seen of artist renditions of the original gardens three thousand years ago. He lay in the perfect grass and looked up into the sky.

The clouds were indeed amazing. They were manmade structures, but they still changed like real clouds. They were slightly transparent like real clouds, which was amazing considering he knew there were bots inside. How did they do that? And they took shape more succinctly than real clouds. But what happened to all the real ones? Maybe they just modified the real ones instead of replaced them. That was it, they were hybrid clouds! Everything here was becoming integrated.

Charlie watched a cat-shaped cloud float on by. Its catlike resemblance was astounding. It even had whiskers.

"That's Moses." Charlie took a quick glance at Jade standing beside him as he lay in the grass. "Every day at eleven, Moses floats by." She nodded at the cat.

Charlie turned back to stare up into the sky. He didn't want to talk to her. He wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. He wanted to go home.

Jade turned to Angelo and told him to give them a moment. Angelo happily strolled off to find some garden wanderers to compliment. "Madam," he said to a woman passing. "Colors seem brighter when you are around!"

Jade lay down beside him. Charlie sighed. Couldn't she just go away?

"Next up comes Blade." Jade shifted in the grass uncomfortably. "He looks like a cow, but is actually supposed to be a Beefalo."

Charlie chuckled. "A cow and a buffalo? Of course, a hybrid animal."

Jade gave a small grass filled shrug. "Blake insists. And Moses is no ordinary cat."

Soon enough, Charlie watched as a Beefalo came floating by.

Jade proceeded with caution. She didn't know if Charlie could help, but she needed him to try. Her life was depending on it. "I can't even imagine this, Charlie. I took you from your home, you were given an impossible mission. Three centuries have passed, how could you possibly know- "

Charlie cut her off. "What is your official job title?" He wasn't in the mood to hear about all the

difficult things he was going through and supposed to do.

“I don’t have one.” She said it calmly, because she could tell he was upset. If she said the wrong thing, Charlie would probably just shut down. “I do as I’m told.”

“What if Blake asked you to kill someone?”

Jade remained emotionless. “How truthful do you want me to be?”

“So, you have? You’re an assassin?”

“I am many things.”

Charlie took a deep breath, remembering the dangerous game he was playing. He didn’t really know Jade, he trusted her more than the others out of necessity. He was a stranger in a strange land. But if Blake saw there was no need for Charlie, and he asked Jade to do what she’s told... “What happens if I tell you I can’t help?”

“Then, unless the programmers come up with something, hybrids are going to die. I’m going to die.”

Charlie paused a second. He didn’t want her making it about that, he wanted to know what happens to him. Can’t he even be selfish for one sec?! “Yeah, but what happens to me? You’re an assassin. An assassin! I’m having a hard time coming to terms with everything right now.”

“Charlie, if you weren’t, I’d be worried. Because then you’d be crazy.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I’m crazy.”

“It’s a crazy world. And you’ve been put in the worst of it. Trust me, these are all long shots. You were a long shot. Getting you here was a long shot.”

“Then what’s the point?”

Jade stayed quiet for a good minute. A zonkey (zebra + monkey) cloud floated by. Finally, she turned her head to Charlie. “It’s been a long few days. Come on, let’s take a trip.”

“Long? Pft. I’m just laying here looking at messed-up animal clouds.”

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Where to?”

Jade got up and brushed the grass off her clothes. “To Trenchtown.”

Trenchtown was a well-hidden part of Crowley. It was in the southwest sector, out of sight behind large, solid black buildings. Despite the name, to say it was a slum, in 21st century standards, was not at all accurate. In fact, it was a decent looking neighborhood, rows of brick condos. It made Charlie feel very much at home, as it felt not unfamiliar. But it certainly wasn’t on par with the decadence and technology of the rest of the city.

Jade had explained on the way this was an entirely human neighborhood. It had, just a few years earlier, been double in size. People here generally couldn’t afford transitioning into hybrids, but they were skilled enough to warrant jobs within the city. Those who weren’t skilled enough had been

kicked out beyond the cities walls (understandably disgruntled, thus creating more Lowsmiths.) The grunt work of the city had all been taken care of by bots (cleaning, maintenance, farming.) The high-end jobs were all taking by hybrids (synergy, corporate overtaking, public relations.) Left in the middle were jobs where bots were not the best solution, but didn't pay particularly well (there were a lot of teachers.) But as bots continued to become more advanced, the numbers of the humans in the city kept shrinking.

But then, the plague had hit. Hybrids were getting extremely sick. In some instances, companies were even hiring people from Trenchtown to meet their needs.

The result: resentment all around. Tensions had never been higher between humans and hybrids. The humans in the city of Crowley were generally not like the Lowsmiths, hating the hybrid race, but knowing they had to live in harmony. But recently, many had begun to change their mind. Tensions were at an all-time high.

The reaction to Jade walking through the streets of Trenchtown was mixed. Jade was well known, for two reasons.

One, she was Jade. She was known throughout the city as a dangerous and mysterious person in Blake's small inner circle. Few would have the guts to mess with her in the best of circumstances.

The second reason, Charlie was about to find out when they arrived at 615 Memorial Avenue, a small brick "townhouse".

"Alright." Jade took a deep breath and headed for the door. "Finally bringing a boy home to meet my parents."

Chapter 16

Petra Wendigo, father of the girl who was once Jadynd Wendigo, was showing Charlie a polaroid photo album. Yes, a polaroid photo, circa 1970.

The house was a mix of futuristic and 1970's décor. The family had a maid ServBot roaming around, and streams of content showed on monitors around the room. But the couch looked outdated, even to Charlie. Same with the chairs, and a table at the far end of the living room. It was like his grandmother and future great-great-great-great-grandchild got together and decorated the house.

At the far end of the room was Jade's mother, Tella Wendigo. She did not seem to be particularly happy about the present company. Charlie would have to tread lightly.

"I can't believe it," Petra said with a shake of the head. "I had heard rumors, but...they actually brought Charlie Richards back from the past."

"I'm still confused." Charlie was. "How did Jade become a hybrid if only wealthy people become hybrids?"

Jade shifted uncomfortably.

Petra flipped through the album. When he flipped the page, it was just a swipe of a hand in the air, the book was meant to look like an old photo album, and the pictures like old polaroid photos, but wasn't the case. At closer inspection, the pages were digital pages, and the pages turned by motion sensors. It was a futuristic polaroid scrapbook.

The page turned to a photo of a small run-down town. Petra explained, "This is Coyote Springs. About sixty miles from here."

Charlie eyed Jade. She kept her gaze glued on the photo. He couldn't quite get a read on her, but the photos seemed difficult for her to look at.

Petra carried on. "Tella and I grew up there. Met there. Had a daughter there. It was a nice place. I worked as a teacher, Tella, a baker."

Petra flipped the page with the swipe of his hand. A young girl of six stood on the front porch of a house flanked by two adults. He swiped it again and there was a photo of a girl, smiling and happy, in a hospital bed with bots by her side.

Jade turned and looked away.

"She was eight when she got sick." Petra kept it together. Tella, in the back of the room, stirred.

Her face a mixture of anger and sadness. “We were told Jade was going to die. There was nothing they could do. Her heart just wasn’t strong. Then, a man came to me. He said his name was Monfils and said there was an experimental treatment in Vegas. This was just before the city was changed to Crowley.” Petra swiped again. A photo of the family, their things packed, and headed in a bullet car to the desert. “So, we packed our things and went. Put our lives behind us, but that’s what anyone would have done for their child.”

Tella broke down at this. She quickly exited the room.

The outburst caused Jade to teeter the edge as well. She turned from Charlie and Petra and buried her face in her hands.

Petra took notice, but he didn’t react, just flipped the page. It was a picture of Jade inside the Hybrid Center. There were surgeons and bots and all kinds of things there. Her chest was open. A mechanical heart was at the ready to replace.

Jade stood and left the room.

Jade stood in the kitchen (very futuristic, no 70’s style here. The food distributor made Charlie hungry for an In and Out burger.) Jade, who was once a full human named Jade Wendigo, and is currently in special operations at the Crowley Enterprises Corporation. She looked out the window at a small backyard. She remembered the sterile white walls and surgical bots before the virtual reality glasses would sweep her away to tropical islands. The truth of what had happened was slowly revealed to her over the years. Her parents spent all the money they had in this world to make her into a hybrid, with three mechanical organs, and saved her life. The money they paid still was not enough, and that’s why she was forced into a job with the corporation to repay her debts. But she couldn’t blame anyone. She had to be thankful, right? Her boss (and practically everyone’s boss) had some unquestionably marginal ethics, but she was alive because of him.

As she grew older, the jobs she was instructed to do had become increasingly, shall we say, more serious. From cleaning floors (not fun) to internal audits (not fun), to bot repair (sorta fun) to media production (sounds more fun than it was) to police enforcement (she was a natural) to Blake’s person security force (great fun, just stand behind the bots); then last year she was instructed, and carried out, the assassination of Victor Depoza, an executive at a competing technology company. Things had gotten real. An assassination was a hard thing to deal with, but this was the price she paid to still be here. She would do what Blake asked of her.

“You alright?” Charlie had finished getting the rest of the story from Petra, at least his version, and came in to check on Jade.

“No.” Jade took a deep breath and turned to Charlie. “Yes.” She crossed over to the food distribution unit (FDU) and got a hot cup of tea. “My mother is upset because I haven’t been here in over two years.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And after everything they did for me...they don’t know the wars I fight for them is to pay them

back. That I need to live on for them. That hybrid technology is a way for them to live on. Blake has told me, if I help fix this plague, he will make them hybrids. They can live on for hundreds of years.” Jade turned to look Charlie in the eye. “I even killed for him once. For them. I will kill for my parents. They have given everything for me.”

The look in Jade’s eyes said it all. He knew what she had said to be true. Regardless of what she felt for anyone, her true devotion was to her parents. This relieved him a bit, it was something he could relate to. He thought of his own mother. Guilt filled him. He never told her what she meant to her. He lived in her house because he was afraid not to. That was the truth. “Okay,” he said with a nod.

Jade took a deep breath and downed her tea. Okay. Charlie Richards, whom she went through time to get, who was the god of her race, was her only hope, responded to her last-ditch effort, an effort that was very, very difficult for her, responded with okay.

Hope was lost.

Charlie was at a loss for words. He crossed to the FDU. It could give him virtually any food he wanted. He was starving for fish ‘n chips. Yet, he had no appetite. It was gone. It was replaced by a heavy burden.

Beside the FDU was a rice cooker. Odd. They had a unit that could give any food in all the world, what was the point of an old rice cooker? “Why do you guys have this?”

Jade wasn’t in the mood. “I don’t know, Charlie. Why does it matter?”

He picked it up and examined it. It was antique in this age but it was still futuristic to him. While it looked like a rice cooker from his day for the most part, it had a processing unit on the top of it. “How old is this?”

“I don’t know,” Jade said with frustration. “I think it’s from your time. Or just after. Your century.”

Charlie took out his iPhone. It didn’t work as a phone in this day of age, but if this cooker was old. He checked the Bluetooth and, indeed, the cooker popped up. He opened his HackALot app. The simple little cooker showed up as a connected device. From there he could download the programming.

The code was quite simplistic. The device was basically designed to track when you left work (or a desired location) to start the rice so it was fresh when you arrived home. The code told the microwave sensors to start. It gave Charlie an idea.

“Jade.” Charlie turned to Jade sharply

Chapter 17

In the low-lying hills a good distance from Crowley, under the cover of the red earth, in dark passages, the rebel Lowsmiths gathered in the underground chapel that had once served as the training ground for a potential mission to Mars. However, they would object strongly to being labeled as Lowsmiths. The Crowley brass came up with that name, since before the revolt, many of the humans had primarily worked as smiths in the low plateaus, mining alluvium fan deposits. Crowley had, over the years, upped the demands on the smiths while offering less and less pay. When they were destitute and on the brink of starvation, Blake Crowley replaced all of them with bots. No, they did not become Lowsmiths like the greedy corporate king Blake said. Technically they were HOPE – The Human Operations for Permanent Existence- though most just referred to it as The Allegiance. They were going to make damn sure humans weren't going to go extinct to this invasive hybrid species. That's why they were gathered here today, in church. While not attending a service, the group of a hundred or so rebels were as quiet as a congregation as they stood and watched their leader pace the dais at the front of the room.

Trekon's presence alone demanded respect. He was six foot seven, and looked like he could've played in the NFL back in the day, when it existed. He had gray hair, closely cropped over his ears, but the back was a little longer and pulled up in the short ponytail. His gray beard was precisely trimmed and he wore a white flowing robe that made him look very much not like a rebel leader fighting against a militant army.

He looked almost like a messiah.

"This is our greatest opportunity." Trekon stood at the front of the Allegiance in the red rock underground chapel that was a central meeting space for the rebels. "We have broken through the Northern Wall and made significant incursions into Crowley."

A holler rose from the crowd of brown-clad warriors which filled the chapel.

Trekon raised his hands to quiet the crowd. "We have lost many, but its success is monumental. It is the spearhead by which we will overtake Crowley and stop Blake Crowley's insistence that humans become hybrids."

Applause rippled through the room.

"My brother was killed!" A large man from the back called out. "There is no way we can win

without hybrids and bots on our side!”

“We all lost someone,” Trekon said, “but forward momentum is imperative. We have word from intelligence that Crowley has brought Charlie Richards from the past to write code to strengthen the hybrids.”

A gasp went up from the dusty group in front of him.

“That’s impossible!” A voice rang out.

“We have seen many impossible things happen under Crowley’s leadership,” Trekon’s grey head bowed sagely to the crowd. Many heads bobbed in unison, each remembering an unexpected development with Blake Crowley at the helm.

The inseparable duo of Zeke and Tallahassee exchanged a look. They’d been through the trenches together. A couple of Outliers, whose families had been early victims to some of Blake’s less savory skirmishes, when he’d sent out the early hybrids to see if he could round up more humans to live in Crowley. When some families had refused to leave their settlements, and move into the protection of the city, Blake had decided to show the Outliers what could happen if they didn’t have protection.

Bad things happened.

He hadn’t just sent the hybrids, he had sent bots. It had been no contest. Zeke and Tallahassee’s settlement was in the remnants of St. George. Far enough away from Las Vegas that it wouldn’t make too much of a ripple. Their people had been wiped out, all except for the two little boys hiding in the metal water trough out by the cows. They’d held their breaths and ducked under, lasers flying overhead, the algae infested water washing away their tears as they huddled together.

When the battle had died down, they’d risen from the cold water, shivering in the dark night. There was no trace of their parents or the other settlers. The bodies were all gone, as if they’d never existed. Even at six and seven they had realized the raids from Crowley weren’t trying to get resources. The stores of food hadn’t been touched.

Tallahassee and Zeke had lived alone for thirty-three days before Trekon and the Allegiance had found them. The boys had been taken in, raised and trained by the rebels. The only thing they didn’t have to be taught was their hatred of Crowley and the technology that was developed there. The technology that had destroyed their families.

“They’re going to turn every human into a damn machine,” Tallahassee muttered, his hand resting on the hilt of his gun.

“Over my dead body,” hissed Zeke, spitting on the ground and tucking his hair behind his ear.

“Exactly how they’ll do it, too,” Tallahassee muttered.

The two of them were beside the lone non-human in the group, an Enceladusian in fact. “You jump conclusions,” Gunk said, his fluorescent skin glowing in the dim chapel lights.

“Jump to conclusions,” Zeke corrected the seven-foot-tall alien without even thinking about it.

A holographic map projected up from a small sphere on the table in front of Trekon.

“We will lose everything if we do not continue our fight against Crowley and their eager

dissemination of the human species. Each loss has made a difference. Either we have weakened their defenses, or we have strengthened our resolve. Now is the time to continue the attack. We have breached their walls and can enter through Northeast Sector 42 and make our way to Trenchtown.”

“That’s a human community!” Tallahassee called out.

“Exactly,” Trekon nodded. “It’s the least guarded. We can also set up a barricade to protect the humans, and who knows, we may win over some more recruits.”

Zeke nodded. “Not a bad idea. We could use the help.”

Tallahassee snorted “We’ll be lucky. What’re we going to say? Fight or die?”

Trekon swiped at the hologram map and it changed to Trenchtown and the surrounding quadrants. “This is where our people are being held,” he said, pointing to a tall metal building adjacent to Trenchtown. “We need to free those people and strengthen our forces on the Northern Wall. We must strengthen our forces in Crowley to hold our ground and stand against the hybrids. Without us, humans will cease to exist.”



The light in the Lowsmith transport passage was low, but Gunk’s fluorescent yellow skin still stood out. Vividly.

“I go with you,” Gunk said. “I want be part of next rebel attack on city.”

“How long you been living with us?” Tallahassee asked the tall fluorescent creature walking in front of him, trying to deflect the conversation from his inevitable no.

“75.63 years. Plus or minus four hours. I can’t remember exactly what time I landed.”

“Well, your English still sucks. “

Gunk’s laugh was like a series of small chirps, like something you might hear from three or four baby birds. They came out of the side valves on his neck.

“I can be a hybrid. Or you can let me run the garbage truck.”

“How the hell are you going to pull off being a bot or a hybrid? There’s no way you can pull off a hybrid. And you would make one weird-ass bot.”

Tallahassee had always felt kind of bad for the guy. Gunk’s ship had landed seventy-five years ago. Long before the Allegiance had even started rebelling. Before the plague, before hybrids were created. At first, Gunk worked with the top-tier technologists in the Crowley Corporation, but he eventually got super bored of that when they started focusing solely on hybrid technology, and started doing tests trying to learn about his planet and how he got here in a spaceship. But soon they started talking about doing stuff to his body. He slipped away one night and never went back. He’d been with the original Allegiance since they first started. The Crowley Corporation had let him go, thinking they had everything they needed out of him. But they didn’t know he could take on the form of a human.

“I go,” Gunk insisted.

“No, and that’s final,” Tallahassee said as he loaded up his weapons and headed to the transport. He had enough problems with the potential loss of the human race. He wasn’t going to take responsibility for Gunk’s people dying out in one attack. It was better that Gunk just stuck to driving the Crowley garbage incinerator.

Zeke shrugged his shoulders towards Gunk. “I can’t say I want to argue with him,” he said. “You are the last of your kind.”

Gunk flitted into human form and shook his head. “One day I help,” he said to the rebels’ retreating backs.

Chapter 18

Charlie's fingers had shooting pains and cramps right underneath his knuckles, the same pains he always got when he was typing furiously. Only this time he wasn't typing. He was trying to work the computer system with his eyes and mind, and his fingers were twitching in time as if he was typing. But he wasn't paying much attention. He was hunched over, shoulders drawn together, and if the shooting pains in his knuckles were noticeable, it was three times as bad in his shoulders. He had always had bad posture, even as a kid he was the slouchy slump. Miss Reynolds had yelled at him every day of his third-grade year to sit up straight. Though, to be fair, she would yell at him not matter what. Miss Reynolds was not a Charlie fan, much like the programmers in this room. His slouching was especially bad when he went to visit his sister. Something about her made him want to shrink away and not be noticed. But right now, he wasn't trying to hide.

He was just trying to fix the code, which would have been hard enough had he been home alone or in the quiet of the Lonely Tree Tavern. But right now, he was locked in the mammoth programming room with bots zinging around the air.

And still, he wasn't unnoticed.

In fact, everybody was watching Charlie, staring over his shoulder and analyzing every single piece of work he did, their lips pressed together and eyes narrowed. Even the programmers in the farthest corner of the room were squinting towards his monitor, many looking as if they were going to ask him any moment for his autograph.

Good thing for Charlie he didn't give a damn. Well, except for the fact they might try to steal his ideas. He shook the thought off. They had been using this code for three hundred years. If anyone wanted to steal anything in it, they could've done it a long time ago. In fact, they must have. How else did they get a hold of it? Charlie certainly didn't give it to them. Jade had said something about Blake buying the company that had bought the company that had bought the company, etc....

Dustin tumbled two metal spheres around and around in his hand, producing an annoying clinking sound. He eyed Charlie with the contempt he felt whenever looking at someone with inferior intelligence (virtually everyone in this city, from his point of view.)

Except for Warren.

He even had to hide his contempt when looking at Blake, because you don't want to look with

contempt at a man who can make you disappear forever. Intelligent thinking on Dustin's part.

“Can you help, Mr. Richards, or not?” Of course, Dustin knew Charlie couldn't help. He was a man from simpler days. Still, he had been given orders. “I certainly don't mean to rush you.” He did. “But I have important work to do.”

“Shhh.” Charlie's eyes scanned the screens without looking at Dustin. If he had, he would have seen murder in the man's (kid's, he was just a kid) eyes. Charlie was lost in the numbers and symbols in front of him. He had agreed to fix the code and he was going to do his best. But he wasn't an idiot. When he finished fixing the code and went back to his time, he was going to watch his code a lot more carefully and he was pretty sure he wasn't going to give it over to the company who had him slated at the very bottom of a team of programmers.

Charlie's face pulled up into a tight-lipped grin as his eyes scanned the dark screen looking for the corrupted strings of numbers and letters.

Here was the problem with Charlie trying to fix the code.

Ho-ly shit!

His conceptual code was two hundred and forty-eight letters long. What he saw in front of him was seemingly infinite. The main screen displaying the master code was the size of the USS Enterprise. Beneath that was thousands of smaller screens, each showing one specific part of the code and controlled by the eyes of one of the programmers. Charlie was given control of the main screen. These monitors were like clear boards floating two-inches above a silver background that looked like it was made of something like mercury. Everything ran in black on top of the glass screen and was controlled by the eyes. If you look to the corners of the screen you could control scrolling. Double blinking moved the entire page up. Apparently, this floating glass screen over the moving backdrop of mercury was supposed to be easier on the eyes.

Honestly, it just put Charlie to sleep.

Charlie had been looking at this code for the past eight hours and was completely lost. It wasn't just the vast size of the code, but its complexity that was astounding. The code was like looking out at the universe, complete with all its galaxies and internal solar systems. The Big Bang (Charlie's original code as it apparently came to be known) may be easy to identify, but how everything was connected became murky. Every little solar system was living in a pocket, but the rules of the galaxy applied to that pocket. While there were similarities in different solar systems, they all really functioned on their own. Yet they were completely connected by the universe. To further complicate matters, the planets in each solar system had different races speaking different languages.

This code had all that and more.

The complex hierarchy, the odd exceptions to the rules, the different programming languages. It was impossible to navigate ten galaxies looking for the problem. And this universe had over two hundred.

To top it off, it was constantly evolving right before Charlie's eyes. He just wanted to sleep.

Maybe that was what everybody was watching for. Charlie could feel Dustin's eyes on him and knew without a doubt that was what he was waiting for. The moment the great creator, the hero from the future, just face-planted the keyboard. Fast asleep while trying to save the world.

Charlie couldn't even blink himself awake. Blink too much, you get hopelessly lost in the code as the connected solar systems moved all over the place.

This learning curve sucked.

He had learned that to move his eyes away from the screen, he had to gently close them and then turn his head so the computer stopped tracking his eye movement. He did so now to look up at Dustin. His slick look gave Charlie the heebie-jeebies.

"Can we take a break?" Charlie asked, his voice low, but he couldn't stop his eyes from sweeping around the room for a moment at all the people still staring at him. Like they have nothing better to do all day? "Or maybe I should say, can I take a break? Because none of the rest of you are really doing anything. Did you notice that?" He asked.

But his glance around the room wasn't met with any hostility or judgment. In fact, everyone other than Dustin was staring at him like he was the guy who created everything. Charlie was still trying to get used to which ones were hybrids and which were just humans, but the easiest way for him to tell is the hybrids looked at him like he was God. Like he was the guy who invented the iPhone or the Microsoft Office suite or Facebook. Only, Facebook and the iPhone and Microsoft Office are vague blips in history to these people. Some point on a timeline of technological progression.

It's amazing, Charlie thought. Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg... they're like Galileo and Newton to these people. Shit. I am, for that matter.

There was no way Charlie could stop the face-splitting grin erupting across his face. Bigger than Zuckerberg. When he got home, he was going to have T-shirts made for sure. It would be his little inside joke. No one back in 2017 was ever going to know what he was talking about, but it was good enough for him.

"No," Dustin said. "You cannot take a break." Charlie's attention was jolted back. Dustin snapped his fingers. They gave a strange metallic click that rang hollowly in Charlie's ears. Charlie glanced over. Of course, Dustin was a Gamma hybrid. That should have been obvious. Sleek, simple, yet crushing. "I'll have some food and drink brought to you."

"Well, could you at least clear the room a little bit?" Charlie asked.

The corner of Dustin's mouth lifted in the tiniest hint of a smile, or maybe it was a sneer. "A little nervous?" Dustin asked.

Charlie's brows knit together. Dustin knew who Zuckerberg was. He knew Jobs and Gates. And he sure as shit didn't think Charlie was bigger than them.

Always callous, even though Charlie wrote the code to save human life. What have the other three ever done? Zuckerberg created a marketing website where people could share photos of lasagna. Gates created something people could type into then spent his career shutting down small start-ups. If

you can't beat them, buy them. And okay, Jobs was cool. But still, his company developed a new system of communication so we could hail a cab with a single finger. How is that impressive, having to use a finger? You could order pizza at the touch the button and check the weather in Chesapeake. Seriously, how important was all that stuff? Charlie had written code to save lives. But from the look on Dustin's face, well, Dustin really didn't give a damn.

"Fine," Charlie said. "I don't need a break. I need some space."

"Fine," Dustin deadpanned back. "Team, get yourselves the hell out of here." Dustin circled his pointer finger in the air, encompassing all the other programmers who were standing around and then pointed at the door. They all filed out in a single row, throwing frowns at Charlie.

Charlie looked at Dustin expectantly.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Dustin, sitting himself comfortably in a chair and putting his feet up on the desk. "I know there's nothing special about you. And I'm going to sit here and watch you prove it."

Charlie rolled his eyes. This isn't exactly what he had had in mind when he heard he was going to the future to be a hero. He took a deep breath. Every hero has an enemy. Every hero must battle against a naysayer, a jerk face. Dustin was just Charlie's jerk face. Charlie turned back towards the machine.

He needed to simplify things. When looking at a complex structure, the first rule was to simplify. He needed to get back to what he knew. What he knew was the Big Bang, because the big bang was his code. Charlie zoomed in on what most closely resembled his original code. It had been edited and had evolved, but he recognized it. As Jade had once told him in a tavern, the most important two hundred and forty-eight characters in human history, and they were thanks to him. In there, he could recognize Charlie, because he knew Charlie's code when he saw it (being Charlie.)

Dustin began to cough uncontrollably. He grabbed his stomach. Charlie stood up thinking it might be useful to pat Dustin on the back. It sounded like he was choking. But Dustin waved him off. "It's nothing." He hacked out the words.

Charlie could see a different side of Dustin, though. His eyes were losing color, literally becoming transparent, and they portrayed fear.

"Did...did you find anything yet?" Dustin murmured.

Charlie returned to the screen and his portion of the code. In there, maybe he could find a solution.

Chapter 19

A clock ticked quietly on the wall as MediBots whizzed around Robin's room. Blake thought of it as Robin's now. It was no longer his room. Robin almost never left it. This was her place and he desperately wanted her out of here. As desperately as he had ever wanted anything before.

"I feel like I am a desert," Robin moaned. "I can't stand it. I hate the desert, I hate the heat. But I can't get away from it! It's inside me, it's drying me up and turning me onto parchment."

"Your skin is holding up well," Blake said. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

"It already did," she said.

"Don't worry. We're going to solve the hybrid problem," Blake said, turning her face towards him. He hated looking into those dark and hollow eyes, but if there was any way she could see him, she had to see his face. She had to know he believed there was a cure and he was doing everything in his power to cure the disease.

"I don't think you get it, Blake," she said. "The hybrids don't have a problem." Her eyes were dark and blind, but her lips trembled as she spoke the words that she'd clearly been pondering for a while. "Blake, the hybrids are the problem. We shouldn't exist. We are an affront to the order of things, where people get sick and die; but we have re-engineered them, you have re-engineered us into this." Her fingers clawed mechanically in the air, motioning towards her eyes.

"Don't say that," Blake said, bowing until his broad forehead pressed against her bony shoulder. "Don't say hybrids are the problem." His voice was tense, straining against the cords in his throat.

His body began to shake. And the little metal wires inside his wife's eyes whirled in circles as she tried to tilt her head towards him. Her hand grappling, their fingers uncontrollably clutching at nothing. "I'm dying, Blake," she said. "And I don't mind."

"You will not die," Blake said, his words muffled against the white linen of her nightgown.



Monfils stood with Jade in command central watching the lights as they moved through the complicated fields floating in the air before them. He pressed his fingers against his temple. "They

are breaching the barricade by the Northern Wall.”

Jade pressed her lips together. What the hell were the Lowsmiths thinking? Just because they’d had a bit of success, they thought it was a good idea to try and break into Crowley. Were they idiots? Had they no idea what they were up against?

“It looks like they’re heading towards Trenchtown,” Monfils glanced sideways at Jade. He didn’t want her to go, but telling Jade what to do was the last thing that had ever worked in his life.

Jade frowned at the dots moving across the map. “Why the hell would they want to go to Trenchtown,” she muttered. “Angelo?”

The giant red monster ran the data. “They have prisoners in Roedwane Tower,” he said moments later.

“That’s their target,” Jade said, already heading towards the door.

“Jade,” Monfils said. “You don’t have to be the first responder to every tiny issue.” But he knew his word were falling on deaf ears. Jade always did what she wanted, which was rarely what Monfils would have liked. It was one of the things he loved about her. One of the things that made her such a challenge. “Keep an eye on her,” he muttered at Angelo, who dutifully followed Jade out of the room.



Tallahassee and Zeke ran through the streets trying to get out of the way of the HEL blasts that kept coming for them. They were outmanned and outgunned. The Lowsmith efforts to infiltrate Trenchtown had gone alright, except they were nowhere near getting into the tower that housed Frank. Their squad had been separated, and now Zeke and Tallahassee were on the run on the edge of Trenchtown with no backup. They turned a corner and came to a screeching halt. A dead end. They dove behind a metal air vent rising out of the ground. Three Delta hybrids were hot on their trail. A HEL blasted the metal they were hiding behind.

“We’re never going to make it out,” Zeke said.

“Just keep firing,” Tallahassee growled, sweat beading across his furrowed brow as he threw himself out from behind the shelter and fired at the three hybrids who had them cornered like rats in the cellar.

“I’m telling you, we got to come up with another plan. My HEL is giving out and they’re going to keep coming.” Zeke’s eyes flew wildly around the dead-end where he and Tallahassee had ended up. How could they have been so stupid as to not divert their location before they ended up so completely and utterly trapped?

Novitza, a young Delta hybrid, stared down the dead end. “I think we have them,” she said, her HELs trained towards where the rebels were hiding. One of her eyes was going a bit blurry, but the scanner in her other was still doing okay. She wiped sweat off her brow and glanced over at Goran. “Do you see them?” she asked shakily.

Goran didn't respond.

"Goran?" Novitza turned her head, trying to locate Goran with her good eye. She gasped when she saw him lying out in the alley, out of cover and twitching. "Manya?" she hissed. Manya was supposed to be behind her. Manya was Goran's fiancée. Novitza's eye was going dark, but she could just make out the dark figure of Manya crawling along the alley, her breath coming in deep sharp squeaks until it stopped as she threw herself on Goran's body and both lay still.

Novitza crouched low and felt her way out to the bodies of her partners. Each breath she took felt like her body was being ripped in two, like her innards were being torn apart.

She was supposed to live forever. They all were. All the hybrids were going to be the future gods of the planet. That's what they'd been told.

Her hands fumbled in the dark world. It was all that was left to her now that her eyes had gone. Novitza's cold fingers pressed against Manya's wrist, but there was no pulse. Novitza gasped as she slumped forward. Even if she'd wanted to check Goran's pulse, she wasn't able to. Her body was growing cold as Novitza rolled onto her back, blind face to the heavens, her last breath sliced through her body and left her dead.

"What do you want to do? Attack them?" Tallahassee asked.

"Maybe we should," Zeke said, hitting his laser gun against the wall trying to reboot the generator. "It's got to be better than waiting here to get picked off.

"You're an asshole," Tallahassee spat the words out. "Who the hell thinks they can take an 80% hybrid? We're only human, dumbass."

"Just cover me, shithead." Zeke said. Before Tallahassee could do anything else, Zeke ran out from their cover. screaming into the air and getting ready to wreak havoc on the three hybrids who were...

Lying on a pile on the ground?

"What the fuck?" Tallahassee stood up from behind the rusty metal barrel where they had been hiding.

"Take this," Zeke said, kicking the hybrid nearest him.

"You didn't do that," Tallahassee said.

"They were so scared of me they just fell over dead," Zeke said.

"That's not what I saw."

"How the hell do you know? You were hiding like a little bitch behind the barrel." Zeke gloated.

Tallahassee shook his head. "Come on, let's get the fuck out of here." Without a backward glance as to whether Zeke was following him or not, he ducked out into the shadows of the burning city and headed back to safety of the rebel lines.



Jade pushed open the door and stepped into the alley. She'd just been about to break up the fight between the hybrids and the rebels when the hybrids started falling over. The rebels had escaped, mostly because Jade had let them. She had a soft spot for the Lowsmiths and had often wondered if she just shouldn't get her parents to join them and live as humans off the grid, out of Crowley. She'd even gone so far as to research their location, something she'd been uber careful to not share with Blake or Warren. She didn't like killing humans because they were human, even if they were fighting against Blake.

She crouched slowly, tucking her DC15s pistol into its holster where the HEL could re-charge. She had something the rebels certainly didn't; a fusion charger in her belt.

Her long white fingers went to the necks of each hybrid in turn. They were stone cold dead. And their bodies were growing cold faster than a human corpse would. But these guys were extreme Deltas, practically all synthetic. They were barely hybrid at all. More like droids.

Jade chewed her lip. Her eyes caught the distant tower of Blake Enterprises, where she knew Charlie was trying to fix the code.

The only thing she didn't know was if he was going to do it in time.

A massive cramp moved through her stomach, convulsing her body forward. She lost her balance, falling on top of the hybrids' corpses in front of her. She stifled the yelp of pain coming up through her throat. There might still be rebels around. There was no need to let them know she was here.

Exhaling slowly through her teeth, she pressed her hand against the fleshy stomach of a dead hybrid and raised herself slowly to her knees. Beads of sweat appeared all over her body and a raging heat wave washed through her.

"Holy shit." Her breath came slow as she tried to gain control of her body and let the searing pain of the heat waves roll over her. Her body hunched forward over the vacant eyes of the hybrids' corpses.

"Charlie, you better hurry the fuck up," she whispered.



"What the fuck is going on out there?" Warren asked Monfils as he entered Command Central. "I was in the middle of my mineral spa. I thought you had this whole thing under control."

"It is under control," Monfils stopped himself before he rolled his eyes. One didn't roll their eyes at Warren. "The breach in the Northern Wall saw an influx of Lowsmiths. The Deltas are in their clearing them out."

He didn't bother to tell Warren that a few of the Deltas were dropping like flies out on the field. A fact more troubling to Monfils than a few Lowsmiths out and about in Crowley. Jade had buzzed him and told him she'd seen three fall stone-dead practically from an upright position.

"How many breached?" Warren asked.

“We’re not quite-,” Monfils began.

“You’re not quite sure!” Warren exploded, his black brooding ProtectoBot, Genesis II, looming darkly over his shoulder.

But Monfils didn’t scare easily. “They don’t wear chips like the rest of us,” he said. “So, we think about twenty made it in.”

“How many do we have locked up from the attacks earlier?” Warren asked.

“Ten.” Monfils quickly calculated the number in his head.

“You only have ten prisoners?” Warren was incredulous. “Who is handling this?”

“I am.” Monfils fixed Warren with a steely gaze. “And the hybrids are the ones out there getting their hands dirty. Unfortunately for us, we seem to have contracted a disease, at least the Deltas have, and they are literally out there dying. So, forgive me if we’re not catching every little rat that seems to be getting away from your killer bots.”

Warren scowled at Monfils, but he hadn’t gotten into his position by pissing everyone off. “I understand, and we are trying our hardest to get the disease under control. In the meantime, have one of your people select a Lowsmith prisoner from the tower and have them on standby.”

Monfils frowned, but nodded. He never liked Warren’s tactics, but he wasn’t going to go against a direct order from Blake’s second in command. He pressed a finger against his temple to relay the order.

Chapter 20

Charlie's eyes glared into the moving sea of code, the CodeSwarm, as he took a massive bite of sandwich a ServBot had placed before him. He quickly grabbed the thermos in front of him and slugged back its contents before glaring at Dustin. "What the hell is this?" He held up the remains of the ham sandwich.

"Ham sandwich," Dustin said. "Isn't that what you said you wanted?"

"Salty as all get out," Charlie frowned. "I can't get the salt out of my mouth."

"My bad," and Dustin said. "I didn't realize you needed haute cuisine to code."

"It's not real, is it?" Charlie asked.

"The chemical compounds that made it are real," Dustin shrugged. "But last I checked we're not farming pigs. We're saving humanity."

"I sit here coding for ten hours and you feed me a computer chip." Charlie stood up. The chair he had been sitting in rolled slowly backwards as he stretched his aching muscles. "I have to pee."

"Why do people ever feel the need to share that information with anyone?" Dustin's lip curled in distaste.

"I think I've got it," Charlie ignored him. "I just I got to take a piss before I check the numbers again. Then I'm going to check it one last time before we flip the switch. I don't want anything in there to be wrong."

"You sure as hell don't," Dustin said. "You'll lose the demigod status you've earned over the last three hundred years."

"You're a piece of work, man," Charlie said, shaking his head. "I'm really just here trying to help people out. I don't want your job. I don't want anything, so why don't you get off my ass?"

Before Dustin could say anything, Charlie walked out of the room.

Dustin stared at the door as it slid shut. This was a complete and utter waste of his time. He held his hand up in the air and counted down from five, pointing at the door when he got to one.

The door slid open. Charlie stared at Dustin, who sat in exactly the same place, his arms folded over his chest.

"Take a left, then another left, then a right, go way down the hall. You'll find a ProtectoBot there who will scan your retinas to check your clearance. Then pass through the ionized pressure vapor —"

“What’s an ionized pressure vapor?” Charlie frowned.

Dustin rolled his eyes. “It’s like a face steam. It’ll clean off the sludge that could be lingering on you from this area.”

“Fine. Left. Left. Right. Retina scan. Ionized pressure vapor pass. Then what?”

Dustin was a bit taken aback he’d followed all that. He nodded begrudgingly. “Fifth door on the right to the toilet.” He held up five fingers and cocked his head to the right.

“Thanks.” Charlie didn’t really mean it, but his mother had raised him right.

Dustin waited until the doors slipped quietly shut. He counted to ten and carefully pressed the button. The doors were locked and he was sure to be uninterrupted. He’d given Charlie the wrong directions. But despite how much he did not like Charlie, Dustin knew he wasn’t an idiot. He was just a 21st century guy in the 24th century. Eventually he would find the bathroom and make his way back here to the control room.

Dustin touched his temple to connect to Warren. “Are you still awake?”

“Of course,” Warren mutters. “That is my upgrade. I don’t need to sleep.”

Dustin rolled his eyes. Must be nice to pick and choose exactly the way you want to be without having to fill out any paperwork.

“Look, I only have a few minutes,” Dustin said, making sure to control his voice just enough. Warren hated insolence and he was about to get on his bad side. Not when they were so close to completing this task.

“Fine. Do it. I’ll watch,” Warren said, as if he wasn’t always watching already.

Dustin only had a few minutes.

But it was all he needed. He blinked in Morse code at the computer. An archaic language nobody else knew. He had programmed it into the machine a long time ago so he could quickly access his and the corporation’s files in nanoseconds. Using a combination of deft finger moves and eye blinks, he opened up multiple screens, moved over code from a file deeply wrapped and protected tightly on his computer to one he had spent the last eighteen months agonizing over. This one was going to make his name. It would make him bigger than Charlie. He was going to be the name people remembered in the future. His name wouldn’t just live three hundred years, it would live forever. Where Charlie had a gold statue, Dustin would have a platinum building with his likeness at the top of it. All he had to do was carefully get his code and stick it in the middle of Charlie’s.

He blinked at the file. Unraveled it like a tightly wound spring. Two fingers swishes to the left. Engage it. Blink. Blink. Blink. Wrap it back up. Triple twitch with the right hand. And shove it into the background in a place where Charlie with all of his 21st century knowledge wouldn’t even know where to find it.

And nobody else would care.

Because Dustin and Warren would have all the power in Crowley.



Graham Chattaway had thought he was living the dream.

As a young aspiring programmer, he had dreamed of being accepted into Crowley Academy for Hybrids (CAH). He was born with a potentially fatal birth defect, but if he graduated in the top five percent of his class he would automatically be eligible for government assisted hybrid reassignment procedure.

He studied every moment of his life. Programming was the most elite field in the 24th century, and his goal was to be the elite of the elite. To get in the room where it happened, working on the hybrid code to help better the evolution of the human race.

By fifteen, he knew everything there was to know about modern programming. He knew everything there was to know about the history of the code and the birth of hybrid technology. He knew nothing there was to know about virtually everything else. But that didn't matter when he got accepted into CAH, and graduated second in his class. He would have been first had it not been for the fact they made them take a class in political obedience. That was BS. Still, second was good enough to get him a completely funded hybrid reassessment.

After that, at the young age of twenty-two, he achieved his life-long dream. He excelled in programming and rose through the ranks. Graham was relocated to work in the big room itself. The Big Room! Where the Malcom code, the brain and heart code of hybrid technology, was written. There he got to work on vital parts of the code, and even got to work with Dustin Bovey himself!

He was living the dream.

So, he thought. It was mere peanuts compared to whom he met in the hallway that day. The man he had read every book on, watched every movie, downloaded every Wiki file into his internal neurodrive.

Charlie. Fucking. Richards.



Charlie Richards had gotten hopelessly lost. All the hallways were sterile white and having any sense of direction was impossible. He thought he found a cafeteria at one point, but all the machines required a retina scan that obviously didn't register. He was quite ready to take a piss on them if this went on much longer. But now he was in some other white hallway that looked like the last ten he had been in.

“Oh. My. God.”

Charlie turned to look at the voice. It was a young kid, he looked fifteen with his wiry build. His

eyes were wide as plates.

“You’re...” It slid out of the kid’s mouth like spitting up oatmeal. Then, a long silence.

Charlie didn’t have time for the rest of the sentence. “Hey. You know where I can find a bathroom in this place?”

Mumble mumble came the reply.

“Okay, thanks. Appreciate it.” Charlie turned to continue down the endless hallways. Why was everything so weird in this world? He just wanted to eat fish ‘n chips at a restaurant named after him.

“You’re him!”

Charlie turned to the voice of the kid. His eyes were still wide as plates. He blinked once and came racing up to Charlie.

“I’m sorry. Hi. Sorry to bug you. Hi!” The words came spitting out at a ludicrous speed. “I’m Graham. I’m a fan. I mean, I know your work. You’re Charlie Richards! I studied your work.”

“Great!” Charlie said with mock excitement. He wasn’t in the mood. “So, that bathroom...”

Graham looked like he was going to start jumping up and down. “I mean, the Big Bang code was, I mean, it was the most beautiful thing ever created.”

“Appreciate that. Now, that bathroom?”

“One. Forward slash forward slash loop and create individuals. Two. For parenthesis, dollar sign I equals zero, dollar sign I is less than count, parenthesis dollar sign this period people parenthesis...” Graham continued on. He recited the whole damn original code verbatim. “Mr. Richards, I am your number one fan.”

“You know what, Graham? I believe you.”

“The Big Bang code is the most important discovery this world has ever known!”

“The Big Bang?”

“Sorry, that what it’s known as now. Your initial code. Centuries of programmers have come and gone and advanced your work, but your code was the beginning of it all.”

Charlie took a step back towards the kid. What he said had started wheels turning. “How many iterations of the code had there been?”

Graham laughed. “How much time do you have?”

“Very little.” Charlie’s face was not amiable.

The smile left Graham’s face. He was reminded why Charlie was here. He was reminded that a plague was hitting hybrids. He was reminded that he was hybrid. “It’s been three centuries of programmers working on this. Well, two. No one really knew what you had stumbled upon for a long time. Then came a French programmer named Enzo. Enzo’s code helped create the first hybrid mouse. It didn’t come without problems; the mouse became incredibly angry when cheese was withheld. But it did live unnaturally long for a mouse, and that got noticed. Companies began investing heavily in the technology. The competition became fierce. Each company wanted to have their own improvement on the technology, and it became a wild west showdown to produce hybrid prototypes.”

As Charlie listened, his thoughts turned to his own code and what the effects of people using it to build technology upon were. Graham continued about the evolution of the code, and how it was that Blake Crowley cornered the market on it eventually, but Charlie's mind was back with his original code. What was tricky is he didn't know the end product his code had become in the 21st century since he wasn't done his work when Jade had come. Perhaps he worked on it another fifteen years, who knew? (Besides Graham, who seemed to know everything about it.) There was one thing that Charlie Richards did know about the code that no one else knew. Not Blake or Jade or even this kid.

Charlie Richards kept secrets in all his codes. The only person that could ever decipher it was him. It wasn't complex, or for security reasons, it was because Charlie had created ways to fix his own mistakes he knew he was making later. What if he hadn't fixed it and they were still there? No one would have known where to look except for Charlie.

Jade was right. The only person who could fix this code was Charlie Richards.

Chapter 21

“The door is stuck,” Charlie’s voice reverberated through the metal doors as he beat against it with his fist.

Dustin twitched a couple of fingers on top of the desk and the door slid open. He was sitting right where Charlie left him, leaning casually back in his chair as if he’d spent the entire time staring up at the ceiling.

Only, Charlie wasn’t alone when he had gone to the bathroom. In the end, he had found not just Graham, but all the programmers. They had been sent out of the room at the final moment but hadn’t gone very far. In fact, they were just outside in the hallway waiting for the opportunity to come back in.

And in they had come, filing directly behind Charlie. Only they had multiplied. It wasn’t just ten or fifteen programmers, it was thirty-five or forty squeezed into every space of the room watching his final moments. The message had gotten around that they thought Charlie had figured something out. And everyone wanted to be there at his side the moment the new code was downloaded and the death and destruction wreaking havoc on Crowley’s hybrids was ended.

“All right, this is it,” Charlie rubbed his hands together as he walked with purpose towards the CodeSwarm. He was refreshed, relieved, and ready to go.

Here’s what Charlie Richards remembered while talking to Graham. Charlie had a habit of corrupting his code at an alarming rate. It was what evened him out as a programmer back in his 21st century life; why he was ranked 86th of 89th at his mid-sized Topeka, Kansas computer company. His programming was innovative, but almost always filled with bugs. The bugs tended to be unusual but common mistakes only he would make. The positive from that was he wrote code to fix his own code. This, in truth, was the real genius behind Charlie Richards’s work. Not just the work himself, but the code that fixes code was years ahead of what MIT coders were working on with their “Helium” project.

The thing was, he knew his code fixes that he put at the end of every coding block worked in very particular ways. In essence, they worked backwards to the start of the coding block before leapfrogging the programming fix to the next block. It couldn’t be a simple repeat of the coding block, because if it ran the programming fix again, then was prompted to go the beginning, it would be stuck

in an endless loop.

On top of that, his code had been bridged with new genetic code.

Now, surely programmers that came years, even centuries, after him would notice the point of the code. But programming errors are like when chromosomes are off in the human body, they manifest themselves in brutal ways. And generations of minute errors built upon by the next lead to corruption over time. Like the 19th century family of the Fugates in Kentucky where inbreeding over generations eventually lead to them being blue.

The thing was, there were simple fixes that no one other than Charlie Richards could make, no matter how brilliant the computer scientists to come were. Because they were idiotic mistakes. The future contributors to the code made their biggest mistake thinking Charlie Richards was an unrecognized genius.

The key was in the code that fixed the code. Charlie would hide a hidden link in the fixer code that referenced a third-party application his friend wrote. If that link was obsolete, it would break the fixer code. He always hyperlinked the same word when he did this; Trebek.

Charlie needed to fix Trebek, then the code would fix itself.

Easier said than done with trillions of lines of code. But Charlie was happy to see talking computers did wonders for navigating this. As did computer chip ham sandwiches. As did the throngs of admirers looking over his shoulder.

Charlie worked. And he worked. And he worked.



The problem for Dustin was Charlie really was a genius. The fact he wrote the Big Bang code centuries earlier that was still the foundation for the most important project in history was impressive. And equally as impressive was that the fixing he did on the code now was so simple. He never would of think hyperlinks were the issue, it was too archaic of a solution. Neither had anyone else. There was a simplistic brilliance to it all.

But he couldn't let Charlie know that. He needed Charlie on edge. But he also needed to code to be fixed for Warren's plan to work.

Things were going along smashingly.



Charlie stared at the swirling world of the code universe. He didn't dare blink or look in any direction. He prayed he wouldn't do anything to throw the machines off, because the code looked perfect. It was all carefully back in place, and riding together in a way to stop the problems everybody was having. The Malcom code was bridged.

He was sure of it now. Like healthy blood lines moving throughout a body, lights were moving from his code out to the greater universe of code that governed the Hybrids.

Charlie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He blinked his eyes even slower and slid his face away from the screen.

“The hybrids are fixed,” he said. “It’s done.”

Chapter 22

Dustin looked sideways at Charlie's face. God, he hated the simplicity with which Charlie said that the code was fixed. It wasn't because Charlie was cocky. He wasn't. It was because Charlie knew he was right. And every damn programmer in the room believed him, too. Not just because he was Charlie Richards, Godfather of all hybrids, but because, well, he believed in himself.

Now, as the crowd exploded in cheers accented by some whoops and hollers, Dustin felt a grudging respect for Charlie, a respect he would never admit to.

One of the guys let out some sort of loud trilling sound that stood out above the others. Charlie wasn't sure what the hell it was about, but he felt his heart swell at his success.

Dustin sat there and eyed the raucous crowd, the corners of his mouth pulled up in the tiniest smirk. He raised a single black-gloved hand and silenced everyone.

"You don't even know if it works yet," he said. "Don't be fools. Some guy stares at a code swarm for hours and now you're all caterwauling like some tomcat in heat because you think he's solved all the problems of this little town."

Truth be told, Dustin was torn. Eighteen months' worth of his work was wrapped up inside Charlie's code. He needed Charlie's plan to work. Not just because he was a hybrid and would succumb to the disease like every other hybrid was falling, but he needed Charlie's code to work so that he could live forever through the work he had just implemented in the code.

But he still hated sitting here listening to these idiots cheering on some guy just because he turned around and said he deserved to be cheered on.

"Push the code through," Charlie said, his voice even quieter than the stillness that had descended upon all of the programmers.

Dustin sputtered and considered losing his shit for a second, but all eyes had turned on him and he wasn't going to let them see he was feeling outclassed. He ran a hand over his smooth hair as if it needed it.

"Who do you think you are?" he whispered. "You don't just push things through around here. You don't just make decisions that will affect more than half the population of Crowley without getting the approval from the man himself."

“You don’t know how to do it?” Charlie asked.

“Of course, I know how to do it,” Dustin responded, irritation deep to his toes. “But I don’t have to. It’s already in their system and the system will automatically push it out to the hybrids. This is not the point. The point is, you don’t own this town. This town owns you. The only reason why you’re here is to fix this problem.”

Charlie’s eyebrows knit together.

“Well, I have fixed the problem,” he said.

And before Dustin realized exactly what Charlie was doing, Charlie pressed the fail-safe button on the surface of the desk, which would ensure they could always do a manual reboot. The very button that would reset the computer with the core hybrid code on it. Upon rebooting, it would push the new code out to all the hybrids.

“No!” Dustin cried, lunging forward, but it was too late. Charlie’s finger was already pressed deep into the button. The machine was already shutting off. The room held its breath, save for one guy in the corner who seemed to have a cold and sneezed into the silence.

“Bless you,” Charlie said as the whirs and beeps of the CompuVerse behind him started up again and the code was pushed out to every hybrid of Crowley.

Dustin sagged against the glass desk, his arms holding himself up weakly, then fell forward. What if it was wrong? What if the code was wrong? What if Charlie’s code was wrong? What if something terrible happened? He wasn’t afraid of losing people. Warren, though, Warren was somebody to be afraid of. It wasn’t just the power behind the throne, he was the one who wielded the ax. And Warren would never do anything publicly to Charlie, he couldn’t. But now that he had Dustin’s code... if there was anything wrong with Charlie’s fix or Dustin’s code, Dustin knew exactly who was going to take the blame.

It would be him.

“Screens on,” Dustin said, pushing himself off the desk. There was still time, they just needed to figure out if the code worked. If the code didn’t work, he was going to have to do something about it, or at least disappear. If the code did work, he was going to have to make sure he stayed as close to Charlie as possible so maybe some of the gold would rub off on him.

The room descended into silence with a bit of whispering, everyone’s eyes on the screens lining the walls.

Charlie scanned them along with everyone else. He was looking for Jade, but buried in the random screens, he didn’t see her. It troubled him how much that worried him. What if the code didn’t work? He had no idea exactly how long it would take for the code to travel from the CompuVerse in to the hybrids. The problem was, all the cameras were centered on various spaces in Crowley headquarters and random street scenes. Every programmer was trying to find a sick hybrid who maybe wasn’t quite as sick anymore.

But like everything else, the screens were set to focus on whatever they were told. And not many

people knew the code to reset them. Except, Dustin did. He thought for a moment.

“Josie-968,” he said. At first it didn’t seem like anything had happened.

Then a couple of screens blinked as cameras synced to a different network and the scenes switched from random street scenes to the hybrid hospital. All the screens in the room switched until all ten were connected to a different camera viewing the patient floor. Delta hybrids lay everywhere. The cameras were surprisingly close in some areas, but still not close enough. Dustin scanned the screens and focused on one that seemed to have a decent angle.

“Niko X5, zoom in,” Dustin commanded. Charlie glanced over at him. The kid was a snot, but he sure seemed to have a lot of information stored in his brain. How do you randomly remember a camera name... and get it right? The camera, which initially scanning the entire room, suddenly stopped and zoomed in so quickly they were suddenly staring at a black screen.

“Back up,” Charlie said.

Dustin glared at him, but didn’t say anything as the camera obeyed Charlie’s command.

“Zoom to face.” Dustin took control. The camera focused on the flesh and bone that signified this was, indeed, a face. The gore took up the entire screen. The Delta hybrid lay there, its eyes open, staring at the ceiling. Its head rolled to the side and everyone could see the burnt-out eyes rolling back in its head. Its body started twitching.

“The code is downloading,” someone in the room whispered, and everybody leaned forward ever so slightly to see what the hybrid’s next breath would bring.

Except for Charlie, he was staring at another screen, a screen looking at a street in Trenchtown as a lithe, dark haired woman stepped into view. She held her gun cocked and straight out, aimed at nothing, her eyes wide and staring.



A cool breeze caressed Jade and soothed the lines of her face. She raised her chin into it, hoping to cool down. Her body was heating up.

New code, she thought.

The new code was clicking into place. Her other hand flexed with a sharp intake of breath.

Charlie, I hope you got this right. She looked up at the camera that she knew was there, cameras were always there, scanning her and everyone in Crowley. Everyone that wasn’t above the line, which was everyone except for two people.

Her eyes flickered back in her head and she leaned against the wall waiting for the code to update completely. The world closed in, dark and ominous around her. Breath came shallow. Was this the right code? Or was this something else?

She bowed her head, body sagging. The code had given her a longer life. She’d be dead right now if it wasn’t for this hybrid extension to her life, but as a Delta... she was powerless. Code updated at

the will of Blake. It wasn't Charlie who was like a god, he was an angel, the hands of the god.

Still, she needed this. If she was ever to save her parents and give them what they deserved, she needed to live, whatever the cost.

Her eyes closed and though she didn't believe in a single god, in that moment, Jade prayed it worked.

Charlie leaned towards the screen, barely stopping his hand from reaching out towards it. Had he gotten it wrong? Jade was sagging against the wall, her eyes closed and it looked like she was about to slump to the ground. His eyes flicked to the screen showing the hospital.

The hybrid's eyes closed and still its eyeballs twitched under the skin. His mouth opened, his jaw moved in time to his jerking eyeballs.

The room of programmers held their collective breaths. Charlie held his breath, his muscles, and every atom in his body barely together.

Beads of sweat poured out of the gray skin of the sick Delta hybrid's face. The camera lurched to not lose sight of the pitiful figure, and the whole room moved with the camera, every person trying to maintain the balance and keep eyes on the hybrid. The hybrid's eyes shot open, only to turn away from the camera.

Jade's head lolled back, her mouth open and gasping for air. The download was complete and she felt... possibly better than she'd felt in the long time.

Charlie tilted forward in his chair. He couldn't tell from the screen how Jade was feeling. The camera was too far away.

He whipped around to look at the hybrid in the hospital, who was scanning the rest of the room before slowly turning its gaze directly towards the camera.

A mammoth round of cheers and screams went up from the programmers. The hybrid's eyes were perfectly bright and clear. The burnt-out shells were gone. Whatever code Charlie had installed in the CompuVerse had super powers to heal. Now with the new code, healing was possible.

Jade stared directly at the camera, smiling. She gave it the thumbs-up, hoping Charlie was watching. He was. His thumb lifted in response, even though she couldn't see him. The camera switched off, but Charlie, beside himself with delight, threw his arms around Dustin and gave the CIO a very uncool, non-programmer hug.



Blake's hand flew, swatting a MediBot away from his wife. Her eyes had closed and her lids were twitching. Why the hell hadn't they told him they were ready to do it? He should have been warned. This was his experiment, bringing Charlie here and having him work on the code.

He gripped Robin's hand. She was getting the update. He knew he should call Warren and give him a ration of shit, but it was the last thing Blake wanted to do right now. His heart hammered in his

chest in a way that he would never admit to as he stared down at Robin's tremulous body accepting new code.

For a second she stopped breathing.

Then suddenly, her eyes sprang open and she gasped for a breath.

Blake stared down into the bright blue eyes of his wife.

Robin was healed.

And for the first time in what seemed like months, Blake Crowley felt like he could finally breathe again.



If Dustin went to Warren expecting any level of accolades, he was sorely mistaken as he walked into Command Central. In fact, Warren looked incredibly annoyed.

"It better be right," he muttered to the young CTO.

Dustin didn't need to be told that, but he was far too smooth to let Warren see him sweat. "Oh, it's right."

"Prove it," Warren said.

Dustin was a little taken aback. "You want me to give you control over all of them, right now?" he asked.

Warren shook his head. "No. Let's do a test case."

"Okay, I have this Delta down in -"

"Go big or get the fuck out," Warren said. "Push it through to Jadyn of Crowley."

Dustin's eyes widened as he stared at Warren, almost choking on the words. "Ja-Jade?" He hated the way he couldn't get her name fully out. But he knew better than to say the other two thoughts that were running through his head. You gotta be fucking kidding me and I'd like to have her under my control for even just an hour.

"Do it," Warren said. "I want to see if this code you wrote works."

Dustin nodded silently and moved over to a CodeSwarm in the corner where he could privately access the CompuVerse. In less than two minutes he was isolating and opening the package he'd placed in the computer code of one Jadyn of Crowley.



Zeke and Tallahassee heard the trumpets before they knew what was happening, but it didn't matter. All they knew is that something big was going on in Crowley and they needed to find out what it was.

"Let's get up there," Zeke pointed to a high rise that overlooked the Pavilion. "Whatever is going on, we need to report on it."

“I’ll check in with base,” Tallahassee said, pressing a patch on his brown vest.

Zeke nodded. It was always risky to use comms, which could be tracked. But under the circumstances, they were alone in enemy territory. No rescue would be on hand, but perhaps there was more they could do to help the Lowsmiths. After all, the trumpets of Crowley blaring meant Blake had an announcement to make, and an announcement from

Chapter 23

Blake knew something about making a spectacle of things. He knew something about getting people's attention and ensuring the masses all felt good. Early on, he and his wife had chosen the color platinum as their family brand. They felt it was a valued medal, slightly darker than its cheaper cousin, silver, yet it still sparkled. It didn't look cheap and tawdry like yellow gold.

Today, the Pavilion of Crowley was streaming reflective platinum flags from the highest pinnacles, all the way down to the smallest wooden stick in each child's hand. They hadn't even had to buy them. Crowley had made sure the pennants were handed out to every guest who entered the Pavilion. He knew it was crucial for everyone to feel involved in the celebration. The new code was a win for all of them.

Blake placed his arm around Robin, who was seated next to him on the platform overlooking the crowds. The masses were orderly groups in marked off sections set up in such a way so people would feel unified, but not crowded. He wanted them to feel part of the throng, yet also safely separate. The Pavilion was a masterful plan of control, designed in the early days when rebellion was still a possibility. But today the people were nowhere near rebellious. They were grinning up at Blake and Robin, who sat in the golden glow of the magic hour, just before the sun would rise to scorching temperatures that would heat up the landscape and practically melt the city.

But right now, it was perfect.

He clutched Robin's fingers in his. She was weak, but she was still his wife. Still the woman who built this city with him; built this society. She was much loved by the people and knew exactly how important it was for her to be out here on this momentous occasion.

Blake had overcome the barriers of time itself to find a cure for his people. The thought astounded him. Its implications were limitless. They had been so worried about the hybrid danger, the rebels attacking, and the crumbling of their entire society, that overcoming the boundaries of time and space had almost been an afterthought. But now...his fingers traced the delicate skin of the back of Robin's hand. Now, he would have the opportunity to explore the space-time continuum. Once he got through this awards ceremony and stopped the rebellion. Then he would really sit down with Warren and start to figure out what they could do with this technology.

Warren stepped up to the podium, a platinum metal tripod, which held a single, powerful mic.

Microphones had been obsolete for a century, but for somethings, they were really useful. Appearances was one thing. It didn't just connect to the implants of the people here in the Pavilion, it was connected to all the citizens of the entire city. Still, he had everyone's implants blocked while they were here. Even though he could access them directly, there was something powerful and majestic about a voice booming all around you.

Anything said from this microphone would be heard by everyone and this was exactly the way Blake wanted it; in their ears and executed perfectly. There wasn't a squeak or hiss or anything. Blake's eyes flipped over to the AV guy standing off to the side, who looked visibly relieved the microphone seemed to work without a hitch. Blake nodded and smiled at him. It was important for the people to know someone as high up as himself, though there was no one higher, paid attention to them occasionally. It's good for morale when the word gets out. So, when he gave the AV guy a slight nod and smile, he knew his acknowledgement would be carried back to the AV guy's home, to the warrens and communities of Trenchtown. Bots could do almost anything in this day and age, but you still had to give people jobs and recognition. Every single gesture Blake ever made was done with marketing and appearances in mind. It was crucial to spread the message that he was a great guy. This event was going to be one of his greatest yet.

Warren hated being at the microphone. He preferred to be in the darker, seedier side of things, Blake knew. But Blake couldn't very well walk up to the microphone on his own. He had to be introduced. Obviously.

Warren executed the introduction quite simply. "Ladies and gentlemen. Citizens of Crowley. I give you the man who founded the city. The man who overcame death for many of you. The man we call our founder, Blake Crowley."

The crowd went wild. Or at least they probably did. Blake hoped so. With the wind blowing in the opposite direction, he wasn't sure how much of what he was hearing was real cheering or pumped in through the loudspeakers. But it was okay. Their soundtrack of cheering could make him feel just as good. Everyone around the city would hear the thunderous applause that greeted Blake when he stood in front of his people.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Crowley," Blake gripped the podium and leaned towards the mic. Not too far in, though. He knew he couldn't be too close to the mic but he wanted to give the impression he was leaning towards them, he was one of the people, he could connect with them.

"It is no secret that, recently, hard times have fallen upon Crowley." Blake's voice carried through the entire city named after him. "I will not deny the fact rebels have been more active in trying to destroy our promised land, even though we have welcomed them into it with open arms. And our first line of defense, the hybrids, of which I know many of you are." He paused here, his head swaying across the crowd, letting them know he could see each and every one. "You were sick and unable to fulfill your duties as protectors of Crowley. A great malice came up on you. But today I am proud to announce something of which every single one of you is so acutely aware. We have found and

implemented the cure. How do you know this? Look around those of you in this crowd. Just days ago, you were sick in the hospital. And now you stand among us, ready, willing, and able to serve your duty as a hybrid protector of Crowley.”

Blake paused for two reasons. One, he wanted the words to sink in so the people remembered their duty to protect his city. He knew the rebels weren't giving up anytime soon, in fact, some of their attacks had gotten worse, but the hybrids were an integral part of the defense. And Blake knew that some in this very crowd were going to die protecting the city from the rebels. However, he also wanted to give the audience a chance to connect to each other. It was something many of the historical leaders had, in fact, failed to do. A community is strengthened by the individual connections within the masses. Blake discovered this technique of connecting people by reading about the old churches. Hundreds of people reaching out to shake their neighbors hand and bless them could really draw people into the crowd, give them a sense of belonging and build community.

“Take a moment to greet your neighbor.” Blake’s voice was omnipotent. “Congratulate them on overcoming their illness. Thank them for standing vigil while you were sick. Whatever it was, reach out and let your neighbor know we are all part of this community. And I will tell you this: in the same way we welcome you here, we will also welcome the rebels, should they choose to join us.”

The words rang out across all of Crowley. And they were heard by Tallahassee, who glanced over at Zeke, who was muttering as he sat on the ledge hidden behind a monstrous decorative piece at the top of the high rise, his RR9xi sniper rifle aimed down at the crowd.

“Blake probably would just as soon shit on us as welcome us to the city. He’ll try every chance he gets to kill us and wipe humans off the face of the earth,” Zeke growled. “One asshole to rule them all.”

“Shut it,” Tallahassee said. “I’m not hanging out on this ledge to listen to you bitch about Crowley. You heard the message I got from Trekon, we need to be on our toes if we’re going to save Frank’s hide.”

“Today, ladies and gentlemen,” Blake’s voice boomed. “We are gathered to recognize the men who did this great and brave act. Now, I might’ve had a small part in bringing these gentlemen together, but they are with the ones who did the heavy lifting. They slaved away, dug into the problem, and came up with a most effective solution. Ladies, gentlemen, I give you the newest members of Order of the Accolade, Sir Dustin Bovey and Sir Charles Richards.”

Pompous music filled the square and all of the town as Dustin and Charlie stepped out of the recess at the end transit to the town square. Charlie couldn’t believe it. It was just like the final scene in Star Wars, after Luke Skywalker had destroyed the Death Star and they were getting medals with Han Solo.

He glanced over at Dustin. Dustin was nowhere near as unpretentious as Han Solo, but he was cocky and self-assured. Charlie wondered for a second if maybe he was going to be nice today. Probably not.

Charlie walked slowly to match Dustin's pace. Neither was really in a hurry to pass all the cheering residents who were reaching out to shake their hands and waving from a distance. He almost felt like doing a few victory laps and giving everyone high-fives, but you know, there was an image to uphold as the coolest programmer in the history of the known world, and victory laps and high-fives probably weren't a part of it.

He still had very little idea how Dustin got in on the accolade action, but it was probably Warren. Glancing up he saw the two make eye contact and Dustin give Warren a nod. Charlie shrugged. Whatever. Execs were always taking credit for their team's work. Guess some things don't change. It didn't matter. Everybody knew Charlie was the hero from the past who stepped forward and solved the problem of the future. Dustin wasn't solving the problem. If he had, they wouldn't have had to go get Charlie.

They finally got to the front of the crowd and mounted the stairs to the platform, which Charlie thought was a little higher than it probably needed to be, and the stairs were a little steeper than he would've liked. But, of course, he wasn't the master planner of ceremonies. Blake was, and from everything he'd seen, Blake knew a thing or two about managing crowds, and expectations. By the time Charlie got to the tenth step he realized why the stairs were so steep. It made him rise higher with each step and the crowd cheered louder as if he was scaling a mountain. Finally, when they got to the top of the platform, the entire square was encased in a deafening roar, ten times louder than anything going on in the ceremony before this.

Charlie had to hand it to Blake, he knew what he was doing, for sure.

When Robin stood up, the loud cheering of the crowd softened and fell into the adoring cadence of a child looking at his mother, the bubbling sound of hope and joy filling the space. Clearly, she was someone they appreciated. When she stood in front of Charlie and Dustin, Charlie understood why they were told to stay on the lower step. It made it easier for Robin to take the opalum medals from the hand of a ServBot and slip one, first over Dustin's neck, and then another over Charlie's. She reached out to each one then and raised them up onto the platform next to her, as if it were some carefully orchestrated step onto a dance floor. She took them lightly by their shoulders so they would turn and face the crowd.

And if Charlie had thought the crowd loved them before, they were twenty times more deafening as he turned around grinning and smiling as they received their medals.

But the medal felt heavy around Charlie's neck. Not just heavy-heavy, but like internally-settling-in-his-stomach-heavy. Very uncomfortable. Why was Dustin smiling so much? He hadn't smiled at all until they saw the code worked, now Dustin was just elated. Even more than Charlie was. And this made Charlie just a tad suspicious. His gaze went to Warren, who was also grinning from ear-to-ear with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. Dustin might be the scorpion, but Warren was the snake.

And where the hell was Jade? He expected to see her up on stage next to Blake, but she wasn't there and he hadn't seen her at all since the rebel attack. Of course, he had been in the dungeon trying

to solve the problem of the code, but... well, it would have been nice to see her in this, his moment of triumph.

She must have gone to stop some of the rebel attacks in the city. And he'd seen she was okay. But well, he kind of thought she would've checked in on him. They didn't exactly have a thing but, you know, maybe they could.

Charlie frowned.

The adoration of the unknown masses was great. The appreciation of the city executive was nice. But it was just a little sad, really, not to have anyone to share it with. Yes, some would say he didn't have much, but he had connections. You could say living at home with your mom was sad, but it wasn't. Some people have no one. And he had his nephew, and niece. Even his sister. She could be a bitch, but he did think she tried to do what was best for him. Now he didn't have any of them. Not his sister, or her kids, not his mom, and now it looked like not even Jade, the only friend he actually had in this town. And suddenly there was a slight emptiness and Charlie realized he kind of wanted to go home.

"Everybody knows I've never been one to sweep things under the carpet." Blake stepped back to the mic, his metal-toed shoes ringing out. Charlie was taken aback. He thought they were done. This is all they had done in rehearsal. Stand up and get the awards and sit in one of the chairs. Weren't they done?

Apparently not.

"But at these times of joy and celebration, it's always good to remember the struggle going on around us. And why hybrids are so helpful to us. You may have heard when we were working so hard to save our hybrids, the rebels saw this as a moment of weakness. They attacked the very area where we had the machinery needed to heal the hybrids."

Charlie frowned, well... that wasn't quite true, what Blake was saying.

"While we defeated the rebels, we took many losses. But we also took one prisoner. Today we bring him before you to send a message to all rebels. They are more than welcome to join us, but if they stand against us there is one simple conclusion."

What the heck is he talking about, thought Charlie. He had been staring at Blake so long, he still didn't really notice the commotion over by the side gate. Everybody was looking in that direction.

"What are you doing?" Monfils asked Jade as he rushed up to the side gate of the Pavilion. He'd only just gotten the message from his Deltas that she had shown up to take the prisoner onto the stage. Knowing Warren, Monfils knew this couldn't be good.

"Following Warren's orders," Jade stared at Monfils as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Since when do you follow his orders?" Monfils gripped her elbow.

Jade looked slowly down at his hand on her elbow and then up at him. "Since when do you question my actions?" she asked quietly.

Monfils let her elbow go, a worried expression settling on his face. Whatever was about to happen couldn't be undone. He was sure of that.

Jade didn't say another word, she gripped Frank by the elbow and pushed him out the door and into the Pavilion. Monfils, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, followed close behind.

Charlie's eyes followed the crowds' and Jade stepped through a door, pushing in front of her the big guy who had spared Charlie's life when they first arrived because he was human.

"There he is," said Zeke, elbowing Tallahassee in the ribs.

"The girl," Tallahassee said, shoving Zeke's arm back at him. "I'm not an idiot, I see him, too. Fire on the girl."

Zeke shifted his RR9xi GPS sniper rifle, ignoring Tallahassee's snort. Sure, it was hundred-year-old technology, but that was all Zeke had access to and he'd supped this thing up something wicked. He barely needed to aim it at Jade and pull the trigger and the GPS in the opalum bullet would do the rest. She walked slowly toward the stage with Frank ahead of her, but Zeke paused. "I don't have a clear shot," he said. "There's too many humans in the audience. I can't take it."

"Shit," Tallahassee swore. Humans lived in Crowley and worked for Crowley, and Tallahassee thought he did this as a bit of an insurance policy. Lowsmiths didn't kill humans. Tallahassee wasn't about to tell Zeke to take that chance. "Wait 'til she gets on stage. It'll be cutting it close, but it's going to be the best chance to get a clean shot." He squinted above the stage where a shimmer in the air was all that gave way the presence of a GX Silon hovering in silence, ready to take its one shot at retrieving Frank. The shielded bot-driven transport couldn't take more than one passenger, but Tallahassee and Zeke had agreed: Frank was worth it. They'd figure a way out of here. Like rats in the sewer, they were pretty good at squeaking out of tight spots.

Charlie's jaw went slack as Jade, dressed in her black slick bodysuit, came up the side stairs. She didn't look at him, she didn't smile, she kept her hands on the cuffs of the prisoner she pushed forward to the center of the stage. He grimaced as he saw Monfils wasn't far behind. Why did those two always have to be together. Did they have a thing?

Robin gently tugged on Dustin's and Charlie's wrists, pulling them back and giving center stage to Jade and the rebel prisoner.

A flash of light movement, a reflection in the awnings overlooking the platform grabbed Charlie's attention for minute. He glanced up and that's when he saw them, two weird looking guys with guns, tucked up in the eaves, trying to get a good shot.

And now they had it. Perfectly.

"Jade!" Charlie called, just as Jade was raising her blaster directly to the rebel's temple.

She looked up at Charlie, her eyes black, as she fired the laser directly into the head of the rebel. The large man's brain exploded in a flood of gore and blood out the side of his head. Charlie's mouth screamed in horror, but he was already moving as he leapt to stop the sniper round coming directly at Jade.

It missed her and punched Charlie hard in the chest, knocking him backwards.

He lay on the stage, his hand landing in some of the rebel brain splattered on the ground. His scream drained away, as he realized he'd been hit.

But Charlie Richards was used to being wrong. This time, he was the happiest he had ever been about being wrong. The opal bullet had managed, by some miracle, to hit the dense medal hanging from his neck. The impact had knocked the wind out of him and destroyed the inscription, but Charlie was very much alive and unhurt.

Jade been expecting there would be a sniper. She knew she should kill the rebel quickly and effectively. Faster than a sniper could pull a trigger. And she'd done just that.

But now, she knew where they were. She glanced down at Charlie without saying a word, without a friendly smile, without so much as a "Thanks for saving my life." She wiped off her DC15s HEL and quickly pulled at the scope. She sent off a quick round and clipped Zeke in the left shoulder before shifting her aim to Tallahassee. Zeke tumbled off the side of the building as Tallahassee disappeared down the other side.

Jade raced off the stage, leaving Charlie alone on the platform, gasping for breath, the dented opal medal weighing down his neck.

Chapter 24

“What was that?” Robin cried, ripping the shawl off her head and throwing it on the couch as they entered their suite. The lights of Crowley glistened below them, but it was nothing Robin wanted to look at right now. She just wanted to close her eyes and forget everything she had just seen.

“Calm down, honey,” Blake said, picking up the scarf and carefully folding it and placing it on the back of the seat.

A ServBot popped up next to her. “May I fix you a drink, Madam?” it beeped.

“Get the hell away from me,” Robin said, shoving the bot in the chest.

“What is wrong with you?” Blake grabbed her shoulders and turned her to him. “Are you okay?” He peered into her eyes, making every effort to discern what was causing the anger and rage inside of her. But her eyes look normal. Everything looked fine.

“Since when are we killing humans?” She asked, pulling her shoulders away and stepping back from her husband. “Is this what we’ve become? We are suddenly a dictatorship.”

“We are not a dictatorship,” Blake said, slowly sitting down again. He realized he wasn’t going to be able to strong-arm his wife into calming down, so he was going to have to lead by example. He was going to have to show her nothing was wrong. Everything was just fine.

“However, there are laws that govern this corporation. And those laws dictate we do not suffer other people killing our people. That rebel killed our hybrids.”

Confusion struggled on Robin’s face. “Jade just executed him,” she said. “She blew his brains out on public display. I’ve never known her to do anything like that.”

Blake held up his hand as the bot brought over his evening mixed drink.

“What part of hybrid assassin don’t you understand?” Blake asked. He loved his wife and he honored her and he respected her. But there was only so much he was going to take. This was not the time for weakness.

“I just- I just thought you had the sense do things discretely.”

“We had to make an example of him! We need to show them they can’t just break into our city and kill people. It’s not okay. And if we had a bot kill him, well, it just wouldn’t work.”

“But how did you get Jade to do it?” Robin asked.

Blake looked at her like she was a little bit crazy. “Do what? She kills people for a living.”

“There was something different about this,” Robin said, the confusion settling on her face as she sat down on the sofa opposite her husband. When the bot brought over her drink she automatically raised her hand to take it.

“You’ve been under a lot of pressure lately, my dear,” Blake said. “But all that’s going to change now. You’re not sick anymore, you’ve been made better. You’ve been made whole by the great science that is this colony. You may not agree with some of the things we must do, but we must protect the population. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, just like Spock said.”

“I don’t think Spock said that,” his wife grumbled.

“Suddenly you know the classics?” Blake asked her with a smile. “Remember, I’m the one who was valedictorian with my early 21st-century doctoral degree. It’s how we even discovered this code existed.”

“I’m well aware of what your degree is in,” Robin said. And suddenly she felt very, very tired, her shoulders drooped and she made her way to the couch where she fell and closed her eyes. “How did we even get here?” She asked. “You know, back then, all I wanted to do, all I wanted was to marry you and have a family. What happened to that dream? You asked me to help build the city. I did that, but it wasn’t the only dream I ever had.”

Blake’s heart clenched at her words. A family. He could keep people alive through almost any disease by extracting the parts that didn’t work and replacing them with hardware and computerized software pieces that would work. But he couldn’t get his own wife pregnant.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

But his voice was soft and Robin wasn’t listening anyhow. She was thinking the same thought she’d been thinking for the last few years. She wondered when she would be allowed to die. Or was a hybrid truly meant to live forever?



Charlie was back in his penthouse, looking down on the city. What the hell was he doing? He tried reaching Jade through the ServBot system at least a dozen times since the end of that stupid event. The ceremony he had dreamed of his entire life. Finally getting the recognition he deserved. And it all seemed like a sham, orchestrated by Crowley simply to give them the opportunity to murder the rebel; make an example of him. And when they had escorted Charlie back to this penthouse, well he’d heard the lock in the door when Monfils left. He was pretty sure he wasn’t getting out tonight. He scratched thoughtfully at his wrist.

Charlie was a hell of a programmer and he was good at getting things working. He hoped so. He was so good, Blake had gone to the past to bring him here. But now that was done, well, the cold hard truth was settling in. There was no way Blake or Warren were going to let Charlie go back. Why

would they risk Charlie changing the code, making alterations, or even taking the code for himself? Charlie's brain worked overtime on this problem. But the answer was always the same. There was no way in hell Charlie was going home.

Charlie reached into his pocket and pulled out the card his nephew, Alex, had given him. Alex's voice rang clearly in Charlie's head.

"His name is Halidan. He is savior of the realm, like Taborlin the Great. If he is played when your city has been destroyed, he rebuilds it. He's my favorite."

Suddenly, the full import of the choice he had made slapped him in the face. Charlie was never going to be able to see his nephew again.

Ever.

He could maybe look up his nephew's records, find out what became of him, try to trace his family line, but Charlie from 2017? Wiped off the face of the earth. He had become one of those missing persons. He thought about his mother, about his sister. How long would they be thinking about him, wondering where he went, what happened to him? His nephew would grow up always wondering what happened to his uncle and why he abandoned him.

"I left because I wanted to make a difference," Charlie said aloud to the empty room.

But what had he really done? He could've made a difference in his nephew's life, but he sacrificed that. And for what? From everything he saw going on here, it mostly felt he had just been used. Blake Crowley had a lot of problems and the hybrid disease had only been one of them. He had rebels attacking, and even his wife as a hybrid, it didn't look so good.

What if it was worse, though? Blake was a pretty ruthless guy. He just killed another human right in front of everybody. Just to make a point. Charlie figured his own status was high enough that he wouldn't be killed, but Blake was the kind of a guy who could create an accident and make it believable. Charlie's eyes went to the northern quadrant of town where the DarkM'attr machine was housed. It was overrun by Lowsmiths when he arrived, but he was sure Blake had it back under control now. He had to get back to it. He wasn't safe here, he wasn't a hero, he was just the next guy, probably in a long line of guys, that Blake used to protect his assets. Charlie turned the card over and over in his fingers and looked back out the window. How the hell was he going to get across town? Hell, he didn't even know how he was going to get out of this apartment, but for the sake of his mother, his niece and nephew, and hell, even his sister, he knew he had to try.



Monfils had tried everything. Blake was not answering. Jade was not answering. The only person he could get to was Warren. And he had to be careful about that. You don't just walk up to a cobra and punch it in the nose.

Monfils needed a flute.

He walked into Command Central humming a tune.

Warren glanced up as Monfils entered, but didn't take much more notice of him. Monfils walked over to the hybrid pod to have a quick look at his units and see if there was anything that needed his attention.

As he passed Dustin, he clapped him on the shoulder. "Congratulations," he said. "Good work helping Charlie Richards. Glad you guys got the problem fixed and I can get my hybrids, well, those that are still alive, back in service."

An involuntary snort came out of Dustin.

Monfils's eyes narrowed. "You are planning to have my hybrids back in business. I mean, you gave me back Jade. She carried out my orders perfectly."

And that's when Monfils saw it; Dustin's face fell.

"Your orders?" Dustin asked, his eyes flitting between Warren and Monfils for the briefest of seconds.

Monfils stepped in close, towering over Dustin. "You filthy little rat shit bastard. You can't lead people in any real way, so you wrote code to control them."

Dustin relaxed. He had slid into Monfils's little trap, but it wasn't going to hold him back. "I did write the code," he grinned. "But Warren controls it. I don't think you want to challenge him on that, do you?"

A dark storm crossed Monfils's face as he turned and strode out of Command Central.

Chapter 25

Charlie called out to the ServBot. “I need to speak with Blake Crowley,” he said, donning his best voice of authority. He didn’t think it was an option or that the bot was going to make it happen, but he wanted to test the system.

“I am most sorry,” the ServBot said. “This is not a possibility.”

“I’m not feeling very well,” Charlie murmured, slumping into the couch. It was a classic 21st century “when you’re in prison and on lockdown” sick act. He wasn’t sure if it was going to get him out of the apartment, but he was going to give it a shot.

“One moment please,” the ServBot said.

And it was truly only a moment before a MediBot rolled into the living room.

“How might I be of service?” it asked, opening its side panel showing a huge dispensary of drugs. “What sort of medicine do you need? These are all suitable for human consumption but I recommend letting me choose for you based on your symptoms.”

Charlie was a bit taken aback, but couldn’t stop himself from perusing the goods. Everything, apparently, was done in liquid form these days and only required a single drop on a small slip of paper. Seriously, it looked a little bit like acid you’d take in the 90’s. Charlie wasn’t going near any of it with a ten-foot pole.

“I just need to get out of here,” he said. “Get some fresh air.”

Its eyes rolled back in its head as it processed the request. “You are not at liberty to travel outside of this apartment,” the MediBot said. “But now I’m quite sure you are relegated article 350 CX. Anything you do needs to be reported. And you’re not allowed to do anything.”

“Right,” Charlie said glaring at the MediBot, who stared back with an impossibly disinterested gaze.

Charlie realized a couple of things. The first was that you couldn’t get out on a sick charge, you couldn’t talk to Blake... and even Jade didn’t seem to care about his plight anymore.

He could try the “I’m going to kill myself” shtick, but it didn’t seem like anyone was going to care about that either. If they wanted him dead, it might just get the job done sooner.

A loud explosion across the city made the glass window shake. Huge lights and explosions blew up the skyline. This time it wasn’t in the area where the DarkM’attr machine was, it was all along the

outer perimeter. Every single wall along half the city was being bombarded with explosions.

“Holy shit,” Charlie murmured. “What’s going on?” he asked the ServBot.

The ServBot reached into whatever system plugged it into the main network. “It appears there is a demonstration being conducted. Nothing to be alarmed about.”

“Where the hell are you reading that?” Charlie asked. “The Good Crowley Times? You’ve got to realize it’s bullshit. Unless Blake has decided he wants to destroy half of his precious city, I guarantee you this is no demonstration.”

“There is nothing to be alarmed about,” repeated the bot.

Charlie was trying to figure out how he was going to use the situation to his advantage. The first thing he needed to do was get out of the apartment.

His mind flashed to the awards ceremony. To the look Warren and Dustin had exchanged. Dustin was Warren’s man. Warren would be the one who didn’t want Charlie around. He’d be the only one who cared about what Charlie could do. There’s a reason they hadn’t killed Charlie yet and he was pretty sure it had to do with Dustin and Warren. The code worked, he knew it worked. So, why were they still letting him live? Charlie had the feeling he was losing in a game he didn’t even know the rules of, one he had no power over. He was supposed to be the mastermind. The one who had created the technology that made the hybrids. But now he was being kept in the dark, seemingly in the lap of luxury. But he had no idea what his future was.

Unless... Unless he had made a mistake. Or they thought he had made a mistake. Now that he understood more about the system, maybe there was some way for him to gain a little ground.

“I need to see Warren,” Charlie said.

The ServBot just blinked at him.

“Warren Relic,” Charlie said.

“Just one moment, we will check his availability,” the ServBot said.

“While you’re checking his availability,” Charlie said, leaning into whatever camera the bot stored its vision receptors in, “I need you to transmit this information back to headquarters. Tell Warren I made a mistake. There is a problem in the code that will disrupt what I programmed. It’ll work for now but I set a variable wrong. It’s really wrong. Like it’s only going to work for another hour. You need to get me back to headquarters so I can double-check it.”

It seemed to take forever for the bot to come back with an answer. Charlie was extremely frustrated by the basic inhumanity of them. They couldn’t even see his frustration or irritation; they simply did as they were programmed. There was no connection, nothing. But he knew he got him something right. He knew there was only one thing Warren truly cared about, and that was the hybrid code. Charlie wasn’t quite sure why, but he knew it would get his attention.

“You will be collected and taken to Mr. Relic,” the ServBot finally said.

“Good,” Charlie said. “That’s great.” He tried to look enthusiastic and happy as if he really cared about the code getting corrected, which he didn’t. He just cared about getting out of here, getting to the

DarkM'attr machine, and getting back to his time. To his people.

You could've knocked Charlie over with a feather when his escort showed up to take him to see Warren.

"Good job," Jade said as the door slid open, the black shadow of Genesis II looming behind her.

Charlie wasn't sure if he should hug her or hide from her. He wanted to do both. Though, truth be told, mostly just hug her. He compromised by sticking out his hand. He just wanted to touch her, he wanted human contact. She stared down at it as if it was the strangest thing she'd ever seen. Her arms remained at her sides.

"I'm here to escort you to Warren," she said.

As much as Charlie wanted to ask questions, he knew he could not miss this opportunity to get out of the apartment. But he also knew with Jade as his escort, he had no hope in hell of escaping, or surviving if he attempted it.

They walked in silence down the hallway into the transport lift.

"Headquarters," Jade said, sliding her finger through a vapor portal that apparently recognized her. A dual chair slid into the tube and the gate slipped open allowing them entry.

Charlie glanced at the sleek chair that would take them a few blocks away. This was the future.

Man, if he could get back in time he could make a killing either inventing some of this stuff or, probably more realistically, writing crazy science fiction. Because he had no idea how half the stuff worked. I mean... what sort of vapor bath does one put a finger in so it can identify exactly who you are and what permissions you have? No idea.

He rubbed his hand over the smooth surface of the chair as he sat down. There were no belts. The chair suctioned them in with a great intake of breath.

"Why did you kill him?" The question came out of Charlie's mouth before he could stop himself.

Jade's slanted eyes tilted towards Charlie. "It had to be done."

"But he was just some guy," Charlie said. His words trailed off. How could he explain that Frank reminded him of the kind of guys he sat in the bar with back home. "Just some guy caught up in a crazy rebellion."

Charlie's heart clenched at the truth. It could just as easily have been him. Would Jade kill him if Blake commanded it? He glanced over at her. There was no telling. She stared straight ahead as the chair whizzed soundlessly through the air.

"That guy let me live. He could've killed me when we came out of the DarkM'attr machine and you were taking me into headquarters, but he didn't. He let me live."

"He got caught." Jade's tone was flat.

"But he shouldn't have died, and-"

"I don't know if you realize this," Jade interrupted, "But I don't exactly make the rules

around here.”

“Yeah, but come on, I know you’ve got power. I see how everybody looks at you. You don’t just have to cave and follow the rules like everybody else. I may be new around here, but I see that much. I’m not an imbecile,” Charlie said.

“You might be coding-smart, and handy with hardware, but you don’t have an ounce of emotional intelligence. If you did, you would shut up and just do what you’re told.”

Her words stung. Charlie tried to scoot away from her a bit, but the airlock on the seats wouldn’t let him move.

“Something is wrong with you,” he said. “You’re different.”

“You don’t know me,” she said. “You showed up in my life three days ago. And you are nothing like the documentaries they made about you.”

Charlie raised his eyebrows. “Did you watch them all?”

Jade rolled her eyes and looked out the window. The tube opened up and they slid to a halt in the lustrous lobby of the Crowley headquarters. She grabbed his arm before he could step out of the tube. Her grip was stronger than the airlock that had held him into his chair.

“Is it true?” She asked. “Are you going to Warren to tell him there’s something wrong with the code you gave me? I mean, you gave all the hybrids?”

Charlie knew she was highly trained to measure any imperceptible muscle twitch or eye motion. Anything that would let her know he was lying. He held himself as steadily as possible and stared her straight in the eye.

“It’s true,” he said. “I made a mistake. I am human.” He shrugged his shoulders and use the opportunity to look away from her concentrated gaze.

The sound Jade made wasn’t quite a snort, but it wasn’t just an exhale. It was something in between the two and told Charlie he might’ve given something away. He pulled his arm loose from her as the transport doors swished closed behind them and they stepped forward into the bustling hive that was headquarters.



“Restrain her!” Blake yelled at the ProtectoBots as they stormed into the room. “Gently,” he added, which is not something he had ever commanded a ProtectoBot to be in his entire career as master of the universe.

He turned his back as Robin, screaming at him, was held down by the ProtectoBots, her wrists bond with H-Con cuffs.

Blake pressed his finger to his temple so hard it hurt. “What the fuck is going on, Warren?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Warren says smoothly. “How are things with you?”

Blake listened to Robin screaming in the other room and closed his eyes. There was no way he could tell Warren his wife was going crazy. Still, he should...

“Good,” Blake said smoothly. “Just wondering if there have been any reports of strangeness among the Deltas at all.”

“Strangeness?” Warren asked, trying hard to keep the smile out of his voice.

“You know, aggressiveness from the update or something?” Blake tried to sound real, real casual.

Warren bit his lip to keep from chortling out loud. “Nope,” he finally managed. “All’s quiet on the western front. How’s Robin?”

“Oh, fine, fine,” Blake muttered, but his eyes closed. There was no way he could show weakness to Warren.

“Great,” Warren finally smiled into the comm. “Why don’t you spend some time with her this evening. I know it’s been hard with her being so sick and all.” He had to stop himself before he laid it on too thick.

“Yeah, yeah,” Blake nodded. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“Oh, but look, there is one more thing. Monfils has managed to capture a few extra Lowsmiths from the latest attacks and I was thinking we should have them and some prisoners and make a real gesture to the people, like accept them into our city as citizens. It’s not enough to do any real harm, but we can make us look bigger and better if we can do this. It’ll be a good marketing move,” he finished with a carrot that he knew Blake couldn’t refuse.

“What time?” Blake asked.

“I’m thinking it’ll be in about an hour or so,” Warren said. “Does that work for you?”

“I don’t see why not,” Blake shrugged, relieved to have a marketing challenge to think about rather than his enraged wife.

Warren disconnected and found he had an earsplitting smile on his face. Clearly the code he’d had Dustin unwrap in Robin, well, that code was working, too.



Warren glared at them as they walked into command central. Charlie had noticed earlier the interactions between Warren and Jade, so it was a surprise, but by the glare, this time it wasn’t at Jade, it was at him.

“What’s wrong with the code?” He asked

“I forgot a string,” Charlie said.

Warren narrowed his eyes.

“And a wrapper. The time wrapper.” He didn’t think Warren knew anything about code, at least he hoped he didn’t.

“It seems to be working just fine.” Warren exchanged glances with Dustin. Dustin nodded, Warren

shrugged.

“Oh yeah, it’s working fine now but, you know, any minute…” Charlie made a symbolic explosion motion with his hands, trying to let them know exactly how bad it was going to be.

Warren and Dustin both looked at Jade.

“He’s lying,” she said.

“I thought as much,” said Dustin. “I checked the code myself.”

“I’m not lying,” Charlie said. “I’m telling you, I messed up the code.”

“You might’ve messed up the code,” Jade said. “But you don’t actually think you did.”

“Why are you doing this?” Charlie hissed at her.

“Because, Charlie,” Warren said, his lip lifting weirdly in the light. “Jade works for me.” He waved his hand towards Jade dismissively. “Report to the Pavilion so you can protect Blake as he meets the rebels.”

“You’re having Blake meet the rebels?” Charlie started.

“Yes. I think it’s rather clever mastermind effort,” Warren said, turning back to the screens that lined the walls from floor to ceiling. “It’s a way to bring the rebels and the citizens of Crowley together.”

Charlie looked at them in horror as Jade slipped out the side door. Warren had masterminded Blake to meet some of the Lowsmiths in the Pavilion.

“The rebels were just attacking the city not more than an hour ago,” Charlie frowned. There was something really wrong about this. He could say they were doing it for peace, but Charlie didn’t buy it. Only one thing was going to happen in the Pavilion today. Someone was going to die.

He stared at the closest screen as it monitored the Pavilion. Rebels grouped on one side of the barricade and hybrids and bots filled up the other side of the square. Charlie hoped beyond any hope he ever had before that the person or the people who were going to die today would not include Jade. He saw Monfils on the side of the Crowley citizens. Maybe this would be a good place for Monfils. Maybe he would protect Jade.

“Why don’t you stay and watch.” Warren invited with a snide smile.

Charlie glanced at the door where Warren’s newest Genesis stood, looking a hell of a lot like the big black genesis monster he had seen when he first met Jade. He certainly wasn’t going to get out of here that way.

His plan was to get to the DarkM’attr machine, but that wasn’t really working so far.

“Are you ready?” Warner asked Dustin.

Charlie look between them. What the hell were they getting ready for? Dustin had a gleeful look on his face that Charlie didn’t like in the slightest. A high-pitched giggle came out of the back of his throat, but he clamped his lips down on it after just a small amount came out.

What the fuck was going on?

Dustin nodded his ponytail bobbed at the back of his head. He and Warren gazed at the screens

like it was Christmas morning and they were about to get the best presents ever. Charlie turned to look, too, with the most sickening sinking feeling way down in his stomach. Jade stepped on the platform to one side of Blake. Robin stood to his left, her lips pressed together in a single thin line.

“Why do you have Blake out there on the platform in front of the rebels? Are you crazy?” Charlie asked.

“Don’t you believe Jade can protect him?” Warren asked, with wry amusement slathered all over his face.

“Well of course she can, but what if she gets –”

“Hurt?” Warren asked.

Charlie didn’t respond. His eyes were wide with the realization that this was exactly what Warren was trying to do. They all knew that Jade would stop at nothing to protect Blake.

“You’re trying to get her killed, you bastard.”

Warren tilted his head at Charlie.

“For a genius,” he said, “you sure think small. Why the hell would I care about Jade in the slightest?”

“Because she’s more powerful than you,” Charlie said.

Warren and Dustin both laughed out loud. It kind of creeped Charlie out, but not as much as it made him nervous. These two have done something, something worse than setting up Jade and Blake. But all Charlie’s thoughts came to a standstill as the loudspeakers blared trumpets, of all ludicrous things, across the Pavilion. A representative of the Lowsmiths walked towards Blake.

The Lowsmith had no guns. Blake had no guns. But they both had someone with them. For Blake, it was Jade. For the Lowsmith, it was a massive dark-skinned man who looked like he could crush anyone with a single blow. The guy wasn’t carrying guns, at least not any that were apparent.

As the trumpets died down, Blake spoke loudly and clearly to the gathered masses.

“We welcome you into Crowley. The city my dear wife and I developed and built. We used blood, sweat, and tears, along with technology to improve the life of mankind, and today we want to welcome you as citizens to our fair city.”

“God, I cannot stand it,” Warren said. He looked over at Dustin. “Flip the switch.”

Charlie backed slowly away from them. Everyone was so intent on the screen, this was going to be the best chance to get out of here. Whatever was going on, it was not his problem. Whatever happened in the Pavilion was none of his concern. His had to get the hell back to the DarkM’attr machine. Clearly Warren was trying to create some kind of revolution and there was no way Charlie was going to be able to stop it. There was no way he was going to stand here and watch as Jade died. He needed to get out of here. Get back to the time machine and get home.



Tallahassee and Zeke sat in the shadows of one of Crowley's high rises, looking down at the Pavilion. They were up on a ledge, which they found was often the safest place to hide from the bots, who seemed programmed to think of the Lowsmiths as being low to the ground and in hiding. For some reason, they always underestimated their ability to escape at a height above ground level.

"They have the prisoners," Zeke said, pointing at the gray-clad, bedraggled Lowsmiths that were being led into the square.

"There's no way they're just going to welcome them in as citizens," Tallahassee said as he spat over the edge.

They watched the prisoners being lined up with the twenty or so Lowsmiths that had been cornered in the attack on Trenchtown.

"This isn't going to end well," Zeke muttered. "How can anyone think Blake is going to welcome them with open arms?"



Charlie slid casually towards the door that lead to the central coding rooms. They had to be still open, and since he made it this far he was sure he could make it all the way down there, and figure a way out of this mess.

Nobody was paying any attention to him now. But as he was about to slip out the door, he realized there was no way he could leave without watching what would happen. Dustin reached his finger toward a CompuVerse of code swirling around in the air. Dustin did a movement Charlie didn't understand. He had seen the galaxies and solar systems of code that made up the CompuVerse could be manipulated with blinks and eye directions, but that is not what Dustin did now. Instead, he raised his hand into the swirling code and tapped the air in a sequence with three of his fingers.

"Fingerprints approved," a woman's voice spoke into the room. "Code recognized."

"Is it done?" Warren asked.

Charlie leaned towards the screen, trying to see what they were doing, what changes they were making in the lives of everybody in the Pavilion.

"Sequence complete. Updating code."

It seemed like everybody in the command center was holding their breath. Charlie didn't even notice that he was too.

"Update complete." The mechanical woman's voice said.

"It is now," smiled Dustin.

And for a second it seemed like nothing happened. Blake was still going on about how he welcomed the rebels and no harm would come to them and what a great step this was towards peace.

But then Charlie saw it. There was a shift in the crowd. Then, about a third of the people on the Crowley side, all of them hybrids, suddenly pulled out weapons and in seconds they were firing on

the unarmed rebels.

Charlie stumbled back against the wall as Warren and Dustin together let out a whoop of excitement, as if this was a good thing. As if human massacre was the right thing to do in a situation like this.

Charlie scanned the screens for Jade. She wasn't hard to find. She was still standing, her body in front of Blake, firing into the crowd of unarmed humans. And standing right next to her, firing with as much focus and determination as Charlie could see on Jade's face, was Robin, the wife of Blake and the mother of Crowley.

Chapter 26

Charlie slipped into the shadows of the hallway. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. The lights in the hall seemed to have powered on the moment he entered. He scanned the lights that looked a hell of a lot like the HEL in their guns. Charlie slowed down a bit and bent low, creeping along the wall. The last thing he needed was for all the sconces to turn into blasters and fire at him.

He remembered the way to the code room easily. It was something he was always good at, directions. But even as he went he kept trying to figure out, why the hell am I doing this? I should be heading out the first side door I find but... but... Jade and all the other hybrids, Robin. They were being controlled by Warren. It was starting to make sense to Charlie. Dustin's glee, his excitement as he was engaging the code. Even the way Dustin was given a medal at the same time Charlie was. Dustin had written some crazy-ass code and he must've stuck it in the middle of what Charlie was doing.

Charlie had to fix this.

It was his fault this was happening. And he was sure no one else here knew what to do. Nobody would know how to get into the middle of this code and rip out whatever demonic assassin nonsense Dustin had put in there. If Charlie just left, the future was over. It would become a dictatorship ruled by hybrids and Warren with his hybrid assassins. I mean, he always knew Jade was a bodyguard, but she was no cold-blooded assassin. He was sure of that.

There were surprisingly few hybrids and bots in the hallway leading up to the coding room. Charlie was relieved. There was no way he would be able to hide in this world. He was a public figure. A piece of information that still seems rather strange to him. He turned a corner and froze; there were two bots standing outside the door that lead to the core code room.

Charlie hid in the shadows for a moment, analyzing the situation. These guys probably had lasers that shot out of their eyeballs and could kill him with a single glance. Charlie's legs trembled.

Save the world. Save the world. Save the world.

He took a deep breath. He had to do this. Even though so much of him wanted to run the other direction and hide under a rock. This wasn't his RPG. This wasn't the imaginary world where he could just go in guns blazing and blow up all the robots. He had to sneak by these bots and try not to

get killed in the process.

No time like the present. He thought of the words his dad used to tell him. Way back in the day.

Charlie stepped forward and walked slowly out of the shadows as if he was on an afternoon stroll. He walked up to the bots who held their arms across the door as he approached.

“I left my lucky charm in there,” Charlie said. “I just need to get in and grab it. It’ll just take a second.”

Shit. If Jade could tell he was lying, wouldn’t the bots be able to also?

“We are instructed to grant entry to no one,” the silver bot said, its mechanical voice stilted.

Charlie frowned at the bot.

“Is there something wrong with your voice?” He asked

“My voice?” The gray bot repeated. “I don’t think so.” He looked over at the other bot.

The other bot had an orange V on its chest. “You know, I have been thinking it sounded a little bit off lately,” the V-Bot said.

“You see there,” Charlie said pointing at VBot as he glanced over at the silver bot. “You see how his voice has a bit of a trail at the end? How it kind of rolls as if off a tongue? Your voice, not so much.”

“But I thought I had a perfectly fine voice-”

And suddenly the gray bot’s hand flew over where its mouth might’ve been; where the speaker was projecting its voice.

“You heard it,” Charlie said. He desperately wanted to glance at his watch. This was taking too long. But he had to hold cool and steady.

“I can fix it for you,” he said. “No problem.”

“You can?” the silver bot asked.

“Absolutely. I just need to access your control panel.” Charlie stepped forward.

“We’re not allowed to let anyone access our panels,” the bot said doubtfully.

“Of course!” Charlie raised his hands and took a step back. “When I first got here, you know, I’m Charlie Richards, that’s what they told me.”

V-Bot whirred excitedly. “You could get him to work on your code! Can you imagine how awesome that’s going to sound?”

The silver bot tilted sideways as if considering.

But the V-Bot was already sold. “Hey Charlie, could you do something in my code?” he asked.

Charlie smiled. “Absolutely,” he said. Some programmer had given these robots a little bit too much humanity. They were rolling in ego.

“Let me just get behind you guys. Can you pop your panels open for me?” He asked.

“No problem,” V-Bot said, turning around instantly and popping his panel open. Charlie’s eyes widened as he looked at the panel. He had no idea what the hell he was doing, but he now had the opportunity to stop this.

“You, too,” he said casually to the silver bot, not taking his eyes off V-Bot’s panel.

The silver bot paused for a moment before slowly turning his back to Charlie and opening his panel. Charlie now had them both in the palm of his hand. He simply needed to figure out what to do with that. Which he most certainly did not.

Charlie looked at both panels. The glass sheen reflected the sweat that was beading on his forehead. He blinked twice at the panel and the series of numbers glaring on it flickered.

This was his chance. Charlie closed his eyes for a moment and he remembered watching Dustin as he had gotten into the master computer. A series of three blinks, two blinks, and five blinks, with the swipe of his pinky finger to the right. Charlie copied the memory. It worked on the third try and accessed the core bot code. Now all he had to do was shut it down.

He glanced at the silver bot’s panel and got to its core text as well. All he had to do was dive into the duodenary world of 24th century code and switch the damn thing off for good. They would never reboot.

“Hey guys, can you just hug it out?” Charlie asked.

The bots exchanged a glance, but shrugged and clashed against each other in a metal embrace.

“Hold each other tight now,” Charlie said. He knew the second he shut one down, if the other could move, he’d be a goner. The silver bot gripped tightly so Charlie moved to the back of the V-Bot. He counted rapidly, then moved over and blinked update.

“Hey, what’s happening to him?” asked V-Bot. The silver bot shut down and held its grip firmly around V-Bot. The massive orange bot began to push against him.

“Calm down,” Charlie soothed. “He’s just rebooting.” Charlie slipped behind V-Bot as fast as he could and counted through the system until he could move over to the sixty-fifth galaxy. V-Bot still struggled against the grip of silver bot, but then fell silent. The dead bots hugging looked like some strange modern sculpture ready to be placed in the center of a park.

Charlie turned back towards the doors of the computer lab and did the only thing that made sense to him when they didn’t slide open. He knocked.

The door slid open and there stood the young-programming-Charlie-super-fan, Graham. His face lit up when he saw Charlie.

Charlie was glad to see him as well. Finally, somebody on his side. “Something’s wrong with the hybrids,” he said, moving past the kid and straight towards the master computer. He was desperately trying to remember the kid’s name. “Dustin sent me down here to make some quick repairs. You alone?”

“The others are about to turn up,” the kid said, “but we’ve been, um, told not to not to let you in to do anything.”

Charlie stopped touching the keyboards and turned to look at the kid. Great, even he was against him now. He just couldn’t catch a break.

Graham stumbled when Charlie looked at him, clearly uncomfortable with having to tell his hero

no. “I mean, that was the one instruction they gave me, it was to, like, not let you touch the computers.”

Charlie raised his finger in the air. He had signed the kid’s shirt! “The only problem with that, Graham,” he mused, trying to appear as effortless as Graham saw him, “is how else am I going to fix the hybrids if I can’t get into the computer?”

Graham looked at him with slight confusion on his face. “Are you sure Dustin sent you?” he asked. “He doesn’t really seem to like you.”

“Well, really, it was Blake,” Charlie shrugged, sidestepping the kid as much as possible and slowly inching closer to the computer. “But you know, I don’t like to name-drop Blake everywhere I go. People start to get the wrong idea about you, if you’re a name dropper.”

Charlie’s interpersonal skills were crap, and he knew it, but he had to pour it on for this kid. He had to get access to the CompuVerse. “Why don’t you show me what you were working on there,” he squinted at the boy. “Graham.”

“Oh, well, you know, I noticed there was a delay in the passing of information between-” Graham stopped, looking a little self-conscious. “Look, you’re going to think this is really dumb and I don’t think anybody else ever noticed, but you know, I just really thought the bots, that they should have a little more empathy with humans. You know how when you talk to a bot and it just stares at you and it doesn’t look away? Well it’s not very human, is it? It’s like, humans don’t do that. I’m looking at you, but our eyes kind of dart to the side and things and then- then it’s like, normal. So, I was thinking if a bot could do that maybe it would make them seem, you know, less...”

Charlie had his arms folded over his chest and one finger placed carefully on his lower lip his eyebrows drawn together. He was the very picture of a concerned and interested individual.

“Scary?” He suggested. He didn’t let it show, but he was completely chuffed to have found Graham’s weakness and it was a weakness he could help him with.

“Yeah,” Graham said, shrugging and staring down at his feet.

“No problem.” Charlie said. “They kind of scare me too,” he said. “So, did you work it out? Do you know how to change the code? And do you even have permission to?”

“Can you believe it?” Graham’s voice came out with a slight chuckle. “You know, I got this internship and it’s like, wow I thought they would have me like, cleaning the garbage bins, but well, you know, I scored like the highest gig of all at the programming school – like in all of Crowley. I mean like I’m number one.”

Charlie was actually starting to like this kid.

It was a pity the kid was going to get in trouble for what Charlie was going to do.

“I never got any programming award,” Charlie said. “You must be pretty good.” And to his surprise, Charlie found he meant it.

“Thanks!” Graham blushed.

Charlie rolled up his sleeves. “So, I think this is going to be a great problem to fix, and you might

want to start with just a small timer on the visual tics so it doesn't have to be directly in response to a conversation the bot is having with the human," Charlie suggested. If he could just get this kid refocused on his own work, Charlie would be able to get into his.

"I might be able to, you know, do it at intervals," Graham nodded. "But I'd need to experimentally time it out naturally. Not now, because we're too aware of it, you know, like right now, if I started looking away every couple of seconds, it would be, you know, forced. But maybe tonight when I'm home with my parents, I should look at a conversation with my mom and dad and see how many times they look away from me and count that interval. If I could program twenty different random intervals and feed the code out across everybody and have it select the interval randomly for each bot and then they won't all be doing exactly the same thing at the same time too." Graham took a breath.

"Yeah, could you imagine Dustin or Warren out there talking to the bots and every five seconds all the bots start shifting their eyes to the upper right-hand corner and seven seconds later they're all shifting their eyes to the lower left-hand corner?" Charlie chuckled at the idea. "Actually, that'd be kind of funny."

Graham laughed, too. "So, what was the problem you came down here to fix?" That were just a couple of buds discussing some coding issues.

Charlie glanced around. The monitors weren't on. Clearly Graham had been focused more on the changes he wanted to make in the bots rather than anything going on in the real world.

"Well-" Charlie started.

"There is no problem we need Charlie to fix," Dustin's voice echoed as the doors slid open and he walked in, his patent shoes making a soft, rhythmic tapping as he moved aside to let two massive ProtectoBots into the room.

"This area is off limits, Charlie," Dustin said. "Everywhere is off-limits to you." He turned to Graham. "You disappoint me, kid."

The bot stepped forward and flanked Charlie, gripping his arms in a way he was sure he would never get free from. In fact, if they gripped any harder he wasn't sure he would ever be able to program again.

"Get him out of here," Dustin said.

Chapter 27

Charlie had no choice but to go with the bots. He might've been a genius programmer, but he was nowhere near anything impressive in terms of martial arts or physicality. The bots were so capable, Dustin hadn't even chosen to join them. He just left them to do their work, which was apparently taking him and Graham down to the nether regions of headquarters into what can only be described as a warren of passages leading to a dark metal cell. Graham was tossed into a cell on a higher level than Charlie. A single red light blinked in the corner as the doors slid shut behind the exiting bots. A pale blue light flickered on in the cell.



Monfils didn't want to do it, but he had to. He opened the case and pulled out the small black disc that fit snugly in the palm of his hand. There was just no way he was going to lose her this easily. Not to an asshole like Warren.

"Jade, may I speak to you a moment?" He said into his comm. He'd already identified her location and placed himself within a few blocks of her.

"I'm busy," Jade said.

Monfils didn't even want to know what she was doing. "I'll meet you at 36b and Theta," he said. "If you're not there in five minutes, I'll come and find you."

She was there. Monfils was so relieved, he could have kissed her. But last time he'd tried that, well, it hadn't gone down so well, so he wasn't about to try it again. Not yet anyway.

Jade looked like crap. He grimaced as he saw the blood on her uniform and the crazed look in her eye. She turned on him and he hit the button in the black disc before he could stop himself. Every Delta had an override button and they were all in his possession. Jade was one of the few Deltas who knew about them. He'd promised Jade he would never use hers. But he had always kept it. It didn't work for long, but hopefully it would work for long enough.

Her eyes rolled back in her head and he grabbed her as she slumped forward.

Monfils slapped her awake as Angelo stepped forward, grabbing his wrist from a second slap. "My good sir, I do not think that is the best way to wake a lady," he stated.

Monfils rolled his eyes. “I don’t know what she sees in you, lard can. Jade! Wake up!”

Jade’s eyes opened. “What is going on...?”

“Warren has done something to the code. Not just your code, but every Delta’s code.”

Jade pulled herself away from Monfils. “No,” she murmured with horror as she looked down at her blood-stained uniform. “I don’t remember anything.”

“Warren has all the Deltas under his control,” Monfils said. “We don’t have much time. You’ll be back under his control as soon as the spike wears off. We have about ninety seconds.”

“Charlie...” Jade murmured.

“Warren has him, too.” Monfils said.

Jade blinked as she tried to compute the problem and come up with a solution. “Angelo,” she finally said, “protect Charlie Richards. Take him to the rebel base in Holbrook.”

“Why, the rebels will try to destroy me on sight,” Angelo said politely. “That’s not a very sensible plan.”

“Surrender to them, you big red dufus,” Jade said. “And get out to Holbrook. Maverick and Charlie can help me. They can help all of us.”

Monfils nodded and Angelo bowed as darkness settled over Jade’s eyes and the disease of Dustin’s code returned.



Charlie wasn’t sure how long he’d been in the cell. The pale blue light never changed. The blinking red light never changed, nobody ever came, but when his stomach growled he realized he must’ve been in here for quite a while. Who knows what was going on up above. Were hybrids killing everyone? No one was going to have time to take care of Charlie or decide what to do with him. In fact, they might even just leave him here. Maybe this was his coffin and he just didn’t realize it yet. Surely, they couldn’t just let a time-travelling celebrity starve to death. Could they? This couldn’t be the end of his epic journey through time and his history of creating the hybrid species, the link between man and machine. But as the hours dragged on and Charlie’s stomach growled longer and harder he realized it might very well be the case.

A slight whirring sound woke him from the twilight slumber. He sat up and looked up at the camera in the corner. The little red light was gone. If anybody had been watching, they couldn’t do it now. He heard another noise. He had no idea where it was coming from, until finally a slight metal shaving floated down from above him and brushed against his forehead. He looked up as more metal shavings fell. Someone or something was drilling through the ceiling above him. And quickly. Charlie stepped aside as an avalanche of metal shavings came down. There was no place to hide, whoever was trying to get into his cell was coming in. Charlie didn’t have too many friends, not in this time. Well, in any time really, so he had no idea what was about to come through.

“I thought you might like a sandwich, Mr. Richards.”

It was probably the last thing Charlie expected to hear. When the metallic red arm descended through the hole and presented him with the most perfect pastrami sandwich Charlie had ever seen in his entire life.

“Angelo!” Charlie leapt forward and grabbed the pastrami sandwich. He took four big bites before even bothering to look up. By that time Angelo had managed to make the hole in the ceiling larger and was waving Charlie over.

“Come stand here.” Angelo pointed at the space directly beneath the hole.

Charlie did exactly as he was told; he felt the metal grip on the back of his shirt and he was instantly lifted into the tight metal crawl space in between split levels of headquarters.

“How the hell did you get a sandwich in here?” Charlie asked.

“I’m equipped with a lunch container,” Angelo said. “I am well aware humans get hungry. They eat so much, you would never believe it.”

Charlie could, in fact, believe it.

“Now we’re going to have to shimmy down this path until we get to the outlet,” Angelo said.

“Shimmy?” Charlie said. It was the last thing he ever expected to hear a 24th century robot say or do.

The lights on each one of Angelo’s shoulders created a pale pink glow in the cramped space and wiggled as he moved his shoulders.

“Where the hell did you learn to shimmy?” Charlie asked.

“Why, you are speaking to Crowley’s very own five-time Bot Salsa Champion,” he said with what Charlie was pretty sure was a hint of pride.

“Well I sure as hell wasn’t,” Charlie said as he reached forward and began dragging his ass after the perfect robot.



The Massacre in the Pavilion, as it would come to be known, was, not surprisingly, a massacre. Hybrids leaped, dodged and danced through the rebels, all while firing at the panic-filled rebel human alliance.

“Tal!” Zeke shrieked at Tallahassee. They were hiding around the corner of a brownstone home at the edge of Trenchtown. “What are we going to do, Tal?”

“We’ve been in tighter spots than this, Zeke. We will be fine.” Tallahassee did his best to reassure Zeke, but he wasn’t so sure himself. Things were bad. He peaked around the corner to look back the battlefield. Scores of rebels were being cornered and slaughtered. His brothers. He wanted to run out there and save them. But they were vastly outnumbered and weren’t prepared for a war.

One of his Allegiance brothers, kid named Milan, was cornered by tall hybrid. He shot

backwards as he ran away, but the hybrid was too fast. Tallahassee took aim, fired a HEL. It was a long shot, at two hundred meters, but it found its intended target. “Oh, hell yeah!” Tallahassee yelled.

“You get one, Tal?” Zeke let out a nervous chuckle.

“Damn right I did.” Tallahassee turned back to Zeke and gave a thumbs-up. “See, I told you we’d be fine.”

Tallahassee turned back around the corner to view the scene. He scanned the crowd and then he saw her. Their eyes locked. Jadyn of Crowley’s gaze bore into his soul. The disease had washed back over her and she had returned to the battle. Slowly and methodically she walked through the battlefield, directly towards them. In her hand the electromagnetic whip blazed.

“Shit!” Tallahassee cried as he hid back behind the corner and slammed into the brownstone. His breaths were deep and labored.

“Tal?” Zeke, sensing Tallahassee’s panic, let it seep into his voice as well. “What is it, Tal?”

Tallahassee didn’t answer. He just needed to think. There was always a way out. He just had to think. And he had about fifteen seconds to do it.

“Come now!” came the thick, unmistakable accent of Gunk.

Zeke and Tallahassee turned to see a welcomed sight. Gunk sat behind the controls of his Sanitation Truck at the far end of Trenchtown.

“Gunk!” Zeke yelled exultantly.

They ran.

The sanitation incinerator hovered closer.

And around the corner came Jade, her eyes glazed over in a foggy sickness. She snapped her electromagnetic whip against the side of the building and brick and mortar crumbled to the crowd. She sprinted after Tallahassee and Zeke. But they had a good head start.

Tallahassee and Zeke reached the sanitation hovercraft and leaped into the side bay door. Zeke let out a long, relieved sigh. “Damn that was close!”

Before they could get the door closed, a flash of white lit up the inside of the craft. Zeke screamed in pain as a white electromagnetic tail of a whip latched around his ankle. It burned deeply into his skin, all the way down to the tendons in mere seconds.

Tallahassee ripped off his metal shin guard and crashed it down hard on the white beams. They melted the front plate, but contact was broken. The white beam slithered away as Tallahassee slammed the door shut. Zeke rolled around in pain as the sanitation incinerator flew away from the battlefield. A battlefield where they lost so many of their brothers and sisters today.



“God dammit, Angelo!” Charlie exclaimed as he pressed against the metal wall the killer red bot had just slipped through. “Help me get out of this thing!”

A moment earlier Angelo had lifted the metal and slipped outside. Charlie had expected him to lift the metal wall and help him out, but the bot hadn't done anything. Charlie pushed all his weight against the wall. A small sliver of an opening cracked in the dark metal that scraped against his skin as he tumbled out of the crawl space and to the ground below.

And it was immediately apparent why Angelo had been no help whatsoever. Charlie realized why the minute he fell unceremoniously through the tiniest crack between the metal plate in the building.

Angelo was shockingly sitting on the ground with three rebels standing around him like he was the trophy of a prize hunt. Like they bagged a coon or something.

They didn't even have their weapons pointed at the killer red robot, who was just sitting there staring up at Charlie as if this was his plan all along.

The rebels, on the other hand, were completely startled by Charlie slipping out of the building and immediately raised their weapons, the crisp clicking of metal and the high-pitched sound of the HEL charging filled the air.

"What the hell are you doing?" Charlie waved his arms with exasperation at Angelo.

"It appears," Angelo said, "I'm resting." He seemed not in the least bit bothered by this circumstance.

"Attack them!" Charlie exclaimed. "They're holding guns on me."

"Those are not guns," Angelo explained. "They are in fact high-powered Gx548 laser centric HEL fusion adjusters. When they're fully charged and the energy is expelled, it slips into your body through the space in your cells, not harming the outside shell in the slightest, but when it gets inside it solidifies and creates a huge chunk of sother crystal inside your body, which immediately starts to reach out and absorb all the other parts of your body until you become--"

"Dead," Tallahassee finished. His eyes squinted over at Charlie. "Your robot always this chatty?"

"He's not my robot," Charlie said. "And yes, he is chatty. But when his owner finds him and whatever you've done to him... What have you done to him?"

Angelo held up his hands. They were bound together but each wrist had a partial metal ring on it that looked something like a horseshoe with large flat discs on either side. They seemed to be pumping some sort of an energy through his wrists. "They are hyperspatial defractor cuffs," Angelo said. "Quite remarkable really, don't you think?"

"I might think so if I knew what the hell they were," Charlie said.

Zeke stepped forward. "It short circuits every attack command at the source."

"Great," Charlie said.

"And what it means for you," Tallahassee added, "is that you should really raise your hands in the air."

Charlie slowly did as he was told, turning to face his three captors. His eyes nearly fell out of his head as he finally noticed the lanky fluorescent being that stood casually with the other two rebels. "What the hell is that?" he exclaimed.

“My people and my name is unpronounceable in any language on this planet,” Gunk said.

“An alien?” Charlie stated the obvious.

“I am a visitor to this fine place,” Gunk nodded, the gills on the side of his neck letting out a fine trill.

“A visitor who can’t get home,” Tallahassee said.

“You can call him Gunk,” Zeke interjected.

Charlie just shook his head. Mind overload. “Let me get this straight, you three guys with powerful weapons have rendered Angelo useless and you’re worried about me doing what? Scratching my butt? I don’t have any weapons.”

“Angelo?” Zeke drawled.

“Well, god damn,” Tallahassee slowly walked around the massive red bot. “I thought he looked familiar. Must have been in too much shock, I didn’t realize.”

Charlie frowned. “You guys know each other?”

“Everyone knows the most famous Crowley bot,” Gunk said.

“Well, we’ve got ourselves a winner,” Tallahassee grinned. “We best get him home.” He nodded towards Charlie and spoke to Zeke. “Pat him down.”

Zeke rolled his eyes. “Why do I get all the crap jobs?”

Charlie stood as Zeke ran his hands over his shirt and down his legs and checked his boots. They listen to the sound of the battle in the distance, but it was getting louder and closer.

“Don’t you think we ought to be moving?” he asked. “I don’t know about you guys, but the last time I saw hybrids they were killing humans.”

“He has a point,” Angelo said.

“Get up,” Tallahassee motioned towards Angelo, as if he were a bauble on a string instead of a red killing machine, Angelo stood up and fell in line with Charlie.

“Seriously?” Charlie looked up at Angelo. “You can’t do anything? Not a laser? Not a karate chop? Not a little dagger? Nothing?”

“I can serve coffee,” Angelo said with a certain amount of a surety that pissed Charlie off. A lot of good it did him having the world’s deadliest bot by his side when he had been diminished to nothing more than a barista.

“Come on, let’s go.” Zeke muttered. He and Gunk were behind Angelo and Charlie, but they didn’t have to prod them forward. At that moment, a loud explosion blew something up two streets away. Everyone took off running, following Tallahassee as he stooped low and headed down the alley like a rat looking for food.



Blake Crowley was not sure what to think. He rolled around two metallic spheres in his hand as he

watched the bank of monitors in his office. On the screens, he scanned the aftermath of the battlefield. On one hand, the Lowsmith problem appeared to have been dealt with. That was good, because that was an annoying problem he didn't need in his life. But how it had happened was troubling. He had not given the order for the attack. More troubling; Robin. Robin had just given him a lecture on the sanctity of life, and now she was opening fire on humans? It didn't add up.

"Excuse me sir," Blake's hologram assistant popped up. "Warren Relic is here to see you."

Blake nodded. In came Warren, calm and emotionless as always. But Blake had been around him enough to read hints in his demeanor. Warren was in high spirits. Blake rolled the spheres around and around in his hand. "Is the fighting over?"

Warren gave a shrug of his left shoulder. "Practically. Just a few skirmishes here and there."

"Did we kill all of the Lowsmiths?"

"Not all. A few dozen escaped into the desert mountains." Warren hit a button and out popped a fresh glass onto the desk. The wondrous liquid that was Corsica flowed into the glass. "But I'm not worried about it. Their infrastructure will be decimated." Warren picked up the glass of Corsica. He tipped it to Blake. "To stopping a revolution." Warren took a small, measured sip.

Blake looked at Warren a long time, but eventually took his glass, tipped to Warren, and took a big sip. "Did you order the Deltas to attack?"

"Well, that's complicated. The important thing is the end result is what we wanted."

"Don't play that way with me, Warren."

"There had been some coding issues with the Deltas. Something Charlie Richards did to them. Made them more aggressive than usual. But it's nothing we haven't been able to handle. Dustin has been reprogramming them so we are in control."

"Are they sick again?"

"No, not at all. In fact, he assures me they will be back to normal with the next few days. In the meantime, we had a lucky side effect where they took care of a problem for us."

Blake leaned back in his chair. Warren had been wanting to kill the Lowsmiths all along. He didn't trust him one bit. But if he called him out now it would be a mistake. Whatever happened to the hybrids, they were a deadly bunch. "This isn't good, Warren."

"It's ok. It's all taken care of. The most important thing now is we can go back to doing what we do best, making money. You've been doing this a long time, Blake. You need to relax, and enjoy what you've build. This city. This empire. Your fortune. You don't have to interfere with anything, just enjoy what you have created."

Blake took a long sip of Corsica. What was Warren implying, not interfering? Blake took another sip. "Okay, Warren. What's next?"

Warren smiled.



Charlie was exhausted as they ran through the streets of Crowley, but there was no letting up. They had to get there. It wasn't just the hybrids, there were ProtectoBots out patrolling the streets looking for rebels and finishing off the work at the hybrids started.

Charlie was amazed he wasn't disoriented as they raced to escape the city. He had been looking down at it from the top of a high-rise and had a pretty good feel for the different quadrants. Trenchtown was off to their left about five miles. Crowley headquarters was behind them, which meant...his heart gave a surge of hope...they were headed towards the quadrant that housed the DarkM'attr machine. He bit his inner cheek trying to figure out how he was going to escape the rebels and get to the machine. This might be his only chance. And he had Angelo with him. Angelo would help him get the thing running again. If only he could get Angelo's help. But the two metal rings around Angelo's wrists had rendered him useless. And with a simple glance Charlie recognized they would be impossible to simply pry off. In fact, they looked like if you touched them they might fry off one of your fingers.

"Hurry up," Tallahassee urged them forward. "We haven't survived this long to lose our asses to some bright red target and some slow ass human."

As much as he desperately wanted to get to the DarkM'attr machine, the truth was he needed Angelo. So, he was going to have to stick this out until he could find a way to get Angelo either away from these guys or figure out how to get those rings off his wrists. Regardless, one thing was apparent as they dodged and dove their way through the shining streets of Crowley: sticking with the rebels was going to be Charlie's best chance of survival. The hybrids were on the attack and if Charlie had any money to bet on it he to say Warren was taking over Crowley.

They slipped through the gate right by the DarkM'attr machine. But Charlie kept his head low and kept running. At least he knew exactly where it was even if the monstrous machine looked dormant, almost like it hadn't been used in years, even though Charlie knew it had been. And, with a bit of luck it would be used pretty quickly again.

The walls of Crowley were massive, but they were breached and Tallahassee knew just the path to take over the rubble to get outside of the city. In moments, they were past the DarkM'attr machine, outside the wall and racing across a dark wilderness. Charlie couldn't make much out, but the ground was hard as they ran and they looped around what looked like a massive structure. On the other side of the hulking black space, hidden in its shadows, was a dark foreboding disc that seemed perched on top of a capsule.

"Get in," Tallahassee said as a door slid open in the side of the capsule. They entered a long metal tube that had no windows and helmets attached to the side of the wall as if it was some sort of freakish hair salon with a row of old lady hair dryers.

Zeke grabbed Charlie, pressed him down in a seat under one of the helmet hair dryers and manacled him to the side of the ship.

"For goodness sake, do you think this is really necessary?" Charlie asked. "It's not like I'm about

to attack any of you. You're probably saving my life."

"You can never be too sure," Tallahassee grumbled, strapping himself into a chair.

"He's right," Zeke said. "Heck, I attacked Gunk just the other night."

"Shut up," Tallahassee said.

"You had every right to," said Gunk. "I had after all beat you soundly in a game you take great pride in."

Note to self, thought Charlie, Zeke is a poor loser.

And then he suddenly realized. "Do you guys know who I am?" he asked. In the 21st century this would've seemed like the most ridiculous and comical thing to say. But here in the 24th century, Charlie was somebody. He was Charlie Richards, the inventor of the code connecting biology and machines. He practically invented the hybrids, except hybrids didn't actually exist in the 21st century, they were a figment of his imagination. But it didn't change the fact that Charlie Richard's today actually invented the code making hybrids possible.

"I am Charlie Richards," he said.

But nobody was listening to him. They were strapping in and preparing for lift off.

"I'm not sure right now is the best time to bring that up," Angelo said.

"Why not?" Charlie asked. "Don't you think they won't keep me locked up if they know who I am?"

"You invented the code that has created the race that is destroying their race," Angelo said. "They might want you locked up. However, this transport is about to take off and I believe it can be quite difficult on the human body. And perhaps you should be—" Angelo's words were cut off by a sudden loud whirring sound that enveloped the vehicle. Charlie realized he was the only human who had not pulled a large metal hood over his head. The rest had and were leaning forward and gripping it tight.

Charlie was not.

The whirring sound grew louder and in a millisecond the vehicle jumped straight up in the air and Charlie's stomach plunged down to the base of his spine and his arms flailed in the air, hitting metal as they grappled to find something to hold him against.

"You should have the hood over your head!" Angelo's voice rang out over the loud whirring sound that seemed to create a vortex inside Charlie's head. The vehicle came to a sudden stop in the air and Charlie's stomach rose rapidly, flying out of his mouth. The pastrami sandwich came hurtling out of his throat and splattered in chunks all over his boots.

Laughter rang out around the transport vehicle as Tallahassee and Zeke pushed their metal helmets back.

"Haven't you ever been in one of these?" Zeke asked. "Every idiot knows you've got to put on the puke hood, or else you puke."

"Even Zeke knows," Gunk said. Clipping his hood back against the metal wall behind him.

"Why?" Charlie gasped the word out, still doubled over trying to regain control of his senses as

the vehicle started to move forward through the air. There were no windows so he was locked in his body trying to figure out which direction it was moving in as it sped through the air.

“The hoods?” Tallahassee asked. “They have droms that go inside your ears.” He twisted his head showing there was something sticking out of it. “They engage when the machine starts up, disengage when we go to land. They balance out our equilibrium and help our bodies to adjust to the speed we’re moving at.”

“How could you not know?” Zeke asked.

“I’m not from around here,” Charlie said, starting to feel like his words were a replay of some bad 70s movie. “I’m Charlie Richards. I’m from the 21st century.”

“Yeah, and I’m Blake Crowley,” Tallahassee growled as he stood up and went to check some gauges on the control panel to the side. “We got slammed,” he muttered as he read the screen.

Charlie was still exceptionally queasy but the emptiness of his stomach made it slightly more tolerable. He raised his head trying to stop the capsule from spinning and his eyes looked on a black screen where green numbers played out in long columns, some bright green and some dim green.

“What is it?” he mumbled. Trying to keep his mind off of his reeling stomach.

“Serial numbers,” Tallahassee said.

Zeke held out his wrist showing a number tattooed on the inside of it the series of numbers and letters.

“You have serial numbers?” Charlie murdered.

“Everyone has a serial number.” Zeke said. “Everyone human.”

All eyes in the transport vessel turned to Charlie.

“I’m human,” Charlie said.

“Where is your serial number?” Zeke asked.

“I don’t have one,” Charlie articulated. “In the 21st century we don’t stamp numbers on people unless we’re going to put them all in a gas chamber.”

“The dark ages,” Zeke muttered.

“What happened?” Charlie asked.

“Huh?” Zeke looked up from cleaning his weapon.

“To the humans. Why do they all have serial numbers?”

“It was during the plague,” Zeke said. “People were dying everywhere and the government started to become afraid they wouldn’t be able to recognize the people or keep track of them, so they gave everybody serial numbers. After that, even when the plague was over, it didn’t seem to be such a bad thing having everybody with serial numbers on them. So now any human born is given a number.”

“But doesn’t that mean the hybrids have serial numbers also?” Charlie asked.

“They do,” Zeke said. “It’s just, when you become part machine, letters are added to the front of your serial number. It’s part of the first procedure: HYB.”

Charlie wondered why he hadn’t noticed before, but there had been a lot going on in the short time

he'd been here. "So, everybody has serial numbers on them?"

"Everyone except for the bots and the Outliers." Zeke nodded.

Charlie knew the bots had a code in the middle of their forehead. But... "What the hell is an Outlier?"

"When the plague hit, it wiped everyone out, mostly," Zeke said. "The survivors started pooling into large cities, hoping there would be resources there to save them. But then the cities started collapsing and it seemed like more people were dying in the cities, so everyone started escaping those and set up small settlements, but it was really too late. The major cities died out. All except for Crowley."

"Crowley is all there is of civilization?" Charlie blinked at Zeke. He knew it was desolate, but could Crowley really be the only city?

"On this side of the Rockies," Zeke nodded.

"Los Angeles? San Francisco? Seattle?" Charlie asked.

"They've been gone for seventy years," Zeke said.

"There's nothing between here and Alaska? Or here and Mexico City? Or here and New York?" Charlie couldn't hide his shocked. It seeped out of every pore of his body as he blinked at Zeke.

"Crowley is incredibly isolated. But there are little pockets of outliers," Zeke shrugged. "Village communities that scrape food out of the earth to survive. But most people go to the comfort of Crowley."

"How did Crowley survive?" Charlie asked, but he thought he might already know the answer.

"Hybrid technology," Zeke said. "Crowley was able to do stuff. He'd been using nanotechnology and neuroscience ever since anyone can remember."

"He's not a hybrid at all?" Charlie said. "I find that really hard to believe. How does the man who glorifies the hybrids not tap into some of those capabilities himself?"

"They say he's working on bigger things," Zeke said. "Like accessing the two-thirds of the human brain nobody ever uses. That's how he was able to build Crowley, using technology he's not willing to share with anyone, he uses it only for himself."

"He accesses the hidden region of the brain?" Charlie asked.

"You're going to have to ask your robot about that," Zeke shrugged. "Only time I've seen Crowley is on a pamphlet and the screen. He was a lot more public before his wife got sick. Heck, there was a while when we all thought he might be dead."

"What about cities on the other side? What still exists? New York?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, New York exists, but we don't know anything about them," Zeke said.

"How they survive? Nothing?"

"We hear that sometimes Crowley sends recon through the Rocky Mountains, but that space is controlled by the Dervish and ain't nobody getting through no-man's land."

Charlie sat back against the metal wall of the transport, feeling it grate against his spine. What

sort of world had Earth become? What sort of place was this? Charlie had been so caught up in being the hero of Crowley, he had never wondered where the city itself fit into the scheme of things.

Chapter 28

The transport landed quickly, swooping down over the yellow and red dirt at the base of a large red mountain. It launched the capsule-like a projectile into a large tunnel that looked like it had been carved by one of the worms from Dune. But in solid rock, not sand.

“Welcome to Holbrook,” Zeke said as Charlie stumbled out of the transport. “Or as we like to call it, Hellbreak.”

Holbrook was a decent distance from Las Vegas and the transport had gotten them there in about fifteen minutes. Insane. This was hundred-year-old machinery. Imagine how fast the 24th century stuff must be able to travel.

The Lowsmiths lived in bunkers. Apparently, this region was too far for Crowley to patrol, but not far enough for a few rebels with fast enough transports to slip in and slip out of the city.

They were greeted in the tunnel by a couple of Allegiance members dressed in their trademark dark brown body suits and carrying HEL fusions came to the electric gates of the cell. They took one look at the large red bot standing next to Charlie and let out a low whistle.

“Big Red,” one muttered.

Charlie glanced at Angelo, but there wasn’t time to ask questions.

“Trekon will see you,” the first guard said.

“Who’s Trekon?” Charlie asked Zeke as he was ushered down a tunnel that lead between the different premises of the Lowsmiths.

The rebel behind him pushed Charlie in the back with the butt of his weapon. “He’s in charge around here, and I suggest you treat him with a little respect.”

He wasn’t about to do anything else. There was nowhere to go even if he did escape. The only place he wanted to go was back to the DarkM’attr machine and get the hell out of this crazy place. Then he could figure out what he could do in the past to stop this horrible future from happening.

When Charlie saw Trekon, he thought he would’ve treated him with respect even if he hadn’t gotten hit in the back with a blunt object. Charlie frowned at the gray-haired man as he walked up. The man looked almost kindly.

But he was perfunctory. “Maverick, have you tested them?”

A short round man stepped forward from the shadows of the cavern. He had thick glasses and

different contraptions and digital devices strapped to various parts of his body. He looked like he been rushing to get there and had only just stepped into the room. He wiped the sweat off his top lip as he stepped forward, pulling a device off of his upper left arm and aiming it directly at Charlie's face.

Charlie ducked immediately. "What the hell?"

"Identity device," Maverick said, looking fondly at the tool in his hand. "You can relax, it's not gonna hurt. You know we are not barbaric like they are in Crowley. There they put all those numbers on people but there are so many better ways to identify people and-"

"Stand up for identification," one of the guards said, yanking at Charlie's arm.

Trekon raised a hand towards the guard to get him to stand down. "He has been in Crowley, he may not be used to our ways here. The identification device tests the neuron map of your brain to create identification for you."

Charlie looked warily at the machine. "I don't get it. Like fingerprinting?"

Maverick laughed. "Fingerprinting only works when you have a library of fingerprints to compare it to. No, no, no, this is much more advanced technology and it has to do with your real experiences. Fingerprints must be mapped to a library, much like serial numbers."

"We invest everything we have in technology," Trekon said. "And we have worked to bring some of the greatest minds of our times into the Human Allegiance."

"That's what they call themselves," Angelo leaned over and whispered to Charlie.

"The beam from this device is going to go through your eyes and do a quick neural map of your brain. All the information will be fed through the device and into the machine." He pointed to a screen glowing pale green that Charlie hadn't noticed in the time he'd been in the room.

"Using the map, it will reconstruct your life and tell us exactly who you are. This uses your cellular information to tell us when and where you were born and everything that has happened to you from birth up until this moment. This can access memories you don't even know you have and deliver to us a complete physical and psychological profile of your existence."

"You've got to be shitting me," Charlie said. And suddenly he wished he'd done some more exciting things in his life because he was suddenly terrified that what was going to come up on the screen was him sitting at the bar drinking beer.

"I don't want to do it. I told you, I'm Charlie Richards, and-"

A snicker went up through the room, but it was mainly from the guards. Maverick and Trekon simply looked at Charlie.

"We shall see," Trekon said. "Run the test."

"Hold his head," Maverick said.

Charlie warily eyed the guards who grabbed his shoulders, each one placing a hand on either side of his head.

"I thought you said this wasn't going to hurt," he said to Maverick.

“It doesn’t, but sometimes the memories it draws out have an impact on you and can cause you to jerk a little bit. Now, they’re also going to need to hold your eyes open. Just one.” He nodded towards the guards as both reached towards his eyes.

“The right one, let’s just have the right one.”

Charlie immediately realized resisting the invasion of his brain was going to be futile, but he struggled anyway, whipping his head right and left, until he heard the cool tones of Trekon fill the cavern.

“Charlie, we’re going to do this regardless of whether you want us to or not. The device works whether you are awake or in a coma, whether you are alive or-” he paused to make sure everybody in the room was listening, “-dead.”

“You should’ve killed him before you got on the transport,” one of the guards said to Zeke.

“Shut up,” Zeke grumbled.

“We do not waste human life if we feel we can win them over,” Trekon said from the front of the room. “The more allegiance we have, the better. We are particularly interested in you because you say you are Charlie Richards. If you, by some bizarre chance, do happen to be Charlie Richards, this is the way we are going to discover the truth.”

“I just got a public award!” Charlie exclaimed. “I’m an Order of the Apothecary!”

“Accolade,” Angelo corrected.

“Right,” Charlie said.

“Just because Blake Crowley says you are Charlie Richards and holds some big pompous ceremony proclaiming such, well, it doesn’t mean it’s true,” Trekon said. “If you do not submit to this test then we will assume you are not interested in becoming an Allegiant, and then we will have no further use for you. Is my meaning clear?”

Shit, Charlie thought, no wonder this guy leads the rebels. His tone was so mesmerizing that Charlie had relaxed and just stood there like an idiot, listening. But Trekon had made his point perfectly clear: submit or die.

“What about him?” Charlie deflected the attention towards Angelo. “Why don’t you run it on him? You should be able to tap into his neural brain and access the same type of information.”

Everyone in the room looked at Angelo for a minute and a slow smile slid across Trekon’s face.

“There is not a human, hybrid, or bot this side of the Dervish who doesn’t know who Angelo is.”

Charlie frowned and for a moment, it looked like Angelo actually swelled with a little bit of pride.

“You’re famous?” Charlie asked.

“He’s the only one like him,” Maverick said, his eyes almost gleaming with anticipation and excitement. “I’m going to have so much fun studying him.”

“But not before we study you a bit,” Trekon brought his hand forward to let Maverick know it was time to take care of business.

Judging by the facts, Angelo was disempowered and they were outnumbered and at the center of the rebel stronghold in the middle of nowhere with no other city but Crowley within a 3,000-mile radius, Charlie weighed his options and decided to stand still and open his eyes. Maybe, just maybe, the damn thing would work, they would find out he really was Charlie Richards, and it would buy him some level of appreciation that up until now, they didn't seem to have. He was just hoping the screen didn't show too much about the pathetic life he had been leading back in the 21st century.

Chapter 29

Ten-year-old Charlie Richards of Topeka, Kansas sat in the sunroom of his childhood home. He was only vaguely aware he was in a memory, that he was currently Past Charlie. Present Charlie existed but he wasn't concerned with him at the moment. What he was concerned about was the project that lay before him.

His Nintendo (NES) sat with its top off as he carefully installed a Zotac motherboard and RAM card.

“Is this an early computer box?” came a deep voice above Charlie.

Charlie looked up to see a futuristic man he didn't know was named Trekon. If ten-year-old Charlie was surprised he didn't show it. He simply returned to his work. “It's a Nintendo,” Charlie said. “Everyone knows Nintendo. It's Nintendo.”

“Eh,” Trekon shrugged. “Some of the guys are into this retro stuff, not me. This doesn't prove you are who you are. Maybe you're into that stuff too.”

“Yeah, well do you have Mountain Dew?” Charlie took a big swig of Dew from his cup.

“What are you doing, anyway?”

“My Nintendo just plays Nintendo games,” Charlie said as he inserted the motherboard. “My Atari just plays Atari games. My Sega just plays Sega games. My Nintendo just plays Nintendo games. Inconceivable. But a Linux-based emulator should solve that problem.”

“So, you were always quite the fanster?”

Charlie looked at him blankly. “What's a fanster?”

“A boffing,” Trekon said to no response. “Geek?”

“Ah!” Charlie said in recognition. “If wanting to play Sonic the Hedgehog on my Nintendo is geeky, then I guess I am.”

Trekon blinked at that.

The air rippled and the scene changed. Charlie was now a mid-30's Charlie in a waiting room of a doctor's office with his sister, Tabitha, and her kids Alexa and Alex. Tabitha was on the phone yelling at some poor soul. Alexa punched away on her phone. And Alex sat alone on the other side of the room. Charlie crossed over and took a seat next to him.

“Tell me about your robot.”

Alex just stared down at the floor, worrying away on his bottom lip. Finally, he mumbled out, “Taborlin.”

“Yes, Taborlin. I knew that.”

Alex was quiet a long time.

Trekon entered the vision of the memory and took a seat across from them.

Alex fidgeted and at last went on. “I’m going to have him try Mount Doom.”

“Wow!” Charlie said with honest excitement. This memory was from a few months ago, at least in the 21st century. A few months before he met a woman at a bar who dragged him into a futuristic mess.

“Is grandpa going to be okay?” Alex asked softly without looking up.

Charlie didn’t answer. The air rippled, and the memory dissipated away, back to the future.

“Are you all right Charlie?” Angelo leaned over and lifted Charlie off the ground.

A groan escaped Charlie’s lips, his head was ringing with pain. He couldn’t believe, as he stared around the curious faces looking at him. It had just been a memory. It was so deep and so real and so visceral, like everything he had ever experienced was still there in his brain, and if he could just access it he could touch it and taste it and feel it. It wasn’t a memory that had slipped away and been lost in time, it was there, but in the normal scheme of his daily life, he had no access to it. But now it was raw and present and burning against his skin.

And he had just fainted in a room full of bad-ass rebel allegiants.

Shit.

They were all staring at him.

Trekon’s voice, curious and soothing, filled the cavern. “So, you really are Charlie Richards.”

Charlie’s eyes glanced at the screen. And blazing there for everybody in the cavern to see, more pictures of his mother, of his nephew, of his sister, of his friends, of the pub, smiles and laughter and moments captured in a million tiny fragments, pulled out of his brain and plastered in 3-D up on the wall.

Charlie had never felt so exposed in his entire life.

“Remarkable,” Maverick ran his fingers along the edge of his glasses rapidly, as if it would help him compute the reality that Charlie had stepped out of the pages of history and now stood in front of them. “And... And incredibly dangerous. I mean... You do realize don’t you–” His wide eyes magnified by the thick glasses moved from Charlie to Trekon.

“What the hell did you do to the hybrids?” Tallahassee stepped in front of Charlie and punched him in the gut with a resounding force that knocked the already sterile wind out of Charlie.

Angelo caught Charlie as he slumped forward. “Nothing,” Charlie gasped.

“Stop,” Trekon said.

“He’s a god damn liar,” Tallahassee pulled back his arm to blast Charlie again. “I was there. I saw them die. All of them.” He let fly his arm, but Gunk caught it, stopping Tallahassee from landing

the punch that might have just knocked Charlie out.

“I was there, too,” Zeke growled.

Trekon’s voice came down from the podium. “We lost twenty good men and women today. Punching Charlie Richards isn’t going to solve anything.”

“The hybrids turned on us,” Tallahassee said to the room. “Exactly like we’ve feared all along they would or could.”

“All of them?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Gunk said. “It was the Deltas. The ones with the delta insignia on their necks.”

“The dumbasses,” muttered Tallahassee.

“They’re not dumbasses,” Charlie said.

“I’m going to kill them all,” Tallahassee said, spitting on the ground for effect.

“No,” Charlie pulled himself upright and glared at Tallahassee. “No, you’re not. These people are some of the finest around. They just haven’t been as lucky as you to be healthy and intact, so they’ve elongated their lives with hardware and software.”

“They are machines,” Tallahassee said. “I saw it in their eyes.”

Zeke nodded in agreement. “He’s right. Something came over them.”

“They are not machines. They’re people with software in them,” Charlie insisted. “They have feelings.”

“They didn’t have too many feelings when they were gunning us down.” Tallahassee stepped forward and glared into Charlie’s eyes. “What did you do to them?”

Charlie stepped back, focusing on Trekon. “I didn’t do anything. But someone did.”

“You’re trying to tell me it’s some coincidence Crowley drags your ass out of the dark ages and brings you here, and all of a sudden all the hybrids go from dying to killing machines?” Tallahassee asked.

“It does seem like the two incidences would be connected,” Trekon nodded.

“They are!” Charlie exclaimed as Tallahassee bristled. “But I didn’t write that code! They were updated with two batches of code. One that I did and one that someone else did. The code I did cured them of the disease. The other code turned them into controlled killers!”

“He’s lying!” Tallahassee yelled as Gunk restrained him.

“Silence,” Trekon’s voice was low but all eyes of the Lowsmiths in the room swung from Charlie to Trekon. “We can validate this truth, but so far he has not lied.”

“Damn convenient if you ask me,” Tallahassee said.

“They needed me to fix the hybrids,” Charlie said. “That’s all.”

“You realize there’s no way they would let you live,” Trekon said, and then, as if he could see into Charlie’s heart and understand his deepest desires, he added, “Or let you return to your own time.”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah. That’s why I was trying to get out of there when your people were killed.

I had no idea that was going to happen.”



Monfils glanced over his shoulder. Warren and Dustin were analyzing Delta movements. He had to figure out what was wrong with Jade’s tracking device. He had tried to switch it off remotely but it wouldn’t work. Something was jammed.

Damn their new code.

And where the hell was Blake? Monfils wondered. Okay, so his wife was a crazy Delta, that was no reason to just abandon the rest of them. Was he just going to let Warren get away with whatever he wanted to do? Was he going to lose Crowley? Monfils’ stomach buckled. How could this be happening? How could he have lost the Deltas? And to an asshole like Dustin, too.

Monfils slammed his fingers into the CodeSwarm spinning in front of him. He didn’t need much effort to find Jade’s tracking code, he had it memorized. Had had it memorized for years. At first, he’d pretended it was all about knowing where the prime player on his team was, but this idea only lasted so long. After hours, he would sit and look at her numbers just to see if she was at her parents or in her apartment. That’s when he realized he needed to try his luck with her. It hadn’t been hard to arrange some time alone, he’d invited her to the shooting range. She’d seemed to like that, especially because she could beat him hands down. From there he’d enticed her to grab a bite to eat and, a couple of weeks later, he’d managed to get her into his bed.

But it had always felt like she was doing him a favor.

Which, frankly, really pissed him off. He was Monfils. Any woman, hybrid or not, would be happy with his attentions. Jade, well, she was a bit different. She was dynamic and sexy and happy enough to be in his bed, but she definitely wasn’t falling for him in any meaningful way. They laughed together. Did target practice together. Had sex together. But then, well, she was done and she’d take off. They weren’t really together.

But he couldn’t get her out of his head. She made him crazy. To pressure her, though, or to let him know how obsessed he was with her, there’d be no chance.

When she’d called it off, whatever ‘it’ was, he’d gone insane. His staring at her numbers tracking her had felt like it was something a lot more stalkerish than it should be. Totally more stalkerish.

But now, at Command Central, he was going to turn that capability off completely and irrevocably. In fact, maybe that was just what he should have done a long time ago for his own sake.

He closed his eyes. All he needed to do was pull the code. His heart wrenched. He’d never know where she was again. Not unless she told him, which, based on the fact that she was currently insane, might never happen.

“Where the hell is Jade, anyway?” Warren asked Dustin.

Monfils’ eyes opened wide. With a quick glance towards them he turned resolutely to the

CodeSwarm and ripped out the contents of Jade's tracker. He might not know where she was at any given time, but neither would those assholes.

Chapter 30

“Where’s the programmer?” Jade’s voice rang crisp and clear through the cathedral-like cavern as she stepped out of the tunnel and into the rocky red space where they were all standing. Her eyes were demonic red, and blood from the Pavilion was still splashed thick and heavy across her black uniform.

“Jade,” Angelo said, and you could almost hear the grin in his robotic voice. “It’s so lovely to see you.”

Jade raised her gun and shot the guard holding Charlie. Shot him dead.

“Jade, no!” Charlie shouted, jerking away and watching as the man hit the ground.

Lowsmiths dove in every direction behind pews as they took aim. Two ran to Trekon and ushered him out a back door. Maverick disappeared behind a glowing green protective field that suddenly appeared around them.

“I will have Charlie Richards.” Jade’s voice barely sounded her own. Her DC15s glowing blue and pointed directly at Charlie’s forehead. “You betrayed me.”

“No.” Angelo stepped between Charlie and Jade. Lowsmiths began firing at Jade. She jumped up, flipping in the air, aiming her gun precisely at each of the rebels in turn as she began pulling the trigger. But this wasn’t the first time they’d been fired at. Despite a couple of nicks from the HELs, most ducked low. They didn’t call them Lowsmiths for nothing.

“I would recommend you clear the room of humans,” Angelo directed his words at Maverick.

“Right, so you three can take off back to Crowley,” Maverick yelled, the green force field of green dimming just enough for him to see out.

“It’s more because she’s going to kill everyone, I think,” Charlie pointed out. Jade moved so quickly the naked human eye couldn’t track her.

But Angelo wasn’t human. He grabbed Charlie, whipped him back from her onslaught and plowed through Maverick’s protective energy shield.

Maverick whimpered. “She’s going to kill us all just to get him,” he murmured.

Charlie was pretty sure Maverick was right. Whatever was happening inside Jade’s programming was malicious and deadly. Unless they did something quick, no one was getting out of here alive. Anyone exposed in the room was subject to death.

“Free Angelo!” Charlie yelled at Maverick. “He’s the only one able to stop her. Don’t you see, he’s our only hope.”

“But- but then I won’t be able to study him,” Maverick said, crestfallen.

“You won’t be able to study him if you’re dead either,” Charlie said, ducking low as a laser bolt fired right over the top of his head. He could smell the singed hair as the blast erupted against the wall.

“But what if he turns on us?” Maverick asked.

“It can’t be any worse than the problem we’ve got right now,” Charlie insisted, huddling behind Angelo.

Jade was exchanging fire with the Lowsmiths, but quickly working her way through them and towards where Charlie and Angelo were hiding.

“I won’t turn on you,” Angelo said. “I am programmed to protect Charlie.”

“Really?” Charlie’s eyes opened wide.

“Why yes,” Angelo nodded. “My good lady Jade requested this of me. She said, and I quote, kill me if you have to, but don’t let anything happen to Charlie.”

“Wow.” Charlie let out a low whistle. “Do you think she likes me?”

Lasers blasted the walls of the chapel as Lowsmiths began to retreat.

“Perhaps this isn’t the most opportune time to discuss matters of the heart,” Angelo suggested.

Jade turned on them. The room was empty of all others.

“Angelo, you’re supposed to be loyal to me,” Jade hissed.

“Why indeed I am,” Angelo said. “Your primary directive is to obtain and protect Charlie Richards.”

“Not anymore it isn’t,” Jade said, her eyes glowing red as she fired towards the protective field, which blinked and stuttered against her onslaught.

“Release the cuffs!” Charlie yelled at Maverick. “This guy just saved me from the freaking basement dungeon of Crowley.”

“It really would be in everyone’s best interest if you allow me to disable Jade,” Angelo nodded in agreement. “I will submit to whatever testing you desire.”

Jade slammed shots towards the force field, which gave a dying flash before disappearing. Lasers shot glaring blue through the enclosed space.

“I can fix her!” Charlie screamed. “Let him stop her.”

Maverick’s hands shook as he reached into one of the many pockets of his lab coat. He brought out something that looked a lot like a ballpoint pen and aimed it directly at Angelo. He pressed a trigger on the side and a laser shot out and into the whirring center of the cuffs. They made a quick high pitch squeal and then the cuffs’ energy went black and they fell harmlessly to the floor.

“Thank you, my dear sir,” Angelo gave a swift nod to Maverick, before he sprang up and walked fearlessly towards Jade, his hand outstretched towards her.

“I am free Jade. Stand down,” he said. “I do not want to hurt you.”

Jade’s eyes blinked dark red and confused. “You can’t hurt me. Unless- unless they reprogrammed you.”

“My task is to protect Charlie Richards,” Angelo said. “And you, Jady of Crowley, are his biggest threat.”

Jade’s eyes narrowed. The lone Lowsmith still in the chapel ducked up from behind a pew. Jade spun and shot him in the knee. He fell screaming to the floor.

“Jade, stop,” Angelo said.

“They are the human rebels.” Jade’s voice was monotone. “My task is to eradicate them.”

“You are confused,” Angelo said.

Jade frowned at him and turned her guns on Angelo. “They have reprogrammed you,” she said.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Angelo said, the plates of his arms slowly rising and guns coming out of his biceps.

“Don’t you dare,” Jade said and she fired directly into the heart of Angelo.

Angelo was the world’s deadliest robot. He could not return fire without considerable damage to Jade. He ducked and rolled to the side, working closer to try to engage her in hand-to-hand combat. Suddenly, Jade realized the predicament she was in. Being the lone warrior never concerned her. If it was just her against humans or even her against a hybrid or a few bots, she would gladly take the fight on her own. But a battle against Angelo? It was unfathomable.

Still, she had to do it.

“I can fix you,” she said, but she wasn’t stupid.

She moved behind the cover of a pew as she fired at the weakest point of Angelo’s metal, the joints. Jade was trying to destroy the wires connecting his legs to the rest of his body. The filaments that kept him standing. Her aim was almost on point. Almost, but not quite. It only succeeded in creating a black scar against his calf.

“I am not the one who needs fixing, Jade,” Angelo said, his movements bringing him directly in front of her. He stood in the open, his guns trained directly on her, waiting for the moment when she would rise and take another shot at him.

The only question remaining was who was the better shot?

Jade or Angelo?

It happened quickly. So quickly, the two humans in the room almost didn’t see it.

Jade flicked her wrist above her hiding space and took a shot at Angelo before ducking down.

Angelo fired also, slamming the pew and the wall behind Jade.

But only one hit was apparent.

Jade’s.

Angelo fell to the ground, the wires in his legs severed. Charlie gasped as the metal clanging of Angelo’s falling body echoed on the cavern walls.

“No.” Charlie’s voice caught in his throat as he waited for Jade to rise from behind the pew like a vengeful demon to kill him.

But nothing happened.

The room sat in silence until a single voice rose from the ground to fill the chamber.

“She’s a damn fine shot, don’t you think, Charlie?”

A raspy gasp came out of Charlie’s mouth. “Angelo?” He wanted to run to the bot and embrace him, but didn’t dare move.

“She is stunned,” Angelo’s voice carried like a victory cry, at least, that’s how Charlie heard it. He rushed forward.

“But is she okay?” he asked.

“Yes.” Angelo said. “You have approximately ninety seconds to secure her.”

“Give me something!” Charlie yelled.

Maverick produced another set of cuffs as he and Charlie hastened to Jade’s side.

“Will they hurt her?” Charlie asked as he turned Jade’s limp body over and pulled her wrists carefully together. Her skin was so soft. How could she be so dangerous?

“These are H-Con cuffs,” Maverick explained. They work specifically for hybrids providing a quantity of the restraining capabilities they need, as well as short-circuiting some level of their programming.”

Some call must have gone up to the Lowsmiths because they flooded the room and two grabbed Jade, placing her on a floating plate rather roughly; at least, that’s how Charlie saw it.

“Be careful with her,” he said, pushing at one of the rebels.

“The cuffs will help her sleep,” Maverick said.

Charlie stroked her forehead and adjusted her hands so she at least looked comfortable.

Chapter 31

The city was bursting with wonderful, sweet, melodic chaos. Warren Relic, soon to be most powerful man in Crowley (he would decide a bit later what he was going to rename the city) stared out the main control room's vast windows; over oceans of armies, both hybrid and bot, who listened to his every command. The outskirts of town, where Trenchtown once bred human disease, was now just smoke and ashes.

He smiled. His work was good.

Standing beside Warren was his ProtectoBot, Genesis II, programmed to be emotionless. Had he been programmed differently, he would have felt quite proud of his owner. Warren was sure of that.

"Approaching" Genesis II said in a low mechanical voice.

It was Dustin, impeccably dressed like the Warren-in-training he was.

Warren nodded at the slick CTO. "Things are coming along nicely." His words were drenched in smugness, like an artist prideful in their craft.

"Yes, it is, sir." Dustin straightened his suit, which didn't actually need any more straightening. "I mean, if civil war could be considered a nice-"

"There is nothing civil about the rebels," Warren's words cut him off as he stood silhouetted against the giant Death Star-esque windows.

"I still don't understand though, this is the city of Crowley. It was founded by Crowley. Wouldn't he be able to stop any sort of takeover-"

"Blake Crowley has a sick wife to take care of," Warren interrupted. "One who is probably trying to kill him right now." Warren gave a textbook movie villain laugh. Not really, it wasn't as loud and as head throwing back as that, but it did the trick.

Dustin eyed the screens. Around the city, hybrids lurked looking for human prey. This was the code he had installed in hybrids everywhere, and it was vicious. His hands were figuratively coated in blood. There was a twinge of regret, but it was small and remote. He was a Gamma hybrid, protected from the corruption he'd installed in the Deltas. He was safe, and just one glance at Warren's nice suit and his own nice suit... well, the regret faded quickly. He was a hybrid who would ultimately live hundreds of years. He was also about a hair away from being the second most powerful man in Crowley, probably in the top one hundred worldwide.

“Why don’t we just...take care of him now.” Dustin eyes flicked to the giant black bot lurking next to Warren. “Genesis could rip Blake into forty-eight pieces without breaking a drop of sweat.”

Warren was aghast. “This is a civil, corporate takeover, Dustin! Where are your manners?” Warren’s finger tapped his temple and his eyes glossed over with an incoming message.

“I’ve been called to the principal’s office,” he smirked when the message completed. “Time to finish what I’ve started.” Without another word, Warren, with Gemini II flanking him, swept by Dustin and headed to Blake’s office.

Chapter 32

What the hell was this made of?
“Bonded quartz titanium,” Angelo’s voice carried loudly in the long corridor. Charlie let his fingers drop off the wall.

“What is that?” He asked.

“The strongest material in the known world, at least a hundred years ago it was, before opalum,” Angelo said.

“It’s still pretty damn good,” Zeke said. “If anything happens to this mountain, nothing’s going to happen to this tunnel. It will still be standing when the mountain comes down. As well as all of the rooms inside. It’s indestructible.”

“Seriously?” Charlie asked. “Indestructible? So, setting a bomb off in here wouldn’t make a scratch?”

“Hell yeah,” Zeke crooned.

“And the rebels built this?” Charlie said as they continued down the corridor.

“Of course not. This was DogStar 368,” Zeke said, as if it was something everybody should know.

“21st century over here,” Charlie said, pointing at himself. “If there is something I’m supposed to know about, I don’t. I’m missing about three-hundred years of history that every second grader around here has.”

The Lowsmiths guiding Jade’s gurney turned left. Angelo, Zeke and Charlie followed, though Charlie worried that if he had to find his way out of here it was going to be a bit tricky. The tunnels seemed endless.

“DogStar 368 was the project name for the Mars colony.”

“We have people living on Mars?” Charlie asked. “I mean, you know, I kinda figured that was going to happen soon, even back in my time, but it’s still kinda weird to hear it. You know, I went to the Kennedy Space Center once and they were talking about how they were planning a mission to Mars, but it was still so unrealistic. Wait, when did we make it to Mars? How many people live there? How big is the settlement?”

The idea was fascinating. He had leapt into the future and suddenly it was an exciting place full of

questions that could be answered.

“The first mission to land on Mars launched in 2037,” Maverick chimed in as they turned down yet another corridor. “They went up intermittently for about fifty years, different humans trying to build a colony, but then the Great Peace came, and the refinement of the Earth, and it didn’t seem like we really needed to go anywhere else.”

“How long did it last?” Charlie asked. He never thought peace would reign anywhere on Earth.

“About a hundred and fifty years,” Zeke hooted. “Then they realized there were too many people on the damn planet, so they started an initiative to return to Mars and DogStar 368 started.”

Charlie reached out and touched the slick surface of the glass. “This has been here how long?”

“One hundred and nineteen years, three months and sixteen days,” Angelo said.

“How big is the Mars colony now?” Charlie asked.

“It doesn’t exist,” Zeke said.

“They built the bunker and people lived down here,” Maverick said. “They were supposed to live here for five years to show it was possible. It took twenty years to build and some people had just started living down here for like a year or so when the Plextor struck.”

“Plextor?” asked Charlie.

“The pox. The plague,” Zeke muttered.

“There was no more overpopulation of Earth,” Maverick shrugged. “The Great Depopulation had begun. Between Alaska and Mexico City on this side of the Rockies, there’s only about two million people.”

Charlie glanced over his shoulder for a moment. “And by people, do you mean humans of any kind? The hybrids also?”

“He means any biological being of Homo Sapien descent,” Maverick said.

“I am a bot, I do not count,” Angelo added. “But humans with mechanical and software implants, they think on their own. We have logic, we can have emotional programs running inside of us to make us appear very human, but we are not biologically functioning beings. Of those there are another two million.”

The numbers were hard for Charlie to fully fathom. Two million left in the entire region, in the places where a single city alone used to have twenty million people.

“So, this area was vacated and left abandoned when the rebels moved in?” He asked.

“Precisely,” Angelo said.

“Wouldn’t Blake or Warren know about this place?” Charlie asked.

“Crowley is very strong, inside of Crowley,” Angelo said. “They have great defenses, but they are not so powerful outside the walls. And they do not know exactly where to look, so if they send out a group of seekers they have to go many different directions to try to find this.”



The elevator seemed to go down forever in endless shifts of dark and light. For a moment Charlie was a bit concerned. It seemed high-quality enough that it wasn't going to break, but what if it did and they were trapped down here in the middle of this rocky outpost? Then again, with every step he was getting further away from home, his friends, his real life.

He tried not to think about it. The task right now was to fix Jade. If he could fix Jade, she would help him get back to the DarkM'attr machine. She would help him go back in time, he was sure. He glanced over at her lying there on the floating slab, her black hair fanning against the board, her chest slowly rising and falling. The smooth lines of her face were clear and at peace, a look you'd rarely see on her face during her waking hours. He wondered what she must've been like before she became a hybrid. Before she became so desperate for a cure for her parents. When she was just Jade, the human. He knew it was totally crazy, but he imagined what it would be like to take her out on a date. Like a normal date. A date without the black outfit. Maybe she'd wear a sundress. They'd walking along a boulevard and...

But she wasn't a sundress kind of girl. He needed to not be thinking about white picket fences. She was never going to be a floral print, spaghetti strap girl. Still, he felt part of him could see a little bit of that in her.

Even if she couldn't see it herself.

He thought about how she had been at her parents' house. How sweet and generous and how lovingly she'd served the tea. And now she was this. A vassal to Blake in order to provide for her parents' future, for the opportunity for them to become hybrids. A sharp pain worked its way through his body. What was she going to do when she found out her parents were dead? Or possibly dead, he corrected himself. He didn't know for sure, but it didn't look like there were going to be any other options, not from the footage he'd seen. It didn't look like anyone in the entire quadrant could survive. Charlie frowned. He could fix Jade's code, but if her parents were dead... there was no way he was going to be able to fix her heart. There was a good chance she would just go dark for good.

The elevator doors opened to a long square tunnel. Orange sconces lit the hallway for as far as Charlie could see.

Although the chapel of the rebel base had been fairly rudimentary, essentially just a cave carved out of the red mountain, it was clear the main complex of the Mars project was sophisticated. Passages led in every direction and as they moved through the polished, reflective and impenetrable tunnels, Charlie got glimpses of a running track, swimming pool, a theatre, and a dining hall. All the necessary requirements for healthy, safe underground living.

And then they came to Maverick's lab.

"This is where you make your inventions?" Charlie asked, nodding at the various devices and strange tools that filled the lab.

"Welcome to my palace," Maverick said, waving his hand with to the room where hologram charts and graphs floated in the air, shelves were lined with gadgets, and in one corner was a clear

slab where the Lowsmiths brought Jade.

“Place her over there,” Maverick said, motioned to what Charlie was starting to realize was a triage unit of sorts.

“She needs new code,” Charlie said.

“We’ve had hybrids here before,” Maverick said.

Charlie looked around suspiciously, trying to determine exactly what happened to the hybrids who had been brought into the rebel unit.

“Of course, they’re not here anymore,” Maverick said with a slight chuckle.

“Did you experiment on them?” Charlie asked, his stomach tightening a bit as bile rose in his throat.

“We were doing investigative analysis and research on the enemy,” Maverick said.

“So, you were just hooking them up and looking at how they worked?” Charlie asked.

“That’s a very crude way to describe an autopsy,” Maverick said. “These hybrids were dead already.”

Maverick’s words did nothing to relax the turmoil in Charlie’s stomach. But he realized now it was not the time to deal with it. Something had to be done for Jade before she woke up again.

“How did you do it?” Charlie asked. “How did you get into the hybrid code?”

Maverick spun the table around and waved his hand over a small sphere that projected a fully lit three-dimensional hologram. He blinked three times at it and a beam came out to scan his retina. A scanner descended from the ceiling and sent out a wide fan-like beam of light as it moved from Jade’s head, down to her feet and back again. A 3-D image of Jade began to appear in the air. It built, layer upon layer, until it had created a scanned image of every part of Jade’s body. From the hard bones of her spine and skull through to the soft tissue of her lungs and guts. Shining in silver were the bionic additions.

“The colors identify the different type of flesh, bone, soft tissue, or bionic factors, which comprise the hybrid,” Maverick said.

“Her name is Jade,” Charlie said, his eyes not leaving her floating scan. He finally understood the true power of Jade. Her entire spine was metal, her left eye was metal, her left arm and left leg. He gasped as he realized exactly what he was looking at.

“She has fake organs,” he said.

“She is a masterpiece.” Maverick agreed. His fingers reached out towards the hologram turning it over to look at all sides of Jade. “No expense has been spared on her. Look at that liver.”

Charlie couldn’t quite see the liver from where he was standing, but he ducked underneath the 3-D image and he could see a part of it. He looked back over his shoulder at the real Jade. It was so strange to see her there in real life and here in 3-D, with all of her guts on display. “That’s not a real liver?” he asked.

“No, it’s synthetic material. Do you know how expensive a synthetic liver is? They make it out of

a combination of nanobots and flesh, the perfect meld. And it'll last forever, with nanobots able to replenish dying cells. It's incredible. We are long past the age of just replacing an arm or a leg. To replace her spine, they would've replaced her entire nervous system. She probably doesn't feel any pain or at least, she can probably control it at the touch of a button, so to speak."

"Couldn't they have kept most of her nervous system?" Charlie asked.

"Potentially," Maverick said. "They would've taken her spinal column. There will be a synthetic nervous system running through the center of this and then they would've attached it to her actual nervous system if there was no damage. But as you can see here, along her arms, that is only the synthetic nervous system connected to her spine. Since she already has the implant of the spine the minute one of her legs or arms gives out, she'll be able to have those parts replaced and connected to the spine very quickly. It's quite genius."

"So, ultimately," Charlie said as the reality started to dawn on him, "Jade could be completely made of synthetic material?"

"Yes," Maverick said. "Because you see," his fingers curled up the length of the hologram's spine to the base of her skull. "This one, Jade," he said catching Charlie's eye, "she is 80% hybrid. You see this little part here?"

He pointed to a small silver circle at the base of her skull. "Her cerebellum has been replaced," he said. "So software controls her major bodily functions."

"She is like a bot?" Charlie asked.

"Well, this is the problem with hybrids," Maverick said, his hand resting on his chin as he inspected the rest of the hologram. "Until you look at it this way, you don't really know what you're dealing with. Humans are much simpler. You look in the eye and you can start to figure out our behavior and how we work. You may not know exactly what motivates us, you know, your childhood programming and all, but you don't have to wonder what part of us is human and if our brain is being run by software or by our own logic and feelings."

Charlie looked down and shook his head.

"How do I access her software?" Charlie asked, his mouth dry. Even though he had gotten a little bit used to the bots and the programming, the thought that Jade was run by software alone was horrifying. What made her any different than the big red giant in the corner, who was standing by ready to subdue her if she woke up?

"Do you know what you're doing?" Maverick asked.

Charlie frowned. He didn't dare tell the complete truth. "Sure," he lied. It was close enough. "The code that's controlling her is wrapped up in some code I wrote."

"Ok," Maverick bowed his head. "In that case, you need to start here." He pointed to the silver sphere at the base of her skull. "I can give you access."

Maverick turned to a table and pressed a series of levers, he popped open a drawer holding a set of carefully filed needles of varying lengths. Charlie hated needles but somehow, these didn't look

like the kind to draw blood. These were thinner. They were like the delicate stitching needles his mother used. Very fine, very thin, and very long. Maverick withdrew one needle. He placed it inside a small black disk and then he attached a thin cable to the other side of it. He walked over to Jade, lifted her black hair, and placed the needle above her neck. Clearly it was aimed at a lower cortex.

“Shouldn’t you swab her or get some gloves or something?” Charlie asked as Maverick brushed his fingers against Jade’s neck.

“Why?” Maverick asked.

“Well you know, like germs and things?” Charlie shrugged.

“Hybrids don’t host harmful bacteria or viruses,” Maverick said. “Especially not a hybrid of this status. Their antibodies and immune system are constantly regenerated through what is pumping into their body. They can’t get sick and they can’t carry dangerous germs. Everything is immediately expelled. It’s one of the things which makes being a hybrid so fascinating. Not only do they live very, very, very, very long time, but you are never sick.”

Charlie thought about the colds, the flus, the stomach aches. All the illness he had experienced at any point in his entire life. He thought what a miracle it would be if he never had to experience that again. Being a hybrid might not be so bad after all. Except the vulnerability of running on software, well, that was much more dangerous. If someone knew where to look, if someone knew where to get into you, they could control everything you did. Charlie knew the key question wasn’t just “how do you fix the problem now,” the key question was “how do you stop it from ever happening again?”

Chapter 33

Blake sat in his office and fiddled with his reissued iPod. It was very frustrating. This was no 21st century iPod, this was a 24th century reissued throwback, but the Apple Classics (an offshoot company of Apple Inc.) decided to be authentic and keep the same capabilities. He could listen to any song with a thought through his cochlear chip, but he liked to listen to his music through a speaker. Music in one's head, while the rage of the time, was convenient, but Blake didn't like voices in his head. That's what crazy people had. And Blake didn't want to be crazy, he wanted to relax. He needed relaxing right now.

It was understandable.

His business's main product, hybrid humans, was having a bad day. The fear of robots turning on humans was a consistent dread for hundreds of years. Great lengths, laws and regulations had been set to stop this happening. He knew it well, he regulated against many such laws to build his empire. The bribes he had to pay to lawmakers back East in order to build his business and city were mind boggling.

Now, his hybrids were killing people. Blake was an expert at spinning the truth. Expert wasn't strong enough, not by half. He had twisted his previous corporate takeovers, his (some would say illegal) monopoly on wireless power, his bot gentrification of certain regions. Blake had sold it all to the public with pizzazz.

But killer hybrids? Tough spin.

His best chance would be to ensure they were only killing rebels until they fixed the problem. But hybrids weren't his only problem. Robin was sick again.

A hologram of a conservatively dressed male assistant appeared in the corner of the room. "Sir, Warren Relic to see you."

Blake nodded and the door hissed open. Warren strolled in. Gemini II took up station by the door with Blake's personal ProtectoBots. None of them could come any closer. Blake had a BotBorder installed in his office. He was grateful for that today. Some days it was harder to read Warren than others. He was as ruthless as the day was long. Blake preferred that on his side, but he wondered how much Warren really was on his side. Even though Warren had never failed him, Blake was not one to trust anyone.

“Sit.” Blake motioned to the chair. “Scotch?”

“Luvian.” Warren’s words were slow and eloquent, just like Luvian liquor. A glass popped up in front of Warren. He took a slow and eloquent drink. Everything was going so eloquently.

“What’s the latest?” Blake was not going slow and eloquent, he wanted answers now.

“We can now say with a hundred percent certainty it was something Charlie Richards did to the code.”

Blake nodded, expecting this. Why did he ever agree to such an insane plan? He had been desperate, and Blake didn’t like being desperate. Now it was worse. This was why bad plans happened.

“What’s more,” Warren continued, “We think he has joined the Lowsmiths.”

“What?” Blake asked taken aback. “Why would he do that? Did you see the nice Penthouse we gave him? And that suit?”

“I know, I know.” Warren leaned back in his chair. He was enjoying this immensely. “You are nothing, if not giving. And they just want to take.” Blake wasn’t the only one who could spin a situation.

Blake sat back in his chair with a huff. What a mess. He stood and crossed to the far wall, touching it so it went transparent. Small fires glowed in the dusk all around the city of Crowley. His and Robin’s city.

Warren could tell Blake was heading down to the pits of despair and he seized the opportunity. “Blake, my friend, we will fix this. I personally will see it is fixed. This isn’t like before. We know where the problem is now and we don’t have to rely on some old technology to fix it.”

“Then why hasn’t it been fixed?” Blake’s finger streaked down the window.

“It’s a bit more complicated, Blake, but we will. I know the empire you built and I will not, under any circumstances, see it destroyed.” That was a true statement, Warren thought, but keeping the empire meant getting rid of Blake. “I will handle this. I know you have a lot on your mind.”

Blake swung around. “What, pray tell, are you suggesting?”

“Nothing. Whatever you need. I just hate to see this stress weighing on you. Of course, every decision is yours to make, I’m just suggesting you spend time with your wife.”

“What do you know about my wife? You know she’s a Delta. She’s infected like the rest of them!”

“Which we will fix by the end of tomorrow. And when we do, you should enjoy every second with her you can.”

Blake eyed Warren a long time, sizing him up. Finally, he turned back to stare out the window. His wife was sick again, and just after it looked like everything would be better. Blake had made a staggering amount of money in his life, and every dime went into this city. Every second he was in this city. He spent a fortune making sure his wife would live forever. That’s all he wanted.

And all that was compromised.

Blake needed a solution. He needed the code fixed and his wife better. No matter what it took.

And right now, he was too tired and emotionally exhausted to deal with it. He turned from the fires of Crowley and nodded Warren to the door. “Fix the problem.”

“I will.”

“Now.”

Warren nodded and left the room, leaving half of his Luvian on the desk.

Blake turned and looked at Crowley again. His and Robin’s city. He didn’t want to leave this city. He just wanted Robin to be Robin again. He just wanted Robin to be whole.

Chapter 34

Charlie's hair lay in damp curls around the edges of his forehead. The air conditioning in the room still buzzed with the lightest frequency of chill air being pumped in, but it didn't do anything for the heat that ran, pulsating and oppressive, through Charlie's body. He'd been standing at the hologram of Jade for ten hours as he fought through the code and back to the cerebellum.

It wasn't hard to find the wrapper text with Dustin's code in it. With a series of quick blinks and twitches he was able to pull the bug out and get rid of it. In fact, it was really quite a ridiculous solution Dustin had come up with. Dustin's code had succeeded, but it had been shoved in there as if no one would ever try to get it out again. What a cocky son of a bitch.

But perhaps nobody else could. But Charlie had found a way using Maverick's tool to access at least one hybrid. It had only taken him an hour to clean up the code and delete the corruption. He had spent the last nine hours anxiously trying to figure out what he could do to the hybrid code so this would never happen again. How do you make code inaccessible and indestructible? How do you lock it up and how could he test his theory before he made it live in Jade?

Unfortunately, there was no way to do it. He had asked them to bring a pen and paper, but it was akin to asking a 21st century person for chalk and tablet. The truth is, Charlie still worked best on paper and pen. Maverick had brought over a hologram tablet, which Charlie could draw on with his finger. Charlie knew it would have to do. So, he had spent much of his time doodling in the air and processing every idea he could think of that would seal away Jade's code. He knew if he built a wall, eventually someone would go in and find it and be able to dismantle it, brick by brick.

He rubbed his hands against his weary eyes.

"You haven't got much longer," Angelo said. "The sedative we gave her will wear off soon, and we can't give her another. Hybrids can't be sedated more than eleven hours. It affects their programming and the synthetic organs."

Charlie stared up at the ceiling, sweat dripping from his forehead.

"This place feels like an Egyptian tomb," he grumbled. "Why the hell would anyone want to go to Mars just to live in a place like this?"

"Well, I suppose it's better than dying," Angelo said.

Charlie looked around. Everybody was long gone, it was just the two of them and Jade's body,

strapped down and waiting for the moment she woke up.

Over the last few hours Charlie had paced around the room trying to figure out what to do. Now as he sat there staring at the ceiling, he realized it was hopeless. There was no way he was going to figure out a solution to protect Jade. He might be able to fix her for now, but the minute they did another update on her system, she could go right back to the killing machine she was when she showed up here.

“Have you fixed the hybrid?” Maverick chirped as the sliding glass doors opened and he walked into the room.

“Watch out!” Angelo called.

Charlie’s head whipped around just in time to see Maverick stumble against the tray Charlie had left standing near the doorway during one of his pacing sessions. Maverick tumbled to the ground, rolling on his pronounced belly until he came to a standstill on his back.

“Are you trying to booby-trap the place?” Maverick asked.

Angelo was there in a second to help Maverick stand up and move the cart out of the way. Charlie stared at them for a moment, but he wasn’t seeing them at all.

Traps...

“What do you know about the ancient Egyptians?” he asked Angelo, his eyes suddenly alive with excitement.

“What is commonly referred to as the ancient Egyptian era began in 4000 or 6000 BC—”

“Their tombs,” Charlie cut off the Ancient Egyptian lecture. “Their tombs...”

“The most famous tombs of the ancient Egyptians reside in the Valley of the Kings in Luxor, Egypt,” Angelo said.

Charlie spun his finger in the air as if fast-forwarding Angelo’s speech. “Booby traps,” he said. “Booby traps! Look at this place. All it needs is booby traps to be perfectly impenetrable. Right now, it seems impenetrable, but the moment somebody gets in they are free to access the entire place because there are no booby traps.”

Maverick was rubbing his lower back. “I just fell from a booby-trap.”

“This place needs booby-traps,” Charlie said, “And so do the hybrids.”

“Please explain,” Angelo said.

“Well, in ancient Egypt, if you made it in the door there would be something like a pit with painted stars overhead, so you get distracted by the stars and you’d look up and then fall into the pit. It was by far the most common booby trap, but there were others like double thick walls, false entryways, doors sliding down behind you. Tons of them. We cannot stop the hybrids from having code inside them, it’s what keeps them alive. We can’t remove Jade’s cerebellum, but we have to find a way so nobody who gets in there can interfere with who she really is. So, if we write some reroute code that traps alien code in a windowless room and didn’t allow it in, the code would be caught in an endless loop like a booby trap dropping you in a bottomless pit with no way out.”

“So, you can fix the code and then leave booby traps for anyone who tries to get in with malicious code after you?” Maverick asked.

“Like hell I can,” Charlie smiled. “MS-DOS does this. And I bet I can stick some old code in there to create the shield. When I first started writing code, well we couldn’t afford a real computer. So, my mother bought me this weird black keyboard I plugged into our old computer, and I had to write my own code. I used to go down to the public library and play this game, a really old-fashioned Dungeons and Dragons game. It was a black screen with just green letters going across the screen, and it would tell you things like, ‘you’re standing in the hallway, there is a door to the left and to the right. Which doorway do you choose?’ And you would choose a doorway and you walk into the door and it would show you to something else like ‘a troll stands in front of you, about to strike, what do you want to do?’ and you have to come up with something to do against the troll.”

“It sounds quite engaging,” Angelo said.

“I’m going to write the chamber at the front of the hybrid code,” and even as Charlie spoke he scribbled in the air.

“It’s really quite impressive what you’re capable of doing in modern code,” Maverick said.

“Anybody who enters this space will be triggered into this maze,” Charlie said. “Only it’s a complete loop and there’s no way around it, because nobody in this time knows MS-DOS. And it is so old and so clunky that even if they could see behind it, they won’t be able to see the pattern.”

It was done just like that, without even much more thinking. Charlie reached into his childhood and pulled out a code nobody in 2325 knew. He built a hallway and a booby trap that would keep them trapped there forever, never allowing them access to Jade’s code.

“What happens though when she needs a software update?” Angelo asked. “in one, five, ten years, maybe everyone will need an updated technology to survive.”

Charlie shook his head. “Not this technology. She won’t be able to get a software update,” Charlie said. “But nobody will be able to control her ever again.”

Maverick nodded approvingly. “She will die like the rest of us. Only slightly different. Her hardware will get older, her software will become outdated, and slowly some of her organs will run down. It’ll be like she’s human again.”

“And she won’t be able to get any more synthetic organs. If they’re meant to be run from the cerebellum, it won’t be possible anymore.”

“Never?” Angelo said, tilting his head to the side as he computed. “I’m not quite sure how she’s going to absorb that piece of information.

Charlie shook his head. “The world inside the code is set to grow itself in an endless cycle. There will be an endless series of doors and trolls and pointlessly repetitive quests and even I won’t be able to find my way out of the world inside Jade’s brain.

Chapter 35

Blake looked through the glass pane at Robin. What the hell was wrong with her? What had been done to make this happen? He had his suspicions and Warren was at the top of the list. Who else would have access to the CompuVerse that could make this possible? A ravenous mental disease to infect all Deltas. Only Warren. Well, he supposed Dustin had that capability, too, but that sniveling idiot didn't have two brain cells to rub together. Not the kind of brain cells you needed to pull something like this off.

Malicious. Selfish. Powerful.

The kind of brain cells that, well... Blake had.

That's why he needed Robin. Without her, he was just a narcissistic megalomaniac. He needed her to keep him humble, well, as humble as he could ever be.

Blake pressed his hand against the glass. He'd hadn't dared move Robin out of her room, but he'd removed the wall. He needed to see her, but he couldn't bear to have her see him. The way she looked at him, like she wanted to kill him. It was impossible to fathom.

The woman who had always loved him, always supported him, always guided him...she wasn't dying anymore, but she was gone. Her brain was gone and she was a killer.

Blake bowed his head. In the deepest briefest part of himself a horrifying, quiet thought was emerging... Maybe it was better for Robin if she was dead.



Charlie was sleeping when Jade woke up. Right after he finished the self-expanding DOS world that would act as the booby trap inside Jade's code, he had fallen asleep right in the chair. Angelo had stayed to watch over Charlie and Jade as they both rested and he watch with curiosity and excitement, or as much excitement as a bot could have, as Jade woke up. He watched her eyes open and look around the lab.

"Angelo," Jade said. "Angelo, why am I tied down?"

It was all Angelo needed to hear to know Jade was fine. He reached over and with the simple movement of his fingers he freed the bonds holding her against the table. She sat up rubbing her

wrists.

“I feel... I feel strange,” she said. She sat there staring at her hands for a moment, turning them over. She rubbed her neck where the needle had been. She looked up at Angelo.

“I – I killed people,” she said. “Humans. Rebels... What happened?” Her voice choked up and her throat was raspy. Angelo could see delicate puddles of water forming in her eyes

“It’s not your fault, Jade,” he said, reaching out and carefully moving a strand of loose hair behind her ear.

“I was standing on the stage. They brought rebels in and we were going to welcome them into the city. They were going to become part of Crowley, but suddenly it was a bloodbath.” She stared in confusion at her hands and back at Angelo. “Even Robin was a part of it.”

“Warren changed the code,” Angelo said. “He and Dustin created code that allowed him to control you.”

Jade’s eyes slid over to where Charlie was snoring slightly in the chair. “Charlie fixed it?” she asked.

“He did more than fix it,” Angelo said. “He made it so it can never happen again.”

Jade smiled a warm and lovely smile as she stood and moved over to Charlie. He was slowly waking up in the chair listening to Angelo and Jade talk.

“Well, I don’t know what he did to the code,” Jade said, “But I feel so much better. I feel... Like there’s something more inside me now. Whatever was there before felt like a black circle but now there’s something pure and warm in there.”

“There is something you should know,” Angelo said.

“What?” Jade asked, turning to a giant red robot.

“Your code can never be updated again,” Charlie said, sitting up.

“Never updated?” Jade asked.

“I’m sorry, don’t be mad,” Charlie said. “But I had to protect you. All the hybrids are out running around under the control of Warren. If I didn’t find a way to clear out the whole system, it doesn’t really matter. Anybody could go in and change whatever they wanted.”

“And the problem would keep happening and who knows what would become of you.”

“I’ll die?” Jade asked.

Charlie nodded. “I’m sorry, Jade. It was the only way to protect you.”

Jade stared down at her hands. “My parents went through so much to save me.”

“You are still saved. You will just live a normal life span. Sort of. I think.” Charlie said. “I didn’t know what else to do, Jade. I needed to make sure that never happened again.”

Jade took a deep breath. “It’s okay.” And suddenly, a huge smile burst across her face, like it was a ridiculously warm summer day and she was the sun, shining down on everybody. Charlie’s heart filled with warmth. But then...

“You do realize what it means, right?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “They cannot upgrade me. I will degrade and die.” And she looked so happy about this piece of information, Charlie was a bit surprised.

“It doesn’t bother you?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I never wanted to live forever, I just wanted to live long enough.”

She pulled Charlie up into a standing position.

“Let’s figure out how to go back and fix the code and all the hybrids.”

“That’s my girl,” Angelo said.

The hall was silent as Charlie, Jade and Angelo were escorted into the room, everyone stared at the hybrid, the bot and the man from the past. Charlie looked around at the people in the chapel. There were a lot less rebels than he would’ve thought, but maybe they were out attacking Crowley or something. They walked up to the front of the room where Trekon stood.

“So, this is Jade of Crowley,” he said looking at her less warmly than usual.

“Thank you for saving me,” she said. “I do not deserve it.”

“I agree,” Trekon said. “But I did not save you. He did.” His long thin finger pointed towards Charlie.

Charlie looked down at his feet. He didn’t need any recognition for fixing the code that had turned Jade into a killer. He was just happy it was over.

“I would like to return to Crowley,” Jade said. “I will get Charlie into the central control unit so he can fix the hybrid code.”

“And the shot from your gun started it. When you executed Frank.”

“She wasn’t herself!” Charlie exclaimed.

“That’s the problem with hybrids,” Tallahassee growled. “You never know who they are.”

Trekon held up his hand to Tallahassee. “Reparations may be made.”

“Nothing is going to bring back Frank,” Tallahassee muttered.

“The city still burns and humans still die.” Trekon’s hand swept through the air highlighting the screens lining one end of the cavern well. Crowley was ablaze.

Jade’s eyes narrowed as she looked from screen to screen to screen. Now that Charlie knew exactly which parts of her were human and which parts were machine, he kept a close look on her left eye. He could see it was lens scanning the screens and reading information that there was no way he was going to be able to see.

“Quadrant two,” she barely breathed the words out, but Charlie could tell by the movement of her lips what she was saying. The quadrant she grew up in. Trenchtown. He sucked his breath in through his teeth and fought the urge to reach out and take her hand. The last thing in the world one would want to do was take Jade of Crowley by surprise with a sweet gesture. But he knew exactly what she was seeing: the decimation of the town she grew up in.

Her gaze flew to Charlie. “My parents?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” he said.

She turned on her heel and strode towards the door. Two Lowsmiths stepped in front of her. Jade stopped in her tracks, hands moving to her holsters, but they were empty.

“We can’t let you return to the city,” Trekon said.

“Am I a prisoner?” Jade asked.

Charlie frowned.

“We do not know whose side you are on,” Trekon said. “I think this is an understandable situation. If we were to let you go back to the city, you may simply become a killing machine again, attacking our people.”

“Enough,” Charlie said, stepping forward. He looked around the room. “You’re standing here with the deadliest bot and hybrid in all of Crowley. Neither one is doing anything.”

“She would have just shot our guards if she had her guns on her,” Tallahassee said.

“I wouldn’t have,” said Jade. “But I need to get in there. I will help the Lowsmiths, but I must go to Crowley. My parents are there and they are human.”

Chapter 36

The buzzer startled Blake. He pressed his forehead against the glass. No one was allowed to ring the buzzer to his private apartment. It was completely not allowed. If he ignored it they would go away. They would have to or else his ProtectoBots would make it go away.

Come to think of it, where were his ProtectoBots?

Blake lifted his head and looked curiously over his shoulder as the buzzer rang again, sending a grating shrill down his spine. He pressed his finger to his temple, activating his x-ray eye.

Monfils hit the buzzer. He hit it again and again and again.

It was totally against protocol, but he needed help and he needed help from the top of the food chain. Fortunately, he was close enough to the top, he'd been able to gain access to Blake's private suite.

"There's something wrong with the Deltas," Monfils called through the door. "They need your help, Blake."

Monfils was one of the few in all of Crowley who could call Blake by his first name. They'd been through some things together, back when Monfils was young. When his mother, Blake's sister, was dying. The fact that Blake was Monfils' uncle was something no one in Crowley knew. Both of them had wanted it that way. Monfils had wanted to work his way up and Blake hadn't wanted to show favoritism. But now, well, it was time for Monfils to use his relationship to help Jade. And, if he understood the situation correctly, his Aunt Robin, too. She was a Delta. Whatever was going on in Blake's penthouse couldn't be good.

"Blake!" he shouted, as the door slid open and Blake stood there, frowning.

"Monfils," he said quietly.

"It's Warren," Monfils said. "He's changed the code in the Deltas."

But even as Monfils said the words, he realized it was too late. The look on Blake's face was so discouraged, so down, he wasn't sure he had the strength to bring him up.

"I know." Blake nodded stepping back and motioning towards the window, which overlooked Robin's sick bed.

"We have to do something," Monfils said as he stepped towards the window.

Blake cringed. "Even if we can find a solution," he muttered. "I'm not sure Robin will want to

know what she has done.”

Monfils pushed against the thought that Blake was right. He had lost contact with Jade after she left for the rebel stronghold. There was no telling what havoc she had wreaked out there. There was no telling if she had killed rebels or saved Charlie or killed Charlie.

“I need your BSA, Blake,” he said.

“Huh?” Blake gazed over at Monfils. “You know I don’t let anyone ride it.”

“If there is any hope of saving Helen or Jade, I need the BSA.”

“It’s a dangerous prototype, Monfils,” Blake shook his head. “You don’t even have that much experience on it.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Monfils held out his finger for the code. He could feel his uncle was going to give in. Blake’s BSA was a prototype single man transport that would get him out to Holbrook in fifteen minutes. He needed to get out there as quickly as possible and he needed to get out there with no one knowing about it. He couldn’t risk Warren finding out where the rebel stronghold was. Especially not with Jade and Charlie out there. “Please,” Monfils said.

Blake sighed, staring at his wife, who was grinding her teeth angrily. He reached his finger forward and pressed it against Monfils, transferring the BSA code to his nephew. “Don’t let this get any worse,” he said as he turned back to the window looking in on Robin’s room.



Everybody was staring at Trekon, whose brow was furrowed as he stared at Jade’s one human eye. Silence filled the stone chamber as the fires of Crowley glowed, blinking orange on the screens.

“I give you my word.” Jade’s voice was low. “I will get him into the CompuVerse where he can access the hybrids.”

Trekon’s eyes were dark, his face a stone wall.

“I will leave you Angelo,” Jade said. “If I do not fulfill my promise, you may have him. He will be loyal to you.”

“Why, well, I do not think that is quite appropriate,” Angelo said, tilting his head to stare at Jade. “I am your bot.”

“You can’t get in there without him!” Charlie exclaimed.

Trekon eyes squinted. “You may go,” he said.

“No,” said Charlie. “Without Angelo, it’s a suicide mission.”

“Then take Angelo with you. I trust you,” Trekon said with a nod.

“You can’t trust a hybrid,” Tallahassee said.

“We shall see,” Trekon said. “So much is already lost. This is our only hope of saving humanity.”

Jade looked around the room. “I could use some extra hands to get us into the CompuVerse. There are a lot of barriers to get past.”

“Let me get this straight,” Zeke chimed in. “The hybrids are being controlled by a program that makes them rampaging killing machines. They’re destroying and killing all the humans in Crowley and you want a few humans to go in there and solve the problem.”

“You don’t have to battle them,” Charlie said.

“We just have to get Charlie into the CompuVerse so he can alter the code.”

“It’ll stop the hybrids,” Charlie said. “Once we update the code, we’ll be safe.”

“Dustin and Warren will just go back in there and replace the code again,” a burly guy at the front of the room said.

Charlie shook his head. “No, they won’t. I wrote new code. I used it on Jade. It’s in front of all her ops code. It creates a failsafe trap. They won’t be able to touch a single hybrid ever again. And they won’t be able to create another hybrid, not with that code. They’ll never be able to access it.”

“You think she’ll do it, Charlie?” Zeke asked.

Charlie glanced over at Jade. “Yes,” he said loudly. “She doesn’t need to be here right now. Even without guns she could take almost all of us out and get out of here.”

“All of us except for the big red guy,” Tallahassee said grudgingly.

“And he is her ProtectoBot,” Charlie said. “Face it, we don’t need to be standing here talking to you at all.”

“We kind of do,” Jade hissed at Charlie. “We need a ride.”

“Right,” Charlie said. “However, we do need a ride.” He looked around the room seeing if anyone would volunteer to help.

“You can’t trust a hybrid,” Tallahassee said.

“Seriously?” Charlie asked. “This is the 24th century and humans haven’t gotten over bigotry?”

“They’re not human,” Tallahassee argued.

“She is human,” Charlie said. He hadn’t even really thought about the fact that they may not be.

“You didn’t see any humans out there tearing at each other when Blake’s boy flipped the switch,” Zeke said.

“We don’t make a habit of helping hybrids,” Tallahassee said.

“How about helping humans?” Jade snarled. “Because last time I checked, all the humans are going to die if we don’t go in and do something about the code that’s chewing up the hybrids’ brains.”

“We’re not fighting against the hybrids,” Charlie said. “We’re fighting against control. We’re fighting for equality. Human and hybrid. We’re fighting for a future where everybody can live together in peace. Where one man isn’t turned against another man because somebody can get inside his brain and twist the way he thinks and sees things. I’ve written the code to do that. All we need is a ride back to Crowley.”

“It’s a dangerous mission,” Jade said. “I don’t think anybody should come with us because there’s little to no chance we will even survive. But we need to get to the city.”

“Where is the CompuVerse?” Tallahassee asked.

“In the heart of headquarters,” Jade said. “Past all the hybrids, past all the bots, and if they know they’ve been breached, the whole place will shut down and the bots will sweep through killing everything that isn’t legally there.”

“Sounds impossible,” Tallahassee muttered.

“I’ll go with you,” Zeke said.

Tallahassee rounded on him with a snort. “You’re going with them?”

“Yeah,” Zeke shrugged. “Impossible odds. Little chance of survival. But the opportunity to save the world. I’m in.”

“Well shit. You’re useless without me,” Tallahassee said. “And someone is going to have to keep an eye on her.”

Jade smiled. “We could use anyone. But do either one of you have a vehicle?”

“I do,” said Gunk, stepping forward out of the crowd.

“Who the hell are you?” Jade asked, looking him up and down. “You’re not from around here.”

“No, but I do drive the garbage lorry and I can take you into Crowley,” he smiled.

“That’s all we need,” Jade said. She turned to Trekon. “Do I have your permission to leave to stop the slaughter?”

“Bring Jade her guns,” Trekon said. “It will be of great use to us if she survives.”

Chapter 37

“Where is she?” Warren glowered, staring at the images of the streets of Crowley. “Why can’t you find her?”

Dustin blinked ferociously at the CodeSwarm that showed the map of Crowley. Where the hell was Jade? She’d completely disappeared off the map and try as he might he hadn’t been able to find her. Maybe he shouldn’t have gone drinking the night before, but it had seemed like such a good evening to take a victory lap through The Cross. High five the regulars in all his haunts and grab a few of the girls’ asses just to remind them that he was the man.

Shit.

How could he have forgotten Jade and Warren’s fear of her? And why the hell didn’t Warren keep track of the bitch himself if she was such a nemesis. He sighed as he realized the truth in the code. Warren wasn’t going to take this well.

“She’s gone dark,” he said quietly.

Warren heard every word. “What do you mean, dark?” he asked, even more softly.

“We lost her,” Dustin said.

“She’s out of our control or you don’t know where she is?” Warren asked in the same deadly low tone.

“Both,” Dustin said, his voice ringing out too loudly in the quiet control center.

Warren’s metal fist slammed down against a consol. Sparks flew as metal crumbled. “Genesis, go and find her,” he said. “I will tell you one thing. If she is not in this city now, she will be and she’ll be headed for the CompuVerse.”

“Perhaps she’s dead,” Dustin said hopefully.

“She would register in the system if she were dead,” Warren muttered. What the hell was wrong with Dustin? He was being an idiot. Some men couldn’t handle when they came close to greatness. Warren was pretty sure Dustin was one of those men.

Dustin scowled back at the CodeSwarm in front of him. He was going to show Warren and all of them how you stop a rogue Delta. His fingers worked the code furiously as he rerouted all the Deltas so their primary objective was to discover and annihilate Jadyn of Crowley. His frown tipped towards a smirk as he added the zinger code. The discovery of the unique scent of every being on the

planet had only happened because of the invention of hybrids and the enhanced olfactory capabilities. Dustin pushed Jade's unique scent out to all the Deltas in Crowley so they would be able to smell her and they would swarm all over her, HELs blazing.



“We are going in this?” Jade looked at the hunk of metal. They had taken the transport back to about thirty minutes out of Crowley, not noticing the BSA that had streaked past them at the same time.

The garbage incinerator they now stood in front of was the height of a three-story building and almost as wide. It looked like a great big metal box with floating pods around its base and some sort of a glass dome at the top. The sides, which at one point might've been shiny metal, were now tarnished black with stains. But what was worse was the stench. It stank like nothing Charlie had ever smelled before. It reeked, not like yesterday's garbage, but like a landfill of all the city's rubbish had been dumped in it for a week and left under the burning sun and rapidly decomposing.

“There's no way,” Charlie said. “Does it even fly?”

Angelo walked towards the big black box and clanged his metal fingers along the side. “Did you know, my fine man,” he said, “bots do not have a sense of smell? We have sensors to allow us to know something might smell, but we can't actually smell. I can see this is an F398 garbage incinerator, so I know it will be,” he paused as he searched for a word, “horrific to the human nostrils.”

Jade shrugged and started walking up the gangway into the big black box. “I've never had a good sense of smell. Been punched in the nose a few too many times. My septum is off.”

Angelo followed Jade into the vehicle.

“It can't seriously fly,” Charlie murmured again. “Why can't we use the transport from before?”

“It's in the shop for repairs.” Gunk patted Charlie on the shoulder as he moved past him. “Besides, we have to get close to headquarters and the transport can only take us just outside the city walls.” He gave a wheezing, twittering chuckle through his gills.

“Come on,” Tallahassee said following Gunk. “It's the only way we're going to get in there.”

“You guys run garbage collection for Crowley?” Charlie asked.

“There was a major malfunction with the city's SaniBots a few years ago,” Zeke explained. “Garbage piled up for weeks. So, the head dog insisted on a human collection group to service key areas. Apparently when humans malfunction, they're easier to get back online than bots.”

Gunk walked up and handed Charlie a small white tablet. “You may want to take this. It'll help with the smell.”

Charlie swallowed the tablet without even thinking about it. The stench was so horrid it left an acrid taste in his mouth that made him want to puke. The effect of the pill was almost instantaneous.

“Okay,” he said, nodding as the sharp, fragrant scent of oranges filled his nostrils. “I think I can

work with this.” Charlie inhaled deeply and followed Tallahassee and Gunk up the gangway.

Gunk took the helm as Tallahassee, Zeke, Jade, and Angelo sat in the cramped space right behind the driver’s seat in the glass dome at the top of the collector.

“Our only objective is,” Jade said, pointing at Charlie, “to get him into the CompuVerse room.”

“I don’t think that’s going to do it,” Charlie said. “There’s too much risk. I’m a marked man. Everyone knows exactly who I am. When we get in there, if there’s one of us that has a target on his back, it’s me.”

“That’s why we’re going to escort you like a prisoner towards the dungeon and then veer towards Grand Central,” Jade said.

“Hm, not a bad plan,” Charlie said. “But I think it’s only going to work so far. You need someone better or more resilient than me to make sure the code gets into the system.” His eyes were on the giant red bot sitting casually next to Jade.

“You’ve given him the code?” Jade us.

Charlie nodded. “I also have it here.” He held up his wrist. There was a small metal band placed around his wrist with a black shiny strip on it. “It’s a Maverick invention. Apparently, if I press my wrist against the ports, the code will go straight into the system.” Charlie shook his head. He had no idea how it even worked but from everything he saw, Maverick’s stuff worked pretty well.

“In case Charlie doesn’t make it to the CompuVerse,” Angelo said, “I will step in.”

Jade’s eyes widened as she glanced between Angelo and Charlie. “He’s going to make it.”

“There’s also one for you, Jade.” Charlie handed her a bracelet, but couldn’t make eye contact. He was under no delusions. This was a suicide mission, not a Star Wars film. Well, except for Rogue One. That was a suicide mission, too. But they were going into the heart of enemy headquarters, and even though they had Jade and Angelo on their side, they were grossly outgunned. “This will give us three chances to get past Warren and Blake.”

“You’re going to make it,” Jade said, not touching the bracelet. “I’m going to make sure of that.”

“We don’t know what’s going to happen.” Charlie looked Jade straight in her right eye as he shoved the band holding the code in her hand. “Take the bracelet. We need to override Warren’s control.”

“And then what?” Jade asked, her human eye strangely soft.

Charlie took a deep breath, but he wasn’t about to hide the answer. “And then I want to go home,” he said.

He didn’t look at Jade when he said that. He didn’t want to know what she thought. Jade was a hybrid from the 24th century. She was bad-ass, she was beautiful, and there was no way she would ever be interested in a coding nerd like Charlie Richards. He wasn’t even going to pretend to hope there might be a chance. No, he was going to go back to the 21st century and get on with his life and see if there was some way he could change the future. That was where he belonged; in the past. Maybe if he simply never invented the code, none of this would ever happen.

“You know, there is empirical evidence thoughts are transient things,” Jade said. “And by transient, I don’t just mean they go in and out of your own head, but they go from your head to somebody else’s to another person. They say that a single thought can be shared by at least thirty-two people at the same time and it expands exponentially until it finds root in one person’s brain and they make it happen. This may not be common knowledge in the 21st century, but it is known here.”

Charlie raised his gaze to Jade, his eyebrows lifting quizzically.

“You’re not the only one to think of that code,” she stated.

“Great,” Charlie said.

“My point is, if you go back and, let’s say, uninvent the code or don’t share it with the right people at the right time or don’t write it down or burn the piece of paper or whatever it is you think you’re going to do that’s going to change the world, you have to understand your actions don’t matter. Somebody else will invent the code.”

“Like just anyone can invent it,” Charlie scoffed.

“Geniuses are not the people that are smarter than other people. Successful people aren’t better than anybody else. The people that have an idea... Everybody has an idea. Everybody has genius thoughts. Everybody has a great story, a great invention, a great solution, a great master plan. They can’t help it. These things exist outside of the individual. What makes someone unique is not what they think. What makes people unique is what they do about it.”

Chapter 38

The sanitation incinerator got to the gates of Crowley at twilight. The sun was setting on the desert horizon, but Crowley itself was still lit up. They been gone over twenty-four hours, and while the explosions had died down, the remnants of the burning fires had not.

Getting through the checkpoint was surprisingly easy. It seems like each garbage transport had a regular routine of collecting the garbage in the city and bringing it out, and right now was exactly the right time for Gunk's garbage truck to get back into Crowley. So, although they were stopped briefly at the gate, no one hindered them. Apparently, sanitation liked to keep a schedule, riots, rebellion, or not.

Charlie watched the lines of Jade's face tense, her eyes fixed on some random point on the other side of the cabin. Jade lived for her parents. Every choice she ever made was to protect them, to ensure their long life, to afford for them to become hybrids. And maybe some miracle allowed her parents to escape the demolition of their quadrant. Maybe they wouldn't be dead.

"We approach headquarters," Gunk said.

Jade gazed up at Charlie. "Are you ready for this?"

"If I'm going to be honest," Charlie said, a smile lifting one corner of his mouth. "It's a little out of my comfort zone."

Jade smiled in response. "Just remember, you are prisoners until something happens."

"Check," Charlie said, but trembles ran through his fingers.

"It's go time," Tallahassee said, opening the side of the garbage incinerator.

They stepped onto the burning streets of Crowley.



Katerina had always loved to bake when she was human. Her parents had owned a bakery in Trenchtown and she'd woken every morning to the fresh scent of bread and cupcakes filling the air and wafting up to her tiny bedroom at the top of the steep stairs. They never had much money, but she'd always felt rich. People lined up around the block every morning to fill up on their pastries. Had she not been the daughter of the baker, she would have lined up, too.

But she didn't have to.

Every morning her father set her muffin and glass of milk out on the tiny kitchen table where she would eat and fill her senses with the soft sweet smells of her father's baking.

When her father had grown sick, Katerina had been too young to take over the bakery, but he had written an air-tight will. Although she was being taken care of by her second cousin once removed, when she finally reached eighteen years of age, the entire cash value of the bakery was, in trust, to turn her into a hybrid.

The surgery however, had not gone well and before it was done, Katerina had been turned not into a Gamma, but a Delta.

Now, she stood in the streets of Crowley sniffing at the night air. Something was wafting towards her. Something that smelled almost as good as her father's baking. It was the scent of her primary target.

Jadyn of Crowley.

Katerina let out a blood curdling howl that filled the evening sky and, thanks to the great acoustics that were the streets of Crowley, drew the attention of every Delta within a two-mile radius. The lifted their noses in the air, caught the scent of Jade and turned their full, blood-thirsty attention towards Headquarters, where Jade was entering the complex.



"You guys are going to have to wear these." Jade held up three pairs of H-con cuffs. Zeke, Tallahassee, and Charlie all look down at the black cuffs with glowing green lights. None reached out to take them.

"That's going to be a little hard to do," Tallahassee said.

"They won't be bound," Jade said. She could see the fear in Tallahassee's eyes and for a moment, she wondered what had happened to him, but now wasn't the time to figure that out. Now they needed to get in the building. "You just need to hold one in one hand and one in the other. Like so." She demonstrated holding her hands behind her back. "If you hold these wires together, they'll conduct a small wave so it'll look like they're actually working, but if you open your hand it'll fizzle out."

Zeke grabbed a set of cuffs. "Okay."

Tallahassee frowned and nodded, grabbing the other two pairs and handing one to Charlie. The three of them put on the cuffs and wrapped the buzzing live wire around their wrists, squeezed them in their fingers, and felt them light up. They then let go to make sure they could lose the cuffs at a moment's notice.

"If we get separated," Jade said, as the three stood together, "we'll meet back here at 1430 when Gunk finishes his sanitation rounds."

But even as Charlie looked at Jade, he knew she wouldn't be meeting them back here. She wasn't

a rebel, not really. She wanted to help the Lowsmiths, but mainly because they had a common goal. Jade belonged to Crowley, the city and Blake. She would help them get in and solve the hybrid problem, which was also a problem for Blake, but she wasn't coming back with them to the outpost. And in all truthfulness, Charlie wasn't either. As soon as this code was in the system, he was headed to the DarkM'attr machine. He was going home after this.

But for now, the five of them were together and on a single mission. And for the most part he thought they might actually get away with it. Who is going to question Jade and Angelo?

"We're going in through 39C," Jade said. "I know the guard there, he won't ask any questions. Just make sure you look defeated." She glared at Tallahassee as she said this.

They stepped out of the garbage incinerator, Jade and Angelo walking stiffly behind their "prisoners." Not only did the hulking hybrid guard not ask any questions, but he grinned and sprang to attention when he saw Jade.

Charlie watched the whirring of one of his eyes. Were Gamma hybrids the only ones actually left?

"I found these rebels," Jade said. "Got to bring them down for lock up."

Charlie kept his head down. He was still getting used to the idea everybody knew who he was, but regardless of whether this guy cared or not, it was better if he wasn't recognized. Blake and Warren didn't need to know he was in Crowley. Warren might be a jerk, but he wasn't an idiot. He would know exactly what Charlie was doing there.

Soon they were walking down the small narrow tunnels that lead into the prisons. It didn't look like they were the first humans to be brought down here today. Bots and hybrids moved all up and down the corridors with humans being shoved screaming into cells. A frown creased Jade's face.

"Why are they locking up humans?" Charlie hissed over his shoulder.

Jade pressed a finger against her temple briefly. Her scowl deepening. "To fulfill the prime directive of Crowley Enterprises. That's all it says."

Charlie shuddered involuntarily. Sounded a lot like human experimentation.

"I need to take these humans to cell 586 DL." Jade said to the massive guard who blocked the entrance to the cell block they were aiming for. The cell block that stood directly beneath the CompuVerse.

He looked up at some numbers floating in the air between them, blinked a few times and moved his finger through the glowing hologram. "That cell's taken. Put them up to 373GK," The guard said.

"I can't do that," Jade sounded almost bored. "I've been told to take him to cell 586DL."

The guard stopped looking at the numbers floating in the air and cocked his head to the side as he looked at Jade. "What are you even doing down here?" he asked.

Charlie raised his eyebrows. They might've just found the only person in all of Crowley who wasn't intimidated by Jade. Or who, at least, was going to pretend he wasn't.

"Excuse me?" Jade's back straightened even more and her chin lowered as she gave the guard the "don't you know who I am" look.

The Gamma hybrid guard smiled slowly. It was clear he knew who she was and he was going to enjoy this moment of power. "I'm not moving prisoners just to satisfy your requirements."

Charlie raised his eyebrows and snuck a glance at Jade. Her face was impassive and he could see a slight curl on the corner of her mouth. Charlie was pretty sure she was going to enjoy either beating the crap out of him or watching Angelo do it. However, before any of them could make a move or say another word, a loud rumbling came from up the corridor. The sound of an army of footsteps hurdled up the hall.

"What the hell is that?" The guard asked as another Gamma hybrid came careening around the corner.

Katerina entered the warren of passageways that made their way under Crowley.

"Identification?" A Gamma stood guarding the hallway, his eyes wide as he saw the influx of raging Deltas.

"How's this?" Katerina asked, pointing her laser at his head.

"What the fuck?" The Gamma asked. "Stand down, Delta."

Katerina lowered the laser to his arm, firing it. The Gamma wasn't her primary target, but she would take him out if she had to. The laser sizzled his foot and the smell of charred flesh filled the hallway. The Deltas let out an angry roar as the Gamma screamed in pain and pulled his weapon as he ran down the hall and deeper into the underground prison.

"The Deltas! They've gone crazy," he screamed as he ran up to Jade. "They're attacking everybody! They didn't just stop at the humans, they're starting to attack the rest of us, even the twenty-percenters!"

A look of fear washed over the guard's face. Charlie and Jade exchanged a look. We've got to get to the computer room.

"Plan B," Angelo said, picking up the guard and hurling him out of the way.

They all gazed up the hallway at the raging Deltas. "We won't be able to stop them," the guard said.

"We need firearms," the Gamma with the bleeding arm said.

"Go!" Tallahassee said to Charlie and Jade.

"We'll stay," Zeke nodded at the belligerent guard who lay dazed on the floor of the hall.

"You'll die!" Charlie said.

"We'll only be able to hold them off so long," Tallahassee nodded

"There's a way out," the Gamma said, pointing towards a smaller passageway. "We can hold them off for a bit and if we're lucky, we'll make it out there."

"We need you to hold them back for five minutes," Jade said. "Can you do that?"

"We'll try," Tallahassee said.

A look of sincere gratitude washed over Jade's face. "Thank you," she said.

"You can thank us by stopping them," Zeke nodded at the Deltas.

“Just make sure you meet us on time,” Charlie said.

“Come on!” Jade exclaimed. She and Angelo were already moving down the hall. Charlie hastened to keep up.

“What’s Plan B?” He asked as they raced down the hallway.

“We’re going to burn the wall down,” Jade said.

They sprinted through the hallways. Anytime they met a bot or a hybrid, Angelo took them out in about half a second. Charlie cringed at the sound of bones cracking against the walls, or metal scraping as a bot went flying.

“They’re going to know you’re doing it,” Charlie said.

“I have a feeling they already do,” Jade muttered.

Charlie’s lungs burned and his legs ached by the time they rounded the final corner and came to the main door of the computer room. But where there had been two bots earlier, now there were ten. Clearly Warren was onto them and not about to risk them getting into the CompuVerse.

But this time, Charlie wasn’t on his own. He had Angelo and Jade. Two of the bots went down without a fight, though Charlie presumed they would’ve fought had they been given a little more warning before Angelo blasted their heads off.

Another bot was too close to Jade when Angelo went in. He couldn’t hit him with a bullet, but he did rip his legs out from under him. The bot fell to the ground as Jade swung out at the bot.

“Get the hell in there,” Jade yelled at Charlie.

“I don’t have access!” Charlie said.

Jade smacked her head as if that was obvious. She kicked the bot in the abdomen so hard with her robotic leg, that it went flying backwards and right into a headlock from Angelo.

Jade stepped to the side and put her face against the retinal scanner, letting it scan quickly first her right eye and then her left eye. Charlie heard the sickening snap of metal being torn apart and glanced over his shoulder to watch Angelo rip the head off of the last remaining bot.

“It’s not opening!” Jade said. “Angelo, blow it up.”

Angelo moved down the hallway. “Duck!” he cried as he popped a HEL charger out of his pocket, punched a hole in the wall and stuck the laser explosive in it.

The reverberation of the detonation stunned everyone and everything in the hallway. Human, hybrid and bot alike. The world spun and the space throbbed as Charlie lifted his head from the ground. A gaping hole was ripped in the side of the CompuVerse room and Dustin and Graham stood there, mouths agape as Jade picked up Charlie and carried him inside.

“You can’t be in here!” Dustin screamed.

“I have to be here,” Charlie said. “If anything is going to stop this nasty code you submitted, it’ll be me. How many people have you killed?”

Jade grabbed Dustin, pinning him down against the desk. He let out a pitiful whimper. But Charlie didn’t care. The door to the computer room was stuck open and they could hear the thunderous rain of

hybrids coming up the hall. Charlie had a flash of a zombie apocalypse, but he turned away from the door. He had one task to do here.

He turned to the CompuVerse.

“Get off me!” Dustin yelled, his voice is muffled as Jade pressed his face against the metal desk.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing now,” Jade said. “Thanks to Charlie. You’re a filthy scumbag, Dustin.”

“I made you a powerful part of a machine,” Dustin exclaimed.

“You made me powerless.” Jade punched him in the head.

“It doesn’t matter,” Dustin gave a hoarse laugh. “The Delta army will be here in thirty seconds. That’s not enough time for you to hack into the system. You’ve been locked out for days.”

“But you haven’t been,” Jade said, hefting him off of the desk and pushing his face forward towards the scanner. “Now, if you don’t get your fingers in there and get that damn thing up and running, I will rip your fingers off myself and use them to get in there. And after that, I will shove them up your ass.” Dustin trembled and his eyes teared up. Jade’s reputation was known throughout Crowley. She would do what she said. His hands quivered as he reached for the access field.

Charlie’s eyes were wide as he watched. He was pretty sure Jade was bluffing, but he was glad Dustin was following her instructions. He wouldn’t want to test Jade.

In seconds, Charlie was in the system. Jade handed Dustin off to Angelo.

“Stun him,” she said as guns fired and lasers ricocheted off the walls in the hallway.

Sweat beaded on Charlie’s upper lip, but his hands were steady. He sucked in his cheeks and grabbed the bracelet with the code out of his pocket. He did exactly what Maverick had shown him, he rubbed the bead in four circles and then punched it towards the drive as hard as he could. The code he was looking for appeared in the air and with the wave of a hand, he pushed the hologram into the computer field to exactly the spot he needed.

Sometimes it takes a while to switch operating systems. To learn the tricks and ways that one system is different from the other. And Charlie wanted time to ramp up, but he didn’t have it. He went into deep thought in an instant, allowing his muscle memory to bind up the code and prepare to send it out to the hybrids. He shut off his brain and went into auto pilot. Ignoring the rampage and shouts of the hybrids as they burst into the room, ignoring Angelo’s rapid-fire response and Jade screaming at him to duck. It was as if the world was moving in slow motion, and he was not in charge.

And just like that, it was done. The code was signed, sealed, and delivered into the computer field. Charlie reached forward and hit the button to send the code to the Delta hybrids. But, as he turned around and saw the hybrids swarming into the room, he realized it wasn’t going to happen soon enough to save Angelo, Jade, and himself. They were stuck in the thick of battle, with Deltas surrounding them.

And the hybrids were trying to get through them so they could kill him.

“It’s done!” He shouted over to Jade and Angelo.

Jade gave a brief nod, letting him know she'd heard. Angelo crouched low and with the single burst upwards, he scattered hybrids as he somersaulted backwards towards the back wall. Holding out his hand, a white laser beam blew a hole in the side of the wall.

"Go!" Jade pointed to the hole. Charlie took one look at Angelo and Jade, and knew he had to run. He was great on the computer, but he would suck in real life battle.

He darted to the hole in the wall and Jade was close on his heels. Angelo covered their backs as they ran out of the computer room.

Angelo had to blast through three more walls until they finally made it outside of headquarters, but the hybrids did not give them any respite.

"Why isn't it working?" Charlie asked.

"Updates take time," Jade said.

"We don't have time," Charlie said.

Hybrids poured out of the building, advancing on them. Angelo and Jade exchanged a look.

"You can't kill the Deltas. They don't know what they're doing," Jade said.

"We're cornered," Angelo said. "If I don't eradicate them, they will execute you and Charlie."

"Give it another twenty seconds," Charlie said, his voice hoarse. "Just give it another twenty seconds."

He couldn't quite figure out why he was telling Angelo not to kill the Deltas, except it was what Jade wanted, and these were Jade's people. They weren't just some machines that should be blown away. These were people, people who had been given a disease of hatred and mania; a desire to kill.



"What is going on?" Warren screamed as screen after screen went black in the control room. He pressed his finger against his temple. "Dustin!"

Dustin didn't answer. He wished to everything in the world that he could pull the comm system out of his head. The last thing he needed was for Warren to be screaming at him.

They were losing the Deltas. The code he had slaved away on for eighteen months was destroyed. That damn Charlie had gotten in there and done something, something horrible. Dustin squeezed his eyes shut. How was he ever going to recover from this? Another eighteen months of work?

Eighteen months of Warren screaming in his ear.

It was going to drive Dustin crazy.



And suddenly, the Deltas stopped exactly where they were, their eyes flipped back in their heads, the lids closing, their eyeballs fluttering backwards.

“The update!” Charlie cried. “It’s happening.”

“Marvelous!” Angelo agreed.

“That’s an understatement,” Jade muttered, her shoulders visibly sagging with relief as the garbage incinerator pulled up behind the updating Deltas. “Let’s go!”



Blake pushed open the door and ran into Robin’s room. Her teeth had stopped gnashing, her eyes had stopped roving the room in anguish. Whatever Monfils or Jade or the powers that be had been doing, it had worked.

Robin was saved.

Blake grabbed her up in his arms and held her tight against his chest. She was going to live. She was going to be in her normal mind. But when she found out what she had done, he knew she would never be the same again. Crowley was never going to be the same again.

“We have to rebuild, Robin,” Blake murmured as Robin began to sob, seeing her memories clearly and her part in the brutal attack on the rebels. “We have to rebuild everything,” he said.

Even you, he thought.



“Where are Zeke and Tallahassee?” Charlie asked looking around as the door opened and the gang plank came down.

“You can’t wait,” Jade said, pushing him up the gang plank

Charlie looked at Jade. “You’re not coming,” he said. It wasn’t really a question, even though he tried to make it sound like one.

Jade ducked her head. “No. I need to see about my parents.”

“Of course,” Charlie said. “I need to see about mine.”

“Gunk will drop you at the DarkM’attr machine,” Jade said. “You just press the big green button and it’ll take you back home.”

Charlie nodded. “If you ever need help again, you know where to find me.” He let out a slight chuckle. And Jade nodded.

“I do,” she said.

“Keep an eye on her,” Charlie said to Angelo.

“That’s my job,” Angelo said.

“Angelo, you’ll stay with Charlie until he’s safe,” Jade said to Angelo. “Without you, he’s not going to be able to get the DarkM’attr machine to work.”

Angelo gave a deep, low bow. “I will return to you shortly.”

Jade nodded, her face serious. “Be careful. Both of you.”

Charlie wanted to hug Jade. She was the closest friend he had here. He stared into her human eye still wanting to ask her on that sundress date. But that didn’t make any sense. They were about to say goodbye.

Forever.

Jade stared at Charlie. He was so...human. Nothing like the god she’d been raised to think of him as. It seemed strange that he was going back to his world and yet would still remain a strong public presence in her time. But she would never look at his statues the same again. He would always just be, well, Charlie to her.

She thought about holding out her hand to shake his but that seemed so...not the right choice. A frown creased her face as he stared into her eyes. Could he tell she wanted to hug him? They both stood straight and tall.

This was goodbye.

With a brief nod Charlie turned and entered the garbage incinerator, climbing up into the glass dome. He’d barely been seated a second when the garbage truck thrust forward, moving quickly through the streets.

“Well, that turned out just fine,” Angelo said.

Charlie stared at the spaces where Jade, Zeke and Tallahassee had been when they’d entered the city.

“It’s kinda quiet around here,” he muttered.

“Not everyone makes it during battle,” Angelo said. “It’s a sad fact.”

“Right. It’s just- I hadn’t thought it should be, you know...people I know.” Charlie starred out at the burning city, his face aglow in the orange light. His eyes pricked a bit. Zeke and Tallahassee had been his friends, too. Or, kind of his friends. The kind of guys he’d go and have a drink with if they were back home. Now they were gone. He thought they were gone. But he’d never really know what happened to them.

The Dark M’attr Machine rose in the distance. They were almost there.

Charlie was going to miss this world. He’d have to visit Las Vegas when he got home. Home was going to be weird.

He stared at the streets as an explosion rang out around the corner. Two dark figures careened around it racing towards the garbage incinerators.

“Gunk!” Charlie yelled. “Stop!”

Zeke and Tallahassee, blackened and bleeding, were running towards them, three ProtectoBots on their tails.

The garbage incinerator slid to a halt as Gunk dropped the gangway and Charlie ran down to haul the injured rebels in. “Shut it!” he screamed at Gunk and the gangway came up, closing just fast enough to stop the bots from getting at them.

Gunk slammed the garbage vehicle into overdrive and they careened around a corner and away from the bots.

“You’re alive!” Charlie had never been so relieved in his life.

“No bot’s going to get us,” Zeke laughed.

“What’s going on?” Charlie asked as he dropped down next to Zeke.

“The honchos must have figured out we stopped their hybrid onslaught. They’ve turned the bots on everyone,” Zeke said.

Tallahassee groaned, holding his side in agony. “Gunk, you gotta get us out of the city.”

Charlie stared out at the DarkM’attr machine quadrant that was right in front of them. This was his moment. He was finally going home. To his sister, his nephew, to no crazy robots or confusing foods.

Gunk looked over his shoulder at Charlie.

“Get us out of here,” Charlie nodded. There was no way he was going to risk everyone’s lives just so he could get home. He’d rather everyone was alive here, than he was alive there and they were all dead.

Gunk nodded and spun the machine towards the nearest exit.

Then suddenly, a gut-wrenching blast rocked the earth, and before Charlie’s nearly blinded eyes, the warehouse that held the DarkM’attr machine exploded in a burst of fragmented white light. Charlie shielded his eyes as bits of the machine sailed through the air, littering the sky with all hope he had ever had of returning to his own time.



Monfils pulled the BSA up in Trenchtown. He’d followed the raging Deltas on the comm system and discovered too late that Jade had left the rebels and was back in Crowley. He’d watched the DarkM’attr Machine blow up in the distance as he’d landed outside the house that used to be hers.

Jade stood there, head bowed, staring at the blackened foundations.

“How could this happen?” she murmured.

Monfils placed his hands on her shoulders. They’d been lovers once and it was all he could do not embrace her and kiss away the tears he knew were buried deep within her. But she’d ended it before and never given him any indication she wanted to rekindle their romantic relationship. Monfils always missed her, but he didn’t pressure her.

It’s not like she ever dated anyone else. It was just a matter of time before she came back to him.

“I should have moved them when I saw what was happening,” Monfils murmured.

“Yes, you should have.” Jade yanked herself away from Monfils, even though she knew she was being unfair. It’s just, the rage driving inside her wasn’t the Delta coding anger she’d felt before. The blind turmoil that had clouded her judgement. Now her judgement was crystal clear and stone cold.

Without looking back at Monfils, she walked away down the darkened, deserted streets of

Trenchtown.

Chapter 39

Charlie stepped out of the garbage incinerator in Holbrook. A crowd of Lowsmiths stood dark and dusty, watching them come out. Zeke helped Tallahassee, who was limping. They stood with Gunk at the top of the gangway, Angelo shadowing them from behind.

Applause started at the back of the crowd and slowly moved its way forward. The Delta hybrids had been stopped. They may not have turned into bright and shining Lowsmith lovers, and they might still like their elite lifestyle in the city, but at least they would never be controlled by Warren or Blake or anyone anymore. They would always have their own thoughts and feelings.

Charlie's heart was dragging into his shoes. The DarkM'attr machine was destroyed. Jade was gone, back to her life in the city. He was never getting Jade. And he was never getting home. The thought wasn't completely devastating, but it made him lonely and homesick and... wispy. Very, very wispy. Like a dry desert wind would blow right through him and carry him away.

Tallahassee, Zeke and Gunk raised their arms to the applause, but Charlie couldn't do it. He didn't want recognition for doing the right thing. He didn't want any of it.

Apparently, neither did Zeke. "Hey, you want to go get a drink?" Zeke hissed at Charlie.

Charlie was surprised, not only by the invitation- where the hell did someone get a drink around here? But also, because he found he most certainly did want to do just that. "Uh, why yes I do," he nodded to Zeke.

"Come on, there's an Outliers' village just over the ridge there." Zeke motioned to a red dirt pile in the distance.

"Really? We can just go?" Charlie asked.

"Sure. Come on, I got a little four-seater we can take." He nodded Gunk and Tallahassee away from the crowd and they slipped to the side, letting the crowd get lost in itself.

The four-seater looked a lot like a golf cart covered in dirt. It was only floating a little bit above the ground.

"Jump on," Zeke launched himself into the driver's seat.

"I can't ride backwards." Charlie shook his head.

Gunk and Tallahassee took the rear-facing seats. Angelo turned on his hover ops and took to the air next to them.

“Cool.” Zeke nodded, admiring the bot’s ability to fly. “Don’t let Maverick see you do that. He’ll dissect that out of you for sure.”

Before long, the four of them were zipping along in the evening. The sun was setting over the red horizon. The wind lifted Charlie’s hair and he thought it was really quite an amazing feeling. It was a miracle he was here and this was America, but it wasn’t America, it was such a different place. Something he never even dreamed of. And he was cruising along in this open vehicle, whatever it was, feeling a certain amount of camaraderie with his new friends.

Friends.

Charlie had friends. Sort of.

For all the nights he sat in the Lonely Tree Tavern, he’d never sat with anyone. He always sat alone. And now he was getting a ride with people he’d been through something with. They had survived and they had each other’s backs. These were good people and he was good people and they were hanging out together.

As the small floater slid over the crest, Charlie was amazed to see the ramshackle town in front of them. There was metal and a few other interesting things around, but in general the Outliers’ village didn’t look much different from the small villages dotting the 21st century American landscape. There was only one street here and everything was on it.

Zeke pulled the floater up in front of a dimly lit doorway. He jumped out and was in the building before Charlie had even gotten off the vehicle. He was too busy looking around at how much things had changed in some parts of the world and stayed the same in others. This was clearly a watering hole. He would have known that even if he hadn’t been taken there for a drink. Small, single-story brick building, small metal door... The building wouldn’t be out of place in the 21st century. When he pushed open the door, he found himself grinning. Dirty corners, crooked frames. This place looked a hell of a lot like the Lonely Tree Tavern. He knew it wasn’t, but it looked and felt a lot like it. He realized he probably shouldn’t have been surprised. Buildings in England stuck around for five, six, seven hundred years. Just because three hundred have passed doesn’t mean everything is just wiped off the face of the earth.

His friends sat at a table in the corner, already waving the cute bartender over. Definitely not Dan the Man, this was a curvy, busty young woman. However, from the look in her eye and the blade on her hip, Charlie thought she might give Jade a run for her money.

“I ordered you a beer,” Zeke said as Charlie sat down.

“You guys still drink beer?” he asked.

Tallahassee and Zeke exchanged a look. “What did you think we were drinking?” Tallahassee asked.

“I don’t know, freaking something distilled from something. But I guess beer’s been around six thousand years, no reason why it would disappear in three hundred. And I am damn happy about that.” He grinned as the woman came back and placed four beers on the table.

He took a sip of the beer. “Amstel Light!” he grinned, suddenly at ease. “Amazing.” Maybe things weren’t going to be so different here in the future.

The door to the tavern opened, shedding light inside the dim recesses. Tallahassee grinned as he lowered his glass, his eyes going over Charlie’s shoulder. “That’s one hell of a hybrid friend you got there,” he said.

“She’s pretty amazing.” Charlie stared down at his beer. “I hope she’s okay.”

“Well, she looks okay to me,” Zeke said.

“What?” Charlie asked, looking over his shoulder.

Through the light of the open door a silhouette walked straight towards them. The way her hips moved, the way her hair fell, and the shape of the DC15s pistol in its holster...the silhouette could only be one person.

“Jade!” Charlie sprang to his feet, grabbing her hands in a kind of awkward trembling greeting. He dropped her fingers like she was on fire and motioned to the table.

“Grab a beer, come over. I mean sit down, I’ll grab you a beer,” he corrected himself. He looked up at the red hulking bot. “Angelo, you want anything?” He asked, giddy with delight.

“No, I am quite all right, thank you.”

Angelo stared down at the flimsy chairs encircling the leaning wooden table. “I think I’ll just stand over here by the wall,” he decided.

“Your parents?” Charlie had to ask even though he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

Jade looked Charlie in the eye. “There was nothing I could do.”

Charlie nodded solemnly. It was exactly what he expected, but he knew it had to be tearing her apart. “I’m really sorry, Jade.”

The barmaid arrived with Jade’s beer.

“You know,” she said after taking a sip, “their whole lives, they told me they wanted to do one thing; die together.” Her voice choked a little bit at the words. “They got to do that. And they didn’t want me to feel obligated to keep them alive. And now...now I don’t have to do that. I’m truly free. Nobody can get in my head, nobody can control me, I have nothing I need to think about. Except what I want to do now.”

Charlie looked awkwardly at his hands. “How did you find us?”

“I asked around,” Jade said. “You know the DarkM’attr machine is destroyed?”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I saw that explosion right before we escaped. But somehow, the pain of the DarkM’attr machine being destroyed doesn’t feel quite so bad anymore. I don’t feel quite so hopeless.”

He looked around at his smiling friends, the bot fiddling with his knife, then he looked at Jade, and he raised a glass. “To the Allegiance,” he said, the corners of his mouth lifting just enough as he looked into Jade’s deep brown eye.

“To the Allegiance. To HOPE.” The others agreed, raising their glasses.

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MELLE AMADE is a bestselling science fiction and fantasy author whose debut YA urban fantasy Shifter Chronicles series launched in 2016. Her books weave a tapestry of hidden worlds, ancient power, deep passions, international locations, and heroines who dare to risk their lives and sometimes... even their hearts. Melle lives with her family in Los Angeles, California where she can snowboard on the mountain and swim in the ocean all in one day.

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BOUND TO THE ALPHAS

LILY THORN

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BOUND TO THE ALPHA

No name. No memory. Nowhere left to run...

She awakes in a forest, dressed only in a traveling cloak and with no memory of who she is or why she's run her feet bloody. Worse, she seems to have woken up in shifter territory, under the noses of two huge wolves. One shifter is fierce and cold, the other warm and comforting. But her enemy is after her, getting closer every day. And he has nothing to fear from shifters...

Chapter 1

There was nothing but the sound of her ragged breath in her ears, the pounding of her bare feet against the earth. Her lungs ached, her legs burned, but she couldn't stop. Not now. Not ever.

The stitch in her side flared. Crying out, she stumbled and fell. Ignoring her scraped hands, she rose, gulping in deep, shuddering breaths of air.

She looked back over her shoulder, dread in the pit of her stomach. She couldn't name what was behind her, but she knew one thing.

He is coming.

Far off in the inky night, a scream of rage split the air. Backing away, she began to run again. It felt like an icy hand had seized her heart. The words pulsed through her mind like a chant, her feet lending a frenzied beat.

He is coming. He is coming. He is coming.

She raced toward the mountains, wind clawing at her stolen cloak. Branches whipped her face, thorns tore at her legs, but she forced herself onward.

She just wished she knew what she was running from.

Chapter 2

“*M*aybe you could take a minute to calm down—”

“Calm down?” Jet whirled on his brother. “They’ve ruined everything!”

“Stop,” Jasper said, using that annoyingly serene tone of his. “Think for a while. I’m sure there’s still some way to salvage this.”

“I’ll salvage it, all right.” Jet strapped on his belt knife and strode out of his room. “I’ll salvage both of them until they beg me to let them honor their agreement.”

Jasper caught up, neatly stepping in front of him. “Brother...”

“Don’t try to slow me down.” Jet pushed past him. “And don’t ‘brother’ me. I have to do what’s best for the pack.”

“And what’s best for the pack?” Jasper was jogging beside him now. “Seeking revenge on our sister, and on our neighboring pack?”

Jet stopped, giving him a cold stare. “Which one of us is Alpha?”

“You are.” Jasper lowered his eyes.

“At least someone recognizes that.” Jet marched through the main cavern, making heads turn. Most of the pack was still eating breakfast, but some of them rose as he passed. No doubt they’d already heard.

“As you were,” Jet snapped.

Fable and Rowan remained standing. Jet bristled. They might be his sister’s best friends, but they did not get a say in her punishment.

Rowan opened her mouth to speak. Out of the corner of his eye, Jet saw Jasper raise his hand slightly in a quelling gesture. Still glaring, Rowan sat.

Stifling a snarl, Jet stalked toward the entrance. He wasn’t going to stay inside this den any longer if no one was going to listen to him.

He refused to look back at Jasper, or any of his pack. None of them understood the burden of his position, the responsibility. None of them had sat through five and a half long months of negotiations, trying to forge an alliance with the pack to their south. None of them were kept up at night, wondering if their numbers were too thin or their borders strong enough.

Only Jet knew. And no one seemed to care what he thought.

He stepped through the gauntlet of hanging roots, batting them away from his face. Jet remembered looking up at them as a wide-eyed pup, his father telling him how the towering oak shielded them, connected them to the earth, and how he should remember that every time he passed beneath. But his father had never told him how to deal with a sister who scorned him, a neighboring Alpha who couldn't keep his word, or a pack who didn't respect him.

Jet marched through the canyon, not bothering to look back at the oak that grew at the far end, lending shelter to traitors who didn't deserve it. He would demand respect, by force if necessary.

"Slow down, will you?"

Jasper was a few paces behind him, as relentless as a flea.

Jet would give him as much attention as a flea deserved.

"At least tell me where you're going," Jasper said.

He was Alpha. He answered to no one.

Jet left the canyon behind, continuing his straight, determined path. He would not be turned from his mission. Trees and boulders should move out of *his* way, lest they meet the same fate that awaited Ash.

"You're going with stony silence?" Jasper asked. "Very Alpha. But we're headed due south, so it's obvious you're going to face Ash. Are you really planning on fighting him alone?"

"I would only be alone if you stopped pestering me," Jet growled as he leapt over a mossy log. "I doubt I'll be so lucky."

"You think you'll face just the Ember pack's Alpha?" Snarling, Jasper blocked his path.

Jet tried to remember the last time he'd heard his brother snarl.

"You think Ash's brother wouldn't defend him? Blaze is a formidable foe. And they'd have their entire pack to back them. What if they tear you to shreds?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Shoving his shoulder into his brother's chest, Jet forced him aside.

"So that's your big plan?" Jasper shouted after him. "You're going to fight the Ember pack alone? You want to leave Oak Canyon without its Alpha?"

His brother's words grated. Jasper wasn't Alpha. Who was Jasper to tell him what to do?

"Fine," Jasper called. "Ignore my counsel. That worked out so well with Locke."

Jet stopped, turned. He saw Jasper's face whiten, but nothing could quell the rage building inside him.

"You dare speak his name?" Jet clenched his jaw. "The name of that mangy beast that stole our sister, that ruined my alliance?"

Jasper held up his hands. "You're right. I'm sorry. You're Alpha, and you make the decisions. I won't question you again." Backing away, he veered east.

"Don't walk away from me!" Jet shuddered, trying not to let rage overcome him. Fur rippled over his arms, but he forced it back. He needed to stay coherent. There were things he needed to say, and

Jasper would damn well hear them.

“I’ll leave you alone,” Jasper said, still retreating. “It’s for the best.”

Jet bared his teeth. He was tired of being questioned at every turn. “Let’s see how you like being followed, *brother*.”

Jasper shifted, turning into a gray wolf, his head low and his tail tucked as he slunk away. Jet strode after him, determined to stay on two legs. How dare his brother throw Locke in his face? The shifter had entered Oak Canyon territory a few days after another audacious encroachment from the Wind Runner pack. Jet had taken him for a Wind Runner at first, but the wolf bore wounds that proved he was no friend of that pack.

Normally, Jet’s first instinct would have been to send a rival male on his way—and though Locke’s wolf wasn’t quite as large as Jet’s, it was still large enough to pose a threat. But it was also large enough to be an asset to the pack’s defenses.

He’s too much of an Alpha, Jasper had warned. He’ll never fit in here. Besides, how do you think he got those injuries? Did he challenge the Wind Runner Alphas?

Jet had scoffed at him. He still wanted to scoff at Jasper’s retreating tail. “Turn and shift,” he said. “Face me as a man.”

But Jasper continued silently, slowly leading Jet east.

Glaring at his brother, Jet ground his teeth. He had thought having another fighter in Locke would make Ash think twice before turning down a chance at an alliance. Instead, his brilliant new fighter had run off with his sister. A growl bubbled in his throat as he thought of the indignity afresh. Locke hadn’t even faced Jet, fought for the right of his sister like an Alpha. He and Juniper had simply fled.

“Juniper,” he growled, his jaw stiff. He would deal with her soon enough. She would pay for turning his plans to dust.

“It’s not her fault, you know.” Ahead of him, Jasper had shifted. “She’s only ever wanted to please our father, and then you. You might have noticed if you ever looked past the end of your nose.”

Jet laughed derisively. “When has our sister ever cared what I thought?”

His brother’s face was stony. “She’s only ever cared about the good of the pack. She’s cooked our meals, cared for our sick, patrolled our borders, brought down more deer than anyone—but you asked too much of her, dear brother.”

Jet’s lip curled. “I asked her to act for the good of the pack.”

“You asked her to bind herself to someone who wasn’t her mate.”

Jet laughed. “You don’t believe that, do you? Fated mates, destiny? What a load of—”

“Juniper believes in it.”

“I didn’t know our sister was so simple.”

Jasper stopped short, glaring. “Don’t insult our sister,” he snapped.

Strolling up to him, Jet tried to hide how pleased he was. Jasper always pretended that he was so calm, so collected. But he could get as angry as anyone could, and Jet loved being able to prove it.

Taking a breath, Jasper seemed to compose himself. “She found her fated mate, Jet. Your plan was never going to work.”

Fury boiled through him. “You knew she was going to run off with Locke, didn’t you? She told you her little secret, and you thought you’d keep it from me.”

“I can’t help if our sister confides in me. Maybe if you’d actually listen to her for a change—”

“Listen to what? Her plans to betray our pack?” Rage pulsed through his veins. Black fur rippled over his arms again. His wolf was clawing its way to the surface, and Jet wouldn’t be able to hold it back much longer. He felt his canines lengthen as he bared his teeth at his brother. “What other secrets have you been keeping from me?”

Jasper stepped away warily, not daring to turn his back. Good. He shouldn’t.

“You were so suspicious of Locke’s intentions,” Jet said. “You thought he would want my place as Alpha, but you were wrong, weren’t you?”

“I was wrong.” Jasper lowered his head. “I’m sorry, Jet. I don’t like that Juniper’s gone either.”

“Don’t try to distract me,” Jet snarled. “I see your game.”

“What game?” His brother put on a good show of pretending to be bewildered.

“You want to be Alpha, don’t you? You didn’t want Locke to steal my place before you could.”

A growl tore from Jasper’s throat. “Think hard before accusing me of betrayal, Jet. I’m your brother, and the wolf at your right paw. I know you’re furious about your dead alliance, about Locke and Juniper, but don’t turn your anger on the ones most loyal to you.”

“Like you?” Jet laughed. “You would have had me believe that Juniper was loyal. If you’re as loyal as her, that’s worth as much as dirt.”

Jasper straightened, ready to fight. “I would die before betraying our pack.”

“You should die before betraying me!”

“Stop this!” Jasper’s teeth turned into fangs.

He was losing control. Good.

“We need to salvage what we can from this,” Jasper said, voice tight, “not waste time squabbling. Let’s get back to the den.”

His brother planned to betray him, like they had all betrayed him. Ash, Locke, Juniper. What was one more? He should have seen it sooner. Jasper wanted to drop the final blow, be Alpha himself.

Jet lunged, shifting in midair. For a split second, Jasper looked like he didn’t believe what he was seeing. Then he shifted too, leaping out of the way of Jet’s teeth.

Rolling to his feet, Jasper fled. The white tip of his tail flashed through the trees, goading Jet to follow. He was going to snatch that tail in his teeth and tear it off. Let Jasper try to be Alpha when he was a tailless laughingstock.

His paws beat against the earth. He would not let Jasper out of his sight. His brother veered right, and Jet’s claws dug into the dirt as he switched directions to follow the traitor. Jasper was fast, and nimbler than Jet would have liked. He needed to catch his brother soon. Jasper wanted to tire him out

—he knew Jet was stronger in battle.

Jet was done playing games.

His brother leapt over logs, wove through pines. Jet got close enough to swipe at his back paw, but Jasper recovered without stumbling. Snarling, Jet pushed himself onward. He needed to protect his pack at all costs, even if it was from the brother he thought he loved.

Jasper veered again, heading for a clearing. Jet needed to end this. He had to do it while his vision was still clouded with redness, his blood still boiling. If he calmed, he didn't know if he'd have the strength to do what must be done.

Ahead of him, Jasper slowed. Jet set his jaw. His brother was finished.

In the clearing, Jasper stopped short, then shifted. It was enough to make Jet pause. Why would his brother shift into his vulnerable human form, with his back to him? Was he surrendering?

Jasper knelt down as Jet reached him. Jet blinked, confused. Was this some sort of trick?

Then he saw what his brother had, and all his rage evaporated.

A woman lay on the leafy ground, dressed in nothing but a traveling cloak. It had fallen open, revealing smooth, pale skin. The soft curves of her breasts and hips lay exposed to the mountain air, and Jet had to tear his eyes away from them.

He pulled back his lips, scenting blood. Was she hurt? Jet shook his head. Why did it matter? She was a stranger, and a trespasser.

Sniffing the air, he circled her. The coppery scent was strongest near her feet. Leaning closer, he inspected them. Her soles were caked with blood, strips of flesh missing. She had run herself ragged. But why?

Jasper was looking down at her, the strangest expression on his face. For some reason, Jet didn't like it that much.

The woman didn't stir. He couldn't even hear if she was breathing. Carefully, he touched his nose to one of her cupped hands.

She gasped, gazing at them. Her eyes met Jet's, and she lurched backwards.

"Shift, Jet," Jasper said. "She's terrified."

He didn't see what was so terrifying about one measly wolf, but he shifted. The sight of his human form didn't seem to bring her any relief. She looked from one of them to the other, pulling her cloak around her.

"We're sorry," Jasper said in a low voice. "We didn't mean to scare you. We won't hurt you."

Jet scoffed. They couldn't guarantee that. Jasper glared at him.

The woman glanced around, looking fearful.

Jasper opened his mouth, most likely to reassure her, but Jet cut him off.

"You're in Oak Canyon territory. Why have you come here?"

She stared at him, but didn't speak.

"What's wrong with you?" Jasper stood to face him. "She's hurt, maybe lost. Can you drop the

tough Alpha act for a minute?”

“Act?” Jet snarled. “Who was on sentry duty last night?”

“Sentry duty? Who cares? Jet, she’s hurt.”

“She’s trespassing. Why did no one catch this?”

“She’s alone and hurt. She’s not a threat, *Alpha*.”

Jet’s hackles raised at the mocking tone. What did Jasper know about threats to their pack? That was why he wasn’t Alpha.

The woman was watching them, her hazel eyes moving from Jasper to Jet.

Jasper moved closer to her. Jet was perversely pleased that she began to back away. His brother wasn’t as charming as he thought.

“What’s your name?” he asked. “Mine’s Jasper.”

She stared at him for a long moment, putting her hand on her forehead. “I... don’t remember.”

Her voice was like music.

“You don’t remember your name?” Jet asked.

Drawing her knees to her chest, she put her hands on her head. “Not anymore.” The woman rocked back, biting her lip so hard Jet feared it might bleed.

“Maybe we can help you remember,” Jasper said. “What letter did it start with?”

She closed her eyes, breathing hard. “S. S...”

“Sarah?” Jet guessed.

“Sasha?” Jasper suggested. “Saffron? Sophie?”

Clapping her hands to her ears, she screamed.

“All right, all right,” Jet said. “No more guessing.”

Slowly, she lowered her hands. The look she gave him was slightly accusing, which he found unfair—Jasper was the one making all the suggestions.

“She’s hurt,” Jasper murmured. “We need to get her back to the den.”

“Why?” Jet blurted out.

Jasper looked furious, but Jet stood by his words. This woman might be pretty, but she was a stranger to them. He had a pack to look after.

“Are you serious?” his brother asked in a low voice.

“We can’t take in every lost lamb and expect to make it through the winter.”

“We have plenty of stores, Jet. What are you so afraid of?”

Jet crouched, meeting those hazel eyes. Part of him was pleased that she didn’t flinch away from him.

“What are you running from?” he asked.

Her eyes went oddly blank. “Can’t...”

“Let me guess, she can’t remember that, either.” Jet got to his feet. “How surprising.”

“Can you stop being an asshole for five seconds?” Jasper hissed.

Across from them, the woman stumbled to her feet. Her face went white, and she swayed slightly. Jasper bounded to her side. "Can you walk?" he asked.

She shied away from him. Hurt flitted over his face, but he took a step back.

The woman looked at both of them again, as if checking that they were keeping their distance. Carefully, she placed one foot in front of the other.

There was a sharp intake of breath, and the scent of blood filled the clearing. She lifted her foot to reveal a bloody footprint.

"Jet, she's bleeding. We need to take her back to the den."

"To your home?" The woman collapsed.

They both rushed to her side. Jet scowled at his feet, which seemed to have moved of their own accord.

She sat up, pushing away from both of them, slithering back on dry leaves. "I can't go to your home. He will follow."

"Who will follow?" Jasper asked.

The woman frowned, then buried her face in her hands. "I don't know! But he's dangerous. Too dangerous."

"Right," Jet said, "we're taking you back to our den."

Jasper whipped around. "What?"

"She's in trouble. We have to help her."

"What about all that talk about protecting the den?"

"You don't believe I can do that?" Jet drew himself up regally. "What kind of Alpha do you think I am?"

Jasper narrowed his eyes, but didn't respond.

"I don't think you should walk," Jet said to the woman, "but I can carry you."

She looked up at him, a glint of fire in her hazel eyes.

"You aren't scared of me, are you?"

She shook her head. "You're not like him."

Jet and Jasper exchanged a look as she rose to her unsteady feet, but neither of them pressed her on that statement.

Her pulse jumped visibly in her neck as she limped toward Jet. Her jaw was set, and she seemed determined not to appear afraid. All that betrayed her fear was her slightly shaking hands.

"You'll be safe with us," Jet said.

She seemed deeply skeptical.

Slowly, as if she was a fawn that he might startle, Jet reached out to her. When she didn't flinch or flee, he put one hand behind her back, one behind her knees, and scooped her up.

She closed her eyes, shuddering, but didn't fight him. She was so light, despite the heavy traveling cloak. How did she manage to seem so vulnerable and so defiant at the same time?

Jasper cleared his throat. “We should get to the den.”

“Right.” Jet strode forward, wondering what was happening to him. Just because his right hand brushed the creamy skin of her thigh and her hair smelled slightly like vanilla, why did that distract him so? For once, he had no room in his head for alliances, plans, or strategies. This woman was dangerous.

Jasper cleared his throat again. “The den is this way, Alpha.”

“Of course.” Jet looked down at his burden, but she seemed to have fallen asleep.

He made his way toward the canyon, stumbling occasionally. His footing would have been surer if he hadn’t kept looking down. He didn’t like the dark circles under the woman’s eyes, but they couldn’t hide her radiant beauty. Her long, dark eyelashes twitched every few seconds. She might be getting sleep, but it wasn’t restful.

“I’m sorry,” Jet said as they stepped through the pines.

Jasper quickly took his eyes off the woman. “What for?”

“For accusing you of wanting to betray me. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You know I’d never do anything to hurt the pack. But neither would Juniper. I hope you can apologize to her too, someday.”

His brother was infuriating as ever.

Through the trees, the canyon came into view. The woman sat up in his arms with a start. She stared at him, eyes huge, and for a moment Jet was afraid she wouldn’t remember him.

“Are we here?” she asked.

“Almost.” Jet’s heart was pounding abnormally hard. “We’re about to enter the canyon. It isn’t easy for outsiders to find.”

This news didn’t make her relax. She began looking over his shoulder every few seconds, as if expecting someone to pop out from behind a tree.

Jet hoped she would stop once they entered the canyon. He always felt safer, surrounded by the rock walls.

She didn’t.

“Are you looking for someone?” Jasper asked.

“He could be here already,” she said feverishly. “He’s very powerful.”

“Who’s very powerful?”

Her only answer was to look back once more.

Jet had never been happier to see the towering oak that guarded their den. Maybe being out of the elements would help the woman feel more secure. Jet bit back a sigh. He wished he knew her name.

On the canyon’s rim, Clay let out a yip. It echoed down the rock walls, and Jet felt the woman freeze in his arms. He scowled up at Clay, though he knew the sentry was only doing his duty.

The end of the canyon and the oak were in sight. Shifters poured from the den, responding to the signal of a visitor and curious to see who it was. Jet’s scowl deepened. The woman needed rest and

healing, not a load of gawkers.

“I’ll make sure they give her space,” Jasper murmured. “Don’t worry.”

There was something he had to do. He was loath to leave her here, alone and without his protection, but one last glance of hers over his shoulder decided him.

“I’m going to hand you over to Jasper,” he said.

Jasper seemed confused, but her hazel eyes were steady as he transferred her into his brother’s arms. Jet’s chest clenched. This felt all wrong.

“Look after her, won’t you?” he asked his brother.

“And where are you going?”

Jet looked down the canyon. “To cover her tracks.”

He had taken a single step when someone grabbed his arm.

“Wait.” Her touch was light, but strong. “Sylvia. That’s my name.”

“Oh.” Something about her hazel eyes made him feel like he’d been clubbed over the head. “Nice to meet you, Sylvia.”

Her fingers fell from his arm, releasing him. He had to go now, or he’d never be able to bear the thought of leaving her side again. Jet shook himself and shifted, racing down the canyon and back into the woods. All the while, his paws seemed to drum out the only word that mattered.

Sylvia. Sylvia. Sylvia.

Chapter 3

There were stone walls, a towering tree. A man with large muscles—Jasper—clutched her to his chest. She felt a twinge of fear that the other man—shifter—had gone. It felt safer with two. There were more now, but she didn't know them. They crowded around, and she didn't have enough air.

"Yes, yes," Jasper was saying. "She's hurt, though. Give her some room. Everett, could you get some hot water? Rowan, bandages?" His voice sounded like it was coming from down a long tunnel.

Sylvia. She was Sylvia. She clung to the knowledge. He had tried so hard, but he hadn't been able to take it from her.

Who had tried?

She shuddered as a door seemed to slam shut in her mind. She couldn't think of him. Couldn't let him back in, even for a second. He had tried to take everything from her...

Sylvia let out the breath she'd been holding. Jasper was moving, carrying her through a curtain of dangling roots. This was nothing like the other place. Maybe he couldn't find her here.

No matter where you hide, how far you run, I'll always find you, my dove.

She couldn't help the sob that escaped her.

"What is it?" Jasper's arms tightened around her.

"My... my feet hurt."

"I'll have someone see to them. Just hold on a little longer."

It felt wrong to lie to him, but the twinge of guilt passed. After *him*, she couldn't trust anyone. There truly were monsters abroad in the world.

Don't think of him. Don't think of him.

Her heart beat frantically as she tried to think of something else. Jasper looked down at her, concern in his eyes. He seemed like a good man. But so had the other one. He had fooled her—it had been so easy.

"Put her down here." The voice was calm, but commanding. Unravelling a bandage, a woman with black hair flicked her eyes over Sylvia. "She doesn't look too good. What happened?"

"Not sure." Jasper laid her on a makeshift cot. "I figured I'd ask again once she's rested."

Sylvia wrapped the cloak around her. No one else was wearing clothes, but she felt naked in front

of these people. From the way they strode about, confident and bare, she wondered if they thought her odd for covering herself.

The woman gasped. “What did she do to her feet?”

“Ran her soles off, I think.” Jasper put a hand on the back of his head. “Is there anything I can do, Rowan?”

“Get her some water. And food. She looks like she could use it.”

Jasper knelt down next to her cot. “I’ll be back soon,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

He left the room with a worried backward glance. Sylvia watched him go, feeling like she might be sick to her stomach. The woman—Rowan—was still here. So why did she feel so alone?

A shifter popped into the room. “Here’s your hot water,” he said.

“Thanks, Everett.” Rowan turned to Sylvia as he left. “Can you sit up for me?”

She sat abruptly, wondering why the question made her throat tighten.

“You can soak your feet in this bucket for a few minutes,” Rowan said. “Once the dirt’s off, I can see what the damage is.”

Slowly, Sylvia slid her feet into the water. It stung horribly. She gritted her teeth, determined not to cry out.

“That should be good,” Rowan said finally.

Gasping, Sylvia lifted her feet.

“Not as bad as they looked.” Rowan inspected her soles as she dabbed them with a piece of hide. “Hopefully we can get them healed up fast.”

That was good. She needed to heal as quickly as possible. She needed to keep moving, to get out of here before *he* found her, like he had promised. He always kept his promises...

“This is the best lotion we have,” Rowan said, uncorking a jar. “For healing, anyway. Just don’t ask what’s in it. Or why it smells so bad.”

Gently but thoroughly, she smeared it over Sylvia’s soles. A pungent smell filled the room until it made her eyes water. But the horrible stinging began to fade from her feet, so she didn’t complain.

She hadn’t realized how much her feet had hurt. As the lotion seeped in, she felt her shoulders relax.

“Let me get you bandaged up.” Rowan deftly wrapped her feet, which had started to throb.

Sylvia closed her eyes. She hoped Rowan would finish soon. She could already feel herself drifting off...

“What’s this?” Rowan asked sharply.

Sylvia jerked awake. Rowan was staring at the two punctures near her inner elbow. Feeling self-conscious, Sylvia drew it into her cloak.

“I think it was an animal,” she mumbled.

“That must have been a large animal. Can I clean the wound for you?”

“It’s... old.” Sylvia wished she could disappear into her cloak. “I’ll be fine.”

“Let me bandage it at least.”

Hating herself for not resisting, Sylvia stuck out her arm. Rowan wrapped a bandage around it, taking one last look at the bite marks.

“How’s it going?” Jasper appeared in the doorway. “I brought a tray of food up to my quarters. I figured it might be quieter up there. Is it all right if I move her?”

“Fine, fine.” Rowan spooled and unspooled the bandages. “Let me just talk to you for a moment, Jasper.”

They went into the hall, but snippets of their hushed conversation echoed off the stone.

“...mostly healthy... needs rest and food... but bite marks... vampire?”

“Vampire?”

“On her arm, though... Is it safe?”

“Safe? She’s not a vampire, is she?” Jasper’s voice had risen.

“No, but is it wise—”

“Wise be damned! She’s hurt, and she needs our help.” Jasper stormed back into the room. “If there’s nothing further, that will be all. Thank you for your help, Rowan.”

“Are you besotted already? Really, Jasper?” She tried to keep her voice low, but it didn’t matter. “Last time I checked, you weren’t Alpha.”

“So everyone keeps reminding me.”

“You don’t have final say in this.”

“And neither do you, Rowan. Now *go*.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed, but she left without further argument.

Sylvia watched as Jasper sank to the cot beside her, making the hide groan.

“Sorry about that. I know you need rest, not yelling.”

She ran a finger over the bandage on her arm. Unlike the ones on her feet, it felt uncomfortably tight. “I did get bitten, though. But I’m not... I’m not one of—”

Her throat closed, and she couldn’t finish her sentence. She shut her eyes, trying not to think of the fangs, the searing heat of them, the horrible sucking sound...

“It’s all right.” Jasper laid a hand on hers. For once, she didn’t flinch away. “I’m here.”

Her stomach growled.

“You’re hungry.” He smiled. “And in luck. Come with me.”

Picking her up easily, he took her into the hall and through a maze of stone.

“My brother and I sleep up here.” He was carrying her up steps carved into the inner trunk of the tree. “It’s quieter, if nothing else.”

At the top of the stairs were two doorways. Jasper took her through the one on the right.

“This is my room. It’s not much, but it’s home.”

A platform had been hewn from the stone floor. It was piled with furs, which he placed her on.

“How about we let in some light?” He pushed on part of the trunk, and a piece of it swung open

like a window. Clouds rolled past in the blue sky outside.

“Eat, if you’re not too tired.” He laid a tray beside her. “There’s some rabbit, and some greens. I wasn’t sure what you preferred.”

Sylvia was suddenly ravenous. When had she last eaten? From the way her stomach was twisting, it could have been days. She snatched up the meat, tearing off pieces and gulping them down. Juice dribbled down her chin.

She looked up, remembering that Jasper was there, and froze. He must think her so rude. He would punish her, just like—

“Don’t worry.” Jasper smiled. “I’m a wolf, I’m not concerned with table manners.”

Slowly, she relaxed. She took a cautious bite of rabbit, still watching him in case he had lied and was just waiting until she was off guard to punish her.

But as the rabbit disappeared, he only seemed focused on her appetite.

“Was that enough?” he asked. “I can get more if you want it.”

She shook her head, hoping he couldn’t hear her stomach growl again. What if this was all a trick, a tease? Her eyelids drooped. She was so tired. She had to remember not to trust him, not even for a second...

Don’t trust who?

She remembered the cold green eyes, the cruel laugh. Sylvia shivered, feeling like nothing could warm her.

“Are you cold?”

She jumped. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

Lies, lies, lies. She hated lying to Jasper. His eyes were light gold, and there was warmth and humanity behind them. But it was still so dangerous to trust anyone. So, so dangerous...

“You look tired,” Jasper said as she stifled a yawn. “Please rest. I’ll make sure no one bothers you up here.”

He moved toward the doorway as if he planned to leave.

“No!”

Jasper stopped.

“Please don’t... Don’t go.” The words came out choked and frantic. He couldn’t leave her. Not alone, when *he* was after her, and had promised to find her. She might be at the top of a tree in a hidden canyon on a remote mountain, but that wouldn’t stop him.

Her lungs ached at the thought of being left alone.

“I’ll stay.” Jasper sat down on the edge of the bed, as though afraid she’d take off running.

Sylvia clenched her eyelids shut. He must think her a freak.

“I’m here,” he said, and somehow his voice calmed her. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

Cautiously, she lay down on the bed. She wanted so badly to trust him. Part of her already did, but she couldn’t trust herself. She was stupid enough to have been tricked before.

Sylvia let out a long breath. She was too tired right now to think of lies, betrayal, *torture*.

She buried herself in the furs to hide the shudder that crawled over her shoulder blades and down her spine. All she left uncovered was her face.

“Will you hold my hand?” she asked at last, reaching out from under the fur.

“Of course,” Jasper said quietly.

Something about the warmth of his callused palm and the gentle pressure made her breathing slow and even. She was safe here, in this second. That had to be enough.

“Why won’t you eat?”

She sat in an ornate chair, her heart pounding in her ears. It was a trap—there was no acceptable answer to the question.

A sigh. “Being difficult again, aren’t you, Sophie?”

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. He had taken her voice again. But worse was coming. He only used that name when he was about to punish or reward her. And since she hadn’t answered his question, a reward wouldn’t be forthcoming.

A cold hand brushed her shoulder. She would have sobbed if she could.

“You know what I have to do now. It’s for your own good.”

She screamed.

She sat bolt upright, tangled in furs, sweat dripping down her back. It was pitch black. Where was she?

“What’s wrong?”

Someone was beside her. She crossed her arms before her, mad with fright, trying to ward him off.

“It’s okay. You’re safe in our den. In the canyon. Remember?”

She glanced around the room, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. The window in the tree’s trunk was still open, and she could make out the stars winking in the night. Letting out a soft moan, she collapsed into the furs.

“Jasper?” she asked.

“No. It’s Jet.”

The knot in her shoulders loosened, despite the annoyance she caught in his voice. “I remember you.”

“Do you need anything?” His voice was slightly softer now. “Food, water?”

She hesitated. “Could I maybe have some food?”

“Sure.” He stood in the darkness. “I’ll be right back.”

Sylvia watched him go, feeling torn. She wasn’t hungry at all.

Once his footsteps faded, she stepped out of bed. Groping through the darkness, she headed for the stairs. She took them as fast as she could, trying not to stumble. Though she wished she could have gotten more food, clothes, or even a pair of boots, she had to leave.

The man from her dreams would be stalking her. He would be coming after her, even as he haunted her dreams. Jet and Jasper were good men. And that was why she had to leave.

She couldn't let danger find them too.

Finally, she reached the main level. Keeping one hand on the stone wall, she made her way through the depths of the den. Her heart thudded, and she worried about bumping into someone at any turn. But she met no one.

Pale moonlight showed her the exit, and she walked through the canopy of hanging roots. They clung to her shoulders, as if begging her to stay.

But she couldn't. To stay would be to doom everyone in this canyon.

Bracing herself, she stepped into the moonlight.

"Where are you going?"

Jet stood behind her, looking perplexed.

She leapt backward, almost tripping on her cloak. "I was just... taking a walk." Trying not to panic, she continued into the canyon. He wouldn't try to stop her, would he?

"Taking a walk? On bandaged feet and an empty stomach?" He sighed. "You're running away, aren't you?"

She didn't have an answer for him.

"Will you please come inside? At least wait until it's light out before you go."

Her feet had begun to throb, but she couldn't back down. "I'm sorry. I have to leave."

"Why?" The question was like a small explosion. Jet sighed. "I'm no good at this. I told Jasper not to go on patrol. He's much more persuasive than I am."

She looked into his eyes, which glowed faintly gold in the light. "You knew I would run away?"

Jet shrugged. "You're running from something. Why would you stop?"

The question made her ache. Jet, Jasper... Both of them made her want to stop. To cease running. To have a home. But she had *him* to think about. And he would never let that happen.

She drew the cloak around her, trying to steel herself. "It's for your own good."

"And what about your own good? You're going to hobble off into the mountains, to face your foe alone?"

"And? So what if I do?" She quivered with anger. He wasn't her commander.

Was that a smile that played around his lips? "You're braver than some wolves I know. But even Alphas know not to fight when they're injured."

"I don't want to fight."

"But a fight is coming to you. Isn't that what you fear?"

The wind rose, howling down the canyon. It clawed at her bare legs, raising goose bumps.

Jet held out a hand. "Come inside. Rest. Heal. Let us help you."

"Will you teach me how to fight?" The words tumbled from her mouth.

"Will that make you stay?"

She was glad for the darkness. Hopefully he couldn't see her blush. "I'll try."

"That's all I ask."

Carefully, Sylvia took his hand. Jet guided her back into the safety of the oak. Before she passed through the curtain of roots, she looked back down the canyon. Darkness swallowed its mouth, but she couldn't help but feel like something was watching her.

Chapter 4

“Fists up.”

Sylvia eyed him warily, putting up her hands defensively like he'd taught her.

“Not like that. Like you mean it.” Jet put up his own fists, biceps bulging. It was slightly distracting. “Plant your feet. You don't want a mild wind to knock you over.”

Shuffling her feet, she tried not to scowl. Did he think this was easy?

The meadow was strewn with late summer wildflowers, and morning sun made their colors shine. It didn't really match the mood of the lesson.

Jet scrutinized her feet. “That's better. Now hit me.”

“What?” She couldn't remember ever hitting anyone in her life.

“You said you wanted to learn to fight, didn't you? You're going to need to hit someone some time.”

Honestly, she thought he'd have forgotten his late-night promise. And even still, she never dreamed that her first lesson would be to hit her rescuer.

“But why would I hit you?” she asked.

“I don't know. Pretend I want to steal your cloak.”

“You could have it if you wanted.”

“Sylvia!” He sighed. “You're the one who wanted to learn. You won't hurt me, I promise. Go on, hit me.”

“Where?”

“How about my arm?”

Leaning forward, she jabbed at him, her fist meeting solid muscle. From the look Jet gave her, she suspected that he'd hardly felt it.

“You're pulling away at the last second,” he said. “You need to follow through. Hit me like you plan to punch all the way through me.”

Sylvia swallowed, her throat dry. Maybe she should have thought this through more. Maybe she shouldn't have tried to learn to fight at all. It would have been far better to just keep running.

“Hit me,” Jet said. “You can do it.”

She screwed her eyes shut, preparing to punch him, when a voice cut through the calmness of the

meadow.

“What’s going on here?”

Sylvia opened her eyes. It was Rowan, who had been so upset over the marks on her arm. Slowly, Sylvia pulled her sleeve down past her hand.

“It’s not any of your business, is it, Rowan?” Jet’s eyes flashed. “You should leave, unless you want private lessons yourself.”

“So hostile.” Rowan shook her head in distaste. “I was just passing through, but I might be able to help.”

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. Why would Rowan want to help her?

“Look,” Rowan said, addressing Sylvia directly, “it’s obvious that something terrible is after you, isn’t it? I’m sorry that I assumed the worst happened, but... that’s what tends to happen with them, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?” Jet asked sharply.

This didn’t look like it was going to end well, but it wasn’t like she could hide. Face burning, Sylvia pulled up her sleeve and fumbled with the bandage.

“No, don’t take it off,” Rowan said gently. “It needs to heal.”

“What needs to heal?” Jet sounded like he was at the edge of his patience.

“Vampire bite. On her arm.”

Slowly, Jet turned to stare at her. Sylvia felt her face heat. It must be crimson by now. Would he command her to leave?

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked softly.

Looking into his eyes, she found only concern. It would have been much less strange to find anger.

“She needs a teacher, Jet.”

“And what do you think I’m trying to do?”

Rowan moved closer. “You’re teaching her how to punch. You think that’s going to be effective against vampires, or anything else trying to come after her? She’s a stick. Her punches wouldn’t hurt a rabbit.”

“I’m not afraid to fight.” Sylvia faced her, in the stance Jet had taught her. She wasn’t going to let Rowan keep her from being able to make a stand.

“You should be, if there’s a vampire hunting you.” Rowan glanced over as Jet growled darkly. “It’ll do no good to pretend she’s not in danger. And the pack is only as strong as our weakest member—is that not one of your favorite sayings, Alpha?”

Jet glowered at her.

“I’m not part of your pack, though.” Sylvia could see she was causing trouble. “I’ll go soon enough.”

“While you sleep in our den, you’re part of our pack,” Rowan said firmly. “And don’t think I’m insulting you by calling you a stick. You won’t be forever, but muscles aren’t built in one season. And

the first lesson in fighting is to stick to your strengths.”

Sylvia couldn't help the words from tumbling out. “I don't have any strengths.”

“Wrong.” Rowan strode up to her. “I'm shorter than Jet, and much lighter. Would you like to fight me, Jet?”

“Not particularly.”

“He would win, of course,” Rowan continued. “He's Alpha for a reason. But it would be at great cost to him. I can't beat him on strength alone, but I've built up other talents. And that's what you need to do.”

Sylvia could only stare at her. What talents could Rowan think she possibly possessed that would compare to those of shifters, vampires, and worse creatures?

“Don't look at me like that. You're not talentless. How else would you have made it all the way out here in the first place?” Flipping her hair over her shoulders, Rowan tied it back. “You have wits and speed, and those count for a lot. But I'm going to teach you some things you might not know.”

Rowan turned. “Jet, hold out your knife.”

“Now I'm the practice dummy?” He pulled out his weapon. “Try not to draw blood. Some of us need to lead a pack.”

“You'll survive. Stop your whining.” She stood in front of him. “Now, this is my favorite move, though it may take some practice.” Her hand whipped out to grab and twist Jet's wrist. He yelled, and the knife fell to the ground.

“See? Easy.” Rowan kicked the blade up and handed it back to him. “This time I'll do it slower.”

Jet rubbed his arm. “As long as you don't break my wrist.”

“I'm not promising anything.” Rowan winked. “All right, so you want to grab the wrist like this.” She showed Sylvia. “Then twist, but really dig into the tendons. That's the secret.”

Jet swore, dropping the knife again. “It's even worse slowed down.”

Picking up the knife, Rowan brandished it. “You try,” she said, facing Sylvia. “Put your hand around my wrist.”

Tentatively, she obeyed.

“Now dig your fingernails in. Don't be afraid to hurt me—we heal fast.”

She pressed her nails to Rowan's skin, but she didn't want to hurt her.

“Come on, harder. We're not leaving until you make me drop it.”

Sylvia tried, but each attempt felt feebler than the last. She started to worry that Jet and Rowan were growing impatient.

“One more,” Jet said, “then let's move on to something new.”

“Focus,” Rowan said. “If it helps, pretend that I'm someone who you really hate.”

Like me, Sophie?

The voice in her head made her pulse surge. Her hand shot out, wrapping around Rowan's wrist. Fiercely, she shoved her nails into Rowan's tendons. The shifter gasped in pain, dropping the knife.

"I'm so sorry," Sylvia said, rocking back. "I don't know what happened."

"You did great!" Rowan beamed, still massaging her wrist. "Maybe a little too well, but then again, I must just be a great teacher, right?"

"Sure." Jet snorted. "Is that enough for the day?"

"Maybe for you. She needs a few more lessons."

Quickly, using Jet as a model, Rowan walked her through the best places to target an assailant.

"Strike the soft spots of the body," Rowan said. "Eyes, nose, throat, groin. Those are the only ones you'll need to remember. And no matter how many powers anyone possesses, their eyes are still going to water when you pop them in the nose."

She immediately proved this using Jet, who didn't seem too pleased.

"I won't give a full demonstration of the groin attacks, since I'm guessing our Alpha will want pups someday."

"I appreciate that," Jet groaned.

"But your knee and shin work wonders there," Rowan continued like she hadn't heard him. "In close quarters, an elbow's great, too—it's one of the strongest points on your body."

"Can we wrap this up?" Jet asked, still rubbing his nose.

"All right, one last thing. I'm going to show you how to break out of a hold. This won't take long." Reaching out, Rowan put her fingers around Sylvia's wrist.

The world went dark. It felt like she was drowning.

There was steel around her wrist, cold and unforgiving. She tugged at it, but it was bolted to the table—there was no escape.

"I don't know why you won't eat," a soft voice said. "It's almost like you're unhappy here. And after all I've done for you. You're disappointing me, Sophie."

She strained to get away from the table, sobbing as the manacle bit into her wrist. "Please, let me go!"

"But I can't let you go. Not until you love me. Do you love me, Sophie?"

He moved behind her. He was going to punish her, she knew it. She screamed for help, knowing that no one would hear.

"Why must you carry on so?" He set a plate in front of her, covered with a silver lid. "I'm only trying to be hospitable. You're my guest, after all."

The manacle glinted in the light of the chandelier, belying his words. But a dinner wasn't a punishment.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. She jumped, but he merely stroked her arm. "You have much to learn, Sophie. But don't worry. I'll teach you everything you need to know."

Would there be no punishment this time? She breathed deeply, her heart rate slowing. Maybe tonight he would be merciful.

"I have only one request tonight, Sophie. I want you to dine with me." He whipped off the lid,

revealing a plate teeming with a mass of snakes. They writhed and slithered, just as desperate as her for escape. She still couldn't help but scream as some fell into her lap, winding down her legs. The manacle kept her bolted to the table, forced to endure the horror.

He slid a fork and knife across the table. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Sylvia? Sylvia!" Someone was shaking her.

She gasped, sitting upright. Jet was crouched beside her. Rowan stood behind him, looking pale.

"What happened?" Her mouth felt like cotton.

"You fell." Jet's voice shook. "You weren't breathing. Are you okay?"

She didn't answer him. She could still feel the snakes crawling up her arm.

Jet helped her up. "That's definitely enough for the day."

"I can try again," she said. "I'm not afraid."

"But I am."

"Alpha," Rowan said, "if she wants to try again, I wouldn't mind—"

"No more today. That's final."

"Well, if you have the time, maybe we can talk about Juniper."

His eyes narrowed. "Is that why you really came down here?" He slipped an arm around Sylvia's waist. "Come on. Let's get you back to the den."

Sylvia did her best to limp alongside him. Her feet were throbbing.

"It won't go away just because you won't talk about it." Rowan followed them, supporting Sylvia on her other side. Another time, Sylvia might have protested, but she wasn't sure she could make it back to the canyon without the help.

"What happened?" Sylvia asked. "Who's Juniper?"

Jet's mouth tightened.

"His sister," Rowan said.

"She doesn't need to know about that," Jet snapped.

"So, what, you're just going to pretend you don't have a sister for the rest of your life?" Rowan bared her teeth. "Or you're secretly going to go after her and punish her? Neither of those is a good solution, Jet."

Between them, Sylvia sagged. Her heart was hammering. "You're going to punish her?" she asked weakly. "Your own sister?"

Jet frowned. "I can't do nothing. I was her brother and her Alpha, and she betrayed me."

"What did she do?" Something was wrong with her lungs. She wasn't getting enough air.

"Jet wanted her to be bound to a neighboring Alpha," Rowan said. "She refused, and ran off with a shifter she actually loved."

"Bound?" Bile rose in her throat. "You were going to make your sister a prisoner?" She stumbled. She wanted to run again, away from Jet, the canyon, his pack, but she was too weak.

"What? No!" Jet sounded alarmed. "Binding is... a commitment. An oath of loyalty to your mate."

“Which is like imprisonment if you don’t agree to it,” Rowan said.

“It’s not like that at all,” Jet growled. “It was supposed to be an alliance. The commitment would go both ways—Ash would be loyal to her, and she would be loyal to him. It would have made both our packs stronger.”

“At the expense of Juniper’s sanity, once she’d found her fated mate.” Rowan tightened her grip on Sylvia’s arm. “But I forgot—you don’t believe in silly things like that, do you, Alpha?”

In the silence that followed, Sylvia fell.

“Hey.” Jet was by her side again. “Stay with me, please. We’re almost to the den.”

“Do you want me to go ahead?” Rowan asked. “I can get cold water ready, a cot made up...”

“Yes, go. I’ll carry her.”

Rowan took off. From the way her footsteps changed, she must have shifted.

Jet scooped her up. “Talk to me. Sylvia, say something.”

There was a note of fear in his voice. What did he have to fear?

“Sylvia, please!”

“I was bound,” she said dully. “How could you think of forcing that on anyone?”

“You were bound?” He stopped. “To a shifter?”

“No.” She tugged off her bandage. “Blood bound.”

“What does that mean?” He traced a finger over the marks. “A vampire did that to you?”

“They bite you. They drink. But they also make you docile. Make you forget.” She had to admit, it had been easy to give in. She had so much she wanted to forget...

“Sylvia, I’m sorry. That’s not the kind of binding I’m talking about. That’s not what we do—” Jet cut himself off as his voice rose in anger. “Don’t worry.” He was moving again. “I won’t let anyone hurt you again.”

She wished he wouldn’t make promises he couldn’t keep.

At the den, Rowan was waiting. She had Jet sit Sylvia at a table where she was plied with cold water and a disgusting tea that Rowan swore would help clear her head. Sylvia drank it, miserable. Clearing her head was the last thing she wanted right now, though the tea only seemed to clear her sinuses.

“Let me change your bandages,” Rowan said, “and put on some fresh lotion. That should dull any pain you’re feeling.”

Sylvia stuck out her legs while Rowan completed her ministrations. Once the bandages were in place, she pushed a pair of fur-lined slippers onto Sylvia’s feet.

“Now remember, it would be better if you didn’t have to use these slippers too often. You should try and stay off your feet as much as possible, even if only for a few days.”

“You don’t mind resting for a while, do you?” Jet asked.

The very question made cold sweat form on her spine. Could she really stay in one place for that long? The hair on the back of her neck prickled as she watched a group of shifters file into the den.

Her mere presence was putting them all in grave danger.

“Sylvia! There you are.” Jasper slid onto the bench opposite her.

“Hi, Jasper.” She smiled.

“You remember me!”

“Of course I do.”

“What have you been up to?”

She didn’t want to trouble him with tales of her losing consciousness. “Oh, I just watched Rowan beat up Jet.”

Jasper laughed. “And I missed it? What a shame.”

“Is there any news?” Jet sounded annoyed.

“We did three sweeps, and scoured the eastern border. No signs of life, save for a few big bucks that were begging to be chased.”

Jet looked toward the entrance. “I don’t want to take any chances. Assign someone to patrol the eastern line. I don’t want a grasshopper to enter without us knowing.”

“No worries, boss. I left Dakota and Hawke to keep an eye on things.”

For some reason, Jet seemed to sour at this news. “Thanks,” he muttered.

“Unless you don’t trust Dakota and Hawke?” Jasper raised an eyebrow.

“They’ll be fine.” Jet turned away from him.

“Great.” Jasper clapped his hands. “Then I think it’s time for a hunt. Are you coming, Sylvia?”

“I can come?” She sat up straighter.

“I don’t see why not.”

Jet rose, grabbing Jasper’s shoulder. “She’s had a rough day. Even Rowan said she needs to rest...”

“She can rest after the hunt.” Jasper brushed him off. “I’m not going to tell her she can’t come if she wants to. Do you want to?”

“Yes!” Tottering a little, Sylvia got to her feet. She probably shouldn’t run on them, but they felt fine.

“Rowan,” Jet barked as she was clearly trying to slip away, “back me up here. Doesn’t Sylvia need to rest?”

Rowan shrugged. “That’s just my recommendation. If Sylvia feels up to it...” She put a hand to her ear. “Oh, I think I hear Fable calling for help in the kitchen.” Before Jet could say anything else, she dashed off.

“Looks like you’re outnumbered.” Jasper winked.

“I’m still Alpha.”

“Yeah, and Sylvia’s not a pack member for you to boss around. Come on.” He held out a hand to her. “Let’s round up the hunters.”

It felt like she was walking on air as she accompanied him out of the den. The slippers were like

tiny clouds. She might even be able to run in them.

Jet blocked the exit. “Can’t you wait a couple days?” he asked Jasper. “It’s not safe.”

“She can watch us, though. It’s not like I’m asking her to face a charging buck. Nothing will happen, so stop worrying like a mother turkey.”

Jasper guided Sylvia into the canyon.

“I’ll be fine,” she said to Jet. “I just want to see the hunt.” She waved as they left him behind, but he simply watched them go, seething.

Chapter 5

“This will be a small hunting party,” Jasper said, “just you, me, Gwen, and West. But if you help us flush some game, we might be able to hunt more efficiently.”

“So I can help?” She would love to be able to give something back to the pack that had given her refuge, healing, and amazing slippers.

“Yep. You have the most important job—without someone to guide our prey to us, the job is much more taxing.”

She doubted that startling animals was more difficult than bringing them down, but she wouldn’t argue.

As they journeyed down the canyon, they were joined by two other shifters.

“This is Gwen”—Jasper nodded to her—“and West.”

“Sylvia,” she said, drawing her cloak around her. Gwen was beautiful, with blue eyes and curves that Sylvia could never hope to attain. West had a chiseled face and body that any man would envy, and most women would want. How were all the shifters so inhumanly gorgeous? Beside them, she felt no prettier than a block of wood.

“You’re going up there.” Jasper pointed to the left rim of the canyon. “It’s a perfect spot. There’s a thicket filled with sweet summer berries that the deer love. But there’s a drop on one side, and a ridge on the other. If you make a racket at one end, the herd will be forced into a funnel that leads them directly to where we’ll be waiting, over there.” He pointed to the other end of the canyon. “And then to our dinner table.”

That sounded like a good plan. Sylvia craned her neck to look up at the place where he had first pointed. “And how do I get up there?”

“I’m glad you asked.” Jasper slowed. “Can you see our secret staircase?”

She turned to face the direction he was looking in. A narrow ledge led up the canyon wall, roughly hewn handholds dotting the way.

“You can’t be serious. In what world is that a staircase?”

Gwen laughed. “That’s what I said.”

“It’s not that bad.” Jasper waved them away. “No one’s ever fallen on it.”

“Hardly anyone ever uses it,” West said. “And never humans.”

“What, you don’t trust me?” Jasper frowned. “You can make it up there, can’t you, Sylvia?”

“Sure.” Her throat felt very dry, but she didn’t want to let him down.

“I’ll go up with you,” he said. “Every step of the way.”

“He won’t let you fall,” Gwen said.

“Probably,” West added.

Jasper glared at him. “Don’t listen to him, Sylvia. He’s just jealous that he doesn’t get to be your escort.”

He led her to the edge of the canyon wall. Looking up, she tried not to let dizziness overcome her. It seemed so high.

“Try not to think about heights, or the ground,” Jasper said. “Look.” He stepped onto the ledge. “Do exactly what I do. Let the handholds guide you.”

Pushing her fear aside, she put her foot on the ledge. She trusted him. And he wouldn’t let anything happen to her... right?

“That’s good,” Jasper said. “Your right hand is secure. Now move your left.”

“You won’t let me fall?” she asked.

“We’re only two inches from the ground.”

“I don’t mean here.”

“You’re safe with me.” Changing handholds, he moved up the ledge.

Letting out a breath, Sylvia copied him. They moved inch by agonizing inch. It took all the willpower she possessed not to look down. She just focused on moving from handhold to handhold exactly as Jasper did, her feet skating along the ledge.

The wind pulled at her cloak and her hair, but she kept creeping upward. If Jasper thought she could do it, she wouldn’t disappoint him. He moved with a languid ease, his muscles standing out as he secured his position. He never took his eyes off her. Sylvia hoped she didn’t look too frightened.

The canyon rim edged closer. She tried not to think about how the ground must be receding at the same pace. Somewhere below, Gwen and West were shouting encouragement, but Sylvia could barely hear them over her own simple thoughts. *Handhold. Handhold. Shuffle feet.* All she had to do was not lose her grip...

And then Jasper was up and over, crouching on the canyon rim. He put a hand down, and easily pulled her up.

It felt like she was on top of the world.

Cheers erupted from below. Sylvia grinned weakly, surveying the world from this new height.

“We made it,” Jasper whispered. “And I told you I wouldn’t let you fall. Now is the easy part.” He pointed to a tangle of plants that seemed to swallow the densely packed trees. “There’s bound to be something in that thicket. The summer berries are far too tempting.”

“So I just need to run in there shouting?” Sylvia asked, her voice low.

“Yes, but not until we’re in position. We’ll be fast—the sun should hardly move. When we’re

ready, West will caw three times like a crow. That's your signal to start making a racket up here."

"I think I can do that." Her heart was jumping.

"Good. Don't be afraid to scare whatever's in there. Just tell yourself you're ten times as scary."

His light gold eyes were laughing. "This will all be over soon, and we can return to the den in triumph." He squeezed her hand lightly, then leapt onto the ledge.

Sylvia gasped. He didn't seem to walk back down so much as fall. His feet only appeared to touch the ledge about three times before he was back on the ground. Jasper looked up at her, waved, then shifted into a huge gray wolf. Gwen and West, brown and white wolves, followed him as he raced down the canyon.

Her heart thumped as she watched them go. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to people turning into wolves.

She kept still as wind whistled through the thicket. It made it hard to hear whether there were signs of life inside. She'd feel pretty stupid running screaming into an empty thicket, but she had already agreed to do it. And she would like a nice meal tonight.

Her stomach rumbled. She put a hand over it, hoping to quiet it. She hoped she hadn't made Jet too mad, going on the hunt with Jasper. He hadn't looked at all pleased when they left. But she hadn't wanted to stay cooped up inside all day, and she felt much more useful up here. Still, she should probably apologize to Jet when they got back. He'd spent all morning being used as a practice dummy for her benefit, and she'd immediately turned around and disregarded his wishes.

Sylvia sighed. The pack seemed complicated. Living alone would be so much simpler. Though alone, she'd never be able to catch and bring down deer herself...

Ahead, in the thicket, something whuffled. Sylvia crouched down, hoping it hadn't noticed her. She didn't want to scare it too soon.

Stock still, she waited to see if it would make the sound again. She hadn't just imagined it, had she? Based on what Jasper had said, it must be a deer. Sylvia licked her lips. She was hungry for some venison.

The creature whuffled again, moving through the thicket. She couldn't see it, but she was certain she could scare it. Sylvia looked at the sun impatiently. Were the others ready yet?

Down the canyon, a crow cawed once, then twice more. She was startled by how real it sounded. If she were a deer, she would definitely think that a bird had made that sound, not West.

It was time. Rising to her feet, she charged into the thicket.

"Get out!" she yelled. "This way, please! I'm going to need you for dinner."

She crashed deeper into the thicket, crushing berries under her slippers. There was indeed a creature inside. It scrambled back, fearful. But it was no deer.

It was a black bear cub.

"Oh no." Sylvia lowered her voice, backing away immediately. "I scared you, didn't I? I'm sorry. I don't want you for dinner. Just don't—"

Sitting back, the bear cub let out a cry.

“No, no,” she whispered. “Please don’t. I’m leaving, see?”

The little cub cried again, louder this time.

From behind her came an answering call. It was deeper, and angrier.

Sylvia turned, hardly daring to breathe.

A mother bear thundered into the thicket. It took one glance at her and roared. Sylvia was distinctly aware that she was between a bear and her cub. She had suspected that she might die soon, but she never would have guessed a bear would get her before her captor could catch up. She could only laugh.

“I’m sorry, Mama.” She stepped aside, stumbling over tangled vines. “I didn’t mean to scare your baby.”

The cub raced to its mother, ducking behind her legs. It peered back out at Sylvia, as if curious to see her fate.

“Your baby’s safe, Mama. Can I go?”

The bear lowered its head, its eyes locked on hers. Heart in her throat, Sylvia backed away. Her slipper caught on a thorny vine, tripping her.

She fell on her ass with a gasp. The mother bear didn’t seem to like that at all. Grunting, she lumbered forward. Sylvia tried to rise, but her slipper was caught. Abandoning it, she rolled aside just as the bear swiped a paw at her.

“Hey!” She struggled to her feet, ignoring the brambles underfoot. “You have your baby. Leave me alone!”

The bear’s black eyes were still fixed on her. Sylvia swallowed. She wasn’t intimidating enough... She needed to look bigger.

Sylvia stared the bear down. “I refuse to get eaten by a bear. You hear me?” Opening her cloak, she let it billow in the wind. The bear sat back, alarmed.

“That’s right. Get out of here! I’m very dangerous.”

Behind them, the cub cried again. That seemed to settle the mother’s mind. Turning tail, she trundled out of the thicket, pushing her cub ahead of her with her nose.

Her knees trembling, Sylvia sank to the ground just as a gray wolf exploded into the thicket. She jumped up, fists ready. It took her a second to realize that the huge wolf was Jasper.

“Sylvia!” He shifted. “Are you all right? Was that a *bear*?”

She fell into his arms, which had never felt better. “Just a bear and her cub.”

“We heard you,” Jasper said, “near the end. I didn’t think we’d get here in time.” He looked stricken.

Gwen and West appeared behind him, their faces pale.

“She’s alive!” West said.

Gwen gaped. “And without a scratch.”

“Did you really tell the bear that you refused to let it eat you?” Jasper asked. “I thought I might have been dreaming.”

Sylvia blushed. “That was stupid of me...”

“Not at all. It worked, didn’t it? You scared a bear away.” He sounded awed.

“I was just lucky.”

“Lucky that you have a warrior’s spirit,” Gwen said. “You’re a bear maiden.”

Sylvia couldn’t help but laugh. It had been such a surreal day.

After retrieving her slipper from the brambles, Jasper declared their hunt to be over. He wouldn’t hear any of her protestations as he carried her back toward the den.

“I could try flushing something else,” Sylvia said as they entered the canyon. “Maybe even a deer this time.”

“We’re not taking any chances. Gwen and West can have fun chasing rabbits, but I’m taking you back. I know you’re eager for a second round, but that’s the only bear you’ll be facing today.”

By the time they reached the towering oak, the whole pack seemed to know the story. Details buzzed all around them, and shifters were eager for more details.

“How big was the bear?” Rowan asked. “Four hundred pounds? Five?”

“Were you scared at all?” Everett butted in. “You don’t even seem shaken.”

“That’s because she’s a bear maiden now,” Gwen said. “Nothing could rattle her.”

Rowan grinned. “Would you like me to wash your cloak, bear maiden? The hem is covered in berry juice.”

It felt easy to hand the cloak over. She had been using it like a shield, but there was nothing to shield herself from anymore. It was a warm and sunny afternoon, with no need for thick cloaks. None of the shifters batted an eye at her naked body, for they were all nude themselves. And after conquering a ledge and facing a bear, what did she have to fear from being naked?

“I’ll get this back to you tonight,” Rowan said. “Do you need me to find you something to wear until then? I’m sure I could dig up an outfit somewhere.”

“I’ll be fine.” Sylvia smiled. “I’m already mostly covered in bandages, anyway.”

“Bandages? Are you hurt?” Jet strode up, and the shifters dispersed. Jasper remained by her side, looking uncomfortable.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just got a little too familiar with a bear.”

“A mother bear, I heard.” Jet frowned, turning to Jasper. “And where were you?”

“On the other end of the canyon.” Jasper met his brother’s eyes, almost defiantly.

“And you thought it’d be funny to let Sylvia waltz into a bear family’s picnic?”

“I never thought there’d be anything bigger than a buck in there. We haven’t had bears around the canyon in months.”

“And did you think to use your nose, ears, or eyes before sending someone totally green into that thicket?”

“The wind was wrong, Alpha. And I didn’t see—”

“You didn’t check!”

“That would flush the game and defeat the entire purpose.” Jasper sounded strained. “You know that, Jet. It was an accident that could have happened to anyone—”

“Nothing would have happened if you’d been more careful. Or if you’d obeyed my wishes as Alpha.” Jet glared at both of them. “You’re both lucky she’s not dead.”

“But I’m fine,” Sylvia said, almost surprised at herself for speaking up. The tension in the air was palpable, and with Jet this forcefully furious, she could see how he could command a pack as Alpha. “It wasn’t Jasper’s fault—the bear was just protecting her cub.”

He gave her the strangest look, surprise mixed with anger, then swept out of the room.

Sylvia looked at Jasper, bewildered. “Did I say something wrong?”

He gave a soft laugh. “I’m not sure our Alpha quite knows what to do with you—despite his protests, he’s not used to anyone cutting him off mid-tirade.”

She looked at the doorway Jet had disappeared into. “Should I apologize?”

“Give it a while. Let him cool down.” He motioned for her to follow him. “Come on.”

“Are we going out to find more bears?”

He tried to hide a smile. “Not exactly.”

Jasper led her out of the den, stooping to grab a small bundle. But they didn’t go far once they’d passed through the curtain of roots—Jasper sat in a patch of shade, unfurling his bundle. A handful of thin knives with wooden handles rolled out.

“What are those for?” she asked.

“I’ll show you.” He pulled out three cubes of wood. “Which do you like best?”

She wondered if it was some kind of test. Was she supposed to be able to tell a difference between them? She pointed to the one in the middle.

“Good choice. It’s got a nice grain.” Jasper stowed the other two. Picking up a knife, he began to shave pieces from the wood.

“You’re a wood carver?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I’m not hopeless, but I’m nowhere near mastery, either.” He nodded toward the knives. “These were my grandfather’s. He’s the one who carved out our den.”

She watched, fascinated, as pieces of wood fell to the ground. For all his modesty, his strokes were quick and sure. “What are you making?”

“I cut where the wood tells me. You can’t force anything out. But whatever’s inside, I’ll find it.”

“So you don’t know what you’re carving?”

“Not yet. But I’m sure we’ll figure it out eventually.”

They sat for a moment, silent except for the sound of Jasper’s knives eating away the wood. A soft breeze kept them cool, swirling over the stone walls. She sat back, lazily letting time pass by, for once not worried about much at all. A beetle trundled over the wood shavings, then over Jasper’s

foot. He didn't seem to notice, lost in his carving.

Sylvia smiled. She felt just as lost in Jasper's determined expression, the muscles rippling in his arms. His golden eyes were focused on his work, but she still felt like he was fully present with her, as no one had been before.

She wondered if she would ever see his brother so calm.

"Is Jet mad at me?" she asked.

Jasper didn't look up from his work. "I think he's mad at me—he usually is. And I never should have let a mother bear get that close to you."

"What happened wasn't your fault."

"It was." He sighed, putting down his knife. "I should have listened to Jet. He's right most of the time, or he wouldn't be Alpha. It's just that, when he's wrong..." Jasper trailed off.

"Don't blame yourself. That bear was just protecting her cub."

"But I should have been protecting you."

Sylvia bit her lip. She shouldn't have said anything.

"Of course," Jasper said, "I'm not sure I could have scared off a bear with quite so much style." He set the knife back against the wood, carving out another chunk. "I guess both of us need to come to terms with the fact that you can save yourself." He pulled the knife over the wood, removing long, curling shavings. "Just give Jet some time. He'll come around eventually, don't worry."

She felt like she barely had time to blink before he made three more sweeping cuts, and was done.

"Here you go." He handed her the carving. A mother bear stood over her cub, one wooden paw raised protectively.

She turned it over, marveling. "How did you do that?"

Jasper shrugged. "That's what was inside."

Sylvia didn't want to take her eyes off the incredible carving. Reluctantly, she held it out to its creator.

"Keep it," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Who else could it be for?"

She clutched the bears to her chest, astonished. "I wish I had something to thank you with."

"I don't need anything." Jasper put his tools away. "I just want you to be—"

But she never found out what he wanted her to be, because she leaned over and kissed him. His eyes were wide with shock, but his lips were soft, inviting. She grinned. His lips felt so right against hers. Having overcome his initial surprise, he leaned into the kiss, and put an arm around her.

This was bliss. This was where she was supposed to be.

There was a crash behind them. They both whirled. Jet stood there, a tray on the ground and broken plates at his feet. He stared at them for a long moment, then turned, retreating into the den.

Sylvia stared after him, her stomach sinking. If he hadn't been mad before, he definitely was now.

Chapter 6

Jet flew up the stairs, then out a hidden door and into the sunshine. The puffy clouds seemed to be mocking him. Shifting, he raced through the forest, away from the canyon. Jasper had put Sylvia in harm's way. Jasper hadn't listened to him. And Jasper got a kiss.

He dug his claws into the earth, determined to put some good distance between him and the den. He didn't want anyone coming after him, especially not Jasper, bringing fake concern and false pity.

But why should he care? Sylvia was free to do what she wished, and it wasn't like Jasper would listen to him, Alpha or no. The two of them could do as they pleased. They could kiss, until it led to more, then find a quiet spot—

A growl tore from his throat. Why was he so upset? He had never been this annoyed with his brother, and he couldn't put his paw on the reason. Sylvia fascinated and infuriated him. She was the most beautiful human he had ever met, but she seemed oblivious to real danger. And in the end, she was nothing more than human, as weak and frail as the rest of them. She was no match for a bear, a vampire, or even an angry sparrow.

He pushed himself onward, faster and faster. She was only human. So why couldn't he stop thinking about her?

A doe burst out of the trees in front of him, alarmed by his scent. Her tail flashed white, like a flag of surrender. She leapt away, hooves throwing dirt and moss.

Well, he wouldn't let her surrender. Where had she been earlier? The doe should have been in the thicket, not a bear. Sylvia never should have been in danger. Snarling, Jet bounded after the doe.

She kicked at him, sharp hooves flying by his ear. He ducked, making sure to keep his footing. The doe stared at him, eyes rolling, before surging away again. Jet followed, unwavering. The doe would be his.

All it took was a single misstep, like it always did, like he kept warning them about. The doe faltered, and he was on her. Latching onto her hind leg, he brought her down. The motion was practiced, and her neck snapped as she fell. It was quick and clean, the way he liked it.

Jet stood over the carcass, breathing heavily. He would not fail in his hunts. He needed to put no one else in danger.

And yet... It flashed into his mind again, the sight of Sylvia, her lips locked with his traitorous brother's. Jet shifted, putting his hands over his eyes. None of it mattered—his hunting prowess, his commands, his title of Alpha. It had taken him too long to realize that the woman might mean something to him, and another shifter had taken her.

It was just salt in the wound that the other shifter happened to be his younger brother.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled the deer onto his shoulders. Jet shifted again, not caring about the hot blood that stained his fur. Turning, he padded back toward the den.

What should he do now? What could he do? Kick Jasper out of the pack? That would be a great way to lose Sylvia as well, just like he'd lost Juniper.

Jet closed his eyes. Why was he so miserable at this? Should he leave the pack to their own devices? Were they all better off without him?

He sighed. It had always been so easy for him to do what was needed, to lead the pack despite the occasional objections and complaints. He had thought that nothing mattered compared to being Alpha. He thought that he had achieved everything he'd ever wanted, that nothing else could make him happier than his position.

He had been wrong.

Jet took the long way back to the den, dragging the doe through the canyon. He braced himself as the oak came into view, preparing for the sight of Jasper and Sylvia locked together again. But they were gone.

"A doe?" Rowan, accompanied by Fable, walked out to meet him. "But you weren't even on hunting duty today."

Jet shifted. "I do my duty to the pack, no matter what day it is."

As he dumped the doe off his back, he saw Rowan and Fable exchange a worried look.

"Let us take care of this, Alpha," Fable said.

"Yeah," Rowan added. "Why don't you go get washed up? Otherwise you'll drip blood into the den."

They took the doe aside and began to dress it. Jet watched them, annoyed. They were both treating him like he was a quail egg, fragile and breakable. It wasn't like Rowan to let such a perfect opportunity pass to hound him about Juniper, how it was all his fault and why he shouldn't chase after her. Instead, she had taken a burden off his paws.

Because she knew. Jet looked into the den and saw other shifters watching him from the shadows. They all knew that he had wanted Sylvia, that she had chosen another. And they pitied him. They all did. Like he was *weak*.

Biting back a snarl, Jet shifted again. He would go to the river to wash, but not because Rowan told him to. He needed some time away from everyone.

Loping back out of the canyon, Jet made his way toward the water. Warblers called from among the reeds, and the wind whispered through the rushes. Jet felt himself breathe easier. This was exactly

what he needed. Taking a flying leap, he splashed into the river.

Someone let out a gasp. “Jet?”

It was Sylvia, hidden among the reeds.

“You scared me. For a second I thought an actual wolf was jumping in here with me.”

She swam over to him, her body hidden under the water. Her hair was damp, and she was looking radiant.

Jet shifted, trying to hide his annoyance. He couldn’t even bathe without having what he’d lost rubbed in his face? “I didn’t mean to startle you. I can go.”

“Don’t.” She reached out to grab his arm.

He felt himself flush. This was all just ridiculous. An Alpha should have more control.

By the way things were going under the waterline, all control had been lost. He bent his knees, hoping the darker water would conceal his growing ardor.

“I won’t bother you. I’m sure you want to be alone.” *Or with Jasper.*

“I want to be with you.” She swam over to him, her hazel eyes unbearably close. They reflected the greens and browns of the river, and he had never seen anything more stunning.

“Rowan gave me this.” Sylvia held up an oilcloth bag. “She said it’s full of soap sand, but I’m not sure how to use it. Can you help me?”

She held the bag out to him. How could he refuse? She was entrancing. It was hard to forget that she had chosen someone else, that he couldn’t have her... She swept her wet hair over her shoulders, droplets of river water dotting her arms.

Jet poured some sand into his palm, struggling to remember how to speak. Somehow, she had completely transformed from the moment they’d met. She’d been afraid, meek, quiet. But she stood before him self-assured and vibrant, seeming to know exactly what she wanted, which was for Jet to help wash her naked body. But hadn’t she chosen Jasper? He was so confused.

“Are you sure you want my help?” he asked. “I could tell you how to do it yourself.”

She smiled over her shoulder. “You aren’t going to make me ask again, are you?”

Jet swallowed, his throat suddenly dry, then rubbed the sand into her shoulder. She exhaled, leaning into his touch. Jet hoped she wouldn’t lean too far, or she’d discover more than she might bargain for under the water.

He dipped his hand into the water, wetting the sand, and started massaging it into her arms. Sylvia’s eyes were closed, and she seemed totally at peace.

Jet’s mind was raging. Should he be doing this? What if she was soon to be bound to Jasper? He wished he could have her, but he would never betray his brother, not even for his fated mate.

She is, you know, his wolf said inside him.

Jet froze.

“Is everything okay?” Sylvia asked.

“Yes. Just getting more sand.” He upended the bag, dumping half of the sand into the water before

he could stem the flow. Had his wolf gone mad? There was no such thing as fate.

You don't have to believe it. She's still our mate, though.

"Can you put that stuff in my hair?" Sylvia asked. Her voice was like music. He had noticed when they'd met, but he hadn't realized how much he needed to hear it.

"Sure." He remembered that she'd asked a question. "Just keep your eyes closed. You don't want any to get in there."

Jet brought his sandy hands up, running them through her hair. She smiled, moving closer to him. His heart beat in his throat. What was she thinking? Did she not know how much he needed her? How much his wolf needed her?

Inside, he felt nothing but a glow of contentment from his wolf.

The creature must be mad. She wasn't theirs!

Stop worrying. Our mate knows us.

Jet rubbed his face with a wet hand. There was no talking to the beast. He'd just concentrate on Sylvia. It wasn't like it was hard.

The afternoon sun made her creamy skin glow, and her hair glinted with strands of bronze and gold. Jet sighed. She was gorgeous. But not for him.

"If you lie back, you can rinse the sand out," he heard himself saying.

She brought up her feet, letting herself float on the water. Droplets cascaded down the curves of her breasts, and he tried not to stare.

"Did I rinse it all out?" Sylvia's hair formed a cloud around her head.

"Mostly. You might have to dive under to get it all."

"Will you come with me?" She reached out to grasp his hand.

Jet hoped she couldn't feel his racing pulse. "On three," he said. "One... Two... Three."

They both ducked under the water.

She shook out her hair, the lazy current playing with it. Opening her eyes, she looked at him. She was totally naked before him, the river lending her a greenish tinge. Her hair was wild, her eyes alight. She had never looked more beautiful. A string of bubbles escaped from her mouth. He had never wanted to kiss anyone more in his life.

But he couldn't.

Sylvia kicked up, breaking the surface, and he followed.

"Why were you looking at me like that?" Her wet hair dripped down her back, and water clung to her every curve.

He wished he weren't grinning so stupidly. He couldn't think of anything to say, so he plucked a flower from a nearby waterlily and placed it in her hair.

Sylvia put a hand up to it. Jet held his breath. He'd never been compelled to do anything like that before.

Turning to him, she gave him a gorgeous smile.

He could feel his resolve melting. How was this human holding such sway over him?

She swam closer, right into his arms. Jet held her close. She felt so perfect there, so right. Tilting her head up, she kissed him.

She was air and light. An eagle on the wind. A cool breeze on a sweltering day. And her lips were the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted.

His hands traced her back, her shoulder blades. His fingers ran through her damp hair of their own accord. He wanted to draw her closer, closer, until she was part of him.

Jet forced himself to break away. He gazed at her, panting.

"I thought you liked Jasper."

"I do."

Damn those bewitching hazel eyes. "You can't like me too. You have to choose."

"Why?"

On the bank, the rushes parted. Jasper stood there, the absolute last person Jet wanted to see in this moment. He stepped away from Sylvia, letting the river flow between them. He felt like a pup that had been caught sneaking meat before dinner, and he resented that it was his little brother making him feel that way.

Jasper waved to them both, then hopped in. Cutting gracefully through the water, he swam over to them. Jet scowled. He didn't have to show off.

"Did you see that?" Jet asked warily.

"Your kiss? I did." Jasper grinned. "Nice, wasn't it?"

He would have preferred his brother to be angry. Was Jasper planning to try and drown him if he turned his back?

"All right." It was best to lay everything out in the open. "I know you're mad, Jasper. There's no need to pretend otherwise."

"I'm not mad."

Jet stared at him. What was his game here?

"I'm serious, Jet. Sylvia and I have already talked about it. She likes both of us. We'll both just have to accept it."

"What?" He couldn't be hearing right. Had he gotten water in his ears?

"You both found me," Sylvia said. "You both make me feel safe. I want both of you."

The thought of sharing her made annoyance flare within him. "You can't have both of us. You have to choose."

"Come on, Jet," his brother said. "Tell me, does your wolf really have a problem with it?"

As long as we have our mate, nothing else matters.

They were insane, all of them. He turned to Sylvia. "How would this even work?"

She took him by the hand. "Let me show you..."

When Sylvia reached out to take his brother's hand, Jet's wolf barely stirred. Jet found himself

caring less that she wanted both of them. He wanted her, needed her. Nothing else mattered.

She made them follow her onto the bank, had them lie with her in the tall grass. Rolling onto her side, she laid a hand over her hip. The motion seemed to put a spell over him. He rose to his knees beside her, hardly daring to believe she could be his. Bending low, he put his lips on her shoulder.

He was going to claim his mate.

Chapter 7

Sylvia lay back in the long grass, her damp hair heavy around her shoulders. Jet knelt at her right, Jasper at her left, their eyes molten gold. With them beside her, she feared nothing.

The sky above was a deep blue that could only be held by a summer afternoon. Birds called, insects hummed, and her men bent to kiss her.

A shiver ran through her, from her toes all the way to her crown. In this moment, she was the luckiest woman on earth.

Jet put gentle fingers near her face, softly pushing her hair away so he could kiss her neck. Jasper's lips roved over her belly and thighs, making her laugh with delight.

She knew one thing—today was going to be unforgettable.

Slipping a hand behind her head, Jet put his lips to hers. She responded greedily, wanting more of him. With her tongue, she traced the line of his lips, making him shudder. She suppressed a smile. He was hers. They were both hers.

Farther down, Jasper slid a hand beneath her ass, giving it a light squeeze. Sylvia was pleasantly powerless as he straddled her, putting a finger between her legs. She moaned as he felt the wetness within, wetness that had been called forth by him and Jet, not left by the river.

Jasper moved his finger back and forth, lightly stroking her. His touch sent ripples of delight through her, ripples that she was sure Jet could feel. He gripped her more tightly, kissed her more fervently. And she could see them both growing harder. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back.

Jasper's breath was growing ragged. He slid a finger into her, then two. Sylvia moaned into Jet's mouth. It still wasn't enough, not quite enough... She wanted more.

Seeming to sense her needs, Jasper bent over her. Spreading her legs, he lay in the space between them. As he set his tongue to her flesh, Sylvia cried out. It felt like she would never be the same.

Jet moved down her body, his tongue flickering over her breasts, forming whorls as he moved closer to their center. His tongue and Jasper's seemed to work in time, both sending waves of sensation through her that crashed when they met, melding into a paroxysms of pleasure.

Sylvia tried to keep herself still and under control, but they continued until she could no longer feel the grass beneath her. Jasper's strong hands grabbed her hips, holding them tight to keep her from bucking. His tongue ran over her like a flame, and she loved the heat. It seared her, branded her, and

she wordlessly cried out for more.

He knew what she needed—he'd always known what she needed. Jasper mounted her, easing his hard cock deep into her wetness. Jet ran his hands through her hair, tethering her to the earth as Jasper pushed deeper, so deliciously tight inside her. Jet's lips brushed her neck, her collarbones. He whispered in her ear, telling her what he was going to do to her, the descriptions so lush and detailed that she had to remember to breathe.

Jasper clutched her waist, his fingers spasming over her skin as he buried himself in her. Sylvia wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer, urging him deeper. He looked up at her, his golden eyes locking with hers, his gaze somehow even more erotic than his touch. He stared at her like she was an oasis in the desert, a ship to one lost at sea.

Sylvia pulled him closer, her thigh muscles burning. She would give him and Jet everything, mind, body, and soul.

His eyes never leaving hers, Jasper pumped in and out. His every thrust sent her spiraling higher as bliss surged through her. She never wanted him to stop.

But he did, shuddering. "I'm sorry, my love," he said, kissing her above the ear, "but I want to last longer for you."

Before she could ask what he meant, Jet had picked her up and set her on all fours. "Are you ready for more?" he murmured.

She could only moan in response.

Jet positioned himself behind her, his cock brushing the backs of her thighs. Sylvia tingled with anticipation as Jasper gathered her hair and draped it down her back.

Then Jet grabbed her hips, and thrust.

Stars burst behind her eyelids. He seemed to drive all the breath from her body, all the power from her limbs. Leaning in to kiss her, Jasper helped her remain upright. He cupped her breasts in his hands, stroking them, as Jet plunged into her. Jasper's hands traveled over her, his touch electric. Jet's hands were firm on her hips, pulling her forever closer.

Bending her head, she moaned, their caresses blurring together until she couldn't tell where one man ended and the other began. And it didn't matter, because they both belonged to her, and she to them. They filled her with strength, and she had the power to face any foe with them by her side.

Sylvia opened her eyes to find Jasper kneeling in front of her. His cock was hard, and at eye level. Reaching out with one hand, she drew him closer. He had taken good care of her, and she needed to return the favor.

Jet was still pulsing into her as she licked the long length of Jasper's shaft. He closed his eyes, and his cock throbbed under her tongue. She grinned. He needed her now. Opening her mouth, she took him in.

Jasper groaned as Sylvia's lips traveled down his shaft, until he was deep in her throat. He pulled back, then plunged in again, and she reveled in how she could make his abs jump, make the muscles in

his legs twitch. Putting her hands on his waist, she drew him in closer, urging him to thrust faster, faster.

Jasper groaned again, and Jet let out an answering moan. Their peaking arousal made her shudder, and all three of them felt it. On either side, her men thrust harder. Sylvia held tight to Jasper, wanting to anchor to something as the world dissolved around her in a kaleidoscope of colors. She was full of her mates, full of life. She never wanted this feeling to end. She wanted it to go on, unbroken, this perfect day by the river.

They thrust into her at the same time, and it was too much. Crying out, they emptied into her. Sylvia reached down to grip the grass, determined to hang on to the world as she was rocked by more pleasure than she'd ever felt before. It rolled through her like an ocean wave, and she was powerless before it. All she could do was hold fast and not get swept out to sea.

She came back to earth, gasping, her knuckles white as she clutched the long grasses. Her shaking limbs gave way, and she collapsed. Jet and Jasper lay on either side of her, draping their arms over her shoulders and waist.

"Sylvia," Jet murmured.

"Our mate," Jasper said.

Sylvia closed her eyes, completely content, warm in their embrace as the river meandered past.

"Alpha. Alpha!"

Sylvia sat, feeling slightly groggy. When had they fallen asleep?

"Hawke?" Beside her, Jasper rubbed his eyes.

Jet looked up at the shifter who stood over them. "I thought you were supposed to be patrolling the eastern border."

"I was." The shifter, lean with straw-colored hair, seemed agitated. "Dakota told me to find you. Someone wants to cross into our territory."

Jet stood with a snarl. "Who is it?"

"A man... we're not entirely sure. He wouldn't give his name." Hawke hesitated, glancing at Sylvia. "He's asking for her."

She felt her stomach drop, her heart go cold.

"He asked for her?" Jasper repeated. "By name?"

"Not exactly." Hawke glanced back over his shoulder, as if he feared someone might be following him. "He asked if a woman on the run had been through here. He didn't believe us when we said no." Hawke bit his lip. "I don't think he's human."

Sylvia put her head between her knees, the waterlily falling from her hair. She left it where it fell, her heart racing. This was it. Everything was over. It was time to run.

"Breathe." Jasper grabbed her hand, but his voice seemed to come from the bottom of the river. "We're here. We won't let him hurt you."

She knelt, putting her forehead to the grass, agony washing over her. He spoke like he had a

choice, like he could prevent anything. She had been so selfish. She had wanted someone to protect her, someone to keep her safe. But no one would be able to. All she had succeeded in doing was dooming their pack.

Steeling herself, she took in a gulp of air. “I’m going.” She stood, not allowing Jet or Jasper to help her up. “I’m leaving. Don’t stall him, it’s too dangerous.”

“Stop talking like that.” Jet gripped her by the shoulders. “You’re part of our pack. We’re not leaving you to fend for yourself.”

“We can face him,” Jasper said, “together. We’re not afraid, Sylvia.”

They should be. Oh, they should.

Her mouth felt like it was filled with sawdust. Her lungs didn’t seem to be working. She had to make a decision. They wouldn’t let her run, and she couldn’t let them die for her.

But there was another choice.

“We’ll face him,” she said. “Tell him of your pack, and that may make him turn away.”

“Are you sure?” Jasper asked.

Jet looked at her, his eyes narrowed. She tried to keep her face expressionless. He had to believe her.

“I’m sure.” She looked into Jet’s golden eyes. “Are you, Alpha?”

He gazed at her for a long moment. “Let’s get this over with,” he said. “Dakota’s still at the border, right?”

Hawke nodded. “If she’s held him.”

Sylvia tried not to shudder.

“All right,” Jet said. “If all of us go, then that’s four shifters against one. I’d like to turn him away without getting the entire pack involved. Does that sound good, Jasper?”

He nodded. “I’m ready. We’ll face him together, Sylvia.”

Jet knelt down. “Get on my back,” he said.

Sylvia swung a leg over him and had barely settled herself when he shifted. She surveyed the land astride a great black wolf. But she didn’t feel strong, or powerful. She felt like they were about to walk into a trap.

In a way, they were. But it would be a trap of her choosing. She would bargain with him, make him agree to spare Jet, Jasper, and the pack if she went quietly. He would agree—after all, how many times had he told her not to make a scene? Jet and Jasper would not agree, but they would have no other choice. If he was merciful, he might leave them with no memory of her at all.

Like I never happened. Sylvia clutched two handfuls of Jet’s fur to keep herself from shaking. She must let him think that everything was okay, that they could beat the man who hunted her. If she gave the game away, everyone in the Oak Canyon pack could die.

She would save them all. Even if it cost her everything.

Jasper and Hawke had shifted too, and the three wolves sprang forward. Jet led them toward the

eastern border. Her heart pounded as they raced through the trees. The sun was sinking, light fading from the world. It felt like her hope was waning with it, waiting to be extinguished by the night.

There would be no more sunrises for her.

She closed her eyes as they got closer, not bothering to duck as branches whipped at her face. They didn't hurt her. Not compared to what he would do.

Jet slowed, and the others followed suit. They must be near the border. Sylvia slid off his back.

He turned, observing her with golden eyes. Jet made a magnificent wolf, black but for a white patch on his chest. Her heart tightened. Would this be the last time she'd see him?

Jet shifted. "I know what you plan to do."

She crossed her arms.

"You can't give yourself up, Sylvia. We'll fight for you. The whole pack will."

"It won't be enough," she whispered.

"Give us a chance?" He clutched her hand. "I can't lose you."

"Jet?" The call came through the woods. "Is that you?"

Despite the distance, they could hear Dakota's voice tremble.

"We're coming," Jet shouted. He gripped Sylvia's hand, eyes like steel. "You can run," he said. "Jasper can take you away."

She shook her head. "I'll face him."

Her mates exchanged a worried glance, like they both feared she'd break down. And she would. Just not yet.

Clenching her fists, she walked forward.

Jet, Jasper, and Hawke hurried to catch up.

They came to the edge of a small rise. Below, Dakota stood facing a man in a dark cloak. His face was covered by a hood, and no skin showed.

"Vampire," Jasper muttered.

Sylvia's legs almost gave way.

"I've got you." Jet grabbed her arm. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not." The relief that flooded through her made her feel lightheaded. "That's not him."

"What?" Jasper stared. "I thought a vampire was after you."

"He is. But I'm not afraid of him. He's a kitten compared to his master."

"There you are." The vampire's voice had a whining edge. "Are you done playing your little game yet?"

"Hello, Dario."

The sun sank behind the mountains, and Dario pulled off his hood. Red eyes gleamed in his pale face. "There may still be time to return before the master finds out you were missing. Come back with me, and you can spare us both."

"She's not coming with you!" Jet barreled down the hill, halting right in front of Dario.

The vampire didn't blink. "Your furry friends can't save you. But you already know that."

"You think I can't fight you?" Jet snarled. "Sylvia is under our protection now."

"Very nice." Dario sounded bored. "I can't wait all night for an answer. We need to leave now to hope to beat him back."

Sylvia walked forward.

"Don't go," Jasper whispered, glued to her side. "We'll think of something. We'll make a plan."

She put a hand over the inside of her elbow, remembering the agony Dario had put her through. The fangs weren't the worst part—they stung, but only for an instant. It was the paralysis, the helplessness. And then the sucking, the insatiable sucking, and the fear that he might not ever stop, might leave her a carcass drained of blood.

Sylvia bit the inside of her cheek, willing herself not to shudder, not to show weakness. Stopping beside Jet, she stood before her former captor. Now that she was faced with the prospect of walking alone through the woods with him, letting him return her to his master, she couldn't go through with it. Her best hope would be that he bled her out on the journey back.

"Are you ready?" Dario asked. "Don't make me ask again."

"I'm never going back."

On either side of her, her mates stood straighter, daring Dario to protest.

"So that's what you want to do, you want to anger *him*?" The vampire arched an eyebrow. "You know as well as I how he'll react. Are these your new friends?" He swept a scathing glance over the shifters. "If you want us all to remain alive to see the autumn, I suggest you come with me."

She swallowed hard. "No."

"Fine." He inspected his fingernails. "It won't be my funeral." Dario turned to go.

"Wait," Jet said. "Who is he? Your master?"

The vampire shivered. "Pray you never learn his name. But he will break you. All of you. Easily."

Silence descended over the clearing. It was as if the forest itself held its breath.

"I'll be going now." Dario put his hood back up. "It was nice meeting you." With one last look at Sylvia, he walked into the trees and vanished.

Jet watched him go, looking like he wanted to follow and rip him apart. Finally, he tore his gaze away. "Let's get back to the den."

The five of them strode back, Dakota and Hawke occasionally throwing furtive glances over their shoulders. Sylvia wasn't afraid. She knew Dario wouldn't bother following them. He had bigger things to worry about.

"*Why must you carry on so?*" The voice was like a snake in her mind. She shook her head, willing it to go away. They must be able to outrun or outsmart him somehow. Together, they could think of a plan. How many days had it been since she'd escaped? Surely they had a little more time...

"*You were my guest once. You will be my guest again. Forever, this time.*"

She clapped her hands over her ears. She couldn't let his voice inside her head, not even for a

second. That was how it started, right after he pulled you under with those bright green eyes. With those eyes, and that voice, he could convince a mouse to climb into a hungry lion's mouth.

She felt her steely resolve crumble. This was all a mistake, one huge, terrible mistake. She felt herself losing control, little by little, then all at once. She couldn't breathe enough air, she was drowning, her legs were folding under her—

“Sylvia, what's wrong?” Jet and Jasper were kneeling beside her.

“Bring him back.” She clutched Jet's arm, her words reaching a hysterical pitch. “Find Dario, and tell him I'll go. If I don't go, it'll be all my fault.”

Jasper smoothed her hair. “It'll be okay,” he said. “Don't worry.”

“I won't worry. I won't worry when you bring Dario back.”

Jet looked at Jasper, who nodded. Quickly, the Alpha scooped her up.

“No,” she begged, reaching back the way they'd come. “I need him. We all need him. It's the only way you'll be safe.”

“We want you to be safe,” Jet said.

“Put me down!” Furiously, she tried to wriggle out of his arms. “You don't know who you're dealing with.”

“Sylvia, no!”

She twisted from his grip, and fell to the ground. Jumping to her feet, she set off running. She didn't expect Jasper to tackle her. They both hit the forest floor, sprawling in the dirt.

“Come back to the den,” Jasper pleaded. “Just for tonight. You're tired, stressed—in no condition to make grand plans. We'll figure out what to do tomorrow.”

Sylvia sobbed.

Jet put a hand on her knee. “Let us help you,” he said.

“Help me?” She rubbed a hand under her running nose. “How?”

“Let us Bite you—you can be one of the pack, a shifter. Stronger, faster. He won't be able to hurt you.”

Tears welled again. “But he will.”

“How? How is he so bad? Tell me.”

She could see it so clearly, the snakes writhing and twisting. “He can... he can make you do things.”

“Like what?”

Sylvia closed her eyes. “Whatever he wants.”

Chapter 8

They sat around the fire eating venison, but Sylvia could barely taste the meat. The pack was all gathered, and the meal was a quiet, tense affair. She wanted to leap onto the table, to shout at them, to demand to know why they were even bothering. *He* was coming, and there was nothing they could do to stop him.

“Stop it,” Jet murmured. “I know you’re thinking of running, or giving yourself up. Neither of those is an option.”

She bit back a laugh. He was right. When the time came, she wouldn’t have a choice at all.

“The Bite will solve everything,” Jet said. “What could hurt you as a wolf?”

Sylvia set her venison down. She couldn’t stomach any more.

“That’s a terrible idea,” Jasper said. “What if she doesn’t survive the Turn?”

She bit her lip to keep from blurting out that it didn’t matter either way.

“She’s strong,” Jet insisted. “She’d survive.”

Compared to what was after her, a shifter’s Bite wasn’t scary at all.

On the canyon rim, Clay yipped. But the sentry’s bark was cut short.

Within seconds, everyone was on their feet. Sylvia stood slowly, not bothering to reach for weapons as the others had. They’d find out soon enough that resisting was useless.

They waited long minutes, staring into the darkness. Icy dread seeped through her. It was all over.

There was a scuffling of pebbles over rock. Clay appeared around a bend, leading a tall man. The pack seemed to relax, but they hadn’t yet noticed that Clay’s arms were slack and his eyes blank, that he was responding to other orders now.

A wave of despair washed over her. He was here.



Jasper peered at the man who walked behind Clay. He didn’t like how Clay had abandoned his post, or how the man seemed to be using him as a shield. Something about the situation set his teeth on edge.

Beside him, Sylvia had gone rigid. Her hands shook, and she didn’t seem to be breathing. She

stared down the canyon, naked fear in her gaze.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” he murmured.

She took in a shuddering breath. “You should have let me run.”

Jasper shifted, hoping his wolf form could comfort her, and intimidate their visitor. But the man hardly seemed to notice him, or care that he was walking into a den of angry shifters. He was tall and lanky, his long hair was drawn back, and he moved with a swagger that indicated he had little need to fear much at all.

The stranger stopped ten paces from the fire, and Clay halted too. The sentry looked straight ahead, as if he didn’t recognize any of his fellow packmates.

Jet tensed, letting out a snarl. The stranger didn’t even glance at him. He merely rolled up the sleeves of his blue robe, which was strewn with stars and could have been made of night. He only had eyes for one person.

“Hello, Sophie,” he said softly.

She screamed, a terrible sound that seemed to rend the air around them.

“Hush,” the stranger said.

Sylvia did, instantly, sending chills down Jasper’s spine.

“I leave you for a week,” the man said, “in the best of care, and this is how you repay me? After all I’ve done for you, Sophie?”

She let out a dry sob. “You left me with D-Dario. You knew what he’d d-do to me.”

“He kept you safe. And for a tiny payment. What’s a little blood loss compared to your safety, my dear?” His words were like caramel, soothing and sweet. Jasper shook himself to keep from being lulled by them.

“But you ran away.” The stranger advanced. “From *me*, after everything I’ve given you. I’m not done with you, Sophie, and your desertion just proves that. I promised you that I was going to break you. You won’t make me break my promise too, will you?”

Rowan stepped forward, growling. “Leave this place while you still can.”

He whipped around to look at her, the fire seeming to grow in his eyes. “*This does not concern you.*”

She stepped back, and sat calmly. Around her, the rest of the pack relaxed.

Jasper felt queasy. This was an extremely powerful sorcerer. Could he make them do whatever he wanted? Had Sophie been right?

Sylvia! He snarled to himself. *Her name is Sylvia. Don’t let his words poison your mind.*

“What was our one rule?” The sorcerer’s words echoed off the canyon walls. “The only rule you needed to follow to guarantee that I would never irreparably harm you?”

She stared into his green eyes, like she couldn’t help herself. “Never run away.”

“And so... it’s time to surrender to me once more.”

She held out a hand to him, and he moved forward to seize it.

“No!” Roaring, Jet leapt at him.

The sorcerer raised a hand. “*Halt!*”

Jet stood frozen, his face caught in a silent scream.

The sorcerer wanted Jasper’s mate. But he couldn’t have her. He wouldn’t. Surging forward, Jasper lunged at him.

“*Stop. Stop!*”

For a second, he saw fear in the sorcerer’s eyes. Jasper wondered if his commands had ever failed before. He hit him with his front paws, and they both went sprawling to the ground. Jasper put his jaws on his throat, determined to bite down before his foe could pull out another kind of weapon.

The man glared up at him. “I wouldn’t recommend that,” he croaked.

Jasper’s anger flared. He bared his fangs, daring him to speak again.

The sorcerer pointed toward the fire.

Against his better judgment, Jasper looked. What he saw made his blood run cold. Sylvia was holding a knife to her throat.

“If this mutt spills my blood,” the sorcerer said, “you will spill yours.”

Her eyes were blank as she nodded. The knife was steady in her hand.

Jasper whimpered.

The sorcerer pushed him aside. “What will it be, wolf?”

He looked between his foe and his mate. There had to be something he could do, something to fix this. If only Jet had shifted. But his brother was slumped against a canyon wall, looking completely docile.

“Do I need to have her give herself an interesting scar before I can persuade you?” The sorcerer raised his hand, and Sylvia pressed the point to her throat. “I’d hate to ruin such a pretty neck, but if that’s what you want...”

She pressed too hard, and a droplet of blood gleamed on the blade’s tip. Sylvia didn’t seem to notice.

Jasper backed away, his head low to the ground. He had never felt so helpless.

The sorcerer moved forward to grab Sylvia’s hand, but didn’t let her remove the knife from her throat.

“That’s better,” he said, pulling her away. “I don’t normally negotiate with animals. Next time, I won’t. Stay in your pathetic little playground and I won’t have your pack put themselves down.”

All around him, shifters raised their dinner knives to their stomachs.

The sorcerer, Sylvia’s hand in his, backed out of the canyon until he was untouched by the fire’s light. Jasper looked anxiously between the retreating figures and his pack, who all still held their weapons at the ready. He had the terrible feeling that the sorcerer would make them all slaughter themselves at the last second.

Jasper couldn’t take it anymore. He shifted. “Let them go!” he called.

A sinister chuckle crept out of the night. "They can stay."

Around him, the pack slowly lowered their weapons. Jasper let out a breath.

"You will come."

Darkness descended as he stepped toward the sorcerer.



Sylvia woke in a familiar high-backed chair. She tried to rise, but her limbs were manacled to its arms and legs.

"No," she said. "No, no, NO!"

"Awake again?"

She wanted to weep, because it was *his* voice, the one sound she never wanted to hear again. And he was here, his hand on her shoulder once more. He'd dressed her in fine silks, but she wanted nothing more than to fling the finery off and burn it.

"Did you have a pleasant dream?"

Sylvia threw herself against her bonds, making the chair swing around. She didn't plan to sit here and let him play his sick little games. She would face him.

He gazed down at her, delight in his green eyes. "You must have had a very good dream indeed. Dario said you tried to misbehave while I was away. Is it because you missed me?"

No. Oh no. He was going to make her forget. He was going to take Jet, Jasper, Rowan, all the others, all of Oak Canyon, and tell her that they'd never existed.

She clenched her fists. "I won't!"

He laughed coldly, tracing her arm. "You'll have to be more specific. There's so much you try to refuse me, my dove."

Sylvia wanted to reach up and slap that smirk off his face. "I won't forget them. Not ever. They mean too much to me."

"They do, do they?" He didn't seem angered by her defiance, only mildly amused. "You poor idiot." The sorcerer moved behind her chair, gripping its back. "Don't you know why you entrance me?"

She swallowed. She didn't want to know the answer.

"You're the only one who can resist me, even a little. And I love a good fight." He chuckled. "You won't forget them. Such innocence... What makes you think I'd ever want you to forget your friends?"

He clapped his hands, and Dario opened the doors to the chamber. The vampire walked in, followed by Jet and Jasper. They stopped in the center of the stone room, which was empty except for her chair. Bowing, Dario left.

"You should bow to me too," the sorcerer said to them. "Do so."

Obediently, they bowed.

Silent tears ran down Sylvia's face. Why did he have to take them too? Couldn't he have spared them? She had never wanted anyone else to get hurt.

This was her fault. All her fault.

She closed her eyes against what felt like an ocean of tears.

"Oh, Sophie, but you must watch. You won't want to miss this."

She turned her head away. He couldn't make her watch.

A rough hand grabbed her by the chin. "I feel like you aren't appreciating my hospitality, Sophie. You know what I do to ungrateful guests."

Sylvia looked at him, tears spilling down her cheeks. She hated how easily he could do this to her, how much he was reveling in her weakness. He was lucky the manacles held strong, because otherwise she would scratch out his eyes.

The sorcerer knelt beside her chair. "You see my new toys?"

Sensing his gaze, Jet and Jasper bowed again. Their glazed eyes made her want to weep anew.

"You know how generous I am, Sophie. Show her your presents, toys!"

Jet and Jasper held up gleaming silver daggers.

"The hilt is covered in leather," he said, "but it still must be agony for a shifter just to hold. Funny, don't you think?"

She closed her eyes again, unable to help the sob that escaped.

"I said, don't you think it's funny?" His hand was back on her chin, tighter this time. He gave her a firm shake. "If you're displeased, I can have them kill themselves now."

"No," she said, trying to keep the fear out of her words. "It's very funny."

"Good, good. I wouldn't want you to be having a bad time. That wouldn't make me a very considerate host, now would it?" He draped an arm over hers. "Now tell me, I'm having a hard time remembering—what's your name?"

The question made her stomach flip. She squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't let him take that from her again. The last time he'd done it, he'd almost taken everything.

But if she answered wrong, Jet and Jasper would die.

Sylvia. Sylvia. You're Sylvia.

"Sophie," she said.

"Very good." He stroked her cheek, and it took everything she had not to shudder. "And what's my name, dove?"

She couldn't contain her overwhelming revulsion. A dry heave rolled through her at the thought of saying his name again. But she had to. "Ammon."

"Master Ammon." He sighed. "Are you even trying, Sophie? Do I need to give you a little more persuasion?"

He waved a hand, and Jasper knelt on the stone floor. Splaying his fingers, he pressed the knife to his pinky.

“No!” she screamed.

“Then who am I?” There was a dangerous edge to the sorcerer’s voice.

“Master Ammon,” she sobbed.

“And what’s your name?”

“Sophie.”

“Say it like you believe it.”

“Sophie!”

He smiled at her as she cried. “That’s better. You’ll get there, dove.”

Slowly, Jasper rose.

Sophie—Sylvia sniffled, wiping her nose on her silken sleeve. All around, candles flickered on the walls, looking perversely cheerful. Ammon sounded more gleeful than she’d ever heard him before. It was like he was pleased she had escaped, reveling in the fact that he got to break her again.

This time, she knew, he planned to extinguish all hope.

She looked at Jet and Jasper, trying to catch their eyes. They weren’t bound, except in their own minds. If they could just snap out of it, they could run. They needed to flee, to leave her behind. Ammon might even grow bored with them, and let them live. That was all she cared about—her mates living through this.

Run! She wanted to scream it at them. But their eyes never left Ammon’s face.

“Oh, my dove.” He took her hand, despite how she tried to scrabble away. With the manacle, she didn’t get far. “I’m so glad you’re back with me. You need to learn a lesson, though.” His bony fingers tightened around hers. “It’s partially my fault, because I never would have left if I thought I hadn’t broken you. So this time, you won’t be punished.”

Releasing her, he patted her hand. “I still want the lesson to stick. This should be a good reminder of why you will never run away again. I can’t bear the thought of you leaving me, Sophie darling.”

He leaned closer. “We’re about to have some fun,” he whispered. “But first, tell me again, what’s your name?”

“S-Sophie.”

“Again.”

“Sophie.”

“Louder.”

“Sophie!”

“That’s good, Sophie. I’ll check in again later.” He stroked her hair like she was some kind of dog. “We wouldn’t want you to forget your own name, now would we? That would be embarrassing.”

Sophie—Sylvia—Sophie watched him move closer to the center of the stone room. She leaned forward, straining against her bonds as he circled Jet and Jasper. They simply stood there, compliant and still.

Holding the rest of her body perfectly rigid, she tried to pull her hand from the manacle. It bit into

her wrist, the slight looseness taunting her. She needed to protect her mates, needed to do *something*. How did Ammon intend to torture them?

The one thing she knew was that whatever he devised would be beyond her worst imagining.

“Look at these two.” Ammon held out his hands. “They were so eager to defend you.”

She forced herself to meet his gaze. They had defended her, done their best to protect her. But there was no protecting anyone from Ammon, and so they would die for her. She looked at the sorcerer, hatred welling inside her.

“What did you even see in these two?” He laughed, prodding the shifters toward her. “Did you think they loved you? Poor, deluded Sophie. No one could ever love someone as broken as you. No one but me.” He kissed her on the forehead, his lips cold as ice.

But his words weren’t true. They had loved her. And she had loved them. With her mates beside her, she didn’t feel broken at all.

Biting her lip, she looked into Jet and Jasper’s dead eyes, pretending that they were looking at her, not at Ammon. The sorcerer’s face shouldn’t be the last thing they saw. It wasn’t fair.

“Jet?” she whispered. “Jasper?” They had loved her—hadn’t they?

They didn’t even bother to turn their heads.

Ammon sniggered. “You still think they cared for you? Oh, Sophie. You’re too dear.” He turned to the shifters. “Did you love her, at all, ever?”

As one, Jet and Jasper turned to face her. Expressions impassive, they took three steps toward her. They were so close, yet so far. The total lack of recognition in their eyes made her heart ache.

“No.” They shook their heads. “We never loved you, Sophie.”

Her nails bit into the wooden arm of the chair. It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real. They knew her name wasn’t Sophie.

But what was her name?

She thought frantically. Samantha. Sasha. Susan...

What other names were there? She could only remember Sophie. But that wasn’t hers.

She looked into Jet’s eyes. For a second, she thought she saw a spark of recognition.

Sylvia! Sylvia, Sylvia, Sylvia. She chanted it in her mind. Jet looked away. It must have just been a trick of the candlelight.

She might forget her name, but she’d never forget theirs. Not in a hundred years. Sylvia gritted her teeth. She’d give anything to be able to grab one of those knives, just for one second. Chained or not, she’d take care of Ammon.

Until he spoke one word. She slumped back in her chair. What could she do? All she knew was that she couldn’t let him kill her mates, couldn’t let him take her sanity.

What choice do you have?

Bitterly, she had to admit she had none.

“You seem so sad, Sophie.”

Sylvia, she corrected in her mind.

The sorcerer tilted her chin, making her look up at him. “I only want to entertain you. How about a game, Sophie?”

He clapped his hands, and the shifters returned to the center of the room. Ammon made a show of repositioning her chair so she had a full view of them.

“That’s perfect. Now, Sophie, what shall we have our toys do for us?”

“You’re going to make them kill each other,” she said dully. “Why don’t you get it over with?”

“Oh, Sophie.” He stroked the side of her face. “That’s not sporting at all, is it? I’ll give them a chance—whoever is left alive after thirty minutes can leave with his life and his memory.” He turned to the shifters. “Are you ready to fight?”

Silently, they lifted their weapons. From the way they looked at each other, it was clear that neither recognized themselves as brothers.

“Don’t do this!” she shouted. Ammon could punish her all he liked, but he couldn’t kill her mates. “Jet! Jasper! Listen to me!”

“Oh, don’t shout, my dove. You’ll go hoarse.” Ammon moved toward the door. “I won’t stay—I can’t stand the sight of blood. But I’ll be back to check on the winner.”

She knew that her eyes were red from crying, that she looked disheveled and not at all intimidating, but she glared at him all the same.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Ambling back to her, he kissed the edge of her mouth. “Have fun, Sophie.”

Ammon walked out of the doors, letting the outer bar drop with a clang. She was locked inside with her murderous mates, left to watch as they circled each other, knives raised.

Chapter 9

“*Jet*,” she pleaded. “Jet!”
They ignored her, continuing to circle.
“Jasper! Stop!”

He stabbed toward Jet, testing his defenses. Jet growled, leaping back. For the attention they paid her, she might as well save her breath.

Sylvia refused to give up. She had absolutely nothing to work with, but she wouldn't let them kill each other. That was how Ammon intended this to end, with her beloved mates dead by each other's hands. He never intended for there to be one victor, just three losers.

Gritting her teeth, Sylvia threw her weight against one side of the chair. It swung forward an inch, scraping against the stone floor.

She looked forward, setting her jaw. All she had was her body. If she had to throw it between them to stop them, she would.

Sylvia threw herself against the other side of the chair, pain flaring in her ribs. But the chair rasped forward another inch. She pushed on, knowing that bruises must be blooming on her sides. She didn't care—all she cared about was getting to Jet and Jasper in time.

In the center of the room, Jasper charged. Jet brought up his knife, and their blades clashed. Sylvia winced. If she didn't move fast, it wouldn't matter that the chair would budge—Jet and Jasper were both attacking to kill.

Jet pounced on his brother, pinning him on the floor. Snarling, Jasper grabbed Jet's wrist, trying to keep the knife away from his throat.

The blade was so close—it touched skin, and Jasper shouted. Sylvia forced herself not to shut her eyes. She didn't want to topple over. She wouldn't be able to lift the heavy chair with all her limbs chained down. Once on the ground, she'd be completely useless.

Jasper kicked out, catching his brother in the stomach. Jet went flying, his blade leaving his hand. It clattered to the floor, far out of reach. Jasper looked between his brother and the fallen knife, an empty grin spreading over his face.

“Stop!” she cried. “Jasper, I love you. Put down your weapon!”

He moved toward Jet, looking more like a predator than she'd ever seen him.

“Jet, I love you. Please, stop this!”

Jet looked around, confusion in his eyes. For a second, their eyes met, and her heart soared. Jasper sprang forward, taking advantage of Jet’s momentary inattention to slash at his eyes. Jet ducked, the blade narrowly missing his face.

“Jasper, please! Stop!” She hurled herself against her chair, gaining another inch.

But Jasper didn’t stop, and the tenuous thread she’d established with Jet evaporated. Had it ever even existed, or had she only seen something she wished was there?

Jet charged at his brother, teeth bared, as if he forgot he didn’t have fangs. Jasper leapt out of the way, slicing as Jet passed. Jet fell, letting out a howl. He rose, clutching his arm. He’d been sliced from shoulder to elbow, and blood dripped from between his fingers.

“Jet,” she called, “come over here. Don’t fight him, just stay away from him.”

He looked down, found the knife by his feet. Bending low, he picked it up, then turned to Jasper.

“No!” Sylvia flung herself against the chair again and again, but it felt pointless. They were so far away. Even if she got closer, how could she ever reach them? By their expressions, neither would be satisfied until the other lay dead.

Sweat shone on their skin, and they both panted, but neither backed down. Jasper slashed, and Jet parried. Sylvia lurched closer. She could smell the sweat of the fighters. She just wished there was any way to make them stop.

Jet and Jasper faced each other, chests heaving, as Sylvia’s chair thudded into place between them.

“Stop this,” she said. “If any part of you can hear me, drop your weapons.”

They didn’t seem to see her. Jasper’s knife whistled by her ear, and Jet only dodged it at the last second. Snarling, Jet threw his own knife. It soared by her, sticking into Jasper’s shoulder. He stared at it as he collapsed on the stone.

Eyes gleaming, Jet moved in for the kill.

“No!” Sylvia threw herself and the chair in front of him. The chair partially shielded Jasper. “If you want to kill him, you’ll have to kill me too.”

Rage darkened his face as he approached. He leaned down, moving in for the kill, though she wasn’t sure if he intended to slay Jasper, her, or both of them.

Sylvia squeezed her eyes shut. She didn’t want to see Jet murder anyone.

You cannot kill our mate. The voice blazed in her mind. *I will kill us first.*

Gathering her courage, she cracked open one eye. Fur burst from Jet’s skin, his muscles swelling and transforming, until he stood before her as the huge black wolf. His golden eyes met hers, full of recognition, and she almost wept. Her Alpha was back.

“Jet?”

Lowering his head, he licked away her tears.

“Jet, what about Jasper?”

He shook his head. Carefully, he took the limbs of her chair in his jaws and crushed them, one by one.

Grimacing, Jet kicked Jasper's knife toward her. Sylvia picked it up and chopped at the chains. The silver blade made short work of them.

They both turned to look at Jasper, unconscious on the floor. Sylvia ran to his side. "He must have hit his head." Laying a hand on his fevered brow, she willed him to wake.

Jet leaned down, nuzzling his brother's head.

"Wake up, Jasper. You have to wake up."

He didn't stir.

Jet shifted, his face stricken. "I did this." With a trembling hand, he touched the knife that sprouted from his brother's shoulder. "This is my fault."

"It isn't your fault—no one could resist a command from Ammon."

Jet's eyes were unusually bright. "I'm not going to let him die with that sorcerer's blade in him." Grasping the knife, he pulled it out.

Jasper sat, gasping.

Jet immediately turned the knife on him. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Glaring, Jasper swatted at the knife. "Put that away. You know perfectly well who I am."

Jet relaxed as Jasper clutched his shoulder.

"That hurt worse coming out than it did going in." He glared at Jet. "Thanks a lot."

"Well, you got me, too." Jet showed off his arm. "Let's call it even."

"We can call it even when I stick you with a knife." Jasper stood with a groan, fingers running over his wound. "Silver. That's going to take forever to heal."

Jet grimaced. "I'm truly sorry."

"I know it wasn't really you." Jasper shuddered. "Part of me—I think it was my wolf—knew what was going on, but I couldn't stop myself. I had no control, and I almost—I almost killed you, Jet."

"I think you got off worse." Jet put an arm around Jasper as he swayed precariously. "How do we get out of here?" he asked Sylvia.

"Ammon will be close, if not right outside the door. Dario may be with him."

"Two against three," Jet said. "Our odds aren't bad."

"More like two against two and a half." Jasper winced. "Or less, if that damned sorcerer opens his mouth."

Sylvia tore a candle off the wall. "Maybe this will help."

Jet raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I think the knives would be better—"

"No. The wax." She scooped some out, letting it cool only for a moment before she stuffed it in her ear. "It will block any sound." She handed blobs of warm wax to Jet and Jasper.

"You're brilliant," Jasper said.

She shrugged. “We’re not out of here yet.”

“We need to leave fast,” Jet said. “Run, and keep running.”

“His voice is bad, but he can also do damage with his eyes,” Sylvia said, putting the wax into her other ear. “Don’t look at him, no matter what. I’ll point the way out. Got it?”

The two of them nodded, stuffing the wax in their own ears.

Sylvia gave them a thumbs up. “Ready?” she asked, unable to hear herself.

They nodded.

The three of them strode to the doors. Jet looked at Jasper, counting down from three. On his mark, they slammed against the wood.

The bar gave way, and splinters flew.

Sylvia threw her hands over her head, but the three of them pressed forward. Ammon stood ahead of them in the passageway, dust covering his majestic blue robe. She looked away as his mouth opened, issuing a command they couldn’t hear.

Jasper charged, punching the sorcerer full in the face. Ammon hadn’t expected that. He crumpled to the floor.

Chest heaving, Jasper stood over him. It seemed like he wanted to finish his foe, but Jet grabbed his shoulder. Dario had appeared in front of them.

Jet stepped forward, and the vampire backed away, his hands raised in surrender. Sylvia pointed down the hall toward the exit.

“Go!” Jet mouthed.

The three of them sprinted down the hall. Sylvia guided them through the maze of corridors, hoping she remembered them right. At last, they smelled a breath of cool night air. They raced into the darkness, hope renewed.

Together, they stumbled out a set of large front doors, down the drive of what looked to be a decrepit castle. Ivy clawed at the bricks, and seemed to be pulling them down an inch at a time. Half the windows were missing. But all they cared about was the sweet taste of freedom, the freshness of the night wind, and the splendid stars above.

Sylvia pointed. The mountains lay to the west. As one, her mates shifted. Jet bent low, the white patch on his chest bright against the dark. She swung onto his back, glad she could save her feet this time.

The wolves whirled, and the three of them raced toward home.

Chapter 10

They made it to the canyon just before dawn. Jet slowed as Jasper had begun to limp. Jet shifted, still carrying Sylvia on his back. “Does your arm hurt from the knife, or from the punch?” he joked.

The gray wolf whined, transforming into Jasper, who looked more weary than Sylvia had ever seen him.

Stumbling forward, Jasper put a hand on his wound. “I wish I had done more than punch him. I should have killed him when I had the chance.”

“We got out of there,” Jet said. “That’s what matters.”

Sylvia rubbed her ears. The wax had fallen out miles back, and she felt nervous without it. “He’s going to come back, you know.”

“We know.” There was steel in Jet’s voice. “But we’ll be ready.”

She slid off Jet’s back, striding into the comfort of the canyon walls. She needed to make sure the rest of the pack was safe. There was no telling what Ammon might have done to them. She couldn’t remember more than the sorcerer ordering her to surrender.

“You’re different, aren’t you?” Jet was asking Jasper. “After defending our mate.”

“Yes.” Jasper’s voice was slightly wary. “I can feel the change.”

“You’re an Alpha now.”

She turned back to look at them. They stood still, facing each other, like they had in Ammon’s lair. She felt a chill race up her spine. They wouldn’t challenge each other again, would they?

Jasper let out a long breath. “I can leave the pack, if you want. I won’t betray you.”

“No.” Jet clasped his brother’s uninjured shoulder. “Stay, and lead the pack with me. Share our mate. With two Alphas, we’ll be twice as strong.”

“Two?” Jasper glanced at Sylvia. “Don’t you mean three?”

Jet grinned. “Three Alphas—even two and a half—against one sorcerer? He won’t stand a chance.”

Sylvia wished she were as confident.

On the canyon rim, someone barked. She looked up to see Everett streaking back toward the den. Breaking into a run, Sylvia raced after him. She needed to know that Rowan, Gwen, West, and the

others were all right.

She rounded the bend in the canyon and found the pack pouring out of the den. Half of them were shifted, and the rest bristled with weapons.

“Who goes there?” Rowan shouted.

“Your Alphas,” Jet called.

The pack didn’t stand down or lower their weapons.

“How do we know you aren’t being controlled?” Rowan growled.

Jet sighed. “We don’t have time for this.”

“Oh, yes we do.” She raised her bow, pulling the drawstring taut. “What’s something you would only know if you were in full control of your brain?”

“That you’re annoying?”

She glared at him. “I mean, that is really convincing. But I’m still the one with a nocked arrow.”

“There’s something you told me that you kept secret from everyone else,” Jasper said.

“And what’s that?” She turned the bow toward him.

“That you once had a crush on Ash.”

“Ash?” Jet stared. “The Ember pack Alpha? No way.”

Rowan’s ears were turning red. “He wasn’t Alpha then. We were practically still pups.”

“Rowan and Ash?” Jet grinned. “I should have sent you south instead of Juniper.”

She loosed the arrow, and it sailed by his ear. “That’s the last I’d better hear about it, Alpha!”

The pack broke into laughter, tension ebbing away. Rowan strode forward and embraced Sylvia.

“I’m glad you took care of yourself, and got those overgrown coyotes back okay.” Rowan showed her the stockpiles of weapons and shields that they’d accumulated at the den’s entrance. “Ever since you left, we’ve been preparing for your return. Just in case you needed some help sorting out that maggoty magician.”

Sylvia stared around her, stunned. “You didn’t doubt we’d come back?”

“Of course not.”

She had to look away before her happy tears spilled over. The Oak Canyon pack was too good to her.

Jasper waded into their midst, bombarding Rowan and the others with questions of exactly how many arrows they had, and how their food supplies were holding up. Slipping away, Sylvia found Jet.

“Ammon will come after us,” she said.

“I know. But we will finish this.”

Sylvia grabbed his hands. “I want you to Bite me.”

“Now?” Jet looked taken aback. “He could be here any moment.”

“That’s why you have to Bite me now—I’m not strong enough as a human.”

He squeezed her hands. “You’ve escaped him, twice. Without you, I couldn’t have done it once. You’re stronger than me.”

“Not strong enough.” She set her mouth in a stubborn line. “I want to be a shifter when I face him. I’m done running.”

Jasper passed by, and Jet grabbed his arm.

“She wants to be Bitten,” he told his brother. “Help me talk some sense into her.”

Jasper gazed at Sylvia, his eyes lingering on hers. “Bite her. She won’t change her mind.”

“What? You’re the one who said she might not survive the Turn!”

“And you’re the one who said she was strong enough.” Jasper faced his brother. “It’s the best chance we all have of surviving the sorcerer.”

“So this is your first act as Alpha?” Jet asked accusingly. “Disagreeing with me?”

“No. My first act is protecting our mate.” Jasper lowered his voice. “I can Bite her if you’re too afraid...”

“I’m not afraid,” Jet snapped. “I’ll do it now.”

“Maybe on one of the beds, in case she thrashes.”

“Thrashes?” Sylvia asked. “Will it hurt?”

“I’ve heard it’s very painful,” Jet said. “Maybe your Bite can wait until after we defeat the sorcerer—”

“No. Let’s do it now.” She pulled him through the curtain of roots and up the stairs, before he could say anything else to try and change her mind.

Sylvia lay on the furs, her heart pounding. Jasper and Jet stood on either side of her.

“Are you sure about this?” Jet asked.

“Positive.”

The sun rose over the trees, blood-red light spilling into the room. She stared out the window, hoping this wasn’t the last sunrise she’d see.

“Fine...” Jet leaned over, fangs ready. Lovingly, he Bit her at the base of her neck.

Fire shot through her veins.

“Sylvia?” Jet grabbed her hand.

She screamed, and everything went dark.



Jet and Jasper faced each other, knives ready. Their eyes were blank.

“No!” Anguish surged through her like a physical pain. “You can’t!”

They didn’t recognize her voice, or each other. They would fight to kill.

“Such a fun game, isn’t it?” Ammon stood beside her, barely containing his glee. “Once they’re gone, you’ll be mine again.”

“I’ll never be yours.”

He laughed, his green eyes cold. “You’ll have no choice, my dove.”

She glared at him, her limbs chained to the chair. “You’re wrong. I’ll always have a choice.”

“And what would you do?” His haughty words rang out over the stone. “You’re a lowly human, with barely enough strength to defy my weakest command. You’ll never defeat me.”

“We’ll see about that.” She felt different this time, fiercer and more powerful. Something swelled inside her, leaving no room for fear.

Sylvia flexed her limbs, and brown fur sprouted over them. Her muscles grew, breaking the chains. She threw off the chair, heard it crash against the wall. She dropped to all fours, stalking toward Ammon. Her teeth had lengthened, and she licked them with her new tongue. She wondered what sorcerer would taste like.

Ammon backed away, toward Jet and Jasper. The blankness slid from their eyes, and they turned their knives toward him.

“Please, Sophie—Sylvia. I’ll do anything. Just don’t—”

With a snarl, she pounced.



“Sylvia. Sylvia!”

Jasper’s room swam into view. Hazy at first, the details began to fill in. She was wrapped in sweat-drenched furs, and she seemed to have pinned Rowan to the floor.

Sorry, she wanted to say, but she barked instead.

“You have to shift back,” Rowan said. “Just think about what it’s like to be human. Two arms, two legs, fingers and toes... it’ll come.”

There was a lessening feeling as her beautiful brown fur receded. Sylvia rolled off of Rowan, stumbling as she tried to rise.

“You’ll get used to it,” Rowan said. “The first few shifts are the hardest. But your wolf will know what to do.”

Staggering to the bed, Sylvia rubbed her eyes. The sky was still the same red color, and it felt like she’d been running for hours. “What time is it?”

“Dusk.”

“So I’ve been out for less than a day?”

Rowan shook her head. “You were Bitten yesterday.”

Leaping up, she raced to the window. “Ammon. He hasn’t come yet, has he?”

“No. But if he does, you’ll be ready.”

She bit her lip. Should she go out and find Ammon herself? She never wanted him to return to the canyon to threaten her pack. But she was so tired from Turning. She couldn’t go tonight.

“Sophie...”

The call was magnified by the canyon walls, and his voice made her hair stand on end.

“Time to come home, Sophie.”

Rowan gripped her shoulder. “Rip him apart.” Grabbing her bow and quiver, she raced down the stairs.

Sylvia followed, as if in a dream.

“Don’t keep me waiting, Sophie.” Ammon’s voice echoed through the oak. “I’m losing patience.”

Once down the stairs, she turned toward the entrance. It was time to see what Ammon made of her claws and teeth.

I still want to know what sorcerer tastes like, her wolf said.

It was time for Ammon to meet his fate.

Jet and Jasper were waiting for her by the curtain of roots.

“I told the pack to put beeswax in their ears,” Jet said. “Do you want any?”

She shook her head. “I want to hear his dying breath.”

“Are you ready?” Jasper asked.

“Yes. I just hope Ammon is.”

The three of them shifted. Sylvia walked out of the den, flanked by her mates.

Ammon stood before her, in a robe of silken gold. “It’s time, Sophie. Time to give in.”

Snarling, Jet and Jasper charged. Ammon flicked his fingers at them, and they both slowed, ambling past him like they’d forgotten why they’d been angry.

Her ears swiveled back as she caught the noise of footsteps behind her. She turned, growling at Rowan, Gwen, and Fable, forcing them to retreat. No one else would be hurt on her behalf.

Ammon laughed. “So you’re a shifter now? Aren’t you the clever one. I just hope you don’t catch *fleas*.”

She could feel them, biting her all over. Closing her eyes, she resisted the urge to scratch.

They aren’t real. They aren’t real. They aren’t real.

Ammon snapped his fingers, and the sensation vanished. “I must confess, I grow weary of our little game, Sophie. Your defiance amused me for a time, but my patience has reached its end.”

Reaching into his robe, he drew out an amulet on a silver chain. “See this?” He touched a finger to the pendant, a purple stone carved into a snake devouring itself. “I’ve concentrated my power. As soon as I slip this around your neck, you’ll be mine forever.”

She eyed the purple snake, her hackles raised. Even from here, she could feel the ominous pulse of power.

“Soon, I’ll command you to do as I please. But I need to tell you how it works now, because once it’s around your neck, you won’t be able to think of anything but me.” His eyes were the color of a storm at sea. “It won’t matter if you’re shifted or not—I’ll bind you to me once and for all. Now *come here*.”

With horror, she felt her paws move forward to obey him.

No!

She focused all her thoughts on two legs, and shifted. Though she stood naked before him, she had control of her limbs again.

He grinned. "I have you now!" Leaping forward, he grabbed her wrist. With his free hand, he tried to force the amulet over her head.

"Let go!" She tried to twist away, but his grip was like iron. A move Rowan had showed her popped into her mind, and she slammed her palm into his nose.

Ammon shrieked. Blood ran down his face, his nose a ruin.

"You bitch! I'll make you my slave for all time!" Grabbing her hair with a bloody hand, he pulled her toward him.

Sylvia scratched at him, her mind frantic. The amulet brushed her skin, and for a moment she felt deadened. She couldn't let him put that on her. If he did, it would all be over. Sylvia would be over.

He reached toward her, the amulet gripped in his hand.

Sylvia's hand shot out, seizing his wrist and digging her nails into his tendons. Rowan had made her practice enough times, but never before had Sylvia been prepared to dig all the way to the bone.

Ammon shrieked again, his fingers jerking apart. He dropped to his knees as the amulet fell.

She caught it. Wrenching it away, she forced it around his neck.

His shriek was cut short, and silence reigned in the canyon. Sylvia stood over him, panting. Ammon's muscles had gone slack. He looked up at her, smiling, as if waiting for a command.

"Raise your right hand," she said.

He obeyed, content and docile.

"Lower it."

Ammon did without question.

"You can tell him to do anything?" Jet appeared beside her. "Tell him to kill himself."

Jasper nodded. "Not a bad idea."

"No." Sylvia looked down at the defeated sorcerer. "That's too good for him."

She knelt to face her former captor. "Here is what you must do."

Ammon smiled, waiting patiently for his orders.

"Go to the farthest reaches of the earth. Speak to no one. Eat only enough to survive. Find a deep, dark cave, and spend the rest of your miserable days there. Think only of the victims you've hurt, and feel their pain as yours. Do not take off the amulet. If someone else attempts to take it off, you must kill yourself before you let that happen.

"Forget me. Forget my name. Forget this place, and this pack. Go now, and never return."

Ammon rose, walking out of the canyon. He didn't pause, didn't turn, and the falling night soon swallowed him.

Sylvia's knees felt weak. He was vanquished. She was free.

Jet put an arm around her waist. "Want some venison?"

"I hope so," Jasper said, slipping his hand into hers. "We saved you some prime pieces."

Grateful to her Alphas, her mates, she headed back toward the den. There was a fire to light, and stories to tell. She already knew she would eat and drink long into the evening with Rowan, Everett, Fable, and the others. She had found her pack at last. She was safe, and she was home.

Holding tightly to Jet and Jasper, she walked through the protective curtain of roots.

Chapter 11

SIX WEEKS LATER

That morning had dawned cool and crisp, and even at midday a chill still hung in the air. Sylvia stood in the den entrance with her Alphas, under the roots that swayed in a breeze that promised autumn.

She looked out over the faces that were ringed around them. Juniper caught her eye, and winked. Sylvia grinned back. Juniper had insisted on returning to the canyon and helping with feast preparations. She had only arrived four days ago, but Sylvia felt like they had always been sisters. It was endlessly entertaining to see Juniper joke with Jasper, or goad Jet.

Beside her, Locke took her arm. Juniper gazed up at him, practically radiating with happiness. The two of them made an excellent pair, and even better hunting partners.

To their left stood the Ember pack Alphas. Val, Ash, and Blaze had just arrived that morning, and the pack had seemed to hold its breath as Jet and Ash met. But the Alphas had clasped hands—any enmity that had once existed could not survive an occasion as happy as a binding day.

Sylvia took a breath. The word could still make her shiver, but she couldn't wait to be bound to her Alphas. She wanted to be one with them, one with their pack. She could search the world and not find a man or shifter half as wonderful as either of her mates. How had she gotten so lucky as to have both of them?

Turning to look at her Alphas, she felt a fierce pride wash over her. Her heart was so full of joy that it was hard not to leap into their arms and shower them with kisses.

But Rowan said that had to wait, so Sylvia would do her best to control herself.

Val's eyes shone with unshed tears, but her smile was brimming over. She glanced at her own Alphas, and Sylvia grinned. She must be remembering her own binding day.

Rowan stepped forward. "Are we ready? Is everyone here?"

A hush fell over them all. The pack seemed to draw closer to her. Sylvia felt like her heart might burst. They were the shifters who had taken her in, who had defended her from a sorcerer. She would never forget that, and she would do anything for them.

"All right, then," Rowan said. "Alphas?"

The three of them stood in a circle around her, like they'd practiced.

"A pack is only as strong as its Alphas," Rowan said, "and the Oak Canyon Alphas are as strong

as the earth. May your love grow into the towering tree that holds our pack together.”

Jet’s fingers twitched as if they longed to twine with hers.

“Not yet,” Jasper whispered, though it was clear he couldn’t wait either.

“Everyone, please take a root,” Rowan said, clasping the longest one that hung from the oak above.

All around them, their attendants grabbed roots.

Rowan stepped out of their circle. “Alphas, please take each other’s hands.”

Sylvia felt a sharp relief at finally being able to hold her Alphas again. Both of their hands felt so warm, so right in hers.

“Your roots are as strong as your pack, and your friends.” Rowan looped her root around Jet and Sylvia’s clasped hands, then over Sylvia and Jasper’s. “Let them be the foundation you grow from, and let them strengthen you in times of need.”

One by one, their packmates, relatives, and friends stepped forward to lay down their roots. Some pulled them around Sylvia and Jet’s hands, others around Sylvia and Jasper’s, or even between the two brothers. Some began to weave between the roots that were already in place, crisscrossing into a lattice that locked them together.

Jasper met her eyes, squeezing her hand reassuringly.

Once the last root was put in place by Juniper, Rowan stepped forward. “You are now bound, our Oak Canyon Alphas.”

Everyone around them clapped and cheered, but Sylvia only had eyes for Jet and Jasper. Her mates were everything she could have ever asked for, everything she could have ever wanted. She wouldn’t mind if they never untangled these roots.

Jet and Jasper both leaned in to kiss her, to whistles from the crowd. Sylvia couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her. It was a beautiful, perfect day, here in her den. There was no need to run ever again. She had been found. She had been bound to her Alphas.

All she needed now was to spend forever with them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on Halloween, Lily Thorn may have been destined to write about shifters and magic. Her stories feature fiercely protective heroes, strong women who fight for the men they love, and plenty of steam. When fated mates finally find each other, nothing can stand in the way of their happy ending.

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APPROACHING NIGHT

BOOK I OF SELUNA

ILANA WATERS

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APPROACHING NIGHT: BOOK I OF SELUNA

Silver Hill Asylum holds a deadly secret. But Seluna may not live long enough to uncover it.

Almost everyone is convinced I'm mad. But I'm not sure I believe them.

Seventeen-year-old Seluna doesn't know why she was admitted to an all-female insane asylum called Silver Hill. She doesn't know exactly how she makes inanimate objects come to life. And she can't figure out the reason for the sadistic and brutal experiments on girls here—many of whom are never heard from again.

When Seluna sneaks out to the moonlit, forbidden garden behind Silver Hill, she meets a mysterious boy swimming in a pond. She senses there's a connection between him and what's happening at the asylum, but he's not telling what. Then there are the screams from down long halls and the constant absence of light. No doubt they're all part of the scheme concocted by the merciless head of the facility, Dr. Catron. He's growing more and more frantic and violent in an attempt to find the person—or thing—he's looking for.

Yes, there's a lot Seluna doesn't know about Silver Hill. About why moonlight, madness, and murder are following her. But she needs to find out fast . . . before she becomes the next victim.

(Set in the nineteenth century of an alternate world called Hartlandia, *APPROACHING NIGHT* is a YA gothic fantasy).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story takes place in an alternate world called Hartlandia, which shares characteristics with our world. You'll also find that many characteristics are different. The story's time period reflects our own late Victorian era. However, anachronisms and other strange occurrences are left in on purpose for you to enjoy.

PROLOGUE

In the beginning, there were the vines. They'd been there as long as anyone could remember, plastered against the decaying back walls of Silver Hill. Eventually, they took over what had once been the garden. The vines strangled dead trees, tripped the unwary, and gnashed ugly patterns on the hard, gray stones. They were everywhere, inescapable, black as tar. Unlike living vines, the ones surrounding the insane asylum were hard and unforgiving. They were so hateful that sunlight shunned them. Only the moon cared enough to shine down.

The vines didn't have thorns—they didn't need to. Parts of them were sharp as razors.

The only place they did not touch was the moat around the asylum, or the garden's forgotten pond. Their lengths reached right up and over the water, but somehow were prevented from entering it. Instead, they lay on the pond's desolate shores in mourning. Then they ripped even more fiercely at any mortal they could find.

Many attempts had been made to cut them back over the years, or burn them. But the vines were too hard to cut. They refused to burn. They continued their angry, endless existence. Unable to go where they pleased, they made sure no one else did either. They would never be welcome or at home anywhere.

The vines were not content to stay this way.

Chapter 1

“Try, Seluna. Just *try*.”

“I *am* trying! But it’s like I told you, Laura: nothing’s happening.”

“But sometimes, it does.”

“Well, now is not one of those times.”

I leaned my head against the bottom of the flimsy bed frame. Sitting with my back perpendicular to the center of the mattress, I continued looking at the wooden horse. I didn’t know why I couldn’t animate it. A glint of moonlight shone through the narrow room’s high window onto the horse. As I stared at the toy, I thought I saw it move.

Then a cloud must have passed over the moon, because suddenly, there was very little light in the room. The only other illumination came from the dimmed gas lamps behind both beds, and the tiny window on the door, the one with bars on it. Most of Silver Hill’s windows had bars on them.

“Maybe the horse is defective,” said Rose. She was on Laura’s bed, lying sideways, and leaned over to get a closer look. She brushed curly red hair out of her eyes. It wasn’t truly red; I could see the dark roots peeking out from beneath. “Where’d you get it, anyway?” she asked.

“It’s my little brother’s. He said I could have it to keep me company while . . . while I was away.” Tears welled in Laura’s eyes. “He really believed it would, too. Of course, he’s only three. It was his favorite toy, too.”

“Then I’m sure it’s not defective,” I said firmly. I reached over to where Laura was sitting on the floor, legs crossed, against the other bed. With a reassuring squeeze of her knee, I repeated what I’d told them both before.

“It’s true I can animate objects, and temporarily make dead things come to life. But that doesn’t mean I can *always* do it. And when I can’t, I’m sure it says more about me than the object itself. So don’t fret over it.”

“I know.” Laura took the horse and moved it up and down with her hand, making it prance on the nightstand between beds. “It’s just . . . that’s so *magical*, you know? I’m really keen to see more of it.”

I shrugged and adjusted my skirts. I didn’t really think of my ability as magic. It wasn’t even particularly useful, so I rarely thought about it at all. Although I would have liked to use it to make

Laura smile more. When she smiled, it was one of the few times her pale hair and skin didn't make her look like she never saw the sun. Rose's complexion was darker, almost tawny brown. But there was a sallowness there as well, like she could use a holiday.

"Eh, Laura, you're fourteen years old," Rose said. "Isn't it time you quit playing with toys?"

Laura made a face and stopped moving the horse back and forth. "I'm not playing. I was just . . . demonstrating what Seluna could do with it. Besides, you're sixteen. Shouldn't you be able to tell when someone is playing and when they're not?"

"Hey, have some respect for your elders," Rose said. "After all, I'm the oldest one here."

"Ahem." I coughed.

Rose scrunched up her nose. "Oh, right. I forgot you're seventeen, Seluna. Well, old lady, astound us with your wisdom and experience. Do more you know what." She indicated the wooden horse.

"Do more of what? What are you girls doin'?" A low, matronly voice boomed through the door's tiny window, and two piggish eyes appeared behind the glass. Nurse Cutter.

All of us gave a start, and Laura quickly hid the wooden horse behind her back. One didn't know if it was strictly forbidden, but then again, precious objects could be confiscated here for any reason. Or for no reason at all.

"Nothing!" called Rose. "Just . . . playing jacks."

"Jacks." We saw the tiny eyes squint into even smaller slits in the woman's doughy face. "Ain't that a form of gamblin'? Like card playin'?"

Rose and Laura looked at each other with wide, fearful eyes. They had no idea what to say.

"Not the way we're playing," I replied smoothly. "We're playing the, ah . . . the boring way."

"Well, all right, then," said Nurse Cutter. "But nothin' too overstimulatin'. It's almost time for lights-out."

"Yes, Nurse Cutter," we chorused, and heard her footsteps grow fainter down the hall.

"That was a close one." Rose took a cigarette out of a secret pocket in her bodice and patted a different pocket, looking for a match. Silver Hill allowed patients to wear their own clothing most of the time, but did not permit skirts with pockets.

"Rose!" Laura's big blue eyes grew even bigger when she saw the cigarette. "You know you can't smoke that in here!"

"Or anywhere at Silver Hill," I reminded her.

Rose gave an exasperated sigh and let her head flop back on Laura's pillow. "I know, I know! But if I don't do something I'm not supposed to, I'm going to go mad!"

"They say we're mad," Laura said softly. She held her brother's horse in her lap, stroking its head. "That's why we're here." She put the toy on the comforter and continued watching it. Suddenly, we heard the sounds of squeaking gurney wheels and pained groaning. Rose jumped off Laura's bed and went to the door's window. She stood on her tiptoes and tried to look out.

"What's happening?" Laura asked. She and I got up and stood next to Rose, but there was only

room at the window for one.

Rose hopped up and down, trying to get a better view. “Ugh, I can’t see anything! Seluna, you look. You’re the only one tall enough.”

Although I had only a few inches on these girls, it was just enough to allow me to peek over the bottom of the window. I squinted. I could typically see better in the dark than others, but it was still difficult to see *anything* in the shadowy hallway. I could just make out a girl strapped to a gurney, struggling to regain consciousness. The head of the asylum—Dr. Catron—was walking alongside her.

“What’s going on? Who’s out there?” Laura’s voice trembled.

“Hush!” chided Rose. After a brief pause, she asked, “Yeah, Seluna. Who’s there?”

I turned to face them both. “If you two don’t be quiet, *we* may be the next ones out there!” I hated to be so harsh, but it did shut them up fast. I turned back to the window.

“What shall I put down as the diagnosis, Doctor?” It was a nurse speaking this time, but not Cutter. I didn’t recognize this one.

“Early-onset nervous disposition with vague hysterical tendencies.” Dr. Catron’s melodic voice was assured and condescending as always. “She’ll soon be feeling much better. Won’t you, my dear?”

His tone was anything but caring, and the returning moans were anything but sounds of someone about to feel better. The gurney’s wheels continued squeaking, growing softer and softer until they disappeared entirely behind the echo of a slamming door.

I backed away from the window. Frowning, I sat on Rose’s bed and told both girls what I’d seen. They sat on the opposite bed, and the room was silent for a few minutes.

“What do you think they did to her?” Rose asked grimly.

“Don’t know,” I replied.

“I shouldn’t ask,” Rose sighed. “Ought to know better.” She found a match and lit her cigarette.

“Maybe she . . . needed it?” Laura clutched a pillow to her chest and rested her chin on the top.

“Doubtful,” I muttered. “You know, Rose, smoking can kill you.”

Rose took a long drag and blew a ring of smoke while looking at the ceiling. “Being here can kill you.” Another long silence. It wasn’t as if any of us could disagree.

Rose took a few more puffs, and her bangs fell into her eyes. “Ugh! These stupid curls!” she snapped. “And they won’t let us have hairpins. Wish they’d at least let us get a bloomin’ haircut in this place.”

“Doubt they’d trust us around sharps, like scissors, even if someone else were doing the cutting.” I absentmindedly examined my own waist-length, coarse black hair.

“You can use my ribbon, if you like.” Laura motioned to the ribbon, tied into a large bow at the back of her head. It held back her long, wispy hair from her face while the rest draped over her shoulders.

“Nah.” Rose waved away the offer. “Then what will you use to keep the hair out of *your* face, Laura-lie? Hey, why don’t you try that reanimation thing again, Seluna?” She stuck the cigarette in one

side of her mouth and grabbed the wooden horse from where Laura had left it on the comforter. “Just one more time?”

“Ooo, yes! Please do!” Laura nodded and seemed to perk up, setting the pillow aside and clasping her hands in her lap.

I shrugged. “All right, if you want. Though I don’t know why this time would be any different.” I took the horse from Rose and put it in my own lap, staring at it.

Rose rooted around inside a different pocket in her bodice and finally found what she was looking for: a compact mirror. The outside was ornate silver filigree; it must have been a gift. Perhaps a gift from Rose’s family before she came here. No one ever saw their families once they were admitted.

“Rose!” Laura exclaimed, her mouth making a little O. “You know we’re not allowed to have those!”

“She’s not allowed to have cigarettes either.” I smirked at Rose. She took the cig from her mouth just long enough to mouth “sod off.” Then she rolled her eyes and looked in the compact’s mirror to fix her bangs.

“What a couple of ninnies you two are,” she said. “Now, are you going to move that thing or aren’t you, Luna?”

I sighed and looked at the wooden horse again. I tried to concentrate, but the truth was, I didn’t really know how I was able to do what I did. Sometimes, things moved, sometimes, they didn’t. It had been that way ever since I was a little girl.

Laura’s eyes were glued to her brother’s toy. Rose glanced over every so often, but mostly kept looking at the compact and adjusting her bangs. She sighed and turned the mirror this way and that, trying to get them just right.

That was when it happened. A bit of light reflected off the compact, and in the glint, I saw the horse give a jump, as if someone had startled it. Animation would be much easier now that I had some momentum. I smiled and made the horse canter and kick, back and forth along my legs. Laura drew in a sharp breath and tugged Rose’s sleeve. Annoyed, Rose turned and opened her mouth to protest. Then she saw the horse moving, and let out a low whistle.

“You did it, Seluna! You did it! That is so neat!” Laura squealed. I made the horse paw at my knee the way they pawed at the ground in real life.

“Not so loud, Laura,” Rose whispered. “You want Nurse Cutter to hear us?”

Cutter’s voice came again as if on cue. “Did what, ladies? What did Seluna do?”

How had Cutter snuck up on us? We hadn’t even heard her heavy footsteps come down the hall. My concentration on the horse broke, and it fell lifeless once again in my lap.

“Er, she won,” Rose said quickly. “Seluna won the game. Good show, Seluna.” Laura chimed in with mock congratulations as she grabbed the horse and shoved it under her pillow. Rose quickly put the compact away and snuffed her cigarette out on the floor. Then she hid the butt under her mattress and waved both hands in front of her to dissipate the smoke.

“Bedtime, ladies.” Cutter’s voice was firm. We heard the heavy clink of keys unlocking the door as she entered the room.

Any way you looked at it, Nurse Cutter was an intimidating figure. She was at least six feet tall, with hair pulled back in a low, tight bun. It was bad enough she could bellow like a sea captain. But the woman weighed three hundred pounds if she weighed an ounce. She could subdue the most uncooperative patient in seconds, not that many were foolish enough to be uncooperative. Her starched white uniform and nurse’s cap never looked comfortable. Maybe that was why she was always in such a foul mood.

We all stood quickly when Cutter came in. “Seluna,” she pointed at me, “time to go back to your room.” Rose rotated the heel of her left boot on the ground behind her to erase the stain where she’d put out her cigarette. She and Laura looked at me sympathetically.

“Sorry, Seluna,” Rose whispered as I turned to leave. “We’ll see you tomorrow. Hopefully.” Laura nodded and tried to give an encouraging smile.

“We’ll see what Dr. Catron says about that,” barked Cutter. The woman had ears like a bat’s. “Personally, I think you three girls ’ave ’ad quite enough socializin’ for one week. ’Alf an hour each day for the past two days. It’s enough to overstimulate anyone, much less a bunch of lunatics.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Laura wince. One never got used to hearing oneself referred to like that. Cutter put a large hand on my back and led me into the hall. Her enormous set of keys jangled as she locked Rose and Laura inside their room.

“Ten more minutes, ladies,” she called to them, gruffly. “Enough time for you to get washed and dressed for bed. Then it’s lights-out.”

We walked the long, dark hallway and up the stairs to where I slept. Despite the girls’ sympathy, I didn’t really mind my room. Cutter said I was put in the attic garret because of overcrowding. But more girls came in every day, and there were plenty of empty rooms. I often wondered if there was another reason the staff kept me separate from everyone.

I remember when I first saw the garret, the day I arrived at Silver Hill. The unfinished attic was no match for the biting winds of late winter, although it did have a crude fireplace in the chimney that ran through its center. I learned quickly that it didn’t work, most likely because of a blocked flue. There was a thin, stained mattress on an iron cot, just below slanted and rotted wooden beams. A mountain of dust and cobwebs greeted me when I arrived. They covered the assorted junk that had piled up over the years: small pieces of bric-a-brac, extra washbasins, broken stools. I’d made a cursory attempt at cleaning, but it did little good. Staff wouldn’t let girls near anything that could be used as a weapon, like a broom.

No place like home, I thought tonight, as Cutter turned to leave.

“Far too nice a place for a lunatic,” she muttered, but not so low that I couldn’t hear. “I know staff in other ’ospitals that don’t ’ave rooms as nice. Not this one, of course. Dr. Catron is very good to us nurses.”

I'll bet he is. Needs someone to do his dirty work for him, after all.

"Evenin', child." Cutter shut the heavy wooden door behind her as she left. This one didn't have a window where one could see out. I heard her keys jangle again as I was locked in.

"Evening, Nurse Cutter," I replied. I didn't know why she made a pretense of politeness. It was clear she didn't care what kind of evening we girls had, or what kind of lives, for that matter.

I groped around till I found my candle and matches; there were no gas lamps in the attic. The staff must have forgotten there were matches up here, or they would certainly have removed them as another potential weapon. I dearly wished I could light a real fire; it was freezing. I wondered if it ever occurred to the nurses that "lunatics" got cold the same as other people.

In the end, I just put my dark lace shawl over my shoulders. It didn't offer much protection from the chill, but it was all I had in terms of outerwear. I didn't bother getting into my nightdress; it was warmer in my day clothes. With the candle lit, I gazed out the small, round window that overlooked the asylum entrance. It had been only a week since I'd walked up the broken steps to see the following letters etched in stone:

Silver Hill: Lunatic Asylum for Unmanageable Females.

The asylum was a large, imposing structure. It was daunting just to *look* at, let alone go inside. Set deep in the rolling moors of the Westernlands, Silver Hill was like a fortress. It was even surrounded by a moat. And once you were inside, there was no getting out. Girls who managed to run away were quickly caught, lost in the miles and miles of woods that grew past the moors. Ghostly, snow-tipped trees stood around the back and sides of the asylum. The edifice rose high above the land and seemed to glare down, as if challenging one's right to be there. Truly, it lived up to the name "Silver Hill."

I recalled how I'd had to tilt my head back to get a complete view of the building. It was at least six stories, with stone turrets and crumbling chimneys. I tried to pretend it was a castle, but it wasn't like the friendly kind in fairy tales. For one thing, it was covered in ivy and moss, as if nature were trying to take back what was hers. For another, outside it was eerily quiet. There weren't any birds singing, or squirrels scampering about. It seemed even the animals were too frightened to venture near.

As I walked up the entrance steps with Nurse Cutter that day, I couldn't help but marvel at how magnificent Silver Hill must have once been. We came into the main hall, and I gaped at the balconies supported by a dozen enormous Corinthian columns. Then there was the sweeping, semicircular staircase that was the room's only way to the second floor. And my jaw nearly dropped at the long walls of mirrors in gilded frames on either side.

This part of Silver Hill was said to have been modeled after a similar room in the royal Palace of Versailles. I wondered if the mirrors there had the same effect. The ones here made the space seem much larger than it really was, as if it went on forever. As if there was no escape. Unless one could fly, of course.

That was because the hall's shining glory was a large, circular stained glass window. It stood

high on the wall opposite the entrance and just above the top of the staircase. In stunning detail, it showed the Greek goddess of the moon in her chariot, pulled by silver-winged horses. There was a chandelier in the center of the hall, but without many candles. I didn't know where the money from asylum admissions was going, but it certainly wasn't towards the lighting. The only real illumination was from the moonlight shafting through the stained glass window. It was one of the only ones without bars.

Actually, the near absence of light didn't bother me. I felt more comfortable in the dark anyway. More *alive*. My senses tingled, the blackness draped around me like a warm cloak. I wouldn't mind if it were always night.

But from what I *could* see of the inside of Silver Hill, it wasn't much better than the outside. All had fallen into decay and ruin. Paint was peeling from the walls and gilding on the mirrors, falling off in chips and flakes. Some of the stairs and railings were broken; many places were mildewed. As Nurse Cutter and I traversed the asylum, it was clear that numerous windowpanes had been smashed, maybe from girls trying to escape before the bars were put in.

"Ave to get that swept up," Cutter said the first time we passed one window. "Bad enough patients try to get out. But them big shards of glass on the floor is just an invitation to slice themselves open." My eyes widened. "Miserable mess to clean up it is, too." I wondered if she meant the glass or the blood.

On our way to my room for the first time, we went by the cafeteria, where I saw another broken window. It had to lead to the back of Silver Hill. I surmised this because the cafeteria was right next to the kitchen, and most kitchens were near the backs of large residences. It was then that I saw a long, dark vine coming through one pane where the glass was missing.

"Are they going to clean that up as well?" I stopped and nodded at the vine. Gods only knew what kind of animals could crawl up the vine and right into the cafeteria. Not that I had anything against animals, if any were eventually brave enough to come to Silver Hill. I just wanted the wild ones outside, where they belonged.

Nurse Cutter turned around and glared at me. "You just mind your business. Them vines is part of Silver 'ill's old gardens is all, and Dr. Catron will do whatever 'e sees fit with them. We don't 'ave money to waste clearin' away all them tangled, thorny dead leaves and things. Which is *forbidden* to the likes of you, anyways. You ain't allowed to go out there. Now keep walkin'."

Forbidden. Just like sharp objects, cosmetic supplies, and too much socializing. Apparently, gardens were bad for a person's health as well. Whatever happened to the curative powers of fresh air?

A deep yawn brought me back to the present, and the image of my first impression of Silver Hill dissolved. I moved away from the garret window. It was definitely time to go to sleep. I wondered what kind of day Dr. Catron had planned for us tomorrow. I crawled under the covers—nothing more than an old horse blanket—and shivered. As I drifted off, I could have sworn I heard another long,

low moan that ended in a scream.

Chapter 2

I dreamed of the day I arrived at Silver Hill. After a rudimentary meal of coarse bread, turnips, and something I think was porridge, I was put in Rose and Laura's room for a bit of "socialization." Apparently, this was something lunatics needed, though not in great quantities. I silently questioned how helpful socialization could be inside a narrow room with two people I'd never met. It wasn't as if there was anything for us to do. No games, no books. All were too "stimulating."

But it turned out Rose and Laura were quite nice. Laura seemed like a slip of a girl, fairly terrified at being admitted to an insane asylum. I could tell Rose was nervous, too, but being Rose, she hid it behind a curtain of bravado.

"New girl, eh?" She whipped out a cigarette and matches after we'd been introduced. She offered one to Laura and me. I gave a little smile and shook my head. Laura's jaw dropped as she stared at the contraband, and when she didn't close it for a few moments, Rose withdrew the offer. Shrugging, she lit her cigarette and took a drag, but her hands were trembling. "What they got you in for?" she asked me.

New girl. It was a strange phrase. I later learned that Rose and Laura only arrived a few days before I did. But perhaps it made Rose feel better tagging someone else as the newbie.

"You first," I said boldly.

I expected resistance, but Rose just shrugged again. "When I graduate, my family said I have two choices." She took the cigarette out of her mouth and held it between two fingers. With her thumb, she pushed down on one finger of her opposite hand, then another. "I could either go into the family business—import/export—or I could get married and have children. But I don't want to do either of those things. I want to start my *own* business. I'm not sure what kind yet. Something different. Maybe textiles. As for marriage and kids, phew! I'm only sixteen. I mean, what's the rush? Can't I decide all that later?"

She put her cigarette back in her mouth and took another drag. "Anyway, my family acted like I was totally crazy for not following the path they'd mapped out." She put her hands out to either side of her shoulders. "And so, welcome to Silver Hill."

I shook my head. "That is utterly ridiculous." Then I looked at Laura. "Why'd they bring

you here?”

Laura gave the impression of a startled deer and stammered: “I-I . . . ah, well . . .”

“ ‘Disobedience,’ ” Rose piped up. “Laura here refused to marry the bad-tempered lout her father picked out for her.”

“Rose!” Laura’s entire face turned red. “You don’t have to go around telling everybody.”

“I didn’t tell everybody. Just her.” Rose jutted her chin at me. “Besides, why shouldn’t people know? It’s not like you did anything wrong.”

“You should have seen that man,” Laura whispered, tugging at a thread in her skirt. “He locked his own dogs in the cellar for two weeks and refused to feed them. I don’t even know why.”

“No doubt you feared the same treatment once you married him,” I said. “And at fourteen, you’re far too young to wed, anyway. At least you got out of it.”

“Yes, but then, I ended up . . . *here*.” Laura looked fearfully around the small room.

“Well, you’ve got us now, so that’s something,” I said. I didn’t know why I was practically vowing eternal friendship with two girls I’d just met. But there was something about seeing them treated like animals that roused my protective instincts. Besides, these girls clearly weren’t crazy. They didn’t belong in an asylum.

Though I couldn’t help but notice that both Rose’s and Laura’s families were thinking of marriage for them already. At seventeen, I was almost of marriageable age, but no one in my family had said anything to *me* about it. I had a feeling it was because I wasn’t as pretty as these girls. My hair, for instance, was untamable. Unlike Rose’s curls, no ribbon or pin could hold it, even if I had one. It would abide no attempts at restriction. I was told I had eyes the color of steel, but not the favored baby blue, like Laura’s.

To make matters worse, my eyebrows were as thick and dark as my hair. Frankly, I liked the way they framed my eyes. People said they made me look angry, but I didn’t feel angry often. Mostly, I just felt . . . thoughtful. Since I hated wearing makeup, I made no effort to alter my naturally pale face. No wonder most people who met me thought I was plain. It was just as well that makeup wasn’t allowed at Silver Hill. And although I was slightly taller than average, I once heard my figure described as “sinewy.” Not exactly the voluptuous beauty it was assumed I should be.

I tolerated the current fashions by wearing long skirts, though they were rather cumbersome. Mine were always blue black (my favorite color), but with silver thread that I wove in myself. I refused to wear a crinoline or bustle like other girls, and so my skirts fell down in a straight line. I think they looked much chicer this way. But I did have the typical high collar, the long row of buttons down my bodice, the pointy leather boots. The only light-colored part of my outfits was my kidskin gloves, which I always removed at the first opportunity.

“So, what’s your story, morning glory?” Rose asked again. “What indescribable act of utter lunacy did you commit?”

I hesitated for a moment. I wasn’t sure I wanted to answer just yet—or how I would do so. “Why

don't I tell you later? What I'd really love to do right now is tell ghost stories. Do either of you know any?"

"Ah, I don't know." Laura twisted the thread from her skirt around her finger until it broke off. "I'm scared of ghost stories."

"I know one that's not too scary," I assured her. "If Rose is game, that is."

Rose squinted at me and turned her head to the side. She must have been wondering why I wouldn't give the reason I was admitted to Silver Hill. She took a final drag on her cigarette before stubbing it out on the floor and sticking the butt under the mattress.

"Of course I'm game." She didn't press the issue of my admission for now. "I'm not scared of a silly little story. Lay on, MacDuff." She nodded at me.

"Okay, then." I leaned in closer so both girls could hear me better. "There's kind of a story that goes with my name. My parents first wanted to call me Selene, after the goddess of the moon." I paused for effect. "But I don't believe her story. It's just a fairy tale."

"The Greek Titans—Hyperion and Theia—had three children. Helios, god of the sun, Aurora, goddess of the dawn, and the youngest was Selene, who ruled over the moon. When the Romans defeated the Greeks, they changed Selene's name to Luna. Anyway, it was said that Hyperion and Theia's children were meant to bring all manner of light to the world. Together, the three siblings ruled the hours of the day, shedding light wherever it was most needed by mortals."

"Selene traversed the heavens in a chariot led by silver steeds. One night, she was riding across the sky when she saw a handsome shepherd below on Earth. His name was Endymion, and he had closed his eyes momentarily to rest from his labors. Seeing Endymion lying on the soft grass, Selene couldn't help but notice how peaceful and beautiful he looked as he slept. She fell in love with him. Selene went to the king of the gods, Zeus, and begged that Endymion be granted eternal life. She could not bear the thought of him growing old and dying."

"But what Selene did not know was that Zeus was in love with *her*. He had no desire to see her in the arms of another man. But so great was his love that he couldn't bear *not* to grant her wish, because he knew how unhappy she would be. So he compromised. He gave Endymion eternal life, but only if he slept. That way, he would not be able to see Endymion's happiness at being with Selene, and would not grow heartsick and jealous."

"Selene accepted this arrangement, and so her shepherd sleeps for all eternity. But Endymion is not sad, for each night he dreams of holding the moon in his arms, of kissing the goddess herself." I put out my own arms to indicate the story was finished.

Laura sat rapt, her hands clasped. "That is *so* romantic! I wish I could meet a boy like Endymion."

"Pretty neat," agreed Rose. "But um, Seluna? That's not really a ghost story."

"What? Oh." I scratched my head and laughed. "I guess you're right. I don't know why I always thought of it that way. Maybe because I only remember that story at night."

"I still thought it was lovely, though," Rose said.

“Yeah, and that Endymion sounds dreamy,” Laura sighed.

“Literally!” I said, and we all giggled. But the giggling stopped when we heard shrieks in the hall outside, and what sounded like someone struggling.

“Hold her down, for gods’ sakes!” barked a man. “What am I paying you orderlies for, anyway?”

“Sorry, sir, but this one’s a fighter, she is,” a different man replied. “Be still, girlie; you ain’t going nowhere. Be good now, or we’ll sic Nurse Cutter on you!” There were more shrieks, and the clicking, pulling sounds of straps and buckles. Rose put her ear to the door, and Laura and I leaned closer as well.

“Who’s that?” I whispered.

“It sounds like Dr. Catron,” Rose whispered back.

“Who’s Dr. Catron?”

“The owner and head of the facility. You haven’t met him?”

“I got in late last night,” I explained.

“You’ll probably meet him today.” Rose looked at me with pity in her eyes. “Good luck to you.”

We heard the first man—Dr. Catron—sigh. “Her condition is worse than I thought. It could be deteriorating, despite all my noble efforts.” Then he spoke at a slower pace, and there were scratching noises, as if he was writing on a pad.

“Power cravings and critical thinking leading to brain overstimulation. Refuses to submit to those in authority.”

“I am *not* power hungry!” the girl wailed. “My whole family treats me like a maid, and now they want me to have a career as a maid, *too*? I just want a say in what happens to me. Is that so wrong?”

“Miss, that is the very kind of rebelliousness that can lead to hysteria,” Dr. Catron said severely. “Your belief that you know what is best for your life is a perfect example of hallucination.”

“Hallucination?” asked Laura. “I thought that was when you saw things that weren’t there.”

“Hallucinations are when you think things are real, but they’re not,” I clarified. “They certainly have nothing to do with disagreeing with someone. This sounds like they want the girl to act like a cog in a wheel and be happy about it. And Dr. Catron seems like a nut himself.”

Speak of the devil. “I think solitary confinement is the best treatment for this case,” Dr. Catron said.

“NO!” the girl shouted, and there were more scuffling sounds. Clearly, the orderlies were still having a hard time holding her down.

Rose sucked in her breath. “Solitary. That’s bad.”

“How bad?” I asked.

“Really bad,” Laura said. “Have you *seen* the Hold? That’s where they put you for solitary confinement. I’ve never been there myself, but I heard about it from other girls. It’s a tiny, windowless room with padded walls. No light at all. They chain you up and leave you there, and come in only once a day to feed you. *If* they remember to feed you.”

“What if you have to use the toilet? Or bathe?” I asked.

“Then you’re on your own,” Rose answered.

I felt bile rise in my throat. “That’s revolting! It’s a miracle girls don’t die of infections.”

“Some do,” Rose said quietly.

I was stunned, though perhaps I shouldn’t have been. I knew the first thing despots often did to break a person’s mind was to isolate them. I just didn’t know how often it ended in the victim’s death. But the conversation in the hallway wasn’t over.

“Perhaps she’s a good candidate for a more rigorous treatment, Doctor.” For the first time, I recognized one of the voices.

“Quite right, Nurse Cutter, quite right. We’ll have to look into that if the present treatment is ineffective. And it would certainly help us find out if she was . . . the one.”

“The one,” Cutter repeated. “The girl you’re lookin’ for.”

“Precisely. I don’t *think* she is.” Dr. Catron sniffed, and the girl gave a little sob. “Though one never knows. Not until one performs the ultimate treatment, that is. But for now, just put her in the Hold. I think a month should do it.”

“No, please!” the girl begged. “Not for a whole month. Please!”

“Do you really think that’s wise, Doctor?” Cutter asked. “After all,” she lowered her voice, “ain’t that when the Event is supposed to ’appen?”

“Not so loud, Cutter!” Catron snapped. “There’s no need to discuss asylum business in public. I’m sure there’s plenty of time before the Event to find who we’re looking for.”

“What’s the Event?” I asked the girls. Laura shrugged and shook her head, but Rose knew something.

“I overheard Nurse Cutter talking to an orderly the other day,” she whispered. “Even though he’s supposed to be an educated man, Dr. Catron is very superstitious. He regularly employs a fortune-teller, who lately predicted that an inauspicious event will happen at the asylum in about a month. He says it is ‘written in the stars.’ ”

“What does ‘inauspicious’ mean?” Laura asked fearfully.

“Ah, it means bad, I’m afraid,” I replied. “Really bad.”

“Don’t fret about it, Laury-kins.” Rose put her arm around her roommate’s shoulder. “You can never trust what fortune-tellers say, anyway.”

“Who’s this person they’re looking for, then?” I asked. But neither Rose nor Laura knew anything about it.

“I only hope it isn’t *me*,” was all Laura would say.

We listened at the door for a few more minutes, but all we heard was the girl sobbing, and Catron and Cutter talking about ordering supplies. Eventually, their voices faded away, and we went back to sitting on the beds. We were silent for a while until Laura finally said:

“I don’t think I want to tell ghost stories anymore.”



I hadn't lied when I told Rose and Laura about arriving late at Silver Hill the previous night. Everyone but Nurse Cutter and I had been asleep, so there'd been no time to introduce me to the other staff. Which was why, shortly after my attempt at a "ghost story," I was brought to meet the head physician at the asylum. The *only* physician at the asylum, as a matter of fact: Dr. Catron DeKay. Following a lunch that bore a remarkable resemblance to the intolerable breakfast, Cutter escorted me to Dr. DeKay's office.

"Sit," she instructed, pointing to a hard oak bench.

Sit? Just like that? What am I, a dog? I sat.

"Doctor'll be with you shortly," she sniffed. "'E's in with someone else at the moment. Behave, now." And she walked away without another word.

Behave. As if I were going to run amuck in the hallway for no reason. I folded my hands in my lap and examined the dark, wooden wainscoting on the opposite wall. At the time, I wondered why no one stayed with this "lunatic" if they felt she was at such risk for misbehaving. I would later learn that Silver Hill was notoriously understaffed. But the door to the office was open a crack, and it gave me an opportunity to listen to the conversation taking place inside.

"It's like I was telling you, Dr. DeKay," said a man. He sounded very aggravated, though his tone with the doctor was respectful. "Geraldine here has become completely unmanageable." There were some crying and sniffing sounds from a girl who couldn't have been more than twelve.

"Please, Mr. Wexler, call me Dr. Catron. Everyone does."

"Thank you, Dr. Catron. As I was saying, Geraldine is unmanageable. She cries and mopes all the time if she doesn't get what she wants."

"That's not true!" Geraldine protested through wet sobs. "All I want is to be an artist. And I only cried when you threw out all my brushes and paints and tore up the canvases I'd finished."

"You see?" Mr. Wexler said. "This is the kind of behavior my whole family has to put up with. She makes life miserable for the rest of us who are content to lead normal lives."

"You mean *boring* lives," Geraldine said. I'd never met this girl, but I liked her already. There was a determination, a fierceness in her voice despite her obvious distress. "I don't want to be like you and Ma. You can both draw and paint, but you scrape by, painting *other* people's houses. You never try to paint anything of your own. And I know you hate your jobs, because you come home unhappy every night."

"That's quite enough out of you, young lady!" Mr. Wexler raised his voice. From the sound of chair springs, it seemed he had stood up as well. "Painting for fun was all well and good when I was a kid, but I grew up. This is real life, not a fairy tale. You need to be able to make your way in this world. Soon, you'll be old enough to graduate, and you'll have to get a job. What are you going to do then? Live on air? Give a painting to your landlord in exchange for a month's rent? Surely you must

see how insane all that sounds. I don't know; what do you think, Dr. Catron? Is there any hope for her?"

"Oh dear, dear, dear." Catron spoke slowly, his voice low. "I can see we have a very difficult case on our hands. Chronic depression bordering on psychosis. No doubt brought on by an inflammation of the female brain. It tends to aggravate the more emotional, irrational faculties. But don't worry, Mr. Wexler. We specialize in treating the most willful, disobedient, and *unmanageable* girls in the entire kingdom."

Emotional is irrational? Catron spoke as if emotions did not have logic behind them. As if sympathy, compassion, and love were not designed to bind the species together and help it survive. Were they really going to lock up Geraldine because she wanted to use her gifts instead of deny them? Because she wanted to *try*? Being forced to live a tedious, unsatisfying life would make anyone depressed. Her reaction seemed perfectly rational to me.

"Well, Hartlandia certainly owes you a great debt of gratitude, Dr. Catron. Heaven only knows what life would be like if every daughter acted like Geraldine." Mr. Wexler snorted and Geraldine hiccuped, her bitter tears returning.

"It's no trouble at all, sir," Catron replied smoothly. "The disturbances of the female psyche have always been a specialty of mine."

"Well, as we agreed, I'll leave her in your care, and you can bill me at home." Geraldine's father sounded very relieved. "I do appreciate all you're doing. The country needs more good doctors like you."

"Indeed, Mr. Wexler. Indeed," said Catron. "I assure you, we'll do our very best to take care of your problem. I'm confident we can work with your daughter until she takes a more practical view of life. Believe me, when you see Geraldine again, you won't even recognize her."

"That's all I ask. Good day to you, Dr. Catron." Then Mr. Wexler's voice darkened. "Geraldine."

"Good day as well, Mr. Wexler." Catron's voice was pleasant and cheerful.

A stout, tired-looking man walked out of the office, putting on his hat as he left. I peeked around the corner and saw a girl on a chair in front of Catron's mahogany desk. I'd guessed correctly; she looked only about twelve, and terrified. But she sat rigidly, staring straight ahead. Doubtless it was an attempt to be brave. I saw the man who must have been Catron lean over his desk towards a collection of speakers and wires. He pressed a button and began giving directions into one of the speakers.

"Nurse Cutter? Would you mind sending an orderly up here for our new patient, Ms. Wexler? I believe we'll start with the standard treatment. Be sure to have the syringes ready." I heard Geraldine give a little squeal.

Standard treatment? I swallowed hard. *Is that what they'll start me on as well?*

I didn't have time to wonder long, because an orderly appeared almost immediately with a wheelchair—leather straps on the armrests—to take Geraldine. I quickly turned away from the door

and folded my hands in my lap. It wouldn't do to have them catch me spying.

"Now, Geraldine," Catron said as I heard the orderly bind her to the chair, "everything will be just fine. A key part of treatment is to submit to the will of the physician. To surrender all your thoughts and feelings to my control. But I need you to trust me. Do you think you can do that?" Geraldine made no reply, but did give a little grunt as the orderly tightened the straps. Probably too tightly.

"You don't have to answer right now," Catron continued. "But it's something to think about as we begin the first phase." His next words were to the orderly. "Take her to Cutter. She'll know what to do."

I didn't dare look at Geraldine as she was wheeled out of the office. Although in retrospect, perhaps I should have. Even a momentary glance into her eyes might have given her strength, let her know she wasn't alone.

"Seluna, isn't it?" My heart gave a jump as Dr. Catron called my name, and his head appeared from around the door frame. "Won't you come inside?"

I stood up, brushed off my skirts, and vowed not to let my apprehension show as I walked into the office. I wasn't sure if handshaking was acceptable for women at Silver Hill. Still, I didn't want to risk giving offense, so I stuck out my palm. "Dr.—"

"Catron. Please." Ignoring my hand, he indicated I should take the seat opposite the desk where I was guessing Geraldine had been.

"Dr. Catron, then." I sat down. He did the same, leaning back in his chair, never taking his eyes off me. I kept to the edge of the seat, my back ramrod straight.

He was a slim man in his mid-fifties, with silver hair not unlike the color of my eyes. It was kept carefully in place with pomade, which only increased the shine. Everything about him spoke of elegant refinement. The cut of his suit, his manicured nails, the crisp lab coat . . . right down to the flawless silk handkerchief in his pocket. His voice was soft, his movements graceful.

With a quick glance around the office, I saw a cozy fire burning in the grate. It seemed this was the only room in the asylum where one wasn't allowed to freeze to death. There was a chaise lounge covered in red velvet, as well as a comfortable armchair where Catron sat. Across from his desk were two other chairs, including the one I was in. These were decidedly less comfortable.

The walls were lined with bookshelves holding medical texts. Framed certificates showed Catron's degrees from all over Hartlandia. The University of Dryden in the Northernlands, Windley medical school in the Easternlands . . . there was even a certificate for first place in a rifle competition at Dartport.

Certainly gets around, doesn't he? I thought to myself.

"Satisfied with my credentials?" There was a hint of amusement in Catron's voice.

"Sorry? Oh, yes." I worked to keep my own voice steady. "It's just that . . ." I tried to think of another reason a person might glance around an office. "I noticed there aren't any windows in here."

“Right you are.” Catron smiled. “Can’t have patients looking out the windows too much. They might see something that upsets them, or makes them overexcited.”

What would that be? I wondered. *The sky? Air?* We sat in silence for a few moments. I couldn’t help but think Catron was expecting me to do something.

“Not overly chatty, are we?”

Talk? He expects me to talk? He didn’t expect that from Geraldine. Maybe because her father was with her.

“I was taught only to speak if I felt the need,” I said hesitantly. “And only things worth saying, naturally.” *To those worth saying them to,* I felt like adding.

“Naturally.” Catron leaned forward and looked at a pile of papers in a folder on his desk. He said my name again. “Se-lu-na.” But this time, it was as he’d known me for years. As if I were returning to him from some long journey.

“Quite an interesting case, aren’t you?” He flipped through the papers, which I assumed were my records. “Seems there’s a history of, shall we say, odd behavior in your family?”

“You might say that.”

“Now, Seluna, I know this can’t be easy for you, but *do* try to cooperate.” I blinked a few times. *Cooperate? I haven’t done anything uncooperative yet.*

“Sorry?”

“It’s a pity your family couldn’t be here to see you admitted personally, so I know you must be disappointed. I understand you were dropped off at the train station, and then accompanied on the rail by Nurse Cutter.”

“That’s right.” *I’m not disappointed. And it’s not a pity they couldn’t be here to admit me. It’s a travesty they had me admitted at all! A travesty . . . and a mystery.*

I had considered running away after my family brought me to the station and put me in the care of Nurse Cutter. But one look at Cutter, and I knew she was the kind of person who’d hunt me to the ends of the earth. Also, at that point, I was more bewildered than anything else. As I sat on the train, I couldn’t fathom why my parents felt the need to send me to Silver Hill. Of course, I had no idea what this hospital was really like. If I had, maybe I *would’ve* taken my chances and tried to lose Cutter at the station. But if I didn’t know about conditions at the asylum, maybe there was a chance my family hadn’t, either.

“I’m only sorry you arrived so late that I could not see you.” Catron closed the folder and looked at me again. “You must have been very tired.”

“Ah, yes. Yes, I was.” I didn’t want to tell him how much more alive I became at night. It was as if I could *feel* myself getting stronger, my senses sharper, after the sun set. Even my vision was better, and I could get through the day with less sleep than others. But when the sun was up, as it was now, I felt drowsy. Almost like I was walking around in a fog compared to my nighttime awareness.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve had a chance to rest since then. It will make it much easier to begin our

program.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Program?”

Catron leaned over the intercom again and pressed a button.

“Nurse Cutter? I think we’re ready to start with that other new admission.” He looked at me and smiled.

“The standard treatment.”

Chapter 3

I awoke from the dream of my first day at Silver Hill to a loud banging on my door. “Rise and shine!” shouted Nurse Cutter. “Breakfast in ten minutes.”

I groaned and sat up. *Breakfast in ten minutes, stomachache in thirty. Damn the ungodly food here.*

But the cuisine wasn’t the worst thing about Silver Hill. I remembered all too well waking up from my first “treatment” with Dr. Catron.

It took a while for my vision to clear, and for the grogginess to dissipate so I could understand where I was. I lay in a bed on wheels at the recovery station—a high-ceilinged room with windows (barred, of course) reaching to the top. My mouth was so dry, it felt like it was full of cotton. I had a pounding headache accompanied by waves of nausea, and my forearm was sore and bruised where they’d inserted a needle. It bled slightly, but no one bothered to bandage it. I was still strapped down.

I didn’t remember if I’d fought, or if they’d injected me before I even realized what was happening. All I knew was that like every other girl here, I’d been drugged—poisoned—in the name of medicine.

I lifted my head and saw long rows of beds on either side and across from me. Girls my age and younger lay in them, not too doing well by the looks of it. Some were crying, others were asking panicked questions. Nurses and orderlies milled about, checking patients, making notes on clipboards. None of them seemed to be doing anything to relieve their charges’ discomfort, confusion, or fear.

I ran my tongue along the inside of my mouth to combat the dryness, and heard other girls whimper, their beds squeaking as they tried to move. There were a few brusque words: “Stop that!” and “Hush, now.” Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Geraldine being wheeled out, moaning. Then I heard heavy, determined footsteps walk up to the left side of my bed. I quickly put my head back down and shut my eyes.

“It didn’t go as well as I’d hoped with this one.” It was Dr. Catron. I made my chest rise and fall more slowly with each breath to maintain the illusion of sleep.

“Her answers were too vague,” he continued. “They could mean anything. We may have to accelerate treatment if we’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

Bottom of what? Accelerate treatment? My head still felt like someone was hitting the side of it with a mallet. I didn't know how much more of this I could take. Then I began remembering other details of the past few hours.

They'd given me sodium pentothal, or what was more commonly known as "truth serum." They'd asked all kinds of questions. My full name, where I was from, what year I was born. But there had been other inquiries as well. Stranger ones. What did I like to do at night? Did I look up at the sky a lot? Did I ever get the feeling I was different than other people?

My heart began beating a little faster, but I tried not to take deep breaths. *Remember, Seluna, everyone in the recovery room thinks you're still asleep.*

In my drugged state, had I accidentally told them something about my reanimation abilities? I don't know why, but it felt important to keep it a secret, at least from the staff. Even though it was a harmless trick, I didn't trust them with it. They might misconstrue anything out of the ordinary as a form of madness.

But it was doubtful I'd divulged anything. Catron said my answers had been vague. Saying one could make things come to life was pretty specific. Still, it was a disturbing thought. Did the people here have the power to make me reveal information whenever they liked?

"Don't be too 'ard on yourself, Doctor." Nurse Cutter's voice yanked me back to the conversation. "You can't win them all."

"True," Dr. Catron agreed. "At least I got a lot farther with the Wexler girl. A few more treatments and she'll have this artist nonsense out of her head. Her father will be very pleased. But I doubt she's the one. Too young. Still, it does help to take in extra patients, if only to pay the bills.

More talk of 'the one' again. Who on earth could they be looking for?

"Quite right, Doctor. Quite right," said Nurse Cutter. "In the meantime, what do you want us to do with Seluna?" From her tone, one would have thought she was asking what to do with leftover fishing worms.

Catron didn't answer for a few seconds, and it took all I had just to keep my breathing even. "For now, I just want to . . . observe her. If she *is* the one, then in time, she may reveal herself without us having to do anything."

"Always the optimist, Dr. Catron." I could tell by Cutter's voice she was smiling.

"Yes, well, if one doesn't have optimism, what else is left?" I could tell he was smiling, too. "Now, about those other patients we were discussing . . ." I heard their footsteps grow fainter as they walked away. Later, I learned that not only were most girls drugged upon admission to the asylum, but some were subjected to it more than once.

One would think that after such horror, the mind-numbing routine at Silver Hill would be a welcome respite. But even though I'd been here only a week, I was already tired of it. After an inedible breakfast, we performed a sort of catechism, though this one had nothing to do with religion.

"All right, ladies, pay attention, now," a nurse called out. This one was male; short, scrawny, and

giving off a sort of intellectual dimness. But he was one of the only other professional men at Silver Hill besides Dr. Catron, so he got a lot of attention from the female nurses. Apparently, they thought the orderlies—most of whom were men—beneath them. Never so much as gave them the time of day.

We were in the solarium, whose barred windows hardly let in any light. We sat on hard, uncomfortable chairs like the ones in Catron's office. As always, the nurse asked silly questions, which we were expected to answer.

“Who is our doctor?”

“Dr. Catron,” we chorused. Laura, who was sitting on my left, sighed.

“What does he know?”

“He knows how to help us.” Rose, on my right, rolled her eyes.

“And what does he do?”

“He does what's best.”

It usually went on like this for an hour, during which time I was sure I'd go hoarse. Then we had writing exercises (two hours), where we copied over and over from a textbook describing the “perfect” female. Apparently, this was one who did whatever she was told without question. I failed to see how writing the description till our hands cramped would ever make it true.

Afterwards, we had lunch, and two hours of exercising. Exercising consisted of walking in circles around the main entrance of Silver Hill. It was by far the largest space except for the cafeteria, which wasn't suitable for walking due to the tables and chairs. Of course, I hardly thought the main entrance was an appropriate gymnasium either, owing to its state of disrepair. It was a wonder more girls didn't trip over the cracked floors, or get brained by the occasional piece of falling plaster.

The only thing that relieved the tedium, at least for me, was the occasional glance at the stained glass window. And even though I didn't believe her legend, sometimes, I'd pretend that the goddess Selene was following me with her eyes. That she was my friend, watching over me. At least until I was caught.

“You!” a nurse would bellow, though sometimes, they had an orderly watch us, if the nurses were too busy. “Eyes on the girl in front of you!” And the tedium would continue. I sincerely believed the only reason for this so-called exercise was to exhaust us. That way, we'd have no energy left to do anything remotely subversive.

I couldn't even practice my animation abilities because we were in constant motion. Typically, I needed to be stationary and concentrating pretty hard to make anything move. And even then, I wasn't able to do it all the time. I always thought it would be amusing to raise a nurse's skirt a few feet. When the nurse realized everyone could see her knickers, it surely would've been good for a laugh. And it might have gotten us out of going around in circles for five minutes.

I don't remember exactly when I told Rose and Laura I could animate. It must have been in the first few days after I was admitted. I just felt like I had to tell *someone*. My family already knew, of course. Was that part of the reason they sent me here? I didn't see how that could be. What difference

did my ability make? It was charming, to be sure, but that was all. A parlor trick, something to break out at Winter Solstice fetes for the guests' amusement. Nothing more.

After our exercise, we were tutored in womanly arts for the rest of the afternoon. This involved helping in the kitchen and laundry room. Though I didn't really see why one had to be female in order to peel potatoes and scrub shirts. After dinner, we returned to the solarium for fifteen minutes of supervised socialization. Just fifty or so girls milling around awkwardly, unsure of what to say to one another. Occasionally, we were allowed unsupervised socialization in our rooms. However, I suspected this had more to do with the staff's desire to sneak a cigarette or tryst than concern over our mental welfare.

Although I'd met a few other patients, I spent time mostly with Rose and Laura. We were enjoying a particularly long session of socializing today in the solarium, courtesy of a pipe that burst in the hallway of the girls' dormitories. Patients were unable to return until staff finished mopping up all the water. I hoped it would take at least half an hour. I saw Geraldine a few yards away, sitting by herself. Her shoulders were slumped, and she stared dejectedly at the floor. I considered going over and introducing myself, but then, Rose said something alarming.

"These treatments are getting worse and worse." Rose scrunched and un-scrunched the curls on the side of her head with one hand. We were standing by a set of windows overlooking the moors. There wasn't much to see; the overcast March skies put the gray hills in a state of perpetual mourning. "Tell Seluna what Dr. Catron did to you the other day, Laura." Laura looked down at the cracked floors and said nothing. "*Tell her,*" Rose urged.

"He asked who some famous people were that I admired," Laura finally said. "I told him, Daisy Cartigad, the explorer, and Pearl Luxembourg, the animal rights activist. And then he shocked me!"

"Shocked you?" I asked.

"She means electrocuted," Rose explained. "Catron had her hooked up to this crazy machine, with plugs and wires all over. Every time she said something he didn't like, he gave her a shock."

"And that hurts?" Electricity was a new and exciting area of science, but I'd never heard of it being used this way before.

"Of course it hurts! It feels like . . . I don't know." Rose blew a curl away from her forehead. "Sort of like being burned, but worse."

My eyes widened. "You've had it, too?"

"No, I heard about it from a few other girls. But I'm definitely due." Rose swallowed. "Apparently, my 'condition' is even worse than Laura's. I'm sure that's the next step in my treatment."

I closed my eyes for a moment. *Then it's only a matter of time till they start electrocuting me.* Although I had a decent pain tolerance, how did I know they wouldn't accidentally turn up the voltage too high and kill me?

"Oh, Rose, I hope not!" Laura's voice grew higher, and she started to cry. "It's positively horrid. He—Dr. Catron—asked what kind of man I wanted to marry. I said, 'Before Papa told me I had to get

married, I hadn't really thought about it.' So he shocked me *again*! He said the only people I should admire are those my father approves of, and that's the kind of man I should want to marry, too. Oh, how I wish Aunt Mae were here!" Her cries threatened to turn into wails. Rose put her arm around Laura, partially to comfort her, and partially to calm her crying so she didn't draw attention to us.

I frowned. "Aunt Mae?"

"My mother's sister." Laura ran a sleeve across her eyes. "She divorced her husband the first time he hit her. *She'd* understand why I don't want to marry the man Papa picked out."

I wasn't surprised that one of Catron's favorite pastimes was to convince us our ideas were crazy. But his most recent method left me flabbergasted. You *may not have a family you can run to, Seluna, but that doesn't mean others have to suffer*. I'd come to a decision.

"This is unacceptable," I said. "Laura, I've got an idea. This aunt of yours, is she nearby?"

Laura shook her head, and tears ran off her face. "No. She lives in Suxby."

"Where in Suxby?"

Laura squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember. "Twenty-Two Harrow Way. Why?"

"Does she know your parents sent you to the asylum?"

Laura sniffed. "I don't think so. She and Mum aren't that close. But she sends me Solstice cards, and packages. She always said I could come to her for help with anything."

There was little hope of writing Aunt Mae a letter, or getting one from her in return. No patient communication with the outside world was allowed at Silver Hill. No visitors either, not that I ever heard of family members who wanted to visit. I grimaced at the very thought of it. *As if my family would want to see how I was, or send me anything. I might as well be dead to them*. But perhaps Laura's aunt was different.

"Maybe we can get a telegram to her," I said.

"But where would we find a telegraph machine in here?" Rose stopped holding Laura and put her arms out to either side, but kept her voice low.

I thought of the intercom in Catron's office. I bet if he had an intercom, there was a telegraph machine in there somewhere. There had to be, if only to order supplies for the asylum.

"I'm almost sure Dr. Catron has one in his office," I said. "I figure we have at least twenty more minutes until they finish mopping the hallway by the dorms. One of us can sneak into the office and send Laura's aunt a message." *Maybe, if we're lucky, she can help Rose and me get out of here, too*. But I didn't want to get Rose's hopes up by saying that.

"I'll go," said Rose.

"No, I will." My reply was firm. "The halls aren't well lit and I can . . . I can see better in the dark than most people."

"You can?" the girls said in unison.

I rubbed my temples. I still wasn't sure how much of my strangeness I wanted to reveal, but there seemed no way to avoid it. Doing anything else at the moment might put Rose and Laura in danger.

“Yes. It’ll be easier for me to get around, so don’t even think about arguing.” Rose opened her mouth to protest, then closed it.

I glanced at the corner of the room opposite the door, where a female nurse was flirting with Scrawny Male Nurse. The rest of the girls were facing the windows. This was my golden opportunity. I leaned in closer to my friends.

“Okay, I’m going to sneak away. Just act natural. Hopefully, I’ll be gone and back so fast that no one will notice I’m missing.”

“Good luck!” Laura’s voice was trembling.

“Ugh. This is so nerve-racking!” Rose ran her fingers through her bangs. “I’d kill for a cig.”

“Do *not* try to sneak a cigarette.” I pointed at her. With one last look over my shoulder at the nurses, I was still pointing as I backed away towards the exit.

The heavy door creaked loudly. I cringed, wondering what excuse I could invent to explain why I was opening it. But just at that moment, Scrawny Male Nurse must have said something funny, because Flirty Nurse laughed so loudly she snorted. The sound covered the door’s creaking. I slipped out, silently thanking the gods for whatever passed as wit from the mouth of that dull, skinny man.

It felt so good to walk the dark halls with no one watching, no prying eyes. It was almost as good as going outdoors, which we weren’t allowed to do either. Too “stimulating,” even if weather permitted. Though it was still cold and windy, I had the unbearable urge to run across the moors. But all the doors were locked, and only nurses had keys.

And I didn’t just want to be outdoors because it would let me run away from Silver Hill.

I think it was because being *indoors* all the time was driving me mad, if I wasn’t already. I wanted to run across fields and rivers and through forests until my heart burst, maybe with a dog or two by my side. I had fairly good stamina for a teenage girl. Funny, but I often thought there was no way I could ever run enough. Sometimes, it seemed I could go on forever.

Though the asylum was labyrinthine, I remembered the route to Dr. Catron’s office from the day Nurse Cutter took me there. And even if I hadn’t been able to see well, I could *feel* things in the darkness. I rarely bumped into objects or tripped, even when I was at home. The walls, the furniture . . . they seemed to speak to me somehow. It was as if they told me where they were.

But these hallways were dark even by my standards, and the few gas lamps set on low cast lengthy shadows on the walls and floors. I almost thought I saw things moving in them. I could have sworn one shadow was in the shape of a tall man.

I whirled my head around, my hair spinning over my shoulder. There was no man. Nothing was there except a long hall that ended in a pool of black. But it would be easy for a person to flatten themselves against the wall and disappear into the darkness. I knew that was what I planned to do if I met any staff on this little quest. I waited several seconds and listened hard, just in case someone was following me. But I didn’t want to take too much time; if I did, Nurses Flirty and Scrawny were sure to notice my absence. I walked on.

Catron certainly has a lot of strange artifacts in his hallways, I thought as I looked around. In addition to the typical solemn portraits lining the walls, there was a lot of Viking and medieval weaponry. I wondered if it wasn't Catron's at all, but left by the previous owners of the asylum. After all, the building had stood for centuries. I passed an armored knight that was at least a thousand years old. He stood next to one of the few windows in the hall, his shield and breastplate gleaming.

And then he moved. Out of the corner of my eye, I distinctly saw the knight bend his arm down an inch and swivel his head towards me. I nearly jumped out of my skin, then covered my mouth, laughing. *I made him move*, I realized. *Pretty keen. Don't think I've ever animated anything that large before*. Though I knew I had to hurry, I wanted to see if I could move him again. A ray of moonlight from the window passed over the knight, and I made him bow and salute me before returning to his previous position.

Hmmm. Reflecting light makes moving things easier. Don't know why I never realized that before. I picked up my skirts and walked faster down the hall. Now, I really had to make up for lost time. Soon, I saw the wooden bench that I'd been instructed to sit on by Nurse Cutter. There was no light coming from underneath Catron's door, so that meant he wasn't there. I wondered if the door was locked. I cursed myself for not thinking to steal a hairpin.

The floorboards—did I just hear them creak behind me? I turned around and squinted, but saw nothing. I reached out to put my hand on the clear-glass doorknob when someone's strong fingers clamped down on my wrist.

I gasped, and looked up to find myself staring into the face of Dr. Catron.

Chapter 4

“Seluna! How unusual to see you here.” He brought my wrist up to the level of his chest, then slowly lowered and released it. “Is there something I can help you with, that you are so eager to enter my office?”

I blinked rapidly. *Hellfire. How did he manage to sneak up on me like that?* Then again, the signs had been there all along. I’d simply chosen to ignore them. I had to think fast.

“Oh, is this your office?” I asked innocently. “I thought this was the utility closet. Nurse Sommers sent me to get some more mops for the dormitory hall. It seems they’re having a pretty rough time getting those floors dry.”

“Really.” It was a statement, not a question. “I find that hard to believe for two reasons. One, my name is on the door.”

I looked up, and sure enough, “Office of Dr. Catron DeKay” was carved into a gilded plate fastened to the wood.

“Oh, well, it’s awfully dark around here, you know. Hard to see which door is which—”

“And two, the excess water in the dormitory hall was mopped up ten minutes ago.”

Perdition. I was caught. Utterly and completely caught. Catron looked at me with eyes that seemed to want to pierce my soul.

“I think it’s time we faced the facts of the matter, Se-lu-na. You’re deteriorating, and quite rapidly. I think more . . . drastic measures are called for.”

“Drastic?” I swallowed. “What do you mean by ‘drastic’?”



I pounded on the inside door of my room, though my wrists and arms hurt from where orderlies had dragged me. “Hey! When are you going to let me out?”

“When Dr. Catron decides you’re ready.” The sound of Nurse Cutter’s voice was as final as the click of the key as it turned in the lock.

“When will *that* be?” I yelled. “A week? A month? The rest of my life?” *Is this like putting me in the Hold?* “Hey, where are you going?” I could hear her footsteps getting fainter and fainter as she

went down the stairs. "Answer me!"

But she didn't. I had a feeling neither she nor anyone else would be back, unless it was to give me meals the following day. Or perhaps not, if what Rose said about treatment in the Hold was true.

Except for the fact that I might starve, it was hard to consider isolation a punishment. Catron probably didn't know it, but I often got my best ideas when I was alone. Then again, I had always been odd. But I didn't really think I'd starve. Just as I'd always been able to see with less light, I could usually get by on less food, though it was unpleasant.

Still, this was a complete injustice. *Who the hell does Catron think he is?* I hadn't done anything wrong, not really. I only wanted to stop people from getting hurt. I found my chamberstick candleholder and matches, lit a taper, and tried to think.

I *had* to get out of here. Not just out of my room, but out of the asylum. However, the more I thought about escape, the more I realized the inevitability of failure. Even if I could get past the locked doors and barred windows, then into the forest that surrounded the moors, I had no way of getting *out* of the forest. I'd been raised in civilization; I'd no idea how to survive alone in the woods in winter. And unless my reanimation abilities included raising my own dead corpse, I was would likely be made a meal of by some wild animal.

And where would I go? Home wasn't an option, even if I could make it there. After all, the people at home were the ones who sent me here. I wasn't entirely sure they didn't suspect the things Dr. Catron and his staff were capable of. I had no other family or friends who lived close by, and no way to travel to the few I did have.

Friends. Even if I made it out, what about the other girls? What about Rose and Laura? It was true I hadn't known them long, but what would they think of my abandoning them? As long as I stayed, there was a possibility I could figure out a way for us all to escape.

Fat chance of that happening, I thought bitterly. I'd already failed Laura once. What would they think once they heard I'd been locked in my room? They'd probably be more frightened and distraught than ever. And the staff would probably keep a closer watch on *me* than ever. I wouldn't have another opportunity to sneak into Catron's office and find his telegraph. Hopefully, once word of my imprisonment got to Rose, she wouldn't dare try either. It wasn't worth the risk of her suffering the same fate as me. Or worse.

Cursing, I watched as the candlelight made shadows around the garret. Still cursing, I walked back and forth across the floor. I kicked the wall in one corner. I expected it to give at least a little, to crumble like the rest of the rotting wood in here. But it held firm. Annoyed, I kicked the wall again, harder.

Ow! Dammit, that really hurt. Even with the thick tip of my boot, I could feel the pain vibrating through my toes. And the second kick had made a dull, thudding sound. Not what you'd hear from an old piece of wood. Whatever I'd kicked felt more solid. Substantial.

Slowly, I moved my hands over the bottom of the wall, sweeping away a thick blanket of dust and

cobwebs. It was disgusting work, and I had to wipe my fingers off on my skirts several times; the mess was that bad. But I was so irritated that I didn't care. As I cleaned the debris away, the wall felt colder. This part of the attic wasn't made of wood, it seemed, but stone. That was why my foot hurt when I kicked it. But the wall was so dirty—and the attic so often dark—that I'd never noticed it before.

I found a large crack between the wall and the floor. There was a draft coming from underneath it; that was why the wall seemed colder. As my hands made their way up, and I paused to wipe them every few feet, I realized it wasn't a wall at all. I felt a large iron ring on the right side. The wall was actually a door.

Anticipating the door would be heavy, I put my boot against the wall next to the door and pulled the ring with both hands. The door didn't budge. I stood on my tiptoes and brushed the rest of the dust and cobwebs off it. Now, I could see its outline clearly. But no matter how much I pulled and pulled, the door wouldn't move an inch.

Blast. I really wanted to see what was behind it. Was it a secret room? Could it be . . . a dead body? I had to admit, I found the latter thought more thrilling than horrifying. It would certainly be a creepy and exciting find.

Gods, maybe I really am as loony as they say. Normal girls didn't think like this. Regardless, I had to know what was behind that door, even if it was only storage.

I pulled so hard on the ring that I lost my balance and fell on my tailbone. I swore, rubbed my backside, and stood up again. I gave the door a hard thwack with my palm. *Damn this wretched thing!* But then, I heard a click, and the door began gently swinging into the room.

What? You had to *push* the door to get it open? Perhaps the ring was just for show.

"Clever, aren't we?" I said to the door. "Getting me to hit you like that and all." I backed up a few feet, just in case the dead bodies behind the door weren't quite so dead.

The door swung open all the way. And although there was a draft, which I expected, there was nothing dead. But there wasn't a place for storage either. I peered inside. I couldn't glimpse much from the light of the candle, even with my keen vision. But it seemed to be the top of a stairwell. I stepped into the doorway and looked down a winding staircase, one whose bottom I could not see.

You have two choices, Seluna, I thought. *Stay here, bemoaning your fate, or go down the stairs and see where they lead.*

I was no coward, and staying up here was pointless. It was an easy choice. I debated whether to bring the candle. If someone—or *something*—dangerous was in the stairwell, I didn't want to call attention to myself. I may not have been a coward, but I wasn't a fool either. Still, no creature—including me—could see in total darkness.

Creature. I smiled a little. Exactly what was I expecting to find in the secret passage?

It was an intriguing question.

I picked up the candleholder and grabbed a small matchbox. Undoing a few collar buttons, I stuck

the matchbox down the front of my bodice. For the first time, I wondered if it might be a good idea to sew in secret pockets, the way Rose had. I'd no idea how she'd gotten the needle and thread to do so, but if she could sneak in cigarettes, she could do damn near anything. Wrapping my shawl about my neck and shoulders, I cupped one hand around the candle flame so it wouldn't be killed by the draft. I took a deep breath and stepped over the door's threshold.

No sooner had I done so than the door closed behind me with a resounding thud. It nearly blew out the candle, but I hunched over it just in time. Now it was the only light in the cramped space.

Well, you're the one who wanted to go down the stairs, Seluna, I thought to myself. *Now you've got your wish.* I picked up my skirts and walked slowly, trying not to trip on the tiny, steep steps. I couldn't see that far in front of me.

In medieval times, twisting stairs like these were built to give castle owners an advantage in the event of an attack. They would have been able to sword-fight more effectively going down the stairs than an intruder would be able to do going up. Then again, I had no sword. I didn't have so much as a letter opener to use as a weapon if I needed it.

Bugger all. Should've thought of that before. Why didn't I bring something? Oh well. Too late now.

I tried to tell myself there was nothing to worry about. From the looks of the cobwebs in here, no one had gone up or down this staircase in quite a while. I wondered if Catron knew about it. Unlikely. He owned the asylum, but he wasn't the original builder. I'd never seen Silver Hill's blueprints, but if the staircase wasn't on them, Catron probably had no idea it existed. He never would've put me in the garret if he had.

The steps seemed to go on forever. *How far down do they reach, anyway? Am I underground?* Perhaps the staircase wound into the very center of the earth. I remembered a story where several men once ventured there, but I believe they did it by means of an inactive volcano.

I was still racking my brain for the name of the story when I came to the last step. Before me stood a stone door, roughly the same size as the one in my room. There was no need to try and open this one. I could already see moonlight shining through the large slit on one side where someone had failed to shut it completely.

I pushed the door open and peered around it. I wasn't at the center of the earth. I wasn't even underground. Instead, I was tentatively walking into the forbidden gardens of Silver Hill.

Chapter 5

It wasn't quite cold enough to see my breath, but it was still chilly. I re-buttoned my collar, flipped it up, and tightened my shawl. As soon as I cleared the door's threshold, it shut behind me. I whirled around, but couldn't see it any longer. The door's outline was covered by black, angry-looking vines. I felt around where I thought the door should be. Finally, I found an iron ring similar to the one on the secret door in my room. Not wishing to be fooled a second time, I gave the door a push. It creaked open, as I suspected it would. I pushed a second time and it shut tight. At least now, I knew how to open this one when I needed to get back.

It was late. No light from candle or gas lamp shone in the asylum windows; everyone must have been asleep. I could see where the formal entrance to the garden was: through several pairs of French doors with barred windows. Quietly, I tried opening each of them, but they were all locked.

Of course they're locked. I peered through the dirty glass, but couldn't see much inside. I did glimpse vast marble floors, however. *Perhaps this was once a ballroom?*

But the gardens certainly weren't fit for dancing, or even for a pleasant stroll. All around me were dead, stunted trees, about half the size that trees should be. They drooped and curled on themselves as if doubled over in pain. And they were black. In fact, everything that should be green or brown was black. Not the comforting, familiar black I loved. This was different. This was the black of dead things, of burned pencils and choking soot.

It looked like a forest had tried to overtake a graveyard. Not that there were headstones, but the entire landscape had a desolate feeling to it. The most noticeable part of this was the vines. They were as black and dead as everything else here, yet they seemed worse somehow. Like the rest of the place had given up, but the vines had just enough life left in them to do malice. It reminded me of a fairy tale where a prince had to hack his way through evil vines to rescue a sleeping princess. I looked around. *Little risk of that happening here.* I'd have to make my way through the garden on my own.

As if on cue, the vines tightened in front of me, growing thicker and more impenetrable before my eyes. They grew so thick that they weren't a wall of vines, but a wall of sheer darkness. Unlike most darkness, I could not find my way around this one. A particularly large vine began lashing out at me, twisting this way and that in front of my face. Even though it had no thorns, it sliced into my upper

cheek. I felt a warm drop of blood drip down my face.

“Ugh!” I held my candle in front of me for protection. The flame lit the vine, but only for a moment. *They don’t burn? What kind of demon plants are these?* “Get away!” I cried.

Then the most bizarre thing happened. The vine actually seemed to *listen*. It stopped whipping back and forth and withdrew slowly, its sharpness no longer at risk of touching my skin. I could have sworn it was looking me up and down, weighing and measuring me.

It retreated into the black vine wall, which pulled apart to let me pass. I walked through slowly, expecting a trap. But the vines did not try to attack me, nor did they close behind me as I moved forward. And it might have been my imagination, but they seemed to turn a little greener as well.

Maybe I really am going mad. In fact, maybe I’m imagining this entire scenario. The hidden staircase, the garden, all of it. Then I saw the pond.

It must have been twenty-five feet in diameter, possibly man-made—the culmination of the moat that encircled Silver Hill. You could see where it tapered off into two outlets that wound back around the front of the asylum. It was still half-frozen; large sheets of ice covered part of it. And although dead trees surrounded the pond, the vines did not go near.

What’s so special about the pond? I wondered. Though there could be no doubt it was beautiful. The pond was so clear, and the night so dark, I could actually see stars reflected in the water. For once, it was not overcast or raining, and the stars shone as if someone had flung an armful of diamonds into the sky.

Written in the stars. Although a sinister phrase employed by Catron’s fortune-teller, I couldn’t help thinking it sounded rather pretty. I looked up. The stars seemed so far away, and yet, I could swear they were close to me somehow. As near as my own heartbeat. The moon, full and round, shone down as well. Its mirror image was in the pond, making it look as if the world held two moons. I momentarily imagined them as lovers, reaching out to one another across the universe.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the water move. I don’t mean *flow*, the way water often does. Nor was this a tiny ripple beneath the waves. It seemed like something larger *under* the water was moving. Moving, and coming closer.

It couldn’t be a fish; it was far too big. *An air pocket, perhaps? Do ponds even have air pockets?* I didn’t have to wonder for very long. A brunet head appeared in the pond. It rose straight out of the water as if something was lifting it from below. Next came a dark, sinewy chest and a smooth, glistening stomach. It had a sharp face and bright, penetrating eyes. They were green eyes, the color of sea glass. Whatever it was, it was definitely male. Without knowing why, I leaped back and pointed at the thing with my index finger. I nearly lost my balance and dropped my candle.

“Don’t come any closer!” I shouted.

When I turned back, I saw that the “thing” was just a boy. He looked about my age. It was hard to tell, because when he spoke, he seemed much older. There was a weight to his voice; a low, resonant quality that sent shivers through me. Shivers that weren’t exactly unpleasant.

“Why not?” he asked, raising his eyebrows and bringing his hands out of the water. The tight curls of his shoulder-length hair dripped water down his chest. I couldn’t stop staring at it. He put his palms out to either side, as if to indicate he had no weapons. “Do you think I’m going to hurt you?” His tone was teasing, and a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

I was still standing there, pointing at him. I looked ridiculous. A boy had snuck into Silver Hill, and here I was with a finger in his face. What was that going to accomplish? I didn’t even know why I did it. As far as defensive reflexes went, most people would have at least put up their fists. *Maybe I really am strange.* I put my hand down and turned my head for a fraction of a second towards the asylum, praying my shouts hadn’t woken anyone up.

The boy squinted at me and cocked his head. His mouth made a little O, and his smile became one of surprise and awe.

“It’s you,” he whispered, staring at me as though seeing the sun for the first time. “At least, I think it’s you.”

“Of course it’s me,” I said very slowly, as if talking to a small child. “Who else would it be?”

“No, I mean, it’s just . . . never mind. I thought you’d be more . . . no matter.”

“Were you expecting someone else?”

“I . . . I’m not sure.”

The trespasser was clearly an idiot. Even more irritating, when I looked into his eyes, I felt like I was swaying. I don’t mean dizzy. I mean moving subtly back and forth, as if I were underwater.

“What are you doing here?” I asked impatiently. “There are no boys allowed. There’s hardly anything allowed, but certainly not boys.” *And you wouldn’t want to be here even if you were allowed,* I thought. *Trust me.*

“I’m not exactly a boy,” he answered.

Did the trespasser think *I* was an idiot? “You’re naked from the waist up.” I paused, then continued quickly when I realized I was staring at his chest again. “So, as far as I can tell, you look an awful lot like a boy. And if you’re not a boy, then what exactly *are* you?”

The not-boy swam to the edge of the pond closest to me and leaned his palms on it. This time, I did not back away or point my finger at him. I couldn’t help but notice the light blue veins and sinewy muscles of his forearms. *He must do a lot of swimming.*

“Some things are best kept below the surface, as it were,” he replied. “For now, let’s just say I’m Dym.”

“Dim?” I raised my eyebrows. “As in ‘stupid’?” His name would be the first thing about him that made sense.

The not-boy rolled his eyes. “No. As in short for ‘Endymion.’ ” He cleared his throat and quoted the first part of the poem to me.

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing

A flowery band to bind us to the earth,

Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth

Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,

Of all the unhealthy and o’er-darkened ways

Made for our searching.”

“That’s John Keats’s ‘Endymion,’ ” he added.

“I *know* who John Keats is.” I glared at him. “What I *don’t* know is what you’re doing in a pond in the back of an insane asylum.”

“Oh? Is this an insane asylum?” The playful tone returned, and he clasped his hands behind his head and looked up at me. “I hadn’t noticed. I’m, ah . . . a shepherd. Have a flock nearby. Come to swim in the pond every once in a while at night.”

I pursed my lips. “That’s funny. I’ve been to the tallest tower of the asylum, and I’ve never seen a flock of sheep. Not for miles. You must come from a very long way off.”

Another annoying smile, and the swaying feeling. “Well, I definitely wasn’t born of your land, let’s say that.”

I didn’t smile back. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll freeze to death in there?” I jutted my chin at the pond.

“Not at all.” He made circles in the water with his arms in a leisurely fashion. “In fact, I find it quite invigorating.”

“The prospect of freezing to death?”

“I assure you, my body is made to endure all manner of temperatures.” Despite his suggestive tone, I rolled my eyes. *Boys always think they’re invincible. That’s why they often die young.*

“Aren’t you at least getting tired?” I asked. “You’ve been treading water the entire time we’ve been talking. You must be a strong swimmer.”

“I get by.” Then, out of nowhere: “I couldn’t help but notice you admiring the moon.”

“Oh really?” This Dym fellow was *beyond* forward, and bizarre. He must have been referring to the moment I glanced at the sky before he arrived. “How would you know? Can you see underwater?”

Dym tried to stifle a laugh. “Something like that,” he replied. *Infuriating*. “I’m rather obsessed with the moon myself, as a matter of fact.” Indeed, his eyes rose to the heavens, an enchanted smile on

his face. “Here in Hartlandia, it’s always big and round. I’ve heard in other places it changes. You can actually see it get slimmer and slimmer as it goes from new moon to full moon and back again. I always thought that would be beautiful to look at.”

“Fascinating.” I gritted my teeth. “But you haven’t even asked my name yet.” I didn’t really see why I should tell him. Yet, for some reason, it bothered me that he hadn’t asked.

Dym stopped looking at the sky and set his penetrating gaze on me.

“What’s your name, then?” His voice was softer than I expected, and coupled with the way he looked into my eyes, made my heart beat a little faster.

Blast. I didn’t really think he’d care about my name. I’d have to tell him now. Well, I didn’t *have* to, but he clearly wasn’t a threat, so there was no excuse to be rude. “It’s Seluna,” I said.

“Se-lu-na.” He closed his eyes and let the name roll over his tongue, but not in the ugly way Dr. Catron did. It was more like he wanted to savor the *taste* of my name. This boy was even stranger than I was. And still, I enjoyed watching his full lips form the word, hearing it echo from his throat again and again. “Seluna,” he whispered. “Seluna.”

I waited a moment, but he didn’t say anything else. “Would you mind telling me what you’re doing here?” I asked. “What you’re *really* doing here?”

Dym shrugged and did a few backstrokes away from the pond’s edge. He must have been kicking his legs underwater, because I didn’t see them. “I told you,” he said. “I come here for midnight swims. Although, to be completely honest—”

“Aaahhh.” I folded my free arm beneath my elbow. “Now we get to it.”

“—I did have a feeling something important was going to happen here tonight. Most of my people have some measure of psychic ability.”

“Your people? Like, other shepherds?” I chuckled. “Does being psychic help them find lost sheep?”

Dym gave me a withering look. “It’s not a shepherd thing; it’s a family thing. Sometimes, it’s not so much a distinct message. More like a feeling you get. That you should be in a certain place at a certain time. Or that you’re going to meet someone.” His eyes lingered on my shape. “We’re also pretty good at reading body language, and knowing how other people are feeling.” This time, he peered at me intently, and I worried he was scanning my thoughts. *Are such things possible?* “For instance, right now, I can tell you’re deeply troubled about something.”

“You don’t have to be psychic to guess that,” I said. “Most folks admitted to insane asylums are pretty troubled.” I didn’t mention that Silver Hill seemed to be an exception. The only troubled people here were Catron and his minions.

“Riiight,” Dym said. “Say, you never told me what you were *doing* in an insane asylum anyway. And here I thought you were trespassing, like me.”

Should I tell him the truth? I didn’t know what I was doing, having such a frank conversation with a boy I’d only just met—one who went for midnight swims in winter, no less. And yet, there was

something so familiar about him, it was as if we'd known each other for years. I shouldn't have been ready to trust him, but for some reason, I was sure I could tell him anything.

"My parents put me in here," I said finally. "I think they were afraid I'd end up like my sister."

"What happened to your sister?"

"Well, she's only a year older than me, but she started talking to animals. I don't mean the way people talk to their cats and dogs in those baby voices. I mean *really* talking to them."

Dym nodded as if this sort of thing happened every day. "Do you miss her?"

"I don't know. I mean, by the time I left, she was spending most of her time in the fields 'conversing' with the cattle."

"Not an easy person to get close to."

"Definitely not." I didn't actually know what happened to Aurora after I left for Silver Hill. For all I knew, my parents had her admitted to a completely different asylum.

"Is she the only sister you have?"

"Yes. I have an older brother too, but I haven't seen him in years. Last I heard, he was raising horses on a ranch somewhere. He's been kind of depressed since his son died."

"You had a nephew?"

I nodded. "But he had an accident riding one of my brother's horses. There was a barn, and a fire . . . anyway, they were both killed. The horse and my nephew, I mean."

"Sweet Sophia," Dym said, and let out a low whistle. "Sorry to hear it. But why was your family afraid you'd go crazy? Were you acting crazy?"

"That's what I can't figure out." A stiff breeze blew, and I tightened my shawl around my shoulders. A few of Dym's hairs blew back as well, but otherwise, he didn't seem to notice the cold. I had to stop myself from looking over his body for goosebumps. "I wasn't doing anything crazy. At least I don't think I was. Maybe they worried that with my sister's behavior, madness ran in the family. Maybe sending me to Silver Hill was a precaution. That's the only explanation I can think of."

I took a deep breath and tried to collect my thoughts. There was one thing I hadn't told Dym. Something I felt compelled to.

"And there's something else weird about me." I bit my lip.

"Oh? What might that be?" He cocked his head to one side.

"I can . . . I can sort of make things come to life. At least temporarily."

"I imagine any boy feels his heart go pitter-pat whenever you're near."

I quickly disguised my flattered smile with a smirk. "Very funny. What I mean is, well, here. Let me see if I can show you."

I stepped back a few feet so I could get my hands on some vines. Dym leaned forward on the pond's edge. I took one of the vines from a dead tree in my hand and concentrated very, very hard. For some reason, the vine let me pull it away from the rest. I knew it couldn't be alive, but somehow, I got the feeling it was sentient. I let the moonlight shine on it.

For a moment, it worked. The stem plumped up, and the leaves on the vine turned dark green, then light green as they began to unfurl. I could even see tiny plant veins beneath the surface of the leaves. But then, just as quickly, the vine twisted on itself and shriveled into blackness again. I let it drop from my hand and looked back at Dym, whose face bore no expression.

“You don’t seem surprised,” I said.

Now, he smiled, as if a girl reanimating objects was the most commonplace thing in the world. “I think you’ll find I’m very open-minded,” he said. “Believe it or not, I’ve seen stranger phenomena than that.”

“Really? Like what?”

“I’ll tell you some other time.”

“Presuming there will be some other time, or that we’ll see each other again.” I walked back to the pond’s edge.

“Oh, I’m certain I’ll be back. It’s very relaxing in the garden.”

“It’s not quite as relaxing on the inside,” I said darkly. “Do you even know what it’s like there?”

“How could I? Unless of course, you tell me about it.” Dym looked as if he had all the time in the world just to tread water and listen to me.

I explained the routine at the asylum, the restrictive rules. “It’s bad enough for me, and I’m fairly hearty. But for the other girls . . .”

“What other girls?” Dym asked.

I hesitated. *Do I tell him about Rose and Laura? Best to keep it vague.*

“The other patients,” I finally said. I detailed some of our treatments, including drugging, isolation, and electrocution.

Dym’s eyes widened. “Sounds ghastly. Why don’t you run away?”

I briefly explained the reasons why that wouldn’t work. Reasons I’d gone over in my mind just before I found the secret door to the garden.

“Well, I can’t think of a solution to your problem, except to do what you’re told until you’re released.” Dym splashed some water onto his face and ran his fingers through his hair. *Why would he do that? I wondered. The water must be freezing.* “Not believe what this Dr. Catron and his ilk are selling, mind you,” he continued. “Just go along till you fool them into thinking you’ve bought it. Hopefully, that’ll be enough to get you and the others out of the bulk of those horrific ‘treatments.’ You can always work on the family situation when you get home.”

“That was my conclusion as well,” I said. “I only managed to sneak away tonight because everyone else was asleep.” *No need to tell him about the secret passage yet, if at all.* “I’m not actually supposed to be here.” I indicated the garden. “It’s forbidden to patients. And to trespassers, obviously.” I looked down at him.

Dym grinned and floated on his back, showing only his torso. It made it look like he had half a body. *A very nice half, to be sure.*

I sighed. “So you’re just going to swim in and out of here whenever you feel like it?”

Dym stopped floating and bobbed up and down in the water. “Pretty much.”

I stole a glance back at the asylum. “Well, I won’t say anything. But make sure you don’t get caught.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t get caught. But you take care as well.” His voice deepened with concern. “I have a feeling that in a few weeks’ time, something will . . . happen.”

“ ‘In a few weeks’ time, something will happen.’ Could you possibly be a little more specific?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can.” Dym rubbed his eyes as if doing so would allow him to discern more, to truly *see* the future. “Again, it’s just a feeling. In nearly a month, a very important event will happen here.”

One month. An important event. Just like Catron’s psychic predicted. Was it a coincidence? Unless Dym *was* Catron’s psychic. But the idea of Catron trusting the word of a mere boy was preposterous.

I wondered if the girls and I would even last a month in this place. Should I ask Dym to get a message to Laura’s aunt? I barely knew him. Sure, he was fascinating, in an exasperating sort of way. But could I trust him? I decided I’d better wait. If he didn’t have the girls’ best interests at heart, requesting help could lead to disaster.

“Well, I’ll certainly be on the lookout for important things.” *One month since I learned about the prediction, minus the week I’ve been here. That leaves about three weeks, if the psychic and Dym are right.*

“Important things like me?” Dym grinned in that maddening fashion of his.

“My, aren’t we adept at self-flattery? Actually, I don’t know if I should make a habit of coming here.” *Although it doesn’t seem like an entirely bad idea, given the alternative of staying upstairs.* “But either way, it was, ah, nice meeting you, Dym.”

His cheekbones. Why hadn’t I noticed how high and sharp they were before? I forced myself to look away, but not before nodding politely. Then I turned to go.

“Nice meeting *you*, Seluna.” I glanced over my shoulder; he was swimming backwards, never taking his eyes from me. “Again,” he said softly as I walked towards the asylum.

Again? What does he mean by “again”? I turned back, but Dym had disappeared into the water. I peered closer. Had he drowned? Unlikely, given his superior aquatic abilities. But he couldn’t have swum around to the front of Silver Hill that fast either. I waited, looking at the pond for a few moments. Still no sign of him. Not even the bubbles on the surface of the water that a drowning person would make. I guess he really had swum off.

Quite the athlete, that Dym. Perhaps he’s training for the Titanympics.

I put my hand to my head. *Ugh. That swaying feeling.* The longer I stayed in Dym’s company, the worse it got. I felt like I was being drawn into a whirlpool, a body of water with only him and me. I imagined it making a funnel around us. I felt the heat of his skin touching mine, our bodies pressed

together. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, and the feeling went away.

Others might have had a hard time finding the door to get back, but I knew to look for the iron ring. It was the kind of thing you wouldn't really see unless you were looking for it. I pushed on the door, opening it, and went back inside. I had only gone up a few steps when my skirt caught on a loose, rusty nail.

"Aaah!" I cried out as I fell, almost face-first, into a step. Cursing, I tore the edge of my skirt off the nail and steadied my candle, which had almost fallen as well. That was when I saw it.

Out of the corner of my eye, the candlelight glinted off something. At first, I thought it was a piece of gold jewelry. But when I brought the candle closer, it turned out to be the gilded writing on the spine of a very old book. The book rested on a step against the wall. With my taper held high as I walked up and down the steps, there was no way I would've looked down to see it.

Maybe it's lucky that I tripped, then. I tried picking the book up with my free hand, but it was too thick and heavy. Parts of the leather were flaking away. Pieces of loose paper had been stuffed inside, and were sticking out in various places. It looked bloated and waterlogged, as if it had been dumped in a bath.

Or a pond, I thought.

But the ink was still legible. Magical ink, no doubt. And the inscription on the cover hadn't been done by a machine. You could tell someone had lovingly hand-tooled it. The hinges on the book weren't modern by any means; I wouldn't have been surprised if they were medieval. All in all, it looked like an artifact that had been there for hundreds of years.

" 'Property of Queen Sophia Rose Delphi Del . . . something,' " I read aloud. I couldn't make out the rest; it was too worn and faded. I sat on the steps for a moment and gently turned the pages by candlelight. It seemed like a diary, or a scrapbook. Some of it was in Old Hartlandian, which would take me a while to translate. Thank heavens for that class on ancient languages I'd aced last year.

I gave a loud, wide yawn. I was too tired to look at the book anymore tonight. At least it would give me something to do tomorrow during my confinement, which I assumed would still be in effect. I climbed the rest of the stairs with the book under my arm and pushed on the secret door. Nothing. I pushed a bit harder, but it still didn't open.

I tried not to panic. I would *not* die of starvation in a secret staircase in an insane asylum. I took deep breaths. Worst-case scenario, I could just turn back around and get out through the door that led to the garden. But I'd have a devil of a time explaining to the staff how I got there once they found me. I put down the book and candle down and pushed on the door with both hands. Nothing. I leaned my entire body into it, but still nothing.

Damn it all. I gritted my teeth. *I know the door swings open into the attic. That's how it worked the last time.* Doors couldn't change the way they worked, could they? Was the iron ring on this side just for show as well? I gave it a quick tug, not expecting anything to happen.

My expectations were not met, which turned out to be a good thing. I heard the same click as

before, and the door fell open into my room.

“Tricky, tricky,” I said to the door. “One would almost think you were magic. Or just sneaky engineering.” I picked up my candle and book and went inside, closing the door behind me.

I snuffed out the flame and lay down on my cot. I wasn’t thinking of how long I’d be in solitary confinement anymore. Instead, my thoughts wandered to the secret passage and its mysterious book. The unearthly garden. And the boy in the pond who I couldn’t get out of my mind.

Chapter 6

It wasn't until one week later that I was let out of my own personal Hold. I was dirtier, not to mention thinner from reduced rations. They'd only given me one meal per day. I supposed I should consider myself lucky they remembered to feed me at all.

I managed to wash what few clothes I had in the pond. I even dragged a bucket full of water upstairs to bathe myself. It didn't work as well as an actual bath, but what choice did I have? I guessed I could have bathed in the pond, but it would have been even more freezing than the bucket water. And I didn't relish the thought of Dym coming upon me stark naked. Not really. I tried to tell myself that it didn't matter if he was there or not, that I didn't care if I saw him again. But I knew it was a lie.

Yet, what I'd told Dym about my admission was the truth: that sending me here as a precaution was the only plausible explanation. Oh, I never doubted that Mother and Father loved me, at least not until now. They'd always treated me and my siblings equally. And aside from the usual squabbles, I couldn't say my parents and I got along poorly. But I was keenly aware they never knew what to make of their odd, dark daughter. Unlike Helios and Aurora, who seemed to fit in wherever they went, I always felt out of place in society. I was more comfortable in the shadows.

Maybe that was why, sometimes, I'd catch Mother and Father exchanging worried glances over me. Or they'd have hushed, late-night conversations where I'd overhear my name. They never did such things when it came to my brother or sister. But I never thought I'd done anything that warranted being hauled off to an asylum.

I could only assume they knew something I didn't. Was my strangeness destined to morph into madness, or worse? If it was, why hadn't they at least told me, so I could prepare for or prevent it? Was it because there was no way of doing so? The uncertainty only made it all the more dreadful. Maybe when Aurora started talking to animals, they decided something had to be done about me before it was too late.

Anyway, it was pointless to ruminate on it too much. I had more pressing matters of survival at hand, like eating. Pity the garden wasn't alive; otherwise, I might have found something edible in it. But nothing grew there that I could put in my mouth, unless I wished to feast on dead vines. Though they did look a little greener every time I visited, which was odd. I'd heard of gardens blooming

again in the spring, but not dead plants coming back to life. Unless, of course, I was reanimating them.

There were other odd occurrences during the week of my confinement. For instance, I had the strangest dreams imaginable. I mean, I'd always had vivid dreams. Some I dreaded, and some were so beautiful I dreaded waking. But recently, my dreams were no longer of my earlier days at the asylum. Instead, they showed me the moon, the ocean, and the tides. I couldn't remember the dreams exactly, but they seemed to consist of places I'd been, past lives I'd had.

It was funny; though most people described their dreams as being illogical, incoherent, I always felt there was an order below the chaos. I rarely had nightmares. Although some of my dreams were unpleasant, I always knew they were nothing to be afraid of. Sometimes, I dreamed of Dym swimming underwater, all wavy dark hair and supple limbs. It was terribly vexing. By slipping just underneath my awareness, he'd found a way to irritate me even when he wasn't there.

I managed to disguise the door to the secret staircase by hanging an old sheet over it. It was a good thing, too, because one of the junior nurses almost discovered the door when she came to end my isolation.

"What's this bedspread doin' 'angin' up 'ere?" She went to pull it aside.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you!" I blurted out. "There's a hole in the roof. You never know when a wild animal might get in and bite you."

The nurse yanked her hand back and stepped away from the sheet. "I don't fancy bein' bitten, I don't. But *tsk!* Puttin' an 'ole in the roof? That's destruction of property, that is. *Dr. Catron's* property."

"*I* didn't put the hole in the roof," I said indignantly. "It was there when I got here. Why would I put a hole in the roof?"

The nurse tsked again. "You askin' the wrong nurse, girlie. Why would you loonies do anythin'?"

I was fairly certain the staff wouldn't be interested in repairing the fictional hole, and I was right. As I dutifully followed the nurse down the garret steps for the first time in a week, I knew my secret was safe, at least for a while. Unfortunately, things hadn't changed for the better at Silver Hill while I'd been "gone." Not that I expected them to.

I met up with Rose and Laura in time for late-morning lessons. "Seluna!" Laura cried hoarsely when she saw me. She waved her hand hard back and forth. Rose broke into a smile and accidentally kicked the empty wooden chair in front of her. Fortunately, they were both sitting at the back, so Nurse Cutter at the head of the classroom didn't notice their outbursts.

As I slid next to Rose on the triple row of seats, I noticed that both she and Laura looked a bit paler, their hair duller. Even Rose's curls seemed limper. I pushed my satchel full of lessons under my part of the seat. I'd put the book I found in the stairwell in with them, hoping to have a free moment later to sneak a look at it.

"We were so worried for you!" Rose whispered.

"We thought they put you in the Hold," Laura said.

I leaned my head towards her. “No, they just locked me in my room.”

“In that freezing attic?” Rose asked. “Crikey, that’s nearly as bad!”

“And all on account of me,” said Laura. Now, she looked as if she was about to cry.

“Don’t.” I took a handkerchief out of my satchel and handed it to her. “It was *not* your fault. I’m only sorry I got caught and couldn’t reach your aunt. I don’t think we should try that again. It’s too big a risk.” The comment was intended for both of them, but I was looking at Rose. “Say, why *didn’t* they put me in the Hold?”

“Many girls, only a few rooms in the Hold,” Rose explained. “I suppose those rooms were occupied. Sad to say, but they usually are.”

I was very tempted to tell the girls about the secret staircase, Dym, and the garden. But it was probably a bad idea. They might try to sneak into the passage, or out to see Dym. It was safer if they didn’t know. Another part of me—a more selfish one—wanted to keep it all my own little secret, especially Dym. *And there he is in my thoughts again.*

Nurse Cutter was writing something on the blackboard. From the sharp, forceful way she moved the chalk, I presumed she wasn’t happy about it. Staff here often had to pull double duty, fulfilling whatever roles Dr. Catron saw fit to assign. I doubted Cutter had any real teaching credentials. I wasn’t even sure she had *nursing* credentials. The chalk made a terrible screeching sound as her hand went up and down.

“Did you move anything while you were in your room?” Laura whispered.

“Move anything?” I squinted to see what Cutter was writing, but her large body blocked my view. “No, I keep the furniture where it is. There really isn’t that much of it.” I stopped trying to see the board and turned my head to Rose, who was giving me a look.

“No, she means *move* anything.” Rose lowered her voice. “Like, you know . . .”

It finally dawned on me. *Curse this daytime mental fog.* “Oh, as in . . . no.” I didn’t mention reanimating the vine, because it would have involved mentioning the garden, and possibly Dym.

“Maybe you can do it for us later,” Laura said breathlessly. Her eyes shone, and she looked more excited than I’d seen her in a while. “If we get some time to ourselves.”

“Yeah. Did you ever think your powers might be our ticket out of here, Seluna?” Rose asked. “You could use them to pick a lock or something.”

“Rose, even if I managed to work that trick long enough to unlock the front door, we’d step out into nothing but a frozen wasteland. How would we get from there to someplace livable? Trust me, I’ve thought about it enough to—”

“Pay attention, Seluna!” I hadn’t even noticed Nurse Cutter staring darkly at me. “No extraneous conversation! Out of solitary for all of one ’our and already you’re makin’ trouble. You’d better start shapin’ up, unless you want to go crazy the way your sister did.”

There were a few giggles around the room, and I willed myself not to blush. *Why did Cutter have to say that? And how does she know? Maybe she saw it in my file.* She gave me one last glare and

went back to writing on the board.

“Is that why you were admitted?” Laura asked, her voice even softer than before. “Because of hereditary madness?”

I closed my eyes. “I think so. Or something like that.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re mad.” Rose’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Though I can see now why you didn’t tell us the reason you’re here. Family reputation and all.”

“Ah, yes.” I nodded quickly, opening my eyes. “That’s it exactly. Family reputation.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Laura reached across Rose, slipped her hand into mine, and gave it a squeeze. “Every family has problems.”

But not every family uses them as excuses to banish their daughter, I thought. But I said nothing of this, and just squeezed Laura’s hand back. “You are too kind,” I murmured. She really was.

“All right, everyone, eyes to the front.” Cutter put down her chalk. “We ’ave a treat for you today. We’re goin’ to read and discuss *books*.” She indicated the blackboard, where she had written “Appropriate Lessons for Young Ladies.”

“Not just textbooks, mind you, but actual fiction. These books was all written by Dr. Catron ’imself,” she said reverently. “So you know they’s going to be very, very special.”

The girls broke into excited titters. *Books!* We hadn’t been allowed to bring or read books during our entire stay at Silver Hill. But our enthusiasm was quickly squashed when we realized the type of books Cutter had in mind. Each short story we went over was about a different girl who bucked convention and did what she wanted with her life. In the end, each met with ruin and disgrace. I wondered if Catron spent a long time writing these volumes, or just dashed them off in his spare time for the joy of it.

We were done reviewing the stories and were starting to pack up for lunch when one girl raised her hand. I didn’t recognize her; she must have been a new admission who arrived while I was in isolation.

“Excuse me, Nurse Cutter, but when is music class?”

There were a few murmurs from the others, and I saw Rose frown. This girl was definitely new.

“Music class?” Cutter’s eyebrows shot up. “There’s no music class at Silver ’ill!”

“But when will I practice my violin . . .?” The girl’s voice trailed off.

Cutter stared at her. “We cannot ’ave you girls listenin’ to or performin’ music. It might lead to your feelin’ things, or gettin’ ideas.”

“What a Greek tragedy that would be,” I muttered.

“I’ll ’ave to make a note of this in your case file for Dr. Catron.” Cutter shook her head. “Now, all of you—line up for lunch. Quickly!” she barked, and everyone rushed to collect their things.

As I hurried to put papers in my satchel, the book I’d found slid out and onto the floor. I managed to jam it back in, but not before Rose and Laura spotted it.

“What’s that, Seluna?” Laura asked.

“Seluna, do you have a *book*?” Rose’s eyes darted back and forth, watching for Nurse Cutter.

“A *real* book?” Laura’s jaw dropped.

“Let’s see it!” Rose breathed.

Blast. I was caught. There’d be no hiding it from them now.

“I’ll tell you at lunchtime,” I said, then put my finger to my lips.



“Where did you find it?” Laura sat hunched over the circular wooden table where the three of us had gathered to eat. Rose was on my other side. She was also hunched over to obscure the view of the contraband in my lap. With its tiny windows and dark, paneled walls, the room resembled a tavern—or even a dungeon—more than an asylum cafeteria.

“Ah, near the garret,” I replied. It was half-true, at least. And although I’d gone back over the stairs thoroughly on my hands and knees with a candle, I still hadn’t found anything other than the mysterious book.

“It says ‘Property of Queen . . .’” Rose squinted at the faded inscription, but had as much trouble reading it as I did. “‘Queen Sophia,’ et cetera. Who’s Queen Sophia?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know.” I couldn’t remember if we’d studied Queen Sophia in history class. Looking over my shoulder, I could see the nurse/cafeteria monitor directing girls to bring their empty trays up to the lunch window. Mealtime was nearly over. We’d already deposited our trays, so hopefully the monitor wouldn’t be back this way.

“Wow, a queen?” murmured Laura. “Like a real queen?”

Rose bent her head to get closer to Laura, making her curls bob up and down. “No, like a *fake* queen.”

Laura ignored Rose, running her fingers over the book’s cover. “I heard Silver Hill used to be the royal palace,” she mused. “It was where Hartlandia’s kings and queens lived in ancient times.”

“I think that’s just a myth,” I said. *Like the story about my name.*

“Who cares who it’s by?” said Rose excitedly. “What’s in it? Is it a diary?” She carefully pulled back the cover, but couldn’t read the first few pages.

“Hey, is this Old Hartlandian?”

“Some of it is,” I explained. Then, after another moment, “I know a little.”

“What does it say?” the girls asked in unison.

I kept turning the pages, trying to find something Rose or Laura might recognize. “Well, my Old Hartlandian isn’t the best, and there are a lot of pages missing. So, it’s hard to tell exactly what the book contains. But I think it’s a grimoire.”

Rose’s brow furrowed. “A grim what?”

“That sounds scary,” Laura said.

“It’s not, really,” I said. “It’s sort of a cross between a witch’s diary and a recipe book.”

“A recipe book?” Laura cocked her head. “What do witches cook?”

Rose made a fist and lightly bopped Laura on the head. “She means spells, silly. Witches cook up spells.”

I told them a bit of what I’d found and managed to translate during the past week.

“Here’s something interesting.” I put my finger on a page with a large moon at the top, its beams coming down onto the text below. “It talks about the cycles of the moon.”

“Interesting? That doesn’t sound interesting,” said Rose. “I think you meant boring.”

I continued explaining. “The new moon is for success, blessings, and planting. Waxing moon is for working hard on projects you hope to see completed by the full moon. Full moon is for fortune-telling, protection, and banishing. Waning moon is for healing, breaking habits, and releasing negative emotions.”

“Dr. Catron and his foot soldiers need a waning moon,” Laura snorted. “They’re full of negative emotions.”

“I think they’re just full of it,” said Rose.

I looked over my shoulder again and put my fingers to my lips. The cafeteria monitor was still several tables away, but her eyes were moving back and forth, looking for the slightest sign of trouble.

“Say, what moon cycle are we in now?” asked Laura.

I tried to remember the date. “I think we’re in the waxing moon.” I wondered if what Dym said about the moon in other places was true. Did it really change shape as it went from waxing to new to waning to full? It must have been convenient to look at the sky and know the moon phase. In Hartlandia, if one lost track of phases, one had to go to an almanac.

“What’s this part?” Rose pointed to the figure of a woman on the page. The woman had her back to the full moon and was pointing at something out of frame with her index finger. Light streamed from the moon to her finger to the unseen object.

“ ‘Drawing Down the Moon. Must be done with a full moon,’ ” I read slowly. It was part Old Hartlandian, part New. Oddly enough, this made it harder to translate than if it had just been Old Hartlandian. “ ‘Done to honor the Moon Goddess or employ her power. Results in a trance state combined with a power surge that radiates through the body. Make . . . ’ some kind of circle.”

“You mean walk in a circle? Draw a circle?” Laura peppered me with questions.

“I don’t know. It just says ‘make a circle.’ Open your chakras—”

“What’s a chakra?” Laura asked.

“Take your wand—”

“You’re supposed to have a wand?” Rose asked.

“—in your . . . something hand, and point it at the moon. Say . . . damn. This part’s been nearly rubbed out. I think it was a rhyming incantation. Wait—there’s more. ‘You should feel the moon being

absorbed into you. Slowly lower your wand. You now have the power of the goddess.’”

“Pretty wild stuff,” said Rose.

“I wonder if we could draw down the moon, Seluna,” said Laura. “Maybe then we could get out of here.”

I shook my head sadly. “I don’t think that would work. We’re not witches. We don’t have wands, we don’t know the incantation, and so on.”

“Too many don’ts,” Rose agreed, frowning.

“I did look in the book for something that might help us get away from here, or incapacitate the staff,” I said. “I thought at the very least, I might find a way to immobilize Catron so he’d stop torturing us.”

Rose’s frown disappeared, replaced with an eager smile. “And did you find anything?”

I shook my head again. I hated to keep disappointing them. “I haven’t translated the whole thing, but most of the spells are for those with advanced skill in the Craft. Witchcraft, I mean.”

“Then what good is this stupid book, anyway?” snapped Laura.

Rose and I looked at one another. It wasn’t like Laura to be so angry. “Well, it was a fun diversion, right?” Rose put her hand on Laura’s arm, but Laura turned her head away. “And it’s really old, which is kind of neat.” Rose fingered the spine, glancing down where gold leaf flaked off on her hand. Then there was the terrific noise of a tray hitting the floor and several plates and bowls smashing.

“Dammit to ’ell, you imbecile!” the cafeteria monitor screamed in the face of a terrified girl. “I *told* you she needs ’elp. She can’t *feed* ’erself no more. She sure as anythin’ can’t bring up a tray on ’er own! You have to do it *for* ’er!” The girl was trembling, her hands clasped so tightly in front of her I could see them turning white.

The patient she was supposed to be helping stared at the ceiling, mumbling. Her eyes looked almost as white as the other girl’s hands, and filmy, as if someone had poured milk over them. Her dress and hair were askew, as if she’d had trouble getting ready in the morning. Or perhaps someone had trouble helping her, if they’d even bothered.

“I know that girl!” hissed Rose. “That’s Thomasina. She was admitted the same day I was.”

“Which one?” I leaned forward to get a closer look. The entire cafeteria had come to a standstill, with everybody staring at the monitor and her victims.

“The one who’s not herself.” Rose jutted her chin at the mumbling girl.

“What did they do to her?” Laura’s voice quivered.

Rose grimaced. “Don’t know. But I do know she spends a lot of time alone with Dr. Catron in his office. More time than anyone I’ve seen here.”

“I’ve ’ad enough of your antics!” The cafeteria monitor was screaming again at the petrified girl. “All you brainless loonies are alike. I think they should just get rid of the ’ole cursed lot of you. You can bet Dr. Catron will ’ear about this! Now, clean up this mess and line up at the door. It’s nearly

time for your daily exercises.”

The girls formed a line. Thomasina’s friend hastily wiped the floor with several napkins, then gently guided Thomasina into place with shaking hands. Rose, Laura, and I got up slowly to join them.

“Why is Thomasina spending so much time with Dr. Catron?” I asked Rose. It was astounding how much I’d missed in only a week. The cafeteria monitor glared at me for reasons I couldn’t discern. I gave her a tight smile. She glared for a few more seconds, then began scolding the other girls for not lining up straight enough.

“All I know is she said she had a problem with the light,” answered Rose. She pulled the flap down tighter over my satchel to make sure no one saw the Book.

“The light? What’s wrong with the light?” I asked. We stayed close together, moving forward inch by inch.

“There isn’t enough of it, for one thing,” Laura said. “Haven’t you noticed? Sometimes, it shines down from the high windows, but other than that, you can hardly see it. At night, they never turn the lamps up high enough. I’ve got bruises on my shins just from trying to walk straight after dusk. Even in the solarium, it’s always so gray and cloudy. Oh, how I wish spring would come!”

“There’s something unnerving about it always being dark, about never getting enough sunlight,” agreed Rose as we went behind the other girls. Now, we waited for Nurse Cutter to arrive, like always, to take us to the main entrance. “It does terrible things to the mind, or so I’ve heard. I’m starting to believe it’s true.”

I stood in line, feeling awful for Thomasina, Laura, and the rest of the so-called patients here. With my acute vision, I actually *hadn’t* noticed the lack of light as much.

It’s a shame they can’t feel the darkness the way I can. Its comforting arms, its tenderness.

“Well, it’ll be spring soon enough,” I said brightly. “Just a few more weeks, right? Then maybe we’ll all be home, and there’ll be plenty of sunlight.”

“You mean *if* we go home,” muttered Rose. “And it’s not like we have the greatest families to return to.” The cafeteria monitor passed by, giving us the once-over. Rose smiled widely at her. Satisfied that our part of the line was straight, the monitor went and stood by the door.

“It’s not only the lack of sunlight that’s creepy around here. Did you notice the last few rooms at the end of the dormitory?” Rose asked. “The ones marked ‘Reserved’?”

“The ones with the horrid screams coming from them?” Laura shivered. “Or sometimes, the girls inside make no noise at all. Not even normal sounds, like talking or moving about. I don’t know which is worse.”

“What rooms?” I asked. I had to talk out of the corner of my mouth; turning towards Rose and Laura would mar the line’s perfection, but I didn’t dare speak louder. Staying in the garret was really starting to become a liability. I was all but cut off from the rest of Silver Hill, from things everyone else knew.

“Those rooms are reserved for permanent residents. You know—girls who *never* go home,” Rose

said darkly.

Laura's eyes bulged. "Never?"

Rose nodded. "The ones Dr. Catron decides are the sickest stay here *forever*. If you manage to do what he says, or act the way he wants, you're considered 'cured.' In other words, you're sent home." She patted the hidden pocket in her bodice. I knew she was waiting for our toilet break so she could sneak a cigarette. "Sometimes, I think a few of them—especially the younger girls—actually believe what he says is true. That they really are crazy."

"Do you ever wonder why there are only young girls here?" asked Laura. "I mean, it says 'Lunatic Asylum for Unmanageable *Females*,' but you never see any older women."

"I don't think anyone stays here long enough to grow up," Rose said.

Or lives long enough. I thought of the patients Rose mentioned who died from infections after being in the Hold.

"That's true," Laura said softly. "Then there are girls you don't see anymore, not even in the rooms at the end of the hall."

"Yeah, like Geraldine." Rose pulled her bangs all the way back over her head, then let them flop forward. Laura peeked around the front of the line, but Nurse Cutter still hadn't arrived. One look from the cafeteria monitor and Laura jerked herself back into position again.

"What happened to Geraldine?" I asked. I recalled the spirited girl I almost met on my first day at Silver Hill, when I'd listened to her argue with her father and Catron. "Did she go home?"

Laura shook her head. "I only talked to her a few times, but she told me Dr. Catron said she was one of the worst cases. At first, he thought she'd be easy to treat, but it didn't work out like that. There's no way they'd send her home."

"Maybe her family came and picked her up?" I said hopefully.

Rose raised her eyebrows. "Have you seen anybody's family here since we arrived?"

"I know they're not allowed, except when the girls are admitted. I guess I thought . . . maybe to pick someone up . . ." My voice drifted off. We were all silent again for a moment. We hadn't known her well, but Geraldine had disappeared, and no one knew what had happened to her. It put a bad feeling in the pit of one's stomach.

"I wonder if they shocked her." My voice was barely audible. I didn't want to finish with the words "to death."

"I was shocked just the other day." Rose shuddered and rubbed her upper arms.

"Rose, no!" I had to fight not to gasp.

Laura nodded. "We didn't want to tell you right after you came out of solitary. We thought it might upset you."

"It was horrible." For once, there wasn't even a hint of sarcasm in Rose's voice.

I gave a lightning-quick glance towards the cafeteria monitor, but fortune favored us, and her back was turned. I took the opportunity to wrap both arms around Rose.

“I’m so, so sorry,” I said. She leaned her head against my arm, and I felt her shoulders give a little heave. Then I saw the monitor’s head swiveling in our direction, and quickly stopped hugging Rose.

“I think we just have to go along with them, like so many of the girls do,” I said, realizing how much my thinking echoed Dym’s. “Just *pretend* we’re getting better.”

“And what happens after that?” asked Laura.

“I’m not sure. If you’re sent home,” I pointed at her, “you may be able to contact your aunt Mae, for one thing. Perhaps she wouldn’t mind taking you and Rose in for a bit.”

“But what about you, Seluna? When I get home, do you want me to ask Aunt Mae if you can stay with us, too?”

“That’s okay, Laura. I can look out for myself.”

“But what about your family?” Rose patted her bodice again. She must have really been dying for that cigarette. “How can you go back to live with them if they think you’re crazy?”

I had absolutely no idea. I still hadn’t sorted out my feelings about my family, or confirmed the real reason they sent me here. All I had were conjectures and speculations. “I’ll figure that out when the time comes,” I said. “Don’t either of you worry about me.”

Nurse Cutter had finally arrived to take us to the main hall for exercise. We left the cafeteria in single file, with Cutter at the door. I was the last one to go out, but before I could do so, the enormous woman put her arm in front of my chest.

“Not you,” she said. “You come with me. Dr. Catron wants a word with you.”

Chapter 7

“Se-lu-na, how *are* you? Did we enjoy solitary confinement?” Dr. Catron’s demeanor was positively congenial. “Did we learn our lesson?”

I sat on the uncomfortable chair facing Catron’s desk and tried to resist the urge to strangle him. “If the lesson was how to survive on one bowl of porridge a day and no baths, then consider it learned,” I said.

Catron shook his head and placed his long, elegant fingers on either side of his armchair. “I expected better of you, Seluna. I thought a brief spell alone might clear your mind. Now,” his voice hardened, “would you care to tell me what you were *really* doing in my office last week?”

I looked him straight in the eye. “I wasn’t in your office. I was just at the door. And like I said, I thought it was the broom closet.”

“Where you were looking for supplies to mop up a spill that had already been dealt with?”

I gritted my teeth. “Obviously, that news had not yet reached me.”

For a few moments, Catron said nothing. Finally, he sighed. “You’re really sticking with that story, aren’t you?”

“I told you, it’s not a story.”

“As you wish. You are certainly one of the most fascinating cases of my career. I can see now that I’ll have to find more . . . appropriate strategies to address your condition.”

My condition? Which was what, exactly?

“I’m surprised you didn’t try to shock me like you did Rose and Laura,” I said boldly. “What with my condition being so horrendous and all.”

“That remains an option for the future.” Catron returned my stare. “Though such therapy is not effective for everyone. Sometimes, we don’t use it on cases we feel are too advanced.”

“Advanced?”

“It’s like trying to staunch blood flow from a gunshot wound with a napkin.” He put his palms out in a gesture of helplessness. “But don’t think I don’t notice your hesitation, your resistance to treatment. I was *so* hoping you’d be different than the other patients here.” He looked at me and stroked his smooth chin. “Special, somehow. But regardless, everything we do at Silver Hill has a purpose. I promise that if you cooperate, someday, this pain will be useful.”

“Maybe to you,” I retorted.

Catron smiled, but the smile did not reach his eyes. “You’re a fiery girl, Seluna. We’ll have to see what we can do about that.” He pressed a button on his intercom, but continued looking at me while leaning over it. “Come to my office,” he said. “It’s time to take her back.” Not three minutes later, Nurse Cutter arrived.

“Dr. Catron, I—”

“Not now.” Catron was riffling through papers on his desk. Occasionally, he would glance at me and make notes. We hadn’t spoken a word to each other since he called Cutter on the intercom.

“But I can’t be takin’ ’er back now, sir.” It was the first time I’d ever seen Cutter look frazzled. “We got trouble with that girl who dropped ’er tray in the cafeteria today. Now she’s walkin’ into walls, and a few of them other ones, too.”

“Thomasina,” I said. “Her name is Thomasina.” Both of them ignored me.

“They ain’t listenin’ to us no more. I don’t know if they don’t understand, or they’re just bein’ willful. But either way, the staff is havin’ a devil of a time corrallin’ them, cleanin’ up after them—”

“I don’t want to hear excuses, Cutter!” Catron snapped. The burly woman took a step back. “I don’t care what you do with her.” He indicated me. “Just get her out of here.”

I expected Cutter to make a few more remarks. But to my surprise, she simply nodded and said, “Yes, sir.” Then she grabbed me roughly by the upper arm. “C’mon, you!” She yanked me out of the chair and into the hall. I only just managed to grab my satchel as we left.

Before I knew what was happening, she pushed me onto the bench outside Catron’s office. I felt cold metal on my wrist, and realized she was handcuffing me to the armrest.

“What’s this?” I asked in disbelief.

“A precaution. Can’t ’ave you go runnin’ off on your own. Not after you almost broke into Dr. Catron’s office.”

“I’d hardly call attempting to turn a doorknob ‘breaking in.’ ” *And since when does Nurse Cutter carry handcuffs? Perhaps she always has them on her, and I just never noticed.*

“See?” snapped Cutter. “It’s that kind of thinkin’ that gets girls like you in trouble. Now, the good doctor don’t need to know you’re ’ere. Don’t make a peep—just pray he don’t come out. I’ll be back for you as soon as I’m done dealin’ with them other sickos. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay right there on that bench.”

I looked at the handcuff. I looked at Nurse Cutter.

“Do I have a choice?”

She glared at me with her beady, animal eyes. “Just. Stay. Put.” Then she walked away down the hall, heavy shoes echoing.

I jerked at the handcuff, then examined it. *Maybe I can animate it and make it open.* I stared at the cuff and concentrated very hard. Although I managed to bend the metal back and forth, I couldn’t enlarge the opening around my wrist enough to wriggle out. And my abilities did nothing to trigger the

locking device inside the handcuff. I definitely needed a key.

With nothing to do except wait for Cutter to return and “rescue” me, I listened to what was going on in Catron’s office. He was speaking to someone on the intercom, but I couldn’t make out what the other party was saying.

I saw a stout, perspiring orderly walk towards me from the other end of the hall. He had on stained overalls instead of his usual orderly’s uniform, but I recognized him from my previous weeks at the asylum. He carried an open, metal toolbox with various hammers, wrenches, and pliers spilling out.

If he thought it was odd that a patient was handcuffed to a bench, he said nothing about it. For all I knew, he saw girls at Silver Hill in similar situations all the time. It was a disturbing thought. He walked right up to Catron’s office, then stopped and leaned his head towards me.

“Psst—’ey, you there. Girlie. ’Ow’s the doctor feelin’ today?”

“Feeling?”

The orderly rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell me you’re one o’ them loonies who can’t even understand a sentence. I really need to know, see. Is ’e feelin’ all right?”

“All right?”

The man rolled his eyes again.

“He seemed like his usual self when I was just in there,” I finally said. *His usual self just happens to be a sadistic nut bag.*

“I can’t risk goin’ in there if ’e’s not ’imself, see? ’E’s in an especially funny mood these days because of that new girl, Seluna.” He squinted at me. “What they call you, by the way?”

“Mary,” I answered quickly. *Why would Catron be in a funny mood because of me? Is it because I tried to break into his office?*

The orderly nodded slowly. “Well, you just do what the good doctor tells you, you ’ear? And there won’t be no trouble.”

“Yes, sir. Absolutely, sir.”

Satisfied, he gave a sharp nod and a grunt, then walked into Catron’s office.

“’Ello, Dr. Catron.” I could tell by the orderly’s voice he was smiling with artificial cheer. “’Ow are you today?”

“Fairly well. And yourself?”

“Oh, splendid. Splendid I am, thank you, sir. Accounts going well, then?”

“What? Oh, yes. Lunacy is a lucrative business, after all.” Catron definitely didn’t know I was in the hall; he’d never speak so freely if he did. At least I didn’t think he would. And it seemed he wasn’t on the intercom anymore. I tried to twist my neck and look in the office to see what he was doing. But the bench was too far away, and my prisoner status limited my mobility.

“Good, good. Glad to ’ear it. I did like you asked and took a look at them pipes. Now, you didn’t ’ire me to be a plumber—not that I’m complainin’, mind you—but I tightened everythin’ that could be

tightened. Took me over a week, but I think it's safe to say the dormitories will be 'igh and dry from now on."

"Excellent," replied Catron. "Mr. . . ."

"Flack," the orderly said. "Flack's the name, sir. Remember?"

"Ah, yes. Flack. Fine work there. You may go now." There was a pause, and then I heard Flack say:

"Beggin' your pardon, Doctor, but you 'ad any luck findin' . . . the creature?"

The creature? Is that "the one" Catron mentioned seeking before?

"Mmmm?" I got the impression Catron was looking at something else, only half-listening to Flack.

"You know," Flack lowered his voice, "the *creature*. You said if only you could locate one, you might be able to open up its brain and find out where the goddess is."

Is "the one" the same person as the goddess they're talking about? It would make sense, since Catron had said whomever they were looking for was female. But that would mean the creature was something else. Were they using *goddess* as a metaphor? Maybe it was an ancient artifact, like a statue. But if that were true, why search for it at an asylum? One would need to host an archeological dig or something. Silver Hill was getting more bizarre by the minute.

"Possibly," replied Catron. There was the sound of a fountain pen scratching paper. "Rumor has it one was seen not far from here—a young male with dark skin."

My heart froze. Dym had dark skin. He was the only male *anything* within miles that did. Were they talking about him? What kind of creature *was* he? I always thought he was just a boy. A strange boy, yes, but still a boy.

"Splendid! P'raps it'll save us all a lot o' trouble." Then the orderly's voice became more serious. "I 'ate to bring it up, sir, but what about Seluna? Should we move 'er to a regular room? Nurse Cutter was sayin' it might be best. Better to keep an eye on 'er that way and all."

A regular room? Would that be better or worse? No more freezing garret, but more pairs of eyes on me. And I'd lose access to the secret passage, as well as any chance of seeing Dym.

Catron paused in thought. "No," he said finally. "Let her stay where she is. She may stir things up if we put her nearer to the general population. That one seems like trouble, if my instincts are correct."

The orderly snorted. "Don't need instincts to see that. Breakin' into people's offices. What's the world comin' to, eh?"

"Indeed." The sound of shuffling papers indicated Catron wasn't that engaged in the conversation.

"I know it's not my place, sir, but wouldn't it just be easier to, you know, perform that there final procedure on the patients straight off?"

Another pause, then Catron spoke very slowly. "If we performed it on them straight off, it wouldn't be the *final* procedure, now, would it? And no, it's not your place." It was the tone of a man trying very hard to keep his patience.

“I know, sir, I know. It’s just an awful lot of ’ard work, this is. Them shock treatments is bad enough. Bringin’ these girls in and out, then ’avin’ to take care of ’em when they can’t wash themselves no more. Doin’ that final procedure first could save us a lot o’ time.”

I could only envision the withering look Catron was giving Flack. “Don’t be stupid. Can you imagine the public outcry if I had an asylum full of patients who received the final procedure? Most of my clients want their girls *cured*, or at least compliant. The final procedure is only for the very worst cases. And *she* would certainly be one of the worst. The most power hungry, the most unpredictable. As for taking care of patients, that’s your *job*. So, I suggest you do it. Now, if you will leave me in peace, I have a great deal of work ahead of me. Work which does not involve explaining my methods to simpletons like you.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, Doctor. I didn’t mean to put you off.”

Catron sighed. “I must say, the thought of it is tempting. In the best-case scenarios, those who survive the procedure become remarkably calm and docile. You’d hardly know they had feelings or emotions at all. It would mean fewer willful females in the world. We’d be doing all of Hartlandia a great service.”

“You said ‘best-case scenarios,’ sir. Just curious, what ’appens in them worst ones?”

“What can I say?” Dr. Catron replied. “Not all patients’ bodies are meant to withstand the procedure. Then there are those who succumb to complications. Even with all the advents of modern medicine, it can’t be helped. But none of that matters. All that matters is finding *her*. We must find her!” His voice grew louder, more adamant than I’d ever heard him. The floorboards in the office creaked; I thought Flack must have taken a wide step back.

“We cannot let her mission in this world come to pass!” Catron continued. “We *must* find and remove the source of her power.”

“Are you sure she’d be only seventeen or so, Dr. Catron?” Flack asked in a quieter voice. I imagined he didn’t want to upset his employer any more than he accidentally had. “We could expand the search, admit them females much older—or much younger.”

“No. All my prognostications indicate she arrived roughly seventeen years ago. Yet, we keep trying and trying, with no luck.” Catron’s voice grew tighter. “It’s beyond frustrating.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor,” said Flack soothingly. “We’ve got an asylum full of—what do you call ’em—‘viable candidates’? And new admissions every day, too. She’s sure to be ’ere somewhere.”

There was a long pause before Catron finally replied. “You’re right, Mr. Flack. With enough diligence and hard work, we’ll find her.” He repeated his final thought:

“We’ll find her.”

Chapter 8

Later that night, I sat on my bed, making charcoal sketches in the few blank pages in the back of the Book. I hated to despoil what might be a sacred text, but it would have been too hard to steal sheets of loose-leaf from the schoolroom. The staff's eyes were vigilant, especially around me. At least I'd managed to get some charcoal out of my otherwise useless fire grate.

After Flack left Catron's office, Nurse Cutter came to pick me up. I managed to leave with her before Catron discovered I was eavesdropping, but only just. As Cutter and I turned a corner, I heard Catron's door click shut, and his footsteps echo down the opposite corridor. I ruminated about what I had overheard for the rest of the day.

So the goddess Catron seeks is an actual person? Can a goddess even be a person? What's her mission and the source of her power? I drew a picture of Rose, Laura, and the front hall's stained glass window. *Could she really be somewhere at Silver Hill?*

What might it be like to meet a goddess? I drew some more detail on the image of the stained glass. Pity I couldn't do it in color. *She must be very beautiful.* I added some length to the hair of the figure in the window. *But what if she was a dark goddess? I might not be so keen on meeting her, then.*

Then there was the matter of the "creature" the two men had mentioned. I had no evidence they were talking about Dym, and no reason to feel frightened for his safety if I did. Yet, I felt I had a duty—or more like a compulsion—to warn him.

Most sinister of all was the "final procedure" they'd gone on about. I put down my charcoal and looked out at the cloudy night. *What could they be doing to girls that would leave them in worse shape than Thomasina? That might possibly end in their deaths?* I wished I had some way to find out.

Although I wasn't much for writing poetry, I'd found the afternoon's events perversely inspiring. For some reason, they reminded me of a neighbor's garden near my home that I watched every spring for signs of life. *Will life ever return to Silver Hill? Or will all that ever takes place here revolve around pain and death?* I scribbled the following in the back of the Book:

“Growing”

‘Someday this pain
will be useful’?
I hope to the gods
that’s true;
because I am heartsick
and discontent
to watch the undeserving
make off
with my happiness.

A neighbor’s trellis vine
every year the same—
turns bare brown
to green to rose,
yet I never expect
the flowers.
I pray hard
that all the good
of my life
will suddenly burst forth
into bloom.

It might not have been Keats’s “Endymion,” but that was all right. No one would see it but me.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed something white and fluttering. My heart skipped a beat. *Could it be a ghost? A real, live ghost right here in my room?* Well, it wouldn’t be a *live* ghost, of course. That would be contradictory. Still, meeting a ghost would certainly be interesting.

I sighed and went to investigate. Why couldn’t I be afraid of things like normal girls? As I got closer, I realized it was just the sheet I’d placed over the entrance to the secret staircase. But there was no wind in the room, so I couldn’t tell what had made it move. I pulled the sheet back, pushed the door in slightly, and watched as it swung out. I held my candle in the stairwell, but it didn’t flutter. The breeze hadn’t come from inside the staircase either.

I hesitated only a moment before grabbing my shawl, closing the door, and heading down the

stairs. Maybe the moving sheet was the garden's way of beckoning to me. *Or Dym's*, I thought.

Either way, I decided it was a call I had to answer.



It had been over a week since I visited the garden. Not much had changed, though the dead vines did seem greener than I remembered. The pond was less frozen, but the water couldn't be suitable for swimming yet. Still, it felt good to be outside instead of trapped indoors all day. Especially after overhearing Dr. Catron and Mr. Flack. Apparently, the inside of Silver Hill was even more dangerous than I had imagined.

I walked towards the pond; I knew the way now. The vines gave me no more trouble and parted easily, almost as if they were bowing to me. I walked over the gray, cracked pavement stones, stopping only to move the errant branch out of my way. Then I felt something small and soft beneath my foot. I looked down to find a dead rat lying on its side.

Most other girls would have shuddered with revulsion, but I just cocked my head and looked at the rodent. I was surprised to find anything living (well, formerly living) in the garden. The moon peeked out from between gray clouds, and I focused very hard on my discovery.

It worked. The rat slowly got off its side and stood on all fours. It yawned, as if awakened from a long sleep. Then it took a few wobbling steps towards a large, dead tree. It tottered several more inches and fell on its side again. Try as I might, I could not reanimate it a second time. I went over and nudged it with my boot. It was definitely—permanently—dead.

Incredible. Even though my second attempt failed, I couldn't help but be a little giddy. I'd never reanimated anything as big as a rat before. A few insects and a mouse or two, yes. But never a *rat*. It was grotesquely impressive. I smiled as I walked the last few yards to the pond.

I looked all around, but didn't see Dym. I even peered towards the far ends of the moat on either side of the garden. Nothing.

It was silly to come, to think he'd be here. I walked the perimeter of the pond twice, just to enjoy the night. Not because I was hoping he'd show or anything. I was about to turn back to the asylum when I heard a splash . . . and a voice.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the goddess herself." Dym smiled and swam to the edge of the pond where I stood. Once again, his body was only visible from the waist up. Why he swam shirtless in freezing water, I'd never know. But he looked as beautiful as I'd ever seen him, though I'd only seen him once.

"Goddess?" For some reason, hearing him say that made my heart leap. But I wasn't sure if it was in a good way or a bad way. "What did you mean by that?"

Dym shrugged. "It was just a figure of speech. Beautiful girl, moonlit night." He raised his eyes to the heavens. "Almost ethereal, don't you agree?" Then he said:

“Yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms.”

“More Keats?” I asked, and he nodded. I had to admit, Dym had a fine voice for poetry. It seemed to reach inside and reverberate within. And he put just the right emphasis on the words, drawing the listener into Keats’s world. If Dym was looking for a career, he could easily be an orator.

The swaying feeling wasn’t quite as bad this time when I was near him. It was distant, like the sounds of the sea one would hear walking along a beach. I wondered if the swaying had served its purpose. Was it trying to tell me something about Dym the first time I’d met him?

“You know, I still can’t understand how you keep getting into Silver Hill’s garden,” I said. “Even if you used the moat to swim around back, you’d have to get through the forest and across the moors. That’s an awfully long way through some very wild country just to go for a swim.”

“What can I say?” Dym did the backstroke towards the center of the pond and stayed there for a few moments. “I’m fanatical about fitness.”

“Riiight,” I said. Then I tilted my head. Though Dym was now in the middle of the water, he wasn’t moving his arms to keep afloat. It almost looked like he was *standing* in the water. But the pond couldn’t be that shallow if it was the same depth as the moat. Moats often went down as far as thirty feet to discourage intruders. So, unless he was over thirty feet tall, Dym would sink to the bottom.

Curiouser and curiouser.

“Why do you swim all the time?” I asked. “I mean, *truly*. Are you training for something?”

“You seem to think swimming is awfully hard work. I, on the other hand, find it relaxing.” He floated back towards the edge of the pond where I stood, hardly moving his arms at all. *He must have some very powerful legs underneath there.* I tried not to think about them too much.

Instead, I shrugged. “When I was in school back home, some of the girls used to sneak out to the Crazy Raven in town to relax.”

"I'm afraid I don't frequent pubs," Dym replied. The moonlight seemed to play on the waves in his hair, making them shimmer and shine.

"You don't drink?" Most boys I knew liked to brag about how much liquor they could hold, whether it was true or not.

"Oh, I drink, all right." He smiled wryly. "Like a fish."

"But you don't get your spirits from a pub. Do you raid your parents' liquor cabinet, then?"

"No, no." Dym's shoulders shook in silent laughter. Whatever private joke he was having at my expense was grating. "Where else do you go with your friends to have fun?" he finally asked. "When you're not sneaking out to the Crazy Raven, that is."

"Friends? Fun? I, ah . . ." I couldn't think of an answer that didn't make me sound like a recluse. "I like to be by myself a lot." *Good one, Seluna. Nothing reclusive about that.*

But somehow, Dym seemed to understand. "I assumed as much. I'm a bit of a loner, too. That's why I like it here. Nice and quiet."

"But you don't come every night," I said. "You mentioned last time it was only 'once in a while.'"

"No, I don't come every night. Only when I feel . . . the need." He held my gaze for several long moments.

"The need? Oh." I hastily looked away. "Because you think something's going to happen. The intuition thing again."

"And it appears I was right." Dym smiled. "For here I am again, conveniently on the same night as you." I didn't mention to Dym all the nights I was down here during my solitary confinement. I didn't want him to think I'd been seeking him out.

"I'm actually glad you returned," he continued. "I wasn't sure you would. I've been thinking about you, wondering how you were."

"Really? I've been thinking about you, too," I said, perhaps too quickly.

"Ooohhh?" Dym drew the word out, making it several syllables long.

I blushed, hoping the darkness would hide my reddening cheeks. "Not that often," I said. "More like your swims. Just every once in a while."

Dym slowly closed and then opened his eyes. With my keen vision, I couldn't help but notice how green they were. Not a drab, diluted green. This was a fierce, deep, *wild* green. *How could I have missed it?*

"I'm flattered to be in your thoughts at all," he murmured. Then, louder: "But something's got you troubled again. I can tell."

"More intuition?"

"Maybe. Or it could be the fact that you're frowning. Either way, why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

Damn. Dym's a hard boy to stay annoyed at. And why didn't I realize I was frowning?

I felt a crick in the back of my neck. I'd been leaning over my sketches for at least an hour before coming here. Now, I was leaning down to look at Dym. It was too much leaning. I knelt by the edge of the pond so that we were nearly face-to-face, and the feeling in my neck eased. Our heads were so close, they were almost touching. I could see the veins around his temples, the water droplets coming off his eyelashes. I forced myself to focus on the conversation.

"I found . . . something," I confessed.

"Something?" Dym propped his chin up on his palms, putting his elbows on the edge of the pond. Now, our heads were even closer. "My, how very interesting, and *specific*." I resisted the urge to stick my tongue out at him like a child. I secretly wanted to, just so it could accidentally land on his lips.

"I found what I think is a witch's grimoire, some of it in Old Hartlandian. It had to have been written several hundred years ago."

"Really? What's in it?"

"Lots of different things. Like a spell for something called 'Drawing Down the Moon.' "

A smile played at the corner of Dym's mouth. "Sounds intriguing. Anything that can help defend you against this Catron fellow you mentioned?"

"Nothing that I can see so far."

"Hmmm. That's not good. Any luck getting a release date, then?"

"Unfortunately, no. If anything, the situation at the asylum's gotten worse." I explained what had happened since we last spoke. I started with Rose and Laura, how they'd been shocked. Then I moved on to Thomasina, and how it seemed some girls weren't ever leaving Silver Hill.

Dym looked alarmed. "Not leaving Silver Hill? What do you mean?"

"Some are staying on as permanent residents. I don't think they have much choice in the matter. Others . . ." I briefly went over the disappearance of Geraldine, then the conversation between Dr. Catron and Mr. Flack.

"It seems Catron is looking for a 'creature' of some sort. He didn't say exactly what kind. All I could find out was that one had been spotted near here—a male with dark skin." I waited a moment to see if Dym had any strong reactions. But all he did was nod slowly.

Maybe I'm wrong about the creature being mortal-like at all. For all I know, it could be a brown bear or something.

"Did he say anything else about this creature?" Dym asked.

"I have to warn you, it's rather disgusting." I put down my candle. "He said if he could just open up the creature's head, he might be able to find some kind of goddess."

The muscles in Dym's face went slack.

"Now, I know this is going to sound silly," I continued, "but when he said 'creature,' I thought of you. I mean, I know you're a person, not a creature, but maybe he was just using a figure of speech? Anyway, you're male, you're dark . . ." I rubbed my temples. "I don't know. It seems crazy when I say it out loud. But if you're the person they spotted, and they think you're this creature, you might want to

lie low for a while.”

Dym grimaced. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, Seluna.”

“What do you mean? Why not?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“I don’t see how. Can’t you take your midnight swims some other place? Some other *time*? It might do you a world of good to go swimming in warmer weather. You know, like normal people. Or is it just a bizarre thrill, sneaking in here?”

Dym gave a weak smile. “Something like that.”

I shook my head and looked at him in disbelief. “Do your feelings of excitement increase or decrease, knowing you might get killed?”

“Both. Neither. I . . . I don’t know.” Dym put his hands to the sides of his head and looked at me with pained eyes. “It’s not thrilling for the reason you think it is. What worries me more is this goddess you said they were looking for.”

“Really? Why would that worry you?”

“I don’t know. Again, it’s hard to explain. But don’t you agree it’s a strange thing to be looking for?”

“I guess. If goddesses even exist.”

Dym’s smile was wider, stronger now as he looked at me. “Oh, I *know* they exist.”

I blushed again. *And they say girls are the moody ones. One minute, Dym is all mysterious, the next, he’s flirting like crazy. At least, I think that’s what he’s doing.*

“Did Catron and Flack say anything else?” he asked.

“They said that they had to find the goddess, that they couldn’t let her mission in this world come to pass. Whatever *that* means. Catron seems to think it’s one of the girls at Silver Hill.”

“Meaning you?”

“I don’t know. You’d think if he were looking for me, he’d have found me by now. I mean, I’ve been at the asylum for weeks. Yet I can’t help but feel he’s waiting for proof of something. Proof that the person he’s found is the person he’s looking for.”

Dym ran his long fingers through his hair. “This reasoning is more circular than the inside of a seashell. Regardless, Seluna, you have to get out of there.”

“I know, I know. But *how*?”

“Try page one thirty-six.” Dym coughed.

“What?”

“Page one thirty-six. Of the book you found.”

“Why one thirty-six?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Dym scratched his head. “I mean, it’s just a random number. Something I pulled out of the air. You know, page ninety-seven. Page two eighty-five. Page . . . one thirty-six.” He looked at the dead trees that surrounded the pond, and wouldn’t meet my gaze.

I narrowed my eyes at Dym. Had he seen the Book before? It *was* waterlogged when I found it. Still, I decided to give him an out.

“Is this more of your intuition at work?”

Dym snapped his fingers, flinging several droplets of water onto the front of my dress. “Yes, intuition! That’s it exactly.”

“Okay, Dym, this fish will bite. I’ll look at page one thirty-six. But maybe there’s something you can do for me in the meantime.” I decided I had to ask Dym for help. Although I was hesitant before, the situation was clearly becoming dire. I’d have to trust him, because obviously, I couldn’t trust anyone in authority at Silver Hill.

I took a deep breath. “If there’s any way possible, can you hide me and a few other girls? Maybe just the ones I mentioned: Rose and Laura.” I saw Dym’s face fall. “Or if not,” I said quickly, “can you get a message to Laura’s aunt Mae? She might be able to help us.”

Dym bit his lip. “Seluna, I am so, so sorry. But I’m afraid I can’t do either of those things.” My heart turned to ice. “Can’t . . . do them?” I sat back so that my face wasn’t quite so close to Dym’s. “Why on earth not? Or do you just mean you *won’t* do them?”

“It’s definitely ‘can’t.’ I don’t have a place I can hide you—”

“You have a home, presumably?” Now, my voice was ice as well. *Why would you act all charming with a girl, seemingly to win her affections, then refuse to help?*

“I do, but it’s not exactly one you can visit.”

“Fine. Your home situation’s a mess. I get it; my family’s not exactly normal either. But why can’t you get a message to Laura’s aunt Mae?”

“Because there would be . . . questions. People—like Aunt Mae—would wonder how I got here, what I was doing at Silver Hill.”

“Funny, those are the same questions I have.” I glared at him.

“And how would I explain it to Aunt Mae, or anyone else who asks? Those are the types of inquiries that lead to trouble. Believe me, the trouble would be greater for *you*.”

“Would you mind telling me precisely how?” It was taking all my self-control not to reach out and strangle Dym around his wet, ropy neck.

Dym shook his head. “All I can tell you is that I wouldn’t mind if the harm only involved me. I wouldn’t mind dying even, Seluna. Not for you. But to have my death cause you harm? That I don’t think I could bear.”

He wouldn’t mind dying for me? We barely know each other. And yet, I agreed it didn’t seem that way. Something about Dym felt familiar, like coming home. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t explain himself.

“You know, Endymion, for a person who cares so deeply, you sure know how to play it cool,” I said through gritted teeth.

Dym smiled weakly. “It’s part of my charm.”

I collected my candle and stood up. “This is the furthest thing from charming that there is. In fact, it’s ridiculous. You’re just a selfish, lazy coward. A coward who can go to hell.” I started walking away without looking back.

So much for the prince who fights his way through evil vines to rescue the damsel, I thought. Monster.

“Wait!” I heard the sound of sloshing water, coupled with near panic in Dym’s voice. The latter was so sharp and pleading I almost turned around.

“*Please*, Seluna!” he begged. “Please believe me when I say that if I could help you, I would. I care more about you than anything. Truly.”

I stopped and looked down at him over my shoulder. “I find that very hard to believe,” I said. “Why would you care so much about a crazy girl like me? And if you cared about me, you’d help me. You’d at least come out of the water after me.”

“I, ah . . .” Dym sighed. “All right, this is rather embarrassing. But about coming out of the water, there’s a reason I can’t. It’s because I’m not fully dressed under here.”

My jaw dropped. “Wait a minute. You’re telling me not only do you go swimming in frigid water in the middle of winter, but you do it *completely naked*?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“That’s the most senseless thing I ever heard.” I rolled my eyes and was about to head back towards the asylum. “You just don’t give a damn about me.”

“Wait—I’ll prove it,” Dym said. “Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He lifted himself a few inches up on the shore of the pond. The moonlight shone down on his biceps and forearms, highlighting every muscle and sinew. As he began pulling himself out, I could see the hairline of his stomach traveling down his abdomen, lower . . . lower . . .

“All right!” I turned away and covered my eyes.” *Is he really going to come out of the water without anything on?* “I believe you! Stay where you are. I have no desire to see more.”

Which was a lie. I desperately wanted to see more. But this really wasn’t the time or the place. I turned around, and just before Dym sank back down, I thought I spotted something green and shimmery at the bottom of his stomach. But it could have just been moonlight on the water, or a piece of moss. We looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

“I don’t blame you for being angry, Seluna,” Dym said. “Really, I don’t. I want nothing more than to tell you the whole truth right now. But until the day comes when I can, you’ll just have to trust me.”

I set my jaw, but said nothing.

“I do hope you’ll come back,” he continued. “I’d love to see you again.”

“If you think I’m coming back here for a boy who won’t lift a finger to help me, you’ve got another think coming. I’ll return if and when I choose.” *But probably when. Because no matter how much I want to hate you right now, I want to be close to you just a little bit more.*

“Very well.” Dym’s green eyes locked on mine. “I hope it’s soon.”

I walked away again without saying good-bye. *That bloke has a lot of nerve.* I was muttering angrily, going almost too fast for the vines to part. I wondered if I would survive captivity long enough to come back, or if the inauspicious Event that Catron mentioned—

The Event! I stopped in my tracks. I should have asked Dym about that cataclysmic occurrence or whatever it was Catron was so afraid of. Maybe it wasn't too late. I picked up my skirts and hurried back to the pond.

Of course, it's going to be awkward asking him for a favor, seeing as how I left so abruptly. Still, it's the least he can do. Maybe I can make him feel guilty for not helping me more. Then, if he knows anything about the Event, he'll have to tell me.

But when I got back to the pond, Dym wasn't there. I looked all around, even in the dead trees along the shore. Still no sign of him.

"Dym. Dym! Where in blazes are you?" I hissed. I called for several minutes, but he didn't reappear. He couldn't have swum out of the pond that fast without my hearing him. I began to worry. *Not that I ought to be worried, because I shouldn't care what happens to him.* And yet, I did.

Suddenly, there was a gigantic splash, and Dym's head and torso popped back up out of the water. I gasped and put my hand to my heart, nearly dropping my candle.

"Dammit, Dym, you frightened me! I thought you disappeared. Or drowned."

Dym burst out laughing. *How can he be so callous?* "Me, drown? That's *too* funny."

"You shouldn't laugh. It happens to strong swimmers all the time."

"Well, it won't happen to me."

"I'm sure that's what the other swimmers thought directly before they drowned. Just be careful, all right? I'd hate it if something happened to you." *Uh-oh. I said that last part out loud.*

I half-expected Dym to start teasing me. Instead, he stopped laughing, and his whole face softened. "And you know I'd hate it if something happened to you as well."

Although I had good reason to doubt that, I didn't want to argue the point anymore tonight. "Right. So you say." I cleared my throat. "Look, the reason I came back is that I forgot to ask if your intuition said anything about the Event that's supposed to happen soon. According to Catron's psychic, it's going to be bad, and I'd really love not to be at Silver Hill when it happens." *If that's even possible.*

"So Catron has a psychic that saw it as well? Can't say I'm surprised. My gift is rarely wrong." Dym closed his eyes in concentration. "Sorry, but I'm not getting anything more on the Event. My intuition doesn't often work on command like that."

I couldn't tell if he was being truthful or not. It was exasperating not to be able to get anything out of Dym. "Kind of a useless gift, then, isn't it?" I snarled.

"It tells me what I need to know."

"I wish it would tell you to get out of here. Why do you keep coming back to Silver Hill if it's so dangerous for you? Tell me the *whole* story this time."

"I can only tell you part of it. It's that the moon has its own gravitational pull on the tides, just as

you pull me towards you. You are like a magnet, a form of gravity.” I waited, but Dym said nothing more.

“That’s it? You keep returning because I’m your gravity magnet?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “You know, one minute, you act like you don’t care, and the next, you’re practically swearing eternal devotion. That’s kind of crazy.”

“Humph,” Dym snorted, and looked up at the asylum. “Pretty sure I’m in the right place for crazy.”

“Good night, then,” I said curtly. “I’ll go back to being crazy, and you can enjoy the rest of your midnight swim.”

“Good night, Seluna,” Dym said, his eyes never leaving mine. Then he sank down into the water like he did before. It was almost as if he were being tugged by an invisible string beneath the waves. *Why doesn’t he kick off like other swimmers?* I’ll bet he just enjoyed giving me the shivers, pretending to be mysterious.

I walked back through the garden and up the narrow stairs to the garret. *Maybe I really am insane, and Dym’s just a figment of my imagination. A beautiful, hair-tearing figment, to be sure.* I sighed.

He was almost worth the price of madness.

Chapter 9

In the nights after I met with Dym for the second time, I had more strange dreams. These dreams were so realistic, it was almost as if I were still awake. In one of them, I was floating in outer space, far above the earth. I remember not wanting to leave Earth, reaching with outstretched fingers as it grew smaller and smaller in my sight. Then I was spinning, but not quickly. More like rotating, turning over and over towards the moon, where I landed safely.

I sat there, looking at Earth, which I no longer missed because I could still see it. I waved to the stars that sparkled above, and to the planets orbiting all around. I fit nicely into a particularly shallow crater, and so I used it as a seat. Beside me was a second crater of similar size. There were no others like them on the moon. I kept thinking, *Is someone else supposed to be here?* I searched the entire moon, but didn't see another soul. Then I woke up.

My daytime endeavors were no less confusing. For one thing, I was having a lot of trouble with page 136 of the Book. Although it looked intriguing (it seemed to be for a hypnosis or sleeping spell), much of it was in Old Hartlandian. To make matters worse, it was written in a regional dialect, my knowledge of which was scarce. I wonder if Dym or his intuition had known that. In any event, the translation process was becoming long and tedious.

I needed more *time*. But time was running out; there was only a little over a week left before the Event. And I was no closer to finding what it was, why Catron feared it, or how to avoid it. Rose and Laura had all but stopped discussing the matter. I guessed that with the daily atrocities happening at the asylum, they had more pressing things on their minds. Like Dr. Catron's electrodes. *Animal*.

But *I* couldn't stop thinking about it. I usually didn't hold with soothsayers, but I did believe Dym was somewhat psychic. Since both he and Catron's fortune-teller said the same thing without either knowing about the other, it had to be more than a coincidence. I'd kept my eyes open for a creature with dark skin, or a girl who might resemble a goddess. But so far, I hadn't seen anyone who fit either description. It wasn't until a few evenings later that fate gave me another chance to learn about the spell Dym suggested.

One or two girls were admitted to Silver Hill each day, as Mr. Flack had said. But sometimes, it seemed like more than one or two went missing each day, so the patient population was actually dwindling. There were fervid whispers amongst the remaining girls about what was happening, who

might be next. Catron seemed more frantic than ever to find whatever—or *whomever*—he was looking for, and it was taking its toll on the staff. Like the new nurse who was supposed to bring me back to the garret after ten minutes of socialization with Rose and Laura. That one looked especially nervous.

“What’s your name again?” she asked as she locked my friends into their room for the night. “Mabel? Margaret?”

“Er, something like that,” I replied.

“They told me to keep special watch on this one girl, Selena or Sekuna or whatever it was.” She fumbled with the keys, trying to determine which would imprison Rose and Laura for the next eight hours. “I can never tell you nutcases apart nohow.” Suddenly, there was a terrific smashing sound in the next hall, and noises like metal hitting the floors.

“Bonnie! BONNIE!” I heard Nurse Cutter scream. “Get over ’ere, s! This thunderin’ loony is tryin’ to overturn the equipment cart.”

The nurse I was with turned white as a sheet. I guessed this was Bonnie. Hurriedly, she found the correct key and locked Rose and Laura in. Then she turned and pointed to me.

“You stay put now, you ’ear?” she said. “I ’ave to go ’elp Nurse Cutter. Don’t know what I was thinkin’, takin’ a job in this blighted place.” She gathered her skirts in her hands and scuttled off down the hall.

I could hardly believe my luck. I’d been left alone in the asylum, and for once, I wasn’t handcuffed to a bench. *This is my chance.* I’d sneak away, maybe to the secret staircase. I could gather a few supplies and hide there for a while with the Book, translating and seeing if it held anything useful.

The Book. Which I left in the locked garret. I groaned and put my forehead in my hand. Maybe I could get a hairpin or something to unlock it with before they found me—

“Psst. Psst! Hey, you!”

Is someone calling me?

“Yeah, you with the long black hair!”

Blast it—a nurse. I’d been caught. Should I stay where I was or try to run? *And where’s that voice coming from, anyway?*

“Psst—come *on*. Get over here! Haven’t got all night; who knows when that Bonnie twit will be back.”

I turned around. The voice was coming from the other end of the hall, opposite where Nurse Bonnie had gone. I tiptoed over to the last door. Peeking through the window was a girl with messy brown hair and big, brown eyes. I looked at the sign above the window. It said “Reserved.” I swallowed hard.

Aren’t those the rooms for permanent residents? Where Laura said she heard horrid screams coming from?

But what if the girl inside needed help? I couldn't just turn my back. *Curse it all*. Maybe I could see what she wanted very quickly and then sneak away.

I didn't have time to make a decision. In a few swift movements, the girl opened the door, grabbed my arm, pulled me into the room, and slammed the door shut. Then she spun me around and stood in front of the door, hair matted, eyes wild. Her clothing was torn, her fingernails long and dirty. I put my finger up to point in my usual senseless, defensive gesture. Was she the creature Dr. Catron wanted so badly?

But as I squinted and looked closer, I realized she couldn't be. For one thing, she didn't have dark skin. I also saw that no one had bothered to brush her hair, or let her near a comb. They hadn't bothered to change or mend her clothing either. No wonder she looked like hell. To top it all off, she had scars all around her fingers, palms, wrists, and forearms. As if she'd had a lot of experience trying to fight people off.

She was just a girl, like me. An unkempt, forgotten girl, but a girl nonetheless.

By the looks of things, she had no roommate. Her room was smaller than Rose and Laura's; what they called a single, not a double. There was only one bed. I guessed most of the reserved quarters were private ones. Catron probably didn't want the "advanced cases" rooming with the general population, the same way he didn't want me doing so.

But I was still trapped by the girl standing in front of the door. Maybe if I convinced her I was friendly, she wouldn't hurt me. I lowered my finger. It was bizarre; I'd never gestured with it before I came to the asylum. I really had to stop this pointless pointing.

"What's your name?" I asked gently.

"Francine." She cocked her head to get a better look at me.

"Great. Ah, nice to meet you, Francine. I'm . . ." While I was debating whether or not to tell her my real name, she said it for me.

"Se-lu-na." She grinned and drew the word out the same way Catron did, but it didn't sound as frightening coming from her. "I know who you are. We *all* know who you are."

"We? We who?"

"Lunatics. You have quite a lot of influence over us." Before I could ask Francine what she meant, she spoke on. "It's a good thing dear old Bonnie didn't lock my door right. Honestly, it's a wonder that woman can tie her bootlaces in the morning."

"If your door's unlocked, why don't you try to get out of here?" *If you're not dangerous, maybe we can hide together*, I thought.

"For the same reason you don't. How long do you think we'd last on the wild moors, or in the daaark, forbidden forest?" She wiggled her fingers at me. "How long before they find us and drag us back?" I couldn't deny it was true. This girl might have been crazy, but she was also savvy.

"Not to mention the fact that my family just up and left me here," she said. "So I don't have anywhere else to go. Do you?" She looked at me pointedly, as if she already knew the answer.

"I suppose not," I replied.

"Just as I thought. No, I'm here for the duration." Her eyes took on a dull, dead quality, and she looked at the floor. "I've resigned myself to fate." Her head snapped back up. "But that doesn't mean *you* have to. There's something strong about you. *Special*."

"I . . . I don't think so. I'm flattered, though."

She laughed a little too loudly. "Oh, it's not just flattery, dear. You're going to need all your strength for what's coming." As if on cue, a loud wind swooped through the trees around Silver Hill, rattling the windows. Francine gave a jump and crouched down to the bed's footboard. She laughed again and motioned for me to get on the bed. Then she wrapped her dirty hands around the footboard's thin metal rails. Now, it looked as if we were gazing at one another through the bars of a prison cell.

"The earth, the moon, they can feel it." She glanced around the room, then looked at me with penetrating eyes. "Can *you* feel it? It won't be long now. Not more than seven nights or so, I'd say."

I shivered. That was the third person to mention the Event. Well, not mention it specifically, but it had to be what Francine was talking about.

Francine took my shivering to mean I agreed with her. "Ah, so you *do* feel it! Splendid. I'm glad you know."

"Know what?"

She ignored my question. "This makes it so much easier. I mean, sometimes, I actually think you have trouble remembering." She almost seemed to be talking to herself.

"Trouble remembering what? Why did you pull me in here? Are you in trouble?"

"Oh, I'm in trouble, all right," she said bitterly. "But not the kind you can help with. As for why I pulled you in here, well, I just wanted to make sure it was you. After all, I might not have another chance to meet you. It's quite an honor."

"Ah, thanks. Honored to make your acquaintance as well." I had no idea what Francine was going on about, but this encounter reminded me of my first time meeting Dym. "It's you!" he'd said, even though he'd never met me before. Likewise, I was certain I'd never met Francine.

"Mind if I ask why you're in a room marked 'Reserved'?" I ventured.

"Because I'm crazy," Francine said simply, as if I were already aware.

"Right, got that. We're all crazy here." I rolled my eyes.

Francine didn't. "No, I mean I'm *really* crazy," she said. "As crazy as they come. I've got schizophrenia."

I sucked in my breath. "What's that?" It didn't sound good. I hope it didn't mean she was dangerous.

"It means sometimes I see things that aren't there, hear things that aren't real. At least, other people *say* they're not real." She took a thick piece of her hair and waved it back and forth.

"What kinds of things?" I asked.

Francine shrugged. "Shapes, shadows. Sometimes people. I hear them telling me to do things."

She looked to the left and right, then leaned closer to me, as if trying not to be overheard. “But I’ll tell you a secret.” She put a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles. “I don’t always listen!” She giggled again, and continued waving her chunk of hair.

This girl is all over the place, I thought. “When did it start? Your hearing and seeing things, I mean?”

“A few years ago.” I didn’t ask how old Francine was, but she looked about my age, maybe a year or two older.

“Do you . . . do you hurt people?” I leaned back slightly.

Francine stopped waving her hair back and forth. Instead, she shook it at me. “Now, why would I do a thing like that? Sure, some crazy people are dangerous. But not all of them. Some are only a danger to themselves. And there are plenty of people who aren’t crazy—or who the world thinks are just fine—who hurt folks every day.”

I thought briefly of Dr. Catron and his staff. “I agree with you there. But is there anything they can do for your, um, type of crazy? Like a treatment?”

“There are medicines that might help. But I fear Dr. Catron and his cronies have *other* methods they enjoy using far more.”

I nodded sadly. “Right you are again.” *Incredible. There really is someone who needs mental help in this insane asylum.* Knowing Silver Hill as I did, it seemed ironic. This was the last place such a person should be. The last place *any* person should be.

Could this be the goddess they were talking about? I wondered. But I quickly realized it was impossible. By the state of her, Francine had been here quite a while—long before I overheard Catron and Flack’s conversation. If they were still looking for a goddess *after* Francine was admitted, she couldn’t be “the one.” Or could she? Maybe Catron suspected she was, but needed proof. As I’d said to Dym, I felt Catron was waiting for proof of *something*. I just didn’t know what.

“But you know the most twisted thing of all?” Francine asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“No, what?”

“My family didn’t send me to Silver Hill because I see and hear things.” She put down her hair and folded her arms across her chest.

I frowned. “Really? Then why did they send you here?”

“Because I didn’t want to be part of the façade anymore, the lie they were telling the world. I wanted to live a different life.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“My family occupies a particular social position. But I want to break out of it. They want me to stay by their side, to never change. They see anything else as a betrayal.”

“I think I know of someone like that,” I said, with Geraldine in mind. “This person wanted to be an artist instead of following her parents into jobs they hated. I think they were convinced she was betraying them by being true to her heart.”

Francine snorted and uncrossed her arms, digging one fist into the opposite palm. “I wonder if it ever occurred to her parents that *they* betrayed *her*. We all have a responsibility to encourage each other to be the best versions of ourselves. They failed to do that.

“And there’s more to me than just a crazy person, you know.” Francine suddenly stood straight up, agitated. “Before they pulled me out of school, I wanted to be a union organizer. You know, one of those people who fight for workers’ rights. They call *us* mad because we want to blow the whistle on exploitation and hypocrisy, to advocate for change.”

“I know there’s more to you than crazy,” I said quietly. My tone was partly to avoid upsetting Francine, and partly because I believed what she was saying. “Sometimes, I think madness is just the name our enemies give us. It symbolizes everything they’re not ready to face. Instead of admitting they have a huge problem on their hands, it’s easier to focus on a single person, to call them mad. Then they never have to address the real issue, which is usually much more complicated.”

“You know what beats it all?” Francine sat down on the bed and exhaled loudly, as if all the fight had gone out of her. “The worst part of being crazy isn’t the crazy. It’s the loneliness. Being in a world that exists only to you—some parts grand, some ghastly—but one others can’t experience. It’s the most horrific way of being alone. Because you aren’t, really. People may be sitting right beside you.” *I* was sitting right beside Francine, but she stared straight ahead without looking at me. “And yet, it doesn’t matter. For all you have in common, you may as well be on separate planets.”

Now, she did look at me. “Do you have any idea what that’s like? To be completely isolated in a universe that is perhaps of your own making, perhaps not? And it’s not the kind of place where you can just find a door and leave.” She threw out her hands in exasperation. “It follows you, envelopes you wherever you go. You can’t escape, and no one can pound their way through to rescue you, even if they wanted to. Which they never do. On the contrary: people are so repulsed and frightened by me that they usually run far and fast in the other direction.” Her voice hung heavy with agony and despair. “And there’s no relief, no relief at all.” Her throat caught on the last word, and I feared she was about to cry.

I longed to reach out to her. To take her hand and tell her that I *did* understand. But Francine didn’t seem like the kind of girl who appreciated being touched. Besides, she was unpredictable. She might just decide to grab my hand and spin me around again. Instead, I replied:

“It’s funny, isn’t it? I have strange dreams—one might say they’re a world of madness. But they’re not what scare me so. It’s the hellacious realm that exists just outside.” I raised my hands to indicate the room, the asylum. “It’s full of frantic and cowardly people, more willing to run each other over than contemplate a new idea, much less help a soul in need. I don’t know about you, but more often than not, my imaginary world is peaceful, calm. Idyllic.”

The corners of Francine’s mouth lifted into a smile. “If only these fools could see your world. Then they’d be running *towards* it, not away, eh? But they never will.” Her smile faded, and she sighed. “In reality, they’re the ones who are trapped, not us. Trapped under a siren-spell of madness,

unable to escape the tiny world they've bricked themselves up in." She looked at her dirty hands and nails, turning them over and over. "Stupid people."

Suddenly, we heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hall.

"She's here!" Francine's eyes went wide. She grabbed my hands, pulling me up and spinning me towards the door. As she shoved me through it, she said, "You have to get out before she sees you in my company!"

"But what about *you*?" I pressed.

"Don't worry about me. It's more important that you fulfill your mission."

"*What mission?*"

"Go!" she hissed, and pushed me so hard it left a bruise on my shoulder that I only found the next day. I closed the door to Francine's room just in time to see Nurse Bonnie walking towards me, muttering to herself.

"Well, *that* wasn't a boatload of giggles, I can tell you." She came briskly down the hall, wiping her palms together. "Thank heavens they got that there patient sedated. She won't be causin' no more trouble till she wakes up, *if* she wakes up." She pressed her damp palms against her uniform in a final effort to clean them, then looked up and saw me.

"You! There you are. Didn't I tell you to stay put?"

"I did."

"No, you didn't. You was over there." She pointed to Rose and Laura's door. "Now you's over there." She pointed to Francine's door.

I had to think quickly. "You told me to stand over here. Don't you remember?"

"No, I *don't* remember tellin' you to stand—"

"You said I should look in them—I meant, these—rooms and see what happens to patients who don't do as they're told."

"I . . . I did?" Nurse Bonnie looked confused.

"That's what I heard. Good thing, too. One peek in those windows . . ." I shuddered. "I won't be misbehaving if that's what happens to them that do. I mean, *those who* do."

"I *did* tell you to stand there, didn't I? Clever of me, wasn't it?" She straightened her skirt. "Right, then. Time for us to run along. Quick-quick, now!"

Bloody hell, I thought. *My one chance to hide and I completely fumbled it.* As Nurse Bonnie brusquely escorted me to the garret, I tried to think of how to get another opportunity to be alone with the Book. I needed more undisturbed time to translate page 136. Even with my reduced need for sleep, which let me translate into the midnight hours, it was slow going. Or perhaps I could gain another audience with Francine. She seemed to know more about the Event than she let on. Maybe she knew about the creature and the goddess, too.

But I was never to see Francine again.

Chapter 10

Laura was going downhill fast.

She was getting shocked more and more often, and had started forgetting things. Every time I saw her, her eyes looked a lighter shade of blue than I remembered. She'd also taken to mouthing words to herself when she thought Rose and I weren't looking. I wondered if she was beginning to see and hear things the way Francine did.

"I can't give the answers fast enough," she whispered when we asked after her. "Or I *think* they're the right answers, the ones he wants to hear. But it turns out they're not. I don't know what to do anymore." Then she'd wring her hands back and forth so hard I thought they'd fly off.

Rose's predicament was also rapidly turning sour. Although she managed to get out of additional shock treatments, she said it was because Dr. Catron wanted to try something different with her.

" 'Different'?" I asked one day while we were in the solarium. Evening socialization here had dwindled from fifteen minutes to hardly more than five. "Different as in better or worse?"

"I don't know." As Rose pushed the hair off her forehead, I could see her hands were shaking. Whether it was from nerves or nicotine cravings, I couldn't tell. "Better for him, maybe. I don't know how it could mean better for me. They caught me smoking a few times."

"Rose!" I gasped.

"I know, I know." She squeezed her eyes shut and pulled at her curls. "But I couldn't help it. Now, Catron says I'm one of his 'difficult cases.' He says he'll have to accelerate treatment, whatever *that* means."

"Just try not to get into any more trouble," I begged. "Laura and I couldn't bear it if something happened to you. Right, Laura?" But Laura was gazing out the barred window, shaking her head and mumbling. Rose and I exchanged a glance, then looked away from one another and Laura.

Absorbed in their own troubles, my friends had completely stopped asking about my reanimation abilities. It was just another sign of how bad things were getting at Silver Hill. I desperately wished I had more than a parlor trick to help them. And the other patients were disappearing at a faster rate than ever. Catron wasn't even bothering to hide the fact that the remaining ones were restrained far more than necessary. We frequently passed girls in the hall strapped to chairs and beds. I didn't get too close a look, but I could've sworn one had been tied down so long the skin of her wrists was

growing around the leather straps.

My visits to Rose and Laura in their room were becoming less and less frequent as well. And when we were together, we often heard screams and pleadings coming from down dark corridors. Once, we even heard something like chains being dragged over stone floors.

“Ooo, that gives me the shivers!” said Rose, remarking on the chain noises. She rubbed her arms and huddled close to Laura, who was sitting on one of the beds, knees drawn to her chest. I felt a chill run through me as well, as if I’d been showered with ice.

“It’s just like in a ghost story,” I agreed.

“But not like *your* ghost story, Seluna,” Laura whispered. She’d stopped mumbling for a few moments, and was almost like her old self. “This is like the bad ones. Where people end up dying.”

“In order for there to be ghosts, Laura, people pretty much have to die,” Rose said.

But that doesn’t mean we have to die, I wanted to say.

We didn’t actually know what was happening to the girls who disappeared. Some came back after a while, but much altered. Several shrieked when anyone tried to touch them. A few were catatonic, or muttered to themselves like Laura. Others were unable to dress or feed themselves, like Thomasina. Clearly, Catron was torturing these girls to find the creature, or the goddess he so desperately wanted.

Could they possibly be the same person? No, Catron said he was looking for the creature in order to find the goddess. *They must be two separate things*. Whenever I thought about it, I had to rub my temples. All these circling thoughts were giving me migraines.

I wrestled back and forth with whether or not to tell Rose and Laura about my meeting with Francine. In the end, I decided against it. I didn’t want to scare them. It might make them worry they were the next ones headed for the reserved rooms. Besides, explaining Francine would mean trying to explain more about the Event and the goddess’s mission. I wasn’t sure I understood either of them myself.

Then there was the part where Francine mentioned *my* mission. Was it in line with the goddess’s, or opposed? There was also the possibility—and I hated to think it—that these were just Francine’s mad ramblings. But they were too similar to what Catron and Dym had said. There had to be a connection. If only I could figure out what it was!

In a macabre case of silver lining, Catron’s treatment of the other girls gave me additional time alone. Whatever he was doing took more and more staff to accomplish, so there were fewer people to supervise us. After being locked in the garret far too early for several nights, I’d finally finished translating page 136.

As I’d originally surmised, it was a sleep spell. An odd thing for Dym to suggest, unless he had just picked page 136 randomly. I had my doubts about that, but it hardly mattered now. The spell purported to put the desired object to sleep for a good while. But that was where it got vague. It didn’t mention hours, days, or any specific time frame for how long the spell lasted. It just said “as

long as necessary.” Maybe the intent of the spell’s caster determined the length, which was fine with me. If it were within my power, I’d put the entire staff of Silver Hill to sleep for the rest of their lives.

But that seemed unlikely: one of the spell’s drawbacks was that it could only be performed on one person at a time. One had to wait till the spell finished with the first person before moving on to a second. Although my main focus was Catron, it would have been nice to knock out his workers, too. But hopefully, with their leader absent, Nurse Cutter and the rest would be far less of a threat. Confusion and chaos were sure to result from his sudden, prolonged unconsciousness. It would be the perfect opportunity to try and get to the telegraph machine again. Then I could contact Laura’s aunt Mae, or whoever else might be willing to get us out of here.

The magic was relatively simple to perform. It didn’t require complicated herbs or tools; just chanting. I could do that when I was alone in my room. But I still needed something personal from the object of the spell.

That was going to be the hard part. Where was I going to get something personal of Catron’s? I certainly wouldn’t be able to get into his office again. His private sleeping quarters were out of the question. I couldn’t imagine being able to steal something off his person; I wasn’t a skilled pickpocket.

The next day, I tried to think of objects I could pinch easily. The girls and I were finishing our daily walk around the main entrance. We’d been exercised more than usual, probably because staff members were increasingly busy with whatever Dr. Catron had them doing. There couldn’t be more than ten girls here now, with no new admissions for over a week. And as surely as the number of patients was dwindling, the staff seemed to be as well.

“I hear it’s because Dr. Catron is sending them away,” Rose whispered while we waited to be taken to afternoon lessons. We stood single file, all of us so tired and perspiring we looked like wilted flowers. “Doesn’t want too many employees around in case they cause that Event. He’s growing more suspicious and paranoid by the day.”

“The only person he seems to trust anymore is Nurse Cutter,” Laura said, looking at Rose and me. Then she abruptly stared off into the distance, and kept staring.

“Speak of the devil,” I muttered. Cutter was coming down the hall, wheeling a cart, when she stopped to talk to the orderly who’d been leading our exercises. She turned her back on the cart and walked a few feet over to the orderly. On the edge of the cart, next to a set of surgical supplies, was a clipboard with a form on it. At the very bottom was Catron’s signature.

His signature.

What could be more personal than someone writing their name? That was it! *That* was what I could use for the sleep spell. But how was I going to get it?

Cutter and the orderly were still talking. Cutter looked more harrowed than usual. Her uniform was wrinkled, her complexion like a bedsheet that had faded in the sun. And whatever she was telling the orderly, he didn’t appear to like it. I inched myself out of the line, nearer to the cart.

“Seluna, what are you doing?” Rose hissed. She tried to grab my sleeve, but I pulled away. Keeping my eyes on Cutter, I moved sideways towards my target.

When I reached the cart, I glanced down at the form. It was mundane, but unnerving. An order for scalpels, with an angry note at the bottom from Catron. Something to do with the previous ones wearing out too quickly, or not being sharp enough.

What’s he doing with that many scalpels in the first place?

It was a disconcerting question, but I didn’t have time to speculate. I had to get my hands on that signature. I looked up; the conversation between Cutter and the orderly was more animated than ever. But they were deliberately keeping their voices low, so I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Finally, Cutter looked at the orderly and pointed towards the front door. The orderly threw up his hands and stomped off towards the staff quarters, presumably to collect his things.

“Did he just get sacked?” I heard Rose whisper to Laura. But Laura was still staring at things unseen, and did not answer. Cutter was coming back for the cart. At the last second, I managed to tear off the part of the form with Catron’s name on it.

What could I do with the signature? I didn’t have any pockets. I folded the paper into the smallest piece I could manage and slipped it between my fingers just before Cutter spotted me.

“Oy! What’re you doin’ there?” she barked. “You’d better not be messin’ around with Dr. Catron’s supplies. Let’s see them ’ands.”

I put both my hands out, palms up.

“Other side now,” Cutter snapped.

I flipped my hands over. A tiny piece of the white form was sticking up between my fingers. I looked Cutter in the eye and let out a loud cough to distract her while I wriggled the paper back down. She wrinkled her nose and pulled her face back, probably thinking my cough was contagious. Then she glared at me for a few seconds.

“Back in line where you belong! If there’s so much as a single thing missin’ from them supplies, I’ll ’ave your ’ead!” Cutter peered over the cart and silently mouthed the number and types of items. Satisfied that everything was accounted for, she pushed me towards the line of girls. “You all come with me, now, you ’ear?” She never even looked at the form and its lack of signature.

“But what about that man who was here before?” asked one girl.

“Yeah, Mr. Mavis, wasn’t it?” called another. “He was leading our exercises.”

“Don’t you worry about Mr. Mavis.” Cutter put her hands on the cart and began wheeling it down the hall again, indicating we should follow. “I told ’im ’is services was no longer necessary. You won’t be seein’ ’im from now on.” The girls started whispering among themselves, but Cutter silenced them with a look.

“Seluna, what were you thinking?” Rose gave me a hard jab with her finger as we trailed after Cutter. “You keep telling *me* to stay out of trouble. What have you got there in your hand?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to see what was on the cart, that’s all.”

“Liar. I saw you take something off.”

Blast. I really hated to do this. But I couldn’t risk having Rose or anyone else know what I was up to. It might get them hurt.

“Are you sure, Rose?” I asked gently. “You know Laura’s been a bit . . . confused lately as well.” I nodded towards Laura, who was staring at a piece of her hair as if she’d never seen it before. “Maybe you just *thought* you saw me take something.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Rose huffed. “I know I saw you tear something off that clipboard.” She swallowed hard. “At least, I thought I did . . .”

I gave her shoulder a rub. “It’s okay, Rose. I understand.” *Gods, I’m a terrible person.* Rose just held her hand to her head and looked alarmed. But my deception worked, because Rose didn’t say anything more about the scrap of paper. Perhaps I could apologize and tell her the truth later, when the spell worked. When it helped all of us get out of here.

That night, I performed the ritual that would put Catron to sleep. I couldn’t help but smile as I chanted his name and waved my candle over and over the signature. With Catron incapacitated, this whole nightmare might soon be over. For all of us.



I was positively glowing the next morning when Nurse Cutter came to collect me from the garret. I thought she might say something about Dr. Catron sleeping in, or being “taken ill.” But she didn’t.

No doubt she doesn’t want it getting out that something’s amiss, I thought as I nearly skipped down the stairs. *But it’s only a matter of time till they realize they can’t rouse him.* I couldn’t wait to see what happened then.

What few staff members were left didn’t seem concerned about Catron’s well-being during exercise, lessons, or any other activities we did that day. Or if they were concerned, they didn’t mention it. They did seem worried about who would be fired next, or what they would do once their employment at Silver Hill ended.

“I’m thinkin’ of goin’ to work at that new ’ospital in Ballifor,” I heard one nurse say. “Almost as much pay, and they give you two days off a week!”

It wasn’t till nearly the end of the day that I found out exactly how Catron was doing. We were all being led back to our rooms; at this point, private socialization had been completely canceled. I said good-bye to Rose and Laura at their door. Looking back, I wish I’d lingered a while longer. But instead, I was accompanied by a nurse towards the hall that led to the garret. That was when I nearly walked straight into Dr. Catron.

What? How can Catron still be awake? He was supposed to be unconscious. I couldn’t stop staring, my jaw slack. The spell should have worked right away. I didn’t remember reading anything about a delay in the magic.

His hair was a bit disheveled, as if he hadn't combed it that morning. Like Cutter's uniform yesterday, his once impeccable clothing hadn't seen an iron recently. His eyes had dark shadows under them, as if he hadn't slept.

How ironic, since he was supposed to be asleep for a good, long while.

"Better watch where you're going!" Catron snapped when we almost collided. I was still staring at him in shock. He looked down. "Something amiss, Se-lu-na?"

I shook my head rapidly. "No, sir, not at all. Just glad to see you looking so well."

"Is there any reason I shouldn't be?" He narrowed his eyes.

Yes, because my spell should have worked. "Absolutely not, sir. Everything's in perfect order."
Except the part where you should be knocked out.

I was screaming curses inside my head as the nurse locked me in the garret. I went around kicking every wall, including the one in front of the hidden staircase, though I knew it would hurt my foot. But I barely felt the pain as I paced the floor, gnashing my teeth and cursing some more.

Why didn't it work? What did I do wrong? I knew most of the spells in the Book were difficult, and of course, I wasn't a witch. But you didn't have to be a witch to perform simple spells, and the one I'd used on Catron had to be the simplest in there.

The Event was only two or so days away. Clearly, Catron and the others were preparing for it; the feeling of alarm was palpable throughout the asylum. I had no way to get myself or anyone else out of here before it happened. I still had no idea who this goddess and creature were, or what havoc they might wreak at Silver Hill.

That meant I had no choice but to beg Dym for his help, one last, desperate time. The situation was truly dire now; I had to find a way to make him realize that. If Dym couldn't do anything, then I didn't know who could.

Chapter 11

It seemed even colder than usual when I ventured into the garden that night. I pulled my shawl around my neck, trying to keep the bitter wind from finding the exposed parts of my throat. It was almost like winter was clinging until the last possible moment, refusing to relinquish its icy grip. But there was more color in the vines than when I last visited, and they seemed suppler, too. Still, clouds covered the entire sky. It was as if the moon refused to come out.

The moon. When I was a little girl, I'd look up at the sky and wonder if I belonged there. I'd always felt out of place on Earth, as if I could float away at any moment. Sometimes, I'd look down at my feet and wonder what they were doing on the ground. I could've sworn that I was once able to fly. Not just wish for it, but actually *remember* what it felt like.

As the vines parted before me and I made my way towards the pond, I recited a poem aloud. I'd made it up a few years ago, when I looked at the night sky and put my hand over the moon so I could see only part of it.

“Half-moon seen
with my half eye,
drinking in a world
half truth, half lie.
Tell me now,
Eternal Spy:
Will I live by halves
until I die?”

“Not bad,” said a smooth, familiar voice. “Not bad by half. But I never finished the end of Keats for you:

‘We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven’s brink.’ ”

Dym was leaning one elbow on the edge of the pond. I wondered why he never just sat there like a normal person. It was as if he didn’t want to leave the water. Maybe he didn’t want me to see him without anything on, though he seemed more than willing the last time I was here. I wondered if he ever traversed the garden when I wasn’t there. I worked hard to push away the image of a beautiful, naked Dym wandering in the moonlight. I had more important things to think about this evening.

“Anyway, it’s quite a nice night for poetry, don’t you agree?” he asked.

It’s an even nicer night for saving my life.

“I suppose,” I answered. “But I’m afraid that’s not the reason I came.”

“Oh?” Dym raised a playful eyebrow and made circles in the water with his index finger. “Was it to see the one you cherish so much?”

I was in no mood for teasing. “No,” I said curtly. “It’s because things at Silver Hill are going downhill—fast.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised.” Dym continued making his lazy finger-circles in the water. *How is he not freezing in these temperatures?* His skin, smooth and gleaming as ever, didn’t even have goose bumps. “You should just run away,” he said. “That’s what I’d do.”

I gritted my teeth. “Yes, well, it’s rather difficult to do when you’re in the middle of nowhere in the middle of winter.” *And it would also mean leaving behind all the other girls, not that you care.*

Dym stopped moving his finger and raised his head to look at me. “I’m only thinking of your safety, Seluna. Trying to defeat Catron may not be possible.”

“I don’t think you’re as concerned with my safety as you should be. And if I don’t do something about Catron, who will?”

“As you wish.” Dym shrugged. “Have fun tilting at those windmills, kid.”

“It would be more ‘fun’ if you’d join me,” I retorted. My face was getting red, my fury increasing.

“Sorry, no can do.” Dym refused to meet my gaze. “Might interfere with my swimming.”

“Yes, well, don’t let my overwhelming troubles cut into your leisure time,” I snapped. “Did it ever occur to you how serious things are? If it did, you might not be in such a joking mood.”

Dym folded his arms, which pulled the muscles in his chest tauter. “Explain it to me.”

I took a deep breath. “More girls are getting shocked—and gods only know what else—by Catron and his demonic devices. More patients are disappearing from Silver Hill as well.”

“Disappearing? Disappearing how?” Dym asked. “To where?”

“That’s what I don’t know!” I wanted to fling my hands in the air, but one of them was holding a

candle. “The Event, or whatever it is, gets closer every day. I still haven’t the foggiest notion of what it entails, or what to do about it. I tried using a sleep spell on Catron, but—”

“Really?” Dym interrupted. “A sleep spell? Where did you get that?”

“What do you mean?” I narrowed my eyes. “You practically suggested it to me.”

Dym nodded slowly. “Ah . . . so *that’s* what was on page one thirty-six.”

I couldn’t tell if he was pretending not to know the spell had been on that page all along. Right now, I didn’t care.

“Anyway,” I said, “it doesn’t matter. The spell didn’t work; I’ve no idea why. Which means Catron is still up and around, wreaking havoc and planning new tortures for us.”

“The sleep spell didn’t work?” Dym’s jaw grew slack. He seemed genuinely surprised. “Then the danger is greater for both of us,” he murmured.

“No joke!” I was practically yelling. The only reason I kept my voice down was that I didn’t want to alert anyone in the asylum to our presence. “Though I’d say the danger is decidedly greater for me. All *you* need to do is swim out of here.”

Dym swallowed hard. His expression was the closest thing to fear that I’d seen on him since we met. “You know I can’t do that, Seluna.”

“I know you *won’t*. I still don’t see why you *can’t*.” Dym opened his mouth to speak, but I put up my hand. “Right, right; it’s ‘hard to explain.’ But Dym, you *really* need to do something. I have nowhere else to go. I’m out of options, out of *time*!”

“I’m so sorry, Seluna. I wish I had more assistance to offer. But if it’s any consolation, I won’t leave you.”

“What do you mean, you won’t leave? You can’t just hang around here in the middle of the pond.” *It wouldn’t do any good, anyway.*

“If that’s what I must do, then that’s what I must do. All I know is I can’t leave you to face this by yourself.”

“But that’s exactly what you *are* doing! Not helping me, not even telling me why you won’t. Do you have any idea how all this looks?”

Dym’s shoulders sagged, and his entire body seemed like a deflated hot-air balloon. “Yes, I do,” he said quietly. “All I can say again is that I’m sorry, I wish things were different.” He looked up at me. “And I *will not leave you*.”

I wanted to throw myself into his arms, to beg him to help me. Or maybe I just wanted to be in his arms, for him to hold me the way I’d imagined. Either way, that would never happen. I was far too proud. *Although, Seluna, if your life is at stake . . .*

No. I doubted even that would change anything. It didn’t seem like begging was what Dym wanted. He was disinclined to offer aid no matter what I said or did. I hated him for not helping, hated myself for having to *ask* for help, and hated myself even *more* for wanting to be with him regardless.

“Fine, then.” I pursed my lips to keep the rage inside. “I guess this is the last time we’ll be seeing each other.” The childlike look of pain on Dym’s face was almost too much to bear.

There has to be something I’m missing, something he’s not telling me. But since I had no idea what it was, and no way of finding out, it was pointless to keep pleading with him. There was only one thing left to do if he insisted on staying here, or on coming back. It probably wouldn’t work, but I needed to try. I couldn’t risk Dym being harmed by this Event. I had to keep him safe, even if he refused to do the same for me.

I had to use the sleep spell on him. Maybe the second time would be the charm.

“It pains my heart to think of never seeing you again, Seluna,” Dym said softly. “It truly does.” His eyes ran all over me, as if trying to memorize my form, my face.

I literally had to bite my tongue to keep from making a sarcastic remark. I still needed something personal of Dym’s in order to work the spell. But what could I get? He didn’t even wear clothing—at least, not while he was swimming. Then it dawned on me.

“At least give me something to remember you by,” I said haughtily. “A lock of your hair, perhaps.”

“You want a piece of my hair?” He looked skeptically at my own, which was waist-length. “You seem to have quite enough as it is.”

“You are wasting the remaining time we have with these asinine comments.”

Dym put up his hands. “All right, all right. You wouldn’t happen to have a pair of scissors on you? Or a small knife, perhaps?”

“Are you kidding? They won’t let us carry so much as a pin at Silver Hill.”

“Figures there would be no sharps allowed. Can’t have you girls do any subversive pinning, I suppose.” Just as I was wondering how to get a lock of Dym’s hair, he ran a few strands back and forth against the jagged edge of a rock. In no time at all, the strands came off cleanly in his palms. He held the hair up to me, and I took it in my hand without my eyes ever leaving his.

Even wet, I was surprised at how light and soft Dym’s hair was. *Makes me want to run my fingers through the rest of it.* Then I remembered I was still mad at him.

“Well, then . . .” My voice trailed off. I knew I had to leave now. I couldn’t risk Dym realizing how I truly felt. Who knew if I would see him again? If I would even survive Catron? A last, desperate urge swept through my heart, and I wanted to kiss him good-bye.

It was almost as if Dym felt the same. He pressed his lips together and looked at mine.

“Seluna—” he started.

I cut him off before I could change my mind. “Good-bye, Endymion. I wish you luck. The way you treat your friends, I fear you’ll sorely need it.”

Dym swallowed hard and moved back from the edge of the pond. “Good-bye, Seluna. For once, I hope you’re wrong. I hope we do meet again.”

“I think *that* is about as likely as this garden turning into an Eden overnight.” I turned on my heel before he could see the hot tears coursing down my cheeks.

Chapter 12

I cursed myself as I walked back to the secret staircase, then continued cursing as I wound my way angrily back up to the garret.

What am I doing? Why am I being so stupid? Trying to save a creature who wouldn't lift a finger for me. It was as if I was compelled by some strange, otherworldly force.

I really hope it isn't love, I thought, shutting the big stone door as I returned to my room. I pulled the sheet over it and wiped my sleeve across my eyes. My throat hurt from trying to keep the tears inside. *Because if this is love, then by all the gods, they can keep it.*

But I still needed to deal with Catron. *Since the sleep spell didn't work, maybe I can take another look at that Drawing Down the Moon thing.* I didn't know why, but I felt like it might help. It couldn't hurt, anyway, *and* it was my last shot. I got out the Book and sat cross-legged on my cot, holding a dwindling candle over the ancient pages.

On second thought . . . I propped the Book up on the windowsill and let the moonlight shine on it. Not only did this make it easier to read, but for some reason, it made me feel better, too. I began searching for Drawing Down the Moon. But before I reached it, I came across a section I didn't remember seeing before.

Across two full pages was a picture of a young man gazing at the moon, which encircled a feminine face. The face on the moon was smiling. There was a great deal of text below the picture, written in neat, tiny script. Fortunately, it was in a recent Hartlandian dialect. But some of the text was faded and scratched out, so I had to begin reading several paragraphs after it started. What I uncovered was a most interesting story:

"The king and I were on a tour of the Westernland coast when our ship was caught in a bad storm. It was late at night, and we and the crew nearly drowned but for the quick thinking of a young woman and her male companion. They arrived suddenly, just as our ship was going under. Cramming all of us on board their tiny rowboat, they brought everyone safely to shore."

The king and I? Unbelievable. Maybe the Book really did belong to a Hartlandian queen of old. I read on.

"The girl was quite striking. She had pale, pearly skin with long, thick black hair. Her lover was equally distinctive: a dark, powerfully built boy with bright green eyes. They were constantly smiling,

gazing at each other. So clear and deep was their affection, it touched one's heart to look at them.

"They were more than gracious, letting us take shelter in their seaside home. Even though they knew we were royalty, they did not act nervous or affected in any way, like so many subjects do. As we sipped hot drinks with blankets around our shoulders, I asked how long the pair had known each other.

"They laughed and said, 'Forever!' and 'Since the dawn of time.' I smiled and replied, 'I know what you mean. Sometimes, it seems the king and I have been married for an age as well.'

"But the girl shook her head and smiled. 'No, it's true. You see, I am the goddess of the moon, and this is my consort. Because he is not a deity, we cannot stay in the same heaven when our bodies expire. The only way we can be together is to be reborn, over and over, and find each other on Earth. We only learned this recently—in *these* bodies, that is.' She exchanged a knowing look with the boy. 'I don't know how soon we were able to find out in previous lives. But it appears we come down here with little prior knowledge of who we once were. We must reacquaint ourselves in every lifetime.'

" 'Hardly a disagreeable task.' The boy brought his beloved's hand to his lips and gave it a gentle kiss.

"I hesitated before responding. I wasn't sure whether or not to believe them."

How could the queen believe them? I thought. It sounds ridiculous. I bit my lip. *Beautiful, but ridiculous.*

" 'Well,' I said slowly, 'that certainly is a very lovely story.'

" 'But what happens,' asked the king, 'if you don't find each other in your lifetime? Or something happens to one of you before you do?'

"The girl's face fell. 'According to what we've learned, that is indeed a possibility. Sometimes, we do not find one another, and must wander the earth alone.'

" 'And then there are forces that may conspire to keep us apart,' said the boy. But he did not elaborate on what they were.

" 'There is also the chance we will fall in love with someone else,' added the girl, 'or not believe the legend from which our love is sprung.'

" 'But that is not the case this time.' The boy wrapped the girl in his arms, and looked on her face with complete adoration. 'Now that I've found you, I will let nothing come between us. You are my sea-treasure, and I will fight to the last to hold onto you.' He kissed her passionately. My husband smiled at me and put his hand on mine.

"Although we had to return to the royal palace shortly afterward, I never forgot that night. And I never forgot the legend of the moon goddess and her infinite consort."

There was a lump in my throat when I finished reading. *It's not fair,* I thought. *I mean, it's not like I'm sitting around in a tower expecting to be rescued. Not exactly. But it would be nice to know that kind of love. Someone who would do anything for you. Why can't Dym be more like that boy in*

the Book? Sometimes, I thought all girls had to be masochists to give their hearts to those so undeserving.

I looked out the window. The moon was high in the sky; the night was half-over. I should get some sleep if I didn't want my daytime drowsiness to be worse than usual. But there was still the sleep enchantment to perform on Dym; I'd have to look at Drawing Down the Moon again tomorrow. I still half-remembered it . . . circle, wand, chakras, goddess . . .

Taking Dym's hair out of my pocket, I moved the candle over it rhythmically back and forth while chanting. *Dym. Dim.* I recalled how I'd associated his name with stupidity when we first met. As I thought of how angry I was with him, it took all I had not to say "stupid" in place of his name. Still, I hoped the spell didn't take effect while he was on one of his midnight swims. It would be tragic if Dym drowned because I was trying to save him. But I didn't really have an alternative.

Why did Dym refuse to help me? My mind moved in circles around the question as I performed the spell. He seemed so earnest and sincere, so anguished when he said he couldn't do anything. It made me want to believe him. Then there was the pesky fact that I couldn't stop thinking about him and his welfare—even when I didn't want to.

But I told myself I was saving Dym for purely altruistic reasons. *I would do the same for anybody*, I reasoned. Even if Dym turned out to be a selfish coward, that didn't mean he deserved to die. I uttered the last words of the spell, holding in my heart the intention that Dym awaken when it was safe. Surely the spell's caveat of "as long as necessary" would cover that.

"If the bloody thing works at all," I muttered, and put the Book under my cot. Pulling the horse blanket over me, I tried to ignore its roughness and concentrate on the minimal warmth it provided. I prayed that tonight, at least my dreams would grant reprieve from the unending sense of doom.

For a long while, I tossed and turned on my cot, but at last, sleep washed over me, and I entered the Palace of Dreams. Unlike my previous dreams, this one was not shrouded in symbolism and metaphor: it was literally a palace. It looked like the home of an Olympian god, supported by columns like the ones at the main entrance of Silver Hill. The moon was just surrendering her reign on the right side of the sky, the sun peeking over a rose-red threshold on the left. There was a valley of mountains with a river running down the center. In the early-morning light, you could see the valley for miles. Never before had I beheld anything so breathtaking.

Things *made sense* here, the way they only did in dreams. Despite the insane events of the past few weeks, the palace radiated order and logic. I couldn't really explain how. It just seemed that here, I was reminded of truths that in daytime were disguised as lies. Of my real self that in waking hours must hide behind a mask. I walked the flawless marble halls, drunk on the infinite space between sleeping and waking. I remember being soothed by the wild sweetness of my vision, as if no harm could breach the impenetrable wall it built.

But nothing could have prepared me for what happened when I woke up.

Chapter 13

I knew something was wrong the moment I opened my eyes.

I couldn't really explain how, except that it was too quiet. Although it was always quieter in the garret than in the girls' dorms, this was different somehow. It was an *eerie* stillness. I sat up in my cot and looked out the window. The slant of the light was completely off. It wasn't early morning, the time I usually heard Cutter or one of her cronies banging on my door.

I must have overslept. But how was that possible? We were never allowed to sleep in, and I didn't need that much sleep in the first place. The mental strain of the past few weeks must have taken more of a toll than I realized.

I got up, smoothed out my dress, and looked out the window again. The sun was setting! My jaw dropped. Something was definitely wrong.

"Miss?" I heard a tentative knock. "Miss?" Definitely not Cutter. The voice would have been deeper, meaner. Not to mention the full weight of her heavy fist would have been pounding against the door. I heard keys turning, and a small, mousy woman walked in with her nurse's cap askew.

"Come with me." She turned and began walking briskly down the steps and into the hall. I almost had to lift my skirts and jog to keep up with her.

"Shouldn't we be going to breakfast?" I asked as we passed the cafeteria. But the nurse didn't answer. I supposed it was a little late for breakfast, after all. We passed the schoolroom and solarium as well.

"Where is everyone?" I didn't see Rose, Laura, or any of the other girls. In fact, I didn't see any other staff members as we walked, either.

"I'm not at liberty to say, Miss," the nurse finally answered. "All I can say is I'm glad fetchin' you is my last assignment before I get out of 'ere."

"Get out of here?"

"I've been let go—not that I'm complainin', mind you," she said hurriedly. "Frankly, I can't wait to get into *decent* employ. I 'ad enough of them long nights in this gods-forsaken place." Her eyes scanned the shadowy walls and ceilings as if she expected them to come to life and attack her.

"Why did they let you go?"

Now she turned and looked me up and down as if I had no right to exist. "Well, ain't we the nosy

one?" she said. "Not that it's any of your business, but Dr. Catron said 'e couldn't trust me no more. Don't know why, seein' as 'ow I'm one of the most upright souls on this 'ere earth. But 'e's been actin' more funny that way lately, 'ardly trustin' nobody. Anyway, it ain't none of my concern. Like I said, I'm just glad to be gettin' out of this circle of 'ell. Though I ain't lookin' forward to leavin' through that there big 'allway. The way they 'ave them layin' on the floor like that, it ain't right." She shuddered. "They should at least cover 'em with a sheet or somethin'."

Alarm bells were ringing in my head. "Cover what?" I demanded. Still no answer.

"Gettin' even worse, if you ask me, with 'im sayin' that Event supposed to be tonight and all," she muttered to herself, shivering.

Oh, no! The Event is tonight? I knew it was coming soon, but I hadn't realized it was *that* soon. *Is there a chance Catron's wrong?* I had no idea what was going on, but it was time to find out. I stopped in the middle of the hall.

"I'm not going another step until you tell me where everyone is and where you're taking me."

The nurse's mouth made a little O, and she grabbed me by the wrist with more strength than I expected from someone her size. "Now, you listen 'ere." She shook me hard. "You're comin' with me and that's that. You's the last job I 'ave before I can collect my check and leave this place, and I'll not 'ave you interferin' with my leavin'!" She twisted my arm and began dragging me.

"If you think I'm going anywhere with you, then you're crazier than anyone who ever passed through the gates of Silver Hill!" I snapped. Then I kicked her hard in the shins, and she let go of my arm.

"Ow!" The nurse howled and grabbed her leg. "Devil take you, you 'ateful little—oy! Oy, you! Get back 'ere!" But I was already running as fast as I could down the hall.

"I said *get back 'ere!*" the mousy nurse shrieked. Then, to herself: "Which way did she go? Drat these dark 'alls! Doctor can't be bothered to turn up the gas, and I can 'ardly see a bloody thing!" The sound of her cursing my name and Catron's grew softer and softer as I ran faster and faster.

Passing a tall window on my left, I could see that the sun had set completely now. Outside was the rich blackness of the night sky, strewn with stars. Too late, I realized I was running towards the treatment rooms, where Catron conducted his experiments. I hadn't meant to come here, but when I started running, my only thought was to get away from the nurse.

Was she taking me to the treatment rooms all along? I didn't see Catron or anyone else in what must have been the old waiting room. It was as broken-down as the rest of the asylum; paint was peeling off the walls, baseboards were disintegrating, and chairs and tables had legs and seats missing. But the condition of the room wasn't the worst thing about it.

The worst thing was how Laura looked in the wheelchair right in front of me.

Her hands and feet were bound to the chair with leather straps. Her hair was a mess, her dress disheveled. She was doubled over, mumbling and crying. I reached out to put a hand on her shoulder.

"Laura?" I said as gently as I could.

Laura's head jerked up and she shrieked. I was so surprised I jumped back. There was no recognition in her big blue eyes, which seemed to stare right past me. They had a filmy, watery quality to them. She continued mumbling, but more angrily this time. Now, her eyes darted back and forth between me and the ground.

What on heaven and earth did they do to her? The only thing I could think of was that they'd shocked her so many times it destroyed parts of her brain. Or maybe the whole of it, for all I knew.

Laura would never be able to contact Aunt Mae now. And it was unlikely her aunt could do anything to help if she did. *Catron and the rest of those evil bastards have all but killed an innocent person.* I turned away, unable to comfort Laura, or even look at her. That was when I saw Rose.

She was seated in a wheelchair a few feet away, but at least she wasn't strapped down. Her body was so still, I thought she was sleeping, or unconscious. I rushed over to her.

"Rose?" I cried. "Rose, wake up!"

As I drew closer, I saw her eyes were open. But something wasn't right. Rose seemed catatonic, unmoving. Even odder was the fact that her bangs were hanging over her eyes. Rose hated when hair fell in her face. And though her hands were free, she wasn't making a move to push it back. With the lightest of touches, I pushed the curls away for her. That was when I saw them. Long, unhealed incisions on either side of her head.

From a lobotomy.

I'd read about lobotomies in textbooks. They were surgical procedures that severed nerves in the front of the brain. The surgery was used to decrease or eliminate unwanted behavior in patients—something Catron had always been keen on doing. All the air seemed to rush out of my lungs when I realized Rose wasn't catatonic. In fact, she wasn't even breathing.

Rose was dead.

I jumped back the same way I had with Laura, this time covering my mouth with both hands. My eyes ran all over Rose, looking for signs of life. But there were none. Gingerly, I lifted the clipboard attached to the side of her wheelchair and read the notes scribbled there.

" 'Uncontrollable obsession with nicotine,' " I mouthed. " 'All methods to end obsession failed due to patient's refusal to cooperate with treatment.' "

" 'Cooperate with treatment,' " I said bitterly. "As in 'let them torture her,' most likely. Oh, Rose." My eyes filled with tears that I willed not to fall. "I always said cigarettes would kill you. But I never dreamed it would be like this." I realized this was why girls had been "disappearing" from Silver Hill. Most of them were getting killed during—or after—lobotomies.

I heard Laura whimper, her eyes moving back and forth between Rose and me. *How could they have left her alone with a dead body?* I hated to think of Rose that way, but essentially, that was what she was now. Then again, why wouldn't they just leave Laura and Rose here together? It wasn't as if they ever cared about their mental welfare. I walked back to where Laura sat. I couldn't leave her, or she might share Rose's fate. I squeezed my eyes shut and clenched my fists, trying to figure out what

to do.

And to think I tried to convince Rose she was crazy. Now, I could never apologize, never tell her why I'd done it. Both my friends were gone forever. I never even got the chance to say good-bye. I was so lost in thought that Nurse Cutter's voice came to me like a jolt of electricity.

"Ah, Seluna. You're just in time." She swung open a set of double doors at the end of the waiting room, an orderly on either side of her. "Looks like that dull-witted junior nurse managed to get you 'ere after all. Come with us." She smiled. "Dr. Catron is acceleratin' your treatment."

I was so startled that I pointed straight at Cutter and the orderlies. I thought I felt a snap at the end of my index finger, like static.

"What's she doin', then, Miz Cutter?" One of the orderlies looked at me with a furrowed brow.

"I ain't never seen loonies point like that nowhere, I ain't," said the other. "And what was that at the end of 'er finger?"

So I didn't imagine it. I glanced down quickly at my hand, but there was nothing unusual about it.

"Never you mind what she's doin'!" snapped Cutter. "Lunatics do whatever suits them, no matter what decent folk think. That's what makes them lunatics. And it's *Nurse* Cutter, you bleedin' idiot. Now, stop dawdlin'; we got a treatment scheduled."

This wasn't good. "Accelerating treatment" was definitely a negative at Silver Hill. *Just look what happened to Rose.* I had to get out of here—fast. But I couldn't leave without Laura. I lowered my arm and put my hand on her shoulder. She began to make low moaning noises.

"What's going to happen to Laura? Where are the rest of the girls? *What did you do to them?*" I demanded.

"Not that it's any of your business, but that junior nurse is takin' this patient—" Cutter jutted her round chin at Laura—"to 'er parents' 'ouse. Then that silly woman'll be on 'er way to 'er new position. The carriage we telegraphed for should be 'ere any minute now to pick them up."

So there is a telegraph machine at Silver Hill. Probably in Catron's office, where I first assumed it was. Little good it did me now.

"As for the rest of the patients," Cutter said in a dark voice, "some of them went 'ome. You know that."

"What about the ones that didn't?" I asked. Laura gave a squeal.

Cutter set her lips in a firm line, and her cheeks bulged slightly. "Now, you listen 'ere. I've 'ad quite enough of your cheek. You're comin' with us to see Dr. Catron without any more of a fuss."

"And what if I don't want to?"

It was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

Finally, Cutter spoke—very, very slowly. "If you know what's good for you, you'll come with us. Right. Now."

My eyes darted from orderly to orderly. Both were good-size, burly men. The kind that would be hard to fight off. They kept looking at Cutter, then at me, awaiting instructions. I tried stalling for time.

“I just want to know where you’re taking me, and what’s going to happen once we’re there. Asking such things is hardly a crime, is it?”

Still looking at me, Cutter held her hand in the air and snapped her fingers. Without a word, the two orderlies pulled and pushed me into a straitjacket that seemed to come out of nowhere.

It’s hard to describe how unsettling it is to be in a straitjacket. There’s just enough give in the sleeves to make you think you can wiggle yourself out. But no matter how hard you try, you can’t. Never before had I felt so powerless. I don’t know if one could say I handled the situation with sangfroid, but whatever it was, it was the sole thing standing between me and panic. Laura, on the other hand, was squealing like a stuck pig.

Cutter was calm as could be while I grunted and wrestled fruitlessly against my bonds. “That’ll be all for now, gentlemen. Dr. Catron and I thank you for your service.”

“What’s that, then?” one orderly asked.

“I *said*, ‘Thank you for your service,’ ” she repeated, taking me by the arm. “Which, incidentally, is no longer needed at Silver ’ill.”

“You firin’ us, then, are you?” the other orderly asked, his jaw growing slack.

“That’s about the gist of it. Be sure and collect your things on the way out.” She turned with me towards the double doors.

“Now, see ’ere—” started the orderly on the left.

“No, *you* see.” Cutter turned around, nearly taking my arm off. “I’ve no time for any more shenanigans tonight. I said your services is no longer needed. There ain’t no more duties for you to perform. If I was you, I’d leave ’ere as soon as possible. There should be just enough room on the carriage that’s arrivin’ shortly. Unless you want to speak to Dr. Catron about it, of course.”

The orderlies looked at one another. Despite the fact that they both seemed much stronger than Catron, one of them swallowed hard, and the other grimaced.

“Well, *do* you?” Cutter asked menacingly. “Want to take it up with Catron, that is?”

“Er, well—” started the one on the left.

“There’s glowin’ letters of reference tacked to the doors of your rooms. I’m sure you’ll find them very useful in seekin’ new employ.”

The orderlies looked at each other again, and this time, it was the one on the right who spoke.

“Thank you kindly, Nurse Cutter. Best of luck to you, then.” He nodded to the other man.

“Ah, yes. Best of luck, ma’am.” They tipped their caps to Cutter and walked quickly down the other end of the hall. They didn’t give me so much as a second glance.

“Well, thank goodness *that’s* done,” Cutter said under her breath. “Them was the last two orderlies. Now it’s just me and Dr. Catron, the way it should be. Two true professionals workin’ together.” She smiled and turned both of us towards the double doors again.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear Cutter was in love with Catron. The very thought was nauseating. But what she said also meant I was alone with them at Silver Hill.

“Wait a minute. Are you saying that you, Dr. Catron, and I are the only ones left in this asylum?” I asked.

“That’s what I said, ain’t it?” Cutter snapped. “‘Onestly, it’s no wonder you girls end up in the predicaments you do. Ain’t even got the decency to listen.”

“I was under the impression you were muttering to yourself.”

Cutter spun me around by the shoulders and slapped me across the face. I was so surprised, I couldn’t think of anything to say. My cheek was burning, but of course, the straitjacket prevented me from putting my hand to it.

“That’s enough!” Cutter’s voice seethed with rage. “You just wait till Dr. Catron gets ’old of you. ’E knows what to do with impertinent little wretches.” She grabbed me roughly by the elbow, opened the doors, and dragged me down the hall. Laura’s squeals died down until I couldn’t hear them anymore. “Oh, yes,” she said, smiling again. “If you ain’t the one we’re lookin’ for, I don’t know who is.”

I tried pulling in the opposite direction, leaning all of my weight against the force of Cutter’s arm. But she was too strong for me. She shoved me through the door of an operating theater, where Dr. Catron was waiting.

His back was to Cutter and me as we entered the room, but he turned around slowly when he heard us come in. He had a cap on and a surgical mask over his face, but I could still tell it was him. Plastic gloves covered both his hands, and one of them held a scalpel. His usually spotless white lab coat had a number of dark red blotches on it. My stomach turned over.

“Se-lu-na,” he said when he spotted me. I couldn’t see his mouth beneath the mask, but I could tell by his voice he was smiling. “How nice to see you again.”

“Wish I could say the same,” I retorted, still struggling. Cutter slapped me across the face again. *If I ever get my hands on that bitch*, I thought, *I’m going to pound her senseless*.

“Now, now, Nurse Cutter,” Catron chided, “there’s no reason to exert yourself. We’ll need all our strength and concentration for the procedure.”

“Of course, Doctor,” Cutter said. “Shall we strap ’er down now?”

“Yes, it’s time.” Catron put the scalpel down and turned up the gas lamp above him. They took me out of the straitjacket and put my hands and feet in leather cuffs attached to a freezing-cold operating table. A larger strap was tightened across my waist, and the last went over my brow so that I could barely move my head. I tore and kicked and even tried to bite, but it was no use. Cutter was an immovable mountain of a woman, and Catron was surprisingly powerful as well. They tilted the table up so that I lay at a forty-five-degree angle.

There was no doubt in my mind now. The final procedure—the acceleration of treatment—was definitely a lobotomy.

I struggled against the straps as they cut into me, mainly along my wrists. I could feel my skin tearing and bleeding, but I didn’t care. All I could think of was the drip, drip, dripping sound of an IV,

the smell of isopropanol. The only light came from the flickering gas lamp, and the moon shining through a high, barred window above us.

I twisted my head to one side, but just barely. On a metal tray, I saw several different-size scalpels and a small hammer. There was also something that looked like an ice pick, and a saw. I felt my stomach drop out from under me. I didn't even want to *think* about what the saw was for. There were also a few tools I didn't recognize at all.

Cutter donned a surgical mask and gloves as well, pulling the latter over her hands and releasing them with a snap. She tied a cap similar to Catron's around her head. Before I knew it, both villains were leaning over me. Catron picked his scalpel up again and sighed.

"I do hope these are better than the last ones." He looked at the slim piece of metal in his hand.

Cutter made a clucking noise with her tongue. "No one is committed to quality these days, is they, Dr. Catron?"

"Only us, I'm afraid," he replied.

"Oh, of course, Doctor. I wasn't referrin' to you. I know 'ow seriously you take your work." There was a strong note of admiration in Cutter's voice that made me want to be sick.

"Yes, it's good to be hardworking when you're a pair of raging sociopaths," I said. *At least they didn't muzzle me.*

"Se-lu-na," Catron drawled in his patronizing way. "Is this really the time for insults? I wouldn't say *our* behavior is deviant." He used the scalpel to indicate himself and Cutter. "*You're* the one with the abnormalities."

"Oh, really? How do you figure?"

"We've been observing you," Catron replied. "Your refusal to conform. Breaking and entering. That clandestine meeting with Francine." My eyes widened. "You didn't think we knew about that?"

"How on earth did you—"

"Never mind how," Catron said. "What matters is that we know. And that our little *Francine* problem has been taken care of."

I struggled uselessly against my bonds. "WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER?" I yelled.

"Now, now, calm yourself, Se-lu-na." He leaned over the tool tray and began sharpening the scalpel on some sort of miniature grinding machine. "This will all be over before you know it."

"Serves 'er right, the little blighter," Cutter snorted. "A deviant of the worst sort, and a bloody stupid one, too. As if a simple sleep charm would get through the protections this man 'as on him."

"Protections?" I repeated. Catron was almost done sharpening the scalpel.

"Of course 'e's got protections!" Cutter all but threw up her arms. "One don't have a psychic foretell 'orrid things and *not* demand a protection spell right after the tellin'."

So that's why the sleep spell didn't work. But maybe it means it will work on Dym. Unless, of course, he uses protection spells, too.

"How did you know I cast that—" I started.

“Well, who else could it ’ave been if the magic came from the garret? Besides, the protected always feel somethin’ bouncin’ off them when someone tries a spell.” Cutter rolled her eyes.

“Of course, they don’t work against everything, I’m sorry to say.” Catron finished sharpening the scalpel and turned to me again.

“Like this Event you’re so afraid of?”

Catron looked taken aback. *Ah, so you’re not inside my brain yet, are you?* I thought. *Don’t know everything I know, do you?* But he quickly regained his composure.

“Protection spells work well enough against the small minds of pests.” He raised the scalpel above my forehead. “We’ll see if that’s what we have here.”

I swallowed hard. “Don’t doctors usually anesthetize patients undergoing these types of procedures?” Of course, the last thing I wanted was to be anesthetized. I’d need all my faculties to get out of this mess—if I could get out of it. But I also needed to stall for time.

“We feel it’s important for patients to participate in the treatment process,” Catron said sweetly. “Otherwise, how will they grasp the full benefit? How will we know if the treatment is effective?”

“Or if you find what you’re looking for,” I said.

“That, too,” said Catron. Again, I could tell he was smiling. “But your thoughts on the subject are of little consequence. Your resistance is simply more evidence of your madness.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said through gritted teeth. “You want to experiment on me—essentially torture me to death—and *I’m* mad for trying to stop you?”

“Something like that,” Catron replied absentmindedly. His attention was on the flickering gas lamp. “But it doesn’t matter now. All that matters is that I can avoid the disastrous Event that would have laid waste to our plans.”

Our plans? Does he mean his and Cutter’s plans? The woman doesn’t seem capable of planning so much as a birthday party without his help.

“Soon—very soon—I shall discover the one thing that lies between me and greatness.” Now, his eyes were piercing mine. “And I shall *destroy her*.” Cutter let out a girlish, almost hysterical giggle.

My sangfroid was disappearing fast. My heart beat wildly, and I had to control my breath so it didn’t come out in gasps. But I vowed not to let any sign of emotion cross my face. I would be like a girl in a book I once read. She was a princess who’d lost her father and fallen victim to an evil boarding-school headmistress. The headmistress always wanted to see her beaten, broken. But the princess never gave her the satisfaction. She pretended to be a brave solider instead.

That’s how I will be. Brave and unyielding to the last.

“At least tell me what you’re talking about.” Beads of perspiration were beginning to run down the sides of my head. “What’s the reason behind all of this? What—or whom—are you looking for?”

“That reminds me, Dr. Catron.” Cutter jerked her head up. “What about the creature?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, woman,” Catron said. “We don’t need the creature anymore. Not if this procedure goes the way I think it will.”

Dear gods, they're really going to do this. They're going to get inside my brain and tear it apart. What if I don't die? What if I turn into someone like Laura—or worse? I couldn't decide which fate was more terrible. I saw the light from the gas lamp flicker once or twice again, then dim considerably and stay that way.

"Bloody hell, there's not enough gas!" Catron threw the scalpel to the floor. "I knew I should've topped it off before we started." He tore off his mask, gloves, and cap, gnashing his teeth.

"I can run and get the canister for you, Dr. Catron," Cutter offered.

"No. All the canisters are in my office, which is locked. And you *know* how I feel about other people having a key. I'll get it. Wait here." He walked towards the door. Then he turned and pointed at me. "And keep a sharp eye on her."

"Will do, Doctor," called Cutter as he left. "'Onestly, 'e's a brilliant man, but so forgetful these days. It's the mental strain that's gettin' to 'im, it is." She looked down at me. "But all that'll be over shortly, won't it? Soon 'e'll be back to 'is old self."

His mad, delusional self, I thought. But at least I had a bit of time to think. A thin sliver of moonlight peeked out from between the bars of the window high above us. I hoped it was enough.

It was difficult to focus the moonlight on the scalpel; I couldn't move my head a great deal. But if there was ever a time to work hard at something, it was now. I concentrated as intensely as possible, and the scalpel darted across the room and sliced open the top of Cutter's cheek.

Cutter howled, and her hand flew to her face. The scalpel clattered to the floor. Cutter drew back her blood-smeared palm and stared at it in disbelief.

"What the? 'Ow did—"

"Never mind how," I said in the firmest voice I could manage. "Untie me before I use that thing for more than a cut on the cheek!" Cutter just stared at me, blood dripping from her face and fingers onto the white-tile floor.

"I *said*, untie me!" I looked at the moonlit window, then at the tray filled with surgical tools. The metal saw leaped in front of Cutter, bending back and forth like a scrap of paper. The twanging sound it made was almost musical. It was certainly music to my ears.

Cutter, however, was decidedly less enthused. She stood plastered against the wall, body frozen, eyes wide. I moved the saw to the right, then to the left, inches from her face. Almost as if I were daring her to try and escape. She grabbed the ice pick—or whatever it was—from the tray and jabbed at the saw. Her cap went askew and her surgical mask came halfway off. I kept making the saw move in swift, menacing waves.

"Dammit to hell, untie me or I'll *take your head off!*" I shouted. Cutter's eyes darted from me to the saw and back again.

"Oh, for the love of the gods, I don't have time for this!" Keeping the saw in front of Cutter, I lifted the scalpel off the floor with my mind. As fast as I could, I used the scalpel to cut away the straps that bound me to the table. Then I leaped off and ran out of the room before Cutter could

stop me.

I burst through the double doors; there was no sign of Catron. But as I dashed down an adjacent hall, I could hear his footsteps moving swiftly back to the operating room.

“You let her get away?” Catron roared. “I’ll have your head for this, Cutter!”

“Please, Doctor, it wasn’t my fault!” Cutter begged as I flew past portraits and gas lamps on the walls.

“How could she have escaped? She was *sodding tied down*!” I heard sounds of metal objects overturning and crashing; Catron must have been throwing things.

“She—I—I don’t know, sir! She just, that is—”

“Damn all, Cutter. Stop your blubbering. I don’t have time for excuses. It doesn’t matter. All that matters now is getting her back.” Their voices faded away as I tried to think of a plan.

I had no idea where I was going. My only thought was to run, run, *run*. So, I wasn’t prepared when I stumbled into the main hall and saw what had become of most of the other patients at Silver Hill.

Chapter 14

There was something ghastly in the main hall, and I smelled it before I saw it.

Formaldehyde. No doubt to preserve the bodies; not for dignity, I wagered, but so the stench of decay wouldn't attract wild animals. It stung my eyes for a moment, and I covered my nose with one hand, trying not to inhale. Blood from where the table straps dug into my wrists had run down my hands. It was drying in ugly streaks. But I ignored the blood, and the pain, gaping instead at the unholy sight before me.

There must have been eight or ten dead girls stacked in piles on one side of the room. Everything about them looked wilted and gray, from their flat, cloudy eyes to their limp and tangled hair. Some had a waxy, green tinge to their skin. Others were bluish purple, or bloated, with wide-open eyes bulging out of their sockets. I could see veins making black, marbled outlines against their hands and faces. Waves of horror passed over me.

I recognized several faces plainly. Geraldine. Thomasina. Francine. Some I didn't know by name, but I'd seen them before in the schoolroom or solarium. Almost every one had lobotomy scars like Rose's just above their eyes.

This is what that mousy nurse was talking about, I realized. "Should at least cover 'em . . . it ain't right . . ." They must have been awaiting disposal. My guess was that Catron planned to get rid of them in the least noticeable manner. Maybe he was going to throw them into the asylum furnace in the basement. My stomach threatened to revolt. *Why isn't Rose with them? Perhaps Catron and Cutter anticipated moving her here after they'd dealt with me.*

I turned away, unable to comprehend what I was seeing. That was when I spotted the front doors flung wide-open, as if someone had left in a great hurry. It didn't take me long to figure out who. I could see the orderlies Cutter had fired hitching a ride on the back of a horse-drawn carriage, suitcases in hand.

"Hi-yah! Hi-yah!" shouted the driver, whipping the horses madly. Even he knew better than to stay here long. The mousy nurse sat next to him. "Faster, you fool!" she screeched. Over it all, I could hear Laura inside the carriage, wailing. Any hope I had of catching the last ride out of Silver Hill disappeared rapidly onto the distant moors.

The sound of an alarm rang, unbearably loud as the noise came in angry waves. *Why is an alarm*

ringing? I thought. *I didn't even know the asylum had an alarm. Then again, it seems there are a lot of things at Silver Hill I didn't know about.* My eyes scanned the room, trying to determine where to go without looking at the bodies of the girls. The long walls of mirrors once again made the hall seem infinite.

Is there really no escaping this hell?

"FIND HER!" Catron's voice was so thunderous I could hear it over the alarm.

Dammit! I had to hide, to think. I couldn't run away from the asylum; Catron and Cutter would come after me. I needed a way to *destroy* them. There was only one place I knew about at Silver Hill that my enemies didn't. And that was the secret staircase.



As I shut the door to the staircase behind me, I realized too late that I had no way to camouflage it with the sheet on the other side. It was very likely they'd search my room, thinking I'd return there. Maybe they were under the impression it was my safe haven, or that I'd rush to collect mementos before escaping. They really didn't know me very well.

I sighed and swore. The sheet was a loss. Still, I hoped they wouldn't figure out the trick way of opening the door. That might buy me a bit more time. But I couldn't stay in the stairwell indefinitely. And I didn't feel safe at the top of the steps; if Catron and Cutter came to the room, they might still be able to hear me breathing through the wall. I went halfway down the stairwell, taking my Book, candle, matches, and shawl with me. I'd only brought the necessities, praying they would be enough.

The unrelenting noise of the alarm had blessedly stopped. I sat, shawl on my shoulders, candle in my hand, and Book in my lap. I turned the pages furiously, trying to find *Drawing Down the Moon* or anything else that would get me out of this waking nightmare. I was moving my hands so fast it upset the candle, and drops of hot wax splashed my fingers.

Ow! Bloody hell, that really hurts. I stopped flipping pages and put my burned fingers in my mouth, then put my hand to my head.

Maybe I really am mad, I thought. *Maybe there's something in me, a darkness, an evil that I can't see. I mean, nonliving things that I make move? Vines that act strangely whenever I'm near? Who wouldn't think I was odd at least, and perhaps mad at most?*

Yet, I couldn't help but think those things didn't strictly point to madness. Differentness, yes. But madness, no. And evil, well, not necessarily. Whatever the case, it wasn't something I wanted to die for, or believed I deserved to. I was just so *tired*. Tired of thinking, tired of fighting. Paralyzed by indecision, I felt more than a little tempted to give up.

What's the point of all this? Do I really stand a chance, all alone out here with two maniacs hot at my heels? I turned back to the Book, accidentally tearing out a page.

"Oh, for pity's sake!" I said under my breath. I couldn't even read a book right. Trying to fit the

torn page gently back in place, I noticed the next page had something tucked inside it. I never would've seen it if I hadn't torn out the previous one. The frail paper was brown with age, even older than the rest of the Book. I had to move it delicately back and forth to get it out, almost as if it were hiding there. There was one word at the top of the page, then a column of text below it. The word was . . .

“ ‘Stay,’ ” I read aloud, then pored over the rest silently.

Stay.

Stay.

Please don't take
your light away.
Though day may break you
and sun may burn
thought, word, and soul,
mock the yearning
and push towards night
with peace-seeming dreams . . .

Stay.

Stay although
the stars may shine
deceitful beckons
to cut short your time,
and you long to rest
among your kind . . .

Stay.

Stay to free

the ones who'd mourn
the light of you
and souls not born.
They have in mind
a different name
for you to keep . . .

The world does change.
Do not yet sleep.

Stay.

Stay to show

the stars and moon
this name you bear,
set in tune
to your orbit-world:
the Universal,
Irreplaceable you.

Stay.

Stay for all

that's yet unknown;
solutions found
and problems grown
too small to ponder
as you reach such heights,
galaxies wonder . . .
You soar past sight.

Stay.

Stay.

Shine your light . . .

And break the day.

What on earth could it mean? I wondered. But I didn't have time to find out because the wolves were at the door.

"Aha!" I heard Catron's cry far above me, and the sound of stone moving. "I've got it! Look, fresh footprints in the dust, Cutter. She must be here, the sneaky hellion. Follow me."

"Down there, sir?" Cutter actually sounded nervous. "But it's dark, it is."

"Then light another candle, you whining simpleton. She's getting away!"

I jumped up, nearly knocking my own candle out of my hand. They'd discovered my location—and how to open the door. *Blast*. I'd hoped it would take them a little longer.

Jamming the Book under my arm, I picked up my skirts and hurried down the stairs. I could hear Cutter's heavy footsteps behind me. They were quickly followed by Catron's, which were lighter, but no less terrifying. I rushed out into the garden and looked around. I needed something to block the door. But there was nothing large enough.

I put the Book and candle on the ground, then grabbed a nearby vine. Looping it through the iron ring on the door, I tied the other end to a small, dead tree nearby. I pulled and pulled at the vine, but no matter how hard I tried, it didn't tear off the ring or the tree. It was that strong. I hoped it would work.

Suddenly, the door heaved forward, just an inch. Someone was pushing on it from the other side. I jumped back, my eyes glued to it.

"What's this?" I heard Cutter cry, her voice muffled behind the stone.

"What's the matter?" barked Catron. "Just open the damn door!"

"I can't, sir." The door moved forward again and again, but each time was caught by the vine going across it to the tree. "It's stuck some'ow, it is."

"Move aside, you stupid cow. Let me try." The door pushed out into the garden, maybe two inches this time. But my rope of vines made sure it went no farther.

"Bloody flaming hell!" Catron shouted. "Turn around. We'll have to go back up. I said *move!*"

I exhaled loudly. “Seems like you were good for something after all,” I said to the vines. They twisted and turned for me, almost as if they were showing off. Their undersides looked even greener than I remembered. I heard Catron and Cutter rushing back up the steps, no doubt to find another route to the garden.

I wonder if they searched the garden while I was sleeping today, hoping to find the creature or the goddess. So much had happened since then, it felt like a hundred years had passed. Just like that story where a princess goes to sleep for the same length of time, and a web of vines grows all around her.

But this was no fairy tale, and I was no princess. I picked up the Book and candle and made my way towards the center of the garden. *What if they dredged the pond in their search attempts? How can my spell keep Dym safe then?*

I was in luck, if one could call it luck. When I got to the pond, Dym was nowhere to be found. I didn’t know whether to be frightened or relieved. Part of me wanted him to be there, on the off chance he’d do something incredibly chivalrous, like save me. Another part was grateful I couldn’t find him. I dreaded the thought of seeing his body—floating on the pond’s surface—because the spell took effect while he was swimming, and drowned him.

Maybe he decided not to swim to Silver Hill tonight. But he seemed so genuine when he said he wouldn’t leave. And if he didn’t leave, then he’s here sleeping somewhere. My spell worked. At the very least, my Endymion is safe.

It worked, I thought again. At least one spell in the Book worked. Maybe a second one will, too. And as Catron said himself, protection spells don’t guard against everything.

I had a decision to make. To my left were the moors. Endless expanses of wild terrain, where my chances of survival were uncertain to minimal. On my right was the lunatic asylum of Silver Hill. If I could get back in, I might be able to perform Drawing Down the Moon on Catron and Cutter. I could prevent them from hunting me down. And perhaps, most importantly, I could stop them once and for all from harming and killing more innocent girls.

If you don’t do it, Seluna, I thought, then who on earth will?

It might have been utterly suicidal and insane, but I chose the path to my right.

Chapter 15

I broke through one of the garden windows into the old ballroom. It was the only window Catron hadn't bothered to place bars over, probably because it was completely covered with vines. I stood in the moonlight and made sweeping motions with my hands in front of the glass.

Miraculously, the vines parted. I thrust my elbow inside the lowest pane, breaking both the glass and my skin when my sleeve tore. Still, it allowed me to slip one hand inside and unlock the window, which I lifted open with great effort. I'd never been in this section of Silver Hill before, but I knew if I could find my way to the main entrance, I could get anywhere in the asylum.

I can't believe how crazy all this is, I thought as I exited the ballroom. On my right, I recognized the hall leading to the cafeteria, and followed it. *Before, I was running away from Catron and Cutter, and now, I'm hoping to run into them. But if that's the only way to end this, then so be it.*

From the cafeteria, I found the schoolroom, and from there, the hallway to the main entrance. All the gas lamps had been put out. I blew out my candle as well and left it on the floor; I couldn't risk alerting any enemies to my presence. *Thank gods for moonlight and my nighttime senses,* I thought. *Otherwise, I'd never be able to find my way around here.*

Finally, I got to the front of Silver Hill. The first thing I saw was the stained glass window depicting the goddess. The moonlight was shining directly through it, making it glow brighter than usual. Then again, I'd never seen it so late at night. Perhaps it always looked that way at this hour. I hadn't thought about it when I'd been here earlier this evening; the sight of the girls' corpses prevented me from focusing on anything else.

The glass chandelier in the center had only a few lit candles on it, which made it a bit easier to see. Unfortunately, it would also make it easier for Catron and Cutter to see *me*. The stench of formaldehyde was not so strong now. I tried hard not to look at the dead bodies as I made my way into the cavernous hall.

I assessed things from a military perspective. I'd get to the second-floor balcony; it had the best vantage point. If Catron and Cutter came in on the ground floor, I'd have a better view of them. I picked up my skirts and hurried up the enormous, crumbling staircase. If I could just get underneath the stained glass window, it would be the perfect place to perform Drawing Down the—

“She ain't in the garden no more, sir!” With supreme dread, I heard a familiar voice. “She's 'ere!”

Cutter cried, running into the main hall. No longer did she have on her nurse's cap, gloves, or mask. There was nothing to hide her evil grin, her eyes full of dark delight. One hand held a candle, while the index finger of the other pointed at me on the upper level. "We've got 'er now, Doctor!"

Catron wasn't far behind. His lab coat was gone, and he was struggling with a long, heavy object partially blocked by his body.

What's that under his arm? Wait—is that a rifle?

"Don't just stand there, Cutter!" Catron was trying to load the rifle with as many bullets as it could hold. "Get her!"

Cutter held up her candle and looked at the numerous steps between her and me. "Ah, right then, sir." She began huffing and puffing her way up the balcony, careful to avoid any stairs that were broken or missing. I had to admit, for a large woman, she could certainly move fast.

What am I going to do? I supposed I could run around and around the balcony, praying Cutter would pass out before she reached me. But there was still Catron with the rifle. He would probably use it before I outran her. I couldn't deal with both of them at the same time. I had to find a way to get rid of Cutter first. She was almost at the top of the stairs, just a few yards away.

"Aha!" she cackled as she finished the climb and ran towards me. Beads of perspiration were forming on her forehead, but the hag still had plenty of fight left in her. "Now, Dr. Catron and me is going to make you wish you was never born. C'mere, girlie!"

"Not a chance in hell!" I retorted. Whipping off my shawl, I threw it over Cutter, making sure part of it landed on the candle she held. It set both the shawl and Cutter on fire, as I had hoped it would. At this point, I really didn't care if she burned to death.

Apparently, Cutter didn't feel the same way. She let out earsplitting screams as she frantically tried to wrestle the flaming shawl off. I ran a few yards and ducked behind a long table with a trio of marble busts on it.

"What the devil's going on up there?" Catron was still trying to load the gun. "Curse this old thing; it always jams. *Cutter!*" He gasped to see the nurse on fire one story above him.

Unfortunately for me, Cutter didn't remain on fire for long. She managed to fling the shawl off and stamp the flames into submission. Half her hair and the shoulders of her uniform were gone. Her face was a mess of red and black flakes. She looked like the angry surface of an active volcano. Although her candle had been snuffed out, she still had the chandelier in the center of the room by which to see. And she used it to focus all her rage on me.

"You miserable, 'orrid little witch!" she howled. "You're going to pay for this!"

Heart pounding, I looked to the left and right. I needed something to use as a weapon. I tried picking up one of the busts, but it was too heavy. I felt like choking the neck of the person it resembled. Cutter was running towards me, light falling on her body again and again from the chandelier reflected off the mirrors.

I gasped. *The chandelier! The mirrors!* Maybe I didn't have the physical strength to move the

busts, but perhaps my animating powers would. I hoped man-made light would work as well as that from the moon. I concentrated hard on one mirror on the ground level, directly across from Cutter. I imagined I saw a beam of gray-blue light shining from the chandelier to the mirror to one of the busts. The stone face opened its sightless eyes and moved its unspeaking mouth from side to side, as if it were waking up. Just as Cutter was about to reach me, the bust flew up and hit her in the chin—hard.

Cutter fell backwards with a heavy grunt. I looked over my shoulder at Catron. I didn't know if he'd seen what happened. But he had managed to load the rifle and aim it at me.

Catron let out an angry yell. "The damn column is blocking her!" He moved from place to place on the floor, trying to find a position from which to fire.

"Cutter, I can't get a clear shot! Bugger all, flush her out!"

Cutter put her hand to her jaw and groaned, but struggled to her feet. Blood trickled out the side of her mouth. My guess was the blow from the bust had knocked out a tooth or two.

For the love of all saints, I thought, *can nothing keep this foul woman down?* I'd have to try again. I focused on the mirror once more and managed to fling the second bust at Cutter, this time nailing her in the middle of her face. The force of the blow made her cry out again and double over onto the railing, where she stood clutching it and moaning. A quick look over my shoulder revealed that Catron had a better view of me now. He'd definitely seen Cutter get hit with the second bust. I pressed myself against the back of the column. I didn't know what I'd do if he fired the gun at it.

I expected Catron to at least take a shot at me, but instead, something very surprising happened. I heard him give what sounded like a cry of victory.

"It's you!" he shrieked. "You, who turns light into motion!" His voice was hysterical, like a madman's. "We went through all those girls trying to find the truth, but in the end, I *knew* it was you!"

Light into motion? He must have been referring to my reflecting light to move the bust. But I had no idea what he meant by the rest.

"I searched for decades for your brother and sister without success. But then, I realized it didn't matter. You, with your power of light in darkness, were the strongest. I knew you'd stop at nothing to complete your mission. All I had to do was get to you, and my future would be assured."

The air around me seemed to turn wavy, but I didn't dare put my hands to the sides of the column for balance. It was all starting to come together, like long-mislaid puzzle pieces. *The nighttime abilities. Reanimating things with the help of light. The way I automatically point like that woman in the Book.* I couldn't believe it. It sounded impossible, and yet, it had to be true. The answer was staring me in the face all along.

"The goddess is . . . *me*?" It was almost a whisper, but the echo easily traveled down to Catron.

"Don't pretend you don't know! Feigning ignorance won't save you now. I can see you are still too young to know how to use your powers. Better for *me* that way, however." He laughed again, and I heard the *chit-chit* of the gun.

My head was spinning. *I am a goddess. I have a mission.* Catron also seemed to have a mission,

part of which involved killing me. *Is destroying Catron my mission? Why must I have a mission at all? Haven't I been through enough?* You'd think being a goddess meant things would get easier.

I turned my head ever so slightly so I could talk to Catron, but not enough for him to see me. "If I have a mission," I called out, "then what is it? What's this 'future' of yours? What the devil *are you talking about?*"

"Don't act as if you don't remember!" he sneered. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him snaking around the column, trying to get the best possible shot. "I was sure you'd be one of the most troublesome girls in the realm, too. I knew if I set up a clinic especially for those girls, you'd find your way here eventually."

A wave of cold horror passed over me. *All the atrocities at Silver Hill were committed because of me? Because one man was trying to find me?* The thought was too hideous to comprehend.

Regardless, I didn't have much time to contemplate it. Cutter had gotten back on her feet and was looking at me with murder in her eyes. Blood from her nose was pouring down her face and onto what was left of her burned uniform.

Oh, come on, I thought desperately. *Can't anything kill this bitch?* My gaze fell on a landscape painting on the wall. I still had one more bust left. I had to make sure Cutter stayed down this time.

"There's no use tryin' to run, Seluna," Cutter snarled. Her voice sounded raspy, almost animal-like. "We're a force from which you cannot escape. Our darkness will swallow you 'ole. Your life—and the life of everyone you care for—belong to *us*. You'll see. We may as well be the monsters that 'aunt your dreams."

I never heard Cutter speak like this. I had no idea where it was coming from. Still, there was only a moment's hesitation before I said:

"Trust me, Cutter, if I ever have dreams about you, they'll end with my kicking your *ass!*"

This time, I didn't need more than a cursory glance at the mirror. I tore the painting off the wall with my mind and threw it over Cutter. As she cursed and struggled to get her arms out from the canvas, the last bust flew up and knocked her squarely in the forehead.

I half-hoped the blow would kill her before she went over the railing. But in the end, it hardly mattered. Cutter let out an unholy scream as she fell backwards, breaking the balustrade. Her legs flailed wildly, and her body hit the floor with a final, heavy thud. I dashed to the next column before Catron had a chance to react. From there, I could see Cutter still encased in the painting. Her eyes were wide-open; more blood spilled out of her mouth. Her torso was bent at an impossible angle from the lower half of her body.

Nurse Cutter was dead. But there wasn't a moment to celebrate, or even feel relieved.

"Cutter, you miserable sow!" Catron howled, standing over the body. "I suppose I'll have to finish this myself. That's what I get for hiring subpar help."

Well, that was a quick grieving process, I thought. But it was no concern of mine whether Catron cared about Cutter or not. The only thing that mattered was that he was still out for my blood. There

was the earsplitting noise of a gunshot, then the sound of shattering glass.

I cringed so hard my shoulders jerked. I covered my ears and thought about crouching down to make myself a smaller target. However, that also might make it harder to run if Catron shot at me again. But as I peeked past the column, I saw that Catron hadn't shot at me at all. Instead, he'd destroyed the mirror that helped me animate.

Oh, no. He'd realized that was what I'd been using. He was going to destroy every reflective surface. If that happened, I was doomed.

As fast as I could, I tried to focus on the next mirror and think of something else to animate. But Catron was faster. I almost cried out as the second shot fired, the huge sheet of glass bursting apart. Next came the third mirror, and the one after that. They disintegrated on contact, or crashed to the floor, the sickening sound echoing throughout the hall. I tried to get ahead of Catron by several mirrors, but it was no use. As soon as I got enough focus, he simply fired again without even slowing down. I could see Catron's reflection in the mirrors' remnants, ten thousand slivers of homicidal maniac.

Finally, every mirror was gone. I could hear the tinkling of glass as the final shards fell. Darting from column to column, I didn't stop until I was behind one at the top of the stairs. I was forced to leave the Book behind; I couldn't run fast enough with it in my hands. Perspiration trickled down the sides of my face as I heard Catron reloading the rifle.

He was actually *chuckling*. Even though I heard the gun jam a few times, he must have managed to get the next round of bullets in, because I heard the same *chit-chit* noise as before. From the sound of his voice, I estimated he was standing three-quarters of the way across the room, a few yards behind the chandelier.

"What do you think you're doing, Se-lu-na?" Again, he said my name in that obnoxious way that made me want to clobber him. "Even if you manage to kill me—which is looking unlikely—you'll never stop the others. They're coming for you."

Others? I thought. *What others? Maybe Catron's bluffing.* But it didn't sound like he was bluffing.

I took the quickest of peeks around the column, to see if there was another object in the hall I could use against Catron. Maybe I could get my hands on a piece of broken glass and—

BAM! A shot rang out, and I heard a bullet whiz past my head to lodge in the wall in front of me, right beneath the stained glass window. *Gods, that was close!* How was I supposed to kill Catron when I couldn't even turn to look at him?

Just then, a sheet of plaster fell from the ceiling next to the chandelier. I supposed it was the vibration from all the gunfire that did it. It didn't take much for this place to go to pieces. The chandelier made clinking sounds as the plaster hit the glass.

Wait—that's it! The chandelier was made of glass, which reflected. All I had to do was use moonlight from the window on it. With any luck, I could make the whole thing fall directly on top of

Catron.

I inched my way forward, towards the wall. BAM BAM BAM! Catron fired three more quick shots. I heard the crunch of glass underneath his feet as he circled for a better vantage point. I hated to make myself a moving target, but I had to turn around in order to focus on the chandelier. Every time I saw Catron getting a good view of me, I moved to the other side of the column to block him. Probably, the only reason he didn't shoot the column was that it would make the building collapse.

Finally, I could see the chandelier clearly in the moonlight. Catron was nearly underneath it now. Narrowing my eyes, I tried to focus on making it sway so that when it fell, it would hit him.

But when it came to bringing down the chandelier, Catron beat me to it. He looked at me, looked above him, then shot the chain holding the chandelier to the ceiling.

The noise from the crash was deafening, even more so than the shattering mirrors had been. It rang in my ears for several long moments, and every candle on the chandelier was instantly snuffed out. A piece of the glass flew up and sliced open my palm. The pain was so unexpected, I cried out.

Dammit! Why did Catron have to be such a good shot? That didn't bode well for me. And the only light now came from the moon shining through the stained glass window.

"You stupid girl," I heard him jeer. "A valiant effort, I'll give you that. But try to kill me now, when you can't even *see* me."

You're *the stupid one*, I thought. Catron might have known about some of my powers, but not all of them. For example, he had no idea how well I could see him. How was *he* going to defeat *me*, since he could barely see now? Clearly, Catron was not a man who thought things through.

Then I raised my head. *Damn it all!* I was just beneath the window. The moonlight was shining right on me. Catron had a perfect view.

I tried to think rationally, but my heart was already skipping beats. *Can I really be killed by a rifle blast?* It was true I had magical abilities, and that in spirit, I was a goddess. But this body was mortal. It could succumb to hunger, fatigue, and pain, as I'd seen during my stay at Silver Hill. I'd just had my hand sliced open by a relatively small piece of glass. I had no doubt that a bullet could kill me.

That meant I had to draw down the moon *now*.

I never got the chance to review the spell like I wanted. The Book was at least thirty yards away, and it wasn't as if Catron was going to let me have a quick read. I'd have to remember it as best I could. It had only been a few weeks since Rose, Laura, and I talked about the spell in the cafeteria, anyway. *Was it really such a short time ago?* That meant that this moon was the full moon, the most potent. If there was ever a moon for defeating enemies, surely this was the one.

Chakras, chakras . . . the spell said something about opening chakras. I vaguely remembered that chakras were power centers scattered throughout the body. I prayed mine were already open. I didn't have a wand, but maybe if I was a goddess, it wouldn't be necessary.

But I still needed a circle. *Oh, hell.* A circle of what? I didn't know if it was supposed to be

something specific, like the chalk or ash so often used in witch spells. Regardless, my options were limited. I couldn't even get down to where Catron was to *make* a circle. Unless . . . my eyes fell on the bodies of the dead girls.

I can't make a circle unless I have some help.

"Okay, ladies," I whispered. "I'm sorry to do this, but I really, *really* need you right now." I could see Catron on the ground floor. He was squinting and repositioning the gun, no doubt trying to use the moonlight to see well enough to shoot. But I was the one who used the moonlight first.

I came out from behind the column, praying I had enough time before Catron pulled the trigger. I held both hands above my head, and the same gray-blue light pulsed down, this time from the window. I lowered my hands and spread my fingers out towards the girls.

One by one, they rose to their feet and surrounded Catron, eyes open but unseeing. The moonlight only served to highlight the dull, ashen color of their skin. They moved around and around him, holding hands in a macabre dance. It was grotesque, but it had the desired effect. Catron's jaw dropped as he saw the corpses of his victims closing in on him.

"You . . . you can't be. It's impossible . . ." His voice trailed off. His complexion was whiter than the moon itself as he looked from girl to girl, frantically trying to get away. But they were too close together for him to get out of the circle. He jerked the rifle back, pointing it at one, then another as the circle drew tighter. Catron quickly realized he couldn't kill his intended victims.

"You're dead. You're all *dead!*" Repulsed and terrified, he was unable to shove them aside even with his weapon. He looked up and pointed the rifle at me again, this time with shaking hands. "You mad demoness! I'll see you finished yet!"

Gods, I had no idea how hard this would be. Until now, the largest thing I'd reanimated was a dead rat. I'd never done a human before, and certainly not so many at once. My arms ached, and perspiration was pouring down the sides of my head now. There was nothing to reflect the moonlight off of. I didn't have the mirrors. I didn't have the chandelier. The only conduit for the energy this time was me.

Maybe I don't need a reflective surface, I thought. *Maybe, if I focus hard enough, I can kill Catron myself. I just need to harness my powers, to concentrate.* But there was still the incantation. And I had no idea what it was.

Then, the strangest feeling came over me. I felt the words rise up from my heart into my throat and out my mouth. But as I was saying them, I knew they were more than ordinary speech. I was *remembering*. My voice didn't sound like my own. It was deeper, stronger, reverberating throughout the hall:

"I am called by many names.

I am called on many times.

But thrice be damned
be he, the man,
who seeks to take what's mine.

My light shines on those in need
and keeps them safe from harm.
But if you are one
to cause such pain,
evil spirit, then, begone!"

Catron seemed to realize something important was happening. The girls continued moving around him, faster and faster. He took several panicked shots at me, and at the stained glass window. But each one missed, as I somehow knew it would. Chunks of stone spewed out of the walls behind me where the bullets struck them. I felt as if I were floating, as if a misty, invisible barrier were between me and everything happening in the room.

"I'll see you dead somehow, you ruinous harpy!" he cried in great, heaving gasps, eyes wild. With his once pristine suit and flawless hair disheveled, he truly did look like a madman. "When I get through with you, you'll sleep for a thousand years!"

Sleep. It made me want to laugh. What did Catron know of such things? *I wonder, when we sleep, do we enter a world as bizarre and unreal as a fairy tale? Or do we dream of home at night? The veil between the daylight world and the one we dream of, the one we know exists, is so thin we could reach out and brush it aside. One motion, one little swipe of the curtain, and our dreams are made real. That is our true home, our true reality.*

It was the message I'd been receiving all along as I slept. I had it upside down, backwards, twisted. Like sunlight that reflects off the moon or a mirror. My dreams weren't a confused, nonsensical jumble. They weren't showing me what was wrong. They were showing me *who I was*. And I'd be damned if I let Catron take that away from me.

My arm no longer ached, but felt weightless. The front hall of Silver Hill, so intimidating when I had first arrived, now made me feel powerful. The moon shone down brighter than I'd ever seen. It created a line of light from me to Catron. I lowered one hand and used the other to point—not to the girls, but straight to my adversary. *Of course! Pointing is the way to channel and direct my energy. Why didn't I see it before?*

The rifle slid from Catron's hands, but did not go off when it hit the floor. He froze where he stood, wide-eyed, mouth gaping at me. The moonlight was aimed right at him, but still he was not destroyed.

I narrowed my eyes. I wasn't going to let a silly protection spell get in my way. It wasn't going to work, not when I was in my element. I could feel the spell around Catron, an annoying black ball.

The hell with you, I thought. You don't deserve protection. You are heinous and hurtful, upsetting the balance of this world. I focused on the energy coming out of my hand, pushing, pushing, till it popped through the protection bubble and burst it.

Now, the moonlight flowed through me more easily than ever, radiating a sense of peace and stillness. Still pointing at Catron DeKay, I saw a beam literally shoot from my fingertips into center of his chest. Then light exploded all around him, and I shielded my eyes with my free hand. Somewhere in the far distance, Catron was screaming. But I was unafraid and unharmed. I knew this light, this radiance, was mine and mine alone.

I am the power, the moon, the goddess herself.

I lost all sense of time, so I couldn't really tell when the spell subsided. It could have been hours, or it could have been only minutes. The beam of moonlight faded away, and I lowered my arm to get a better look at the scene before me.

Catron was definitely dead. There was an enormous, charred hole in the middle of the floor where he'd been standing. I could see the outline of his shadow on the stone. Some people might think moonlight was insubstantial. But I gave a little smile as I looked at the remains of my conquered foe.

It certainly isn't insubstantial when I wield it.

That was why Catron hadn't been able to find the source of my power: it was the moon. Unless he planned on pulling it down from the sky, his schemes had been all for naught.

I stopped smiling when I saw what was happening to my dead friends. They were leaving the large circle in which they'd trapped Catron, and were walking in aimless, smaller circles. One by one, they dropped to the floor. The last one I knew instantly: Francine.

"Wait!" I cried out as her knees began to buckle. I didn't know if she could hear or understand me, but I couldn't stop the words from coming. "Don't fall down! Maybe I can help you, bring you back to life permanently." I wracked my brain for a way to do just that. I might not have known Francine well, but at least she'd believed in me. And nothing could have shocked me more than the sound of her reply.

"No, it is over. *I am over. All of us are.*" Her voice had a far-off, monotone quality as she turned to me. Her dead, unseeing eyes stared into the distance. I could see the lobotomy wounds clearly above her brow. They were still open, with small rivers of dried blood running down the sides of her face. She wasn't even stitched up. She must have died during the operation.

"My life here is finished; it's time for me to leave. 'To everything there is a season,' and mine on this earth is done. Now, I am going home." She knelt on the floor and sank to her side.

"Wait—please—don't!" I begged.

"Good-bye, Seluna. And good luck with your mission," Francine said. Then the dead girl closed her eyes, never to open them again. She even put her hands together and placed them under her head,

as if settling down for a nap. Try as I might, I could not reanimate her—or any of the other girls—a second time. They had indeed fulfilled their mission, their purpose in life.

It remained to be seen whether I would do the same.

Chapter 16

The next day, there was quite a lot of cleaning up to do.

I swept copious amounts of broken glass and other rubble from the main entrance, glad for the changes in my wardrobe. I'd cut away the front part of my skirt and donned a pair of tight black trousers that were in a box marked "Confiscated." I suppose Catron couldn't have girls do anything as rebellious as wear trousers. But it was so much easier to move around this way. And there was a lot of work ahead that would be ill-performed in a skirt. For one thing, I'd moved Geraldine, Thomasina, Francine, and all the rest into a corner and covered them with a tarp for now.

Although exhausted from the previous night's events (and of course, tired in general during the day), defeating Catron had given me renewed vigor. Still, nothing could have prepared me for the sight that had greeted me earlier that morning.

I'd gone out to the garden, Queen Sophia's Book in my hand. I didn't really know why I'd brought the Book; it just felt good to have it with me. The sky was so blue it almost hurt my eyes to look at it. Huge white clouds passed lazily overhead, and the air was balmy, inviting. The pavement stones that were previously a dull shade of gray were almost silver.

And the garden I stepped into was not the one I remembered. It was *alive*! The trees were proper shades of brown and green, no longer doubled over, but standing proudly at their full height. A few birds were even singing in them, building nests. The vines were no longer black, hateful things. When I brushed against them, they weren't hard and sharp anymore, but soft and smooth. They moved back and forth in the breeze, and I know it sounds silly, but it almost felt like they were waving to me.

And even though it was now early spring, the garden was in fuller bloom than the land around it. I had no idea how that could be. Also, the pond wasn't frozen. I supposed the warmer weather had something to do with that, though I didn't know of any ponds whose ice melted overnight. And the water was a stunning shade: so bright it was almost turquoise. When I spotted Dym in there, my heart soared. I could almost feel it, rising in my chest. He looked even better in daylight than moonlight.

"You're awake!" I cried as I ran to the edge of the pond. I wanted to be angry with him for failing to help me. But that desire was no match for my overwhelming relief.

Dym smiled and yawned, rubbing his eyelids. "Hey," he said drowsily, "I like the new look." He nodded at my half-skirt, half-trouser ensemble.

“This? Oh, thank you,” I replied. “It’s just a little something I threw together.”

Dym chuckled, waking up more fully now. “Or tore apart, by the looks of it. But it’s nice. I don’t think I’ve seen a girl wear anything like it before. And of course I’m awake,” he said. “Rather hard to swim in one’s sleep, don’t you think? Though I did dream I held the moon in my arms. It was almost a pity to open my eyes.”

“But how are you . . . I mean, because I . . .”

Dym raised his eyebrows. “Because you what?”

I sighed. “C’mon, Dym. You must know it was me who made you sleep. After all, it was your idea in the first place.”

“It wasn’t my idea to make *me* go to sleep. It was supposed to be Catron. And I did wake up with an appalling crick in my neck.” He rubbed his back, just above his shoulders. Then he stretched out his long, lithe arms, twisting them over and over. I couldn’t help but stare. *Sometimes I wonder if he’s just showing off.*

“I know, but what could I do? You wouldn’t leave! I only wanted to keep you safe. It turns out the spell didn’t work because Catron already had one on him—for protection.”

“He *did*?” Dym’s jaw fell, and he stopped stretching. “I’m sorry, Seluna. I never would’ve guessed that—or suggested a spell I thought wouldn’t work.”

“It’s all right. I know you wouldn’t. Anyway, you’re probably wondering what happened in there.” I jutted my chin towards Silver Hill. “Why I’m still here. The truth is, Catron tried to kill me. And I don’t mean with his sadistic experiments. I mean *really* tried to kill me. With a rifle.” I went over last night’s events, including using the spell for Drawing Down the Moon. I left out the goddess part.

“I can’t believe you were so brave,” Dym said when I was finished. “I mean, I *can*, but I don’t know if I’d have made the same choice you did. Going *back* in the asylum and all.”

“It wasn’t really a choice. I had to do it.”

“You could have been killed. I apologize again for the sleep spell’s ineffectiveness,” Dym said solemnly. He used his forearms to lift himself partway out of the water. It was almost as though he wanted to take my hand, or wrap his arms around me. “And I am truly sorry about your friends, especially Laura and Rose.”

I swallowed a lump that suddenly appeared in my throat. “That’s all right. I only wish they could have had the future they deserved.”

“At least now, they are vindicated,” Dym said. “And Drawing Down the Moon worked. Guess the protection spell was no match for it.”

“Er, right!” I didn’t know if I should say it was my goddess power that removed the protection. Instead, I motioned to the trees and vines around us. “And can you believe the garden is in full bloom again?”

“It’s not surprising this would happen when there’s a spillover of power. Doing something like

drawing down the moon calls upon a great deal of cosmic energy. The excess generally goes to the closest place it's needed."

"The garden," I realized.

Dym nodded. "You probably noticed a smaller example when the garden started coming back to life, little by little, when you were here."

"You saw that, too?" *I guess it wasn't my imagination. But why does Dym think I carry moon power with me?*

"You affect life all around you, Seluna." Dym grinned his smirky grin. "It's a bit hard not to notice."

I tried not to blush. *It's just as hard to remember I'm supposed to be angry with you.*

"Not to mention the fact that reflective surfaces act as conduits to channel the moon's energies. It's part of why reflections made it easier for you to reanimate things."

"Wait a minute," I said. "How do you know all this? About the moon and the energy and the conduits? And I never mentioned anything about reflective surfaces making reanimation easier."

"I told you, Seluna, I'm a student of the moon." He smiled again and made circles in the water in front of him. "I look at her, study her. Try to predict her every move."

"Okay, then why did the moon save the garden, but not those poor girls?" I sank down by the pond and dropped the Book by my side. Suddenly, I was saddened by the realization that the other patients could have lived, but didn't.

Dym stopped smiling and took my hands. The gesture surprised me so much I almost cried out. His hands were wet, of course, and I expected them to be cold. But though they left damp spots on my trousers, Dym's hands were as warm and caring as any I'd ever held.

"The moon can only work with what it's given, Seluna," he said softly. "The garden was alive all along, underneath. But the girls' life energy was all but gone." He stroked the backs of my hands with his thumbs.

I took several deep breaths and willed myself not to cry. I'd never had trouble controlling myself before, except the last time I saw Dym. What was it about him that made my emotions crash on top of me all at once?

"If you don't mind my saying so, I think you should bury them in the garden. I can help, if you like."

I almost regretted having to pull my hands away from Dym's to stop the tears from coming. For a moment, I put them over my eyes, which stayed dry.

"They'll be part of the earth again, and will help the garden grow," Dym added.

"I don't suppose their families will come looking for them," I said at last.

"Sadly, I didn't suppose that either."

"But the garden will keep growing, won't it?" I lifted my head to look at the trees and vines above. "I don't think I can bear the thought of all this flowering beauty turning back into death."

“It will if you take care of it from now on.” Dym rested his elbows on the ground. “It only died because Catron let it. Most of us need constant light and attention to live, from one source or another. When we are unloved, neglected . . . when our potential and possibilities wither, evil things take root.”

“I’ll certainly do everything to prevent that from happening here,” I said. A green leaf—green!—fell from the tree overhead, and I turned it over and over in my hands. “But what I don’t understand is why Catron’s psychic said an evil event would occur at all. You’d think ridding the world of people like him and Cutter would be considered a *good* thing.”

“Because it was Catron’s fortune being told, the psychic saw those deaths as evil and inauspicious for *him*,” Dym explained. “The outcome of the fortune all depends upon your perspective.”

“Speaking of fortune-tellers,” I looked darkly at him, “why didn’t you tell me these things were going to happen? The girls getting hurt. *Me* getting hurt. So many innocent people dying.”

“Seluna, if I was shown something I thought could keep you—or anyone—from harm, you know I’d tell you in a heartbeat. But it’s like I said when we first met: psychic abilities can be unpredictable. If a feeling or vision comes, it’s like an unexpected gift.”

“Next time you get a gift like that, do me a favor?” I sighed. “Keep the receipt.”

“Rather difficult, with no pockets in my swimming costume.”

I managed a smile. “Then get a box specifically for receipts at home.”

I thought Dym would smile back. Instead, he looked at me for a long moment.

“Actually, Seluna, the sea is my home.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, ‘the sea is your home?’ No one lives in the sea . . . unless that person is a fish.”

Dym looked at me for several more long moments, a reluctant expression on his face. “Seluna, I have something to tell you.” He pushed himself back from the ground and into the water, then stopped. “Actually, it may just be easier to *show* you.” He swam towards the center of the pond. “Ah, you may want to stand back a little.”

I had no idea what Dym was about to do, but I got up and moved several feet away from the pond.

Dym took a deep breath. “Okay, here goes.” He sank underneath the surface of the water.

When he didn’t resurface right away, I began to get nervous. “Dym?” I called. Then louder. “*Dym?*”

Suddenly, Dym came bursting out of the pond, leaping straight up. He made a wide arc with his body before slicing back into the water. Over and over, he flew above the waves, each time landing back with an enormous splash, only to explode out again. *Incredible*, I thought. *I didn’t realize he was such a strong swimmer*. But his swimming abilities weren’t the most startling thing. No, *that* honor was reserved for the lower half of Dym’s body.

It was an enormous fin covered in scales.

I gasped. The blue-green fin was long and agile, tapering into two points at the end. It sparkled brilliantly in the sun. *Beautiful. Just like every other part of Dym.* I was still gasping for breath when he swam to the shore.

“Dym, you’re . . . you’re a *mermaid*?”

“*Merman*,” Dym corrected, somewhat sharply. He shook the excess water out of his hair while I returned to where I’d been standing. “I still have all my important parts underneath these fins, you know.” He rolled his eyes. “Just call us ‘mers’ for short. That’s what we do.” Then his face softened. “I see you’re fairly shocked about my heritage.”

I shrugged and quickly regained my composure. “Maybe a little. But my sister claims to have married a cricket. Stranger things have happened.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “So, when I first met you . . . that bit about you being a shepherd?”

Dym didn’t even blink. “Oh, that? I lied.”

“Wait, that means *you* were the creature Catron was looking for,” I realized.

Dym made a face. “ ‘Creature’ is rather a harsh word, don’t you think?” He smoothed back his hair and extended his long neck to look up at me. “Still, I’m guilty as charged.”

“But that also means if Catron had found you, he would have found . . .” My voice trailed off. Dym was looking at me, full of awe, the same way he had when we first met.

“You knew,” I said simply. “You knew what I was—*who* I was—the entire time.”

Dym’s eyes were shining, and he smiled as though he’d never stop. “Not at the beginning,” he said. “Though I strongly suspected, as I’m certain Catron did. I heard whispers on the wind that Selene—also called Luna—had been reborn somewhere in this area, and my intuition led me to Silver Hill. I couldn’t tell you outright that I was a mer, or that I thought you might be the goddess of the moon. As I said, I wasn’t certain of the latter. Not to mention that professing the two beliefs combined might make me seem a little, well, crazy.”

“Crazy.” I nodded, glancing back at the asylum. “I agree we’re in the right place for crazy. So, all those times you came here weren’t to swim, relax, or thrill-seeking? It was to see *me*?”

Dym nodded. “After a while, I surmised who you were.”

“Why didn’t you tell me I was who you thought I was? When you knew who I was, I mean?” I rubbed my head. *This conversation is making me dizzy.*

“Would you have believed me if I did? What evidence did I have to convince you? Even your own extraordinary abilities weren’t enough to do that.”

I had to admit, Dym had a point. The evidence had been staring me in the face the entire time. I’d just refused to see it.

“And knowing what valuable creatures mers would be to someone like Catron, revealing myself would only have put you in danger. I couldn’t even disguise myself as a mortal at Silver Hill if I wanted to. I have no method of smuggling dry clothes in here, you realize. The only way in for me is through the moat.”

I tried to interject, but Dym wasn't finished. All the words came tumbling out of him. Like my emotions, I supposed he'd been holding them back a long time. He must have wanted to tell me all this ages ago.

"How was I going to explain not only a trespassing boy, but a *naked* trespassing boy at an insane asylum? If I showed my fins, they'd definitely know I was a mer. We'd both be in a boatload of trouble then. And I couldn't very well bring you to my home to ensure your safety. After all, I live at the bottom of the ocean. I couldn't get a message to Laura's aunt or anyone else, because I'd have to explain *how* I knew the girls were in trouble, about the asylum, et cetera. Why I was there when I shouldn't have been."

"Wait," I interrupted. "Exactly how would you have been a naked boy? I mean, any more naked than you are now." I looked down at Dym's exposed torso and glistening scales. "You can't walk with fins."

"Mers have legs on land, when our lower halves are dry," he said.

"But I still don't understand why you were so valuable to Catron."

"It is said that the minds of mers instinctively turn towards the moon, and therefore, the moon goddess. I don't know if it's a myth, or if it actually has a basis in science. Let's just say Catron wouldn't be the first to try and fish around in there—no pun intended—for some useful gray matter." He saw the look of alarm on my face. "Not that it's been done to me," he said quickly. "But I've heard of it happening to others of my kind."

"That's awful," I said softly.

"Indeed." Dym rubbed his face. "I don't know what they'd find if they did crack open my skull. Possibly something, possibly nothing. But I selfishly kept coming back because I couldn't stay away from you. I'm so sorry, Seluna. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you? But there's nothing to forgive! It is *I* who should be asking *your* forgiveness. For the way I ended it, the things I said . . ." I gestured helplessly.

Dym shook his head. "I knew there was a possibility of your enchanting me, the way Selene did with Endymion the shepherd. I didn't know if I'd ever reawaken once you made me sleep. Endymion never awoke in the legend, if you recall. But I chose to stay anyway. What else could I do? All mer worship you, Goddess." Again, that look on Dym's face that I had never seen on any other boy's.

"How could I be a goddess and not know it?" I asked.

Dym shrugged. "Many people do not know the power they possess. Especially women."

"But how did you know about the sleep spell? You can't expect me to believe you just chose page one thirty-six by coincidence." I picked up the Book and held it in front of my chest.

"The same way I knew to search for it, and leave it in the secret passage for you to find," he answered.

My jaw dropped, and the Book nearly did as well. "You knew about the secret passage, too? Let me guess: it's all part of that family-intuition thing. And by family, I assume you mean mermaids?"

“*Mer!*” Dym corrected. “And yes.”

“Where *did* you find the Book?”

“It was behind a few stones in one of the outer walls. How it got there, I’ll never know.”

“How do you even get to Silver Hill and the garden, Dym?” I turned the Book over in my hands.

“I mean, now that we’re revealing our innermost secrets and everything.”

“Most people don’t know this about the asylum, but its moat connects to an underground river that leads all the way to the ocean. That’s why no one ever sees me walking along the vast miles of moor when I visit.”

“Because you’re essentially swimming underground.” *I wonder if Silver Hill’s founders put the river there.* “Still, I can’t believe you came all that distance just for me, over and over. It’s an awfully long journey to the sea.”

“Not for an adept swimmer.” Dym rose up and down on his fins. *Show-off.* I realized all those times it seemed he was standing in the pond, he’d really been moving his tail underwater to keep afloat. He couldn’t kick off like other swimmers because then I’d see his fins. All the strange, mysterious things he’d been doing were starting to make sense.

Slowly, Dym stopped his body from rising and falling. “Seluna, I wanted to ask you, what will you do now that you’ve defeated Catron? I can’t imagine you going back to live with your family.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them. “I’m not sure. It’s all just been too much. I need some time to think. I thought I’d live at the asylum for a while.”

“Live *here?*” Dym made a face like he’d tasted Silver Hill food for the first time. “Why would anyone do that?”

“Well, I’d make a few changes, obviously. Besides, there’s a certain mer who visits for midnight swims. One I’ve grown especially fond of.” This time, it was Dym who blushed, and I enjoyed a smug sense of victory.

“And I have a feeling this battle isn’t over,” I continued. “The last time I saw Catron, he said I’d stop at nothing to complete my mission. Then he mentioned something about ‘others coming for me.’”

Dym looked alarmed. “Others? What others?”

“Beats the devil out of me.”

Dym leaned his head closer. “You know, you might have told me this before. I’m only now finding out you might be in peril. *Again.*”

I pursed my lips. “Well, excuse me if I was distracted by someone revealing himself to be part fish. Besides, I don’t care. Let them come, these ‘others.’ Let them all come. I sorted out Catron. I wager I can sort out anyone else who challenges me. In the meantime, I’m pretty much head of the asylum, and I’ve got some interesting plans for it.”

“I admire your confidence, Seluna, but do be careful. Of course, I will help in any way I can against these new threats, whatever your plans may be.”

My expression softened. “Hopefully, we won’t see them for a while, if at all.” I knelt down to get

a closer look at his face. “And thank you, Dym. You are kind beyond words.”

We looked deeply into one another’s eyes. Dym and I were so close, our lips were almost touching. Suddenly, he coughed and juttet his chin towards the Book.

“You know, I flipped through more than a few pages of that compendium before putting it in the staircase. But there was one part I didn’t understand. It shows a boy smiling, looking up at the moon.”

I knew exactly which part Dym was referring to: it was Queen Sophia’s story of the moon goddess and her lover.

“Do you think it could be us?” he whispered. The sunlight filtered through the trees, making beautiful triangular patterns on his face. I could only imagine my face looked similar.

“I think it must be,” I breathed. Maybe that explained the swaying feeling I had when I first met Dym. *Is it because I knew him in other lifetimes? Am I the sand to his sea, the moon to his tide? If this is what falling in love feels like—again—it’s enough to make one dizzy.* “Perhaps that was the real reason I used the sleep spell to protect you, even though I was furious you wouldn’t help me.” Dym opened his mouth to speak, but I put my hand up. “Now, I understand why you couldn’t, of course. But maybe, subconsciously, I knew we were destined to be each other’s loves. It’s funny, though. You’d think we’d get tired of doing this over and over. Coming back down, having to relearn everything.”

“I don’t know, Seluna,” Dym replied. “A thousand lifetimes with you may not be enough. After all, the moon is the heavenly body of mystery. Endlessly fascinating.” At first, I couldn’t tell if he was teasing me. Then he said the next part so softly, I could barely hear him.

“Why do you think I’ve worshipped you all this time? I think I loved you even before I was sure you were a goddess.” This time, I knew he wasn’t teasing.

“And imagine, I thought you were just a boy in a pond. Dym, I think—no, I’m *sure* I love you.”

“I have always loved you, Seluna. *Always.*”

He leaned closer to me, his eyes hesitating. Finally, he pressed his mouth fully against mine and circled my waist with his arms. His whole body was wet, soaking my clothes. But I didn’t care. I threw my own arms around his strong shoulders. *Finally.* I kissed Endymion. His lips were warmer and sweeter than I ever could have dreamed. Through him, I tasted salt on the water, felt light and shadow on the waves. I kissed and kissed him as a thousand oceans moved back and forth between our souls.

Our lips parted for a moment, and we were breathing hard. We stared into each other’s eyes, almost unable to believe we’d arrived safely at this moment. But Dym kept holding me tight. I stroked the back of his neck. At last, he spoke.

“I finally did it,” Dym murmured. He raised one hand to my face and put his fingertips to my cheek. “I kissed the moon herself.”

Chapter 17

*I*t was late in the afternoon, just before sunset. Thoughts of that morning drifted away as I tried to focus on the tasks at hand. There was still a lot of sweeping to do, not to mention a laundry list of other things. But I could feel my energy begin to rise with the approaching night. I'd already thrown Cutter into the asylum furnace. I considered moving the girls to a separate room until Dym and I could put them to rest properly. It was something I dreaded, but at least the one I loved would be there to help.

Dym. Even the thought of him had me smiling. I was sure his ego would be very satisfied to know that, not that I was going to tell him. We'd made plans to meet again tomorrow at the pond. After that, who knew what would happen? Right now, I had to concentrate on getting Silver Hill back in order. And I had to find a clean pair of trousers for Dym.

I'd just finishing cleaning a large part of the main entrance and was sweeping rubbish down the front steps when my eyes met with the strangest sight. A lone rider on horseback was galloping up to the front door at breakneck speed. The horse's hooves sounded like falling coconuts as they went across the stone bridge over the moat. It didn't look like there was any attempt to slow down. I jumped out of the way, and at the last minute, the rider jerked the horse's reins to one side. The horse let out a loud whinny and swerved into a stop, spraying gravel everywhere.

The rider was a postman.

What on earth is a postman doing at Silver Hill? I thought. Patients weren't allowed to receive letters or packages, not that there were patients here anymore. Perhaps it was something for the recently deceased or absent staff. The postman climbed off his horse and looked around. The front doors were wide-open, so he could easily see the building's disastrous interior.

"What 'appened 'ere?" he asked in disbelief, giving me only a cursory tip of his cap in greeting. I looked around at what could only be described as utter chaos.

"Remodeling," I replied.

He glanced at the falling ceiling, the bullet-riddled and broken walls, shattered mirrors, and of course, the debris-strewn floor.

"Remodelin'? Looks like a bloody meteor came through 'ere!"

"A heavenly body was definitely involved," I said.

The postman's brow furrowed. "What's that, then?"

"Never mind." I nodded to the item in his hand. "It seems you have something for Silver Hill?"

"What? Oh, yes. This." The postman stopped staring at the devastation and handed me a large white envelope with my name on it. "It was only recently the post office got orders to begin deliverin' mail 'ere again. Well, any mail not addressed to 'Dr. Catron and Staff,' that is. Wonder why we got the order all of a sudden."

Dym, I thought. I looked at the address on the front of the envelope. It was written in my mother's hand.

"Say, where is Dr. Catron, anyway?" the postman asked. "'Aven't gotten any mail for 'im in a while."

With a satisfied smile, I glanced behind me at the crater-shaped hole in the middle of the floor.

"He's gone away on a long trip," I said. "He won't be back anytime soon."

"Well, I'll be on me way, then. That is, unless you'll be needin' me 'elp with anythin' in there . . ."

The nosy postman peered over my shoulder, trying to get a better look inside.

"Thank you kindly." I stepped in front of him. "But I'm sure the Hartlandian postal service has much more important things to do than sweep floors." Disappointed, the postman tipped his cap to me again.

"Good day, then, miss," he said. "Good luck with your ah . . . yeah." His voice trailed off, and with one last glance at Silver Hill's rubble, he jumped back on his horse and sped off into the distance. As soon as he left, I threw my broom down and tore open the envelope. Tossing the latter on the ground, I took a deep breath and focused on the tight, elegant script.

"Dearest Seluna,

"If you are reading this letter, then you have realized who you are. Your father and I cannot tell you how happy we are for you. We also understand you met Endymion, who has incarnated as a mer in this lifetime. We know this because the messenger god, Hermes, witnessed these events and reported them to us. But as it is not his role to directly influence earthly affairs, he was prevented from intervening in the dangers you faced.

"By now, you must also realize that we are the incarnations of the Titans Theia and Hyperion."

What? No, I felt like saying, *I did not realize that!* The shock was so great, I nearly dropped the letter. But I continued reading.

"Your brother, Helios, is the god of the sun, and your sister, Aurora, is the goddess of the dawn. Together, you three form a triumvirate: the Protectors of Light. All of you are reborn again and again to perform a special mission upon the earth: to safeguard light. It's possible Endymion will be able to assist you in this mission during your incarnation. But you may not remember all this just now."

I was suddenly aware that my mouth was hanging open. *There really is a Hermes? My parents are Titans, and my siblings deities as well?* In addition to discovering I was a goddess and Dym was a mer, I didn't know how many more surprises I could take.

My mission is to “safeguard light”? What in blazes does that mean? Is the sun in danger of burning out? Apparently, that’s my brother’s department, since he’s the god of the sun. This was crazier than anything I’d witnessed at the asylum. It was too unreal for words. Slowly, anger started burning a hole in my chest. *How could they do this to me? Throw me into the path of a sadistic madman and his minions?* I could literally feel the heat of rage as it rose in my throat. I kept reading.

“You may be angry that we placed you in harm’s way.” *You bet your bloody souls I am!* “Please believe us when we say that we knew you were strong enough to defeat these monsters. You may not know it now, Seluna, but you are perhaps the strongest of us all.”

The strongest of them all? I don’t understand. I sank down on the steps, clutching the letter. I stared harder at the words, as if doing so would force them to make sense.

“We did not send you to Silver Hill for the reason you believe: that we feared you would end up like Aurora. She’s actually not mad at all; your sister really can talk to animals. No, we sent you to the asylum because it was the only way to show you your strength, and who you really are. Words would not have sufficed, for if someone had told you that you were a goddess, would you have believed them?”

You could at least have tried to tell me! I thought, almost in a silent scream. But I couldn’t help agreeing with my parents a tiny bit. I had always been the skeptical sort. If someone had tried to convince me I was the goddess of the moon, I likely would have laughed at them, no matter how trustworthy or sincere they were. It was the reason Dym didn’t tell me; he said so himself. But there was more to the letter.

“You seem to have this difficulty in every lifetime, not understanding your heritage or your powers. Please believe us when we say we gave a great deal of thought to helping you come to terms with them. We hope you understand, and perhaps can even forgive us. And yes, we always come down to Earth as a family. Oddly enough, Helios and Aurora never seem to have any trouble accepting who they are.”

Nice to know I’m exasperatingly special. At least now, it made sense why Mother and Father had been worried about me. Though I didn’t know that sending me to Silver Hill was the best way to resolve my identity crisis.

“But don’t think just because you now know the truth that things will be easy. Quite the contrary. Your fortitude will be tested in ways you could never have imagined. You may find that, with the knowledge of your divine nature, living as a mortal is more challenging than ever.”

I groaned. *Why didn’t they tell me that before I fell in love with a mer?* Though I supposed it wouldn’t have changed anything.

“When you are ready, please send for your brother and sister. They will explain more about your mission, and how you three can work together. Your father and I will remain at home for now, so that you, Helios, and Aurora can reacquaint yourselves fully in your new incarnation.

“We are both so proud of you, Seluna. We cannot wait for you to show the world all you were

meant to be.

“With everlasting love,

“Your parents, Theia and Hyperion”

I sat on the steps of Silver Hill for a very long time, staring into the sunset. There were so many conflicting thoughts and feelings running through me. Confusion. Anger. Love. More confusion. I couldn't even begin to sort them out. I'd definitely have to give it some time.

There's no need to send for Helios and Aurora immediately. My parents did say “when I was ready.” I'll have to decide when that is. I was curious to find out if Aurora really married a cricket. If so, I could easily invite him as well. Silver Hill was certainly spacious enough to accommodate any number of guests. *And of course, I thought with a little smile, you can't beat the garden.*

But what about the “others” Catron spoke of? The letter didn't say anything about them. *Does my family even know? Maybe they're part of the challenges the letter mentioned.* I'd have to ask about it at some point. But despite Dym's concern for my safety, I was intrigued to meet these new villains. I wanted to know who they were, what they wanted with me. And whether or not I could kick their asses like I did Catron's.

It would be interesting to explain this “Protector of Light” thing to Dym. I wasn't even sure I understood it myself. *What is his part in it? What is mine?* I hoped the future would bring us both some answers.

I heaved a loud sigh and put the letter in my pocket. Then I stood up, retrieved the broom, and headed back into Silver Hill. At least repairing the place would take my mind off things for a while. Plus, I could get ready for these “others,” if and when they decided to show up.

As I moved the broom rhythmically over the stone floor, I thought about what Catron had said. How he would know the goddess because she would be power hungry. But he'd been wrong. I just wanted power over myself and what happened to me. I wasn't different from most girls in that respect.

The broom hit something hard, but it didn't sound like the glass or stone I'd been clearing away. I looked down to find myself staring at the wooden horse Laura's brother had given her. She must have dropped it when the nurse wheeled her out of the asylum for the last time.

I picked up the toy and ran my thumb over it. I knew I wasn't to blame for what took place here. That guilt lay with Catron and his band of evildoers. But I still felt a sense of responsibility to the other patients. What happened to those girls happened because of me. It was my duty to make it up to them, to bring peace to *all* our spirits. I vowed to make Silver Hill worthy of them, as it always should have been.

Although I hadn't given Dym much detail regarding my plans, I'd decided to make the asylum a safe haven for those who'd been driven out by their families. A place where girls could use their talents, start a business, or refuse to marry. A place they could go even if they just saw things differently than those around them.

I would turn Silver Hill into a refuge, make it truly live up to the name “asylum.” I only hoped my so-called mission wouldn’t interfere. But surely it was possible to accomplish more than one thing in a lifetime. I tucked the wooden horse into my trouser pocket and gave it a few pats.

It was dawn when I finished sweeping and removing the majority of the rubble from the main entrance. I was exhausted; the time when my magic was strongest was at its end. But before I slept, I found a crowbar and began removing the bars from all the windows. I admired the dazzling colors of the sunrise as they shone through the glass.

Never before had the asylum seemed so alive. Never before had I known such light.

EPILOGUE

The vines were enjoying the peaceful weather, hanging lazily along the trees. No longer sinister and threatening, they wound their way freely down to the lake and dipped their toes in the water. No one tried to hinder them, or destroy their curious ways. And like Seluna until she returned to her heavenly realm, the vines were truly part of the garden now, and home. Home at last.

THE END



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ilana Waters writes mostly fantasy for adults, young adults, and middle graders. She once pet-sat an electric eel and crashed her car into a house, though not on the same day. Before she became a writer, she was reprimanded and/or fired for reading in every job she ever held.

She considers this her greatest accomplishment to date

Read more from Ilana Waters:

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FORBIDDEN THIRTEEN

FORBIDDEN LEGACY BOOK 1

ERIN RICHARDS

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FORBIDDEN THIRTEEN

Friday the 13th is no time to be a telekinetic—at least, not this one.

The number thirteen follows Aria Elle Walker like a bulldog. Lucky or unlucky, it triggers her telekinesis in freaky ways. In an era of banned magic, it could get her jailed...or worse.

One Friday the 13th, Aria's telekinesis goes wild and she accidentally kills a bounty hunter in her home. Before her freakout begins, in walks Ronan Riley, another "thirteen" telekinetic, and his doppelgänger—a dying Forbidden fairy. Hells bells, everyone knows fairies and the Forbidden are extinct!

After claiming she's the gateway "key" to releasing ancient magic into the world, the doppelgängers whisk Aria away from the goons Ronan's father hired to snag her. Dodging bounty hunters and screwy magic, the trio race to fix the damaged Rift before tainted magic kills the doppelgängers...or opens the floodgates to abolished magic. But Aria never expected their desperate alliance to generate a force of a different kind...an uncanny bond and undeniable desire for *both* doppelgängers.

Destroying Ronan's father, the mastermind behind the mayhem, is just icing on Aria's chaos cake. If her luck cooperates and doesn't kill her first, that is. And will unluck add Ronan to the body count after he betrays Aria?

Chapter 1

*I*t figures my natural bad luck and a blind date on Friday the 13th dumped me in the emergency room. I should've shied away from the creepy combination of cursed luck and locked myself in a closet. Lucky for me, I was okay. Unlucky for my date, Michael, he'd suffered an allergic reaction after eating Mexican cornbread. Talk about bonehead move. *I mean, hello, he has a corn allergy.* What part of Mexican *cornbread* had he missed in that little tip? To top that off, the inept artist had left his epinephrine shot at home. Zoe, my soon-to-be ex-best-friend, swore her cousin was available and smart. No wonder he was single. *No sense in pleading the fifth on smart.* Just another craptastic date on a merry-go-round of losers.

A guilty sigh pushed out of me as I stepped onto the elevator. I punched the fourteen button and the doors whooshed shut. The fact that Michael had ordered dinner number thirteen and the thirteen sombreros hanging from the ceiling had everything to do with him landing in the hospital. My stomach became a tight fist of unease.

Too many thirteens together equaled crapstorm in my life. Cursed at birth, I'd entered the world on Friday, January thirteen, at one thirteen in the afternoon. Or in military terms, thirteen thirteen. The bad luck number affected everything around me. I controlled some of it if I caught it in time, and fate took a spin on the rest.

Had Michael become an unwitting victim in my jinxed life or what? I certainly hadn't known he had a corn allergy until after his face nearly exploded. Honestly, I barely paid attention to what he was ordering while he ogled my chest and babbled on about how he'd love to paint me in the nude for an art class project. *As if.* Knowing it was Friday the 13th, I should've paid more attention once I'd counted the sombreros due to my insane need to count everything to avoid the number thirteen. Or my not-so-insane need to use my telekinesis to thwart the inevitable bad luck. Or I could've persuaded him to order dish number seven, but he was so freaking obnoxious, he'd left my brain practicing its freedom to terminate the date.

I sucked in my bottom lip. It was just too risky for others to be near me. I mistrusted my ability to control the bad luck side of my telekinesis, and I didn't know where my so-called freaky *gift* stemmed from. I wasn't sure if I had been born with telekinesis or if it'd developed over time. My abilities hadn't shown up until I'd turned seven years old.

Thank my lucky stars I'd never gotten caught. I mean, seriously, if the government honed in on my abilities, they'd lock me up like Hannibal Lecter, pink mask and all. For the most part, practicing any kind of extra-sensory perception and magic, whether innate or externally created, was illegal. People were scared of ESP abilities and magic, a deeply rooted fear from over three hundred years ago, when Earth was overrun with sorcerers and fairies who'd done the nasty and created a race of powerful fairy-sorcerers. Eventually, the governments eradicated them all and enacted permanent worldwide laws and heavy sanctions on magical use after the Abolishment. Yet, they never defined "extrasensory perception" as magic. That spooked me, so I lived way under the radar.

The elevator stopped on my floor, and I slipped between the doors before they opened all the way. I slid my card key into the security slot and pressed my thumb to the bio-reader. Automatic entry lights flickered on, lighting my way inside the dark condo on top of the Stargazer Casino, San Jose's newest residential-entertainment complex. The top floor of the residential tower was really the thirteenth floor, but marked fourteen. *Like people can't count.*

I kicked my pink pumps off and dumped my jacket on the antique chair in the foyer. My purse clunked on the marble console, the strap leaving tracks in a film of dust. I jiggled the potpourri bowl until a wimpy bouquet of cloves and cinnamon drifted to my nose. Housework hadn't risen to the top of my To-Do list yet.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." I yanked my phone from my front pants pocket and hopped the two steps down to the living room. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the glittery amber dots of downtown's lights. Winds had swept away the clouds, and a soothing star-blazing night greeted me, a far cry from the doom and gloom of my date.

"Cody, Cleo." My two Himalayans *always* skittered away from the havoc they wreaked the second they heard my voice. "Where are you?"

Creepy crawlies teased the nape of my neck. I slanted a glance down the two empty hallways. My right pinkie twitched. *Oh, hell.* If the crawlies advanced to a pinkie twitch, it was bad. Alarm dipped in and squeezed my heart.

Slipping my hand inside the small drawer of the end table, I gripped my stun gun. I tapped in casino security on my cell phone without punching the send button. The wall clock tick-tocking from the dining room eclipsed the sound of my uneven breathing in the quiet-as-a-church space. Not even a mouse stirred.

"Where are you ding-a-ling cats?" My voice trilled unnaturally. "You better not be leaving stinky presents in my new ficus."

Three halls broke off from the living room. The wide hall led to the foyer, and two narrower halls led left to the kitchen and right to the bedrooms. I tiptoed down the right hallway. The recessed lights automatically winked on. At the first door—the hall bathroom—a whiff of cheap Old Spice cologne assaulted me, reminding me of the casino blackjack dealer who marinated in it. My heart thudded in my ears, and I about hightailed it toward the front door. Gossamer threads of something foreign

fluttered in my head. As a telekinetic, I sensed ESP, and I oddly absorbed the intangible energy of other beings through my aura, but never to the point where it invaded my mind. I'd never even sensed a telepath tickle my telekinetic sensors, and I sure as shit didn't think an intruder was reading my mind.

I gripped my focusizer, a pendant encompassing the number thirteen. It helped me delve into deep telekinesis and concentrate my energy. Something just clicked in my brain whenever the dang number was present in any way, shape or form. Focusing also allowed me to deflect bad luck...when I knew in advance I needed to deflect. The enameled leaves on the vine and rose lucky charm dug into the flesh of my fingers, comforting and scary at once.

When I crossed the threshold of the wide open bathroom door, the automatic light flashed on. Stun gun held outward, I shoved aside the purple shower curtain. Empty. My heart pounded against my ribs. No rest for the terrified, I still had a bedroom and an office to check. Hating to expose my back to the hallway, I spun to face the door. Where were my useless fraidy cats? I should've gotten the drooling Rottweiler who ate kitties for snacks.

A crash echoed in the office next door, followed by two twelve-pound thuds on the hardwood floor. I nearly stunned myself as the furballs slid down the slick hardwood in their headlong rush toward the living room.

Feathers wavered in and out of my telekinetic receptors. Puzzled, I concentrated on the foreign invasion, but my thoughts muddled. More gossamer wings flapped in the corners of my mind, working toward the middle to totally unhinge me. *What the freaking hell?*

My phone rang. Startled, I hurled it into the air and it clattered onto the hallway floor. Lunging out of the bathroom, I stooped to snag it. The second I cleared the doorway, strong hands gripped my upper arms from behind.

A banshee scream erupted up my throat. Kicking backward, my bare feet connected with steel beam thighs. I thrashed side-to-side, hoping to break his death grip as his hands slid down my arms. My heart drummed so hard I thought it would pop out of my ribcage. I lost my grip on the stun gun and it spun across the hardwood to kiss my phone.

"Hold steady," my attacker growled. He cinched both my wrists in long, lethal fingers.

Pain seared my shoulders as he yanked my arms behind my butt. He grabbed my short hair and snapped my neck back. Needles scored my scalp.

"Take whatever you want," I gasped out. His weird ESP hit my brain in a puzzling jumble, and my telekinetic brain waves floundered beneath it. It was as if he was sending commands from his head to mine. I didn't care for his terrifying mind commands, not one bit.

He chuckled, his skanky breath hot on my neck. "That's the plan."

The stench of male sweat and *very* Old Spice filtered into my nose. "Okay." I stalled to collect myself. "Lock me in the bathroom and do your thing."

Sausage fingers tightened around my wrists. My shoulder muscles burned. I muffled a gasp,

refusing to dignify the attack with proof of my pain and terror.

“My *thing* is with you, Aria Walker.” The brute released my hair. Coarse fingers grazed the nape of my neck before sliding beneath my blouse to grip my bare shoulder.

“What are you?” I had to know what caused the tangle inside my brain.

He chuckled arrogantly. “Never met a Scrambler?”

I sucked in my stomach. “Scrambler” was slang for a strong telepath who had the ability to jumble and temporarily kill psychic abilities. A powerful Scrambler could even permanently destroy a person’s ESP, leaving behind a shell of emptiness. Some used to have the mental ability to coerce, but they hadn’t existed in centuries. Anyone with an inkling of ESP knew what a Scrambler was. The last sorcerers to permanently eradicate magic from the world used Scramblers to do the government’s dirty work.

No wonder I’d dropped my guard. The slimeball had messed with my head.

An arctic blast of shock iced my flesh. My innate electromagnetic energies swelled, steadying my growing terror. Energy surged, melting the ice, filling me with warm, heady power. My aura barriers vaulted in place to protect myself from the intense energy seething for liberation. A familiar, alluring darkness mushroomed inside my head. A flame ignited, a pinpoint of white-hot light, growing brighter, blazing hotter. I envisioned slipping into the Scrambler’s mind, forcing my command upon him. *Sleep*, I willed fiercely, drawing upon the light, oozing my will and my brain waves into the heat. *Sleep, lights out, assbat*. My bioelectric energy field—my aura—surrounded us, raining a paralysis on the guy.

Spears of energy pierced my shroud, numbing my flesh where it made contact. Mutually increasing horror threw us off kilter against the bombe chest in the hall. *Holy crap*. I’d never felt my aura touch me in anger.

The dude’s fingers dropped away. The sound of ripping cloth split the charged air as he thumped to the floor. Jagged silky edges tickled my bare arm as feeling quickly returned to me. Sidestepping the heaped intruder, I scooped up my stun gun and smartphone in trembling hands.

Goose bumps broke out along my bare arm. Regardless, I scouted out my condo to ensure no accomplices waited in the fringes. My defiled haven turned up empty and my shoulders sagged in relief. What did the guy want with me? Surely, my secret telekinesis was still *my* secret. The Scrambler hadn’t had enough time to screw up my head. So what had caused my aura to expand to the point that I actually felt the normally intangible energy?

I tiptoed back to the hallway and scrutinized the body. The man’s bald head, trim brown beard, and mustache didn’t ring my familiar bells. Criminals were sure well-dressed, or he was wearing his charcoal, pin-stripe suit for a funeral. I hoped it wasn’t for my funeral. “Not much of a Scrambler, are you?” I kicked his thigh. “Maybe you’re a wannabe.” Maybe I was a Scrambler. *Holy mother of illegal magic*.

The quaking in my hands fled across my entire body. Backing out of arm’s length in case he

awakened, I called casino security. City cops didn't show their faces on California casino property without an in-house security request first. New laws for an era of overpopulation and legalized stupidity. In a shaky voice, I informed the officer that I'd apprehended a burglar. The grumpy security man of the hour wasn't too jazzed to hear about a breach in their high-tech system, but assured me he'd dispatch a man stat.

Minutes later, the doorbell gonged. On wobbly legs, I managed to jog to the front door. A badge flashed through the peephole. I disarmed the alarm, opened the door. My breath left me in a rush. "You guys are quick."

I looked up and up into the handsome, arrogant face of a broad, muscular guy as he slipped his wallet into his jeans pocket. He appeared twenty-one, same age as me. Shoulder-length black hair framed sun-kissed skin that took poker face to a glacial extreme. Then he cracked. Concern flashed across his somber expression, and his gaze drank me in before his gray-flecked, blue eyes flicked over me, assessing, discounting. The hair of his right eyebrow was a strange shade lighter than his left, emphasizing his disregard.

"R.L. Walker," he said as if I had a sticky note with the answer pasted on my brow. He hauled a gun out of a shoulder holster and shoved past me, nearly knocking me against the wall.

His aura tangled around mine in a way I'd never experienced. Harmless, it seemed to seek relief, leaving a tingly sensation over my exposed skin. I froze, held my breath.

The strange sensation dissipated as quickly as it hit. Maybe the Scrambler *had* screwed me up. "Geez, what'd I do, interrupt your snooze fest?" I scurried down the hall behind him.

"Stay here." Without waiting for an invite, his long legs hiked over the downed intruder as though stepping over a twelve-pound cat.

Speaking of which...my two felonious felines proceeded to sniff Old Spice. Arms crossed to keep myself from wilting into a puddle of terror, I waited in the living room. After he swept the entire condo, Security Goon barreled out of my bedroom. I checked out his snug jeans, black boots, black T-shirt, and black leather jacket. A cliché in the making? Did he wear black skivvies too? All the security guards wore plainclothes at the Stargazer, so his appearance wasn't unusual.

He fingered the Scrambler's neck pulse. "Did you call the cops?"

"No." I rolled my eyes. "Isn't that *your* job?" My cats dared to rub against Rent-a-Cop. I tried shooing the furry traitors away with gentle toe jabs, but they wouldn't spare me a morsel of their time. What was up with that? My cats hated the male species.

Suspicion erased his blank expression. "Who *did* you call?"

"You." I hugged my arms tighter to my chest. "Aren't you a casino watchdog?"

Straightening, his eyes bored into my face. "Did you call them?" He stuck his gun into his shoulder holster, a good sign he didn't plan to use me for target practice.

Bowing my head, I pooled my sketchy mental resources and knotted a knockout spell in slow motion—a fancy way of saying I'd spring an electric emanation on his mind that'd send him to

Snoozeville. Why hadn't I examined his badge closer? I swallowed my renewed turmoil and glimpsed the stun gun where I'd dumped it on the chest across the hall, next to Fake Cop. Did I have enough mental energy left to protect myself?

My gaze flitted from his chest to his face. "Who are you?"

"He's dead. Call security off."

As my dwindling brain waves dissipated, my "knockout spell" unraveled as fast as it knitted together. I wagged my head, dispelling my mental sludge. "Not until you tell me who the hell you are and what you're doing here."

He tapped his foot on the floor. "Ronan Riley. I'm bagging your ass to keep it alive."

"Alive?" My eyelashes twitched up a breeze.

He snatched up my cell, stabbed redial, and handed it to me. "Call them off."

"Or what?" I tugged my torn blouse over my lacy pink bra.

Ronan pointed at the intruder. "Or you'll face murder charges, if you live long enough."

Those icy eyes pierced me, bright and beautiful against his winter tan. Energy rolled off him, and I shivered from a sensation of familiarity, almost like a connection. Heat flared low in my middle, startling me with confusing inappropriateness.

"Right. The sleazebag may be out cold—" I bent over the Scrambler. Ronan jerked my hand down and pressed my fingers to the man's lifeless pulse. The phone clicked on at the other end and I stuttered as my brain malfunctioned, "Aria Walker from P14. Ummm...false alarm on the burglar. Safe word, *Triskelion*. Just my boyfriend playing bonehead games." I waited for dismissal, then shoved the phone in my jeans pocket.

Through slit eyes, I studied Ronan's dark Viking build compared to my fair, petite stature. As night and day as women and men. Renewed warmth flushed my neck. I twisted my hands and scanned the unconscious intruder. Ronan's words registered. "He's only knocked out, right?" I whispered.

He landed his assessing glare on me. "Did you feel his pulse? You have no clue, do you? He's *dead*."

"No. No." My knees buckled. I'd have kissed the floor if Ronan hadn't swept me into his arms.

He carried me into the living room, dumped me on the couch, and backed away as if I'd sprouted dragon wings and spewed fire. "Water?"

"No. Thanks." I stuck my head between my knees, fighting the nausea inching up from my stomach.

"Your first kill?" Ronan's deep voice penetrated my chaotic thoughts.

"First...kill?" I closed my eyes. I couldn't even kill an ant. Bug spray didn't count. How could I have done that? Was that what had happened? *Oh, God. No.* The room spun.

"I know who you are, R.L. Walker." Arrogant impatience layered his voice.

"Obviously not, since my name's Aria." I screwed a lid on my raging horror. I had to deal with the...situation. I had to deal with Ronan. Hoping the nausea stayed buried, I lifted my head.

No one ever called me R.L. except my... *Holy shit, Batman.* He'd called me that twice. I gaped

at Ronan the barbarian. “How do you know me?”

He hunched down to my level. “I knew your father for a minute. He called you R.L., short for Aria Elle.” Empathy spooled off him in waves.

I longed for someone to fix this mess, to tell me what to do. Instead, I focused on his words. He *knew* my father? That rat-bastard who’d split from my life when I was six? The man who vanished into thin air, leaving his family behind.

Ronan stood to his full height. “We’ll talk about him...and other things later.” His hard voice held no sympathy. “Right now, we need to haul ass.”

Numb, I rose from the couch. He cupped my elbow, steadied me. His touch baffling and uncomfortable, I cast him off and clutched my throat. “What did you mean by first kill?”

“I caused my first bad luck kill when I was fourteen. On a Friday the thirteenth.”

Chapter 2

Another telekinetic plagued by bad luck? I twisted around to face Ronan. His grim face halted my inquisition. Small disappointment pricked my heart in learning I was no longer one of a kind, but a warm rush of excitement quickly eclipsed it. My earlier intuition at a connection between us was right on the money. Had a door opened in the life of my aimlessness? The door hidden from me as I searched for my true place? Everyone had died and/or left me too soon, leaving much unsaid and undone, enhancing my bumble into a world in which I never felt connected.

Over the last few years, I'd searched high and low for others like me, hoping I'd blunder upon hidden talents, since magic was illegal to practice. It's not like people walked around flaunting their abilities and risked arrest. My strange abilities weren't documented anywhere and spoon-bending, book-flying show-and-tell tricks were all I'd ever shown Zoe, my most trustworthy confidant. Although there hadn't been a forbidden magic death penalty case in decades, I certainly wasn't going to become a freak-frenzy for the media and law enforcement.

Fearing the unknown, the New Urban World government, known as NUW, established twenty odd years ago, continued the antiquated laws against magic. If anyone exhibited magical ability above a certain kindergarten level—gifting of gemstones for their positive energy properties and palm, tarot card, and crystal ball readings—they were put on the government's Paranormal Science Practitioners list, otherwise known as PSPs or just plain paranormals. It was like going on the terrorist watch or the FBI's most wanted lists. Once on the PSP list, you couldn't pop a squat without calling someone first. Big Brother at its finest.

Ronan and I regarded each other silently until he spun on his heels. "I'll dump the body." He snatched the Scrambler's gun, jammed the weapon into his coat pocket. "Pack a bag for several days."

"Excuse me." Slack-jawed again, I stared at his back. "Why?" I needed answers before I obeyed a stranger, connection or not, dead man notwithstanding.

Ronan ceased fumbling with the body and rose to look down on me from his towering height. "You've been outed, and you're wanted by...people who'll go to any extreme to bag your ass and lock you up forever." He thrummed his fingers against his thigh, nudged the dead psychic with a booted foot. "He works for them, and a shitload of bounty hunters aren't far behind."

My mind reeled as I wrapped it around this eye-opener. Who wanted a lucky charm maker, college art student so badly? Rubbing my ear, I gawked at Ronan. “Why me?”

“They know you have the powers of an ancient sorcerer.”

I waved my hand in front of my face and uttered a short relieved laugh. “I’m not...no one—” My heart plummeted toward my stomach. “What’re you talking about? Sorcerers died off with the dinosaurs.”

He scrubbed his hand over his face, giving me a look eager to melt skin. “Can you manipulate mind, matter, and other kinds of energy? Are you affected by strange things, bad luck, good luck?”

Face growing hot, I plucked at a loose thread on my new fashionista blouse. “How did *you* know?”

“Your father ratted you out to my fucking father,” Ronan spat out. “We’re both wanted.” He grabbed my bare arm in a vise grip. “Now shift your ass in gear.” He propelled me in the direction of my bedroom, giving a final prod on my lower back. “Pack or not. Either way, you’re coming with me.”

“Bastard,” I muttered. My *ass* still in park, I turned. “Why the hell would my father tell lies about me? He doesn’t know anything about me. You’re freaking delusional.” I snorted. “Why’re you here and why’re we both wanted? And who elected *you* puppet-master?” Hands on my hips, I glowered at him so hard my face practically pinched into place.

“Look, we don’t have time for this. I’ll explain it later. I won’t hurt you, but if *they* snag you, you’re screwed. You’ll wish you were dead. The man they work for will do a helluva lot worse than kill you.” He kicked at the downed intruder. His impenetrable facemask descended again. “Move it or I’ll drag you out.”

Apprehension gnawed at my usual confidence. Under the strain of an emotional kaleidoscope, I trudged toward my bedroom, snagging my stun gun off the bombe chest. I knew what being outed meant. Stranger or not, Ronan was right. I had to run. I couldn’t risk getting caught by the authorities, or anyone for that matter.

I stopped in my bedroom doorway, faced him. He watched me, his brooding face easier to read than earlier. “Where are we going?”

“Safe house near Los Gatos.”

The ritzy, high-rent town bordering San Jose sat along the nearby foothills, close enough to escape into the familiar if I needed to. “Safe for whom? You or me?”

“Both.”

“You’ll tell me everything?” My stubby fingers latched on to the door molding, needing to touch something normal. He nodded. “What about...how did...do you know what I did to him?” I waved a shaky hand at the Scrambler.

“Take two minutes to pack a few things. We’ll talk later.” He returned to hiding the dead man as if he taught body snatching for fun.

Thoughtful, I zoomed into flight mode.

My father had gone Benedict Arnold on me in the worst way, and I wasn't going to take it sitting on my rear, losing my freedom, or my life.



I secured the alarm behind me. Ronan carried my two overstuffed bags of jumbled clothes and whatnot. I left out bowls of water and dry cat food—enough for two weeks if the furballs didn't stuff themselves the first day and kick off from bloat—and both litter boxes filled for Cody and Cleo.

Ronan hadn't divulged what he'd done with the Scrambler's body. Honestly, I preferred to remain clueless about that aspect of my night from hell. I wasn't sure how to deal with my first accidental kill, so I buried it, knowing it would haunt me forever.

His voice butted into my thoughts. "Where's your car?" We stepped onto the elevator and he jabbed the first level casino button.

I studied the earthtone granite tiles. The reek of pot-laced cigarette smoke lingered, and I scrunched my nose to avoid inhaling it. "Where's *your* car?" The elevator dove to the first floor casino level.

He sneered. "I'm driving on a run-flat."

My head snapped up. "That was *you*? You were tailing me earlier?" I'd sensed someone following me from the hospital after making sure dipshit Michael was okay. At least until we passed Thirteenth Street and he'd popped a tire.

That perpetual scowl froze on Ronan's face. His sour lemon features didn't detract from his rugged handsomeness. He appeared menacing, a bar bouncer you'd evade at first until you got a tip-off at what lay underneath. Right now, frustration with a hint of fear played along the chiseled planes of his tan face.

The elevator dinged, the doors slid open, and I walked through the opening, staring at the slate tile floor. I pointed toward the door at the opposite end of the hallway. "My car's in the resident garage."

"We're not taking your car. Too obvious."

"I thought—"

"Try not to think. It's not working for you right now."

Slowing, I gave his backside a dirty look. "Screw you, Ronan Riley." I wavered at the first row of dollar slots. He kept on walking with a silent, lethal grace that had part of me dying to give chase. His nice firm ass was so worth it.

Rainbow lights sprayed the casino. Spinning wheels, videos, and bells created a symphony of noise. I spun out of Ronan's sight, jogged to my favorite machine. As usual, the thirteen-thirteen machine was unoccupied. I squeezed between two older women with identical brunette dye-jobs wearing polyester pantsuits differing from blue to purple floral working the flanking slots. Ugh, I

hoped that wasn't me in thirty years. I didn't do floral well.

I dug a Player's card out of my rear pocket and stuck it into the card slot. The fifty-credit balance registered. Anonymous and transferable cash-in-a-card after an automatic flat-rate tax hit on any winnings. Usually I waved my smartphone at the machine, but I didn't want this transaction traceable. As I punched the triple play button, Ronan grabbed my wrist, dwarfing half my lower arm in his hand.

"What are you doing?" He mashed his teeth.

Red, white, and blue sevens stopped on my machine's winning line. The woman to the right squealed. Digital bells clanged. Lights above the bank of dollar slots blinked in rapid succession, glints of red bouncing off the chrome and plastics.

"Lookie, sweetheart, I won!" I said in my best Southern belle twang. I eased my wrist from his grasp, jumped up and down, clapping.

Ronan's mouth gaped like a hungry tax man. "You just won twenty grand."

The two women gushed over the jackpot I'd risked my luck to win. Seriously, it was the biggest jackpot I'd ever won. I merely expected to win a thousand credits for emergencies. I never let myself win larger jackpots. I did maintain some morals and personal rules when manipulating my telekinesis.

Ronan plucked the card out of the machine and stuck it in my back pocket. His fingers lingered a few seconds too long before he whisked his hand away. I couldn't halt the bizarre desire trickling into my veins. *Add to To-Do list: therapy.*

"Time to go, babe," he drawled, matching my phony accent. He leaned down and whispered, "Move it" nastily in my ear, grabbed my hand and hefted my bags over his shoulder.

His long-legged stride forced me to skip to keep pace. "Slow down! I didn't drink my EnerRizer this morning." I knew I'd regret not replacing my supply of rise and shine instant energy in a bottle.

"Shut. It." Ronan's stride revved up as we traversed the midnight Friday casino crowd.

I dropped my voice to a whisper. "Hey, cut the 'tude. I can't go on the run without cash. How much cash do you have shoved up your ass for this jaunt to Insanity?"

We flew by the entrance to the Licensed Escort wing designated by a swish of ruby lips across an ebony door. Wildly popular, Licensed Escorts were NUW's legalized slant on prostitution. I tended to avoid that part of the entertainment complex. Ronan did a double take, slowing, his head spinning like the *Exorcist* girl.

"What's wrong?" My right pinkie spasmed. "What the what?" I muttered under my breath. Couldn't I skid through the night without more bad luck dumped on me?

"We've been tagged by another bounty hunter." Ronan released my hand and slipped on a pair of black leather gloves he'd snared from a mysterious pocket in his jacket's interior. "If you have gloves, put them on."

"Hell. Lo. It's *California*." I narrowed my eyes at his worn gloves. "You came prepared for a crime spree? Are you a prophet or just a kidnapper?"

Ronan shouldered me behind a jungle of fake trees and bushes toward a tropical paradise. "Can

you get us out of here?”

“What? You’re asking me to *think*?” Sarcasm dripped venom from my tongue. “I thought you knew what you were doing.”

I had much to learn from Ronan, and it pained me to admit that I was growing to like him. *Don’t ask my love-struck eyes*. His aura gave off an energy that frolicked nicely with mine. Normally, when I absorbed energy, it was barely perceptible, rarely identifiable. Even though it enhanced my aura, I’d never *felt* other people’s auras. Mine was always too dominant. His aura I definitely felt, warm and prickly at once. Fear also prevented me from trying anything stupid on him. I might be blonde with three-quarters of an art degree, but I wasn’t dumb.

“*You* know the casino.” He glowered at me.

I peered through the fake jungle and spotted *the* man. “Slim guy, navy suit recalled by the ’50s? Dirty blond? Just came out of the escort wing.” Rubbing his bulging crotch. I screwed up my face.

Ronan grunted something akin to a yes. He hovered behind me, peering through the fake branches I’d spread to form a peephole. “Is there an exit behind the waterfall?”

“Probably, but—” I paused. We’d end up on the frontline of a chase. “Lure him closer. Let’s knock him out.” I watched the bounty hunter in an aisle of electronic bingo machines. He spun in a slow circle, scanning the thinning casino crowd.

“Like you did to the guy upstairs?”

“Yes.” I almost missed the incredulous scorn lacing Ronan’s voice. The impact of his words smacked me upside the head. “I didn’t mean to kill him.” I blanched, forcing the memory aside. Dropping the fern branches, I pivoted on my heels. Ronan stepped back, probably afraid I’d whack him too. “I meant *knock* him out.”

“Won’t work.” Ronan investigated the granite boulders bordering a garden of soaring pampas grass, dense enough to hide in for days. The phony sea breeze fluttered a palm frond at my head. I smacked at it, snagged my foot on a silken vine, knocking down a red parrot. It thumped on Ronan’s foot and he booted the bird toward the wafting pampas grass, where it landed with a loud thwack.

I gave him a tight-lipped smile. “Why won’t it work? I can control it.” In dismay, I peered at the upside down bird.

Ronan stepped behind the waterfall. Crouching, I inched toward him into a utility room off a corridor leading to the rear of the building.

“I’m doing it,” I said, hands on my hips.

He scrutinized my face, but I masked it, stealing a cue from him.

“Two telekinetic sorcerers negate one another when together.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think not. Didn’t I just win twenty grand? Way I see it, if you really are a sorcerer, you didn’t negate me. You probably boosted my energy.” Okay, I exaggerated since I wasn’t absorbing his energy at all even though I felt his aura, but the idea seemed plausible in this new universe of the weird.

Ronan groaned, indecision painting his face as if he struggled with bad information about this negation thing. Suddenly the air wavered around him, streaming into a thin opalescent rope. The rope shot toward the parrot, and the bird rose a foot off the floor, then plopped back down. “You negate me.” His eyes had gone dark. “I tried to shoot the bird into the waterfall.”

“I’m special, aren’t I?” A smirk might have been overkill so he received my beauty contestant smile.

“Yeah, something like that.” Ronan curled his arm around my waist, plastering me to his side. His hard body pressed against mine, and I shivered with that puzzling familiar awareness.

I inhaled his exotic spice on leather, filled my lungs with the intoxicating cologne. His aura stirred around mine, creating a cocoon effect. My heart pulsed in the most bewildering way I’d ever experienced. *Cripes, I don’t need my hormones to rampage.* “Umm...dude...what’re you doing?”

“He’s nearing,” he said, his mouth close to my ear. “Pretend we’re hooking up.”

My aura swelled and panic smashed my warm tinglies into smithereens.

“Calm it, Aria.” Ronan’s arm tightened on my waist. The heat of his chest pressed into my cheek. “You’ll off him if negation doesn’t affect you. It’s probably why you killed the other guy, if you absorb energy to boost your own.” His breath wafted my hair against my temple. “Give me your stun gun.”

All I’d experienced in the last hour scared the bejeezus out of me. More than anything, I wanted freedom to discover who and what I was without mercenaries tailing me.

Ronan began patting me down. He brushed the sides of my breasts, my nipples stiffened, jutting through my thin cotton T-shirt.

“Did you earn a cop badge in the last two minutes?” Face flushed, I pulled the gun out of my jacket pocket before he caused further harm to my rebellious hormonal system.

He snatched it and released me. “Stand behind me.”

“You have a plan?” I scooted behind him.

His body obscured my view of everything except his back, broad shoulders, and amazing firm and round ass. “Go along with me.” Ronan hid the weapon in his coat pocket.

Faux foliage shifted, rustled. Leisure Suit Larry had breached our hideout. My heart thudded against my chest.

I heard a nasally voice. “What’s up, kid?”

“Murph,” Ronan greeted, an edge of iron to his tone.

“You found her.” Murph rubbed his hands together.

“I’m taking her back.” Ronan shifted from one foot to the other, his spine arrow straight.

Say what? Aural energy escaped me, cracked heads with Ronan’s energy. Tangled telekinetic energy pulsed around us, smacking of electrical wires twisting in a windstorm.

“Come on, man,” Murph whined. “You don’t need the five mil bounty.”

My mouth mimicked a flycatcher. I quickly smacked it shut. Who’d have ever thunk lowly

telekinetic Aria Elle Walker was worth five million dollars? Dead or alive?

Murph took two steps closer. Stale smoke clung to his clothes. My nose crinkled, and I longed to bury my face in Ronan's back, but I fought the urge to touch the potential traitor, kidnapper, and hormone charmer.

"Stand down, Murph." Ronan pulled his hand from his pocket and eased it toward his hidden shoulder holster. "She's my take."

"Let's split the dough. No one'd be the wiser."

Would I have to knock them both out? "Hey, Murph?" I called from behind Ronan. "Guess what?"

"Shut it, bitch," Ronan warned.

I gnashed my mouth. He better be acting, or else I'd give his ass the smackdown to Australia. I needed a few more minutes to absorb energy from around me to recharge my brain waves. Not sure what Ronan was up to, I wanted my own escape route. "Murph? How bad do you want the bounty?" I scooted to the left, remaining halfway shielded behind Ronan.

Murph halted in the doorway of the utility room. The tinkling waterfall's splashes drowned our voices in the casino beyond. Grinning, he stroked his chin, displaying a gappy set of tobacco-stained teeth. A weapon hung loosely in his other hand. "Darlin', if you only knew. Now you gonna come with me willingly?"

The heat of his gaze felt like slimy hands on my boobs. I angled my head, eyeing him critically. "Do I look stupid?"

"Dial it down." Ronan stepped in front of me again. I moved along with him, my sight glued on Murph.

The unmistakable cocking of a gun hammer clicked. The gun engulfed in Murph's hand moved into position, aimed at Ronan's head. A muffled shot exploded in the air. It was barely long enough.

Relying upon my focusizer, I invoked my telekinesis, sending out an electrical vibration. Breathing in deeply, I focused on the path of the bullet. It zoomed above our heads, so close the hairs rose on the top of my scalp. A ceiling tile popped behind me after I deflected the bullet's course. My aura lashed out and connected with the energy Murph emitted. He slumped to his knees, arms dangling at his sides. A wet stain darkened the front of his pants as his bladder released.

In one swift movement, Ronan aimed and shot Murph point-blank between the eyes. Even with a silencer, the shot boomed in my ears. Blood oozed out the center of Murph's forehead, dripped down his hawk nose.

The heavy thump of his body on the glossy, red cement floor obscured the hiss of tropical white noise and the screaming in my head. My legs became seaweed, dumping me on the floor near Murph. I stretched forward and yakked my quesadilla dinner into a bucket in the corner. My stomach heaved until I expelled the entire ghastly night.

"Stay hidden." Ronan shoved my stun gun in my curled hand.

The barbarian of Hidden Bodies 'R' Us went to town without sparing me a second thought. By the

time my clarity resurfaced, he'd stashed Murph's body in the fake fauna and knelt beside me.

"Leave me alone," I said, voice hoarse and throat scratchy. I tried to invoke my power again, but it sank into a teaspoon of acid in my aching stomach. The energy I'd expended that night had shut down the intangible doors to my ESP. A tingle of electricity fluttered my hair. I just wanted to go upstairs, drag myself into bed with my kitties, and sleep the nightmare off. A blasted tear slipped down my cheek and that pissed me off the most. I slapped at the offensive droplet, smacking sense into myself. Before I could stop him, Ronan picked me up and hoisted me over his shoulder as if I were another sack of dead bones he needed to hide.

"Put me down!" The diminishing splashes of the waterfall drenched my croaky voice as he tramped down the hall toward the rear of the casino. My travel bags, slung over his other shoulder, banged against my skull. Using the last of my strength, I bolstered my arm to muscle the bags from hitting my already rattled head. His shoulder dug into my empty stomach, and my gut ached with every step. "Come on! I can walk."

"If I drop you, will you turn it off?"

"If you ask me nicely, I'll zip it, turncoat."

"Please?" he asked with considerable trouble. "We don't have time to screw around and you're going to draw attention."

Blood coagulated in my head, fogged my fried brain. I hated being upside down staring at the shiny, red floor. "I'll behave." That word hurt to say.

Double steel doors barred us. Ronan wrested me off his shoulder, his hands encircling my waist as he set me on my feet. Surprisingly, he straightened my skewed jacket, and then stripped off his gloves to work the security lock on the service door. Well, one second of gentlemanliness didn't make up for a night of murder, mayhem, and mystifying magic.

I fished mints out of my purse. Blood drained from my head, easing my encroaching headache. I contemplated my next move. Stun and run? Go along with him? I studied a crack zigzagging the length of the cement hallway. The red river zigged to Murph and zagged to the sane, safe life destroyed in one measly hour.

I couldn't go back. If Ronan told the truth, there'd be more Murphs, and the cops would lock me up tighter than a nun's chastity belt. With a decisive squint, I watched the silent hulk's hand enclose the electronic lock. He exhaled a couple of times and the lock clicked. The security light flashed green, and he shoved the door open wide.

"How'd you do that if I negate you?" I accused wanly.

Sweat glistened on his pasty forehead. "Cheap lock. I managed."

So there was a way around the negation, or he lied. I probed his features for any clue I could steal. Shallow lines of pain around his eyes aged his face, my only clue. I trudged past him out the door. We found ourselves by the delivery docks. Not a soul in sight, not even a bat. Chilly air flowed around me, dispelling the bloody stench from my nostrils.

Ronan motioned for me to follow him to a crevice between two loading docks. Shadowy lights illuminated the deserted area. Even in the dim lighting, I saw the pained tolerance on his face. “Get it out.”

I blinked rapidly. “Get what out?”

“Your rant.”

I braced my weary body against the exterior wall. What could I say? Murdering people squarely shoved me outside my element, even if the victims included skeevy bounty hunters. “Thanks, I guess.” My stun gun grew arctic against my palm.

“Aria. Murph was a hired enforcer with a mile long rap sheet. He would’ve taken a few days with you...before collecting his bounty.” His jet lashes swept down, up. “Five million. Do you get it now?”

Revulsion rolled through my middle as his innuendo sank deep. I clutched my jacket tight around me and said the only thing I could think to say, “You don’t want the money?” My teeth chattered.

He grasped my upper arms. “It’s not about the money.”

I jerked out of his hold. “Then why do you care about me? Why do you want me?”

His fists clenched at his sides. “I need your help to take down my father.”

Chapter 3

As much as I wanted to believe otherwise, I didn't exactly live a ho-hum life, especially due to my father's desertion at age six and my mother's death at thirteen. *Yeah, unlucky thirteen strikes again.* My grandmother raised me afterwards until she died after a bizarre topple off a ladder last fall. A few other traumas I'd rather pretend were fiction, and all involving the number thirteen.

I'd always known I possessed paranormal talents that defied description. Now people wanted me for them. One part of me wanted to knit a red carpet with my toes for the recognition and potentially finding my true purpose in life, something to kill the emptiness inside me. The chicken part of me didn't want the exploitation—or to die for it. Dying just didn't appeal to me. Ronan appeared to have information I wanted and needed. I refused to ignore that. Obviously, it wasn't safe to stay at home, and as much as I hated to admit it, I needed his help to get out in one piece. And he'd let me keep my stun gun.

Ronan and I left the shadows skirting the casino complex. My feet dragged and I was thankful he carried my bags.

"Where's tenant parking?" He slowed his long-legged stride.

My heart galloped from the exertion of keeping pace. "I thought you didn't want to take my car?"

"We're not." Ronan plucked a small tool kit out of his pocket.

"We're stealing a car?" I sucked in air. "I don't steal—" Ronan placed his palm over my mouth and my heart plummeted into my stomach. I bit him and his skin tasted salty...and chocolaty.

He yanked his hand away. "You little—"

I forced winter's fury into my glower, prodded his hard chest with my fist. Forget the evil eye. "Don't ever put your hand over my mouth." I punctuated each word with a finger jab to his shoulder. "Got it?"

His mouth hung open and he rubbed my reddening bite marks.

Shaking like a mad leaf in a gale, I spun on my heels and marched toward the parking garage. I wiped his taste off my mouth with the back of my hand as I approached the black-as-death Mustang I'd bought with Granny's life insurance money. Mom loved Mustangs and had driven one at my age. She was with me whenever I drove the hot rod. But I didn't trust Ronan with it. Maybe *borrowing* a car wasn't such a bad idea. *Oh, sweet hell's minions, get your pitchforks ready.* I'd have a lot to

atone for if I ever made it home alive.

Ronan's booted footsteps pounded a few paces behind me. Before I knew it, he'd picked the lock on the driver's door to an older dusty Cadillac. The sport model was parked in the thirteenth spot from the end. *Wonderful.*

"I have another vehicle waiting," said Ronan the barbarian. "We just need to clear out of the area."

Aggravated heat warmed my chilled cheeks, and I whirled to face him. "No fingerprints."

He slipped on his black gloves. "That's why I brought gloves." A hint of a smile curved into a devastating grin. His smile set off the slate specks in his eyes, sparkling from the fluorescent bulbs directly over his head.

What prompted that irresistible grin? My pulse raced circles around my hormones.

"We cool?" he asked as I neared the passenger side of the car.

"As a cucumber." *Rolling in the desert.*

I used the bottom of my jacket to open the door. Careful not to touch anything, I slid into the passenger seat. Leather bolsters wrapped around me, the leather cracked and rough. Rose-scented perfume lingered in the car, masking the scent of *eau de smelly ashtray and locker room carpet*. I banged my elbow on a half-empty water bottle in the cup holder, knocking it toward the driver's floorboard. As I made a grab for it, Ronan's hand tangled with mine. Electricity buzzed through his glove and I jerked back.

Wiped out beyond reason, I pressed the recline button, scratching the strange tingling away. The seat eased back softly and I wanted to snooze the night away. I'd placed my life in the hands of a total stranger, but resistance seemed as pointless as my date with Dipstick Michael. One hand resting on the stun gun at my waist, I huddled in my seat. If Ronan so much as looked at me cross-eyed, I'd find a way to jinx his luck.



Our swiped car jolted to a stop, flinging me out of a nightmare featuring the dead intruder chasing my cats on *Survivor* island, immunity up for grabs. I bolted upright, practically braining myself on the roof. Aural energy trickled from me and dissolved like tissue paper in a bonfire. I hadn't meant to fall asleep, which proved my telekinetic reserves had sunk to the level of ground squirrels. My brain ruled my body, and I needed time to recuperate, or there'd be a war of wills between my head and body. I wasn't quite sure who'd win.

Ronan strung his arm across the center console to brace me in the seat. "Sorry. Mutt ran in front of the car." He parked in the circular driveway of a secluded mansion nestled within a shadowy forest of Douglas firs, oaks, and redwoods. Little starlight penetrated the canopy of towering trees. The headlights and a single porch bulb illuminated the fir strewn, pea gravel driveway. *Did the butler*

forget to buy lightbulbs?

A black lab puppy trotted into the headlight beams, tail wagging sixty miles a minute. I did a double-take, my eyes narrowing as I inspected the dog. Strange psychic energy flashed into my center of power, stemming from the dog. I sensed an old soul inhabiting the pup's body. Exhaustion bogged my mind, and I shook off the weird sensations. Dogs weren't my thing, or I would own a salivating Rottweiler.

I tightened my grip on my stun gun. "I thought we were switching cars. Where are we?"

Ronan killed the engine and shifted to face me. "Adam's place in the foothills. He'll return the car, grab our other ride."

Anxiety circled my chest. "Who's Adam? Is he like us? Do you trust him?" A fiery focus of energy coiled in the pit of my empty stomach. "Whose puppy is that? He friendly?"

Ronan stretched out a hand, thought better of it when my eyes prepared to launch fireworks. "When you bit me earlier...did someone try to shut you up?"

"What's it to you? I ask a lot of questions, so call your lawyer." *Ronan Riley, meet Aria's tangent.* "Why do you think you can forcibly shut me up without any consequences?"

My last question stopped the words about to trip from his open cavern mouth. He closed it, a veil descending over his expression.

He tapped the dash. He must've been a drummer in a past life, or even in this life. Heck, I knew nothing about him. Gaze fixated on the shadowed house, Ronan ceased his finger solo. "There's a lot you need to know. You're gonna need to trust me. If you can't..." His wide shoulders rose and fell, the leather seat squeaking in protest.

My defiance melted in the wake of my fatigue and curiosity. I suffered his words grudgingly. "I'm listening."

He scratched his jaw. "If I were you, I don't know why I'd trust me. I understand why you didn't come willingly." He rasped his hand over his stubbly cheek, appeared to battle with a desire to extend a gesture. "You're just like your father described—feisty, stubborn, cute as hell."

"Cute is a six-year-old bouncing in the driveway on Friday the thirteenth, waving to Daddy as he drove off to get cookie dough ice cream." I crossed my arms over my stomach, cramming down the angry grief I despised.

A dense silence enveloped us until Ronan whispered, "I'm sorry, Aria."

"He lied to me. Deserted me and my mother, left us destitute, broke my freaking heart." My tears had dried up for my father long ago, and I'd only cried twice since the day he'd left. At that moment, divulging the deepest dregs of my life, I almost ended the drought.

I ground my back teeth. *No!* I refused to surrender so easily. Not after learning of his betrayal. Fury wiped the sorrow from my heart so painfully my breath hitched. I pressed my fingers to my mouth. The timing of our conversation sucked. I wanted to be two hundred percent lucid when Ronan gave me the goods on my father, and why a five-million-dollar bounty hung over my Goldielocks. And

how did my father know about my telekinesis?

I touched the back of his hand. “If you hurt, betray, or lie to me, I’ll hex you six feet under.” I hadn’t figured out how to hex someone, but I was working on it. Of course, I only had to wait for my *unluck* to handle it for me.

“I figured that was the lay of the land.” He massaged the spot I touched as if he wanted to buy the slightest bit of contact he could afford. “I had no clue I was rescuing a killer.” His lips ruffled up at the corners.

My bitterness skated out on my laugh. “Yesterday, I couldn’t kill a pesky fly. Look at me now. One dude in the hospital, a dead man or two. What’s next? Am I a secret killing machine? Thirteen curses and I’m dead?”

Ronan dipped his head. “If you only knew,” he murmured clear enough for me to catch his drift.

I swallowed the egg-sized lump in my throat, cracked open the door. “Is the dog friendly?”

“Yes.” He unfolded his large, sinewy body from the front seat. Gravel crunched loudly beneath his boots in the still night.

Easing into the pitch-black night, I gingerly planted my boots on the ground. Unafraid of dogs, I just didn’t want to step in any little presents that might stink up my shoes. The tail-whipping lab loped over to me and waited on its haunches. It seemed too well behaved for a puppy. Threads of energy wafted off the pup and skimmed through my aura like slivers of cool, luminous moonlight. The dog’s energy flitted around me similar to an unshielded psychic. It was cozy, exploratory, a light sifting of the hair on my arms, my special brand of psychic sensitivity. I’d only experienced that sensation from a human. Unease slipped over me as if I hovered in the stargate to the Twilight Zone.

“Let her sniff your hand,” a male voice crackled from the porch. “She won’t hurt you.”

Silhouetted in the doorway, within the shadows of the porch light, stood another tall hunk. The mysterious Adam, I presumed. The puppy swung its tail, swishing pine needles on the ground. My sight adjusted to the dark and I reached toward the black pup. Cats were my specialty, but the puppy was adorable. Both guys watched me as though I had an initiation to pass. Love/y.

The puppy stretched its neck, sniffed my hand, its nose cold and wet. Goose bumps fled across my arms as my aura crashed into another band of energy. I patted the dog on its soft head, my fingers tingling against its silky fur. Kneeling on a bed of dry leaves, I looped my arms around the pup’s neck. She smelled of firs and spring meadows. The lab licked my cheek, its tongue sloppy wet. A freeze swept through purgatory as cat lover Aria bonded with a dog.

“Hi, baby.” It wriggled in ecstasy. I kissed her nose and stood up. The pup gave a croaky bark.

The guy looming in the doorway moved toward us into the shelter of darkness from the surrounding forest. “Her name’s Infinity. Fin for short.”

His low, melodious voice drove chills down my spine that quickly warmed and flooded me with... Heaven forbid, I squirmed. Suffice it to say, his voice skimmed my bare skin, simulating a lover’s hands, vibrating in parts of me that had no right to vibrate to a voice.

Even with a baseball cap low over his brow, I saw his eyes glow like an animal's at the end of a flashlight. The violet orbs mesmerized me, and the glow bathed me in the unimaginable. Heat dripped into parts of me that had suffered a cold front for a long season. My mind challenged my body's response to him, tried to dampen my smitten hormones. I'd never burned for another in such a sexual manner. Invasive and welcome, the sensations both excited and frightened me.

I managed to close off my mind to his coercion and conquered whatever mesmerism he nailed me with. His violet eyes changed from emerald to teal to azure before the glow petered out. The stranger didn't possess an evil or harmful nature from what I sensed. He touched my arm but I withdrew a step, bumping into Ronan. I hoped Ronan would jump in if his friend meant to harm me. Of course, he could've led me into a trap as I skipped along on a suicide mission. One thing for sure, Adam possessed a strange breed of ESP I was certain wasn't documented anywhere. I'd stumbled upon the motherlode of criminal activity that night.

Fin leaned against my leg, lending me comfort only an ally offered. And I needed all the allies my love could buy. "What's going on?" I finally asked. A breeze breathed across my shoulders, shifting the tips of my hair. Trees stirred in the wind, and papery dry needles showered us in more death. The air carried the scent of Christmas trees rounding the bend toward Easter lilies.

The pup sidled toward Adam, looked over its shoulder, and waited for me to follow.

"Let's go inside," Ronan said. "It's been a hellish night."

"I'll bet." Adam's voice crackled again, no longer sinking inside my soul, lacking the layers that first skimmed my flesh. He extended his hand, this time with no pretenses. "Adam Freshfields." His cultured voice and manner along with the McMansion fit the life of the privileged.

Wary, I hesitated to touch him. However, my inflamed body screamed at me to take more than his hand. To its indignation, I ignored my fickle body and allowed my faltering mind to shift the gears. His fragmented aura joined Ronan's aura still teasing mine.

Fin gave another one of her short affable yaps, which I took as approval. I'd have to sleep with one eye open if my cats ever found out I accepted affirmation from a dog.

I inhaled deeply and grasped Adam's hand. "Aria Elle Walker."

"I know." His tone held a smile the darkness hid.

He led me through the dark, his aura wrapped around mine, merging within it and Ronan's aura surrounding me. Since when could an aura meld with someone, let alone two people? I derived aural energy from other people, but I just absorbed it like oxygen. I never felt it because my aura always dominated. What was happening to me?

An owl hoot splintered the night's tranquility, and I tripped on the first porch step. The screech of a bird of prey grated across the back of my neck as Adam caught me against him. I wished I could fly off into the night and ease the horror crimping my intestines.

Ronan stopped in the doorway. "You've only touched the tip of the iceberg tonight."

Mechanically, my fingers tightened on Adam's hand. "I kinda figured that out all by my little self."

My cheerful tone fell flat even to my ears.

Ronan nodded, pinched-lipped as ever. “Things will get worse.”

“Before they get better?” *You’re just full of ominous clichés, aren’t you?* “I get it.”

Adam squeezed my hand, released it. “What he’s trying to tell you,” he interjected, “is that my appearance may unnerve you.”

“You’ve already mesmerized me with multihued glowing eyes.” I tapped an index finger on my chin. “What’s one more link on the chain of weird?”

A random thread of Adam’s aura spilled outwards and dissolved on the brick porch, as if his aura was dying bit by bit. “Look at me, Aria. Here or in full light.”

Brushing my shoulder against Ronan’s chest, I forced him inside the woodland mansion. Fin raced to her bed beside a stone fireplace. A fire snapped and popped, spitting crimson and amber flames, its heat luring me closer. Adam voice-commanded the ceiling light to turn on, adding near daylight brilliance to the great room.

A triangular gouge in the polished hardwood floor drew my dread. Without squandering the last iota of endorphins this bizarre night had instilled in me, I faced Adam.

My gaze traveled his length, feet upwards. Loose khakis encased muscular thighs, slim hips, and a rumpled long sleeve dress shirt clung to an oddly familiar rippling abdomen and broad chest. Then I saw the skin of his hands. My smile died. A gray-violet cast tinted his skin. *Dude, the sun shines in California, even in winter. Rent a tan.*

The faint odor of fruitwood smoke irritated my nostrils and I tweaked my nose with a knuckle. I pressed my other hand against the hard knot forming in my stomach as my gaze honed in on his face.

He looked like Ronan’s identical twin, after a dip in a pool of bleach. And so much more.

My fried eyes blurred. “I’ve had enough of today.” Without waiting for an invite, I staggered toward a soft chenille couch in the center of the room.

Chapter 4

I awoke in a humongous bed, a heavy jewel-tone comforter knotted around me. Sunlight filtered through angled blind slats on one wall, which I gathered opened to a view of the woods and the muted creek gurgling and splashing nearby. I slanted a bleary glance at the clock. Already noon, I'd slept the morning away as if my problems didn't include extinct sorcerer twins and a psychic pooch. Oh, yeah, count the Scrambler's murder in my condo and Murph in his time-capsule suit. *Oh, God.* A groan slipped out and I rubbed my temples as the events of last night flooded my foggy brain.

After I'd crashed on the couch, Adam Freshfields guided me halfway-to-dead to the master bedroom, the only bedroom with a lock on the door. He'd chucked a couple of logs on the toasty fire in the bedroom and locked the door on his way out—not locking me in, but locking them out at my insistence.

Who was Adam Freshfields? Why did he look so like Ronan—if you looked past the corpse pallor—but have a different last name? Ronan had called Adam his *friend*, not brother.

Wary, I brushed my fingers over my stun gun under the pillow, glad it was still part of my arsenal. Shock shivered down to my toes as the realization sank in that I'd allowed myself to sleep in a house with two strangers. I slept deeply too, which begged me to believe my gut instincts that they had no nefarious plans to hurt me. Adam and Ronan's auras tangoed so sweetly with mine, as if we were three parts of a whole. I never sensed a threat. In fact, the warmth of their protection and want wafted over me. Not wanted because of my strange abilities, but desired as part of a threesome. "Yeah, did I just think threesome?" I muttered. I'd never experienced that rash of aural warmth from anyone, not even my beloved mother and grandmother.

Refreshed energy vibrated along the sleepy nerve endings in my brain. My telekinetic receptors were working overtime to connect to Ronan and Adam in that strange way I'd experienced last night.

The air outside the covers was frigid, the fire stone-cold ash. I stretched out my legs, plucking the covers to my chin. My clothes lay in a heap on an overstuffed armchair by the windows. My travel bags sat between closed double doors and a carved mahogany dresser that matched the nightstands and four-poster bed. Seascape paintings in settings from dawn's hazy light to star-spangled midnight's ink covered the taupe walls. All painted by the same artist—someone I'd love to bribe. My condo

had yards of wall space desperately begging for splashes of color. I might be a digital art student at San Jose State University, but wall art wasn't exactly my specialty.

Rubbing my icicle arms, I worked the circulation from wrist to elbow, mentally preparing for the nightmare beyond the doors.

High-pitched yapping joined scratching paws on the door, alerting me to Fin's presence. My head began to ache anew. Morbid thoughts of the dead men rose to the forefront of my mind. Focusing on Ronan, Adam, or Fin was far easier to process, even though they were all related, all a circuit on the same memory board. Fin whined and scratched again, forcing me to tackle the here and now.

Adam shushed her from behind the door. "Leave off, girl."

"It's okay." Stun gun wrapped in my fingers and teeth chattering, I shoved off the comforter and ran to unlock the door. Without breaking stride, I dashed back to the bed and snuggled under the covers. "She can come in."

"You don't know what you're asking," Adam said in that curious flat monotone. "She hogs the bed."

The dimple my body made in the gargantuan bed earned my head wobble. "Let 'er rip." I piled up the pillows and leaned against the headboard.

Fin scrambled on the hardwood, sliding to the rug at the foot of the bed, landing with all four legs skewed like a newborn foal learning to stand. She—I refused to call Fin *it*—passed me a dog's equivalent look of acute embarrassment. More human expressions than...well...Ronan flashed across the dog's mug. Taking stock of her dignity, the pup leapt onto the bed. Barely palpable now, Fin's weirdo energy felt more like an old comforting friend.

Adam remained in the doorway, and I hesitated to confront him either verbally or visually. You know what they say about *De Nile* being a river. With my mind buried in my surroundings, I pretended my life hadn't flipped topsy-turvy, nor did I reside in the home of the lighter half of twin sorcerers who impersonated a human-sized, wingless fairy. The quick glimpse I'd stolen of Adam after I'd arrived had tattooed itself on my brain. I had a credible hunch he wasn't dressed up for Halloween.

Fin's earthy energy raised the hairs on my arms into a gentle sway. I'd never heard of psychic pets. Hell, with all the newfangled PSPs popping up, it wouldn't surprise me if all living beings on Earth had paranormal ability. No wonder the NUW government kept beefing up PSP law enforcement with their newly minted Paranormal Vice Division, PVD for short.

Fin snuggled against me, and I rubbed my cheek over her silky fur. Static waved her hair against my skin. "What's your story, little missy?"

Adam padded into the room, his weight sinking onto the edge of the bed. Scooting farther away, I feared looking at his face, scared to acknowledge my odd attraction to him. Afraid to confess I sensed a similar bond to Adam as I did to Ronan, despite the mesmerism stunt he'd pulled on me in the front yard. I scratched and rubbed my temple, trying to smooth out my confusion. As if they were two halves of a whole, I *felt* Ronan in Adam and vice versa. Worst of all, I feared the story, whether

truthful or not, Adam and Ronan had yet to dump on me.

“Aria, look at me.” Adam’s low voice crept along my twitchy nerves.

My empty stomach clenched. Fin slobbered on my cheek, and I made a dodgeball play of slowly wiping my face on my shoulder.

Ronan sauntered in. “Room for one more?” he teased, a far cry from last night’s barbarian attitude. The tension in the room fractured.

The moment of reckoning had sprung. What was a girl to do when two gorgeous men wanted to leap into bed with her? I couldn’t be luckier sitting in a field of four-leaf clovers, not a number thirteen in sight.

Ronan set two steaming mugs of coffee on the accent table between the chairs. He opened the blinds and dappled sunlight brightened the room. His butt took up residence on one of the empty armchairs by the windows.

The scent of caffeine ambrosia drifted to me and my stomach purred. How’d he know caramel mocha was my downfall? I hooked my stun gun on my thong for lack of a better hiding place. Still hedging, I flung off the covers. Fin lay splayed on the comforter, as if waiting for a bowl of popcorn and the main feature to start. I swung my legs over the edge, wintry air hitting my bare skin. “If you’re trying to freeze me into an Otter Pop, you’re doing a stellar job.”

“Sorry,” Adam replied, his voice devoid of emotion. “I need cool air.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him walk to the closet and pluck something off a hanger. I bucked up my resolve and jumped off the bed.

He froze, a gray sweatshirt dripping from his fingers. One second his skin glowed and his eyes shone brilliantly. Then it was if gray mist swallowed his vibrancy. That radiance had clued me in on his fae nature last night. No human ever gave off such innate, ethereal beauty. The fae had always fascinated me when I’d learned fairies and sorcerers were the last and strongest magical beings to roam Earth forever ago. Until now, it seemed.

I reached for the sweatshirt, my hand brushing against Adam’s hand. My crackling aura mingled with his the way it tangled with Ronan’s last night. Yet, he lacked something in his energy field, empty boxes that should be full. Parts of his body shimmered in and out of focus as if he fought with Satan to remain topside.

“Whoa,” I exhaled the word, fought my hand from its hormone overload and touching his solid, but faint right arm. “You’re disappearing.”

“I’m still here,” he said. “It’s some bizarre cloaking spell I tried that won’t stop trying to work.”

I tugged on the sweatshirt. Warm and smelling of fabric softener, it hung to my knees. I rolled the sleeves up to my wrists. Slowly, I raised a hand toward Adam’s face. “May I?” I didn’t know what compelled me, but my hands had to feel what my eyes were witnessing.

“Sure.” He smiled, shrugged.

Not a muscle budged as I stroked his cheek, traced the outline of his bones. His magical energy

encouraged me to explore every inch of his muscular body. *Did I just think that?* Like I'd ever get the chance for a further arctic exploration. For now, I'd start with his face.

No hint of stubble marred his baby butt smooth chin. He had high cheekbones, a blade nose, and square jaw, mimicking Ronan's facial features. I traced my thumb over his dry full lips, the color of putty. My thumb dipped into the crevice to the left of his mouth that stretched to a dimple when he smiled. A dimple lacking on Ronan. His gray eyes were flat, the pupils a shade darker than the irises, fringed by translucent lashes. His eyebrows matched his hair, which changed from clear to lavender and gray to white. I couldn't tell if the color was changing or if all those colors tinted his hair.

His thick shoulder-length mane lacked sheen as if coated with powder, negatively setting off the wet-cement cast to his skin. If Adam weren't kicking it in front of me, I'd swear death had called. Yet, he was very much alive. Our mingled auras could testify to that in a court of law.

He smelled of pine and meadow, edging the scant scent of smoke from the room. Every time part of him wavered in and out of sight, the crisp and fresh scent strengthened. Beautiful to me in so many ways I couldn't explain, he was Ronan without the color of health and life.

I hugged my arms to my chest. His energy stroked my aura, leaving me in breathless confusion. Adam tucked an errant lock of hair behind his ear, and my gaze rested on his one ill-formed pointy ear. It looked as if Fin had nibbled on it at one time. His other ear was normal.

"I take it you're not a Vulcan?"

He smiled in a boyishly shy way, his dimple coaxing a spark of vibrancy to his features. "*Star Trek* fan?"

"More of a *Star Wars* fan." I had a gazillion questions. Corralling my thoughts, I studied a moonlit seascape painting on the wall to his right. Completely non-confrontational, his magical energy—on him it could be called nothing less than magic—screamed for my attention.

Ronan watched as if waiting for us to jump each other and do the nasty in front of him like we were trying out for a porno flick. All we needed was popcorn, Milk Duds, and soda. I sensed no threat from Ronan either, even in the electricity that always seemed to bristle beneath his tanned skin. It was as if he also felt the strange aural bond and wanted to see where it tugged all three of us.

"What ESP do you have?" I sifted my fingers through kinks in my bedhead.

He patted down a lock of swaying hair floating toward me. "I've never had ESP...before this happened." He wanded his hand up and down in front of his delectable body. "Now...I'm not sure what abilities I have."

I tilted my head. "Mesmerism?"

He winked and his smile spread to a captivating grin in response to the coil of energy I accidentally released. I about dissolved into a puddle. I hunched into the sweatshirt, hiding my body's betrayal.

"Okay, so we're done with the show part of show and tell." I forced a glance over my shoulder at somber Ronan. "Let's get on with the telling part."

Adam's aura fell flat, knocking the air out of me. I staggered, my eyes threatening to shoot nails at his lack of finesse in dealing with our intertwined energies. His form solidified as if humanity won that particular battle, the war still up for grabs.

He gripped my shoulders, steadying me. "Sorry. You okay?"

I eased away with a conciliatory smile. "Warn a girl, will ya?" My aura recoiled, leaving me bereft, as if someone had stolen a cherished keepsake out of my hands and flung it into the fireplace.

Adam's throat bobbed. "I'm still learning...still getting used to—" He dug his hands in his front pants pockets, shot a glance at Ronan.

I pulled the sleeves of the sweatshirt over my freezing fingers. "What are you, twenty-one, two?" With a tween's lack of control over extreme energy. His and Ronan's auras, and mine for that matter, were beyond calculation if we could meld together. Fascination zoomed through me.

Ronan rose from his chair, a cup of coffee in one hand. "Twenty-one, same as me, you. We think he may also be descended from the fae," he paused for emphasis, "and immortal. He may have a long time to grow into his powers."

"Blood of one of the Forbidden," Adam said hesitantly, gauging my response.

My hand slinked southward to rest on my stun gun. Shit was getting real. Hazily, I recalled my paranormal history class from high school. The powers-that-be at the time of the Abolishment had called anyone with magic the Forbidden. The Forbidden included witches, fairies, and sorcerers. All magical races had been extinct for centuries. If Adam was fae, then Ronan probably was too. If Ronan and I had the same telekinesis, was I part fairy or just...what? A sorcerer? The hollowness inside me tingled as if my body was ready to accept my true self. Or was I overreaching into the land of delusion?

Laughter erupted, a crazed sound I tried to push down. I pinwheeled my arms wildly. "I'm being punked right? Where's the camera?" Hot anger bubbled up my chest, and my blood pressure shot to stroke zone.

Adam sank onto the bed, his sadness riding the air. He balled his ashen hands into fists on top of the comforter.

Time to schedule my brain surgery. My self-loathing became a palpable anchor in my aura. "Oh, God." I pressed my fingers on my eyelids. "I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry about," Ronan replied softly. "It's my fault Adam's the way he is." He handed me a cup of coffee, the warmth barely penetrating my icy fingers.

Adam laughed roughly. "He'd love to believe he's all that powerful."

I sipped the coffee, savoring the caramel on my tongue, rinsing away the acid of epic confusion. "You promised to tell me everything." I had to exert mental pressure to prevent my energy from leaking out to party with Ronan's aura. I usually didn't have to fight to keep tabs on the stuff. It was normally instinctive. Yet, I'd never experienced anyone who oozed energy like Ronan and Adam.

"Clean up and we'll eat." Ronan finger-combed his damp hair, triggering a waft of citrus

shampoo.

“I’ll warm the kitchen for you even if I have to strip to stand the heat.” Adam rose, tugged his wavering hair over his pointy ear.

A hot and cold shiver raced up my back at the idea of a naked Adam. He shared Ronan’s bodybuilder physique, but with skin tone that’d send the unwary into a mental freakout.

“Okay.” My stomach rumbled in loud agreement, and I mentally slapped it to and fro for intruding in the conversation.

They left the room and I locked the door behind them. Fin hopped off the bed, her toenails clacking on the hardwood floor behind me. I spun around. “A little privacy, huh?” I stooped and ruffled the fur on her neck, her cow eyes going round and sorrowful.

“Okay,” I said with fake exasperation. Dog voyeurism was the least of my problems. “Come in and keep to yourself.”

The pup stretched out in front of the tub, stared at a tiny splotch of crystalized tree sap on the slate floor, her mug averted. Okay, maybe she did get human-speak.

I turned on the tub water, squirted in lavender bubble bath I found under the sink. Swishing the water around, I dug deep into the box in my mind labeled NUW History 101. Unfortunately, the Ancient History 101 box had gotten lost somewhere while my mind tried to comprehend my ridiculous reality. History had never been my favorite subject.

A sigh escaped me as I sank into hot, bubbly heaven in the sumptuous jetted tub. Heat turned my muscles into mush. I drew forth the boring history lesson to satisfy that niggling doubt. There was a reason why the world had originally abolished the Forbidden, and it’d cropped up again during the change to the NUW reign.

Twenty-two years ago, the world experienced a cluster of harmless earthquakes on every fault line known to man and then some. It took years for the geologists to yank their heads out of their respective butts and cough up some fib no one believed that a series of new ley lines—invisible lines of earth energies—had exploded from the tremblers. Supposedly, the “lines” spat out a ton of harmless energy, triggering latent ESP in people who hadn’t otherwise exhibited paranormal abilities. More and more cases of psychic sightings kept the police and governments busier than a queen bee serving her horny swarm. Most other scientists didn’t believe it and still searched for answers to this day.

Scientists and paranormal fanatics went berserk and had warned the governments what would happen if they didn’t slap shackles on the newly minted PSPs. They’d reminded the governments that pre-Abolishment days would seem like cake compared to the magical threats to the enormous 21st century population. They’d demonstrated mock horror scenarios of what would happen if PSPs were given free rein to use their increasing abilities at the drop of fly spit. It scared PSPs into hiding, even when the government couldn’t prove telepathy, telekinesis, or the like was Forbidden magic.

“Congratulations on the birth of the New Urban World.” I sighed as the history emptied out of my

brain, leaving more questions than answers.



After what seemed like hours of pure pampering in the luxurious marble bathroom, I left it, refreshed and invigorated. I donned my favorite jeans with a hipster topping black and pink sweater. My stun gun accessorized a belt loop. Black riding boots topped off my ensemble of comfort. Maybe unicorns existed in this fantasyland and the boots might come in handy.

Fin and I stepped into a cozy reading loft overlooking the great room. I didn't even remember passing through it last night. Male voices rose up from the first floor beyond the swirly wrought iron railing. I trudged down the hardwood stairs. The thirteenth step emitted a squeak loud enough to awaken the rest of the Forbidden.

Ronan peeked around an arched doorway. "She's alive." The darker color of his left eyebrow lent him a natural mocking expression.

"Funny, ha fricking ha." A ghost of a smile passed my lips as I strode under the archway into the kitchen.

Adam waved his arm at the expansive table centered in the dining area. Afternoon sun streamed through the kitchen windows and set off a faint shimmer around him, transforming his skin tone to opalescent.

Burying my head deep, I pressed on my severely deprived stomach. Pancakes, sausage, toasted English muffins, and juice met my bulging stare. Adam might make a lucky lady very happy one day. I sat in the chair he pulled out. With a flourish, he set an empty plate in front of me and unfolded a cloth napkin on my lap.

French doors and floor-to-ceiling windows filled two dining room walls. Puppy nose prints smudged the bottom panes on the doors. The room overlooked a stunning redwood and conifer forest beyond a clearing of wintergreen bushes and a meandering creek. Maybe I'd get the chance to shoot pictures on my smartphone. I never knew what jewelry design a client might request. Flora and fauna were prominent in my enamel charms, the job that put food on my table while I finished college. I touched my handmade pendant, the small rose and the bigger rose growing out of a heart represented Mom and me.

Fin trotted into view along a bed of battered purple pansies bordering the circular driveway. She lifted her leg and oh so delicately watered them.

I heaped a bit of everything on my plate, smothering it with butter, jellies, and syrup. "Your dog's got serious gender issues." The smorgasbord beat the fruity protein smoothies I usually sucked down for my morning energy boost.

Adam chuckled. "Don't let her hear you say that."

A moment later, the swing of a doggy door creaked in the kitchen, and toenails clicked on the

hardwood floors into the dining room. My new best friend sat on her haunches beside me.

As I grabbed the salt shaker, I accidentally rolled two sausage links onto the floor. Fin attacked them like a starved wolf in winter. I tested the holes in the shaker and the lid fell off, spilling a mound of salt on my palm. *Crap on toast.* I tossed a pinch over my left shoulder, hoping to ward off bad luck.

Adam handed me an empty plate to dump the salt on. "Sorry about that." Eyebrows fused into a V on the bridge of his nose, he examined the shaker.

Stifling a smile, I looked at my watch. Thirteen after the hour. Enough said. Slowly, I cut my pancake into bites, waiting for the guys to start eating. Call me paranoid about eating meals prepared by paranormals. As soon as I saw them shovel food into their mouths, I inhaled two sausages, and drowned it with orange-pineapple juice. I pointed my fork at Ronan.

He clanked his coffee mug on the wood tabletop. "Suppose you want answers."

Part of me did. The other part was halfway out the door. I studied Adam's ethereal features and knew in my heart that whatever set off the hunt for me was linked to his...issues. I grew clammy just thinking about an unknown future and the things Ronan knew about my father and me. It was bad enough my life seemed to revolve around Ronan and Adam. Our auras had converged the moment I entered the dining room and continued to play hide and seek around us.

The bond with Adam and Ronan reached into every crevice of my aura. It was one bond with two similar halves, not two bonds, which freaked me out. How could two people have an identical aura? Or maybe Ronan's aura overpowered Adam's and I only sensed the one. If they weren't twins, what were they? Cloning experiment gone haywire?

Thoughtful, I bit into a strawberry jam slathered English muffin and chewed. Swallowing roughly, I addressed Ronan, "Start at the beginning. How you knew my father. What he did and why. Who your father is and why you want to stop him. Why everyone is hunting me. Why you and I..." I skimmed Adam's face, tried to gauge his knowledge of secret clubhouse things.

"Why you and Ronan have weird telekinetic powers?" Adam wiped his mouth on a napkin.

The question lingered in the air for a moment. "Right. Are there more of us? Why does Adam look like a half-human fairy corpse?" I gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry, no offense."

He chuckled, short and grim. "Like I don't already know it."

Ronan and Adam exchanged a sly meaningful look. I hated being in the dark. Honestly, I wasn't a control freak or anything, but if something affected me, I needed to know about it.

"You want to know why the three of us are magically connected," Ronan added in a gloomy voice geared to plant the fear of Hades in me.

And magically delicious. I licked syrup off my bottom lip. "Damn straight." Spearing a sausage link on the serving plate, I left my fork sticking in the air.

Adam's back tensed against the chair, his hair spiraling around him like smoke tendrils. Ronan muttered, his tangible aura causing my hair to flutter and crackle as though I'd stuck my finger in a

light socket. I leaned back, my arms folded across my chest for the reality show of fairy tales.

Ronan's fork clanked on his plate as he angled his chair to view me better. "Ever heard of a company called Dominion Research?" I shook my head. "My father's pride and joy." His nostrils flared in disgust.

Ronan's aura suddenly erupted, jealously driving Adam's energy off me. The tiny electrical zaps didn't hurt much, but they bothered the heck out of me. I clenched my focusizer. Using my telekinesis, I slugged Ronan's energy and coaxed Adam back into the ménage. I'd never done that before, but it worked. Relief coasted down my shoulders and relaxed the taut muscles in my arms.

Ronan wiped the nape of his neck. "What'd you do?"

"Your aura threatened." I shrugged. "I deflected."

Ronan looked bewildered. "No, I didn't."

My exasperation lashed out in a cool aural wave. "You projected stinging energy all around me."

Adam plucked a lock of hair off his eyebrow. "I felt it too. You shoved my aura away from Aria." His hand disappeared for a blink as it morphed into his swaying hair.

Ronan leaned forward, his jaw thrust out. "I don't feel Aria. I'm deliberately containing my spastic telekinetic energy. When she's near, I have a tougher time controlling what little ability I have left."

Obviously, you have no control. I pinned my sight on Adam. "You felt him, right? You feel me?"

Adam nodded, swatting at the lock of hair that swung over his eye again.

"I feel both of you, sort of." I clicked my frosty pink nails on the table, looked pointedly at Ronan. "Who can you feel?"

"No one." Sweat dotted his forehead. "I'm not projecting anything outward." He shoved his chair back and stood as stiff as the redwoods outside. Caustic electricity bristled off him.

Then I guess your power's slipping out your oh so fine ass. Suspicion flickered through my head. I channeled more energy to fight off his thorny aura, pulling the Aria Special off my belt loop. Nothing I did halted his intangible attack. It overpowered Adam's aura again. "Are you sensitive to other ESPs?" A bead of nervous perspiration trickled between my breasts.

"No, just a plain telekinetic, like you."

Proof is in the chocolate pudding. My agitation escalated as well as the heat up my neck. Thank my lucky charm I wasn't absorbing his creepy energy or Adam's tainted magic, for that matter, despite the bond we shared. Or was I and I just didn't feel it?

As Ronan's irritation swelled, it felt like he was dragging his feet in the desert, touching every inch of me.

Chapter 5

The hot prickles multiplied, causing me to sag in my chair. “Ronan, you’re not holding anything back. I feel your energy attacking me.” I scratched my neck and flicked on my stun gun. An idea bloomed. “Go outside for a sec.” I pulled myself upright, dipped a napkin in my ice water, and patted my face.

Ronan scowled his way out the French doors. The farther he moved away, the more he lugged his irksome aural energy off me.

Cool relief trickled through my fiery body. “Better.” I threw Adam a smug look. “You?”

A puzzled smile curved his lips, brightening his dull violet eyes. “It’s just you and me, babe” he teased.

My heart hitched. The last thing I needed was an immortal, sick fairy-whatever in my life. *Can we say oxymoron?*

I waved Ronan back, and he entered the kitchen. Tingles swept up my neck and I scratched them away as more gave chase. “I don’t get it. Your telekinesis didn’t go psycho on me last night.” I cut Ronan a sly look.

Adam went outside and nothing changed. I motioned for him to return. My pulse quickened in response to Ronan’s intangible attack.

Ronan gestured toward the living room. “See if you can deal with me from there.”

I nodded. “Adam can hang here.” Adam’s energy wasn’t strong, but it hinted of happiness and luck, overshadowed by something that mimicked a layer of soot. His paranormal makeup was seriously flawed. I hoped it was reversible. I’d go bonkers if I lost my telekinesis, flawed or not, illegal or not.

Ronan paced in front of the picture window looking out onto the front yard where a large black SUV with ebony-tinted windows had replaced the Cadillac.

Ronan’s barbs finally ebbed. Log one more item in my Book of Bizarre to muse upon later. “It feels better. What’d you do?”

Tolerance masked his confusion. “Nothing.” He sat at the table again and pushed his breakfast plate aside. “Tell me if it gets bad again.”

“Count on it.” I tapped my fingernails on the tabletop. “You returned the Caddy to the casino?” I

asked Adam as I hooked my stun gun on my belt loop.

“They’ll never know it was missing.”

I flicked a couple of crumbs off the polished wood table. Fin chased after them, toenails clacking, and she skid underneath the table. “Tell me how you know my father.” Ronan earned my solemn stare. In order to concentrate on the rest of his tale, I needed to check my father off the list.

A prickle of Ronan’s energy mixing with Adam’s and mine tingled around me, but it appeared to be our new norm. Fortunately, my pinkie hadn’t balked before Ronan’s aura attacked me. The normal sensations I experienced before a bad luck occurrence were second nature, but the pinkie twitch *always* alerted me to danger...and also granted me time to turn it around by focusing on my telekinesis. With enough notice, I could raise my telekinesis to thwart unlucky thirteen’s threats.

Adam began clearing the table, flatware clanging against pottery, making a racket only a male could make in the kitchen. Steam rose from water splashing in the sink, adding to the feverish sheen on his mottled face. Ronan crossed his arms over his broad chest, his biceps bulging. I licked my lips, squirmed in my chair. Damn, I loved muscular arms. His were double divine.

“Your father was Patrick Walker from Cork, Ireland?”

“Did you think I doubted you?”

He shrugged. “He and my father were college buds. They attended Dublin City University together.”

“What’s your father’s name?”

“Richard Riley.” Ronan’s gaze pierced my face for a sign of recognition.

The name meant diddlysquat. I didn’t know who my father had befriended in adulthood, let alone his youth. Another chain of missing clues of my real identity. “Go on.” I stretched out my legs, crossing my ankles, the nonchalant act belying my inner turmoil.

“About all I know. I was hoping you knew more. I think they were doing research together. There’s bad blood between them. I know that from the way your father threatened mine, hoping to score a big payoff and walk away.”

Adam clattered pots and pans into the dishwasher, the noise echoing up to the twelve-foot ceiling. The air grew unsettled and Ronan’s energy turned tickly. An awkward introspective hush reigned. Even Adam’s movements quieted.

Light flickered in my brain and a truth dawned sunshine bright.

I snatched my legs back, straightening my spine against the chair. “So your father is after me because my rat snake father gave him a dose of his own medicine?”

“Not exactly.” A growl rumbled in Ronan’s throat. His booted foot hitting the hardwood floor resembled a clap of thunder, adding an ominous air to the story.

Adam returned to his seat, anticipation schooling his features. Our three auras tangoed wildly. My skin smarted, on guard from further attack.

I picked at the cuticles on my right index finger, a nasty habit I usually reserved for boredom or

indecision. Guess that didn't apply any longer. "What then?"

Uncertainty squeezed that part of my heart my parents—even my father—still owned. I tried to look away, but Ronan's troubled eyes revealed an indecision that seemed to torment him, and I couldn't break contact for fear he'd disappear and I'd never know. "What?" I fought down the scream in my voice. *Just kill me now.*

"Your dad came crawling to my father last year, couple million in debt. He said my dad owed him."

My stomach contracted. I held up a hand to preempt the torture I sensed coming, but Ronan took sharing as caring to heart. I'd asked for it.

"Your father threatened to expose him, me, and my abilities to the authorities if my father didn't pay up. My father broke him down and Patrick gave him the info he wanted to find you. Your dad walked away with four million." His voice lowered. "Then my father had him killed. He thought Patrick too big a risk to his plans. He knew too much."

I wanted to cover my ears, but sat on my hands to prevent them from exercising their independence from my brain.

"The dead man in your condo pulled the trigger." He paused, as if waiting for a fencepost to speak. "And here you are."

Abandoned *and* betrayed? And I didn't even know why Dad had left us all those years ago. I dropped my head between my knees, battling sudden dizziness. Ronan thrust a glass of water at me, knocking it against my hand. I held the cool glass to my cheek.

"He's a screwed up bastard, Aria. He'll do anything to get what he wants."

"Your slimy father or mine?" I patted my eyes dry with a napkin, lifted my head.

"Mine."

Adam shot me a sympathetic look, but I didn't get all warm and fuzzy about offing the enforcer in my condo, even though he was collateral damage that probably deserved to die.

Ronan leaned forward and picked at a scab on his palm. "My father was livid. I don't know all the details of what happened between him and your dad. But that's when he cranked up his efforts to locate you, supposedly with the intel your dad dropped on him."

The remains of my heart splintered under the weight of too much knowledge. I threw up my hands. "What does your father want from me so badly that he'd pay my father a fortune, then bury him six feet under?" I asked the only question I might find an answer to from the dark and light twins in the room. "I'm a measly telekinetic. He didn't even know it!"

Adam contemplated the dishes stacked on the counter, tapping his fingers on the tabletop. "You aren't simply a telekinetic."

Welcome to Tongue-tied City. "Excuse me?" My disdain not only leaked into my words, it painted the sneer of all sneers on my face.

Ronan shrugged his hands. "People with extrasensory perception became stronger after the

earthquake event twenty-two years ago. Kids born with ESP within a year of the quakes are the strongest according to my dad's extensive research. Not only can you and I manipulate mind, matter, and energy from our telekinetic ability, we're pulling energy from everyone, everything around us, which enhances our telekinesis and gives us this abnormal ability to manipulate *all* the energy from external sources, people, the earth, and not just from our own brain wave energy. Makes our abilities stronger." He paused and stared at my face as if waiting for the fencepost to burst into flames. "Like the ancient sorcerers. Like the Forbidden Thirteen." His voice lowered to a stage whisper. Fin nosed Ronan's arm, as if providing solace, and he gently pushed the dog away, rejecting her as if he didn't want to infect her with his delusions. "Although I think you can manipulate a lot more energy than me." He tipped his head, popped his neck joint. "Right now, I can barely bend a hair with or without you negating me."

Was he kidding? Could he really manipulate earth energy in addition to people energy? Could I? I thought I had only been harvesting aural energy from people. Did we really have the blood of ancient sorcerers? Surely, the sheriff of Cuckoo Town's on the hunt for him, right?

"What do you mean the Forbidden *Thirteen*?" A cold sweat slicked the nape of my neck. "Magic was eradicated. The Forbidden were banished. So what? I'm just a lousy telekinetic. If you tell anyone, I'm going to kill you. I won't go to jail for this shit you're spewing and loading the blame on me." Their silence told me otherwise. *Oh, wait.* "Your father's looking for anyone with magic to test to find your mystical Thirteen because he wants to freaking rule the world or something?" And if he tested me, I was doomed.

"Bingo. Give the lady a stuffed dog," Adam said. Fin snuffled and choked up a hairball, stared at it as if willing it to speak.

As Ronan's bright and shiny truth dawned, with increasing difficulty, I swallowed, my hands holding onto my stomach as if to keep Riley Senior away from me. "What the living hell on Earth does he need us for? What's he planning?"

"He needs *us* to properly open a gateway he found—the Rift—to the Realm of the Void to let the banished magic of the Forbidden return to Earth." Hunched over, Ronan rested his forearms on his thighs. "My dad thinks *you* and I together can open the Rift properly using our telekinesis to manipulate the energy keeping it closed. Once open, the Rift should function normally, the way it did way back when, allowing the banished magic to return to Earth. He wants to locate the descendants of the original Forbidden Thirteen, to control the returning magic...to control them."

A hiccupping laugh slipped out and I slapped a hand over my mouth. Forcing a few calming breaths, I still had to smother a giggle. The Realm of the Void was a plane of nothingness between Earth and the Afterlife, which most people didn't believe in. Those that believed in it thought it was a place that existed in space, accessible through a space "portal." Stargate, *anyone*? There were obscure references to it in old history books as being a plane of existence where ancient magic originally stemmed from...and was banished to. Again, most people just thought it all a big hoax and

that the Forbidden simply died off.

Vaguely, I heard Ronan say, “She’s speechless.”

Adam replied, “At least she’s not mad at you.”

“She thinks we’re cracked.”

“Do you blame her?”

“Are you guys off your meds?” Eyes slivered, I glared at them. Fin propped her paws on my knee and planted a sloppy lick on my chin. “Forbidden Thirteen, Rifts, Realm of the Void, and fairies. What’s next?” I grunted unladylike. “Zombies and vampires?”

“Demons too,” Ronan added.

“Possibly. Who knows?” Adam’s eyebrows quirked up, his hair shivering as he shrugged. “Doppelgängers?”

I played the game. “Werewolves and shapeshifters?”

“Definitely.”

Slack-jawed, my mind spun. Could they be any more mental?

“Flies are swarming.” Ronan flicked his hand in the air.

I quickly shut my mouth. “You guys aren’t tripping off the reservation?”

Both chuckled, their laughter stilted and somber, trying to find a skosh of humor in their horror. Ronan tipped his chair on its two back legs. *Jerkwads*. They had me going. I tightened my arms over my midriff as though to keep the mythical creatures from encroaching on Riley Senior’s primo bounty.

“You’re not kidding about the Rift, are you? Why do I get the distinct impression you’re gonna tell me something about these Rifts I don’t want to hear?”

Adam sobered from their little joke meant to ease my dread. “The Rifts were the *doorways* the government forced the thirteen most powerful sorcerers to use so they could cull any magical beings left on Earth and abolish magic. They sent all the sorcerers and fae, the last magical beings, into the Realm of the Void through the Rifts. Up to that time, Rifts always existed and allowed magic to flow between Earth and the Void, enhancing the powers of the fae and sorcerers on Earth. When the government figured out the Rifts were truly portals, they concocted their plan to get rid of magic once and for all. They had the sorcerers destroy all the Rifts, until there was one left. One final exit.”

I must have snoozed through paranormal history in high school. At that moment, Charlotte the spider was spinning nonsense in my skull, twisting all that I knew and all my zillion questions into a tangled web of horror.

“The Forbidden Thirteen, the strongest sorcerers alive, created doppelgängers in their likenesses in secret from a heavy mix of fae-sorcery magic, alchemy, changing blood and DNA, using the fae as their guinea pigs. The true identities of the original Thirteen weren’t a secret and they were able to use their fae doppelgängers to take their place in the Abolishment, sending them through the last Rift and permanently closing the gateway, while they stayed safe in their havens on Earth. A suicide mission,” Adam explained.

“Sounds like Frankenstein’s lab to me,” I muttered, trying to absorb their fantastical tale.

“The Thirteen faked out the government and went into hiding,” Ronan added. “It’s not documented for public consumption.”

“You and Ronan are direct descendants of the Forbidden Thirteen sorcerers,” Adam chipped in slowly, gauging my capacity not to go on a berserker killing spree.

I massaged my scalp, spurring my brain cells to perk up. “How do you know all this if it’s not documented?” I squinted at Ronan.

“My father has part of a secret book called the *Illuminaria*, where it’s all detailed. But he’s missing a chunk of the book. One of the Forbidden sorcerers wrote it in secret to record their history, magic, and the eradication, but over time, the book got split up and separated, until others began to piece it back together. It’s still not complete.”

I starting picking at the cuticle on my thumb, absorbing their maddening tale. “What else is in this mystical book?”

“It’s not mystical. Ronan’s seen parts of it in his father’s safe.” Adam’s hair sifted over the tabletop toward my hand.

“Everything about how to open and close the Rifts, how to control the Forbidden either physically or by using their blood in alchemy is in the book. Basically, how to rule the world either with magic or alchemy.” Ronan scrubbed his face.

My heart stopped. “Where are the missing pages of the book?”

Ronan locked eyes with mine. “Good question. My dad has enough of it to be lethal. He thinks your original Thirteen ancestor wrote the history, spells and alchemic potions, dismantled the book and hid the pieces.”

Holy crap on a crappy cracker. The shit was rising to my eyeballs. Ronan and Adam’s magic cascaded over me, a tingly meld of good and bad aural energy, filling my hollowness with both of them.

The muffled song of my phone blaring the latest alternative rock scattered our co-mingled energy. Our auras settled where they belonged, leaving me empty. I’d so forgotten the outside world that the ringing crashed me back into my sane and safe humdrum existence. *Cripes, was that only yesterday?*

I followed the tune into the living room where I’d abandoned my purse on the couch in my arrival trance. I rummaged inside my undisturbed purse for my smartphone, punched it on.

“Aria! Where are you? You okay? I’ve been calling you for forever.” Zoe lobbed the words at me, her sultry tone turning shrill with worry.

“Calm down. I’m okay.” A stack of leather-bound books resting on the end table drew my attention. I smoothed my finger over the embossed, worn leather of the top tome, *Ancient History of the Magical World*.

Ronan advanced, his stance fidgety, fingers extending and curling. I rested my hand on my stun gun, swearing to surgically attach the thing to my palm. He pressed into my side, his lips close to my

ear, warm breath caressing my neck. Something weird and welcome tugged on my lower region, almost forcing me closer to him.

“Don’t say a word,” he whispered.

I backed away, seizing my own degree of personal space. My butt nudged the books, and the top three clunked to the floor, the first one opening to chapter thirteen, *The Forbidden*. I toed the book shut, hiding evidence of Ronan and Adam’s heritage and the dread rising inside me.

Zoe continued to bitch me out. “Your condo’s trashed...” Her voice faded off.

My stomach lurched. Ronan mouthed something at me, his arms straining the sleeves of his T-shirt. Adam tucked his fists into his pants pockets, a muscle in his square jaw throbbing.

I concentrated on Zoe rather than the two hulking whack jobbers from ancient sorcery town. “What are you talking about? Where are you?”

“In your condo. You didn’t show up for coffee and I got worried,” she said in her classic mile-a-minute fashion. “Girl, you need to hire a brain ’cause your place smacks of a white trash hovel.”

Panic jabbed my heart. I looked frantically at Ronan. My left pinkie kinked. *Ah, criminy.*

“Hang on a sec.” I swiped the mute button, thankful Zoe hadn’t invoked video to see the terror I couldn’t wipe off my face even with a bar of my favorite Belgian chocolate. “My condo’s been trashed. My best friend’s there.”

“Shit,” Ronan muttered, a stony mask of distrust clouding his features. “More of my dad’s henchmen.”

His aura showered me in sparks, and the cell phone slipped from my fingers. “Get. Away,” I managed to expel between clenched teeth, scratching at the fire licking my arms.

Without wasting a frown, Ronan exited stage left, slamming the front door behind his evil energy.

The stinging abated, and I snatched the phone off the Oriental floral rug. “I’d tell her to get out, but she’ll grill me,” I beseeched Adam before punching off the mute. “You still there?”

“Where are you?” Zoe demanded.

“At a friend’s.”

“Seriously?” The curiosity in her voice killed her initial surprise. “Wait. You don’t have any other friends.”

The new BFF ad was going viral tomorrow. “You’re a few jokes shy of a stand-up routine.”

A snarky giggle erupted over the phone. “You have got to scoop me on what went down with Michael last night.”

Adam clamped his palm over the receiver. “Ask her to meet you someplace just to get her out of there.”

An idea flowered. We normally met at the mall’s digital media store & coffee shop every weekend. So sue me for being a book whore. Of course, we worship coffee and shopping for all things girlie. I engaged speakerphone, suggested we meet in half an hour. About to hang up, I heard familiar door chimes in the background.

“Hey, someone’s at your door.” Zoe’s footsteps click-clacked across the tile floor, a haunting din in my ears.

My heart clogged my throat. “Don’t answer it,” I shouted.

“What’s the big frickin’ deal? Hang tight.”

“Zoe!” I stamped my foot. A faint male voice mumbled something.

“Aria’s not home,” she replied.

“Will she return soon?” asked the man with an unrecognizable Scottish accent.

My heart thumped in my ears. My left pinkie twitched again.

Caution trickled into Zoe’s voice. “Who’s asking?”

“Family friend.”

“I think not,” she taunted. “I know all her friends.”

I heard a sharp click, and then a thud hit the wall. Zoe’s cry erupted from the phone, setting off a mini riot in my ribcage. Furniture banged to the floor. Glass or porcelain smashed and tinkled onto the travertine tiles. Mom’s favorite vase?

“Aria Walker?” a man growled into the phone, then snarled in an explosion of rage.

The crack of a palm on skin and Zoe crying out thundered through my senses. I’d give up my puny life for Zoe. Not until I offed the person who hurt her, though.

“Aria Walker?” The man’s Scottish burr thickened. “I know it’s you. Your number’s on your friend’s caller ID.”

Adam and I locked eyes. He plucked the phone out of my hand. “Who the hell is this?” His formerly cultured, monotone voice mimicked arctic Ronan way too much.

“Where’s the psychic?”

Ready for an onslaught of negative energy, I ran to the front door and motioned for Ronan to return from where he waited beneath a scraggly oak at the far side of the front yard. His long-legged stride swallowed the distance in a blink.

I returned to Adam’s side. Hearing Zoe struggle and the man yell at her on speakerphone sent my adrenaline surging. My hand flew to my mouth and I stifled a savage cry.

“Riley?” The Scottish brute panted as if battling a tribe of Amazonians. “If you give up the Walker psychic, this one lives.”

Ronan snatched the phone from Adam. “Who the hell is this?” Steel encased his icy voice, and I shivered at the lethal protectiveness he exuded.

“I think you know.”

“Ian?” Ronan punched his fist into the entryway’s stone wall.

More laughter erupted from the phone, quickly chased by a struggle and another loud slap on skin. “You little bitch!” he shouted. “I’ll kill you if you don’t buck up.”

“Ronan, do something!” Fear vibrated through me.

Ronan held up a hand. “She’s an innocent, Ian. Let her go.”

“Not from where I’m standing. Not until I get what I want,” Ian taunted. “Stay in touch.” He laughed. The phone clicked off.

I raced to the end table and reached for Adam’s cell. Before I picked it up, he grabbed it from beneath my hand.

“No cops.” Adam pocketed the phone.

I spun on him, hands on my hips. “It’s time for real cops, not co-eds playing cops and *kidnappers*,” I said the last with a sneer directed at Ronan.

“My father has eyes and ears everywhere. The minute you call the cops and give up your location, he’ll have his minions on your lily-white ass in five minutes.” Ronan blanched, scrubbing his head with both hands.

Chapter 6

Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I dashed to the entryway, tripped over a rug, and caught myself on the stacked stone wall. “We’ll finish our convo on our rescue mission.” Acting as if I didn’t almost just bash my brains in, I squeezed past Ronan in the doorway.

He grabbed my upper arm before I clawed through the screen. “Hold on.”

I tried to shake him loose, but his grip was lethal. “Do you want another murder on your rap sheet?” I flung open the screen door, slamming it against a bench on the wraparound porch. A basketball hit an open box of dog treats and tipped crunchy nuggets into a tinkling lily pond. Sighing, I muttered, “Adam, I fed your fish.”

Ronan loosened his grip without releasing me, his face a roadwork of granite. “Ian won’t hurt Zoe. He needs leverage.”

“Screw leverage. Let’s go.” I pushed ineffectively against the mountain of testosterone. Willing my drumming heart to chill, I drew in deep, even breaths.

A muscle stood out in a ridge along Ronan’s jaw. “He won’t hurt her.”

I wrenched my arm again. Losing my footing, I staggered into the doorjamb, banged my funny bone against the stone wall, and caught my balance on the coat rack. Stars exploded in my vision. The sleeve tore on a defenseless windbreaker and the ripping grated on my ears. Dread surpassed my anger as I rubbed my throbbing elbow. “Okay, I get it. We’re wasting time.” Normally, with this kind of lame luck, I’d go back to bed and save the world from me. Not at the expense of Zoe, though.

Adam flew down the stairs, lugging my suitcases with him. “Ronan, grab our bags.”

I hadn’t noticed the two black overnight bags dumped in the foyer beside a planter until Ronan reached for them. “Where are we going?”

“San Jose, then Seattle.”

My eyebrows hiked up to my hairline. “You had that planned? I’m sure glad I got the text message.”

Ronan pushed out a weary sigh. “Did you think we were going to sit on our asses and tell campfire stories?” With stiff, jerky movements, he snatched up the two bags.

“Bite me, Ronan.” At least campfire stories wouldn’t strain his brain. I stomped down the three steps to land hard in the gravel. A jarring pain shot up my leg to my hip. If boredom set in, we could

play connect the dots on my bruised body. Ignoring the new throb, I climbed into the SUV's front passenger seat.

"You wouldn't learn shit if we weren't stuck in this mess together." Ronan pitched the two bags into the cargo space.

Adam threw my bags on top and the hatch thumped shut. He climbed into the driver's seat and cranked the engine. Ronan folded his hulk into the back seat behind me, Fin settling next to him.

"You'd be sitting in a magic-deadened cell in Seattle if Ronan hadn't snatched you." Adam maneuvered the black beast off the tree-shaded property.

"Whatever." I held my palm up over the center console. "Give me my phone."

"I'm already calling Ian," Ronan snapped.

"Who's this Ian ass-wipe? Why the hell are we going to Seattle?" I didn't need to ask why my condo was ransacked after Ronan's declaration about the *book*. The hunters were up shit's murky creek without a paddle searching my condo.

"He's not answering."

I stewed, trying to wrap my mind around the idea of anyone wanting me so badly. "I'm waiting." I barely got the calm words past my clenched jaw. No sense in pissing off my two new boyfriends, again. I'd laugh at the absurdity if my circumstances weren't in the crapper. I twisted around and fixed Ronan with a laser stare.

Adam jetted onto the highway and sped up to change lanes around a snail-powered van. Adam and Ronan exchanged a conspiratorial look in the rearview mirror. Ronan dragged his hand over his face, swearing and muttering to his other self.

"We should be on our way to Seattle to snatch the *Illuminaria* and take down my father, instead of wasting time on his shitstorms here." Rubbing his twitching cheek didn't help his chronic condition. "Ian O'Rourke's one of my father's most trusted bounty hunters, same as Murph. He must've been looking for the *Illuminaria* too. Only a couple trackers were given that task."

"At the time of the quake cluster, a Rift that no one seemed to know about, except Ronan's father, opened up at Washington Park in Seattle," Adam explained. "Ley lines exploded all over Earth and caused the Rift to fracture and spew out magic. That's about the time we were all conceived. This Rift's far from the last original Rift in Ireland."

"Whoa." My mouth hung open. "How does Ronan's father know it's an actual Rift?"

"Everything about the Rifts is in the *Illuminaria*. He has gadgets that detect paranormal activity, and the park has the highest concentration of any place in the world. It all added up to what's in the book."

I didn't care for the rippling in my stomach, stemming more from rolling turns on a stuffed stomach than their word bombs. The implications of Riley Senior's bounty hunters tailing me had yet to reach a Category 10 Crapstorm. The seatbelt law didn't stop me from settling in a more comfortable position facing the back seat. However, I did need to keep my balance as Adam slung us

around hairpin turns on the woodsy, tree-shrouded highway that separated San Jose and the Santa Cruz beaches.

“How many bounty hunters did your dad sic on me?” I asked. Ronan shrugged. “You don’t know? I thought you knew everything.” My sneer didn’t quite reach my voice.

Ronan whipped out my phone and hit redial. A few non-responsive seconds later, he slammed the phone on the seat.

Adam took another sharp curve, and I grabbed the console. I dug into my purse for my tin of mints, popping a couple in my mouth.

He cranked up the air conditioner. “Settle back and face forward. You’ll feel better.”

So perceptive, Adam really might make a great prince to a nice fairy princess. After a season in the tanning booth and a bottle of Miss Clairol, though.

“Zoe!” I bolted upright, smacking my knee on the bottom of the dash. A river of pain coursed down my leg bones. Another dot to connect. “She’s a telepath. I don’t want him testing her. He’ll want to keep her for his nefarious shits and grins.” I massaged my knee. “Give me the phone.” I practically knotted into a pretzel to apprehend my cell from the backseat thief.

“Dad won’t kill her, or want to keep her.” Ronan switched the phone to his left hand, farther from my reach. “At least not until he snags you.”

“Oh, that’s comforting.” Tears leaked from my eyes. Damn, not the tears. Until last night, I’d only ever cried when Mom and Granny had died. Oh, yeah, and when my rat snake father slithered out of my life. I yanked down the visor. My eyes had more lines in them than a fault line map of California.

Adam popped the glove box open to reveal a cache of napkins. I snatched a handful and blotted my face dry, wadding them in my fist. The drone of the beefy engine choked out the expansive silence. Breathing slowly, I counted to ten. I needed to get a grip, and fast. Traffic slowed to a crawl as we neared downtown San Jose, granting my emotions a reprieve.

Facing forward, I leaned my head on the headrest. “Isn’t your father hunting Adam too? Aren’t you twins, brothers, or cousins that the magic affected differently?”

“Not brothers. No relation.” The skin of Adam’s knuckles stretched white. If he paled any further, he’d be three days dead. “Only you two know I exist in this sickly form. Until six months ago I was a normal guy. No magic, no fairy look, just a regular human male.”

My heart dived into my unwelcoming stomach. Not twins? “Then...” Aria Elle Walker was at a loss for words. Stop the world from revolving. *Oh, holy hell.* “You’re doppelgängers. Like the beings sorcerers created from the fae back in the day.”

Adam nodded. “We don’t know how it’s possible. We took blood tests and our DNA doesn’t match. You’ve heard the theory that everyone has a double somewhere? Some were created by magic and alchemy by the sorcerers. Our bloodlines have carried the magic down through the ages.”

“Sure,” I replied, never believing in that old myth. Until that moment.

“They’re few and far between,” Adam continued. “They aren’t always lookalikes, sometimes

having similar physical or physiological characteristics. They may have complimentary attributes, or opposite attributes.”

“Like what?” Moisture formed on my flushed face.

Ronan gripped the back of my seat. “One might be cruel, the other kind.”

“Or one might possess magic ruled by his psyche, his innate telekinesis,” Adam added, “and the other, magic pulled from earth energies. But there’s a bond between them.”

“But the sorcerer-created doppelgängers were eradicated and booted through the Rift,” I nearly accused, their story getting weirder and weirder by the minute.

As the vehicle flew down the freeway off-ramp, I grabbed the door handle to keep from sliding off the leather seat. Slowing, he merged into the late afternoon downtown traffic.

Adam gave Ronan one of their boys’ club peeps in the rearview mirror.

“So we thought,” Ronan interjected in his grumpy voice. “There’s nothing about them in the *Illuminaria*. At least not in the part my father has. It only talks about the banished ones. We kinda believe the original Thirteen just didn’t stop their alchemy when everyone was abolished. Or fae-doppelgänger magic is spewing out of the crumbling Rift.”

“Or I’m an anomaly.” Adam chuckled wryly.

My head ached. “What would Ronan’s father do if he knew about Adam?”

“We’d all be in cages locked up tighter than Hannibal Lecter.” Adam’s low voice spread horror through my system.

A terrible sense of his bitterness hit me. Traffic snarled ahead. Adam braked hard and we screeched to a standstill. I braced my hands against the dash, preventing further bodily damage. The heat of his ailing body seared my skin. As fast as Adam’s bitterness erupted, a barbed thread of suspicion worked its way inside my gut. I drew a deep breath, forbade myself to get sick. Like my stomach ever obeyed my brain.

“Are you sure Richie Riley doesn’t know?” I raised my eyebrows at Adam, refusing to look at the source of mistrust behind me. “Maybe Ronan’s drawing you out into the open and they’re hunting you and me?” Hopefully it wasn’t true, because I needed someone to believe in besides an extinct fairy-sorcerer doppelgänger.

In a flurry of motion, Ronan lunged forward and flicked the latch on my door. The door flew open and my scream followed it. I scooted halfway on top of the center console, shaking with a mix of fear and disgust. My uncontrollable energy stabbed at Ronan, but it flared blind and shattered against his defective aura. Fire ants seemed to chomp on me as he lashed a barrage of tainted energy at me that did nothing but scrape my skin.

“Hey! Did you snort stupid dust?” I punched his arm.

“Get out. You’re on your own.” A dangerous cruelty laced his words.

Adam swerved to the curb amid the blare of a piercing horn behind us. The impact of him hitting the brakes swung the door closed with a bang that vibrated in my eardrums. Ronan hopped out and

opened the front door, steam practically spiraling from his blotchy red neck.

“Knock it off, man.” Adam thrust the gearshift in park.

I jumped out on wobbly legs. Ronan’s fury drizzled over my skin in an eruption of molten nails. I prepared to go hillbilly apeshit on him.

“I’m done with you. Go back to the zoo,” I snarled, triggering raised heads from the group of people waiting at a bullet train transport stop. My hand quaked as I thrust it toward him. “Give me my phone. I’ll rescue Zoe on my own.”

“Get in the car.” Exasperation dripped from Adam’s voice. He skirted the front of the SUV, held out his hand to me.

Ronan crammed into the front seat, closing us out of his teensy world. The assault on every pore of my skin downshifted to a tolerable level.

Drained physically, emotionally, and mentally, too much had happened in the last day to upset my boring, secure world. Ronan’s attitude and magic problems were collateral damage I could live without. The man robbed me of my wits. At least I hadn’t spent half my life napping in front of an ion shield the way he had. I could get my wits back. Him, not so much.

I shuffled my boots through faded mulch in the planter between the street and sidewalk, kicking the smirking yellow head off an early dandelion. Not knowing what to do, I grabbed Adam’s outstretched hand. He tugged me into his arms, and his warm hands stroked my back. I laid my cheek against his chest. Heaven help me, but that damn aural connection placed Adam squarely into über-friendly territory. His chest hitched beneath my cheek, and the tightness in his hard body pressed against mine, sharing Ronan’s sinfully muscular body. Two doppel-peas in a pod.

“Ronan has one nice personality, but not for a human.” I sniffed.

Adam swept a strand of hair off my eyelashes. “His father killed his mother a year ago,” he said somberly. “Murph from your casino altercation executed Riley’s orders. Ronan recently found out. He’s dead serious when he says he wants his father destroyed.”

My spine stiffened. I craned my neck to look up at Adam’s downturned face. His baseball cap shadowed his unnatural complexion, granting him a semblance of color. “Seriously?”

“Riley will destroy yours and Ronan’s life if he captures you, or any of us.”

Ronan glowered at us. I eased out of Adam’s arms, unsure why I felt the need to separate, but a naked vulnerability in Ronan’s eyes gave me a cracked mirror into his soul. At that moment, his soul called to me even though he’d thrust me away.

“Hey.” Adam thumbed up my chin. “We need you. *I* need you. I think you can help me return to normal or figure out what my new normal is.”

I smiled wanly. “Did you guys think I fell for that protecting the damsel in distress act?”

Adam chuckled. “Not really.”

Silent, we climbed into the vehicle. Ronan ignored us, his arms crossed defiantly over his chest, dark gaze fixated out the passenger door window. Thankfully, his aura had returned to the grid. Adam

maneuvered back into traffic, avoiding a near miss with a traffic cop behind us.

Timidly, I placed my hand on Ronan's shoulder. He tensed. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve my smackdown." I squeezed his shoulder, dropped my hand. "I need answers. I think both of you need me." I snorted. "Well, you get my drift."

Ronan cleared his throat. "I have no clue why my power's attacking you. It's pissing me off that I'm hurting you."

My cell rang, and I nearly peed my pants. I retrieved it off the backseat floor where it'd dropped during Ronan's conniption. I held the phone out to him. He hesitated to take it, but I nudged it onto his palm, my way of acceptance.

He jabbed it on. "Riley," he barked, listened for a moment. "Ian, what gives?"

Adam sailed into the parking garage at the Stargazer and headed for the public lot behind the residential tower. San Jose was littered with entertainment centers and most included residential towers due to overpopulation. It was a normal way of life. *Was*, being the operative word.

A long pause ensued. "Whatever." Ronan clicked off, pocketed my phone. "Ian's taking Zoe to the old Santa Clara University chapel for the exchange." Ronan and Adam traded another one of their doppelgänger-knows-all looks. "We have three hours," he added.

I massaged my temples. *I'd like to buy a clue or two hundred.*

Rebuilt on the original site of Mission Santa Clara, the chapel was one of the Franciscans-built California missions. A public place open for self-guided tours to anyone. What kind of moron move was that?

"Why there and why so long?" I asked as Adam parked in the first empty slot he found in the back.

"You said Zoe's a telepath? What exactly can she do?" Ronan not so subtly deflected my question.

The dashboard clock flashed thirteen after the hour. I dampened my tangible wave of irritation. The clock reset to twelve and stopped.

"Can we agree on one thing?" I didn't wait for a rhetorical answer to my rhetorical question. "You need to stop putting me on ignore. You have a boatload of information I need."

Adam sniggered. "She's got your number. I want her around, if for nothing other than to help me figure out why I'm stuck in this half-human, half-dead fae body."

I decided to move things along the path of full disclosure. "Zoe can read most unblocked minds." She was going to trade me in for a new BFF if she found out I spilled her secret. "What happened six months ago to change Adam?"

Grooves creased Adam's pasty forehead. "Six months ago, Ronan's dad tried to get him to open the Rift with a ritual from the book using Ronan's telekinesis and his blood. Instead, Ronan screwed up the spell and now tainted magic is leaking into our world, which started my decline. At first, I began gaining abilities. A cloaking spell, mesmerism, powers the ancient fae wielded. The more I gained, the more it began to affect how I looked and felt, and then my fae powers started to decline."

"Now Dad thinks he needs at least two sorcerers to open the Rift, set it right, and stop the taint

from spilling out.” Ronan gave me a pointed look. “Apparently, those pages are missing from the book.”

I drummed my fingers on my purse, trying to contain my excitement. My mind lingered on Adam rather than the implicit idea that I may have access to the other parts of the book. *Yeah, right.* I swallowed hard, pushing down my encroaching unease. “Do I have a doppelgänger too?”

“No one knows.” Adam grinned at me.

“Hell help us if there’s another you,” Ronan muttered. Fin jumped onto the front seat with Ronan, snuggling into his side.

I shot him a scathing look. Hiding a grin, Ronan scratched Fin behind her ears. She licked his hand as if he were a fat, juicy steak. Guess I was a skinny, dry hamburger.

A warm jolt of jealousy rose up. I ignored the fluttering in my stomach. For some stupid reason, I wanted to be snuggled up to Ronan, licking his hand while he kissed and fondled my ears...or some other body part. I gulped. “Then Adam’s part fairy and part sorcerer, one of the final dominant Forbidden?”

Adam sifted his fingers through his flowing hair. “If I *was* fae or a sorcerer, I didn’t know it. After Ronan screwed with the Rift, I started changing.” He waved his hand over himself. “We have a link, but Ronan’s got all the magic. I got nothing now except what I pull from him. He’s the sorcerer and I appear to be fae, whatever that means.”

“And you’re doppelgängers just like the beings the Thirteen devised back in the evil dark ages. Ronan’s a descendant of a Forbidden sorcerer and Adam’s a descendant of a fae-based doppelgänger, created by sorcerers and from fae who didn’t go through the Rift.” As I said the words, I knew they didn’t make sense, but my head accepted them. What else could it be? It made sense if our ancestors were so über evil and industrious. *Hail to the original Forbidden Thirteen. Sneaky bastards.*

Holy convoluted hell in a handbasket. My right eye twitched up the dust. “But the magic link is a good thing. You found each other, however that occurred.” I lifted an eyebrow indicating the time was right for further sharing on that score.

“If you can call that a good thing.” That errant muscle throbbed in Ronan’s left jaw. “We aren’t sure how the doppelgänger bond works. It’s screwing with us both. We don’t know what magic leaked from the Rift, whether good or bad, and who else it affected. The history of the Forbidden Thirteen is documented in the *Illuminaria*, but it was written deliberately vague about the secret doppelgängers or any fae-sorcerer doppelgänger bonds. My dad’s been researching the Forbidden, sorcery, and Rifts for over thirty years and he still doesn’t have half a clue.”

“Why do you think we’re descendants of sorcerers?” I turned to look at Ronan. “ESP is not sorcery. It’s not magic based.”

“It was a closely guarded secret among the Forbidden Thirteen. They had sorcery type powers *and* psychic abilities.” Ronan cursed under his breath, seeming to hate his lot in life. “The Thirteen closed the Rift, went into hiding, and supposedly their magic winked out throughout the ages of their

descendants.”

Until the Earthquake Cluster-Muck—the year we were all conceived. Chocolate-charged adrenaline streamed through my veins.

“If we *open*” —I did air quotes— “the Rift all the way, if that’s even possible, will the magical population explode?” I held my breath.

Adam blanched paler than pale. “Probably. Energy will explode on Earth and those with a seed of magic or ESP, whether they know it or not, will flourish.”

“Or more residual tainted magic will leak out. Like now.” Ronan scratched a throbbing muscle in his jaw. “It’s not exactly written in blood.”

“Can a doppelgänger coexist with his sorcerer counterpart?” Unease expanded like a wet sponge in my gut.

“We don’t know the full gist of the bond,” Ronan said.

“It’s all new to us,” Adam reiterated.

I dared not think of the implications. Should we try to close the Seattle Rift even if we could? Traveling through a vacuum sucking up a clue every hundred miles scared me.

The windshield had fogged and Adam cracked the windows. Sweat beaded his flushed face, and he untangled locks of hair wrapping around his wrist like sinuous seaweed. Our auras tangled and I forced a calming vine toward him. “Why did humans back then chase off the fae and sorcerers?”

“Chase off?” Ronan’s hand froze on Fin’s head. “Our human ancestors murdered them.”

“To rid Earth of everything humans feared and couldn’t control.” Adam rolled up his sleeves, exposing his faintly shimmering forearms. “Magic upset the balance humans wanted to maintain. They worried sorcery would eventually annihilate humans. Humans of that era were afraid of otherworldly beings and thought there was a regular door to the Realm of the Void and that more and more magic would smother the earth.” A lock of his livewire hair shifted, slid down his arm, and fell onto the steering column.

Ronan grunted. “The idiots back then hadn’t comprehended that the Rift gateway might not outlast time, or crumble and unleash twisted magic.” He fixed me with a pointed look. “Twenty-two years is a long time to leak tainted magic and who knows what into the world.” Ronan’s parting shot served up a side order of lunacy. “According to ancient and modern laws, all three of us are walking felons.”

Chapter 7

Before my brain could digest that rusty nail in my coffin, I spied a tall woman approaching the SUV, her lustrous black hair raining down her back. Decked in black from her neck to her heels, she wore glossy, spike-heeled boots I'd sell my cats to own. Her porn queen chest filled out a skintight turtleneck sweater. Raspberry lipstick with matching fake claws completed the panther in heels.

Adam and Ronan swiveled to check her out. The early thirty-something Queen of Darkness parked her stilettos a few feet from the front passenger door. Her beckoning eyes twinkled so brilliantly under the fluorescent lights, her eyes appeared to shoot sparkling emerald icicles.

"You guys know her?"

Ronan drew his gun, his caustic aural energy spearing the air. "Melisande Aguire, my father's right hand and number one tracker." Without moving his sight off her, he pulled a silencer from his coat pocket.

The woman teased her tongue over her bottom lip, causing Ronan's faltering energy to shift to sexual anticipation. I don't know how I knew that, but I did and wished bleach ran through my blood to wash the sensation away. The witchy bitch probed the cab in his general direction, hunger brightening her eyes into emerald jewels.

"Ronan?" I gripped my necklace. "You've hooked-up with her, haven't you?"

"Shit, Aria." He fumbled, dropping the silencer on the floorboard.

"If you've had a relationship, it makes a helluva difference how this goes down." I nudged Fin's front paws off my leg before I knocked her over in my frustration. "She obviously knows how to push your buttons. Is she a Forbidden sorcerer too?"

Ronan slammed the glove box shut. "No. She used me, played me against my father." His scowl deepened, his voice rasped. "She has some freakass coercion ESP, almost telekinetic, but she's not Forbidden. Last I heard my father was doing her."

Where's that ear bleach when you need it? "Can you knock her out if it comes down to it?"

With careful deliberation, he flicked the safety off his gun, cocked the hammer. Answer enough.

"Well, alrighty then." I dusted his shoulder with my palm. "It's crunch time." When I snagged a spare moment to think, I might detest myself from the murderous hell I'd landed in. "Is she capable of

enthraling me?”

“Anyone.” His emotionless voice spooked me stiff. “It’s easier if a prior relationship exists. She can leverage off what she knows of you, your weaknesses.” He punched the dash, a dull thud in the aura storm brewing. “Asshole father. He figured out I came after you, and he knows what she can do to me. He wants to make sure I return *and* bring back the prize.”

Aka, moi. The five-million-dollar prize of three centuries.

“Obviously he knows you’re working against him now.” I fiddled with my stun gun’s safety catch, restraining the urge to blast her down a notch. Ronan gave a too sharp emphatic shake of his head. A warning went off in my brain. He held more secrets than Dominion Research’s closet vault of Forbidden Thirteen trade secrets.

Adam turned up the air conditioner. “Let’s find out what she knows.”

Sweat dripped down Ronan’s temples. The acrid smell of his turmoil filled the interior, his tension scraping the edges of my aura.

“I can’t go out there.”

“Avoid her eyes, man. She can’t be that good.” Adam dipped his head in case she was able to see through the dark window tint, even though it appeared impenetrable.

Ronan landed a mad dog look on Adam. “She is *that* good, especially when my telekinesis is screwed up.”

“Geez, do I have to bang down the double-D witch myself?” I made as if to open the door.

Ronan lunged between the center console and pinned me against the back seat, practically knocking the wind out of me. Poor Fin got shoved to the floor where she yelped and scrambled to steady her legs.

“Ronan, I know you’re in there.” Melisande’s low, sultry contralto carried on a current of air inside the cab. “I take it you have the psychic? Let’s have a little talk before you do anything with her.” She smoothed her hand down her pancake flat stomach. *Skinny, sparkly bitch.*

“Don’t be a total moron. I wasn’t getting out,” I whispered fiercely and shouldered Ronan’s hands off me.

A vein pulsed in his neck. “Get down behind the seat before she looks through the windshield. Don’t look into her eyes.” A palette of dread, anger, and bewilderment mottled his face.

“Okay. Okay.” I wiped a rivulet of sweat off his face before it plopped onto my pants. My fingers lingered on his cheek. His sick aura kicked into gear at my touch, but it wasn’t the stinging sensation of before. This trail of power sought aid from mine. The scared, sensual mix warming my center of power startled me. I snatched my hand back, my lashes twitching rapidly. Surely, I must have misinterpreted the sensation. Ronan attracted to me? *Put the crazy back in your cuckoo clock, Aria Elle.*

Melisande poured herself over the front fender in a seductive pose. She scrutinized her smooth, flawless face in a compact mirror and patted powder on her button nose, slowly sweeping her tongue

over her collagen plump lips.

“Aria?” Ronan croaked out.

“Whatever. Um...you can back off. I’m not going anywhere.” Except down a deep, dark hole. No hole in sight, I dipped behind the headrest. “Oh!” An idea flowered, the thought cooling my untimely passion.

Excitement fluttered in my chest. “I can trip Ronan’s brain to resist her when he steps out. Then I’ll stun her brain to sleep,” I said in a loud whisper. They ogled me as if I’d fallen into a vat of crazy. “What? It’ll work. We’ll figure out what to do after she conks out.”

“Won’t work.” Ronan wiped the sweat off his forehead. “You can’t split off your telekinesis to resist her and knock her out at the same time.”

“Get real.” My scoffing became an evil grin. “Who do you think’s been dumping ice on your prick *and* preventing the witch from skipping to the front of the SUV? At the same time, I might add.” By absorbing extra energy from around me, I can use my telekinetic receptors to hinder someone else’s actions and also knock another out. Without absorbing the energy, I was pretty limited to one action. *Holy hell! Was I a descendant of a Forbidden sorcerer or what?*

Scarlet embarrassment painted Ronan’s face. “You can invoke two telekinetic spells at once?” He squirmed in his seat.

I gave a start in surprise. “Can’t you?”

“No.” Swiping a hand across the back of his neck, he asked hesitantly, “How many can you?”

I thought back to a bullying incident when I was ten. Those three brats deserved my smackdown for taunting my best friend just because she was a little on the hefty side. I speedily chased the disturbing episode away for a snow day in hell. It was the first time my telekinesis had split off into three targets. “Three, maybe. I might need to connect to your aura for an extra boost of energy.” If my unluck didn’t plunk a jinx on my luck, that is. Even with Ronan and Adam’s tainted aura thrown into the mix, I shouldn’t have a problem with two spells. I hoped. I nibbled on the inside of my mouth. *Hell, I’ll just pull energy off the Queen of Darkness.* “Or I’ll just stun her.” I patted my pocket with my trusty stun gun.

Defiance tightened Ronan’s square jaw. “You negate me. I have no power with you around. What little I have is nearly dead.”

My eyes prepared to roll before I put the skids on them. “I can still use your faulty aura to pull energy from, or even hers. Leave the rest to me.”

“Ronan, come out to play.” Melisande’s purring voice seemed to filter from the speakers. “If you’ve got the psychic in there, I can help you with her. First, I want to chat.”

Ronan’s psyche responded to her false allure, his desire palpable in the air around us.

“Dude, rein in your horses.” I slapped another dampener on his mind. “She’s too old for you.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks.” His voice mimicked the crackling of a pre-pubescent teen. He not so furtively adjusted the crotch of his pants.

“Can we get on with this? Remember my *kidnapped* friend, Zoe?” My pitch intensified with my irritability.

“It’ll have to work.” Adam reclined his seat and faced the driver’s door.

“Aria, get on the floor. I don’t want her locking eyes with either of you,” Ronan barked out in a loud whisper.

The moment I dropped down, Fin planted a soppy slurp on my chin, her energy filling me with warm and fuzzies. I patted her and peeked around the seat to glue my sight on Melisande, avoiding her weird, overly bright eyes. Time to get it on before she licked the collagen out of her lips.

Adam merged his aura with mine, expanding our natural fusion, leaving the mix warm and inviting. I hardly noticed his taint as my cleansing aura stole the limelight from him. He almost didn’t have to worry about hiding from the witchy bitch since his entire body wavered in and out of visibility. Guess his body couldn’t choose a side: human or fae, life...or death. I gulped down a lump of air lodged in my throat.

Ronan opened the door and Melisande’s over-sexed enchantment collided with our combined forces. A gasp escaped her, and I suppressed an urge to gloat.

Ronan left the door slightly ajar, standing just outside it. “What the hell are you doing here, Mel?”

“Ronan, love.” She tried to sprinkle holes of bitchcraft magic in our aural shield. We hung tough, and I intangibly spackled the holes as fast as she created them. “Richard doesn’t want you involved in the capture of the Walker girl. You were to remain at the compound. Now it’s my duty to take you in with the girl. If you got her, that is. But maybe we can make a deal?”

“What else does he know?” Hostility poured from Ronan’s tone. Yet fear, in a mix of sweat, spice, and leather wafted off him. *Come on. Man up, man.*

Melisande’s ESP strained against ours. “You resist me.” A raspy laugh followed. “I taught you too well of my charms.”

“Cut the crap. Why’re you really here?”

“For you. What else?” Another gag-me laugh. “Do you think I’d stoop so low as to play bounty hunter for some idiotic psychic?”

I bristled and readied a knockout spell. *Keep talking, witch hag. Maybe you’ll say something intelligent.*

“Aria,” Adam cautioned. “Not yet.”

Cramps were tightening my calves as I squatted on the floor, peeking out a corner of the back window.

“Give me a fucking break. You’re Dad’s number one hit man. Did you tell him I was here?”

“I considered calling him after detecting your bio-footprint in the girl’s condo.”

She stepped closer to Ronan, her spiky heels clicking on the tarmac. Her nearness fenced in our combined auras, but she couldn’t penetrate the shield even if the proctologist freed her magic.

“I’m giving you a break.” She uttered an uneasy, silvery laugh.

“What’s your deal, Mel?”

“I’m on your side. Don’t be so hostile.”

“Prove it. What hand can you play in this game?” he asked. “You’re holding shit without Richard Riley backing your ass.”

“We can be a force, you and I.” She paused, held out her arm, her black bag sliding off her shoulder to her wrist. “Take my tablet out.”

“Why? What’s on it?” Wariness laced his words.

“What proof will sway you to my side?” she taunted him.

“The *Illuminaria*.” I celebrated Ronan’s sneering voice.

Our merger began breaking, and I faltered, allowing holes to form. “We need to speed it up,” I whispered.

Adam held up a finger. One minute to Catwoman blastoff.

“Then I guess we just sealed the deal.” Melisande’s husky voice crawled evil over my scalp, lifting the hairs by the roots. “I want you, Ronan. You’re the power force, not your father. He’s a useless old man relying on his son. You and I could destroy him, take over his mission. Check the tablet. Your idiot father scanned the translation into electronic format.”

“And encrypted it to hell.”

“And I broke his encryption,” her voice slid to a conspiratorial hush.

Stunned, I peeked over the headrest. Melisande caressed his arm with one hand, her other stuck inside her purse. She kept flicking her eyes toward the driver’s seat. I strengthened my spell, helping Ronan cope easier. Adam nodded, giving me the signal.

My left pinkie twitched, then my right. *A little late for that, you think?* I concentrated on wielding two separate threads of energy. Just as I was about to toss my mental knockout spell at her, a gunshot shattered the air, booming through my chest as if the bullet struck me. From the shadows of the garage to the right, a second shot chased the first.

Melisande screamed a shallow gurgling noise. A shot knocked Ronan against the fender. Grunting, he clutched his left shoulder. Strangled screams rolled up my throat. Fin’s mournful howling joined the din. The blast punched our aura, moved over me in a red haze, shooting fiery arrows into my cramped leg muscles. I rose from my elevated crouch and latched onto Adam’s shoulder. He said something, but I didn’t understand him, all my senses riveted on the scene outside. Terror seized my heart, left my aura quivering around me.

A dark stain spread across the upper sleeve of Ronan’s black T-shirt. Melisande tottered on her spike heels, and I saw the point of impact, a gelatinous mass on the side of her head, soaking her long, midnight hair. I gagged and quickly looked down. She fell toward Ronan, her limp form slithering down his arm to the ground in a blot of ink. The last of her nine lives streamed down the side of her head into a darkening puddle where her black-clad body and the tarmac morphed into one.

Pain speared my head and my knockout spell went wild. My thread of energy sped toward the

source of danger hiding in the shadows. Uncontrollable brain waves leached out of me, leaving me shuddering from the force. A gargled yell echoed in the garage and a body thudded onto a car near us. The memory of last night's deathblow resurfaced, and I shielded my mind, cutting off my telekinetic waves.

I scrambled over the back seat to the door on the right, dropping my stunner and bumping Fin onto the floorboards. My heart seemed to stop beating. Gasping, I flung open the door and launched off the seat. My right foot landed on Melisande's open hand. Her rings crunched into the asphalt, the sound of bones creaking renewing the turmoil in my full stomach. I hopped to the right, wanting to dunk my foot in that mystical bleach to rinse the feel of her death away.

Ronan leaned against the fender, holding his wounded arm tight to his side. Blood drained from his face, pain mirrored in his eyes. All thoughts and emotions escaped me. Only one thing mattered. I stepped over Melisande's prone body toward the man who'd saved me last night. The *one* who mattered.

"Get in the car." Adam jogged toward us, surveying the area for shooters.

I clasped Ronan in my arms, anchored down by his weight. Lines etched his forehead, his eyes glazed over.

"You okay?" I struggled against his weight, not taking stock of the weird ache in my chest.

"Yeah," he ground out. "Get me into the seat." Before we moved a step, he bent double and pulled the black purse off Melisande's arm.

I helped him into the vehicle. Adam hefted Melisande up and carried her like a giant sack of cat litter between two other hulking SUVs.

"The bullet didn't penetrate." Ronan gritted his teeth, hoisted his legs onto the floorboard.

Warm blood soaked his sleeve. The coppery tang filled my nostrils, invoking gruesome memories of last night. Gently, I probed his bloodied arm, patting it with a stack of napkins he'd handed me from the glove box. I breathed in deep to steady my frantic heart.

I assessed the damage, gently plucking the T-shirt from his skin. As it rasped over the open wound, Ronan mumbled a string of blue curses. He had an ugly gash and it needed stitches. Even though the bullet only grazed him, it had to hurt like a mother. I offered him a bleak smile, until I looked at my rusty-red, tacky fingers holding pressure to stem the flow of blood. My smile disappeared.

Ronan placed his hand over mine. "You're alright in a crisis."

Another one of those jolts of warmth weakened my knees. Before I could make fairy heads or dragon tails of what it meant, Adam raced back to the SUV.

"We're on the move." He shoved the doors shut, then bolted to the driver's side.

Ronan twisted into the front seat, his hand replacing mine on his wound. I climbed in, left with no choice but to straddle his legs. *I had doctoring to do, didn't I?*

I'd barely seated myself on Ronan's lap, our faces inches apart, when Adam slammed the vehicle

in reverse. Ronan's arm encircled my waist to keep me from knocking myself comatose against the dash. I managed to press on the wad of napkins without causing him a world of hurt.

"Where's Melisande?" Ronan shifted to give my knees better purchase, one knee between his legs, the other on the side of the seat. Any other time and a girl could love that.

The tires squealed out of the garage as Adam sped deeper into the rear of the casino complex. "Dead. Sorry, man."

Ronan's aura spiked, settled. "Who shot at us?"

"Guy wore a Celtic sword pendant. Probably one of your father's bounty hunters."

The knot in my stomach reformed. I touched Adam's arm. "Did you kill him?"

He kept his focus forward, his mouth compressed. "Didn't need to."

The knot unraveled into a pool of acid. "He's dead?"

Adam nodded. Ronan gently squeezed my waist, more solace than support.

"My energy went wild. I didn't mean to do it." My free hand spasmed and I pressed it to my gut. What the hell was I?

I focused on the immediate situation before I ran screaming for the loony bin. What had Melisande done to incur such murderous intent not just from Ronan but from her peers, if you could call bounty hunters peers? "Ronan, what did she do to you?"

"Turned my father against me, caused—" Ronan grabbed the armrest.

Adam bounced over a speed bump. My head grazed the headliner and I lost my balance. Ronan yelped as I fell against him. I eased back, one hand anchored on his steely thigh. "Sorry. You okay?" My morbid curiosity couldn't wait for a response. I needed answers before I lost it. "She caused what?"

Ronan's eyes shot blue flames of pain. "She talked my father into making me try to open the Rift before we understood what would happen or got our hands on the rest of the book. I screwed it up. It's her fault the screwed up magic is causing Adam..." He lowered his head.

I stuck two fingers under his chin, forcing his gaze to mine. "To what?" Deeply rooted pain hazed his eyes, more pain than the flesh wound deserved.

"To die," Adam said with a detached air. "I don't just look like a cadaver. I *am* dying."

Chapter 8

The info bombs Ronan and Adam kept dropping on me created more questions than answers. I hated it. Too many people were dying, and I loathed that even more. If my mother was alive, I'd want to ream her a new one for withholding dangerous and secret family history from me. No wonder I'd always sensed I never really belonged in this world, no matter how hard I tried to lead a normal life, have friends, go to college, make a few bucks on the side. I wanted to scream, cry, rail at everything I didn't know about myself and how Ronan and Adam knew it all...or not enough.

The SUV bounced in a pothole, knocking my head on the roof. Ronan cried out and I gripped the seatback to hold steady. We had time to head to my condo before we rescued Zoe. Ronan's arm needed attention and it gave us a chance to canvass my home for clues.

Adam explained what he meant about dying. When Ronan screwed up the Rift, the bad magic leaking through the portal had caused serious damage to Adam's developing powers, destroying him from the inside out. The doppel-hunks believed the taint would eventually cause his body to shut down unless someone figured out how to stopper the magic or allow it to flow unfettered by opening the Rift completely.

Funny thing, Riley Senior believed that *someone* might be me, not that he knew Adam existed. Yet, Ronan dubbed my telekinesis clumsy and erratic and not much better than his when he was at peak condition. *You think? Hello, unlucky thirteen.* Of course, I neglected to mention that I'd hatched in the middle of a triangle of earthquake fault lines surrounding the San Francisco Bay Area. The more fault lines, the more ley line energy the earth held or emitted. Probably the reason why energy and I had an easy time hooking up. Since California had more fault lines than the number of guests at a pre-Abolishment sorcerer reunion, I wasn't totally convinced I possessed the abilities the doppel-geniuses expected, or if the faulty Rift caused my bad luck episodes. Nor was I sure I didn't. A parking lot puddle had more depth than I did after that conversation.

We entered the foyer of my condo and I reengaged the alarm. Reality stared me in the face and nausea bloomed in my stomach. A very messy and intrusive reality. I needed an infusion of antacids.

"No forced entry. They bypassed the security system." Ronan jabbed buttons on the touch pad, examining it as if he expected clues to pop out in crime scene bags.

Perps had tossed everything in their hunt for the blasted book of Forbidden life and death. I kicked

a chunk of dried potpourri on the tile floor, slipped on a twig, and fell against Ronan who grunted out an oath to the horned one down under. Adam caught me before my butt kissed the marble tiles.

I gained my balance, not so much a calm stomach. “Thanks.” I smiled apologetically at Ronan who backed away from the storm of Aria. “I’ll snag the first aid kit.” I bolted toward the hall bathroom, dodging the scattered litter of normal life. The life I no longer fit. Or ever had.

Bile stung my throat. I rushed into my purple haven and propped my elbows on the counter. Inane sludge filled my head, forcing the bad stuff into a crowded corner. By the time the dry heaves settled in, I was sitting on the cool tile floor.

A few minutes later, Adam entered. Hunkering down, he handed me an open can of ginger ale. “It’ll make you feel better.”

“Thanks.” Our fingers touched as I took the can. A dash of his soothing energy flushed my self-pitying down the toilet. I sipped the calming soda, bubbles popping in the back of my throat.

Adam stroked my hair. My scalp tingled beneath his warm touch, and liquid fire fizzed along the rim of our auras, reenergizing me. Oddly, I felt as if I’d known him forever, even though it was the beastly Ronan also stirring my senses into a tizzy. The idea of Adam’s potential, impending death tortured my soul. Why hadn’t I realized earlier how off the network of the living he was? With gun-toting bounty hunters on my tail, it became increasingly difficult to concentrate on everything happening around me. I vowed to try harder for all our sakes.

I squeezed the can until soda splashed out the top. “Does it get easier?”

“What?”

“The killing.”

Empathy filled his eyes. “I’ve never killed anyone.”

“Oh.” I wiped the soda off my hand onto my pants. Should I be happy or frustrated his resume didn’t include assassin? “I guess I should ask Ronan. He graduated from Murder 101.”

Adam helped me stand, released me gently. “It’s not so bad.”

I peered at his reflection in the mirror and lifted a shoulder.

“Dying,” he said, edging closer until my shoulder blades touched his chest.

Warmth trickled into my southern federation. Damn it. My hormones needed a major time-out. Cruel reality knocked any stupid romantic notions out of my head. I backed away. Facing him, I gripped his shoulders. “Swearing by all that is fairy and holy, Aria Elle Walker will not allow you to die.”

He grinned slowly, so freaking gorgeous. Despite his gray pallor, dull eyes, and brittle-looking hair, that is. “If anyone can save me, it’ll be you.”

A loud bang on the door tweaked the nerves in my neck into a twitch storm. “Time’s running,” Ronan said in a raw tone.

I spun away and grabbed a towel. “I’m not normally a weak-kneed drama queen. Really.”

“Hey.” Adam caught my arm. “Neither Ronan nor I think any less of you.”

“I’ll think less of her if she doesn’t get her ass out here.”

I yanked open the door and bestowed a scathing glare on Ronan. “It’s not every day you kill two—”

Faint smile kicking up his lips, he held his gunshot arm to his chest.

Remorse tripped me up. Had the idiot store issued a recall on me yet? “Sorry, I spaced out.” I rubbed my settling stomach.

He brushed past Adam on his way into the bathroom. “Feel better?”

“Yeah, thanks.” I motioned for him to sit on the closed toilet seat.

He unhooked his gun harness, set it on the counter, and called out as Adam walked away, “Scour the bedrooms. I can’t tell if anything’s missing.” He lowered his voice. “You have a computer?”

“Laptop in my office, tablet in my bedroom.”

“Gone. What’s on them?”

“Homework, business and customer files, zeros and ones.” I frowned at his bloody, torn T-shirt. “Strip it.”

He arched his eyebrows but he ripped off the ruined shirt.

Desire rose as I drooled over his to-die-for shoulders, muscled chest, and the washboard abs tapering to slim hips. *Oh. My. God.* His natural tan didn’t help my bulging, lusting eyes either. Fortunately, Ronan wasn’t paying me an iota of attention while he rummaged in the vanity drawers, gathering first aid supplies as he discovered them in my haphazard glory.

I swiped the fresh coat of perspiration off my upper lip and stared at his gun to stop from totally making a fool of myself.

Perched on the rim of the bathtub, I soaked a rag in antiseptic cleanser. I dabbed the cotton cloth over Ronan’s raw gash, generating a wince. “It’s pretty deep.”

“Wrap it. We don’t have time for a Med-Hub stop.”

Easy to find, Med-Hubs were scattered around the city. They were just small emergency clinics open 24/7 and catered to anyone with a name. I supposed he didn’t want to cough up his name if his father was the all mighty Wizard of the Emerald City.

Frowning, I cleansed the wound and eased the towel up his arm toward the hollow between his neck and shoulder. I wiped the smoking hot tattoo twining his bicep. Green ivy and barbed wire twisted around his arm, dripping drops of red tattoo blood. Each twisted knot on the barbwire formed a swirling number thirteen. Did Ronan also need a focusizer? A strange inner excitement trembled down my limp legs.

I brushed his hair aside, revealing crusty red inflammation bordering two small scabs on his neck. “Who’s been gnawing on you? I think it’s infected.” I touched the cloth to the wounds. He flinched and clenched his hands. “Sleeping with vampires?”

He flicked my hand away. “Leave it.” Tension stood out on his shoulders in knots.

I gripped his square jaw, forcing him to meet my gaze. His smooth-shaven skin blistered beneath

my touch. “If we’re in this together, no more dodging.” My thumb rubbed over a tiny white scar beneath his lower lip.

Ronan exhaled his annoyance. “My dad stuck me with a monitoring chip to track everything my body did. If I lost an eyelash, the monitor picked it up.”

My hand faltered, the cloth fell to the floor. “Bastard.” I grabbed the antibiotic cream, squeezed the tube so hard a glob of cream shot out and landed on Ronan’s chest. Heat zoomed to my face. As much as I was dying to lay my bare hands on him, I had to hold my hand back as it warred with my hormones...and the doppelgänger aura meld thingy screwing up my head.

Ronan slid his fingers through the creamy glob and wiped it on the twin wounds. “I agreed to it for my dad’s experiments.”

“Did you have a leak in your think tank or something?” I pushed his hand away and finished slathering the cream on his scabs.

“He also snuck in a tracking chip. I dug them both out before I left Seattle.”

“I suppose he’s the type who can sell black widows to women with arachnophobia too.” I slung the tube on the vanity. It skittered across the slick granite and bounced behind the toilet. “Your father’s a piece of work,” I spat out. Doing my best with an angry air blanketing us, I bandaged his arm.

Ronan guzzled the rest of my soda and tossed the can into the trashcan. “It doesn’t get better, but it becomes easier to shift focus and detach.”

“What?” I taped the last of the gauze in place.

“The killing.”

I shoved the medical supplies into a pile on the counter, my fist crushing a helpless tube of cortisone. “Was your first bad luck kill an accident too?”

“That was the first of two times I lost control of my telekinesis after a ton of energy hit me from external sources.”

“How?”

He shrugged. “I lost focus.”

It didn’t compute. I hadn’t lost focus last night. “This won’t be the last for me, will it?”

He took my hand, wrapping it in the heat of his. Our auras vibrated around us before his taint flared up and killed the meld. “Our powers are mixing in creepy ways I’m sure no one gets. I doubt anyone ever factored in Adam. Who knows how the Rift magic will affect us.” He squeezed my fingers. “Or any other doppelgängers and other sorcerers in the world.”

I knelt between his knees. Our eyes locked, and the certainty in his gaze would have shot me out of orbit if I weren’t already docked for repairs. Reaching his bad arm forward, he feathered his fingers down my cheek. His thumb slid over my lips and he tamped down another wince.

Butterflies fluttered along the back of my neck. I shifted my attention to his arm and eased away lest my traitorous body betray my head beyond the point of no return. “Adam’s...dying because his powers are tainted and erratic, and you’ve lost most of yours. You both can’t exist without sharing

your powers until the Rift is fixed.” One way or another. “That’s why you can’t control it and why it keeps attacking me.”

“I guess that’s the doppelgänger effect. Who knows?” Surprise sparkled in his eyes, slid to his mouth. “You’re smarter than you look.”

“We’re like bats twisting upside down in the sunshine.” I swatted his knee and rose to my feet. “Let’s go. First we save Zoe. Then we stop your father’s nefarious plans.”

I helped him slip into the clean T-shirt he’d brought, sticking a finger through a weak seam under the left arm, ripping it. His brow went all wrinkly, but he wore the shirt anyway.

In the living room, I surveyed the sea of disaster with a sharp poke of dismay. So we had a few wrenches chunked into the saving-our-butts goal. Ronan hooked his thumb in a belt loop to stabilize his arm. One-handed, he uprighted an easy chair as if it weighed nothing.

“I’ve never seen any book like this *Illuminaria* your sperm donor thinks I have. My tablet’s encrypted so they’re up crap creek without a plunger.” My customer data included communications and drawings. I kept my personal charm designs in encrypted files. Fortunately, I backed up to two clouds. One can never be too paranoid.

My diatribe drew winged eyebrows on Ronan’s sallow face. “What’re you hiding?”

I heated from his scrutiny and shoved up my sweater sleeves. “I make enameled charms and keep my designs private, that’s all.”

“Do you sell the charms?”

I shuffled through a life’s worth of decorative odds and souvenir ends to the corner of the living room. My collection of dragon statues in the curio cabinet appeared to have survived the destruction. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, then set the colorful creatures to rights on the glass shelves. Most of the dragons had been gifts from my mother and grandmother, and my favorite pink and purple one formed the logo of my company.

Thank My Lucky Charms. I couldn’t very well name my business *Lucky Thirteen*, huh? “I sell pieces to local jewelry shops, craft shows, and on my web store. My main business is in custom pieces pursuant to customer specifications.” Hail to my new mission statement. ’Bout time I nailed it down. *Note to thieves: update Aria’s website.*

Ronan seemed to chew on my words as he reset the chairs around the dining table. The perps had slashed the burgundy and gold chair cushions, the stuffing hanging down the sides like sopping clouds. I watched him punch the innards into place, his hands searching inside the cushions a little too long for my tastes. Annoyance flickered through me.

Racking my brain, I stalked from one end of the room to the other. Hiding the rage and terror clawing at me, I rubbed a gouge along the corner of the mahogany end table where it had banged the edge of the steps. The table was one of the few things I’d kept of my mother’s. I gripped the edge until my knuckles whitened and Ronan gently pried my hands away. Combing for additional evidence, I hid the rage and terror clawing at me. “Your father really thinks my mom and her ancestors hid parts of

the book?” Both our gazes slid to Melisande’s tablet sitting on the sofa.

“He spent years searching for the *Illuminaria*, ancient texts, and journals of the Thirteen sorcerers. He has sketchy evidence that your ancestor wrote the book,” Ronan replied. “Your mother’s the descendant. Did you train together?”

Reluctantly, I threw the pillow clutched to my chest onto the couch, met his trademarked Cro-Magnon stare. “Get real. She hardly knew the extent of my abilities.” Regret slipped over me.

Dawn’s light bloomed inside my mind, illuminating a rocky trail to a forgotten memory. I sank down on the frayed couch, shoving wads of stuffing through the zippered cushion. The dead strolled across my spine in lopsided gaits, sending shivers up and down my backside. “She always pounded into me that if I possessed unusual paranormal abilities I should keep it zipped, even to my grandmother.” Mom totally knew about me if she was a descendant. I slapped my hand over my mouth. It was all a ruse. *Why, Mom?*

Adam finished his clue gathering in the bedrooms and joined us. “Did she leave anything behind?” He stopped in front of the windows overlooking the wintergreen hillsides. Wistfulness flared in his eyes, and his hair swayed as if air drifted through the strands. He scratched his pointy ear, snagging a thatch of hair off his scalp. “Journal, books, letters?” he added as if nothing were amiss, shoving the wadded hairball in his pocket.

A pang of alarm chased off the perennial cobwebs in my head. How much longer did Adam have to live?

“Nothing like that.” A wayward thought cut through the lingering head fuzz. Years ago, I used to see her hunched over her desk, researching and writing during every spare moment. I couldn’t put my pinkie on it, though. Whenever I had asked, she’d said she was writing a book. I never dug deeper.

“What—” Interest increased the unnatural sparkle in Ronan’s eyes.

I waved my hand, scrunching my face. “I remember Mom writing a novel in a notebook when she usually used a laptop.” I ransacked my memory to the day I had plowed through her paperwork, recalling all the useless drivel I’d shredded. My face fell, as well as my anticipation, into a puddle of frustration.

Sudden horror clamped that infernal claw around my heart. *Duh, blonde alert.* I pushed off the sofa and cut across the room to the hallway. I wheeled toward Adam. “Did you see my cats?”

“Hiding under your bed.”

Relief snipped a knot in my neck. “I’ll check on them, and then we should take off.”

I coaxed Cody and Cleo out from underneath my bed. My purple swirl comforter hung in tatters off one side of the skewed mattress, and Cody had polyfill wrapped around her neck. Seething, I snatched the stuffing away and flung it into the trashcan. I wanted to fling the bastard who’d done this off my balcony with a wad of polyfill shoved up his ass.

Hugging each cat, I kissed their furry heads, and they snuggled on the bed. Cody swatted at the key ring stuck in my waistband and I knew they’d be okay. As I turned to walk away, that wayward

thought decked me and I skidded to a halt. I yanked the keys out of my waistband, flicking the three keys until the small brass key to Mom's old trunk where she'd stored mementos from her past stopped me cold. I always kept the key close to me, to remind me that Mom had a life before me. A haunting memory from my childhood filled my head. *Oh, holy mother of the craptastic.*

I closed my bedroom door. Her steamer trunk with the padded bench on top rested at the foot of my bed, the lid lifted open, cards, costume jewelry, and mementos scattered across the littered floor. I reached into the bottom and moved some ancient T-shirts around until I found the hidden catch and pried a nail file underneath the false bottom. I lifted the hidden panel only Mom and I had known about. Two packets of papers encased in thick envelopes lay on the layer between the two bottoms. Dickhead Riley's men should stick to picking fleas out of each other's hair. Bounty and treasure hunting certainly wasn't their *forte*.

I walked into my bathroom and locked the door. Avoiding my ravaged face in the mirror, I opened the thicker and larger envelope, my hands shaking. Older than dirt vellum paper with a slight dusty, musty smell met my gaze. A strange language covered the pages with drawings, maps, symbols, and what looked to be recipes. My heart palpitated. I'd just hit the motherlode of my missing life in the lost pages of the book that held the keys to the Forbidden magical world. The *Illuminaria*. Carefully, I shoved the packets flat on the bottom of a zippered tote bag and stuffed a few of Mom's T-shirts around them. Mind spinning into a vortex of excitement and dread, I rejoined my new wingmen.

Chapter 9

Ronan and Adam were swiping through Melisande's tablet at the dining room table. I set the alarm on my cell, plunked my bag by my side, and they moved the tablet closer to me. Typed manuscript pages with diagrams, maps, and symbols, eerily similar to the pages I just saw, flashed on the screen. Ronan scrolled past so much text, potions, spells, and what appeared recipes and diagrams my head spun.

"She really did have a translation? I thought she was yanking your chain." I gripped Ronan's wrist to slow his scrolling.

"Enough to be lethal," he replied. "Not all of it, though."

"Hold up!" Adam exclaimed, stopping Ronan's finger from swiping to the next page. The new page on the screen bore a decorative flourish at the top and a number eight chapter header. He read aloud, "'Note: A cataclysmic earthen energy-based event could trigger a failure in the magic securing the Rifts and allow Forbidden magic to flow over the earth once again, triggering latent magic in descendants of the fae or sorcerers who may have escaped the Abolishment or those not counted among the Forbidden, those who may have an inkling of magic in their blood without knowledge of such. However, such an event is unlikely, and without the formidable magic of at least a pair of Forbidden sorcerers, the doorways to the Realm of the Void should remain secure.'" Adam scrolled to the next page. "That's the Earthquake Cluster event."

"It says *two* sorcerers. Why would your dumbass father have you open the Rift alone? It's like he deliberately had you screw it up." I continued reading over Ronan's right arm, then stopped, a dawning revulsion pinching my heart. "Wait a freaking freakshow minute. He knew what he was doing without the need of two kickass sorcerers! Was he really using your blood with his alchemy, Ronan? Or did he have the blood of another Forbidden? Whose blood?"

Adam and Ronan ogled me, the truth drawing down the horror on their faces.

The tablet fell out of Ronan's hand, clattered onto the table. "He siphoned enough blood out of me to supply a blood bank. I always assumed it was my blood he used in his potion." The pallor of his face gave truth to his father's blood-thieving activities.

I rubbed the vein in the crook of my left arm. "Did my father give him my mother's blood?" Had my father stolen her blood when he left, put it on ice, and sold it to Riley all those years later? Or my

blood?

Ronan lifted his eyes to my face. “I...I don’t know.” He rubbed his head, his confusion seeming to drain him. “My father’s brilliant. There’s no way he’d attempt to open the Rift with just my telekinesis and alchemy based on my blood.”

“Then he used someone else’s blood in his alchemy,” Adam said. “Someone not quite strong enough. Not as strong as Aria or you.”

“My mother. Who else? Maybe he’s had her blood since they all knew each other in college.” I drummed the table so hard, my fingers ached. “Has he captured any other descendants?”

“Not that I know of. He pretty much has focused his biggest attention on you. And me. Not that he wasn’t searching for others.”

“Because we’re the strongest? But not our mothers?”

“Appears so.”

Well, screw me screaming and the other Forbidden descendants born of the Earthquake Cluster-Fuck-it-to-Riley’s Hell.

I leaned over Ronan’s arm and continued reading aloud, “‘If one Forbidden sorcerer uses strong sorcery to attempt to open a Rift, he may incur cracks in the original magic and cause faulty magic to leak out over Earth. This magic may be unpredictable and may cause death to the sorcerer who attempted the opening...and possibly to others—’” I clutched my hand to my throat. “Your father tried to kill you.”

“That’s another reason I want him dead.” Ronan shoved out of his chair so hard, the chair toppled over backward and clattered to the floor.

My alarm chirped, sending me slipping halfway off my seat, dropping a crumb of reality back into our numb minds.

With the few minutes we had to spare and my ravaged stomach aching the whole time over Zoe’s plight, we rejoined Fin snoozing in the SUV.

“Didn’t you bring enough clothes in your other *ten* suitcases?” Ronan grimaced at the stuffed tote bag at my feet in the back seat.

I gave him a black look. “I need something a little lighter.”

Ronan grunted. “You do know it gets cold in Seattle, right? And it’s February?”

Even though I lied, I ignored the man who seemed to know nothing about women and fashion. Bypassing the latest chapter in our manifesto *de* lunacy, I asked, “With all the bounty hunters on my tail, why would your father send Melisande? Didn’t he trust the others to bring both me and *you* back?” I refused to admit that Ronan might be working on his dad’s side until I saw more proof. Breaking into Melisande’s tablet went a long way, though. Hell on high, I needed someone to believe in. May as well be the barbarian.

Ronan tugged a red smartphone out of his pocket. “We’ll find out.”

My mouth rounded in my newest flycatcher parody. “Were you a pickpocket in a former life?”

The SUV's beefy rumble drowned out the lull in the cab. Ronan grunted like a caveman playing with a box of matches from the front seat. He scrolled through Melisande's smartphone trying to decode her passwords. In vain, by the one-syllable grunts he spewed forth.

Finally, I waded into the silence, fear for Zoe paralyzing my thoughts. "What's your plan?"

"Ian usually works alone, but I wouldn't count on it. Sometimes my dad's men team up." Ronan stuffed the phone into his jacket pocket. "Adam will cover us in the wings. I'll negotiate with Ian. You'll stay with me."

Clutching my purse to my stomach, I studied the side of Ronan's head, liking the way his dark locks layered in a windblown tousle.

"Do I knock them out all at once or one at a time?" I asked almost too eagerly, as if knocking out people was the norm.

Ronan checked his gun again. Was I that boring or was he that anal? He lifted his head. "They'll have bio-energy detectors and deadeners. They'll sense and kill your magic."

My eyes rolled back into my head slot machine style. "If we have the same ability, don't you know how to toss out brain waves to shield from bio-energy tools? I can get by a 6000D." The 6000D was the newest detector/deadener used at airports, government, and military sites. Supposedly, no ESP bypassed one without detection. Deadeners killed innate energy and dampened aural energy. Sometimes the tools were so strong and people so weak, the electrical waves they emitted knocked people out. Did I mention that NUW equaled paranoid? For some weird reason, I oozed by any detector undetected.

Ronan rubbed his jaw. "With full strength, I can bolster my aura to shield my brain waves from the older models, but they might detect Adam if he's channeling my energy. You'll have to drop any block you can erect to invoke your telekinesis."

I fluttered my hand in the air. "I hate to short out your memory board, but you forget I can do more than one telekinetic spell at a time."

"Shit." Ronan slowly ran a finger on the inside of his leather shoulder harness. It seemed weird hanging out with guys parading guns as fashion accessories. At least I wasn't in the 'hoods of Oakland.

Adam lowered his sunglasses and regarded me in the rearview mirror. "Hope we're never on your bad side." He turned the SUV down a side street of older businesses, a less traveled route toward the university.

My grin broadened, but my nervous, cold heart didn't enjoy the rash of selfish pride. I huddled into my jacket. "Sooo we locate Ian, you give the signal, I knock him out and anyone else working with him. We snatch Zoe, then bounce to smack down on Richie Senior and fix the Rift."

A puppet string seemed to yank Ronan's spine arrow straight. Adam hissed out his breath and tossed his sunglasses on the dash. Even Fin scooted away, regarding me with her doggy eyes as if I was a pariah from the Void.

My grin faltered. Ronan's aura attacked me in waves of pins and needles perforating my skin. Not that it did much good, my aura ascended to defend against his lack of control.

I observed his flinty profile and Adam's deer-in-headlights reflection in the mirror. "What?" I rubbed my neck, struggled to deflect Ronan's tainted energy. The prickles intensified. By Ronan's reddening sourpuss cast, he struggled with it too. Fin growled and the hackles mounted on her neck.

"Stop the car." Ronan reached for the door handle.

Adam swerved out of traffic into the parking lot of a skyscraping residential building. Ronan flung open the door and jogged away before the vehicle stopped rolling.

The barbs on my skin eased. A strong blast of cinnamon-vanilla wafted from the vents. I took shallow breaths, using the air freshener to focus on my diminishing pain.

"Better?"

"Yeah, but it's getting more intense each time."

"The Rift's screwing with his power."

I massaged my temples, wishing I could rub out the woodpeckers pecking for dinner in my head. "Is it affecting me because I'm supposedly one of the Thirteen?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Adam squeezed my knee, his fingers feverishly hot.

"Wonderful." I traced the prominent blue veins on his opaque hand, stark against my dark jeans. "Why'd you two freak out?"

"Our meld of magic whipped up a static funnel. Weird."

"Oh. I didn't feel anything." Weird was my middle name, and changing the subject was quickly becoming my game. "So there's got to be a reason why Ian came to the U."

Ronan paced the half-empty parking lot, one hand fisted at his side, the other fingering the scabs on his neck. Thirteen parking spaces separated us, enough distance for now.

Adam glanced at his watch. "Riley has the university on a dead zone list. It makes it the perfect place for a paranormal ambush."

"What the heck's a dead zone?" My stomach caved in waiting for the answer.

"Dead zones naturally kill magic. Best guess is that it's due to dead ley lines and the earth or people can't emit energy."

Son of a dead zone bitch.

The SUV's engine spluttered, shuddered, and croaked. I picked at a ragged cuticle, flipped the fringe on my retro suede jacket. Color me cursed. Adam clicked the engine button off and on, receiving a metallic grinding for his effort. He punched his finger on the screen of the diagnostic computer, scrutinized the readouts.

A breeze whipped a sheet of paper at the side of Ronan's head. He grabbed at it, trod into a puddle of freshly dumped coffee. Curses chased after the paper and he stomped his boot on a patch of grass. Poor guy. *Hexes come and go when you play with me.*

The engine rumbled into a smooth purr. Adam cast me a quizzical look, and I gave him a thumbs-

up. At least I had a positive attitude about my unfortunate destructive tendencies.

Thankfully, my skin had quit poking me to death. I rolled down the window and beckoned to Ronan. Quiet and tolerant as a mute mummy, he clambered into the front seat. Adam drove into traffic, his fingers dancing across the computer. I fidgeted in my seat, the creaking leather grating on my last happy nerve. My heart rate sped up the closer to the university we traveled.

Ronan interrupted my troubled thoughts. "Sorry 'bout that."

Without thinking, I combed my fingers through his silky hair, caressing his cool neck, leaving a trail of gooseflesh that traveled up my arm and warmed a jagged path to my heart. Why tall, dark, and barbarian of all people? It wasn't as if Ronan was attracted to me, but something existed between us. When his aura wasn't trying to off me, it was calming, akin to a soul deep tie. A connection I wanted to test drive around for a while. There might even be Belgian chocolate at the finish line...or Adam. *Another note to self: zap my brain cells when I get home.*

"Again, what's our plan?" Before my hands did something stupid, I switched to ruffling Fin's short fur. She nudged my hand for me to scratch behind her ears.

Too much going on and I was getting lost in thought. A scary place, I might add. I had so much to learn before I went off half-cocked on my own. Zoe was my first priority.

Ronan stared forward at the thickening traffic. At the rate we traveled, Zoe would be a vengeful ghost by the time we got to the university chapel. *First haunting: Aria Elle Walker.*

"Count on multiple trackers and we go with Aria's plan." Ronan sounded like he was biting off words and spiting them out. "If the university's not in a dead zone, can you spread out your aural block? My jacked-up magic may not slip by detectors."

Inwardly, I gloated. "Probably." Linking our auras was the only way to do it. "Adam too?" My good aura and Ronan's residual power should be strong enough to tackle Adam's taint.

"Why'd I know you were going to say that?" Through glittery silver-flecked eyes, he tossed me a sideways calculating look. Fin's tail whisked up a breeze. "How many can you knock out while shielding us?"

"With the way my power's been acting, a few within ten to twenty feet."

"How close do we have to be?"

"Maybe two to three yards."

"How exactly do you knock them out?" Adam swerved to avoid a driving-impaired lane changer. He slapped his palm on the horn, letting it blast for a few seconds, the loud honk drowning out the indecision wailing in my brain.

I nibbled on my lower lip, tempted to chomp on a fingernail, and smoothed the fur on Fin's neck. Did I have a rent-to-own deal with Satan, or what?

Adam busted out laughing. "After all this, you distrust me?" His laughter held such warmth, I felt like an idiot savant for holding back.

I didn't trust Adam any less than I trusted Ronan. My secret telekinesis had been such a private

part of my whole life. Now I had two strangers with whom to entrust my most precious secret. One already knew what it meant to be a freak of nature. Both were sinking into my soul with an awakening that left me reeling. I resisted the urge to dip my fingers into Ronan's soft, thick hair again.

Adam flicked on his right blinker. "If it bothers you that much—"

"No. You've exposed your whole being to me when you didn't have to. I respect that."

"You'll kill us if we tell anyone?" Ronan chuckled.

He laughed! Did a blizzard blast hell last night?

"That's the deal." If they betrayed me, I could always drizzle them with curses for the rest of their lives. Eventually, I'd figure out how.

The mere thought of how my telekinetic energy had morphed and expanded last night sent my brain spinning. I tried to bury the thought, but it kept rising faster than a hungry zombie. Could I control my power better? What if I failed? What if it had happened because of Ronan's proximity?

As casually as I could manage, I said, "It's an instantaneous telekinetic hypnotism. I mind bend them into a deep sleep. I can't explain it. I just think someone asleep and he is. Lights out, Snoozeville. Ya know, brain wave to brain wave." An odd tense vibration shifted the aura bubble around us. "Well, it's not like I've done it a lot." I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants. "Not counting the two, you know the ones I accidentally, not on purpose...killed." I almost choked on the word and it left me reluctant to ever use my abilities. If my life was threatened again, I'd have to focus harder to restrain my power to prevent a deathblow.

To think they feared *me*, tiny Aria Elle Walker. Didn't Ronan's telekinetic talents work the same way? I'd tax his brain about it later. Hopefully, it wouldn't hurt much.

"Um, guys, what's the deal if it's a dead zone?"

"You still got your zapper?" Ronan pulled out his gun and did his anal check again. "What do you feel? Do you still have your magic?"

It still seemed weird calling my ESP "magic." It scared me, because it solidified the fact that not only was my telekinesis illegal, *I* was a criminal. The government may not have originally written the laws to distinctively forbid ESP as Forbidden magic, but they would now if they knew about us.

I patted my hip for my stun gun hanging on a belt loop. *Magic* rumbled inside me, ready for action. I tossed out a feeler of aural energy and Ronan's hair stood erect as if the roof was full of static electricity. "Yep. I work."

Adam laughed and Ronan smoothed down his hair, shaking his head and grumbling to his other selves.

Adam parked behind the university's multi-purpose court. A sterling moon slivered the northern sky, granting little illumination. An amethyst sky gobbled the tail of the sun and twilight's first stars glittered. An occasional student and security droid wandered the near-deserted campus.

We had thirty minutes to cruise the grounds and move into lynch mob position. It appeared safe for Adam to go one way, Ronan and I another. We decided to split up to keep Adam from being detected

if Ronan and I were followed. Adam's screwed aura would send bio-energy tools through the nearest stargate, shifting any focus off him. Enough people milled around the campus to clue Ian and potential crew into thinking they were picking up random paranormal footprints.

Ronan and I moved within the shadows of the buildings. We dashed from one structure to another, ducking behind bushes, trees, and garbage cans, evading as much security camera detection, human and droid contact as possible.

The narrow silhouette of a one-story building hid us as an under eaves camera made its sweep. Unused to this cloak and dagger routine, my heart raced. February's humidity seeped through my clothes. I rubbed my hands together, now wishing for those elusive gloves.

Tightness rolled down Ronan's back as he leaned into me. "They're not motion activated," he murmured. He took my hand and we resumed the mission impossible.

Adrenaline blazed through me, a rampant wildfire I hadn't experienced since...ever. I had a difficult time deciphering whether it stemmed from danger or something even more sinister, such as desire. *Whatever.* I bottled up my spineless jelly senses to focus on the meet and greet.

The whirl of a droid's wheels hissed behind us. Ronan towed me between two brick buildings. As the security droid rolled closer, my heart began to drum a rock solo. A cool breeze kicked up, swaying tree branches in a frenzied dance. It swept the spike of warmth out of me and my teeth chattered anew. I had a hard time concentrating on keeping my electromagnetic energy on an even keel.

The droid skated past us intent on an abandoned backpack dumped on a bench ten yards away bordering a lawn area. Its monotone voice called in a report, and the click of a camera eye filled the quiet night with a sense of normalcy. *Oops.* A ditzy blonde cell must've escaped, since normal had pulled a one-eighty on me.

"You still have magic?" Ronan asked.

"Yes. Guess it's not a dead zone."

Ronan went all frowny. "What little magic I had is dead. I can't feel anything here."

"Maybe your pops was wrong. He's not the Master of Wikipedia, is he?"

Ronan hooted. "He wishes."

"Hey." I fisted my hand in my pocket until my arm hurt. "What did you feel at the Rift?"

Once we escaped the droid's sensory range, we continued on our way. Automatic landscape lights flashed on, providing more illumination than we wanted. We passed an overflowing garbage compactor, and the stench of rotting bananas barraged my nose. *Thanks, but I already popped my daily dose of potassium.*

"When I went to the park the first time with my father, I felt like I was being eaten alive from the inside out."

I eased closer to Ronan's side, shivering from his download as much from the night in wintry Iceland. All of a sudden, he wrapped his arm around me, tugging us behind a palm tree. Dry papery

fronds rasped together. Two college-aged guys skulked by, gazes darting left to right, silent, treacherous. My heart began that incessant pounding again. I leaned into Ronan, my power boiling to the surface. A low throb in my jaw radiated to my temples.

“There it is,” the taller of the two guys said and streaked toward the droid rifling through the backpack on the bench.

I kept tabs on my power, despite the false alarm. It cost me a dull headache whenever I forcibly focused too often on holding in brain waves that tried to escape. Or when unlucky thirteen wanted to walk all over me.

Ronan dipped his head and whispered in my ear, “That was further proof the Rift was already leaking from the earthquakes. Magic existed before I’d done a thing.”

A breeze carried the smell of dampness and mold, adding the flavor of distaste to Ronan’s tale. I froze in the elongated shadow of a three-story building. Despite the temperature, my palms sweated. “What would you feel if the Rift was fully open?”

“According to the *Illuminaria*, intense energy. More extreme than the energy the three of us whip up together.” The silver moon highlighted the flecks of charcoal in Ronan’s eyes brighter than the stars twinkling in the indigo sky. “When my father forced me to invoke the spell to open it, magic wrenched on me, trickled into me. It belonged inside me in every sense.” He cupped a hand around my neck and the heat of his fingers lingered in a wash of pained pleasure. “Like thousands of bodies and minds had invaded me and wanted to hijack my body.”

When I absorbed energy from around me, I hardly noticed it any longer. It totally belonged inside me or as part of my aura. I pressed my neck into his hand. Revulsion kicked off a rave in my stomach, but I forced it into a tea party. “Now?”

He bent his head to my ear again, his warm breath fanning my lobe. “Since I met you, the feelings have caved. I feel alive again, like I’ve found salvation.”

Tremors traveled up from the hollow of my back, and I realized it was Ronan’s arm trembling around my waist. The weight of his gaze weakened my knees. Shock struck me and my heart lurched madly. A slender, delicate thread formed between us and I sensed his vulnerability. I clutched his leather jacket in my freezing fists. The warmth of his body offered me no comfort as our auras spun in an unpleasant mix of dread and sorrow.

He gathered me closer. “You want to open the Rift now, Aria?” he whispered, his voice soft, dangerous.

Chapter 10

I registered Ronan's words, losing the ability to breathe for a moment. Did I want to toy with the Rift in any way, shape or form? Was the energy there different from what I already attracted and absorbed? Would I be able to fight off my unluck the way I can when I know it's coming? *Can I trade this assignment for the one behind door number 7?*

We rounded a bend and the church rolled into view, dark and ominous under a slash of pale moonlight. According to Ian, the tower doors would be unlocked, the church undergoing remodeling. We cased the perimeter. No foreign magic intruded upon my senses outside my aura shield. "Aura shield" was just my snazzy tag for jumbling my energy and the energy I absorbed from around me into a force field of indeterminate energy, or magic I guess. Usually, I blocked my telekinetic footprint if other ESPs sniffed around me as if I was a catnip-scented mouse to a fat cat. This happened more often than I cared to admit. So much for the Abolishment. So much for a fake dead zone too. My magic was doing a little smirking inside me, wanting to go bat-shit crazy on kidnapper Ian.

A window halfway up the tower reflected a wedge of moonlight, liquid illumination dripping into the tower and chasing away the bogeyman shadows to reveal the menacing double doors. I flicked the safety on and off my stun gun with one hand, clasped the other around my lucky charm. The electricity buzzing within me couldn't dial down my erratic heartbeat. My muscles tensed as I prepared for bounty hunters to attack.

Ronan drew me into the undulating shadows of winter-bare trees. "Do you feel energy from anyone else? I still don't sense a thing." He sent out a jagged feeler of energy that sputtered at our feet.

"Just your faulty aura," I whispered, wishing I could bolster him with my powers.

He slicked his hair off his forehead, winced as he hugged his bad arm to his side. "Am I hurting you?"

"No." My fingernails dug trenches in my palm. I loosened my clench around my pendant. "If this is a dead zone, I'd know it by now." A white owl ruffled a palm tree and screeched off into the night. I nearly lurched out of my thong.

The grunting of an injured man carried to us from inside the bell tower. Obviously, he wasn't trying to hide the racket. Ronan hefted his gun and motioned me out of the way. I drew my stun gun and

hopped safely behind him. Stupid wasn't my middle name. He was bigger and badder than me. I mentally readied a knockout spell for blastoff. The Aria Special was just for bad luck backup.

The grunting evolved into drawn out groans. The cool, prickly air carried a soft thumping, like someone dragging a sack of body parts across gravestones.

Ronan motioned for me to hang back while he snuck around the tower. My heart pulsed into turbo mode. It wasn't every day I became embroiled in a high stakes illegal paranormal revolution. *Like you hadn't already been hit with a cluestick.*

I peeked around the adobe wall. Ronan's silhouette disappeared through the doors. A bird whistle rang to my left, and Adam's aura grazed my cheeks like sandpaper. Suddenly, his firm chest pressed against my back, boosting my armor a smidge. I knew I shouldn't need it, but, *hello*, my comfort zone was far, far away.

"Coast is clear, security and a few kids. What's going on?" He spoke low in my ear.

A gargled yell echoed inside the bell tower followed by a thud against the interior walls. The clatter of metal scraping a wall resonated through my skull and prodded us into action. Adam lunged for the door. I ran fast on his heels, clamping a restraint on my seething power. My pounding head screamed for release. With Ronan and Adam's intoxicating, rabid energy assaulting me, it was increasingly difficult to control my own. I didn't usually live by the saying, "payback's a bitch," but kidnapper Ian would live to regret that night.

Adam kicked the right side door open, an ebony gun a startling clash against his ashen hand. I scuttled to the closed side of the thick wooden doors.

"Damn it, Riley." Ian's husky Scottish burr tipped off his identity. "Leave off the force."

I shoved past Adam into the square tower, my gaze zipping around the cluttered room. No redheaded firebrand met my frantic search among the construction debris. Ronan rested his booted foot on a burly man's hip. Sporting thick chestnut hair, he looked in his early twenties. The dude flopped on his side on a spattered painter's tarp. How much of the red splotches were blood versus paint? A wet stain darkened the left shoulder of Ian's gray T-shirt. Blood flowed from his right thigh, staining his jeans a deep purple. Gunshots, I presumed. Both must have missed major arteries or organs since Mr. Scottish looked more alert than a whore on a crack diet.

"Where's Zoe, you piece of shit?" I primed my stunner. "If you've hurt her, I'm gonna zap the life out of you."

"Gone." Ian began hacking up a lung. A crimson flush stole across the pain crinkling his handsome, whiskered face.

So help me thirteen, I wanted to yank those crinkles into ditches until I got answers. With all the frosty hatred I was able to muster on my face, I took a step toward him.

Ronan held out his hand. "Hold off." His gaze impaled me with a warning.

He had one lousy minute before I got my spin at the Highlander prick.

Ronan shifted his boot off Ian's hip. "Start talking and maybe we'll call an ambulance."

An expression of part evil and mostly pain consumed Ian's feeble grin. Blood loss changed his skin to vampire white. An ambulance might be too late for him the longer we delayed medical treatment. I think he knew it by the look eating the arrogant satisfaction in his eyes. Still I didn't trust him and wanted him tied up.

"Do you want a swift death or a crawling, tortuous one?" I nudged my foot into the blooming stain on his leg.

He roared bloody murder and grabbed my boot. His waning strength propelled me off balance, twirling me onto a sawhorse. Before I could say, "Hells bells," I was tumbling to the floor. My head crashed into an aluminum ladder and my left hand struck a saw blade. The blade serrated my palm as my hand slid to the canvas covering the floor. Pain blazed up my arm and unconsciousness flirted with my mind.

Shouts and scuffles ensued. My aching back and thudding head beat me into submission. The four bells towering above me multiplied into a dozen. I closed my eyes to stop the spinning and ringing, the nauseating sinking of despair as fate tossed another bad luck wrench into my village square. If I died, who'd save Zoe?

Adam's face floated above me. "Aria." Concern pebbled his voice. "Where does it hurt?"

I opened my mouth to speak but my throat had gone Sahara dry. A tear slipped down my cheek. I didn't think I was crying. Maybe my head was numb and leaking.

Adam's hands tightened on my shoulders. "Talk to me, Blondie."

I cracked open my eyes. "Blondie?" That cut past the desert in my throat. Zoe was the only one who had the nerve to call me Blondie. A tiny cheerleading squad tossed pompoms in the pit of my stomach. A lock of his translucent hair curled around my mess of short tresses. "You're one to talk." His relief trembled against me in his exhaled breath. Air wavered, and Adam's aura surrounded me in warm and fuzzies, chased by flakes of cold taint.

I didn't much care for this artificial reality if it was going to hurt so badly. "Other than a concussion, a sliced palm, and a twisted ankle, I'm okay." I rolled onto my side, patted my hair into place.

Adam gently pulled me into a hug, cradling me against his six-pack abs beer companies would kill for. After they killed for Ronan's tanned six-pack. I buried my face against his shoulder, inhaling his citrusy, amber cologne. Our magic generated waves of energy, sweeping the fog out of my brain until one measly thought blew away the mist.

"Let me at that scumbag!" Woozy, I wrestled out of Adam's arms. He hoisted me up, balancing me on my feet. I waited for the dizziness to pass, steadying my legs. "Ian's contribution to the population problem has just been accepted."

Ronan found masking tape in the construction gear and tied Ian's wrists behind his back and taped his ankles. He trained his gun at the goon's head. Said goon slumped on his side, a parody of pleasure contorting his pallid face.

My inner cat wanted to scratch his pleasure into pain so bad, I had to fight to keep my claws dangling at my sides. “Where’s Zoe? Who did this to you? Why did you want to meet us here?”

Ian’s mouth slackened and his eyes closed. He sagged onto his stomach, his body limp.

“No!” Outrage paralyzed me. Lightning strikes of luck filled my telekinetic receptors. Lucky for Ian, not me, as it ignited an excruciating fire in my battered body. I launched a wave of uplifting energy toward him. Air Drugs, one might call it. When I was twelve, I’d tried it on a neighbor’s cat after a car hit it. I kept the cat alive while I borrowed my neighbor’s motor scooter and zoomed to the vet who saved its eight other lives.

Ronan checked Ian’s neck pulse. “He’s alive.”

Ian’s eyelids fluttered up. “What’d you do to me?” His opaque gaze found a home on me.

“I can do more if you give it up.” My grip grew moist on my stun gun. Antsy as all get out, I danced from foot to sore foot.

“I didn’t hurt Zoe Marino. We have no need for her to die. I wanted you two, same as the other dozen trackers Riley sent.” His ragged breathing stabilized. “I was told this was a dead zone and a good place to make the trade without incurring your magic.”

Ronan cursed a blue streak under his breath. “Who took Zoe? Who told you this was a dead zone?”

Ian coughed, his body shaking hard. “Who do you think? We’re all fighting for the money. Thought I’d found an alliance. Said she had something to show me here. Instead, she betrayed me, set this up, and sicced your father’s dogs on me.” Another racking cough rattled him perilously close to comaland.

“Who?” Ronan growled out.

“Melisande—”

Ronan’s aura tickled mine, exploiting his hatred and fury toward the Botox hag. I gave Ian another boost of calming energy to keep him talking. It worked and didn’t cost me much since I was already in two worlds of hurt.

Ronan rose, stuffing his gun in his shoulder holster. “Someone betrayed her too. She’s dead.”

“Where’s Zoe?” I nudged my booted toes below the bloody trickle staining his pants. “Don’t make me ask again.”

Pain sunk the sides of Ian’s mouth and he gnashed his teeth. “Stop,” he cried. “I’m done with this shit. I didn’t sign up to die. Let me live, I’ll divert Riley away from you. I swear, man.”

Danger gleamed in Ronan’s eyes, and a smile twitched up the corners of his mouth. “Who the hell took Zoe and shot you up?”

“Micah Duprey.” Ian’s torso spasmed. The prick laughed as if his sanity was leaking out his new air holes.

Ronan growled and beat a fist into the adobe walls.

“Who’s Micah?” I whispered over my shoulder.

“One of Riley’s enforcers,” Adam replied. “More than a bounty hunter. Riley’s sparing no one to hunt you down.”

Ronan’s anguish smothered the air, bogged me down. Why was Ronan’s father so formidable that he hired enforcers and bounty hunters? Fresh waves of pain stung my palm, and I raised my scraped hand to rub away my terror.

Ian coughed. “Here’s a tip for you. Get out now, they’re coming back for you, if they aren’t already circling the wagons.”

Adam grabbed my wrist from behind me. “He’s right. We’re wasting time.”

Just as Adam said the words, my magic dwindled, as if an electronic deadener was approaching. And fast. “They’re here.”

I bolted and stumbled on the doorsill, falling face forward to the ground, catching myself on my hands and knees. White-hot pokers of fire burned my palms. More dots of pain to connect. Adam tripped over me and took a header into a planter of mulch nuggets. Ronan jerked me up, his chest against my back. He half carried, half pushed me toward the walled rose garden.

“Damn it, Aria. Watch what you’re doing.” As soon as we approached the gate, he released me.

Ire shot through me, becoming a normal emotion renting space in my body. “Thanks for the tweet.” Knees now throbbing, I sprinted through the gate into the garden, leaving Ronan on the other side of the wall. A body thumped to the ground behind me in the dark. My heart scudded in my chest. “Ronan?” No response. I slipped my injured hand in my jacket pocket. Empty. Just once, I’d love to use my stun gun before I died.

Rose bushes provided a paltry waist-high shield. I couldn’t even rely upon a cloud covering. The crescent moon and the sky of twinkling diamonds ratted me out. Power festered in me, but I feared using a knockout spell in case I hit Ronan. Not that it mattered because I think he was out cold.

“If you want to see Zoe Marino alive, I suggest you reveal yourself.” A nasally voice breached the night from the other side of the wall where Ronan had disappeared.

I slipped along the adobe fence closer to the wrought iron gate. “Where is she?” I hid in the shadowy cover of the twelve-foot high wall.

“On her way to Seattle,” he said, his stupidity vaccine working overtime.

Another presence drew nearer inside the garden. My alien body of perpetual mystery couldn’t absorb blocked energy from anyone at that moment.

I hugged the wall and tried to think, but my head thundered from its collision with the ladder. “What’d you do to Ronan?”

“He can’t help you. He’s taking a siesta.”

“Please.” I snickered. “Like I need help from any tool.” I received a hyena bark in response.

Security lights illuminated the other approaching man. A glow reflected off a thin silver rectangular gadget looped around his bull-neck. Although I’d never attempted to manipulate a spell against a deadener, there was a first time for everything, especially with my new meld of

doppelgänger power. Mentally, I pitched a net of energy. It scuttled back onto me, showering me in stinging ice. *Oh, hell, squared.*

The man behind the wall strolled under the archway. Both cavemen leveled high-tech guns on me. I was pretty positive the goons had orders to take me alive, so I didn't fret about dying. But I bet the guns held illegal bio-deadeners. Enough to conk me out and stuff me in an airplane cargo hold. Fingers of ice twisted around my heart. I sure wanted to know what church picnic Adam had crashed. "Richard Riley Dominion Research trackers, I presume?"

"Good guess," Neanderthal number two grunted out, his voice deep and raspy.

Did DR get these goons from the Caveman Zoo? He strolled within three feet of me, one man at each shoulder. Both had a deadener strung around his neck.

Baldy grinned at me. "You're cuter than your friend. I've always been partial to blondes. How 'bout you, Frankie?"

"Nah, I love 'em red." A hunk of hacked auburn hair hung from his fist.

I ground my teeth at the sight of Zoe's tangled hair and tossed another wave of bad luck at them. It bounced back and spit static at me. "If you hurt her, I'll pluck out every hair from your bodies one-by-one, then torch you alive."

"Big words from a little gal." Baldy advanced on me. "You willing to come with us, or do we have to haul you out of here?"

Frankie moved a smidge and light glinted off both deadeners. Then a light-bulb moment whacked me. If I aimed a destructive wave of energy at one deadener, would the other counteract it and fry them both? It was worth a shot. Not like I had many options.

A mockingbird call from the dwarf palms by the bell tower split the thick air of evil. My aura swirled and I recognized Adam's crackling aura. Neither of my would-be captors appeared fazed by the noise.

The dark-haired man took another step closer. "Grab her, Milo, and let's get on the road."

"Wait!" I held up my hand, backing into a spikey rose bush. "I have a deal for you." I mushroomed that weak white flame in my brain and heat expanded as I imposed my will on it. I loosed an extra controlled barrage of energy, pushing against the dampeners, and flung it toward the two deadeners. Rose thorns pricked my butt but I needed the distance. I couldn't risk releasing too much energy in such close proximity if I jammed up the deadeners. No way was I killing anyone else, even if he was a walking argument for birth control.

The air screamed with the surge of energy. A bolt of electricity flickered between them, blinding me for a few seconds. The men roared and scrambled to thrust the sizzling deadeners off their chests. I ducked and skirted around them. Milo lunged and grabbed my legs, knocking us both to the ground. Air whooshed out of my lungs from the impact of my side slamming the damp grass. A mass of screeching nerves burned across my hips, down my legs. My body was so going to betray me and sign that ownership deal with Satan if I lived to see tomorrow.

Milo pinned me on my back, his bulk spread on top of me. “We gave you a choice,” he spat in my face. I scrunched my nose, the reek of roadkill on his breath murdering my sense of smell. “Give me the syringe, Frankie.”

Milo’s crushing weight numbed my torso, and I rotated my head to face Frankie. He rolled and writhed on the ground near the gate, moaning and sputtering. A landscape light illuminated a patch of singed cloth on his chest.

“Hell, we’ll do it my way.” Milo’s fingers dug into my upper arms. Laser pain stabbed my head.

I screamed. *No. No. No. Not another Scrambler.* I’d destroyed the deadeners that held back his ESP and he took full advantage. Stars exploded in my vision and I once again flirted with oblivion. Flickers of lightning zigzagged in my skull, snipping my energy receptors. I vaguely heard Milo chuckling, yet the rumble of his laughter jiggled along the length of me. Confusion muddled my mind and I was unable to draw upon my telekinesis. I gripped my focusizer, but it was cold and silent. I couldn’t even lift my knee to knock Milo’s family jewels into his throat.

Suddenly, the sound of a blunt object hitting flesh stilled the behemoth on top of me. The magic infiltrating my head cut off, and as quickly as the explosive pain invaded my skull, it vanished. The slumbering weight rolled off me and Adam pulled me to my feet.

“I’m gonna kill that bastard,” I managed to say through gritted teeth, balanced against his side.

Strength coursed into my muscles and I wheeled around. Baldy had toppled on top of the other in a mound of twitching cavemen, out like nightlights at sunrise. Or dead. I wasn’t about to stick around to ascertain which. I’d had enough of that night.

Between my tortured body and dragging a semi-conscious Ronan, Adam and I lumbered to the SUV without another clash from the Neanderthal Asylum. We decided to follow Zoe to Seattle ASAP. The crapfest had dinged Level Ten.

Adam called in an anonymous report of gunfire at the mission church and a plea to send an ambulance, and then we sped toward the airport, barely staying legal. I shoved my rescued stun gun in my pocket and splayed my fingers against my thumping head, needing a diversion to talk me off the ledge. Ronan flopped in the back seat, Fin sliming his face while he groaned and twitched. He assured us they’d only shot him with a bio-energy stun dart, but I still worried. However, from the grumbling overflowing his mouth, his He-Man pride hurt more than his body.

I leaned between the front seats and studied the half-comatose barbarian, his cloudy eyes open, blinking rapidly. Lines pulled at his mouth, etched the skin around his eyes. The pooch nuzzled me, wagging her tail in his face.

Cursing, he swatted at Fin’s rear. “Something you need to know.” He rolled onto his side. “They shot me with an ESP energy depressant my father’s team developed for the government to throw them off his real shit. Normal doses don’t work on me so they doubled up. It kills my magical bandwidth for hours. Not that I have any magic to kill right now. Thanks to the Rift. And you.”

Another evil eye had Ronan scowling at me. I laughed. “Have you been diagnosed? Your scowls

don't work on me."

"Your rabid eye doesn't work on me either." He prodded his head, groaned. "Damn it. DR knows how strong you are now."

I straightened the fringe on my jacket. "Your father also knows for sure that we're together."

"Get me something to eat. It'll absorb the drug burning in my gut. Chocolate peanuts in the glove box."

Chocolate! Why didn't he give it up earlier? I rooted out a full bag of double-dipped, chocolate peanuts. One at a time, I fed them to him, sharing with Adam, tossing several into my mouth. Even the beggar Fin got a peanut after I bit off the chocolate. I was hungry enough to scarf down a fat, juicy burger and a bushel of fries, but the peanuts calmed the tempest brewing in my stomach. My thoughts wandered down Foodville, and I didn't notice Ronan nibbling on my fingers until he sucked the tip of my forefinger into his mouth.

The most intense flare of desire boiled the chocolate in my belly and left me craving...Ronan. I wrenched my hand away as if scorched.

"Feed me."

I stuck two peanuts between his lips, threw him the half-empty bag, and shrank into my seat in acute misery. The lines between no-man's land and reality city had blurred, and I needed to stop my southern federation from shipping out invitations. *Holy cow. Ronan?*

Silence bombarded us until we approached the airport. The SUV lurched to a stop at the light, and Ronan pushed his fists on the center console to steady his dead weight.

Adam swung the vehicle into the San Jose Jet Center and parked in the loading zone. Tongue-tied, I stared. The only kind of jet that flew in and out of the Jet Center was a private one. I'd never been on a private jet! That was more exciting than dwelling on a wrecked Rift, a psycho kidnapper and all-around evildoer. I sorely needed a break from my new hell in a nice private jet with my two doppel-hunks.

"Adam will fill you in some more on the plane." Ronan opened the back door. Fin leapfrogged over his lap to the ground.

"Why can't you?" I slid off the seat and held his arm while he steadied his legs.

"I'm flying commercial. I can't spend two hours on a plane with you."

A normal woman could be offended by that remark. "You can't go by yourself. You're not well. Your shoulder needs attention." I twisted my fingers on his jacket. An iron mass crushed my shoulders. Fear that I'd never see him again worked to destroy my confidence. "I'll be okay."

"Aria." He exhaled my name. Flares erupted in my awakening southern region. "I can't risk hurting you." He fisted his hand around mine. "I'll sleep it off on the plane. You'll be safe with Adam. The jet's secure, not traceable to us." He handed his gun to Adam for safe keeping. "I'll use Adam's identity."

"What about you? Your power's shot even without the depressant."

“I’m not exactly useless without it.” The corners of his mouth twitched.

Overhead lights altered his unfathomable eyes into molten silver pools. “Can you take another private jet?” The heat of his gaze seared me.

“We don’t have time to kill.” Caressing my chin, he slid his hand around my neck, teasing the hair at my nape.

I shivered from his touch and pressed into his hand. “Be careful,” I implored. “Please?”

He leaned forward, brushed his mouth across my forehead, and gently pried my fingers off his jacket. “Count on it.”

I watched him drive away, taking a part of me with him. It was more than just our entwined aura. Turning to Adam, I realized another part of me was eyeing me critically.

Chapter 11

Super-soft leather seats wrapped plushy comfort around my battered body. Fin rolled onto a doggy bed in a strapped-down pet carrier. Adam returned from the cockpit and took my crusty hand in his. I peered at the first aid kit on his lap. “Dr. Freshfields?”

A smile lit his sickly face, his dimple an abyss of heaven. He oh-so-tenderly cleaned my cut. The attention gave me a chance to memorize his face. I loved his boyishly charming smile that twinkled in his ever-changing eyes. Despite his pasty coloring, the shifting washed-out hair, and his one pointy ear, he’d retained his smooth skin and model bone structure. His beauty extended far deeper than skin level. With our aural bond, it was easy for me to envision his true self beyond the cadaver coloring. Of course, I only had to look at Ronan to recognize the darker side missing from Adam. If only the fairies would sprinkle light and happy dust on Mr. Grumpy.

“What do you do for a living? Is this your bird?” The antibacterial solution stung, and I forced my bellyaching body to suck it up.

“I’m a VP in my family’s import, export business, Freshfields International. The plane belongs to the corp.”

My brows hiked into my hairline. “That Freshfields?” It hadn’t registered earlier that I was tag-teaming with a member of one of the richest families in California. He sure didn’t appear the corporate VP rolling in a gazillion dollars. Not that I’d ever dated any white-collar corporate types at my age. I usually attracted tall, cheap, and dumb. “And so young?”

“Surprised?” His humble laugh feathered across my skin.

My hand flinched from the prickly aural energy—guess I should break down and just start calling it *magic*—his touch triggered. “Should I curtsy when I address you?”

“A simple kiss will suffice.” Adam laid my doctored hand on the pillowy armrest. He tossed his baseball cap on the seat in front of us, his opalescent hair flowing free. It had grown several inches since yesterday despite the locks that continued to fall out. The electrified tresses swayed in a nonexistent breeze, reaching for me and fluttering in the energy my aura kicked up.

The plane taxied down the runway, but my gaze remained unwavering on Adam. The bird ascended, thrusting us against the seats. He leaned into me and his mouth claimed mine in a brief, heart-skipping kiss. Soft and firm, his lips tasted faintly of spearmint. His aura pooled warmly around

mine. Fingers on my mouth, I quickly drew apart. My pulse skittered and his touch melted me into the seat. His violet eyes glistened with an unknown promise, leaving my mouth blazing. This was so wrong when I had feelings for both Adam and Ronan and my heart was working overtime trying to figure it out. I eased away as much as the seatbelt allowed.

“Did...did you feel that?” he rasped out.

“Definitely weird.” Several degrees of guilt sprinkled cold water on our mingled auras. Ronan’s frowny face sprang to mind, not that he truly ever left it.

Two men, one Aria. What was a girl to do? I twisted my clasped hand, rubbed my temples, spurring my last two brain cells to work in harmony for a change.

He straightened in his seat, shaking from my frosty aural blast. “I’ve never felt...I think the Rift —” He hesitated. “Our auras are intertwined,” he blurted out. “At the house I felt your aura around me, not inside me. Ronan and I are connected that way. I never knew it until he told me what I was sensing.”

Dazed, I nodded, feeling the hollowness inside my core, a missing piece. It might be Adam’s tainted magic causing the emptiness, or not. Even though I sensed a smidge of Ronan within Adam’s aura, part of him was absent from the equation. *Can I freak out now?* Doppelgänger magic? Two halves of a whole? What kind of magic did the Rift spit out? Fairy dust love potions?

“Aria?” Anxiety stamped his face. “I’m sorry.” He squeezed my knee.

What if we didn’t make it to the Rift in time and I lost both of them to the tainted magic? *Whoa, what?* I didn’t even *have* both of them to lose. I’d met them less than forty-eight freaking hours ago. Who was playing such a sick joke on me? I needed an instant lobotomy to stop the chaos in my brain.

Even though I so desperately wanted both doppelgängers in my life, a tiny part of me didn’t. I didn’t want them only to lose them. I had serious abandonment issues. Every morning I called Zoe to make sure she was kicking and hadn’t toppled me off her BFF pedestal. At least with the doppel-twins, I needn’t worry about my wacky telekinesis chasing them away. Scared spitless, I didn’t know who I was, let alone who wanted me. Or who I wanted.

I picked at a spot of caked blood on my jeans. “We need to focus on the Rift, healing you and Ronan.”

Adam hunched over, probing his pointy ear as if he felt it growing. “Tell me one thing.”

“Sure.” I leaned into him, tilted my face toward the need in his eyes. My heart spooled.

“How do you feel about Ronan?” His jaw tensed. He lowered his hand and a lock of hair stuck to his fingers. Flicking his wrist, he scowled as the lock of hair fluttered to the floor.

Heat rushed up my neck. “I feel the same...I feel...Ronan in your aura. It’s confusing.” No illusions would mar my relationships—whatever they evolved into—with Ronan and Adam. *Note to self: find a doppel-magic cluestick, and fast.*

The plane leveled to cruising altitude and Adam unbuckled our seatbelts. His warm hand lingered on my thigh, gently drawing thirteens on my pant leg. “Ronan and I speculated about this over a bottle

of Irish whiskey when we discovered we were doppelgängers and began sensing each other's energy and aura. We wondered what would happen if one of us found a woman whose magic merged with one of ours, what she'd feel. We knew it was a possibility since ancient sorcerers and their doppelgängers were connected the same way. We wondered what it would do to the other. And we laughed it off." He snorted, his derision all but palpable in the air. "I'm not laughing now."

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the vast, bleak clouds I felt from the occasional bump of turbulence in our dark haven in the sky. After a moment of tense silence, I asked, "How did you really determine you two were doppelgängers?"

"Like we said earlier, it's a big guess based on Forbidden Thirteen history." Adam touched my shoulder, but the blinking beacon of hope on the wing captured my bleary gaze. "We'll work it out." He yawned with loud exaggeration. "Hungry?"

"Starving!" A shaky sigh of relief chased my reply. One more thing to add to that mental journal of items to dwell on later. Soon I wouldn't have capacity left, and I'd have to start checking things off that list, reformat my brain's hard drive, or proceed with that lobotomy.

We ate a gourmet dinner of fresh garden salad, steak, garlic mashed potatoes, and sourdough bread slathered in butter. By the time I pushed away the empty dessert plate, I felt ready to pop out extinct fairies.

The creamy taste of cheesecake lingered on my tongue. Ibuprofen appetizers lessened the brunt of my aches and pains, and I wilted into my pillowy seat, the faint roar of the engines lulling me toward Snoozeville. My mind relived the heady heat of Adam's kiss even as I found his nearness both puzzling and exciting. Yet, the memory of Ronan's tan face and his full, firm lips pressed against my forehead refused to grant me quarter.

The flight attendant cleared away our dinner dregs. Adam dimmed the lights and romantic starlight twinkled in the black abyss. The flight attendant carried in mugs of coffee on a tray, and the scent of caramel mocha nearly launched my pulse into the next galaxy.

"How'd you become a VP at such a young age?" I sipped my ambrosia.

Shadows hazed Adam's eyes for a second. "My father died last year from an aneurysm. I was next in line when my mom became CEO."

"I'm so sorry." I smoothed my hand over his knee. "Which parent do your fae genes stem from? Is anyone else affected?" I whispered discretely.

"It's a mystery." He smiled ruefully. "As far as I know it's just me. My mother hasn't seen me recently since she's been in Ireland opening up a new factory."

Steam wafted from my coffee. "Aren't you curious?" I gently blew into my cup. "Maybe she knows...things."

"She was adopted. So was I. Plus, she wouldn't know a fairy from a dragonfly. I've tried to track down my real parents, but the trail is deader than dead. Almost as if I didn't exist, as if I just popped out of the Rift after the quakes."

My eyes bugged out. Could it be true? Had other sorcerers, fae, or doppelgängers oozed through the gateway from the Realm of the Void? Were they roaming the world trying to figure out what's wrong with them and who they are?

“Who or what else skipped through the Void and is playing in our sandbox?”

“No telling.” Leaning forward, he sized me up with an intent look. “You know, if we figure it out, we may close the Rift, secure it again. I’m hoping Melisande’s tablet has new info Ronan’s never seen.”

Shock cooled the warmth of the coffee sliding down my throat. I straightened my spine, planted my feet on the floor. “Don’t you start popping circuits too. Shouldn’t we open the Rift, let the pure magic out and deal with the consequences later? Isn’t that the only way to heal you two? What happens if we close the Rift, even if it’s possible? Will you disappear...or worse?” I swallowed hard. We hadn’t really discussed goals beyond stopping Ronan’s sperm donor and rescuing Zoe. “Why wouldn’t we want sorcery restored and usurp the Abolishment laws enacted by pea-brained humans?”

“It’s dangerous. We don’t know what will happen when the Rift opens and Forbidden magic is fully unleashed. We have no clue what will come out. Plus, it’s illegal to practice magic.”

“NUW won’t have a choice but to lift the Abolishment and change the laws against magic.” Excitement started my foot tapping. “It’d be wicked cool living next door to fairies and sorcerers.” I set my empty cup aside.

He gawked at me as though I’d opened a demon gate, sprouted horns and a scaly tail. “Not if Ronan’s father has his way and nabs all the Thirteen sorcerers for his world domination goal. They’re supposedly the strongest, or will be, of their descendants. Residual magic’s been building and regenerating throughout the years, probably more so since the quakes. What happens if others have the same ideas once magic escalates? We’re talking world chaos.”

“Then we go back to the incubation box. It’s best to toss out the dumb laws, anyway.” I gave an annoyed sniff. Silent, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “FYI...Ronan’s rubbing off on you.” He might have a teensy, tiny point, but I wasn’t ready to play the acceptance card. “With magic unleashed, groups such as Dominion Research won’t have a donut’s chance in a police station.”

His pale eyebrows drew together in a *V* at the bridge of his nose. “Who’ll control the Forbidden from destroying the human race once magic becomes rampant again?”

“Okay.” I swished my hand in the air. “We’ll need ten boatloads of cash to buy all the clues.” My thoughts resurfaced in morbid land. “What if the Rift continues to crumble naturally? It’s already been fractured from the quakes and Ronan messing with it.”

“We’ll need to focus on that problem ASAP.” A silken edge of warning rose in his lackluster voice. “That’s even worse to imagine depending on how fast the tainted magic has already infected the world.”

“God, Adam.” I thrust forward and threw my arms around his neck. His strong arms embraced me

in comfort, regardless of the unnatural heat of his body temperature. “I wish I could heal you.” I buried my face against his shoulder. “And Ronan.” *You can’t walk in with a short shelf life and leave me to tackle this on my own.*

He caressed my hair. “I know, Blondie.” The air conditioner kicked on. Despite my layers, I shuddered. Adam needed the cool temp to alleviate his perpetual fever, to provide him a skosh of relief from the faulty magic burning him from the inside out.

I settled back into my seat, needing distance from his aura wrapping me in the feel of him. “How did you and Ronan find each other at the Rift?”

He took a swig of coffee and set the mug aside. “I was on a business trip in Seattle when Ronan went back to the Rift after his first attempt to open it with his father. He tried to close it on his own. I had the bizarre idea to go hiking in Washington Park. My fairy connection to the earth—or to Ronan—was working, I guess.” He shrugged. “Not that I knew it at the time. But strange energy drew me to the Rift where I found Ronan, his heart barely beating. I thought he was dying.” His legs tensed. “He was out of it, babbling weird things.”

The jet flew into a patch of clouds, rocking us side-to-side. I grabbed the armrests as Adam steadied our mugs. As swiftly as the plane escaped the roiling clouds, his mood soared and starlight swept a tender curve to his mouth.

“What strange things?” I eased up on the armrests before they absorbed my hands.

“Stuff about my life. Things no one should know. Later, I had visions about Ronan’s life. Anyway, we found no link to prove we might be related other than our research on doppelgängers.” He raised his hands, dropped them.

“Do you still have visions?”

“No, but our auras are intertwined now. At first, we were able to draw energy from each other. Not anymore.” He propped his feet on the edge of my seat. “Hey, tell me how your telekinesis works.”

My telekinesis had always been difficult to define, something I’d taken for granted since I always believed I was alone with the ability. Now I knew the mother ship had opened its hatch.

“You know, telekinesis, the ability of the mind and body to manipulate matter, time, space, or energy. My abilities have soared radically since I was a teenager.” I wasn’t ready to cough up how much energy I absorbed to enhance my innate energy. Such a secret might keep me alive longer. I held my pendant, rubbed the enameled pattern. “The unexplainable part is how the number thirteen affects me. It basically causes bad luck when I’m not paying attention, sometimes sneaks up on me. When I sense it, which is when my aura starts to tingle around me, my head aches or my pinkies twitch, I can usually stop the bad luck from hitting me by counterattacking it with my telekinesis. I use my necklace as a focusizer. It acts as a conduit of aural energy. Whenever the number thirteen’s around me randomly, it usually precipitates a bad luck event.”

“But you wear a number thirteen on you.” His eyebrows lifted up.

“Its base metal is copper beneath the enamel. Copper’s a bridge for energy, or magic. It provides protection and is a conductor that draws away negative energy.” I fluttered my hand, sketched numbers on the outside of my coffee cup. Adam rubbed his leg against mine provocatively. My mind drew a blank, all thoughts flying out into the ether.

“Go on.” He chuckled, stopping his flirtation.

I blinked rapidly, dispelling the fluttering in my lower abdomen. “That’s it. What else is there?” Every sore muscle in my body stretched painfully tight. “What did Ronan tell you?”

“He’s telekinetic. Like you, it’s natural, inborn. Things happen around Ronan when the number’s present. Since he’s a descendant of a Thirteen sorcerer, he’s been trained from the *Illuminaria* to use his internal energy, brain waves, to manipulate elements, people, and events. He’s regained some of the magic his sorcerer ancestor possessed. He tattooed the number on his arm, creating a focal point to negate bad luck, similar to your pendant.”

I frowned. “But then how does his tattoo negate bad luck? There’s no copper in it.”

“Exactly. He hasn’t relied on it since he was fourteen, and mostly has control over his power, enough to thwart his bad luck. You probably never needed your necklace with the kind of power you have.”

I scoffed. “Seriously? I get hit with bad luck every day. How else do you think I’m still alive if I don’t drive it away?”

“Did you ever think your necklace might be drawing it to you?”

“Hell to the no way. I lived nearly sixteen years without it. My unluck was ten times worse before.”

“It’s all in your head, and now it’s all in your strength and control of your telekinesis, the older you grow.” Adam reached forward and uncurled my fingers from around my pendant. “Take it off.”

Did a stupid ghost possess him the last time I blinked? A Baja sandstorm seized my mouth. “What?” I scrunched against the sidewall, but he wouldn’t relinquish his hold on my chain. “No. I can’t do anything without it. Bad luck will kill me.” The lie rolled off my tongue. I don’t know why I said it, why I was hiding my abilities, my last bastion of normalcy.

“Please, Aria. I want you to try something.”

“You think I don’t know what I can and can’t do?” I retorted. Without a focusizer, I got lost within my own head. It wasn’t a pretty picture. I hated not having control. My abilities were growing and it frightened the crap out of me, especially since my aura wasn’t entirely mine. I always wondered if all the energy I absorbed might have a lasting detrimental effect on me. Or land me in jail.

Adam pushed up from his seat and grasped the armrests, pinning me between his steely arms. “Everything’s different now.”

“Any connection between your reality and mine is purely coincidental.” I tossed my head and eyed him with flinty triumph. “The Rift crumbling doesn’t affect me.” After everything they’d told me, I knew it had. What else explained my soaring abilities?

“I think it did.” Adam’s voice dropped an octave. “As I weaken, you grow stronger. I feel it in your aura.”

I’d noticed a difference, but I chalked up my recent souped-up power to our eerie threesome bond. What he suggested was three sorcerers short of the Forbidden Thirteen. I shook my head vehemently. “I’m not stealing your magic. Don’t put that on me. If anyone, Ronan’s stealing it.”

“I didn’t say that.” He crouched, his arms caging me in, blotchy aura cloaking me. “You’re keeping our magic alive, feeding us through our shared bond.” His opaque hair quivered over his shoulders, a drifting mantle of snow.

“You’ve snapped a bolt. Let me go.” I elevated my feet on the seat to push against his confining arms. Fin trotted over and uttered a short, happy yip as if I held a steak bone...or her bestie, Ronan, had materialized on the plane.

“Do you think your abilities are normal for a telekinetic? *Think*, Aria. You and Ronan are deriving your powers from the leaking Rift—from what’s left of the Forbidden, from magic that shouldn’t exist.”

I shook my head so hard brain cells packed their bags and hopped on a cloud. “Get real. I’ve had these abilities all my life.” The lies continued to snowball off my icy tongue.

“We both know that’s not entirely true. You were born with the blood of a Thirteen sorcerer. As the magic leaks out of the Rift, you channel it and unleash it through your own breed of telekinesis.” He drew closer, his heat flickering around me.

For the trifecta of my scorn, I gave him my evil eye, a glare, and a scowl. “Did you sneak a bottle of tequila in the galley?” I asked feebly, knowing the truth was staring me in the face. I couldn’t escape it. Adam and Ronan knew too much.

“Some of the abilities you possess are unheard of. They’re powers only a Thirteen sorcerer exhibited, as far as sketchy ancient texts explain.”

“I’m not a fairy or sorcerer or whatever else existed in ancient Whack Job Town.” My aura rose defensively, suppressing my roadmap of body aches. I raised my hand to grip my necklace. Adam beat me to it, yanked the chain off my neck, and hurled it toward the galley in one dumbass move.

I skidded off the runway. Hands on Adam’s shoulders, I shoved him flying backward to land against the couch across the aisle. Air held him down, and I sprang toward him.

Eyes glowing, he attempted a crappy mesmerism stunt to compel me to freeze. He exuded the illusion of freedom, rising from the couch, but I hacked through his newly minted illusion powers as if he were an ESP wannabe. Wind swirled his hair into knots as fast as his livewire hair untangled the snarls.

The violet glow in his eyes winked out and empathy tightened his lips. Air held him immobile. “You just proved my point,” he said softly.

“Shut. Up.”

His aura had gone to ground, ripping a piece of my soul out of me. Heat swept over me, despite

the cabin's frigidness, stabbing some sense into me. What had I done? What had I become? An unholy panic buckled my knees. My aura fizzled to nothing in the wake of my meltdown. Adam hauled me into his arms, and I buried my face against his chest. His aura bent around me, then shifted back to mingle with mine.

I grabbed a handful of his polo shirt. "Why me? I'm not a plain old telekinetic, am I?" *I'm not Aria Walker, little ole college student, am I?*

He grazed his hand up and down my back. "You're growing, changing. You've probably been able to do that for a long time."

I stiffened, recalling the first time I'd noticed odd sensations and occurrences when my emotions dove overboard and I couldn't redirect the energy. The day Mom died.

He swept tendrils of limp hair off my cheek. "You've noticed, haven't you?"

"I thought thirteen was jinxing my luck."

"Ronan noticed his ESP footprint shift last year too."

"Ronan's changes are a train wreck."

His hand stilled in the hollow of my back. "We thought you'd feel the same." He laughed, a grim humorless noise. "Instead, you're changing for the better."

"Better?" I grazed my chin along the contours of his pecs. "I thought my Catwoman superpowers arose from our aura meld. Maybe my doppelgänger is still in the Void." It seemed weird saying that. "Do you think?"

"That would be my guess, if one existed. Somehow the tainted magic isn't affecting you."

"Prepare for descent." The pilot's booming voice through the speakers nearly sent me leaping to the ceiling. A perfect excuse to put distance between us.

Adam tracked down my broken chain. The flight attendant cleaned up and headed to the galley. I slunk to my seat and strapped in. Fin hopped into her carrier and curled up for another pup-nap. Lucky bum.

Adam handed me my chain and pendant. "Forgive me? I'll replace it."

In dismay, I inspected the broken chain, hating that he'd resorted to brute tactics. It made me wary of him, despite my head and heart begging to trust him. What new secrets had my brain bribed my heart with?

I jammed the charm in my jeans front pocket and tossed the chain at him. He caught it easily. "So you won't forget."

"I won't forget to replace it." He clicked the seat buckle, the snap a loud definitive sound.

I gave him The Look. "That's not what I meant."

Adam's face hardened as if I'd slapped him. "It's a damn chain. I needed to prove a point."

Stripping off my personal belongings mirrored Ronan smothering my mouth outside the casino. The last two people to smother my will were permanently napping six feet under. Not by my hand, mind you, but dead nevertheless. I'd always thought my bad luck caused their deaths so long ago.

They deserved punishment, but not death. I recoiled, and hastily sank the Gruesome Twosome into my mind's dungeon.

“Points are for ice picks.” The plane dipped into the clouds, wobbled up and down. My ears popped as we sliced through the dense, roiling shroud. Waves of multi-hued lights below illuminated the huge city, jewels in a sea of the black unknown.

Fin whimpered in her sleep, probably dreaming of the big dogs pounding their will into her pretty little body. The plane began its final descent, and I braced myself against the seat for landing. A wintry hand grazed my heart.

Adam's soft voice pierced my frenzied thoughts. “Something good did come out of the Rift.” His fingers brushed my thigh and I flinched.

“You, probably. What else?” I could tell he wanted to touch me but feared my reaction. Even I feared me.

“Fin.”

I met the challenge in his stony, alien eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Fin came through the Rift. She hasn't grown an inch in six months.”

Chapter 12

The silent heat of epic astonishment severed the wintry grip on my heart. I contemplated Fin's soulful eyes, the thin web of energy wafting off her.

"You're not surprised?" Adam asked.

"I thought only magic cruised through the Rift." I unbuckled my seatbelt before the plane hit the ground. *Arrest me for being a rule breaker.*

He shrugged his hands. "We found Fin sitting on the ground in the Rift opening after Ronan screwed it up the second time. You have to admit she's not normal."

Point taken. We needed faster microprocessors in our brains to process Forbidden info overload. Or some Einstein cells.

The jet's wheels bounced on the tarmac. The pull of the brakes sucked me forward, and I clutched the armrest, grasping at reality again. I was raring to rescue Zoe. I even missed Ronan, although I couldn't fathom how he'd gotten under my skin so quickly, Thirteen connection and doppelgänger bond notwithstanding. He had and I did. Enough said.

I rose, rubbing away the sharp pain in my lower back. Fin molded her small body against my leg, leaving black fur on my pant leg. When the furballs at home got a load of this, I was so dead.

"Hey, Fin, what's up with you?" The mystery amplified the thumping in my head amid my brain's sluggish return to work. "What time is Ronan's plane landing?" I picked up my purse and the tote bag, felt for Mom's envelopes.

Adam gathered our bags from the inside storage bin. "We have an hour's lead. He's setting up a telecon with his father. We do nothing until he gets to the hotel."

Dying to drop an unlucky bomb on *Dickard* Riley, the idea of the telecon appealed to my sense of safety. Worrying for Zoe contributed to the persistent ball of fire in my gut. Ronan assured me his father wouldn't hurt Zoe, not if he needed leverage to snag me—us. I believed in that *modus operandi*. Better choices weren't flinging cue cards my way. Calling the police played big-time in my backup plans. Zoe could handle herself. Not that she was a slut, but she knew how to use her voluptuous body for the good of mankind. And she loved a challenge, especially when it gave her fodder for her next paranormal psychology research paper. I could almost see her fingers flying over her keyboard already. Ronan's warning rang in my head, dispelling the vision. We were breaking

laws just breathing.

A driver waited with a sweet black limo at the bottom of the airstairs. “Aria Walker, meet Jon Morrison,” Adam said. The older brother next-door, auburn-haired driver threw me a winning smile. Tall and built like a tank, Jon filled out a black suit nicely. A flock of blackbirds—thirteen birds to be exact—squawked overhead. A white bird bomb smacked Jon’s shoulder. *Oops*. The frown on his face was worth the unexpected bad luck I didn’t even try to foil. I stifled a grin as he wriggled out of his jacket without smearing the gooey glop.

Adam took my arm and steered me to the limo, shaking his head. “You make him nervous.”

I clutched my chest and in my best Indian chief voice said, “Me? Little Aria make big, beefy man nervous?”

“Chill, Aria.” Adam pressed his hand in the small of my back. “Get in.”

“Yes, *Ronan*.” Barbarian dust was definitely sticking to Adam.

I sank into the lap of Luxury—with a capital *L*—again, deciding I could get used to Adam’s lifestyle. Men from rich families didn’t impress me any more than men without the dough. However, hot ticket items like private jets and limos worked for me when I had friends to rescue, doppelgängers to save, and Rifts to conquer. I might be blonde, but this cookie had a full load of chips. I planned to use every one of them.

Adam’s thigh pressed against mine. Like we didn’t have an acre of space to spread out in. “Jon’s been on my mom’s payroll for three years. He and his brother, Jax, are the best in security.” He blushed. “I think my mom’s hot on them.” He nodded toward the smoky glass partition. “I’d rather certain matters remain between you, me, and Ronan.” His hand landed on my knee as if he’d been touching me since the Abolishment.

Awkward warmth infused me. I tried to ignore his friendliness by rearranging the inside of my purse, which took all of five seconds. Too friendly too fast, and it twisted and turned inside my chest. Didn’t fairies love to get all touchy feely with people? *That’s all it is, right?* Add another item to my expanding research list.

“I’d miss you if you weren’t near me,” Adam said in a pebbly voice.

I flicked the vent toward me. Sixty degrees and it wasn’t cool enough sitting so close to him, hearing the flirtations spewing from his too-sexy-for-mortal mouth.

I shifted in my seat, placing distance between my deaf hormones and his natural and unnatural fairy charisma. “A girl could take that comment several ways.”

He rested his head against the seatback. “You kill my pain.”

What the what? Sympathy fogged my judgment, and I fitted my palm flat against his chest. “Does it ease when we’re touching?”

“God, yes.” He walked his fingertips from my knee up my thigh, stopping before traveling out of bounds. “It’s a slow burn in my blood, bones, muscles, eating away at my skin. When you’re near, I feel your aura inside me, around me like a cool breeze in a heat wave. When we’re touching, the

burn's almost gone."

"In true romance fiction, I'm a balm to your senses?" I snuggled into the curve of his side. I knew he wasn't playing me because his fever subsided whenever I touched him. I had mistakenly thought it was his aura making room for mine. "Why didn't you cop to this before?"

He swung his arm across my shoulders. "I didn't want to scare you off or cause you to think I was hitting on you. We just met yesterday." He dragged his fingers through his undulating hair, silky strands that kept intertwining with my shorter locks.

"Is the proximity to the Rift making it worse?"

He nodded. "Ronan will feel it too. I don't think we have much time."

"Which means Ronan and I probably can't be on the same sphere." The words hung in the air as if visible. Weird doppelgänger effect?

"His magic's making your faulty developing power worse and vice versa?" The limo drove beneath the *porte-cochere* at the entrance to the Rainbird Corporate Suites.

"That's our guess, although I'm not sure I'm adversely affecting him as much as the tainted Rift magic." Adam climbed out of the limo behind Fin. Fin always had to be in first place. Must be a dog thing. My cats would still be lounging on the seats, giving me the stink eye for subjecting them to the rain. I took Adam's outstretched hand, his sick magic tugging on my aura, seeking relief.

Nippy, damp air clung to the Seattle night. Billowing steel clouds blocked the night sky, threatening to unload at any moment. My heartbeat sped up. I cast a glimpse at the solid cover over the drive-through and my anxiety subsided. Did the sun and stars ever shine in Seattle, the Emerald City of perpetual gloom?

Adam flipped his hood up and stuffed his baseball cap on, hiding half his face. We entered the lobby and rushed toward the bank of private elevators. I expected no less, so my eyes only bulged slightly in surprise. Jon engaged the elevator lock.

Off to the left, I spied a petite figure determinedly striding toward us, a navy snowcap tugged down to her eyebrows. Matching gloves covered her hands and her chin dipped into a navy and white striped scarf. I suspected her berry lipstick and tan foundation hid her cadaver look. I literally felt her tainted magic burn into me. *Hello, I'm not the Fairy Godmother!*

Adam stepped into the elevator, tugging me along. Nervous wrinkles broke out around his eyes, and sweat beaded his forehead. Jon sprang in front of us, a gun ominously engulfed in one large hand hidden behind his back.

The young woman stopped a few feet from the elevator. A wisp of pale blonde hair flapped from underneath her snowcap. The strand sprang out like a corkscrew and she tucked it back under the cap. Angst assaulted my aura in a blaze of red, leaving me jittery.

"Please, I must speak with you." Her gaze darted around the sparsely populated lobby before resting on my face.

Adam moved in front of me, abreast of Jon.

I skirted him and nudged the tower of Jon, without much success I might add. “Let her in.”

“Jon, scan her.” Adam stepped back. “Touch her,” he whispered in my ear.

I nodded, my mind already one step ahead of the bodyguard brigade. Although, I didn’t need to touch her to know she could be Adam’s fairy princess. If she was a fairy doppelgänger, that meant she was linked to a Thirteen sorcerer or at least another Forbidden or some other creature from that era. The more I experienced each hour, the more I believed Adam was truly a descendant of one of the created Forbidden Thirteen suicide doppelgängers. I don’t know how I knew this, but the idea refused to die. Yet, I didn’t think that meant he’d strolled out of the Rift after the quake rave twenty-one years ago.

“I’m not armed.” Her gaze continued to bounce, never resting on one spot long. “I...I sensed you across the room. I suspect we have a similar problem.” She traded level stares with Adam, then pierced me with a look of deep longing. *Whoa, girl, I’d like testosterone with my order.*

Arms wide, feet spread, she gave in to the paranoia and allowed Jon to scan his handheld device over her from head to toe. Once my security detail permitted her onto the elevator, she leaned against me, gratitude swimming in her eyes, her aura flaring weakly.

I touched her feverish cheek. “Who...what are you?”

Sobs convulsed her shoulders. “Sorry.” She buried her face in her gloved hands.

The elevator rocketed toward the top floor. Adam looked like he wanted to dive into the elevator shaft to get away from her. I didn’t pick up evil vibes off her, just deader than a doornail vibes. At least Adam possessed some life within our linked auras, skewed though it was. With her, you’d think an archeological crew had just dug her prune body out of the pyramids.

She wiped her eyes. “I’m just a normal girl. I don’t know what’s happening to me.” Renewed tears welled in her puke-green eyes.

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open. We followed Jon into the depths of the penthouse floor. A chance peep at the crystal chandelier in the hallway had me ducking. The light fixture swayed as if a fan had suddenly blown on it. I deflected attention by grabbing the fairy girl’s hand. Three of the thirteen bulbs popped dead in my wake. No one mentioned it. Lucky me, unlucky hotel.

“Who are you?” she asked, her hand pressed to her heart as if I possessed all the fairy bells and witchy whistles. “Do you know what’s happening to us?”

Adam’s hand tensed on my back, cutting short my urge to run screaming for the nearest loony bin for telekinetic-sorcerers off their meds. “Sort of.”

Jon deactivated the alarm at the suite door. After dumping our bags inside, he split to retrieve my not-so-better third from the airport.

The penthouse’s opulence was lost on me. I was too busy studying the newest freak to join the Court of Delusion. I tossed my purse on the earthtone granite counter between the living room and kitchenette. Wishing I could ward off the taint, I zipped my jacket to my chin.

Adam slipped off her cap, releasing her luminous hair. He yanked off his hood and baseball cap.

Flinching, she stared at his one pointy ear.

Pretty in a country chic way, her translucent hair swayed like a wheat field around her shoulders. She was the same age as us with a few extra pounds and a rounded face that put her in cute territory. Her tainted magic stole the color out of her green eyes, leaving them dull and cloudy.

“Who are you?” Adam literally radiated suspicion. “How did you find us?” He stripped to a T-shirt, and then jacked down the thermostat. “Sorry, but I’m burning up.”

I waved it off, but refrained from discarding my layers. A polar bear would freeze in the room at the current temperature.

“Kiera Kendrick.” She released my hand. Our bizarre connection sank into the dense rug and my aura practically sighed with relief. “I was visiting my aunt who’s here on business, and I sensed you as I was leaving.” Her gaze shifted to Adam.

He edged closer, his arm brushing mine, seeking relief. I smelled his unease overriding the subtle floral perfume Kiera wore. “Are there others like you?” I asked.

Tears created muddy tracks down her cheeks. “Not that I know of.”

“Have you seen anyone who looks similar to you?” I held my breath. “Were you adopted?”

“Why do you think that?” Her back drew straight and her expression stilled. “I mean, how did you know I was adopted? I’m not a twin if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“You’re sure?” I wasn’t ready to spill the doppelgänger secret. Let her think I meant a twin.

Kiera averted her eyes, sweeping them across the paisley carpet. “I was left in Washington Park by my birth mother.” She shrugged. “Alone.”

The freak flags flew full mast. I plunked down onto the plushy armchair behind me. I didn’t want anyone touching me, draining my spirit and energy. I wanted Ronan here so bad. Hell should freeze over after that wish. But I wanted his aura, sick as it was, fusing with mine. It made me feel safer, less hollow. I wanted to ensure he was okay. I wanted him to make Kiera go away.

The fairy wannabe in question flicked her hand in Adam’s direction, anger sparking in her faded eyes. “There’s something going on in the park, at the stone circle. Something drew me there a month ago. It was magical, for lack of a better term, as if all those fictional things you read about stone circles being portals to fantasy worlds is true. Ever since then, I’ve been getting worse, like him, with washed out skin tone, hair growing inches a day and falling out. A constant bonfire burns inside me.”

Rocking forward, I dropped my face into my hands. “Fuck. A. Duck.” Fin dashed over and gave me a sloppy, wet doggy lick. Absently, I scratched her ears, needing to distract my hands before they adopted a life of their own.

“Excuse me.” I shot up, punched redial on my phone on the way to the bathroom. I sat on the closed toilet lid and waited for Ronan to answer. No such luck. My frustration careened off the rails as I whisper-yelled to his voicemail, “You need to get your ass to the hotel ASAP. Something’s happened, and I’m ready to off your dickhead father myself.”

No sense in not putting the bathroom to use. I cleaned up and stole a long look at myself in the

beveled mirror. Dark craters had formed beneath my eyes. My hair imitated a victim of a tornado. In the mirror's reflection, I spied the jetted tub behind me and wanted to sink my thrashed body in hot, bubbly champagne with a hose connected to my mouth. Then I wanted to sleep for days, hoping I'd wake at home to a nightmare my overactive mind had conjured up in a snit of boredom. "Aria Walker, come on down. You've just won the grand prize for The Best Sucktacular Life."

A soft knock hit the door. "Aria, you okay?" Adam asked.

I propped my forehead against the door. "No."

"Kiera's not going anywhere."

No shit, Sherlock. "Give me a sec." I wet a washcloth, landed another hungry look on the tub, and left the dazzling marble sanctuary.

Adam stood over Kiera, her impromptu watchdog. I experienced a slew of emotions too twisted to separate, except for a maddening trace of stupid jealousy. Grayish rivulets striped Kiera's foundation, giving her a zebra complexion. Add the streaks of mascara and she had a silent shout out to a makeup-artist. I handed her the wet cloth.

She took it, her feverish fingers resting on mine longer than necessary, burning into my skin. "Thank you." Her eyes shimmered. "Adam said your name's Aria."

"Yes." I dug my fists into my front pockets. "What else did he say?" I asked with a dagger-launching look at him that set off the drums beating in my head. A dull ache plagued my leg and ankle. My hand merely throbbed. Time to party down with a bottle of painkillers.

"Nothing." Adam approached. "Sit. You look ready to crash. Need anything?"

I sank into the overstuffed couch, pressing into the lush comfort, easing the weight off my lower body. "Pain killers and a bottle of water, pretty please."

Adam left the room smiling.

Kiera perched on the edge of the chair. "Why does your touch ease my pain?"

She hadn't given me anything to dislike about her, but I remained wary. "I have no idea." I was so not letting every fairy in the world feel me up. "Do you sense Adam's *magic*?"

"Just a prickle of energy from him, nothing more. Your magic I definitely feel. It's drifting off you like a strong perfume." She patted the washcloth over her streaky face.

"Wonderful," I grumbled.

"Is it really magic?" She cast her gaze at her feet shuffling on the floor, as if afraid to hear the truth.

"Just exaggerated aural energy." A half-lie's not really a lie, right?

Adam brought me ibuprofen and water. "Thanks." I downed the tablets with half the bottle of cold reality. He sat, drawing me into the crook of his arm. As he rubbed my neck beneath my jacket, his pain diminished and his temperature normalized. The only fairy I wanted touching me was already wrapped around me.

"Have you seen a doctor?" Adam asked.

“Yes. I’ve been having weird symptoms for a month, since I went to the stone circle.” Kiera picked lint off her black pants. “Doctors have no clue. Best guess is the flu.”

Tension twinged my aching back muscles. “Have a lot of people seen you this...sickly?”

She set the wet washcloth on the burgundy and gold paisley rug by her feet. “Not many. I attend an online college so it’s easy for me to stay out of sight. My aunt was ready to call the CDC.”

“Have you been to a scientific or paranormal research facility of any kind?” Adam tugged on his ear, his anxiety pressing on my aura.

“My boyfriend, Scott Walton, contacted a local place called Dominion Research and even spoke to the CEO, Richard Riley. They make those ESP detector devices and research paranormal phenomena.”

Arctic air swept over me, crashing into Adam’s fiery aura, alternatively freezing and boiling my blood.

He whispered in my ear, “Don’t say a word.”

I fixed him an iceberg-melting glare. “Go on,” I urged Kiera with a heartening smile I didn’t feel.

“I have an appointment on Tuesday.” She reached toward Adam and quickly withdrew as if afraid she’d grow a ragged pointy ear too. “You should join me.”

Anger tensed him against me. “Did they ask you to stay?”

“Sure. They agreed to pay my expenses while studying me. I didn’t give them my full name or anything because I was afraid they’d turn me over to the cops. I mean, I’m not illegal or anything,” she quickly added. “But I feel something growing in me.” Renewed tears flowed down her cheeks.

“All that and a bag of stale chips.” Rubbing my bruised head, I had no doubts Riley planned to imprison her.

Adam’s finger dipped beneath my three layers to my bare shoulder, pressing a warning into my skin. “I think you should stay away from them. We believe their motives may be detrimental to you. We can help you, but we need to connect with others first. Give me your contact info.”

Her face brightened, and she extracted a red smartphone from her Barbie-sized purse. “I’ll send it to you.”

Adam opened a link and she sent the information to his phone. At least she was malleable, cooperative, and seemed to trust us. Hurray for another link on the clueless chain of clues.

I angled my head against his steady shoulder. The world rear-ended my thoughts: Zoe, Ronan, Adam, Dominion Research, Rifts, *Illuminaria*, and fairies. *Welcome to my new world of truth and lies. We have nutcase cookies filled with crap chips.*

“Ronan should be here,” I murmured, sinking into the deep velour couch. “Call him. He doesn’t answer my calls.”

Adam called and received the same voicemail of avoidance. The second he clicked off, his phone rang. He held the phone between our ears. I anticipated Ronan’s voice, but thirteen gave no quarter. “Ronan wasn’t on the flight,” Jon’s scratchy voice said. “I’ll check other flights and report back.”

My heart plunged into my stomach. I thrust off the couch, gave Kiera a brutal look. “Can you wait here while we talk in private?”

She cringed deeper into her chair. “Sure thing.”

I handed her the remote for the flat screen. This time she hugged the chair arm and pasted herself to the seatback. Was I an ogre all of a sudden?

Adam followed me into the first of two master bedrooms. A burgundy and gold comforter with a thousand pillows adorned the king-sized bed. I salivated at the comfort begging my thrashed body to take it on a trip through the stars. I didn’t give a hoot if there wasn’t a pot of Belgian chocolate waiting at the end of the rainbow either.

“Calm down.” He gripped my shoulders. “He’ll be here.”

“Do you think one of his father’s trackers snagged him?” I picked at the gauze tied around my palm and probed Adam’s pale, soulless eyes, trying to reach into his thoughts. “What if he’s hurt or dead somewhere? What if he betrayed us? What if we’ve walked into a trap? Maybe Kiera’s baiting us?” Every minutia incurred my distrust until otherwise proven innocent.

“Don’t start doubting him. Not after everything we’ve been through.” Adam glowered at me for the first time since we’d met. “Get your shit together and be a member of the team.”

“What team?” I flung away from him. “The doppel-brutes who abducted me from my sane, boring life?” The hollow life I trudged through? Ronan already held my life in his hands. It didn’t sit well and encouraged me to look for subliminal clues in ice cubes if I couldn’t find them in my head.

A scream rose in my throat before I gulped it down. “It’s my fault Zoe was snatched. I feel like I’m chasing a mirage.” Not only did tears swamp my eyes, but sobs racked me. I must’ve soaked up energy from a hormone clinic. I hid my face against Adam’s chest. He held me while I bawled like a two-year-old hosting a temper tantrum, party of one.

“Aria.” Empathy and passion wore heavy on my name.

I linked my arms around his waist. Adam kissed the top of my head, tightening his arms even after I wiped my nose on his shirt. “Sorry,” I mumbled.

His chuckle rumbled against my face. “I’d gladly wear your snot-rags if it means I get to hold you.”

I sniffed hard. “Are you flirting with me?” My voice was croaky from anguish. Although desire wasn’t far behind if that fire dipping into no man’s land was my girlie parts revving up.

He chuckled. “Is it working?”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t ready to commit to squat, not when I couldn’t tell if my desire stemmed from Adam, his doppelgänger link to Ronan, or a fae glamour. Not when I felt the same desire for Ronan. *Hell to the no.* “Your pain better?”

“You have no idea.”

He slid his hand beneath my multiple layers to massage my back, sending more warm swirling currents of need through me. *Oh, hell to the no squared.*

“Kiera feels it.”

I fingered my eyes dry. “Damn if I’m gonna sleep naked with you two smothering me for the slightest touch.”

A groan escaped Adam. “I was hoping I’d get you all to myself.” Eyes glowing around the fringes, his hair curled and uncurled around his shoulders. I palmed his cheek. Pain in his eyes booted my good sense into the ether. If I could provide him with a scant few hours of relief, I’d do it. To hell with the consequences. I nodded.

He brushed my cheek with a crooked finger. “You can wear all the clothes you want.”

“I may have to if you insist on sleeping in a morgue.” I ran a hand over my forehead, shoving aside my hair, brushing aside my multifaceted reservations.

“I can keep you warm enough.” A heart-stopping smile transformed his gray face.

The warmth between us made me want to curl up in bed with him that instant, draw his heat into me, assuage his pain. Logically, it had to be our aural bond, but I was beginning to feel something far greater, far scarier, far too twisted up with my feelings for Ronan.

Chapter 13

Adam and I rejoined Kiera pacing a canal through the paisley ocean in the living room.

“It’s late,” she said, nervously dry-washing her hands. “Can we meet tomorrow?”

“We’ll call you.” Adam touched her arm. “Please don’t talk to anyone at Dominion Research or tell anyone you met us.”

I took her hand. She curled her fingers around mine, her body nearly dripping into a puddle of bliss. *What am I, fairy speed now?*

“You do know what’s going on?” Hope dusted gold flakes into her dull peepers.

“Sort of.” I hugged her and she clung to me, lost and alone in this new unknown.

Adam escorted her down to the lobby. The minute the door clicked shut, I located the address for Riley’s Dominion Research on my smartphone. When Adam entered the suite, a Seattle street map was spitting out on the printer built into the suite’s workstation. Just in case my GPS failed. Never could rely upon my luck.

“Don’t even think about it,” he growled out in true Ronan fashion.

I snatched the page from the printer, stuffed it in my jacket. “We need a backup plan.”

“No plan includes going anywhere near Riley or his research facility.” He spread his long legs in a he-man defensive stance that mimicked his darker half. “They’ll sense you before you’re in sight of the gate.”

“Who said anything about going through a gate?”

Adam stalked closer, like a pit bull licking his chops at a kitten. His eyes glowed violet, skin darkening to the color of Seattle rain clouds. Reaching for me, he clamped his fingers onto my arm. “We’re going to bed before we both drop from exhaustion.”

Our auras tingled in a dizzying wash. The sensation of Ronan’s aura was still achingly present and it was hard to separate the two. I fell against him, my nipples growing taut against his warm, solid chest. Aura drunk, I craned my neck back to look into the pain hazing his eyes. How could I refuse? For once, my head and body were in sync. First, I needed to scrub the day off my skin...before I did something I’d regret.

After soaking in jetted bliss, I felt sparkling clean and limber with some clarity restored. My signature scent—Zoe’s birthday gift to me—in the bathwater filled the steamy room with a weave of

freesia and vanilla. I washed my face with my disposable wipes, drying off quickly. I loathed the smothering, deadly feel of water on my face.

Unfortunately, my mind refused to wind down as thoughts of Ronan, both confusingly delicious and equally rotten, nagged me. Of course, agonizing over Zoe left a constant ache in my heart.

I heard Adam talking to Jon on the phone. By the time I slipped out of the bathroom, he was lounging on the bed, wearing a white T-shirt and gray shorts, not at all abashed at my seeing his deathbed glimmer. I knew what hid beneath that sickness so it didn't bother me. And I wanted the comfort of Adam's body draped around mine in my maelstrom of emotions and fear.

Not that I had designs on doing more than sleeping, I realized I hadn't slept with a man in over a year. Not since I'd dumped my boyfriend of two years once I'd found him coiled butt-naked around one of my lucky charm clients—a former friend now on mine and Zoe's shitlist—in my bed. It wasn't that I missed that intimacy much either. My unearthly bond to Adam was undeniable, and he drew me to him like a moth to a zapper, scary and liberating at once. How much of it was the bond versus reality? Or Ronan's other half? How hard would the zapper sting? Time to up my anti-crazy dosage of chocolate.

An admiring smile crinkled Adam's eyes. "There's another bed." Uncertainty erased his dimple.

"Leave it for Ronan." Suspicious, I scrunched my eyes. "He's coming, right?" I stood in my short satin robe outside the bathroom door, gripping my tote, Mom's envelopes stuffed securely inside.

"On his way." Adam held up his hand to forestall my scathing look, which didn't work, of course. "He has as much to lose as you."

Housekeeping would have to hose me off the walls if I didn't shut down for the night. Sighing, I stomped to the closet and snuck the envelopes inside the safe, realizing I hadn't thoroughly read the papers from Mom's chest. I'd peeked inside the packet again on the plane, enough to know I had some or all the missing parts to the *Illuminaria*. I wanted alone time to really dig into them without divulging my secret to Ronan or Adam. Yet. Other than going to the bathroom, I hadn't had a moment to myself. To escape my life just for a few hours, I dialed a seascape into the built-in sound machine. Waves lapped the shoreline and a foghorn blew in the distance.

I set my stun gun on the nightstand and stripped down to my fuchsia camisole with matching boy shorts. The glacial temperature sprouted gooseflesh on my arms, and my nipples beaded. Desire ignited in Adam's eyes, and a flush sailed up from my toes. I'd have worn long sleeves except I wanted him to have access to as much skin as I was willing to give. For healing purposes. Really.

He scooted to the middle of the bed and lifted the covers for me. I eased my sore body down, rolling on my side to face him, luxuriating in the sumptuous pillowtop mattress. Fin dashed into the room and bought a corner of the bed to worship me from afar, her gaze glued to me as if she were afraid I'd disappear. Funny pup.

"Are you sure you don't want to sleep in the other room?"

A shivery laugh escaped me. "No. Now warm me up, will ya?"

Adam's arms wrapped around me like vines seeking water and sun. His hard body against mine created fantastic tingles of heat scoring me. Linking my arms around his neck, I snuggled into him. Without a thought, I twined my legs around his, bypassing all real estate in between. The sandalwood smell and hard feel of his body stroked my senses, forcing me to inhale through my mouth to resist the temptation.

He smoothed his hands along the planes of my back, depositing a trail of heat. "Warmer?"

"Umm, yes." Our auras blended, one sifting in and out of the other. His hard tension eased as his pain fled, and the friction of our bodies burned away my last chills. We lay contentedly for several long moments, the soft pillowy mattress a boon to my tender, weary body.

Doubts meandered through my mind. "How's security here?" My thirteen pendant hung temporarily on a silver chain around my neck. I pressed it against Adam's T-shirt, hoping the good vibes kept my unluck at bay. Sleep was never a good place for me as I couldn't control my bad luck.

"Alarm's set. Gun's in the nightstand." He breathed in deeply. "You smell nice."

Heavenly spice wafted off him, but I wasn't about to admit it to raise his hopes. "Do you feel better?"

Adam slipped a forefinger beneath my chin, tipping my head back. We gazed into each other's eyes, his irises shifting from pale violet to indigo. My heart flip-flopped madly.

"I feel awesome."

I caught my breath, resting my cheek over his hammering heart. Waves crashing upon the beach and sea birds applauding filled the spaces between heartbeats.

"Aria," he said in that dusky, sultry way that sought an entrance to my heart.

I walked my fingers up his arm, magic quivering up my hand. "Why aren't you taken?"

Shivers of delight followed the touch of his hot hand stroking my back, his body a furnace beneath the covers. "I hadn't met you yet."

My knees weakened, and I tried to ignore the pleasant ache his words left in my limbs. "Right." I giggled to defray my muddled nervousness. "You don't even know me."

His eyes searched mine, reaching into my thoughts, possessing my soul. "Everything inside me tells me all I need to know."

I groaned into his chest. Every woman's fantasy in my clutches and I was torn into confetti whirling in a cyclone. The doppelgänger bond was going to bite me big time. *Holy hell, I'm so messed up.*

Locks of Adam's opalescent hair feathered my skin, seeking nourishment from my pure aura. I caressed his brittle tresses, giving what little healing I had to offer.

A heavy silence loomed between us. Fuzzy thoughts and feelings assailed me. What would change with Kiera on the scene? Where was her doppelgänger? Was her doppelgänger one of the Forbidden Thirteen? What could I offer Adam, Ronan, and any of the other sorcerers and doppelgängers that might pop up? What if I made their lives and the world worse?

Fear of the unknown nibbled away at my confidence. What if I couldn't sort out my feelings about the doppelgänger bond with Ronan and Adam? *Argh!* Someday, we'd look back on all this, laugh nervously, and change the subject. Yes, denial was my new best friend. I turned around in Adam's arms to avoid his uncanny allure.

"Goodnight, Blondie." Adam spooned around me.

I yawned. "Goodnight, fairy-sorcerer-doppelgänger king."

His biceps stiffened below my head. I let sleep tame my rampant thoughts.

"Why did you call me fairy king?" Adam's chest turned steely against my spine.

"Everything inside and outside me tells me all I need to know." I drifted off into the universe of the dead, a fallen lock of Adam's hair clasped in my fingers.

Chapter 14

Groggy and barely awake, I luxuriated in the warm air whooshing over my face, noticed the emptiness of the bed where my fairy blanket had lain. Ronan's aura played fitfully with mine, his flawed energy shooting holes through it and scattering it around us. I rolled around in the mound of covers Adam must have layered upon me. As I clawed out of the cocoon, my bruised body screamed bloody murder and I stifled a whimper.

Ronan sat on the edge of the bed, watching me, a wry smile quirking up his lips.

Giving him my most disdainful glare, I lunged into his arms and he captured me in a fierce hug. Stiff and sore body be damned. "I should curse your luck on the spot if I wasn't so glad to see you. What happened to you? Are you okay?" I drew back on my knees and dog-eyed the rusty stain saturating his shirt. My heart skipped a beat. "Oh, Ronan!"

"Glad to see you too." He lightly traced the purpling bruise climbing my left arm, his touch leaving me tingling. "Are *you* okay?"

I fingered the small bumps on the back of my head and winced. "I might live to get shot at again."

He drew away. "Where's Adam?"

I nodded my head at the closed bedroom door. "He's not out there?"

"No." His gaze roamed over me, then the bed, eyes burning first with lust, then jealousy. "You slept together?"

Surprise pinged my belly, but I impaled him with The Look. "What's it to you? You don't even like me."

He scowled. "I never said that."

"True." I picked at his bloodstained sleeve. He jerked away as though I carried a doppelgänger-destroying plague. "Quit being an ass. Let me doctor that."

I trounced into the bathroom for the first aid supplies from my cosmetics case. Never travel without them. Why risk even more bad luck? Quickly, I brushed my teeth and rinsed out my morning mouth.

When I returned to the bedroom, Ronan had already stripped off his Seattle Seahawks T-shirt and plunked down on the bed, holding a piece of hotel notepaper. I tried to ignore the fire climbing my neck at the sight of his rippling abdomen, thick biceps, and heavenly forearms. His sinful butt mashed

my robe, and I couldn't cover my body's betrayal.

Yet the state of his shoulder easily quashed my lustful discomfort. He'd torn off his bandage and red rivulets blended into the wicked vines of his tricolored tattoo. I patted his wound with the wet cloth, applying pressure to staunch the bleeding. "How'd you tear it open?"

His biceps twitched. "Somehow, somewhere."

I pinched his forearm and when he tried to catch my wrist, I whisked my hand away. "What dimension is that on?" If he had another brain, it would be so freaking lonely.

"Adam left a note." He ignored me as usual. "He went into the office for a couple of hours before others arrived. Jax is guarding the door."

My blood bubbled. "Jax?" I slathered antibacterial cream on his wound.

"Jon's brother." He set the note on the nightstand, threw a small tube of Med-Stitch on the bed.

I eased closer to examine the edges of the wound for infection. "Is Jax guarding me or holding me prisoner?"

"Probably both." Ronan tilted his head back to size me up. "What's up with that, Aria? What'd you do?" He averted his reddening face, coughed into his fist.

"What?" I picked dried blood off his arm.

His agitated aura stirred the air. I slanted a glance at his face, my boobs all but sticking in his mouth. Geez, the perfect subliminal turn-on for the poor barbarian. My own heat dialed up ten notches. Subtly, I shifted my chest out of his face. "Sorry, you're sitting on my robe."

"I'm not sorry." Ronan didn't make a move to free my cover-up.

I tried to ignore him, but touching him ignited sparks in my blood that left me jittery—in an unfamiliar desirable way. Easing to the side, I fingered a coating of Med-Stitch onto his wound. "Let it dry." I gathered the stained towels and rushed to the bathroom, needing the distance before my body betrayed me further. He followed, closing fast behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders. The towels fell in a heap on the vanity. We studied our reflections in the mirror. Light glinted off his glossy jet hair, startling against his tired face. The set of his chin suggested a renewed stubborn streak compelling me to rip into. "Where were you?"

"Taking care of business."

"What business?" My fists curled on the vanity.

"None of yours." He lowered his hands to his side, his mouth stretched tight.

I whirled around and poked my finger into his good shoulder. "Your business *is* my business. You dragged me into this mess."

Ronan walked away. "Damn. You sound like a girlfriend," he slung over his shoulder. He grabbed my robe off the bed and tossed it at me.

Purple satin puddled on my feet. My anger swirled around me and grappled with Ronan's weak aura. "It is my business because it affects me. Your life is my life now." I held up two crossed fingers. "In case you're too stupid or dead inside to notice, we're connected...our auras..." I flung out my

arms in a dismissive move, bent to retrieve my robe. “I wouldn’t be your girlfriend if you were hung like a stallion and had a zillion dollars.” I straightened to my full height, my fists buried in satin.

Faster than I could blink, Ronan’s hands spanned my waist and his mouth swooped down on mine. The second his lips touched mine, the heat in my body exploded, showering me in an inferno of lust. A groan escaped me as I melted into him, twining my arms around his neck. Our melded auras filled me with an incredible sensation of arousal and power. Tainted magic poured into me, and mine cleansed it, gave it substance. His mouth possessed mine in the most fantastically passionate kiss I’d ever experienced. I floated on a fluffy cloud of silver power, so much untapped energy between us, seething for freedom and exploration. Soft yet firm, his warm lips played over my parted lips, and his tongue tangoed sweetly with mine, the taste of him, chocolate and peanuts, filling my mouth. All my soft curves fit into the hardness of his body.

Then reality hit me, and I pushed away from him, my mouth burning from the hot as hell kiss. Ronan growled low in his throat. An array of emotions swam the liquid depths of his eyes, leaving bewilderment and speculation behind. *Ho. Lee. Doppelgängers.* Whoever said men were like potato chips and you can’t have just one needed to live my life for a day.

“I’m not stupid. I sure as hell am not dead.” His rough baritone thrummed through my feverish nerves, threatening to unseat me again. He gripped my waist, my satin camisole between us.

My mind froze in its swirling confusion and my mouth went on strike.

He skimmed his lips over mine. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I missed you.”

I blinked up at him, my heart finally catching up with its beat. “You did?” My voice wobbled.

Leaning his forehead against mine, he gazed into my eyes. “I don’t trust easily, Aria.”

I nodded in mutual agreement of my own trust issues and understanding what he’d suffered. That damn shock-o-meter churned out mad fairies in my stomach. Kissing two men? Even if I paid my mind with genius drugs, I couldn’t reconcile the fact that they were two halves of a whole or which half I wanted as more than a friend.

“When you’re not with me, a piece of me is missing.” The baring of his soul made his voice uncertain, fearful. “You drive me through a minefield out of my damn mind.” A slow hesitant grin tipped up the corners of his mouth. I wanted to dip my tongue into those corners. “And I still want you.”

“So you do like me?” I teased, dying to dive into a tub of ice cubes.

Carefree and real, his rich, smooth laughter was a symphony to my ears. “I need sleep. Sit with me and we’ll talk.” Ronan moved toward the closed door, my eyes riveted on his firm rear that filled his jeans to perfection.

My heart revved into turbo mode. “Where you going?”

“It’s bad enough I have to smell Adam on you, but I won’t sleep where you two...” Crumbs of charcoal danger appeared in his eyes. He stalked out of the room.

I seized my robe off the floor and caught up to him. “Nothing happened. He needed relief from

pain.” I didn’t need to explain myself. Did I? *Criminy, I’m going to hell in a pink Easter basket.*

Understanding softened his expression. He led the way into the other bedroom, an exact replica of the first one, except for the deep purple and gold bedding. Without hesitation, he stripped to his *black* boxer briefs. *I knew it!* Black to the core. Ronan took in the bed then landed a hopeful look on me.

I was definitely tripping to visit Lucifer when all was said and done. I slipped into my robe, belted it tight. The floor lamp by the door left the room in shadows, and I reached to turn it off.

“Leave it on.”

“You need to sleep, not spend time looking at me.”

“Who said anything about looking at you?” he grumbled half-heartedly. “I like light.”

Despite my heart and head being ripped in two, I gave Ronan the same consideration I gave Adam. I would treat them as equals until one emerged the victor. Or none at all. *Damn my life to the Rift!* I needed Zoe. I wanted to cry at the weird injustice. Days ago, not a man on my radar. Now, I had to struggle to decipher the intentions of two hunks. How? *How do I accomplish that? It’s bad enough I’m trying to figure out my role in the world of adults, the Forbidden, and now the world of men? Aria Elle’s in there somewhere, right?*

I crossed the room and lay on top of the comforter, Ronan’s arm a hard but welcome pillow. Our auras tangoed together as longing surged between us, but I hammered mine down before my heart trampled my head. I certainly hadn’t felt that hungry energy spike in Adam’s arms. Not that I hadn’t been equally aroused. Heck, who wouldn’t be in the arms of the doppel-hunks. It was just different. I’d have to develop a whole new language to describe how I felt.

Ronan settled on the pillows. I rested my head on his chest, his heart beating against my ear in sync with mine.

“I went to Melisande’s hotel and snagged her computer. She always travels with a laptop and tablet. I couldn’t let it fall into the wrong hands. We’ll check it out later. Maybe she has more of the *Illuminaria*. Okay?” His fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of my neck.

A pleased sigh slipped out of me. The sharp tang of antiseptic tickling my nose eclipsed his spicy, woodsy cologne. “Sure, if you want,” I answered with feigned nonchalance. *Yeah, baby! That witch is mine.* Ronan’s chuckle rumbled in his chest against my ear. “We need to get our instruction guide away from your dad.” Just from the few pages I now possessed, I knew that book was über dangerous in Riley’s hands.

“I know. Dad wasn’t very open with info, even to me. But Melisande worked me against him, and she had access to pretty much everything, except the full *Illuminaria*.” He blew out a ragged breath. “Hell, I don’t know. We need all of that damn manuscript.”

His stomach earned a pat, and his skin twittered beneath my touch. “Zoe comes first. Speaking of—”

“We talk to my father at one.”

I hugged him tight. We had six hours.

The heater clicked on and a soothing hiss of warmth filled the room. I lifted my face, drawing thirteens on his chest with my index finger and crossing them out before I invoked a rash of bad luck while we slept. *Sue me for being paranoid.*

“What?” His eyes went all dragon slit on me.

“We have more trouble.”

“I know about Kiera Kendrick. Adam left messages.” He knuckled his eyes. “Later. My head’s killing me from that deadener.”

I scooted up and placed a feathery kiss on his mouth, his nose, his forehead, finally dropping my head on his chest.

“Aria,” he breathed out. “I do like you.”

Twin doppelgänger arrows nicked my heart, spun my head into a flurry of epic confusion. Neither hit the bull’s eye.

Chapter 15

By the sounds of Ronan's even breathing, slumber claimed him in seconds. I stuffed a pillow in his arms and tiptoed from the room to take a quick bath. I turned on the tub tap, evil-eyeing the six showerheads. Showers made me super nervous, mainly because of that wetting the face thing that stems from the worst day of my life.

The night my mother died, I had gotten locked out of the house. I kept waiting for her to come home and she never did. Rain sleeted down, and I'd fallen asleep on the narrow covered porch. I'd awoken choking on water and couldn't catch my breath. Rain had pelted my face and I thought I was drowning. Then I'd lost control of my telekinesis and blasted out the windows on the front door, glass flying everywhere. Another Friday the 13th disaster. That night of death and torment never strayed far from my thoughts. My phobia had gotten so bad, Granny Elle had removed the showerhead in my shower and I removed it from my condo shower. Hence the reason why the multihead shower in the hotel tweaked me out.

Regardless, a half-hour later, clean and glistening, I inhaled a cranberry muffin and two cups of liquid fuel, then painted my face, moussed and dried my hair. I squeezed into a hipster-grazing purple sweater, slim jeans, and donned my black leather jacket. My clunky-heeled boots added two inches to my height. One last glance in the mirror told me I was as hot and ready for the outside world as I'd get with puffy eyes and a pasty face. Total waste of makeup, I might add. Although I twinged with every step I took, at least my outfit covered most of my war wounds.

The mystery pup waited for me by the door to the outside hallway. I hooked the leash on her silver-studded, leather collar. "Let's hit it, Finny."

A younger version of Jon dropped his jaw ogling me from his position outside the door. Potent psychic deadeners flattened my powers, and I eyed one hanging off his neck. Indignation surged hot in my veins. I really wanted to start thinking positive, but I knew it would be a wasted effort. Risking lockjaw, I ground my back teeth.

"Jax, I presume?" I held out my right hand. "Aria Walker."

He pumped my hand, his palm damp and hot.

"How many deadeners are you sporting? Are they for my benefit?" I grinned encouragingly, wiping my hand on my pants. After a few seconds of suppression and absorption of his aural energy,

my energy staged a scathing comeback and my telekinetic brain waves surged for release. The night's rest had restored more than my normal cache of energy. The proximity to the Rift seemed to be working to my advantage. Or it was now spitting out a ton more energy. I buried the thought so deep I'd need a brain surgeon to dig it up later.

"No. They're...there to protect you. They're also detectors." Jax's mouth snapped shut and he got a grip on his puny brain down yonder.

My leg earned the ire of my slapping leash. *I'm so returning Adam to the Jerk Store.* Why did he feel the need to quash my powers? I wrapped my head around my reluctant brain waves and thrust outward, concentrating on the devices around his neck, one on each wrist and ankle. Five pops and Jax danced as if sand crabs nibbled on his feet. Using extreme caution, I forced him into semi-paralysis mode, enough to foil his chase for fifteen minutes.

"Gotta run. Nice meeting you." The poor sap reacted in slow motion to strip the devices off his prickly skin as he slid down the wall to the floor. Excitement kicked my pulse into fourth gear. My new power fuse was becoming easier to control and manipulate. The gloves were off!

I sprinted toward the stairs to catch an elevator on another floor. As soon as I opened the stairwell door, my right pinkie twitched. I looked at my watch, nine-thirteen. *Crap on a cracked cracker.*

A familiar presence wrenched on my aura. Kiera? Had she ratted us out?

Keeping my sight peeled around me, I unhooked Fin's leash. She remained near me, but I wanted her free to run in case I needed backup. Screw the hotel rules.

I held my stun gun as primed as my internal magic. Peering through the small window on the stairwell door, I met only empty stairs. Back muscles achingly rigid, I focused on the odd pressure in my heart of power. It felt like someone was sipping my magic out through a cocktail straw, tiny draws from the larger reservoir of my core. The sensation wafted in and out of my receptors. Such magic hadn't existed in the world before yesterday, and certainly not from Kiera. Was she suddenly gaining powers from her theoretical Thirteen sorcerer the way Adam did from Ronan?

I tiptoed toward the alcove housing the elevator. Fin trotted off to sniff at a chocolate peanut Ronan must've sacrificed. I stamped my foot, but she licked it up anyway. *I see where your priorities lay, Finny. Hope the chocolate doesn't kill you.* A second of worry sent me faltering until a gurgle worked up from Jax's throat.

He sprawled on his back down the hall, staring at the ceiling. No help for the wicked from him. My right pinkie twitched again, and a tug on my aura nearly sucked the air out of my lungs. The door swung open. Gasping, I spun around.

A drag on my aura slammed my heart into hyperdrive. A faintly glowing Kiera and her doppelgänger twin surged from the stairwell. Truth stared me down. *A Forbidden Thirteen sorcerer and her fairy doppelgänger, Kiera?* A viral bug in their webbed energy spun their auras in blurry, fragmented waves, slicing through mine, practically incapacitating me.

Breathing deeply in and out, I flung out a batch of sizzling energy to halt them in their tracks. Their taint hauled my blast every which way and the energy fizzled into the ozone. I tried again, but their caustic magic rendered mine useless. Dread streaked cold strokes up my spine. The supposed sorcerer doppelgänger tossed a brain wave of energy that aped a Scrambler.

“Stop it, Katrina!” Kiera turned on her lookalike. “She can help us.”

“Maybe she did this to us,” Katrina spat out. “She’s pulling on my telekinetic receptors, same as you.” Katrina shoved her fist in Kiera’s shoulder.

“When did you two meet?” My curiosity got the better of the situation.

“Last night.” Kiera scrubbed her hands together, veins visible in her translucent skin. “After I left here, she was at my house waiting for me. Dominion Research was there too. They brought her to me and said they could help us. They snatched her last week from her home in Las Vegas. After your reactions last night and hearing that they’d kidnapped her, we managed to escape before they nabbed me.”

“And you came here to jeopardize *me*, the one person who can help you?” I pasted on my most fierce scowl and rabid eye. “Did they follow you?”

Kiera shook her head, eyes floating in a sea of apology as parts of her body wavered in and out of visibility as if she too suffered from a poorly executed cloaking spell. Katrina was the Ronan to her Adam, full of life and energy. Their auras tangoed with mine, copycatting the doppel-hunks’ auras.

As if Kiera didn’t just say they weren’t followed, out of the stairwell behind them sprang a trio of cavemen. I recognized Milo from the university altercation. Riley’s men tracked K-Squared straight to the hotel. *Holy, honking hell in the hotel hallway.*

“You idiots,” I said through gritted teeth. “They stuck a tracking chip in Katrina!”

I raced toward the elevator, Kiera and Katrina hot on my heels. Fin snarled and nipped at the legs of the men. I slapped my palm on the elevator call button, fruitlessly pushing against the rabid paranormal attack the girls emitted. Even gripping my pendant, I couldn’t focus on my power or deflect them. *What was I, flypaper for doppelgängers and their pursuers?*

“Come on!” I stabbed and stabbed the call button.

The men trapped me between the main corridor and the dead end elevator hallway. Two other men came up behind Double-K and locked their arms around the twits. The girls kicked and screamed until the men knocked them out with a needle in their necks, and they sagged to the floor in a synchronized wave. I crept to the end of the hall, butting against an ornate console table. A golden urn filled with fake flowers rocked on the marble top and toppled to the tile floor, breaking into a million splinters, cracking my barrier of fear. Bird of paradise flowers and tropical grasses thumped to the granite. *Good God, who hijacked lucky thirteen today?*

“Can I help you?” I shook ceramic dust off my boots one foot at a time.

Fin barked and trotted circles around the men. They kept toeing her away. Leaning more toward cute and cuddly, Fin wasn’t much of a guard dog. I’d have to fix that later if we spent a lot of time

together. *Only if my cats grant their divine approval, that is.* Yeah, my ass was in a whirl and my mind had revolted into the mundane of cats and dogs. *Focus, focus.* I nearly thumped the words into my head.

The largest man, a candidate for the newest weight loss craze, stepped toward me, crunching ceramic chunks into dust. His beefy hands flexed and curled. “Give it up, little girl. You won’t get away from us this time. Put the weapon down.” He smirked at Milo who reddened and advanced toward me as if he had something to prove. Like maybe increasing the size of his balls.

The elevator finally dinged its arrival. The doors slid open behind them, closed, and my escape hatch disappeared in a whoosh.

Arm wavering, I aimed my stun gun between Milo and Mr. Beefy. They sported deadeners even more high tech than what Jax wore. “Stay back.” My stunner and my mouth were all I had until I figured out how to work with the deadeners. I was already visualizing the duct tape over my mouth.

I tossed a stab of air and watched it ruffle the fur on Fin’s back. Head cocked sideways, the pup wagged her tail. Tension rolled out of my shoulders down my arms.

In a show of good faith, I held up my stun gun, then tucked it in my waistband. I hoped I shut the safety off. A zap down there could really confuse my already mystified hormones. I needed to stall Riley’s mercenaries. My powers had begun to snip at their deadeners, subtle little attacks of energy primed to short them out. And I think I was drawing something from Kiera and Katrina, even though they were conked out.

“What do you want with me? I’m just a college girl visiting friends on winter break.”

The men chuckled in stereo.

“Sure, and I’m the president of the fucking U.S. of A.” Fat-ass moved toward me. His deadener crinkled through my telekinetic receptors, but my supposed destructive energy didn’t dampen them further. It actually seemed to tickle them awake. “Roger, you and Chan take the other two out of here.”

Oh, no! The two men picked up Kiera and Katrina, shrugged them over their shoulders, and headed toward the back staircase.

The elevator chimed, and the remaining cavemen twitched in their rain booties. Fin snarled, ears flattened back, teeth bared. Everyone spun toward the opening doors. Adam stalked out of the elevator with Jon, guns trained on Riley’s three enforcers.

The disruption gave me a chance opening, and I mind-tossed a barrage of energy, zapping the three deadeners at once. Another headache-inducing arc sent the three men tumbling to the ground, writhing in pain. Adam and Jon sprang into motion to incapacitate the brutes.

I beelined it to the suite to snag Jax and Ronan. My feet dragged and fuzz filled my head. No way would I tempt fate and leave my meager haven alone again. Not until I had a solid plan to handle other sorcerers and fairies destined to flock to me.

The Rift, the whole shebang, was bigger than Ronan, Adam, or I ever imagined. Who else had the crumbling gate affected? Did they all have the ability to sense me? Who or *what* was I to them? A

cold wash of goose bumps raced up my spine.

Stumbling, I rounded the bend and reenergized Jax's brain with a simple thought. Not quite sure how it worked, it was all the energy I managed to conjure. Jax crab-crawled away from me, distress scrunching his face. He struggled to sit up, and Adam skirted around me to help him.

"Five wasn't enough." Jax fingered the short-circuited deadener around his neck and looked behind him as if Adam were the sheriff of wicked Fairyland.

"So I see." Adam shot me an impatient frown.

I seethed and stomped into the suite, Adam close on my tail. Once behind closed doors, I blasted him a new one. "Who made you the master of me? I won't be imprisoned by you, or Ronan." I jerked my thumb toward the bedroom door.

His eyebrows quirked. "He's here?"

"You don't miss a trick, do ya? By the way, your fairy princess Kiera and her *sorcerer* showed up." His eyes bugged out. "Riley's men snatched them." I stalked to the empty bedroom. Fin snuck in before I slammed the door on Adam.

"Pack up, we're leaving before they return," he yelled through the door.

I sank to my knees on the plush carpet. "Why can't I feel your aura anymore?" I ruffled the silky fur around her ears. "Is the bad magic screwing with you too?"

She yipped twice in an acknowledgement that eerily represented a *yes and no*.

Determination got the better of me. I kissed her furry head, and then snagged Mom's papers out of the safe. It was time to face my heritage. To hell with sharing my treasure with my wardens, or packing. I eyed my belongings scattered around the room, knowing I needed to get my butt in gear before more of Riley's men popped up.

I stared at the envelopes so long they should've started talking to me. "Why did you hide these secrets, Mom," I whispered.

At times, I missed her so much I thought my heart might implode. After both Mom and then Granny Elle had passed, I resolved never to get close to anyone ever again. Zoe ultimately patched the hole and kept me from having an epic freakout about my cursed life. I certainly didn't know what to do about Adam and Ronan since I had no clue what direction my life traveled. I thought it'd be easy to toughen my heart with my crappy past and an unknown future. Not so easy now with the doppel-dudes softening it up.

Carefully, I emptied the packages. Most of the papers inside were so very old. I had no doubt they belonged to the *Illuminaria*. One by one, I looked at them, all crammed with writing in a foreign language. Half the sheets were newer and it appeared someone had translated the strange language into English. Was this what my mother had been working on all the time?

The pages contained the ritual to open the Rifts—the ritual Riley Senior was missing—along with the alchemic spells to go along with the sorcery-magic. Almost every ritual a Forbidden Thirteen sorcerer could do naturally with their inborn magic, someone could replicate with the right alchemic

recipe and ingredients, ingredients that included blood of the Thirteen descendants. Richard Riley's ultimate goal. If he couldn't control the Thirteen naturally, he could do a helluva lot of damage with our blood. Worst of all, he could control all the Forbidden with the alchemic potions in the book. My body became a mass of gooseflesh as the implications imprinted my brain, an almost permanent condition of horrifically mysterious thoughts.

Once past the rituals and potions, the summary at the end of the *Illuminaria* stunned me more than anything else had in the last few days. My blood turned to ice.

I wasn't just one of the Forbidden Thirteen sorcerers. I was *the* last living descendant of the *thirteenth* sorcerer. What did that mean? With my blood alone, Riley could call all the living descendants of the Thirteen to him.

My heart clutched up. I continued reading the enlightening and frightening text. The powerful sorcery that created one doppelgänger for each Forbidden Thirteen sorcerer, also ensured only one sorcerer was born in each generation of the thirteen families, even though multiple generations of sorcerers in each family could be alive at one time. How our bloodlines accomplished that was pretty random. If Mom was alive, either one of us could've been the thirteenth sorcerer, one being stronger than the other.

On and on the disturbing text flowed. The original thirteenth sorcerer—my supposed ancestor—had created the doppelgängers and the magic ensuring that sorcery survived throughout the ages even when most of the magic had been abolished. The magic may have waned for a time or became diluted throughout our bloodlines, but it remained in our blood. The thirteenth couldn't wield magic with a doppelgänger in the world with her. *Thank my lucky stars.* I didn't think the world could deal with another Aria. Only the thirteenth had a magical bond to the other twelve sorcerers, otherwise the other twelve were not bound to each other—unless the thirteenth bound all thirteen together. *Holy sorcerers on high hell.*

The pages spoke of the deliberate dilution of magic into odd and sometimes flawed ESP throughout generations to keep the Thirteen safe and undetected. Once brought together, they had the ability to invoke true and ancient sorcery. The pages included a magic spell and its alchemic ritual explaining how to accomplish the task. Only the thirteenth could invoke the final words to restore pure ancient magic to all thirteen. Only the thirteenth had the ability to pull magic from the other twelve and their doppelgängers once the sorcerer and doppelgänger pairs had bonded. It scared the bejeezus out of me.

There was much more in the few pages crammed front and back with magic, myth, prophecies, alchemy, and truth. None of this had to do with a Rift opening and pouring the abolished magic back into our world. I leafed through the pages until I found a frightening and obscure reference that wasn't so vague with what I'd already learned. "Eventually, a generation of Thirteen will be born that will restore the ancient powers of the original Thirteen. However, for all to be born of the same age, the old magic must be present on Earth to trigger the return and births." *Powerful scary magic hell.* How

did the ancients accomplish this? Did they know a cluster of earthquakes could trigger the return of the magic, albeit tainted magic?

Stunned, my mind bended this proof in black and white as I opened a small envelope containing a note from Mom to me in case something happened to her and I discovered the book.

My dearest Aria Elle,

I know you'll understand why I held this from you, and hope that you'll forgive me. I had to protect you from this at all costs, as I'm sure you'll come to realize. If you have this letter, then I assume I'm gone.

I know the extent of your talents, as I was the same before you.

Shock reverberated through me. Why hadn't she told me? I swiped my blurred eyes to read the familiar scrawl.

We belong to an extremely secret group. It has remained so secret throughout time that the members don't even know each other. The original members planned the secrecy at the group's inception. When the founding members entered into their final task on Earth, they did so with full knowledge of their lot in life.

It's an inherent need in each of us to hide our particular talents from the world, including the members of our elite group. That's your cross to bear, as it was mine. I cannot divulge more in writing since it's dangerous, even with what I have written and what I have left behind. So much danger abounds that I cannot comprehend it, let alone write about it. You must remain wary at all costs.

However, you won't be alone in whatever you decide to accomplish. My seer's sight foresaw three good men in your future. They will protect you with their entire beings, as that's part of their task in life, as you will protect them. You will not be alone, and that soothes me more than anything. I'm sorry if that troubles you and compounds your life, but it is what it is.

Remember the danger and the secrecy at all costs. I love you and respect your decisions and choices. I'll always watch over you. Think of the good times we shared, the fantasies we traded, the exotic vacation we enjoyed before I passed on. Think of the realms we explored in our dreams and the one place we always came together.

Love you like the frosting on my cake! Mom.

Chilly air engulfed me, and I sat there for what seemed like hours, unable to turn the pages to read more of the translation. Finally, the absurdity of my life smacked good sense out of me and hysterical laughter bubbled up. I needed to laugh it off, because I really wanted to bury my head in a vat of Mom's decadent frosting. Who were the three men? Ronan and Adam? Who was the third? *Please, please, don't let one be Richard Riley.*

Vaguely, I heard a bang on the door, making my heart jump. I opened my mouth to tell him to take a hike, but my throat seized on the words. What if it was one of Riley's men? I struggled to get up, lost my balance on the bed, and knocked over the bell jar lamp. Despite the dense carpet, and probably because of my *unluck*, the lamp hit the bottom of the nightstand. The bulb popped and the porcelain cracked into pieces.

The bedroom door flew open with a splintered bang.

Chapter 16

The doppel-jerks hulked in the doorway. I hopped off the bed, gently pulled the comforter over the precious and priceless papers. Ronan's aura assaulted me like a bulldozer of snow dumped over my shoulders.

"What?" My heart tumbled. Fin pranced in front of me, her tail whipping my legs. "I hope they don't kick you out for wrecking hotel property. Then where would you lock me up?" I trailed a scornful look from the guilty culprit's black boots to the scuffmarks on the white door.

They scoped out the room to ensure I wasn't the victim of an attempted *redrum* on their watch. *Note to self: Watch The Shining to make my life look like cake.* Adam returned from the bathroom with a wet washcloth and handed it to me. MAC Cosmetics could probably use me as a prime example of cheap makeup gone haywire.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I wiped tear streaks off my face. "Nothing."

"Liar," Ronan said softly. They backed me into the corner.

Panic flitted through me and I spooled my energy for an attack. I felt like the trapped mouse Cody and Cleo batted around my patio last summer. I thrust away from the wall, forcing them back.

Greed sparkled in Ronan's eyes as he honed in on an empty clasp envelope lying on the bed. "Is that from your mom?" His eyes narrowed.

"Aren't you Mr. Nosey?" I shot back. "Appears as if I have something you might want."

"What the hell crawled up your ass?" Ronan dug his fingers through his slick hair. The clean, crisp scent of citrus shampoo infused the air. I breathed in deeply, basking in it like a love-struck ninny.

"She's mad at me for thinking of her safety," Adam quipped.

"For not trusting me." My eyes tried to fling switchblades, but I didn't possess that ability. Yet.

Ronan propped his good shoulder against the wall. "Why'd you leave earlier?"

Both nasty and nice answers sprang to mind. The kiss-ass angel on one shoulder quickly won the battle. "I wanted to scope out your father's compound, get a feel for it in person."

I swear on Granny's urn they both growled at me. What tripped me out the most was that their auras oozed fierce protectiveness. A frisson of heat incited a sexy dance low in my nether regions.

Attention: Aria Elle Walker has finally lost control of her body.

“You’re clueless.” Ronan clenched his fists. He edged closer, hovering like a storm cloud of testosterone. His aura taint skated over my exposed skin. “Start packing. We need to get out of here. Now.”

Adam plucked at a tendril of hair curling toward me. “Riley has deadeners all over his campus. He holds the patents on this shit.” Fog seemed to obscure his right side for a second.

Our fused auras sizzled. I moved forward, pushed the doppel-wardens apart, and stomped to the other side of the room. “Well, I wasn’t planning on waltzing up to the front door. We can disguise and shield ourselves like we did at the university. I can trip DR’s cameras one by one.” My determination was like the Rock of Gibraltar inside me. “I was only planning to scope out our opposition before we attack. Check out the deadeners. I wanted to see if I have enough power to knock them all out the way I did on Riley’s cavemen at SCU.”

Ronan’s neutral expression evolved into a critical squint. Lines of concentration formed under Adam’s eyes. A long beat of silence encouraged me to continue despite the thickening in my throat. “We can get bulletproof skin to avoid their bio-energy darts.” Unease blasted that famous rock into molten pebbles in my stomach. I scratched at the nails teasing my neck. “It’ll work. We just need to know where the deadeners, cameras, and sensors are. We have that info on Melisande’s tablet, right?” Flames seared my insides and I bent double. Adam sprinted around the bed.

My knees gelled. Red pokers of agony stabbed my skin and muscles. Ronan’s aura fed on me as if I was the only source of magical nutrient this side of the Rift. My spastic trembling caused me to lose all focus on my power, leaving me as powerless as spit. What new reality show purgatory had I landed in now?

“Son of a bitch.” Ronan streaked out of the room.

“Blondie.” Adam caught me before I crash-landed, and he laid me on the bed, avoiding my hidden paper treasures.

An inferno roared through me, decimating my power. “It hurts,” I whimpered, crawling out of my head. My skin blazed as if demons were peeling me like an orange in H-Town. The rest of my aural energy dissolved, leaving me boneless and vacant. Clothes tightened around my roasting body, and I clutched Adam’s hand in a wimpy clasp. “Clothes...get them...off.”

He undressed me down to my bra and thong. Then he draped cool, wet towels over me. Nothing appeased my pain. No focusing on my telekinesis or my aura brought my magic back. It was the worst feeling I’d ever experienced. I’d lead a killing spree at DR to restore the energy that’d been my one and only companion throughout my life’s upheavals. The one thing that I could always rely upon when nothing else remained constant.

Adam swept hair off my damp, boiling face. “What can I do?”

Another wave of serrated knives scraped beneath my skin, leaving me writhing on my side, panting in terror. Even with my eyes open, I saw nothing but a jagged darkness. Adam caressed my

arms, whispering sweet somethings in my ear. I struggled to listen to his words, needing them to center me. My mind had frozen in limbo where all decisions and actions had gone the way of the dearly departed.

I bobbed in a sea of syrupy steam, so hot and wild it could only be tagged a firestorm. It cleared for a second, and I'd reach for that tantalizing pool of energy, then the mist hardened into lava, pushing me away. Everything inside me reached for my aura languishing outside my empty shell, refusing to come home. I screamed in frustration as it slipped from my grasp again and again. Adam's voice finally caught in my ears, and I concentrated on his words.

"Take my energy, Aria!" His fingers dug into my shoulders.

A shallow wave of familiar magic swept over me. It cooled my flesh, slowed my virtual skinning. The scent of spring meadows, summer roses, and cinnamon spices licked the air, flooded my nose, and saturated my tongue. With everything in my being, I drew on my shattered energy and doused the fire engulfing me. Magic rammed into me, jolting me against Adam. It was welcome relief to my near meltdown. My aura surrounded him, lending life to his sick body. He scooped me in his arms, cradling me against his chest, the wet towel between his hard body and my softer curves. Somehow, Adam's body filtered the taint and restored my power. Cleansed, vibrant magic seeped into me, driving out the tortuous pain.

He quaked against my length. "God, almighty. I felt your aural energy completely inside me." Adam kissed my head, his breath ragged. "What the hell was that?"

Achy and exhausted, electricity arced through me, rejuvenating my aural energy faster than ever as if every electromagnetic particle in the hotel filtered into me. Insane laughter boiled up. "Like I know?" I closed my eyes for a moment to calm my galloping heart. "In what fantasy-world hell are we role-playing?" Shivering, I stripped off the wet towels. Modesty was a moot point since he'd seen my goods.

"Wish I had answers for you." He gathered me closer, his clothes damp against my cooling skin.

I hauled the crisp sheet over us. "What did you feel?" Adam's magic settled in an acid puddle in my stomach.

"While your power shot through me, I felt awesome. My real powers surfaced, pure and vibrant, and my pain disappeared. Now, the pain's gone only because I'm touching you."

The last of our auras reverted to their rightful homes, except for a sharp spoonful of fairy taint sprinkling dry ice in my gut. I didn't know what else to call the icy stone. I drew my tongue over my lips, capturing the bizarre taste of fresh roses in my mouth. "Thank you."

His satisfied gaze caressed me. A new kind of heat zeroed in on me, creating sensations I hadn't experienced...well...since the last doppelgänger who'd held me in his arms.

"Anytime." He chuckled roughly, averting his flushed face.

Thank lucky thirteen I had a passion for sexy underwear straight from a Victoria's Secret dresser. My sodden pink lacy bra and matching thong caused Adam no end of appraisal from the glint of

wonder in his eyes. He helped me off the bed, steadying my rubbery legs. My lower back throbbed anew. I fingered the skin, feeling raised welts, my eyes bugging out.

“What’s wrong?”

I craned my neck to scrutinize my back. “I’m not sure.”

Adam looked behind me and made a small noise in his throat.

“What?” I scurried into the bathroom. *I’ll take my straitjacket in petal pink.*

I peered at my backside in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. A raised tattoo scored the center of my lower back. Black and green, inflamed against my winter skin, a vague pattern of vines and thorns emerged.

My heart beat so fast I thought I was going to pass out. I leaned my elbows on the vanity, barely able to suck in more than puffs of air. Did Adam’s tainted power cause this? Ten million ideas tumbled over each other in my head and none of them made a lick of sense. He hovered beside me, commanding me to breathe.

“What the hell?” Ronan’s jealous voice splintered my tenuous foundation.

His aura waltzed over me, airy and pain-free. Adam backed away to give Ronan a view of my back. Straightening, I caught Ronan’s wide-eyed shock in the mirror. He tenderly touched my lower back, never breaking contact with my gaze in the mirror. Adam retreated to the doorway. Ronan’s fingers cooled and soothed the burning welt. Sniveling, I pressed my back against his hand.

“Why me? Who elected me mayor of Freak Town?”

“I wish I knew.”

Turning, I touched his cheek, his skin cold beneath my fingertips. “What happens to you when your aura attacks me?”

“I lose more of what little energy I have left.” He shrugged. “I don’t absorb any more, it doesn’t regenerate.” He moved his hands to my hips and squeezed gently. “Like a piece of my soul is being ripped out when I feel your pain.”

I froze, my mouth dropping open. “Why didn’t you tell me? Do you feel my tattoo...thing?” I slivered my eyes. “What else do you feel?” That could be risky with my emotions battling for world domination inside me.

A slow smile spread his lips, crinkling the skin around his eyes. “You’re feeling better.”

“Tell me.” I pinched his arm playfully, anything to sidetrack the butterflies tangoing in my stomach.

“A beautiful, hot-as-hell woman with far too many clothes on.”

I smirked. “You have the right amount of clothes on.”

“I meant you.” A twinkle lit his eyes.

I glanced at Adam, already knowing his answer to the same question. “Fork over some answers,” I said to Ronan, drawing away, needing to throttle that tangible bond that impelled me to sink into an embrace that included so much more than his hands on me. His darkened eyes had gone as wild as a

wind-tossed sea on a moonless night.

Lost in his stormy eyes, it took a long moment to realize I was nearly naked. A flush traveled up from my toes, and I crossed my arms over my torso. My rebel body had totally invalidated my inherent mistrust of near strangers.

Reluctantly, he circled around me to examine my back. “When the pain hits you, it bounces on me then returns to you.” He fingered the welts, skimmed his hand over my right butt cheek. To my consternation, my rear involuntarily tightened.

“Hand me the antibacterial ointment. It’s my turn to play doctor.” He kissed my shoulder, his lips warm and firm.

Adam left and returned with my robe. I forced my mind off Ronan’s unnaturally playful mood. A facet of him I planned to explore in-depth. As much as I enjoyed his flirtations and attempts to lighten the situation, we had no time for it.

Rescuing Zoe was no longer priority one. Many other people were suffering. I couldn’t handle that any longer.

“We have to close the Rift *now*.” Decision made, I lowered my stricken gaze in the mirror to Ronan’s veiled reflection and Adam’s accepting eyes. We couldn’t risk opening it correctly until we got a handle on everything Forbidden.

“I know.” The only words Ronan needed to say. Adam nodded his agreement.

Chapter 17

After I recovered from my newest short-circuit, we scrambled to pack. Once in the parking lot, the stink of wet asphalt caused more knots to form in my shoulders. Roiling charcoal clouds whispered a warning along my nerves. *Just kill me if I ever have to live in Seattle.*

I climbed into one of two midnight-blue SUVs from the Freshfields company fleet. Jon planned to chauffeur Adam in one, and Jax got stuck carting Ronan and big, bad me in the other. *Suck it up, boys. Aria's here to stay.* If Ronan's aura went postal on me again, we'd deal with it. For the moment, our other options numbered zero.

Ronan and I planned to video link to his father while we randomly cruised the city. Even though we turned off our location settings and scrambled them by staying on the move, we didn't trust Richard Riley's ability to bypass the best in high-tech security. The guy was rolling in moola and subhuman gift basket ideas. Since Riley didn't know about Adam, we didn't want to risk him getting caught with us, hence the reason we split up. Ronan and I needed an easy way into DR's compound to obtain the ancient book of clues and to rescue Zoe, Kiera, and Katrina. Riley was going to offer us personal invites to nab his treasures. We just needed to stay one step ahead of him.

According to Ronan, years ago Riley had spent a fortune hiring treasure hunters to locate his portion of the *Illuminaria* buried in an Ireland crypt. My ancestor had purposely dismantled and hidden the *Illuminaria* around the world so no one person could lay sticky fingers on the entire text. Someone had previously found and buried the puzzle pieces Riley now possessed. Who'd shot Riley with a lucky shamrock? And did I possess the key to the kingdom of the Forbidden in the missing pages? My point being, the guy would have hell's minions safeguarding his treasures no matter the cost. Our game plan was eleven doppelgängers short of a sorcerer's dozen.

A lot depended on what went down at the Rift. If we left the Rift in its current state, Adam and Kiera were going to die soon, and possibly Ronan and Katrina. Maybe even me. Who knew? After the phone call with Dickhead Riley, we were going to the Rift to close it, then onward to rescue Zoe, the girls, and get the book out of Dickie's sticky fingers. There was no telling how much blood he'd siphoned out of Kiera and Katrina in hopes of creating his alchemic magic. With Ronan's and Katrina's blood—if she was indeed a sorcerer—could he open the Rift? We had to beat him to it and hope our magic took his down a notch and stuck.

Jax exited the parking garage, and Ronan pinned me with a wrinkly nervous frown from the right side of the back seat. “You’ll follow my lead?” Half question, half command.

I peered at my haggard reflection in the smoky window separating us from Jax.

“Aria?” Ronan’s voice lowered. “I’ve been around the block a few times with my father.”

“Okay. I get it.” I studied him from my limpet-on-a-door position, unable to trust myself so near him. It was bad enough our auras partied around us. I couldn’t afford the distraction or the torrent of indecision rushing through my body. How’d I blunder from a humdrum life of loser blind dates to two gorgeous hunks in my back pocket? Dumbfounded and lucky hardly defined it. That Wiki to describe my new empire was percolating way too slowly.

“What happens if we don’t close the Rift correctly? Will we all die?” The brand on my back burned.

Unease painted Ronan’s bland mask. “Let’s wait and see.”

My chin dropped. “Oh, nice. Thanks for the vote.”

“I don’t know.” He punched the seat between us.

His cell jangled in the seatback pocket. A muscle stood out in a hard ridge in his neck. Snatching up the phone, he clicked on video and speaker. The call routed via Adam’s line, and he remained on a three-way, muted conference. As planned, I kept out of view of the camera. Not that I didn’t want to give Dickie a one-fingered salute.

“Son, it’s a pleasure to speak with you again.” Richard Riley’s snarky sweet baritone was more refined than Ronan’s and slightly nasally as if he suffered from a cold. One could only wish.

Ronan wasted no time. “Release Zoe Marino and I won’t contact the PVD.”

We didn’t have plans to contact the federal Paranormal Vice Division, but the threat was real. We decided not to bargain for Kiera and Katrina, yet. We didn’t want him figuring out how much we knew about the situation. I still hadn’t said a word to Ronan or Adam about what I’d discovered in the missing *Illuminaria* pages. I needed to keep something in my back pocket in case I was walking into a trap of Ronan and Adam’s making.

Riley chuckled. “We both know you won’t do that. Not until you’ve obtained a few of my treasures.” According to Ronan, his father’s possessiveness was legendary. “Since you’ve squandered no time, I’ll get to my point. I’ll release the telepath when you return with Aria Walker.”

“No deal.” Ronan white-knuckled the phone.

“What happened to you, Ronan?” Riley’s tone hinted at regret. “You used to worship the ground I *owned*. You believed in my mission. We’ve spent your entire life working toward this goal. Where did I make a wrong turn?”

I smoothed my hand over Ronan’s knee, hoping to instill a calm vibe. Destroying Riley wasn’t vicious enough for what he’d done to a crapload of people.

“Give Zoe up and I’ll let you live.”

My eyes widened. Would he really off his own father?

“Let me see Ms. Walker.” Exasperation clipped Riley’s words. “Her little friend wants an eyeful too.”

Ronan flashed me on screen. I flipped Riley the bird, and Ronan shot me a tired look of frustration.

“Aria!”

I snuck a peek at Zoe’s face filling the small screen. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, framed by long, tangled auburn hair. I latched onto the device to steady Ronan’s hand. “Zoe, you okay?” Relief cooled the volcano dying to erupt inside me.

“A few bruises, but I’m kicking.” She hiccupped, her shoulders heaved. Two of Riley’s apemen removed her thrashing and snarling from the room.

Riley’s mug reappeared. I glowered at him, but Ronan seized the controls.

“What’s it going to be, Ronan?”

“I’ll return to the compound. Aria and Zoe go free.”

“You can do better.” Riley laughed a silver-tongued, arrogant sound geared to charm the unwary. “You’re not talking to the media or law enforcement. And we both know you don’t have the balls to kill me.”

Fury and hatred vibrated Ronan’s taut body. Riley harbored major blind spots about his son. However, he was right about our inability to cry wolf or to wine and dine the media, which was just another death sentence. We had to gain access to DR’s compound to swipe the *Illuminaria* and every iota of his research, and destroy his alchemic potions and blood. Then Riley bites it big time.

“Release Zoe. I’ll return to the compound. You get three days with Aria, me present at all times.”

“Growing fond of our Ms. Walker, are you?” Green-eyed egotism was rife in Riley’s voice. “I want her for three years. By then, she’ll beg me to let her stay, as will you.”

I jerked against the seatback. “Bastard,” I said under my breath. *The only begging I’ll be doing is begging you to take a vacation on the bottom on the ocean, a block of cement your only friend.*

“One week,” Ronan countered.

One *minute* was crazy risky. We’d located the compound’s schematics, including security data and weak spots on Melisande’s computer. DR had corrected the defects after Ronan’s desertion, but Ronan knew of other weaknesses the latest schematics didn’t reveal. We knew a way out. Out alive was another chapter. We just needed a way inside, and if we could do it by cooperating a smidge, so be it. Dicktard would never kill us, not if we pretended to go along with him.

Riley remained silent for light years. “Sorry to disappoint,” he finally said. “I’m growing rather fond of Ms. Marino. She’s an amazing telepath. Now that my darling Melisande has jumped ship—”

I slapped down the mute button. “He doesn’t know the Queen of Darkness is dead?” Disbelief twitched my eyelids.

Ronan shrugged, yanked the phone from me, thumbing the mute off. “Here’s the final deal, *Dad*.” He sneered at the word. “You get one week with Aria. I stay indefinitely. When Aria’s safely

released, you'll receive a key to a safety deposit box that contains the lost *Illuminaria* pages." The prepared lie tripped off his tongue. "We want forty-eight hours before surrendering."

Riley's eyes did a praying mantis bug-out. "Now you're talking my language," he purred. "I'll give you twenty-four hours. Be at the gate at one tomorrow." The display darkened.

Ronan and I swapped nervous, satisfied glances. Ronan had predicted his father would give us twenty-four hours. We only needed a few hours. The phone rang again. Adam.

"I'll meet you at the Rift at seven thirty," he rambled off.

"I thought we were going together?" That had been our plan—before we'd sold our magic and bodies to Satan's pride and joy.

"We still shouldn't be seen together." Ronan jabbed the SUV's intercom and instructed Jax to drive to our new hotel.

We hadn't tapped all of Melisande's data, and we hoped it contained info even Riley didn't know she'd pirated. Adam would keep Melisande's gadgets and documents safe and be our failsafe on the outside if something went ass-end wrong at DR. That was, if we managed to close the Rift and he lived long enough.

Ronan curled his fingers through mine. Our magic link pacified my frazzled nerves and erected a thin barrier against Adam's nasty lingering taint from my recent magic flogging in the hotel. Ronan's aura amazingly soothed the incessant burn of my new eerie tattoo.

The privacy window rolled down. "We have a tail," Jax said.

Our fleeting harmony shattered. Ronan and I fixed our sights out the rear window. A late model silver sedan followed at a discreet distance. Two cavemen silhouettes filled the front seats, two hulked in the rear.

Pinkies twitched. The clock struck one thirteen. Too late to thwart my bad luck. *Love. Lee.* Could I give myself a crash course in ninja?

"Head away from the hotel." Ronan yanked his gun from his shoulder harness.

Likewise, I tugged out my stun gun, primed it for distance on high. "Who is it?" I settled backward in my seat for an easier view out the rear.

A torrential rain began pounding the roof, drowning the sound of my heart's erratic rhythm in my ears. The rear wipers arced across the glass, unable to defeat the mini-monsoon.

Jax drove into a bleak commercial area peppered with manufacturing buildings. Occasional splashes of color decorated the stark facades. The SUV's engine chugged, rattled, bit the dust. I caught Jax's anxious expression in the rearview mirror. *You have got to be kidding me.*

Ronan locked his sight on the sedan. "What's wrong?"

Jax rolled the vehicle to the curb, stomping on the breaks as the tires bounced off the cement. "Gas gauge reads empty, but we had a full tank."

Ronan landed a glower on me. A bead of sweat dripped between my breasts. *Son of an unlucky thirteen bitch.*

Jax fiddled with the diagnostic computer. The silver car halted in front of the glass-fronted building a couple hundred feet behind us. Rain slashed the windows, making it hard to see through the murk.

Lightning sizzled across the sky in a blaze of white. A clap of thunder caused me to jerk against the door. Then I noticed Ronan's aura had disappeared. Our compelling, confusing meld of tingly power became a frozen black boulder within me. As if my arteries bled out, my energy slipped out and my aura dissolved. In less than a minute, I became a lifeless hollow, despite my blood, muscles, and flesh calling for the lilting melody to return.

Arctic floodgates swung open and panic crashed into me. "Ronan?" I clenched my weapon so hard the outer shell creaked.

He turned to me, his eyes flinty, calculating. One sweep took in my alarm. "We're in a dead zone." Concentration deepened his frown. He attempted to raise his paltry magic to no avail.

I loathed the soul-eating loss in my core. I zipped my jacket to my chin, insanely hoping the insignificant effort contained my last trickle of energy.

Ronan kept his sight peeled on the car. "More of my father's goons."

Jax slammed his fist against the computer monitor. "Piece of shit."

The silver menace behind us appeared no less threatening through the rain-slick window. What were they waiting for?

Ronan touched my arm. "Keep watch. I'm going to help Jax."

I nodded and pitched a rash of positive mental energy at the computer. It drizzled into a pin drop of emptiness.

Another boom of thunder without the precipitating crack of lightning rattled my bones. A glint of light inside the sedan caught my attention. "They're getting out." Something tight wound up in my stomach.

Four tall men in dark raincoats exited the car. One had a glistening bald head, and the others sported short, dark hair the rain instantly plastered to their skulls.

"We're not waiting," Ronan barked. "Jax, cover us. You're not an ESP and they won't hurt you." The back window latch popped open. "Out your side, Aria."

"I'm not worried. I've got an arsenal." Jax laughed maniacally. He crammed his beefy body past me and rolled into the cargo area. "Ready," he growled, one hand on the window to push it open, the other clutched around a handgun.

A hateful, familiar paralysis claimed me. Everything blurred and that flood of panic became a tsunami. I forced my fingers to maintain my grip on my stun gun. Ronan shouted at me, but I couldn't understand his words. All I saw was the rain sheeting the windows, smothering the world outside. Muscles throbbed in my temples, and I fought against the memories flashing in lightning strikes through my mind. Refusing to let the haunting episodes hit me, I pulled inane thoughts out of other pockets in my mind. *Cody and Cleo, bring chocolate to Mommy.*

“Aria!” Ronan shook my shoulders. “Get a grip!” He jiggled me again and his mottled face wavered into view.

I focused on that ruggedly beautiful face as fragile life crept back into me. “It’s raining,” I stuttered, numb from my scalp to the soles of my feet.

“We’re sitting ducks and you’re worried about rain?” He shoved past me and flipped the door latch. The freezing numbness remained, but my mind raced into action, delving past the morass of that horrible night eight years ago.

Ronan cupped my face. “Baby, what’s wrong?” His thumb stroked my cheek, hot against my glacial skin. “You’ll get your powers back once we’re free of the dead zone. But we can’t sit here.”

“They’re moving in,” Jax said. “Hey, here.” Something hit my shoulder and Ronan caught it. He jammed a baseball cap on my head, yanking the bill low over my face.

The muck in my befuddled brain sluiced apart and feeling mushroomed in my pits of dread. I took several deep breaths to still my heart and locked eyes with Ronan’s perplexed gaze. “I’m okay.” I hoped. Only part of me knew the rain wouldn’t hurt me.

Ronan sprang into action. “Stay close.”

I stole one last dismal look at the slashing rain suffocating the earth, then plunged into it. We lunged across a short span of slippery lawn to a large sign staking the home of *A Fantasy on Us, Inc.* Adults Toys. Illuminated, animated purple and black penis-shaped vibrators danced on the left side of the sign. Rain buffeted me, and I dipped my head, my chin practically touching my chest. The comical sign returned a raindrop of normalcy to my bizarre new world.

Lightning lit up the churning dark sky, sizzling into the heavens. It struck the emerald grass, a spotlight on center stage, blinding me with its dazzling performance. Thunder rumbled so loud it shook the ground. I stumbled and grabbed hold of Ronan’s jacket to keep from slipping on the wet grass. Four more cracks answered in quick succession. Only that time it wasn’t thunder.

I flicked on my stun gun. Rain dripped down my neck, and I shuddered from the dampness penetrating the collar of my sweater.

Ronan peeked around the end of the sign. “Make a run for the walkway between the two buildings.”

We tore across the lawn to the buildings. Gunshots tracked us, but I knew empathically that murder wasn’t their top priority, yet they had no such reservations about shooting deadeners. Call it my thirteen spidey sense. We dashed between the one-story buildings. An overhang connected the structures, offering a break from the tortuous downpour. Sprinting to the rear, we rounded the far right corner the same time two of Dickie’s Douches reached the front.

My heart drummed against my chest, beating a way out. The building on the right housed four loading docks, locked steel bars across its doors. Ronan pointed to a narrow opening beneath one of the docks. We slipped through the three-foot-square doorway and scampered deeper into a crawlspace spanning the width of the loading platform. A mildew smell reminded me of dirty, wet

socks in the laundry hamper. I scrunched my nose and crawled across pea gravel, praying I didn't cross paths with any creepy crawlies. A hairy spider spaz attack wouldn't be pretty.

Ronan scuttled around investigating. I hid behind a cement pillar, holding my fist to my mouth to stifle the rumbling sound of my breathing. Denim plastered my legs in a wet, heavy layer. Fortunately, my coat and leather boots were waterproof. I unzipped my jacket and wiped my face on my dry sweater.

The steel ramp above us softened the noise of the rain. Wind whistled and moaned a mournful, lonely sound between the gaps in the sheets of steel, the song of the dead zone, the weeping of emptiness inside me.

"Riley." A voice with a New England accent floated closer. "Daddy's looking for you, the girl too. Come out and we won't hurt you."

"We lost them. These detectors ain't picking up shit," a squeaky male voice intoned.

At least the dead zone had a positive benefit. I clasped my hands to keep from clapping.

A phone rang and one of Riley's goons answered, his voice too low to hear until he said, "Today's your lucky day. If you don't show up at the compound tomorrow, we'll be hot on your trail, sniffing your asses before you can say fart." Rainfall muted the group guffaw.

"Lucky bastards," New England groused loudly.

"Let's get outta this cloud piss." Muffled footsteps carried the voice away on a whistle of wind.

Diminishing sounds of rain engulfed us. Ronan slicked his saturated hair off his face. "Damn it. They have your magic footprint as well as mine. The SUV had impenetrable blocks on it and they picked us up before we hit the dead zone."

My mind whirled around the numbing air. Melisande must have coughed up the goods. The best PSP gadgets couldn't locate a body by their electromagnetic footprint; that was only possible by DNA and brain wave scanning. "Why would they give up on us so easily?" Something didn't ring right.

"I don't know. Dad's up to no good as usual. Probably trying to make it look like he trusts us, or spying on us."

We huddled beneath the dock for fifteen minutes before emerging under drizzling, thick clouds. Hiding in shadows, we worked our way toward the street, pausing in the corridor at the front of the building. The SUV had disappeared. Ronan tugged me into his side, surveying the street in both directions. Just as I yanked my phone from my pocket, a honk pierced the silence and the SUV raced up to the curb.

Jax drove us safely out of the dead zone. My power rushed out of hiding, filling me with the most incredible, delicious feeling of sweetness, desire, and heaven. I never wanted to return to a dead zone and miss the magic that had been a part of my life forever.

Shivers seized control of me and my teeth clattered. Miserable in my soaked clothes, I huddled against the door until Ronan pulled me into his arms, folding his own dampness around me. What cuckoo's nest had we flown into? I derailed the incident in my mind, squinted at his face, my

insatiable need for information putting him in a full court press.

I drew invisible shapes on his thigh. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?” I began with the most innocent of questions.

A muscle flinched in his chest against my shoulder. “No.”

“Are you dating anyone?”

His hand crushed my swirling finger on his leg. His whole body tensed cadaver stiff. “I have no life. Haven’t you figured that out?” he said in the gruffest voice I’d ever heard. “Do we have to do this right now?”

I flexed my hand to escape his clutches. He held on, but relaxed his grip. “I’m scared,” I admitted. “I need something to kill a few rogue brain cells.”

Tension flowed out of his arms. “I know.” He kissed my temple and his fingers butterfly-danced across my cheek. “My father pressured me into doing things that kept me from a normal life. Things I’m not proud of.” His chest rose and fell heavily. “I never wanted to bring anyone into that life.” The heat of his anger expanded around us.

I inhaled a humid whiff of his cologne, fed the tiny fairies forming a dance line in my tummy. Sensing the heat of his disgust, I changed the subject. “Are you sure I negate you? How bad is your magic failing?” His laugh rumbled in his chest. “Okay. I *know* hell just froze over.”

“You still don’t believe in the whole negation thing, do you?”

“Why should I when it doesn’t affect me? I feel your aura.” I dusted his thigh with the flat of my hand. “Try it. Pretty please?” I lifted my head off his chest, landing sparkling encouragement on his face.

Annoyance set into the straight line of his mouth. “Feeling my aura has nothing to do with it.”

“Prove it.” I scooted out of his arms, into my seat.

The air between us wavered for a second, and gloom rained on my happy aura parade. My eager anticipation fell into a black hole. “What’d you do?”

“I put your brain to sleep.” The corners of his mouth ruffled. “Did it work?”

Unable to stop myself, I stuck my tongue out at him.

The mask fell over his features and he reached for me. “It’s bad, Aria. Okay?”

As though his words destroyed another barrier between us, I wound my arms inside his jacket and clutched him to me.

Chapter 18

I rucked up my damp sweater and examined my back in the bathroom mirrors. The welts traveling south toward my butt crack stung and itched like the poison ivy I'd fallen into on a camping trip a few years ago. I swore never to go camping again. Nature and I didn't get along.

Ronan strode into the bathroom, wearing dry jeans and a T-shirt, toweling off his hair. Such was our newfangled relationship. He sucked in a sharp breath as he checked out my back.

He chuckled the towel in the tub and grabbed the tube of cortisone off the counter. "Drop your pants."

"Yes, doctor." Careful not to scrape my raw skin, I undid my jeans and peeled the moist denim past my hips.

He crouched behind me and gently traced my new artwork.

"How bad?" I twisted to my side to see in the mirror.

"Stop wiggling." His fingers dug into my hips to hold me steady. "It's no worse, half-inch longer, if that." He slicked the ointment onto the blistering tattoo. His touch and the soothing medicine left my insides dribbling into a pool of happiness.

My palms flat on the marble vanity top, I studied my face in the mirror. I knew my name, but barely recognized the reflection. Pain dulled my usual sparkling teal irises. Seriously, people with paranormal abilities had an extra sparkle to their eyes. It's not overly noticeable except to the trained. My complexion had colored like death warmed over and then returned for a second helping.

"Why did you freeze in the SUV?" Ronan's question came out of the blue yonder and incited a mini panic attack in my chest as my heart tried to detach.

Breathe. Breathe. I didn't care to explain my unnatural rain phobia to Ronan and make him think even less of me. "I don't want to talk about it." I inspected a bullet-shaped glob of aqua toothpaste in the sink. So not a sign I cared to see after our day from hell.

Ronan's fingers ceased moving for the span of an eye blink before resuming their slow massage. "Better?"

"Mmmm." Eyes closed, I was drowning in his calming touch.

His lips brushed my skin above the brand, soft and sensuous on my back, sending a tingly jolt through my legs. He began kissing a scorching trail northward as he shoved my sweater higher, and I

shivered from the impact of his soft caressing lips. A tainted barb pricked my skin, and my hip froze against the vanity. The sensation trickled into dancing butterflies, and an ecstatic moan slipped out. His flaming mouth and tongue continued to create amazing sensations on my skin.

“Ronan?” I pushed out the one breath that refused to budge.

“Hmm?” He spanned his hands over my hips and pivoted me around, his lips working magic on my stomach.

Desire streamed molten liquid through my blood, and I slumped against the vanity. My body might as well belong to someone else for all the restraint I had over it. “What if the bad magic returns? It affects us when your emotions flip out.”

He raised his head, his eyes half-lidded chinks of charcoal. “Or when my doppelgänger’s around.”

I gasped. So much crud going on, I hadn’t noticed. And speaking of doppelgänger, I pushed against him. “Stop, Ronan. I can’t do this—” I wanted to cry, scream, and rage. He froze, a black scowl working across his face. And the bottom fell out of his seduction.

White-hot ice picks poked me. Fire scorched the brand on my back. His aura turned ugly and mine scurried away. It was that bit of Adam’s leftover contamination from earlier that dominated us, as though Adam’s tainted magic gloated in triumph.

“No!” Ronan slammed his fist into the marble wall.

“Go.” I shoved at him. Sharpened nails replaced the wire brush scraping my skin. He shook his head, cupped my cheek. I kissed his palm. “I’ll be okay.” I fell back against the mirror.

Alarm raced across Ronan’s hard expression, and he stalked out of the suite leaving the door jarring in its frame.

Thunder boomed in my head. Anger, dismay, and uncertainty all fought for the crown inside me. Guilt swept another blast of fire over my physical pain. I needed to figure out the weird doppelgänger connection to both Ronan and Adam. *Man, I’m totally embracing my crazy in a Defcon wake and bake.*

Groaning, I buried my face in my hands, suffering the receding pain. My life was too complicated for man troubles. I had too much to accomplish, too much to discover to allow a love triangle in the middle, or any boyfriend for that matter. If we didn’t fix the Rift, none of it would matter. There wouldn’t be a life for either Ronan or Adam. Nor me, because I couldn’t imagine any existence without either of them.

Pinpricks continued a light assault on my skin. I rubbed my arms, soothing my ravaged flesh. My phone rang in the other room, and I darted to answer it, needing a break from myself. Relief traveled down my back as I clicked on video.

Distress knitted Ronan’s eyebrows into unibrow territory. “I just want to see you,” he said. “Hear you. Are you okay?”

“I’m good.” I’d already told him what had happened during the last time his magic attacked, but I

withheld the one oddity that made no sense. Neither Ronan nor Adam knew about the small piece of Adam's magic embedded in my core, so completely different than the magical energy I absorbed and assimilated into good energy. Although I had absorbed it the same way I absorb aural energy, it mimicked a fiery leaden ball of electricity, pulsing and ricocheting in my bloodstream.

Just when I was getting used to yesterday, along came today.

"We can't do this." I sat heavily on the couch, clutched my jacket over my chest.

"Obviously." His thick voice shook.

I hunched forward. "What I meant was...you and me."

Ronan flicked off the video. "Adam's not for you, Aria," he said with difficulty.

"That's not what I meant," I shot out. "Wait! What's that supposed to mean?" I bolted upright on the couch. "So you think I belong to *you*?" Indignation rallied my spirits and drove off the last of my pain. I envisioned his scowl and wanted to smack it off his arrogant face.

"Don't you feel it?" Emotion lay heavy in his voice. "I have, for every damn moment since I walked into your condo. I didn't ask for this. I hate it." He paused. "I want you so damn bad. It's killing me that Adam—"

My throat constricted. I clicked off the phone and studied the paisley pattern on the carpet, trying to wind my thoughts around my too-bizarre-for-words life. For the first time, my love life was as complicated as the maze of endless paisley.

The suite door opened and I smelled Ronan's cologne. The irritated flare of his sick aura grazed my naked flesh.

I scratched the last few tingles on my arm and said softly, "What I meant was that it's not the time to hook up until our lives are on solid footing."

Ronan didn't move from his rigid stance in front of the door. "Okay." Some of the anxiety fled his taut body as his shoulders slumped forward.

"I won't deny the connection I have with both you and Adam."

"I'm a Thirteen sorcerer, Aria." Triumph sparked in his eyes.

"And Adam's your doppelgänger."

"You'll have to make a choice."

Even though my emotions scurried all over the map, I shrugged nonchalantly. Slowly, I walked to him. Rising on my toes, I brushed a soft kiss over his mouth. "I need time, okay? We all need time. You have no idea how that doppelgänger bond affects me."

The thought of my boring, loveless life roared to the forefront of my mind. My inner fire glimmered, and then winked out. Lack of trust and fear of abandonment weren't terms in my new Wiki. How far I'd come in a couple of days. But I couldn't go back to that life ever again. The problem was I didn't know how to go beyond it.

Chapter 19

Foamy clouds splashed night's ink over twilight. Once again, rain slicked the streets and headlights bounced off puddles. Shivering, I adjusted the heater vents. Ronan maneuvered Seattle's busy streets toward Washington Park, the site of the Rift, along the shores of Lake Washington. Excitement railroaded my fear to connect with the mysterious source of ancient magic that seemed to grant me my identity. I wanted to find myself so badly. It was my life now and I needed to live inside it, for better or for worse.

The steps for closing the Rift revolved in my mind. At the hotel, while we'd waited for dusk, Ronan warned me what to expect from when he'd tried the ritual using a page from the *Illuminaria*. Apparently, only one Forbidden Thirteen was needed to close the Rift. *Go freaking figure*. I finally showed Ronan and Adam a few of the secret pages I possessed. They'd already guessed I carried the pages in the tote bag. My doom and gloom face had given me away.

We still didn't know what would happen to Adam or other doppelgängers who may be alive. All Ronan remembered reading was that the sorcerer-created doppelgängers possessed no magic of their own and they shared their sorcerer's magic. To what extent remained a mystery. We had no legit clue where they came from since the twelve "created" doppelgängers had supposedly abolished themselves. Then we found an obscure passage in Mom's pages that the Forbidden sorcerers created the doppelgängers based on even older magic from a time when many magical beings roamed the earth. The *Illuminaria* detailed nothing about sorcerers and doppelgängers not being able to live together on Earth's side of the Rift. Apparently, way before the Abolishment both had lived on our side of the Rift before the doppelgängers replaced the sorcerers in the banishment.

On the other hand, everything we did could bite us in the ass and we'd all wind up dead. Releasing further forbidden magic caused a slew of illegal activity. I wanted the laws changed and I'd accept the gamble if it came down to it. I'd fight to end the government's long-term experiment in artificial stupidity. The world had no right to banish the Forbidden. What if there were other beings alive in the Void? The *Illuminaria* indicated that only sorcerers, fairies, and the twelve doppelgängers lived to the end of the Abolishment because they were the strongest to survive decades of culling by humans. What if they were wrong? Enough what ifs crammed my head to lay down tracks to the next century.

Before stashing the secret book in the hotel safe, I double-checked Mom's pages, and they divulged the ritual to open the Rift by both magic and alchemy, for the thirteenth sorcerer's eyes only. Only the thirteenth and one or more sorcerers could open the Rift together, which is why Ronan and his father had screwed it up. Ronan was adamant that he could close it alone, now that he'd seen a few of Mom's pages and Melisande's tablet. The steps made sense now, whereas they hadn't before. But I still had a hard time believing the closing ritual would work.

"What if we need all thirteen sorcerers to close it?" I flicked dog hair off my pants.

Ronan rattled his brain cells. "The *Illuminaria* didn't say anything about all thirteen."

I pressed him. "It didn't say anything at all, did it?"

"It said how to close it. It didn't say form a circle of thirteen freaks, dance, and throw a fucking party." He threw up his hands. "It's not like I ever got to read the whole thing. I had to take direction from my dad and the pages we have here don't say all thirteen either. What more do you want?"

"I want not to be playing with lives here," I yelled. Man, I needed to team up with Einstein to work the Rift.

I massaged away the slow tapping in my temples. Tense moments slipped by. Unable to handle the yawning silence any longer, I faced Ronan, stretching the seatbelt over my chest.

A slow flame of bitterness against Ronan's father ignited in my belly. "Your father didn't trust you much, did he?"

"Nope. He didn't even trust my mother." He gripped the steering wheel so hard, the vehicle jerked to the right. "Melisande came closer than anyone."

"Yet the hag betrayed him." I cut my hand through the air as if to slice off her gooey, dead head.

Ronan parked near an ill-lit path far from the park's mainstream entrances and visitor center. The rain had taken a breather, and I was eternally grateful for the jet-set priced ski jacket I'd picked up in the hotel boutique. Adam had left me a store credit, but I'd used my casino jackpot, not wanting to pimp myself out. Much.

Magical energy overwhelmed the air. It licked and nibbled my skin. For the most part, my aura protected me, but had no luck chasing the stalkerish magic away.

Ronan tugged a flashlight out of his backpack and handed it to me.

I flicked it on, the light bouncing off brown stick trees and winter limp foliage. "What's in the backpack?"

"Stuff."

I rolled my eyes at the scuttling clouds. Leading the way through a rickety ranger gate to the arboretum, he secured it behind us with a quiet snick. We trudged down an unmarked path cutting through the woods. An undeveloped, natural woodsy area shadowed one of the secondary trails, far enough away from the mainstream paths to ensure our solitude.

The air swirled, invisible fingers whispering over us, thick enough to touch. It glowed and dripped from the trees like bunches of moss. The farther from the park perimeter we walked the more

the magic raided the air from my lungs. A mischievous evil saturated the sick magic trying to seep into me.

A tremor spooled up my torso and jumped over that thimble of taint inside my core. Was that what Adam sensed? It was bad enough I felt it around me and in the tiny piece of him lodged within me. *Thank you very much.*

“You feel it?” Ronan held aside a low hanging branch, allowing me to pass.

“Yes.” I buried my pride and grabbed his free hand. Another bullet I failed to dodge.

He jerked out of my clasp and wrung his hand. Horror rounded his eyes as though I’d infected him with fairy slaying poison. The edge of the flashlight beam glittered in his frosty eyes. “You’re full of tainted magic. You feel like Adam.”

“What?” I hooked my hand in my front pocket.

“My aura can’t even penetrate yours.”

“It’s around me, not *in* me.”

He touched me again, wrenched his hand back. “It’s there.”

Was he insane? Or a mind reader? I hadn’t felt or seen any external changes. “One tiny morsel of Adam’s taint.” Honesty would murder me one day, if the Rift granted me another sunrise. Of course, that wouldn’t be in Seattle, since outer space had snatched the sun. I nibbled on my bottom lip. “It’s only a smidge.” I regaled him with my tale of torture.

“The magic latches onto fae-sorcerer DNA. You wouldn’t have *his* magic in you unless you were —” He studied me as if I dangled the *Illuminaria* over his head.

“Get real. I thought we were sorcerers, not fae.” Wait a hot minute! “What’re you keeping from me? Are you saying we also have fae blood?”

I stepped on mushy pine needles and my foot slid out from under me. Catching my balance, I grabbed Ronan’s arm and yanked him off-kilter. His good arm whipped the air, banging against a tree limb, raining dead pine needles in our hair. *Thirteen, where’s the love?* I swatted off the needles.

Ronan shook his head like a wet Labrador. “I’m his doppelgänger, not fae,” he lashed out in a surly tone. “We’re bonded.”

“Maybe we all have fae genes.” I gave him an emphatic smile. We hadn’t read all the pages from the *Illuminaria* yet. Just enough to get us through our task and ensure we wouldn’t kill anyone. “Go.” I pushed him forward and we stumbled along the craggy path. I clapped my hand over my mouth to throttle the rant waiting for one last credit to feed it. “Face it. We both could use a Scrambler right about now to stir up some history in our heads.” An old branch snapped underfoot and the sharp crack split the jittery air, forcing us into silence.

The strong odor of wet dirt and dormant nature sharpened my senses. We walked for what seemed like miles before lumbering into a glade enclosed by trees and bushes. Overgrown and lush in winter’s final chapter, it lured me closer. My light reflected off a narrow, babbling creek edging the oblong clearing. The air sizzled with magic, pure and tainted, more magic than I’d ever witnessed. So

thick with it, the air whistled with every movement we made. The Rift taint had a death hold on part of the glade evidenced by the bleak, brown landscape at the far end of the clearing. Far bleaker than a Seattle winter warranted.

My magic mixed with the Rift's magic, pumped through every cell of my being. It swirled around us in a wash of warmth and barbs of glacial evil, becoming part of me, setting my stomach surging and contracting. I breathed deeply, the damp air congealing in my throat.

"Ronan?" I arced my flashlight in a circle.

He watched me a few yards away, a strange luminosity in his eyes that had nothing to do with the light. It was unnerving, cruel, and possessive.

"What?" He dumped his backpack on the ground.

Easing back, I brushed against a dried bush that crunched death's hold against my jeans. "Nothing." I swallowed roughly. Why bother telling him I wanted to swab out my guts with rubbing alcohol?

Approaching, he extended a tiny plastic bag out to me. "Chew one of these antacids. You took aspirin earlier, right?"

I popped two tablets in my mouth. "Yes." Perspiration dotted my forehead. "What happened at the Rift when Adam found you passed out?"

"The Rift was already messed up after my father's forced screwup. When Adam neared, the magic went wild, killing my power, knocking me out."

I chomped on my bottom lip, wincing at the coppery burst of blood. "What's to prevent it from happening again?"

"You. I wasn't strong enough since he was already drawing my magic. With you here, I can pull from you."

"Does the magic feel different?"

"Yeah, it's centered on you, not me." He took the bag from me, careful not to touch my hand.

Why me? I kicked at a clump of dead weeds. His evasiveness ticked me off. Man, I wished I possessed all of the ancient manuscript and the key to deciphering it. My thirteenth sense told me that Ronan knew more about it—and us—than he'd coughed up.

My stomach gurgled alarmingly and my knees weakened. I waved my flashlight around and found a boulder to sit on. Cold and hard against my rear, it enabled me to raise my knees and drop my head to relieve the magic snacking on my insides. After all, I had an illegal magic ritual to remain alive for. *I'll take my handcuffs in diamond-studded platinum.*

"Take your deadener off." Ronan's voice floated to me.

"I will when Adam gets here." I spun the gray band around my wrist, my elbows resting on my knees. Ronan had stolen a few of them when he'd left his father's compound. We wore them hoping to keep his father from detecting us. The deadener was only partially effective in the glade, if not downright useless. The antacids helped, and I lifted my head without feeling like I'd just woken up

after a rave.

“You’ll forget. Do it now.”

“I won’t forget.” I lit him up, standing where I’d left him, scowling up a tornado. “What’s got your briefs in a twist?” Nearby rustling foliage saved his reply. Adam’s presence stirred the acid in my gut.

“Wow, the magic’s changed. It’s not so bad.” A light bobbed toward me. “Must be you, Blondie.” He sounded chipper while I was as irritable as a women’s clinic full of PMSing girls.

“You think?” I vaulted up. “Let’s get this fairy and unicorn show done with. Ronan needs a dose of sugar to sweeten his nasty.”

“What’s going on?” Adam wheeled on Ronan.

“Let’s just do it.” Ronan stalked to his backpack. “Take your damn deadener off, Aria.”

I slipped the plastic band off my wrist and flung it at Ronan, hitting the back of his legs. He stuffed it in his backpack, mumbling and grunting to his various selves. Nothing changed in what I was feeling. The deadener appeared useless on me so near the Rift.

Mist dripped from the roiling clouds. “Brilliant.” I zipped up my jacket and tucked the fur-edged hood around my head. As Adam moved closer, about to put his arm around me, I eased away. “I’m hot to touch, so you’re forewarned.”

“Blondie, you’re hot, period.” He grinned. “Why are you two—”

“Who knows?” I shivered more from the eerie magic raising the hairs on the nape of my neck than from the night air that had already frozen me into a Popsicle.

Ronan trudged toward us. He handed Adam a lancet to prick his finger and gave me a couple for later. “You have your cell?”

“It’s in the backpack.”

“If anything goes wrong and both of us are incapacitated, call my father. His number’s in your phone.”

Stone still, I landed a death-ray look on him. “Like hell. Did the warranty expire on your brain?” I bumped my breasts against Ronan’s hard chest. External magic punched holes in our auras and he flinched.

Adam extended a placating hand toward me. “He’s the only one who has the slightest chance of helping. You want to risk Zoe’s life? Jon and Jax have instructions to alert the authorities with proof of Riley’s illegal activities if he threatens or detains you.”

“You guys planned this?” I stuck my hands in my coat pocket. “Thanks for keeping me in the loop. You’re welcome, Aria. Glad you’re part of the A-Team. Sure, no bleeping problem.”

Unlucky thirteen reared its ugly-ass head. A droopy tree limb snapped next to us. I dodged to the side and it clattered to the ground between the doppel-jerks and me.

“You’re out of control.” Ronan flung the backpack on the ground.

“Thanks for the alert system warning.” Stepping over the leafless branch, I rejoined them. “Let’s

get on with this so I can chase lab mice in a maze for the rest of my life.”

Adam grasped my hand. At least the magic wasn't screwing with our connection. We followed Ronan toward the limpid creek, and stopped at a mini ring of boulders that mimicked Stonehenge. I swished my flashlight in the circle of boulders big enough for six to eight people to stand comfortably within. The narrow rocks ranged from three- to six-feet high.

My aura ascended as I absorbed energy from outside, sweet and full of zest. I erected an aural blockade to deflect the magic the way Ronan had instructed during our dry run. The air lifted my hair, tickled my skin. Ronan and Adam's energy twirled inside me as well. Richer, more intense power churned within the stones. Not dirtier energy, just more of it, period.

The external magic trickled through chinks in my shield. I strengthened it, but the magic was unrelenting.

“I can't block out all the magic,” I whispered.

“It's okay. Neither can we.” Adam squeezed my hand. “At least your pureness is tempering the wildness.”

Ronan dusted the perimeter of the boulders with a mix of crushed yarrow to ground the energy and ward off evil, and jasmine to protect our auras. “She's not all that pure,” he muttered sarcastically. I squeezed Adam's hand until his bones crunched. “Aria has your faulty magic clouding hers.” Ronan stood to his full height and fixed Adam with a fierce look.

Adam dropped my hand, the glow of his eyes changing from light blue to violet. “What's he talking about?”

Well, crap. Since the whole world just got the text message, he might as well know how his magic latched onto me after Ronan's magic attacked me in the hotel room.

After I clued him in, he stroked my cheek. “Sorry. I had no idea that would happen.”

“Not your fault. It is what it is.” I knew it'd happened for a reason, though. By the end of the night, Ronan's magic might also be swimming inside me. *Let's ring the freakin' wedding bells if that happens.*

Ronan flung the empty plastic bag on the ground and handed another marked with red tape to each of us. The red tape identified the mix of angelica, thyme, and agrimonia herbs for healing, cleansing, and closing the Rift. He also handed me a paper bag of sea salt to break the circle or terminate the ritual, if necessary. My fingers twitched on the bag that held enough evidence to fry us for practicing illegal sorcery. Who knew the old geezers were the original source of herbal-based witchcraft? All the ingredients were easily bought from underground Wiccan vendors.

“Move over there.” Ronan gestured at a copse of stick trees.

“I can't see from there.”

“Your power's merging too much with the Rift.” His shadow loomed, pressing over me as if to swallow me whole. “We discussed this.”

“I know.” I stretched to touch him, but he shied away. Dejection speared my heart.

Adam and I followed the small flashlight beam. On my thirteenth step, I tripped on a blasted rock and would've bit the muddy ground if Adam hadn't grabbed hold of me. I usually watched my thirteenth step, but my mind was too twisted at the moment. "Thanks."

"Hold my hand. I can see better at night with my fairy vision." I found his hand in the dark, my fingers rigid in his warm grasp. "We'll light him up so you can see."

I inhaled his meadow fresh scent rising from our entwined auras, soaked in its familiarity. "I'm scared for you two."

Adam tucked me against his side. "It'll work this time. You make the difference. The magic feels cleaner, stronger."

"It's not cleaner to Ronan." I turned in his arms, leaned my back against his chest.

His chest hardened into a granite slab. "He wasn't complaining, though."

We aimed our lights at the stone ring. Ronan pricked his index finger and blood welled up, black as a starless night against his skin. Using a mix of rowan, willow, and mugwort, he created a twelve-point star around the thirteenth and final spot dead center in Mini-Stonehenge. The herbs helped protect against evil, increased psychic powers, and promoted success. Rowan herb originally came from the land of fairies. It kept diseased magic from haunting people or places. Perfect for our half-baked plan of no record.

Starting with the northern point, Ronan held his finger over the herbs and a droplet of blood fell. The rocks blocked most of my view, but the amber flash of fire was unmistakable. A finger of fog drifted above the tallest rocks and dissipated in the misty air.

A hot spike of electricity shot into me. Adam jolted against my hip. "Was that supposed to happen?"

"No," he said in a fierce whisper. "The cloud of magic should still be visible. We shouldn't have felt anything."

Ronan traversed the ring, dripping his life away in flashes of amber and gold fire that spiraled up in tiny puffs and disappeared. With each drop of blood, my magic intensified.

An intangible force tugged me toward the stones. Power singed my insides. Everything went red, and my lungs burned as if I'd swallowed boiling lava. I clutched my pendant, focusing on the charm to halt the loss of magic, to keep the bad luck away. My aura swirled above the stone circle in a halo of violet and pink. The unknown force tried to lure me closer to the circle. Adam tightened his hold on me. A roaring, whooshing noise filled my head.

"Aria." Adam sounded far, far away. "Pull it back!"

"I can't," I wailed, struggling in his arms. "Let me go." Pain seared my internal organs, a jagged blade cleaving me in two. Half of me filled with the tainted magic, the other with mine and Ronan's pure magic, emerging for the first time since I'd met him.

Spellbound, Ronan continued the ritual. His aura floated above him in shades of pale blue. A dead black spot contaminated the halo. Sheer terror stopped my heart. He shouldn't have the color of death

in his aura. Holy fairy godmother, he was missing his other color.

Ugly, disgusting power evolved around Ronan as angry souls screamed in my head, taunting, daring. Invisible arms and wings wrapped around me, grasping at every inch of me, pinching, prodding. I screamed. The sound of my voice died in the seemingly endless stretch of ground to the stones. With the tainted crud seeping into me, my power spent itself cleansing and preventing it from harming me further.

Ronan cried out, a vicious, agonizing sound. He stumbled into the stones and struggled to stand. His pain and anguish burned my soul to ashes.

“We have to stop him,” I cried, my heart in my throat. “It’s not working. It’ll kill him.”

Adam’s arms had already dropped away, the safety of his embrace having lost to the lure of the magic. “Go,” he said softly and prodded my butt.

I lurched forward, propelled by my own feet and the intense, mysterious force compelling me. A tidal wave of realization crashed into me. I muscled against the compulsion, turned and held out my hand. “You’re the missing color, the other half of his soul.”

He shook his head slowly. “Not half, a third.” Wistfulness hung heavy in his tone, but he thrust forward and took my hand.

In that moment, as we stumbled to the stone circle, toward Ronan, I knew without a doubt how inextricably linked the three of us were. Our auras had blended as one from the first moment we all stood in Adam’s driveway surrounded by the forest. Seeing the three halos of aural color above the stone circle, I knew it for real.

Chapter 20

The hum of glorious power in the center of the stones encapsulated my world, pulsing in tune with my heart. Its jagged lure quivered over me, magnificent and devastating at once. Fierce adrenaline pumped into my cells that had never seen the sort. Hungry, grungy desire spiraled against my pure magic, trying to drill through it with its ancient taint, its ancient wonder. I fought it from conquering me completely with every ounce of physical and magical strength I possessed.

Magic choked the clearing, throbbing with a need for release, invisible walls pressing on me from all sides. The immense energy challenged me, dared me to take it. Double dared me to give it everything I had to give. A force of evil languished within the foreign power and I struggled against its magnetism. Earth and the Void seemed to fight for their right to open or close the Rift...or to possess me. Earth pushed back, whereas the Void flooded the glade with crackling, caustic magic.

Ronan's failing magic continued to damage the Rift, adding to the taint surrounding us. He lacked the two vital ingredients that made him whole as a descendant of a Forbidden Thirteen—Adam, and in many respects, me. We made up the triad that could undo the damage and release the pure magic. Only the three of us could open the Rift, I knew that then. Ronan and I couldn't do it alone. He needed his doppelgänger. Had the Forbidden Thirteen known about this connection? Was this the cost they'd paid to trick the world?

I knew I was meant to do this, to be there, to re-activate this bygone world into the here and now. The urge flooded me, set my feet in motion. A cry escaped me, both terrified and excited. I hoped it wasn't too late to reverse the flawed closing spell. I bolted into the stone ring, startling Ronan. A ghostly light surrounded him, bounced off the stone pillars. Deliberately, I knocked my hip against him, shoving him away from the star he'd made on the ground. Drops of blood from his nicked finger missed the twelfth point. Adam curled his hand around Ronan's fingers, halting the blood from dripping onto the ground.

Awed, I spun in a circle and soaked up the glorious energy, fought the corrupt magic with everything in me. The magic in the Realm of the Void sought liberation, and it wouldn't allow the world to ignore it any longer. Why did we think we could lock the enchantment away again when it had tasted life after centuries of incarceration? How could Adam forego the untold power that promised to be his once cleansed and free? What price to the world would this freedom cost? Was

there life in the Void, if it truly existed? Would we all live to see tomorrow?

Adam and Ronan tussled as Adam tried to get a dazed Ronan to understand what was happening. They ignored the urgency in the magic cloaking us until our intermingled auras seemed to knock sense into Ronan. Adam's minty aura joined Ronan's ring of blue, completing the circle. The ebony wedge in Ronan's aura disappeared. Three sundered auras gyrated wildly above us. The scent of heaven sprinkled the three rings, showering us with the intoxicating perfume of spring blossoms, summer flowers, autumn spices, and winter's holly.

A howling wind emerged in the circle, blowing the dried herbs away on a dazzling emerald current. Standing aside, I waved my arms to rush the wind and herbs along their journey. My presence tamed the air saturated with latent energy in its epicenter. My hair whipped about my head, snapping in the magic drenching us. The wind whispered between the stones in noisy voices discernible in sound, but indistinct in words. Without a doubt, I knew the voices belonged to ages of oppressed fae and sorcerers, the last known magical beings to walk our earth before the Abolishment.

Oddest of all, an ancient encyclopedia filled my head, waiting for me to decipher the knowledge it contained.

I plucked out the green-labeled plastic bag I'd hidden in my pocket earlier. Soft illumination lit Adam and Ronan's rapt faces, their bodies quaking in tandem with mine from the deluge of crackling magic. They followed my movements as though obeying my silent commands. Careful not to trample the center where I layered the herbs, they rebuilt the twelve points of the star.

I handed each a lancet, and one at a time, we dripped crimson life on the twelve points. After each drop of blood, fire flared, ending in a glittery cloud that ringed the perimeter of the stone circle. This time the magic held in the air around us. Unable to contain my joy, I laughed and shouted my triumph.

Holding back on the final point, I positioned myself in the center and raised my arms toward heaven. The Rift's energy anchored me to the spot, not that I wanted to move from the burgeoning heaven inside the stones. The aura halos spun above our heads, colors combining into a rainbow of mint, ice blue, and mauve. I'd never seen auras in living color!

As I lowered my arms, I brought my hands together. Contained in my cupped palms, the halos fused into a glowing ball of multihued moonlight. I became the thirteenth point, rooted to the earth. Centuries of magic centered me—heady power undulating in my core, streaming sweet pleasure through my blood, pumping excitement and relief into my heart—until the foreign magic consumed me. My telekinetic receptors invited in all the sorcery and fae magic streaming through the Rift.

Ronan closed the distance and covered my right hand with his left. Adam did the same with my left hand. We stood as one body, so close that the others felt the slightest breath taken by another. After a few seconds, our hearts beat as one.

All my senses blossomed with new life, and I drank in the magic's exhilarating sweetness, inhaled the unsullied air. Vitality usurped every fiber of my being, leaving me quivering as if I'd been reborn,

the magic scrubbing clean twenty-one years of living. Melting sunlight and honey slicked my tongue, sweeter and smoother than the finest Belgian chocolate in the universe. I breathed in the intoxicating mixture of warm sunrises, hot afternoons, and cooling sunsets. Exaggerated sounds of grass growing, trees budding, and clouds gathering bombarded my head. An amazing sense of the earth's wholeness flooded me.

My hormones zoomed into a free-fall. For once, my head handed them the keys to the castle. Unutterably lost within the energy swamping me, my heart burst with love. Desire spiraled through me, rippling under my skin. It set off a craving for Ronan, for Adam, for the whole of their beings. For the completion of Adam's transformation to his fae-doppelgänger nature, for Ronan and me with the pure blood of ancient sorcerers coursing in our veins, and for the two of them, complete as one. What would become of our amazing triad when all was said and done? My rapture nudged that vague sliver of doubt to the wayside.

The Void's urgency crested in need, shooting gentle sparks into my core. "Ready?"

Brilliant silver flecks glistened in Ronan's eyes. He held his hand toward me, his lips thinning in anguish. The glowing ball of moonlight bounced to my left hand. I squeezed a drop of Ronan's blood onto the globe. It sizzled and a corona of energy radiated above our heads. My skin tingled as much from the ball as from Ronan's touch.

Adam grinned and I sensed his eagerness. His livewire hair danced in the electrified air, waiting for an infusion of life. I took his hand and squeezed his blood onto the sphere, layering it on top of Ronan's sizzling drop, the heat of his body coursing down the length of mine. The ball expanded, radiating pure brilliance, raw earthen and ether magic. I nodded at Ronan. He squeezed my finger for the final drop of the one life.

The luminescent globe exploded around us, blinding, blazing. Hands clasped, we formed a circle. Streamers of moonlit magic bathed the stone enclosure. I wanted to rip off my clothes and let the magic wash over my bare skin. I longed to tear off Ronan's clothes and finish what we'd started in the hotel. I yearned to comb my fingers through Adam's reformed hair, and gaze upon his newborn honeyed skin.

The sphere melded above us into another orb of light and power. It plunged into the middle of the star we'd made, exploding outward, blanketing us with magic. It bristled across my skin, rearranged me at the cellular level. Exquisite, energizing, strange magic replaced the old sluggish magic I'd known all my life. The final particles dispersed on a gentle balmy breeze. Ronan's power joined Adam's pure magic and tangoed evocatively with mine. Their exquisite magic became a part of me, providing me with hope that they'd always be a part of my life, in one form or another.

My tattoo sizzled like hot coals under my skin, expanding outward over my left kidney area. I longed for Ronan's cooling fingers and soothing lips to doctor it.

Pure magic poured into the clearing. We'd done it. We'd opened the Rift! We lived to shout it to the world. Okay, maybe we'd rethink shouting it to the world until we ensured we didn't wind up in

an impenetrable dungeon.

Everything that'd happened in my life took me a step closer to the person I was meant to be. But as the sun had risen each day, I still hadn't known what I was, who I was. Then Ronan barged into my condo, and I had instinctively known *he'd* been missing from my life. *This is my place. He is my place.*

Adam glimmered with reinvigorated life, and his solid body took on a healthy coloring almost as tan as Ronan. An exhilarating mix of exhaustion and adrenaline melted my legs. Ronan caught me in his arms, and we clung to one another, lips pressed together hard in a fleeting kiss that ended way too soon. Not wanting Adam left out of our celebration, I reached for him, so fiercely longing to touch him in his renewed form.

But Adam had vanished.

"What the what?" Had the Void taken him? Panicked, I lifted my cheek off Ronan's chest to search for Adam only to find the shadowed outline of a trio of men behind Ronan. An air of menace radiated off them, sullyng the beauty we had brought forth.

"Well done, son. You've unearthed the Forbidden Thirteen master." The unmistakable voice with a slight Irish brogue slivered terror through my heart. "And you've finally opened the Rift as I've wanted for so long. Kudos to both of you."

Shocked, I froze in Ronan's arms, searched his face in the dwindling light, but he veiled his features well, even to my expert eyes. Ronan dropped his arms and swung around.

A muffled shot cracked the night air, then a second and a third. The sharp bite of three darts hit my shoulder, stomach, and my right thigh. Power bombed my feet, leaving me an empty vessel of ordinary. Sounds of more shots filtered into my fuzzy mind sliding toward a hollow of nothingness. My weightless body tumbled to the ground in a heap of limbs and darkness.

Chapter 21

My eyes battled the glue clamping them shut. Furious blinking attempted to clear the grit. I rubbed my fingers against my eyelids, and a prick of pain shot into the right side of my neck, forcing me to squeeze my eyes shut again. Soft breathing and a scuffle of shoes by my side encouraged my groggy brain cells to awaken. I blinked away my epic joy.

“Ronan? Thank god you’re okay. Hey, what are you doing?” My hazy gaze landed on the nasty gun-like syringe in his familiar fingers...fingers I wanted holding mine, assuring me I was still kicking it. I ached from my desire to touch him to ensure he was okay. Aside from his previous bodily injuries, he looked absolutely perfect.

Hello, reality of mine. Hadn’t his father shot him full of bio holes? Why wasn’t he laid up? “Get that piece of Riley Senior crap away from me.”

“It’s a tracker. Don’t fight it. Don’t try to run either,” he commanded in a voice gruffer than his usual McGrumpy self.

“Don’t do this to me.” My heart cricked. Weird wetness loosened the stickiness in my eyelids. I sure as hell wasn’t leaking tears. Was I bleeding? “Ronan? What’s going on?”

Absent a sound, Ronan ghosted and floated away on a soft white cloud. Maybe I was dreaming. No way would Ronan hurt me nor do his father’s bidding of the illegal kind. *Nope. No how. Just a nightmare.*

My brain flirted with unconsciousness again, and I let it sweep me away on a storm cloud scuttling after Ronan and his fluffy white vehicle of confusion.



“Wake up that bleach blonde head of yours.” A familiar raspy voice found a landing in my woozy mind.

Relief coursed the length of my leaden body stretched out on a plank-firm bed. “Zoe?” Fuzz coated my tongue and I had a horrible time dredging up moisture.

“About time you returned to the living.”

Zoe’s face swam above mine. An excavation crew seemed to dig in my skull for long lost brain

cells. I squeezed my eyes shut against the brilliant ceiling lights and dragged the covers over my head. Thank lucky thirteen! She was alive. The last two days were all a fat, hairy nightmare.

Tossing gold bullion into a wishing well probably wouldn't wish away my delusions.

I thrust out my right hand from beneath the covers, feeling the bands cuffing my wrists. My blood pressure headed for DEFCON-10. Time to dial up and deal. Mustering lubrication in my throat, I spewed forth a torrent. "Tell me I just got back from my date with your brain-dead cousin, and you're here to dish the dirt. Cody and Cleo are slumped on my ankles after eating ten pounds of food, right?" I really wished it'd all been my worst nightmare.

Zoe pinched my arm. "Right. Here, kitties, come give Mommy a reality check." She tugged the covers off my face. "Did bleach frazzle your brains?"

"I don't bleach my hair." I made an attempt at outrage until tears skimmed down my cheeks, wetting the low thread count pillowcases. I think the bright lights caused my eyes to water. Seriously.

"Who are you and where's the real Aria?" Zoe's relieved voice shook me to my core. "Aria Elle Walker *never* cries."

"Shut up and hug me." Zoe climbed onto the bed and we hugged one of our nine lives out of each other. "I'm sorry to get you involved." I inhaled her cheap melon hairspray. "I'll get you out of this watermelon hell and back to your beauty salon lifestyle."

"I may have to shave my head to get rid of the drugstore smell." She sniffed.

Unflattering sky-blue fleece sweats covered her voluptuous body. You wouldn't normally catch her dead wearing fleece. Velour was more her style if forced to wear athletic clothes. And she detested blue. "Why did they let you in here with me?"

"You've been out of it since yesterday. The shit-for-brains were worried."

I glanced at my watch. Shock bulged out my eyes. Monday afternoon, and I scarcely felt as if I'd slept two winks. Fingering her jacket's hem, I grinned at her, barely able to contain my joy at finding her alive and well. "What's up with this? Slumming?"

"I could say the same about you, Blondie." Zoe flicked the covers off me, exposing an identical sweat suit in pink.

I smiled to conceal my terror. "At least they got the colors right," I teased, plucking at my sleeves to expose a deadener on each wrist. Pink *was* my color. My hair felt weird, heavy on my head. Locks fanned my shoulders, reaching lower than I'd ever seen it. Was I delusional?

Irritation darkened Zoe's smattering of freckles. "What's going on? Why does a paranormal research group who makes frickin' deadeners for the government want you so bad? Who wants you dead? Who's that hot piece of ass Ronan who carried you in?" She sank into the black vinyl and chrome bedside chair and leaned forward.

My eyebrows shot toward my hairline. I tried to sit up, but straps held my torso and ankles to the bed. "He carried me in?" I thought Riley had shot Ronan with the same triple dose of bio-poisons he'd shot into me. Had Ronan escaped the extra dose? Wariness centered heavy in my chest like an

old wound that ached on a rainy day, which was every day in Seattle. The nightmare returned, and I fingered my neck, searching for the injection site. Nothing, not a stitch of pain. Had I dreamed him?

“Shoulder-length black hair, hot rugged looks—except for the freaky blank stare and frowny grimace. Muscles to die for. Held you like you were the last female on planet Earth.”

The last female on Earth observation mitigated the edge of mistrust and anger creeping up my chest. Things still didn’t play right in this bully versus innocent blonde girl playground fight.

A bang in the hallway sent us lurching in our cheap sweats. We exchanged nervous glances. Beeps dinged before the door slid inward. A stocky security guard sporting a Dominion Research logo on the chest pocket of his navy uniform, carried in a tray loaded with covered dishes. He had a bio-energy dart gun, a handgun, and a smartphone clipped to his utility belt. An earpiece stuck out of his right ear.

How’d they know I was awake and starving on the morgue’s doorstep? A cursory glance of the blue and gray room revealed a camera eye in the flat panel display across the room. *Sneaky bastards.*

Security dude set the tray on a wheeled table near the door. Zoe jumped up to investigate, swiping the covers off.

“Idiots. Aria doesn’t eat ice cream.” She shoved a bowl at Buzz-Cut. “On second thought, I’m still hungry.” Snatching her hand back, she cupped the bowl in her palm.

Buzz-Cut pushed the cart to the side of the bed and retreated as silent as he’d arrived.

My eyes about popped out of my face. “Have you blown a gasket? He could have smoked your ass into a grave.”

“Chill.” Zoe licked her spoon and grinned. “They’re afraid of you.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but I’m a bit tied up.”

“Riley’s men have been instructed to engage only under threat of life: theirs or ours. Or escape,” she whispered, a hand cupped to one side of her mouth.

I whispered back, “How do you know?” I plucked the silver dome off a garden salad, snagged a small tomato, and popped it into my mouth. When I bit into it, a sugary burst of grapes and tomato masked the musty taste of fear coating my tongue.

She shoveled in another spoonful of vanilla ice cream, the sight of which sent the tomato somersaulting in my stomach. “Did that aneurysm hurt much?” she asked through a mouthful of goop.

Ding dong. Telepathy. Pocket lint clouded my mind as the depressant drugs wore off and energy dripped ever so slowly into my veins. In fact, incredible new power melted in exquisite harmony with my own. Food could definitely rally it along. I went to town on the salad, chunky beef soup, and chocolate milk.

Zoe licked her bowl clean and tossed it into the trash can with a clang. “Oh dear, did I miss the tray?” The spoon clinked against the bowl. “Spill it. This better be life threatening because I’ll accept no less for being snatched and all.” She tried her rendition of my evil eye, aping the Wicked Witch of the West instead. I wiped my chocolate milk mustache off with a linen napkin. Nice touch for a

research institute, but they needed to read Martha Stewart's books on bedding etiquette. Martha had prison experience too. Every time my hand brushed the scratchy muslin sheets, I wanted to peel each thread apart and braid a noose for hanging Dickard Riley.

Zoe cast me a calculating look, her empathic brain spinning a million revolutions a second. *Oh, did I mention that she's also a secret empath?* By touch, she can feel emotions in addition to reading minds. It'd been tricky to keep my secrets from her since we'd first met in high school. Our ESP abilities were the reason why we'd hit it off so well. Now, I wondered if she might be a descendant of the Forbidden Thirteen. Turmoil sent my bowels churning.

"Does your ESP feel different?" I whispered.

"Same old."

I heaved out a sigh of relief.

"You're angry, feeling betrayed." Worry deepened tiny lines around her eyes. "What's going on? Did you succumb to my mind control and buy expensive makeup? What's in your hair?"

Mind control, my flat ass. "Huh?" I glided my fingers through my silkier and longer hair. I released Zoe's arm and swung the meal cart to the wall, having suddenly lost my appetite. "What's different?" Pulse accelerating, I patted my face and head.

"Your hair's way longer. Are you wearing extensions? Did you get highlights? You're, like, luminous."

My dinner sank to the pit of my stomach. Guess I wasn't delusional, at least on the hair front. Upon opening the Rift, I didn't think the magic had affected my shell. Whatever drugs and deadeners DR had pumped into me suppressed more than my magical energy so I didn't know what was normal or merely *new normal*. *It's been lovely, but I have to scream now.*

"What else?"

She shot a look at the flat screen then leaned forward and whispered, "Your aura feels like it's not all yours."

"You can feel my aura? How many auras do you feel?" I continued to whisper in case the room was bugged.

She gloated. "I've always felt your aura. It's part of being an empath," she whispered close to my ear, touching my cheek. "I feel your aura and two similar, but indistinct ones."

Gripping her hand tight, I nearly shuddered in my bootie socks. "We need to get out of here."

"Why do they want you? Who's the hunk you're falling for? Why do you think he betrayed you?"

I sniffed. So much for flying under the radar. I couldn't hide it from myself let alone Zoe. I'd curse that barbarian Ronan if he betrayed me; double-cursed if he broke my heart in the process. *Whoa, wait? Ronan?* I knew in that moment that if I never saw Ronan again, I didn't think I'd survive life. Ronan had sunk so deeply into my soul, I'd need a bomb to blast him out.

The right side of my neck itched. I scratched it, trying to rub out my lame infatuation. "Dominion Research thinks I possess untapped ESP they want to study."

Disbelief rounded Zoe's eyes. "Why are they so delusional? I mean, how did they find you?"

Walls vaulted in my mind, and I lied like a dirty, wet rug. I hated blocking Zoe out, but sometimes it was necessary and *she'd* taught me the nifty trick. "I don't know." One of my ragged fingernails sacrificed itself for my dessert. "They sent Ronan after me. He set me up." I might be more accurate than I cared to admit. Clues weren't exactly hiding beneath the covers waiting to yell "surprise, dimwit." If Dickdouche was eavesdropping, he'd form his own opinions.

"Bizarre." Zoe hopped off the bed and began pacing. Her two-pairs-for-the-price-of-one sneakers were silent on the slate-gray commercial carpet that matched Ronan's eyes. "Do you have latent talents?"

I couldn't hide the guilty flush inching across my face.

"What've you hidden from me?" Zoe glowered from the foot of the bed, delicate hands on her perfectly proportioned hips.

"Please don't get upset." I held up a pacifying hand. "It's just more telekinesis." Ugh, a lie by omission wasn't really a lie, right? "It's developing and reacting to Ronan who has similar abilities. He dubs himself a descendant of an ancient sorcerer." I hated bending the truth I hardly understood myself. "What load of bull did they sell you?"

"Sorcerer?" Zoe's brow wrinkled and she wove her fingers through her long, tousled hair. It drove her batty if her flawlessness was less than perfect outside her apartment.

Tears welled again and I hated myself for them and their source. "Why didn't my mother ever tell me any of this?" I sniveled and wiped my nose on the scratchy pillowcase.

Zoe hugged me. "Oh, Aria. She died too soon, that's all. She didn't get a chance to tell you... whatever." She pulled away, clasping her fingers in mine. "How bad is it?"

"It's everything. It's me, my identity, my place in this world. Something was always missing and it wasn't just my dead mother and ditching father. Or Granny Elle. I never fully belonged and couldn't ever figure out why I never felt settled. Now I know why."

Zoe faked a horrified look, screwing up her mouth, aping the Wicked Witch of the West Coast. "You belong. You belong to me, Aria Elle Walker. I love you to death and back. Don't ever think otherwise." She gripped my hand so hard she may have broken a bone, and I yelped to get her to lighten up. "Sorry. But you know I'd marry you if..."

I quirked an eyebrow. "If you didn't love the male species and their equipment so much."

She laughed. "Well, there's that. But I was going to say I think *you* love the male species so much and one male in particular."

I shook my head so hard, I flung out my sorrow, and anger danced into its place. I deflected. "Apparently, I'm a descendant of an ancient sorcerer like Ronan. Mom was too, and she never said a freakin' word." The bed got the brunt of my fisted anger. "My father betrayed me to these assholes. Was I just a pawn in their lives? Something to bargain and barter with? Born to easily give away and abandon?"

Zoe smacked my arm hard, bitch-slapping sense into me. “Cut the crap. You know that’s not what happened. Everyone loved you. What the hell’s not to love, except this pity party you’re having right now? You were born for greatness...apparently.” She snickered. “It just took time for you to find your place. Looks like you’ve found it. So buck up little donkey’s ass and get over it. Live this life you’re supposed to live now. And love it...and him.”

I could always count on Zoe to blast sense into me in her way...our way. Reaching for her, we hugged again. “I love you too, bitch. And I don’t love him,” I whispered in her ear.

“Liar.” Before she drew away, she said, “They say you have a book that belongs to them. That you stole it.”

“Jerkwads,” I yelled at the flat panel in the corner. “Welcome to Kiss My Ass Avenue, at the corner of No Freakin’ Way.” I thumped my fist over my heart, and then had a sudden light bulb moment.

“Aria, why—”

“Forget the why. They’re lying out their asses.” I motioned her closer, my index finger across my lips. She rolled onto the bed and cuddled against me. “We need to get out of this pit. Follow my lead. Without snark,” I said vehemently in her ear, knowing I was in for a bitch-out later. She nodded, a pensive mask pasted on her face. “Don’t spaz if you see me do...strange telekinesis.”

She unsuccessfully tried to suppress a snigger. “Like what?”

“Scoot over and zip it.” Her back faced the camera and she shielded me from Dickard’s Eagle Eye. I stuck my arms under the covers. “I’m wasted.” I faked a yawn and pulled the comforter to my chin, closing my eyes. “Drugs have whipped my ass.”

The deadeners had worn off and my energy had returned for the most part. If the room contained blocks, they weren’t working on me. I focused inward, reaching for the electromagnetic receptors in my head. The wrist and ankle gadgets sparked and hissed, broke in two pieces. Deadeners crumpled at the end of the thick bands holding me snug to the bed frame.

The torso band flicked against Zoe. “Oww.” She rubbed her hip. “What’d you do?”

“I just killed the deadeners.” We continued to whisper in case audio bugs swarmed the room.

Her eyes bulged unflatteringly out of her pretty little face but she kept her tongue.

I told Zoe my plan. It wasn’t a great plan, but it bought us time and got us out of Little Dick’s Prison. In true crime fashion, the ceiling hosted a commercial vent panel. If we stood on the bed, we could just reach it. No security goons guarded the doors. Just two advanced door locks blocked our exit. Riley’s no-necks wouldn’t be more than seconds behind once we escaped. The camera proved the biggest pickle.

“Aria, you need to eat more. I told Riley I’d get you to eat,” Zoe said loudly, jumping to her feet. Playing her part, she strolled around the foot of the bed to the tray of lukewarm slop.

“Bite me.” I stuck my middle finger in my mouth and gave the camera a nasty gagging look.

“You’ll eat or I’ll shovel it in.” Acting the tyrant as though born to it, her voice dropped an

octave. She held the full spoon to my lips.

I slid her a mad dog look. “That swill would kill a robotic pig.” I flicked the spoon away, hitting her above her left breast, a target not too difficult to miss.

She dug her fingers in the bowl and threw a piece of beef at me, deliberately missing my head by a foot. I snatched up the bowl and Zoe grabbed for the tray. I flung the contents of the bowl at the camera eye, coating it and the monitor with congealing beef soup. Continuing to fake noises of a cafeteria food fight, we made a mound beneath the covers to make it resemble me. The fight ended, I stood behind the door, and we waited, hoping the soup hid our actions. We didn’t have a lot to lose if our pathetic plan flopped.

“Go back to sleep,” Zoe intoned, playing her Academy Award role. “Your bitchiness needs a break from reality.” She patted the heap of pillows, turned the flat screen on, and perched on the end of the bed.

Only one set of footsteps echoed in the corridor. The guard peeked through the tiny door window, engaged the intercom. “Keep away from the door.”

“Whatever.” Zoe nonchalantly flipped him off and resumed watching the dinosaur of daytime soaps through clumps of oozing soup. All she needed was a box of chocolates and a cosmopolitan.

The locks snapped open. The goon bulked up the doorway, dart gun drawn, loaded down with useless deadeners. The deadeners pinched my powers, and I pressed my mind through the oppressive force. It felt akin to swimming from the bottom of the ocean and breaking through the water’s surface, filling my lungs with clean, fresh air.

“Move to the bathroom.” He waved his weapon at Zoe and spoke into his mouthpiece, “Walker’s secure.”

Zoe rose and backed farther into the small room. Just as the minion guard cleared the doorway, I pushed the door shut and pulled forth a slew of powers. Six deadeners popped. Minion’s knees buckled and he lost his grip on the gun. It clattered to the floor and Zoe snagged it up.

I snarled in his ear. “Tell them the room’s secure. No backup necessary.”

Acrid fear mixed with musk cologne wafted off him, his shoulders strung tighter than a guitar on steroids.

“Do it!” I grabbed his wispy drab brown hair, snapped his neck back. “When I tap your earpiece that better be all you say. Got it?” I slammed my knee between his shoulder blades.

“Yeah,” he grunted.

I fought to control my madness, the new power roaring to life, almost sinking me to my knees with its ferocity. I tapped his earpiece.

“No backup needed.” He sounded slightly strangled. “Walker’s out, Marino’s secure. I’ll clean the lens and report back.”

I pressed his wireless off and patted his head. “Good guard dog.” My new brew of magic boiled up, and I hurled an onslaught of energy into him. He made a choking sound, flopped forward, out like

a stuffed puppy.

“*Move it,*” I mouthed at Zoe, swishing my arm toward the ceiling.

Wanting to appear as if we’d escaped out the door, I touched the door locks, heat eviscerating them. They snicked apart, smoldering in a puff of smoke. I vaguely wondered which one of my new personalities had accomplished the feat. I slipped on the pair of hideous white sneakers we’d found in the empty closet and joined Zoe on the bed. She’d already pushed up the ceiling tile, and I helped her shove it inside the vent. We didn’t have much time before Riley’s goons caught on. But waiting for shit to happen wasn’t in my playbook.

I boosted Zoe up, and then she helped hoist me into the air duct. I closed the vent hole behind me, we scuttled away from the grill, then stopped to reconnoiter in the tight duct.

Zoe grabbed my ankle, her hand trembling. “Did you kill him?”

“Doubt it.” Not so sure myself, I didn’t want her to dwell on it and detract her sanity from our getaway.

“What’ve you been hiding from me?” Accusation riddled her tone. “I guess I taught you how to block me too well.” Even with a frown turning down her mouth, she still mirrored perfection.

“Later.” I patted her hand. “What’s in the rooms on each side of mine?”

“I was caged to the right. Same layout. To the left is another holding cell. They brought in a sickly blonde girl.”

“Kiera Kendrick.”

“You know her?”

“Met her yesterday. Did you see another girl who looked like her, but less sick?” On hands and knees, I slinked through the square tunnel on the left, elevating my feet to minimize the noise.

“No.”

“Did your room have a window and camera?”

“Yes. Pervs.”

I stopped at the screen over Kiera’s room and peeked down at the tidy bed. Empty. Crawling onward, I wanted to find an unlocked room that Satan’s big brother wasn’t spying into. Zoe closed in on my heels, only the sounds of our breathing and shuffling audible. Cool air flowed through the duct and a long shiver rolled to my feet. The shiver stemmed more from apprehension than the temperature, because my heart was racing on the Indy 500 circuit. The next vent overlooked a supply room.

Familiar voices drifted to me from a few vents down the gray tube. The voices belonged to Ronan the traitor and Richard Riley, the murderer, kidnapper, all around evildoer. Eyes closed, I hunted for Ronan’s aura, but couldn’t thrust beyond my spreading patch of hyperenergy and the deadeners leaching beyond the room’s perimeter.

I counted to ten, steadying the pitter-patter of my traitorous heart. “Stay here.” I scooted down the duct, stopping shy of the screen above what appeared to be Riley’s rich and expansive office. He lounged behind a humongous wood desk in a worn leather chair. Ronan sat across from him in a

sumptuous Edwardian guest chair. A chair I might pilfer to replace the one smashed into firewood in my condo. Zoe slunk toward me and rested her chin on my leg. *Mental eye roll.*

The room's deadeners pinched me, but whatever magic I'd gained at the Rift roiled inside me, punching holes through Riley's rinky-dink technology. I glanced over my shoulder, finger to my lips to silence Zoe, then tossed out a tester wave of magic and sent her hair floating up from her scalp. The deadeners were dead to me.

Ronan smiled at his father, a steaming cup of coffee at arm's reach. The heavenly scent of caramel mocha drifted to the ceiling. *Un. Freaking. Believable.* My heart skipped a beat.

"What do you really want, Ronan?" Riley asked oily smooth, steeping his fingers under his chin.

"Freedom."

"You've always had your freedom."

"Only when you gave it to me." He paused. "You got Aria Walker, the Rift's open. The other sorcerers will come out of hiding now, drawn to the magic." Unidentified emotion thickened Ronan's voice. "You don't need me any longer."

"That's where you're wrong." Riley's smarmy tone dribbled candy canes. "You're as crucial to my project as Walker, either by cooperation or by making blood deposits. By the way, where's Melisande?"

"In San Jose."

"Dead?"

Another beat of silence elapsed. Did Ronan nod?

"She tried to betray you. She wanted me and her to work together to take you down."

Hatred clamped onto my splintering heart. My hillbilly apeshit, Catwoman, ninja claws joined the power scrabbling for freedom inside me.

"Prove it." Did I hear the slightest sadness in Riley?

Rustling drifted up, followed by the metallic sliding of a zipper. I crept forward, peeked through the vent holes. Ronan handed him Melisande's laptop and red tablet. *We need the witch hag's devices!* I backed up, focused on controlling my breathing, which took a turn for the ugly. I nearly hyperventilated myself into a tizzy. Closing my eyes, I breathed deep and even.

"Tell me what you really want, Ronan."

Ronan mumbled and a shuffle drifted up. "Truth about my mother and her death." His voice coasted from the far side of the room. "I want freedom to come and go as I please. I want assurances that you won't hurt Aria, Kiera and Katrina, or any of the other fae or sorcerers you capture. I don't want further involvement in retrieval missions or other criminal activities."

"That's a long list. What do I get out of it?"

"My silence."

"I already own your silence. You have as much to lose as I do by going public."

"I doubt that."

“I’m waiting.”

“Did you kill my mother?”

“The NUW government executed her for practicing forbidden spellcraft,” he said as if giving a lecture to witch wannabes.

“That’s not what I heard.”

“You heard wrong.”

“Give me everything I want, I’ll go along with you, and you can have the keys to the kingdom.”

“If I disagree?”

“If I’m late reporting to my team, they’ll know who to contact to shut you down.”

“You’ll go down with me.”

“At least I’ll be free of you and this hell.”

“This hell, as you call it,” Riley said with no small amount of disdain, “will make you a powerful and rich man. You and Walker will have all the control, all the limelight and power beyond imagine. The world needs you both. You’ll restore order, balance, and purity. You’ll own this world. You’ll control the other Forbidden. They’ll do what you want.” He paused for emphasis. “What’s so wrong with setting to rights what was done in ignorance and fear?”

Ronan snorted. “That’s only part of your pipe dream.”

I tried to sense Ronan’s aura, but it didn’t exist on any planet where I had free range.

“What could you possibly have that’s worth so much to me?”

“The lost pages to the *Illuminaria* and their translation into English, all the magic and alchemy spells you’re missing. Enough to give you everything you’ve always wanted. To dominate the Forbidden. To rule the world.”

My heart shattered. My life exploded. Anger rejected the pain with a ferocity that nearly sent a torrent of bad luck throughout Riley’s building.

Chapter 22

*R*onan and his equipment are so dead! He had no clue how much danger the world was in if his father got his paws on the full text of the *Illuminaria*. And some of the spells in the *Illuminaria* could only be done by my magic or the magic of two sorcerers, not by my blood or the blood of another Thirteen. Which meant Riley had plans to keep us *both*. And our blood. I rubbed the bruise on the crook of my left arm. *Dumbass barbarian*. I had to get the entire book out of Riley's hands before he realized the extent of power he had with or without me. He could literally destroy the world.

Snarling louder than a tiger on the fringe, I pried up the vent and heaved it to the other side of the two-foot square hole. Since I was Richard Riley's ticket to the majors, I knew he wouldn't hurt more than one hair on my head. I swung my legs through the hole, aiming for the desk rather than risking my balance by jumping to the floor. I kicked his mug onto his laptop, cursing the fact that he kept his desk so tidy and his mug wasn't entirely full. My foot slipped and I knocked something else onto the floor where it landed with a quiet thump on the plush rug.

Riley scampered out of his chair. By the time I steadied my balance on the desktop, two guards leveled tranq guns on me. Ronan went all scowly, glowering at me, and a little something tried to die inside me. I jumped to the floor, backing against the windows overlooking a tree-lined grassy courtyard.

"Ms. Walker, it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

I wanted to slap his ingratiating smile off with fingers of thirteen curses.

"Screw. You." I swung on Ronan. "Give it to me." I held my hand toward him. He gripped one of Mom's envelopes. I battled to suppress my straining magic, making Dickard think his elementary science class deadeners were working on me.

"What're you doing?" Ronan clenched his teeth so hard that infernal muscle in his jaw ticked. As usual, his barbarian shell masked his emotions. That is, if he had any left to mask.

Riley's arrogance rolled out on a smooth laugh as he edged closer to Ronan. "You don't really think Ronan will do that, do you? He works for me. Always has."

Mammoth Guard number one looked from me to Riley, his dart gun aimed at my heart, a film of sweat on his forehead. A frisson of magical energy wafted off him, despite the room's strong

deadeners wrapping around me like a steel straitjacket...with beautiful escape holes. He moved to my left as the other Rent-A-Guard pointed his gun at my belly.

“Stand down,” Riley ordered. “The room’s deadeners are active.”

I hope that thought lets you sleep at night!

The sweaty, olive-skinned guard lowered his gun, his gaze flitting from me to Dickhead. I recognized the dilated look of the drugged in his foggy eyes. I drew in a soft breath, releasing it slowly as my mind chattered away at this mind-bender.

The weight of the disintegrating deadeners jabbed my shield, robbed my air. Breathing shallowly, I fought to ignore it. I reached for my pendant and noticed for the first time that it was gone. Had Ronan told his father how it helped me focus my telekinesis? Shock jolted my hip hard against the edge of the desk. Adam was right. I didn’t need it.

I tossed a ripple of energy at a verdant hilly landscape painting to the left of the desk. The frame rattled against the wall. Both my pinkies twitched up a tempest. *Crap squared.*

Ronan’s betrayal hurt so bad I wanted to wither into a sun-bleached grape. But not until I unleashed the Wrath of Aria and hexed him to a portal.

“Hand it over, Ronan,” I said slowly, ominously.

Before he moved a muscle, his father clamped down on his arm. A medley of red splashed across Ronan’s blank mask. My head, heart, and magic warned me not to let Dick Tator Riley get his tentacles on my heritage and the clout to royally screw the world. My half of the book also represented a lifeline to my mother and my ancestors. I’d fight to someone’s death for them.

I lunged at Ronan, scrabbling for the envelope. Using my full strength, I plowed into them and aimed my knee at Riley’s groin, bashing his thigh instead. I managed to bowl all of us to the floor. Riley grunted low in his throat and punched a bone-jarring fist into my hip. Lights dimmed as my abused body sucked up the red blaze of pain. Ronan never lost his hold on the envelope. My hand slapped against him, his flesh sparking on mine. Nothing close to our previous erratic aural problem, though. More like energy scouting for an alternative fuel source, finding it, and struggling to test it out.

Two guards closed in on us. The drugged guard touched my hand. A zap of electricity zinged between us, and I jerked away, trying to crush my magic. Surprise quickened my pulse as I realized from his electromagnet pattern that he was another Scrambler. Where did Riley find all these illegal Scramblers?

Klepto Riley swore up a streak in a parody of Ronan and extricated himself from beneath me. I guess the wormy, rotten apple didn’t fall far from the poisoned tree. He snagged a needle off the desk, the plunger no doubt filled with his special deadener cocktail.

I lay halfway on top of Ronan. The cold-blooded look of his jet-flecked eyes killed my stupid wish that he was playing his father. Ronan took advantage of my shock and flung the envelope at his father. Riley caught it midair, and Ronan lifted off the floor, hauling me against him.

“You just signed your death warrant,” I said, deadly for his ears only, my rigid body quaking my

rage and fear against his lethal hardness.

“I’m already dead,” he grumbled.

“Not dead enough for me.” In one swift movement, I spun around and kneed him. Lucky for him, I flinched and my knee slammed halfway into his thigh. I absorbed the jolt to my spine with a shudder. “Your ridiculous little opinion has been noted.”

“Damn, Aria.” His arms dropped away from me. He staggered, his foot slipping on the thick geometric-patterned rug.

I backed into an unoccupied corner of the room, listing against a Roman pedestal displaying an exquisite hand-enameled genie bottle. A plaque beneath it read: *To Ronan, may all your wishes come true. Love, Mom.*

Several more guards joined the party and even Zoe had crashed the Caveman Ball. One henchman strong-armed her, holding a scary-looking gun pointed at her temple.

Riley salivated over my mother’s papers represented inside the envelope, a shit-eating grin on his face. “Beautiful.” He beamed at me. “Think how much fun the three of us will have together with access to Forbidden sorcery.”

“Think how much fun you’ll have dying.” I matched him smile for smile.

Ronan tottered toward me, halting outside my personal bubble of space, as if he actually gave a damn about me. Something recognizable flickered in his wintry eyes, then dissipated into the pond scum he’d become.

“Take Ms. Marino out and kill her,” Riley said as though ordering a pizza.

“No!” I lunged at him. Ronan and the guard shoved between us, pushing me back.

A strangled roar erupted out of Zoe as she writhed in the grasp of the guard holding her. Red-hot fury and fear obscured the freckles across her nose and cheeks.

Magic plowed through my brain mass, shoving it aside to open the gates to the molten flame, feeding on Riley’s words. The pressure of the deadeners continued disintegrating in the turmoil. New energy derived from the Rift ballooned inside me, and I didn’t think anything could keep it at bay for long. I merely needed to wait it out, but not while they offed my best friend.

I pinned Riley with a bitter look. “I’ll do whatever you want. Just let her go.”

Smug satisfaction burst like an elusive Seattle sunrise across his face. The deadener needle didn’t leave his hand, as if it provided him with a boatload of protection.

Zoe struggled against her captor, kicking him in the shin. “Aria, no,” she wailed.

Unable to face her, I kept my hatred focused on Riley. “Please, I want her released with an untraceable phone and car. Alone.” Eventually, I’d find a way out of this hellhole. At least Zoe would be safe, and I’d get answers to the questions torching holes in my brain.

Riley didn’t hesitate. “Done.”

Muscles rippled along Ronan’s powerful arms as he molded his bad arm against his side. “Take Zoe to her room, get her shit, then bring her back.”

The Scrambler guard opened the door and Riley held up his hand. “One more thing.” He turned toward Zoe. “You’ll never see Ms. Walker alive if you talk to the police or anyone else for that matter. Clear the room.” Riley addressed the guards, “Carlos, you and Harrison guard the door.”

Pensive, Zoe studied my resolute face. Two other guards herded her out, and the door shut behind them with a definitive, life-altering click.

Chaos, panic, disorder. Check. My work here wasn’t done by a long shot.

Ronan made a small choking sound. Again, I gleaned nothing from his blank slate or waxen body.

What gives?

Magic roiled and tingled within me in new ways I’d learn to adapt. It surged and contracted, fighting the room’s deadeners, wobbling me on my feet. I plopped on the couch before I crash-landed. Minutes crawled by as we all settled in the cement-thick tension.

Riley leered at me. “You are so much more than your father promised.”

“That’s because he didn’t stick around long enough to make promises on my behalf.” I clutched my arm. “Is the turncoat dead or alive?”

Mock sympathy stole Riley’s joy. “He came to me in November, loan sharks biting the flab on his back. I helped him regain his feet in exchange for...” he paused and spread out his hands, “... information. He left a wealthy man.”

Did I believe a word? Maybe Ronan had lied to me and his father told the truth. Dismayed, I scratched the stinging tattoo on my back, eyeing the syringe in Riley’s hands. “You get off on sticking your little prick in people?”

Riley laughed, set the needle on his desk. “Ah, you don’t care for my special deadener recipe?”

The double doors reopened. Zoe barreled in, wearing her designer jeans and a form-fitting black sweater underneath her faux leopard jacket. She clutched her purse in one hand and her purple smartphone in the other.

“You sure about this?” She rushed to me, saw my glum look, and halted.

“Your life means more to me than all the cats in the world.” I smiled wanly at our private joke. “I’m staying to help with *research*. I have a lot to learn from them about what’s going on in my head.” I might make a chronic liar out of myself yet. I’d lie up a storm to keep her safe. “I’ll be okay.”

“What?” she screeched, stamping a spike-heeled boot, slivering her eyes. “What’s going on? Talk to me, Blondie.” Zoe ate the distance and dug her fake claws into my upper arm. “What can you possibly help them with?”

Ouch. That almost offended me, but Zoe didn’t know much about the Forbidden Thirteen, or me, the thirteenth. It left *my* mind batty.

I composed my features before I popped a blood vessel. “I want to stay.” Ronan shifted his feet, the tranq gun held ready in his hand. Lowering my voice, I said, “Riley knows things about my father and family I need to learn.”

Her freckly skin glided into the pale. “You trust him?”

“I have no choice,” I said loud enough for Riley to hear and gloat.

The guards steered Zoe past me. I threw her a grim, apologetic smile. Jagged silence stretched while we waited. The jeweled genie bottle in the corner drew my attention like a lighthouse to a life raft in a foggy sea. Focusing on it helped me control the rage slurping up my endorphins. I itched to hold it, but I wouldn't give Dick-Fuck the satisfaction of knowing I drooled over an art object he or Ronan owned.

A few minutes later, Riley's cell rang to prove that Zoe was free. Relief sagged my shoulders as she sped away alone in a spiffy Mercedes, with instructions to leave the car at the airport.

Riley squandered no time. “How did you open the Rift?”

I shrugged, trying to dial past the static my mind broadcasted. “What Rift?” *What the what?* Why was he asking that if he already knew opening the Rift required two sorcerers?

He tossed back his more salted and less peppered head and laughed. “I guess I'll have to read and find out?” He nodded at the large padded envelope Ronan held.

“Sure, whatev. Maybe your OCD will collide with the Milky Way too.” One ace of an idea hid up my cheap fleece sleeve. I'd toss out snark to divert him till the crows came to rest on his roost.

“Ms. Walker, don't you wonder how you and Ronan opened the Rift together?”

The doppelgänger link! Had he not seen Adam at the Rift? Had Ronan told his father about his doppelgänger? My gaze darted from Ronan's vacant face to Riley. Older, leaner, and more distinguished than Ronan, Riley shared the same height and coloring. However, the similarities ended there. Azure colored his eyes in a rounder and softer face that betrayed his emotions, unlike his son.

“Maybe we had help?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ronan's shoulders hitch.

“The only help we had was the ritual in the *Illuminaria* pages,” Ronan answered indulgently, flicking his hand at the still-unopened envelope.

He had to be protecting Adam on whatever side of the Abolishment he played. I hoped to hell Adam was okay. I couldn't feel him inside me any longer either. The blasted room blocks or the drugs severed our bond, even though my powers had skipped past the deadeners. Or maybe opening the Rift had changed our triad bond. The thought might have left me sad if I wasn't in my current jam, or if Ronan hadn't sold me to Satan's top dog.

Hunger illuminated Riley's dull peepers. “Thirteen sorcerers. Classic number for magic. Ronan part fae and telekinetic. Only one Forbidden sorcerer and the thirteenth can open a Rift. Are you getting it now?”

Ronan part fae? Silence shut down the static in my mind. Blood drained from my face. “Are you saying I'm part fae too? Big deal I'm telekinetic. I can bend a spoon. Want to see?”

Riley smirked. “Let me tell you a little story.” His smirk turned jubilant. “The thirteen Forbidden sorcerers closed the Rifts to the Realm of the Void, as I'm sure Ronan already told you. They conceived the methodology well before the government decided to kill them off. The Forbidden Thirteen had been around long before the governments found out about them. They showed the world

how strong they were by killing off any other magic except fae magic and sorcery.” I gasped, clutching my stomach. I side-eyed Ronan and watched him blanch. Riley continued as if he didn’t just sign his death warrant in my head. “The Void and the Rifts existed well before the Abolishment laws were enacted. The Thirteen used the Rifts and the Void to destroy other magic. But they weren’t strong enough to destroy the fae, so they bred with them until they became one powerful race.” He lifted a sword letter opener off his desk and picked at his fingernail. “The Thirteen didn’t want a sorcerer to unilaterally take it upon her or himself to close or open a Rift. So they created a secret master key, so to speak, one dominant sorcerer who had to work with at least one of the other Thirteen to open or close a Rift. Two who could manipulate all the earth’s energies and magic, who would also stand the test of time and dilution. Ancient sorcerers were quite industrious. Their alchemy was incredibly formidable. I thought Ronan and the blood of another sorcerer could open the Rift.” He shrugged. “I was wrong.” Riley hesitated as if waiting for my mind to turn on.

I digested his stunning story. Whose blood? And did I truly stem from a vicious group of magic killing, half-fae sorcerers? Still unable to comprehend, I deflected. “I think you need to lie down and rest your brain. Those XCrack cigarettes you’ve been smoking aren’t helping much.” I certainly wasn’t the freak *de jour* master key descendant. Maybe I needed to inhale a crack-laced cigarette to return to my previous life.

He barked out a laugh. “Your ignorance is precious. Mixed fae blood is in your DNA. As the Rift unleashes magic, it will trigger the dormant magic in your blood. The more magic in the world, the more power you’ll obtain. In time, the other sorcerers will gain additional powers unheard of in this day and age.”

What about the doppelgängers? He knew about them, but acted as if he didn’t. I didn’t want to tip him off, though. Full-fledged hysteria swirled and blustered in my chest. “I suppose you’re the only one who knows this because you have half my *instruction* manual?”

Riley smiled from me to Ronan. “Not the only one.”

Rising, I paced around the couch, clutching my throat. “You knew all of it?” I spun toward the defector who’d flipped my life into a hexed hell.

Avoiding my fiery gaze, Ronan tweaked his shirtsleeve and picked at his bandage. “I suspected.”
“When?”

“When I grabbed Melisande’s laptop from her hotel room. She had much more on her laptop, notes she’d pieced together.” Color traveled up his neck. “Things I had heard and read took shape.”

“Whose blood did you use?” I asked. My fingernails dug into my throat.

Riley waved a dismissive hand in the air. “That’s not important now.”

Their wary stares held me hostage. The nightmare had no end in sight. My gaze bounced around the room, begging to find purchase anywhere but on the son of a bastard and the bastard himself. A glint of light from one of the recessed bulbs landed on a matte black object on the floor sticking out from behind a desk leg, hidden in shadows from the desk skirt. Ideas sprayed my mind.

Riley, seeming to sense my panic, gestured at his desk. “Shall we sit and discuss rationally?”

Knowing and fearing the answer, I gave him a belligerent glower. “Just say it. What am I?”

“You are much more than we bargained for.”

“You’re the *thirteenth*, Aria. Deal with it,” Ronan shot out, giving his father one of his black-ice looks. “You’re the direct descendant of the most powerful sorcerer who ever lived. The master key.”

“The descendant of the most evil, manipulative sorcerer that ever walked the earth.” Riley grinned maniacally, scrubbing his hands together.

Hearing it spoken aloud changed nothing, except that my legs weakened. “Okay. I’m listening.” Poker became my game as I veiled my face.

They both back-stepped toward the twin guest chairs. A strange emotion crossed Ronan’s features, but I couldn’t decipher it. He was shuttered to me in all ways. Had I only imagined those few moments of bliss at the Rift? Deception was a capital offense where my emotions were concerned now. I’d invoke the penalty phase later.

I marched to Riley’s side of the desk. “May I?” I waved at his chair, itching to see if the object on the floor was a gun. In the frenzy, he must’ve forgotten about it.

“By all means.” He threw me another one of his so-like-Ronan charming smiles. However, the viperous charm didn’t con me.

I swiveled the burgundy chair around, perched on the edge of the cool leather, and scooted the chair forward. I snuck a peek at the desk leg by my right foot. *Well, hello, precious.* Excitement quickened my heart, and I schooled my face to contain it.

Subtly, I stretched out my right leg, inched the gun sideways. Avoiding the splashes of cooling coffee, I rested my forearms on the desk and began to dog-ear a business magazine to distract my antsy hands.

Riley settled comfortably into a guest chair. “You have two choices, Ms. Walker.”

My eyebrows peaked. “Two. How lucky can an evil girl sorcerer get?” The side of my foot nudged the gun, and I finagled the weapon into position to slide it closer.

“In your case, very lucky.” As intimate as a kiss, he smiled.

Get real, pinhead. My return smile hurt my face. “How can I help you?” *Now that you’ve pulled my plug and stolen my paddles.*

Riley moved the envelope to his side of the desk. I gave Ronan a glare that would deflate the ego of a hyena. He had the unmitigated gall to look ashamed. My anger spiraled my power into a twisted sword. It lurked, leaking past the room’s barriers.

“You can voluntarily work with us as a team. I’ll give you all the considerable information I have about your true identity, family, your heritage, how to work your magic.” Riley paused for effect, spreading out his hands in a gesture I found maddening. “Or I will force your cooperation.”

“I want some freedom.”

“In due time.” Riley’s rueful look mocked me. “When I can trust you.”

User door number one, or loser door number two? I toyed with an expensive gold and marble pen, sliding it up and down between my fingers. “What if I reject your choices?”

Riley drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “You have no other option. What do you think will happen to you on the street? You’ll be on the run for the rest of your life either from me or the government. If you don’t learn to contain and control your emerging power, there’s no telling what will happen to you or those around you. Or to the other Forbidden.” He paused for effect. “Your best friend will be dead within the week.”

I sucked in my middle and dropped the pen with a clunk on his pristine wood desk. Even though I knew the threat to Zoe hovered over my head, I couldn’t mask the blood draining from my face. Should I have warned her earlier? Was she safe now? I had to play out my hand.

I toed the gun within arm’s reach. A diversion was in order. “That’s a beautiful rug you have. I’d hate to spoil it by tossing my cookies all over it.” Two strangled coughs erupted out of me and I clutched my stomach. spurts of power actually rumbled disconcertingly against my hand, as if I was preparing to hatch fairies.

Ronan leapt up. I held up a forestalling hand. “Keep your distance. I’ll use the trashcan.” Bent over double, I captured the gun in one hand, and reached for the can. A few more fake gags gave me the opportunity to hide the weapon on my lap. The bottom of my sweatshirt covered the gun in the folds of my oversized pants. It was the real deal, not a stun gun. Ronan’s stare drilled into me.

Straightening, I grimaced and smacked my lips a few times for good measure. “False alarm, I guess.” Energy shot holes in the shroud of deadeners around me. I drizzled a targeted charge of energy onto Riley and his twitchy hand aped an addict tumbling off the wagon.

He appeared as if he was sinking into an apoplectic fit, mottled face explosion and all. Either he cared more for the rug or me. Who knew?

“You should rest. We’ll resume talks later.” Riley’s arrow-straight back trembled his eagerness against his chair.

I moved the gun into position beneath the desk. “No. I rather adore the idea of cracking your shriveled nuts across your expensive wool rug.” I cocked the hammer, the sound excruciatingly audible in the swampy tension.

The man-squirming began. Riley’s eyes bulged. Ronan instinctively cupped his package, raising the dart gun at the same time. *Yeah, like that’d stop a bullet.* I barely had time to shower them with a sleepy-time spell. My head thumped in agony, but the magic machines spewed out more happy dust inside me. Not enough to send them to the realm of nightmares, though.

“Drop it.” I stood and hoisted the handgun into view. The dart gun fell out of Ronan’s relaxed grasp onto the floor.

“Slide it away.”

As if he’d been sucking down muscle relaxants, he kicked the gun a few feet with the side of his boot, maxing out the three strikes law to do it. A shimmer of pure electricity sparked in the air

between us. *Whoa, Nelly, reel in a hint.* Ronan didn't give any indication he'd felt it.

I skirted the desk and kicked Ronan's gun behind me. Riley drooped in his chair, and I almost needed toothpicks to prop open his eyes.

"What'll it be?" My award-winning smile pained my pinched cheeks.

"Calm down, Aria." Ronan languidly extended a placating hand. Crimson suffused his face, proving his internal struggles against my telekinesis. "There's no need for violence."

I clung to his words, using them as an anchor for my sanity. "Shut it. I ought to bang you down with the tranq gun. See how you dig it."

His mouth remained tight despite the paralysis.

"That's right. I have the upper hand now," I cooed. "So here are *your* choices." I pasted on an indifferent smile. "I want a cell and car, and I don't give a rat's puny ass if you've embedded them with tracking devices. Or my personal favorite, I bury you both where you squat."

"You're not a cold-hearted murderer," Ronan slurred with quiet emphasis. Not a muscle stirred in his pitiful body.

"Don't bet the fairy dust on it. I learned from the master." I landed an arctic glower on him. "And aren't I the most evil sorcerer imaginable?" *As if. Ants don't even fear me.*

"If you kill me, you won't clear the building." A lock of Riley's impeccably styled hair fell over his forehead. "Nor will you ever learn who you are and what happened to your father. You'll never get your hands on my *Illuminaria*."

Unsuppressed rage stiffened my finger on the trigger. Mention of my father was a verbal F-up. Damn it, I couldn't take down the whole building. I needed more time for my new Catwoman powers to blast apart the barriers. I needed to rescue Kiera and Katrina. Ideas simmered to the top of my head. Scrambler Guard had energy I could borrow and use to leverage him to help me. Whatever drug Riley had him on must be suppressing his energy. It was wearing off, and I think the guy knew it from touching me. At the moment, a game of Russian roulette was in order. A game I was no newbie at besting.

"Then you have only one choice." I lowered the gun and spun the cylinder, listening for the clicks, engaging my mind in their placement. Anticipation spread the warmth of adrenaline, and I stroked the barrel of the gun.

"What if I refuse?" Riley's fingers curled and uncurled around the chair arms. Ceiling lights twinkled on the diamond studded Claddagh ring on his right hand, a ring that looked suspiciously like one my father had worn.

I released the gun's hammer, opened the cylinder, and glimpsed the one bullet. Slowly, I slipped the cylinder in place and spun it. I plucked the figurative ace out of my sleeve and lifted the gun to my head. "Then I'll kill myself, now. Deader than a twice-dead vampire. What'll you have besides a bunch of sorcerers with no master? What if you need to close the Rift? What good will the Forbidden do you if you can't control them? If they don't destroy the world first? I bet dead blood is useless in

your dumb alchemy spells.”

Riley’s eyes darkened as if he’d lost his godhood and his offshore bank account to boot. Pain and guilt swept across Ronan’s face. He extended his hand toward me, the ditches around his eyes digging into his skull.

A hard kernel of his magic slammed into my gut. My wellspring opened for him with a welcome-to-the-neighborhood gush of energy. Unable to control my shocked gasp, my legs quaked. Light winked in Ronan’s soulless eyes and he blinked swiftly in acknowledgment. *Damn it.*

“Aria, please,” he pleaded. “Put the gun down.”

I invoked another smattering of intangible muscle relaxants, sliding Riley to the floor in a blithering crumple. Ronan’s eyes widened. Shrugging his shoulders back, he leapt toward the desk.

Seconds before my finger engaged the trigger, I used my telekinesis to force the gun away from my head and to aim it at Riley not yet passed out on the floor. The gun went off.

The recoil knocked my hip against the desk. The bullet shattered the genie bottle and breaking glass pinged the room. The blast thundered through my soul, rendered me deaf and speechless.

Despite Ronan’s liquid limbs, he dove across the desk. Unintelligible words spilled from his mouth as he knocked my head against the chair. The ecstatic pooling of Ronan’s spring-fresh magic within me accompanied the haze of midnight sucking me under.

Chapter 23

Slipped on the floor, I resurfaced seconds later on the receiving end of a hammering, blinding headache. Both Riley and Ronan were conked out, victims of my sleepy-time magic. Ronan slumped across the desk, and I almost swept the hair out of his eyes, so wanting to return to yesterday.

Magic whipped the air, and dense clouds of it pressed on me. It wasn't the barrier of a deadener, but the mass of fae and sorcerer magic surrounding my core of power. Silvery, golden energy dissolved into my every cell. Untainted, precious magic waited for me to rev the engines. The shock of the gunshot blasted away my shields and opened the floodgates. *Holy doppelgängers, what had we wrought by opening the Rift?*

"Game. Set. Match," I muttered to the silent room.

What happened? The chamber of the gun should've been empty. I'd spun the cylinder and modified the spin with telekinesis, listening for the appropriate sequence of clicks that supposedly emptied the firing chamber. All was in place, but something had gone ass-end wrong. Something inside me deflected the bullet-that-shouldn't-have-been away from Riley. Not even my subconscious would allow me to become a cold-blond murderer.

I squeezed my eyes closed. From the moment I plunged through the vent, I knew deadeners lined the office. Yet I'd gained control of my magic and busted apart the blocks. It was the reason I managed to shift the gun's cylinder to an empty chamber, or so I believed. Holy crap, the bullet almost marbled the sage walls with my brain.

Strangest of all, Ronan's unsullied magic reinvigorated our bond, solid and irrevocable. Joy streamed through me before I became the virtual victim of an Aria drive-by. When he'd dived for me, he never even touched me before I pulled the trigger. Either bad luck thirteen had struck again or something unfathomable had taken root within me. If what Riley said was true, then denial and I were hooking up. The gun earned my nastiest glare.

I'd done the cylinder movement thing before. At eighteen, Zoe and I had found the key to her stepfather's gun safe. Recently dumped by losers, insanely plastered, we were as depressed as tortillas. It was late and Russian roulette with one blank signaled stupid therapy. I shot at my foot, firing on the empty chamber. Only it wasn't empty, and my telekinesis redirected and slowed the

bullet before I shot off my big toe.

The next day, I'd swiped my mom's old revolver out of her trunk and learned to spin the cylinder with my mind, listening for the clinks. A useless trick that only worked on a weapon with a cylinder. Don't ask why I felt the need to play with guns. I wasn't suicidal or anything, maybe arrogant and dumb occasionally.

My first life-threatening episode happened when I was twelve, shaping my warped ideas of invincibility. A car had backed into me as I cycled down the sidewalk. It should've flattened me into a speed bump. At the last second, the driver had hit the brakes. She'd reported never touching the brakes, and I pedaled away without a scratch.

The strange incidences hadn't ended there. I never dwelled much upon the wackiness of my life. Just lucky, I guessed. A paradox, if I'd ever heard one.

I poked my ringing ears and sank onto Riley's padded desk chair. He gurgled from the floor and his eyelids fluttered. I shoved the chair away from Ronan who was responding in one-syllable caveman grunts.

Skin pulled taut over the ridge of Ronan's cheekbones. His paleness magnified the tempest of charcoal flecks in his eyes. For an eye blink, his expression softened, then that blasted hard-ass mask descended. He reached to touch me.

"Back off." I brushed him away and swung my noodle legs over the edge of the chair, aiming the gun between Ronan and his father.

Riley listlessly regained his seating and perched on the edge of his chair once again, shaking his head in confusion.

Energy practically ignited off me. I'd need it to get out alive. Riley would not get his slimy hands on the tools he required and craved to rule the world. Nothing mattered but escaping Little Dick's Pokey with my part of the book and my body intact, including every ounce of blood. Rescuing Kiera and Katrina and getting Riley's part of the book would follow, once I escaped and formed a new rebellion. Ronan's betrayal had forced my hand in a different direction.

My aura circled my head in bubbly shades of pink with bits of green and blue converging on the inner rim. Neither of the Rileys appeared to notice, which meant they couldn't see auras. *Score*. If I needed evidence of the triad bond...bingo. Ronan's aura spun sluggishly around him, blue with bits of pink and green. *Wonderful*. Did I want the traitorous fairy-sorcerer connected to me for the rest of my life? If he were to die, what would happen to Adam? If Adam still lived. Heck, what would happen to me if one or both of them kicked off? How connected were we? How connected was I to the other eleven sorcerers and their doppelgängers, if they existed?

Ronan's flinty, dead gaze never faltered from my face. *Stare long enough and I might perform another trick*.

With the puny deadeners in the room, I should've felt his magic more, especially after our fuse at the Rift. Maybe he wore a bio-energy block just for little 'ole me? I couldn't take the chance of

finding out. Any iota of trust in him had disappeared with the Seattle sun.

Exhilaration buzzed down my legs, and I fidgeted discretely, crossing my legs tight to wait out the resurgence of my new power. More magic than I'd ever known flooded me, laughing at the deadeners. And it wanted revenge. I was also hell bent on wiping up the floor with Riley's smarmy mouth.

What was a little extra magic careening inside a body if one couldn't exploit its full potential? Before either Ronan or Riley gained their full composure, I tossed out a heavy wave of energy destined to knock out every living being in the building. If it worked, I might become an exterminator in my next life. Ronan did a faceplant on the desk again, and Riley slowly folded over the right arm of his chair.

I scooped up the envelope and stuffed it down the front of my blouse, tucking my hem into my tight jeans to keep it from sliding out. A cell phone poked out of Riley's blazer pocket, and I snagged it, shoved it into my pants pocket.

Exiting stage left, I jetted down the hallway devoid of deadeners. Why would Riley line his office with deadeners, but install none in the hallways or rooms? Too much reliance on his drug-deadener regimen? Or was I too far gone into the land of ancient, illegal magic to even sense deadeners anymore? Nothing penetrated the ecstatic power cocooning me. The energy erupting from me was so intense it should've annihilated every electronic board within a mile. Maybe I *had* decimated all the deadeners.

Magic flooded me with energy and happiness. Free at last, it knew no bounds, using my mind and body as a vessel to control and harbor it. *Prepare for takeoff, flying fairy-monkeys.*

There wasn't a soul in sight until I rounded a bend and spied two guards still kicking it and flanking the double glass doors to the vestibule at the front. Another set of doors barred the outside world from the devil's den. I skidded to a halt, backtracked, and peeked around the corner. A wrought iron gate, lush lawns, and evergreens dominated the front of the complex. Both sets of doors had security pads on them, plus another set of guards—with guns trained on me.

Just as I was about to send the four a dosage of Aria's Slump 'n Snooze, my pinkies kinked. Shrill alarms drowned my pulse roaring in my ears. Commands rose down the hallways and booted footsteps rushed me from behind. Doors banged shut, locking automatically.

As I turned the corner toward the front doors and Riley's office near the reception area, the first two guards drew their guns on me. Darts shot out, aiming for my torso. A wall of solid, invisible air surrounded me, captured the poisonous barbs, whooshing them away in a cyclone.

Growing power pounded in my veins and swelled every cell of my being. Voices chanted in my head, obliterating the tremendous pressure building. It would be fun learning what new magic I could flaunt. *Like this little number.*

A warrior's cry escaped me as I threw up a wall of energy. I concentrated on disabling the four weapons centered on me rather than trying to deflect a barrage of tranq darts. The multi-zone clocks dotting the granite wall on the left struck thirteen after the hour. Without squandering a moment, I spun

in a circle and threw up another electrical gust. Hopefully, that time it worked. Lessons on knocking out battalions of people were on tap when I returned home.

The men sported masks of shock, and they drooped to their knees, weapons clattering to the slate floor. Defenseless as dirt, awareness gleamed in eight sets of hazy eyes. I swiped my sweaty palms down my pant legs. Were they dead? I clutched my chest, having to make myself breathe in, breathe out. Damn it, I wasn't a murderer.

Dazed, I dashed up to Riley's office, my gaze landing on Ronan's familiar hulk heaped on the desk. Eyes closed, his chest moved. He coughed and his legs twitched. I very nearly ran to him, dying to wake him and return us to yesterday. Muscles throbbed in my throat, and I imposed an iron control on myself. Until I understood Ronan's game plan, I had to escape alone.

Alarms beeped on the sliding doors to liberty. I sprinted toward them and touched the lock. It fizzled into a thin spiraling stream of smoke, but the door wouldn't open. Stumbling to the nearest guard, I grabbed the security card clipped to his breast pocket. I slid the access card in the reader and pushed open the doors to my new freedom of chaos.

My footsteps pounded down the stamped cement path cutting the lawn in two, jarring in my ears. No one followed my escape from freakshow hell. Had I incapacitated the whole building? I refused to dwell on what I'd done, and forcibly chased off the eight hundred pounds of horror riding my back. Par for the course, the inconceivable tossed another wrench in my escape plan.

Locked twelve-foot high gates blocked my escape hatch. I slid the guard's card key in the reader on the right and the gates hissed open. I resisted the urge to high-five myself.

Willing my heart to quit trying to break through my ribcage, and to stop dying, I dashed through the gates. Glorious power sang inside me, even as realization whapped me, and my stomach sank with it.

Freedom included the price of confusion.

Half the tools I needed to traverse the Twilight Zone remained behind, along with a fractured piece of my heart.

Chapter 24

Except for an occasional vehicle, the streets remained deserted around the Dominion Research building. I ducked in and out of bushes and behind cars. My elation tested no boundaries, but I refused to allow it to nail me. Worry for Adam, Zoe, Kiera and Katrina undermined it sufficiently. Ronan's fate even chewed away at my self-confidence.

Had Ronan implanted me with a tracker? Had I killed the electronics in the building? Had I killed my own tracker?

Dizzy from my lingering headache and residual drugs in my system, I tripped on a rock in the landscaping surrounding a poop-brown building. A low hedge tempered my tumble onto waterlogged mulch. Groaning, I rolled against the windowless wall and sat on my knees. The stench of moldy mulch filled my nose, gratefully stealing away my vertigo. Away from all the deadeners, the newly open Rift spoon-fed me adrenaline in the guise of powerful ancient magic, like tiny conquerors marching into my every cell.

I breathed in cold, humid air. Halfway calm after counting to twenty, I plucked out Riley's top bling phone.

Fingers crossed, I dialed Zoe's number. It rang twice before she picked up. "Zoe, are you safe?" I hugged my knees to my chest. "I've escaped."

"Aria!" she screeched. "I'm driving around in this kickass car wondering if I should go to the police, but I'm scared. Can you talk?"

Quickly, I relayed the events of the last hour. "Come get me." I looked at the sign on the side of the unmarked building and the address number was thirteen thirteen.

I shrank deeper into the bushes. *Sweet mother of crap*. It had to be a coincidence, right?



Edgy silence lengthened as Zoe sped away from the building. I kept glancing in the rearview mirror, but nobody had followed me. Had I incapacitated the whole circus tent? Were Kiera and Katrina safe? Should we try to rescue them? Apprehension crawled up my spine in a wide trail of ants.

Zoe veered the Mercedes onto a major thoroughfare. "Where to, lady?"

I didn't know what to do. "Just drive." I rested my head on the headrest, the envelope pressing into my breasts. I wasn't ready to share the contents with her. The less she knew, the better for her safety.

The odor of charred burgers hung onto the earthtone interior, causing my belly to rumble against my recharging power. Not good. My stomach never interfered with my telekinesis. I pressed my hand to my middle, nudging down a wispy thread of hysteria. What was inside me now? What had I become?

"How bad do they want you?" Zoe's shaky voice scared me.

A tear escaped my left eye and I choked up.

"That's twice. You never cry. It's bad, isn't it?"

Composing myself, I slapped the tear off my face, bitch-slapping sense into me. "I think I'm the Holy Grail that just returned abolished magic to the world."

Zoe skimmed the curb and slammed on the brakes in front of a strip mall of lunch crowd eateries and convenience shops. She thrust the gear into park. Her eyeballs would've popped out of her head if they weren't attached. "You? Klutzy Aria?"

"Thanks for the vote." I straightened in my seat. "Get moving." My gaze darted out the windows. "Go." I pushed her hand on the steering wheel.

I needed a plan. Was Adam in on Ronan's backstabbing scheme? I stared at the phone, my forehead scrunched up. I didn't know Adam's number. My head was so screwed up I couldn't even recall his rich family's last name. Brain massage therapy or a lobotomy sounded golden.

The car roared into traffic, suffering Zoe's lead foot. "Riley won't report the car stolen, will he?" Her long, purple fingernails bit into the leather steering wheel.

I swished my hand, half-listening. "He wouldn't risk it. He'd lose me for sure."

"We need to rescue those other girls, right?" She swung the car down another major street.

"Yes. I can't let them stay there. He'll use them as bait to lure me back the same way he dangled you." Breathing evenly, I closed my eyes to regroup my brain cells. "Did you call your mom?" Zoe lived in a studio apartment over the garage at her parents' house, and her mother had a bead on her whereabouts most of the time.

"Yeah. She thinks I'm on a work trip." Uncertainty wavered in her voice and I hated it. We glanced at each other for a second, a moment of unspoken understanding.

"Did she suspect anything?"

Zoe emitted a cackling witch snicker. "Are you kidding? She was arguing with my stepjerk. I guess she finally fessed up that she'd enrolled the twin twits in private school. He's having a shit-fit about spending the money." She paused, a pensive silence descending. "Should we call the cops?"

"No. We're illegals." A branch of ideas sprouted in my head. I jabbed on the GPS.

"That could be tracking us." Zoe shoved my hand away from the GPS controls.

"I'll take the chance." I punched in the access menu. "They're probably already tracking the car."

If I hadn't killed everyone, that is. That spot on my neck tickled, and I rubbed it, not feeling anything beneath the surface. "I think they implanted me with a tracking device."

"What? That's illegal." Zoe smacked her palm on the steering wheel.

I blinked up a breeze to keep from rolling my threadbare eyes. "Like anything they do is legal. Get a grip, Zoe. This isn't fun and games. These people are murderers, kidnappers, who knows what else. They probably kill animals for paranormal experiments."

"Kill the sick bastards!" She tossed back her hair and gunned the car on a clear stretch.

I squeezed her arm. She made a sharp turn, dislodging my hand in the movement. "Did they hurt you?"

"They were decent. Even that dumbass Ian didn't hurt me."

"I heard him slap you."

"I raked my nails down his neck first."

"Seriously?"

She sucked in her bottom lip. "Do you know if he's okay? Riley's other men shot him when they grabbed me. They wanted you hard."

My mouth flapped in amazement. "Why do you care what happens to that creep?"

Her lips softened in an innocent smile. "He's not so bad. He was forced into that life. You know, like the mob, death's the only way out."

Again, I bribed my eyes from rolling into their sockets. "You picked that up with your empathic skills?"

"He was going to make a deal with you guys before Riley's mug-ugly dogs chewed him up."

"Holy cow." He was planning to flip on Melisande. I chewed on a fingernail, the next course after snacking on my cuticles.

"What are you hiding?" she asked with deceptive calm.

She knew me better than I did sometimes. I told her what had gone down at the mission church. "I need my phone." Plus, I needed a magical recharge from the Rift, to feed my waning reserves after my magic show at Dominion Research. I could barely float my hair. The gut feeling that magic still flowed out of the Rift refused to budge.

"Where is it?"

"Washington Park Arboretum." Punching in recreation sites on the GPS, I set the park as our destination.

"I'm not even gonna ask," she murmured, listening to the female GPS voice spew out its first direction.

Chapter 25

The police had posted temporary “closed” signs along the park’s perimeter fence. Regular police and Paranormal Vice Division officers—as evidenced by wicked purple bands around their shirtsleeves—guarded the visitor center gates.

“Keep driving.” I clutched the door handle. “Something’s up.”

“Ya *think*?”

A news van cut in front of us and stopped. Zoe stomped on the brakes, jolting us in our seats. My seatbelt practically cut my ribcage in half. Another van blocked us from behind. Reporters, police, and bystanders surrounded a suited, gray-haired man preparing to give a briefing in front of the visitor center. “Go see what’s up.”

Zoe unbuckled her seatbelt, her hands shaking. “Are you also wanted by the police?”

“Not yet.” I waved her away. “Hurry, he’s speaking.”

Magic wavered in the air. My aura spiked trying to pull me in the direction of the stone circle, wanting to party at the Rift. Could I risk getting closer to the wild energy with all these people in the area? What would it do to me, to those around me?

Moments later, Zoe shouldered through the knot of bystanders and slid into the car. “A dead area of the park is spitting out tons of paranormal energy.” Excitement bristled off her, leaving her voice singing. “There’ve been reports of people lured to the site, and their ESP abilities—” Zoe froze, mouth hanging open. “Cue the evil organ music. You did it, didn’t you?”

I chewed on a torn fingernail. “What?” I stared at her accusingly, or at least I tried to, but I think it came off as a look of contrition.

“Don’t you dare spin it. What’s going on?”

“ESP abilities skyrocketing?” I finished her sentence softly. “Are people *turning* into fairies and sorcerers?”

“They didn’t exactly say, but the milling people were making wild guesses.” She leaned slightly forward as if to force the words on me. “Your eyes are glowing.”

“What?” I jerked the visor down.

“Oh. My. God. Aria, you’ve been affected—”

My gargled screech drowned Zoe out as I examined my face in the lighted mirror. A glow edged

my eyes and painted my face with a new luminosity. Copper and gold streaks highlighted my golden hair, at least two inches longer than yesterday.

“Uh no. No.” A warning wailed in my brain. “I’m not one of them. I can’t be.” I didn’t look like a fairy! Neither did Adam, much. We had too much human blood. I edged my finger around my ears. Normal. Would we eventually change? Had Riley been telling the truth about our fae-sorcerer origins? The contents of my stomach pitched. In case I needed to toss my cookies, I searched the ground outside the car. I might as well hook disposable barf bags on my wrist if this kept up.

Hordes of curious people surrounded our car trying to get into the park. The SWAT team had arrived for crowd control. Night sank fast beneath a billowing mantle of soaked clouds. The earthy scent of winter-spent vegetation drifted in with the faint breeze ruffling the bare trees. It whispered across my skin, invaded my senses, became a part of me. “We need to get out of here pronto.”

Zoe gauged our access space. “We’re in the middle of a jammed parking lot. Try again.”

“Then we hoof it. We need to ditch the car anyway.”

“What’s the plan in case we get separated?” Grooves drew her eyebrows close to unflattering unibrow terrain. She hooked her hair behind her ears, a sure sign of her agitation since she hated exposing her ears.

I had no choice but to confide in Zoe further. I might be endangering her life, and I hated that part the most. I trusted her with my life and secrets, though. It wasn’t like I had a stack of best friend applications waiting at home. I loved her too much to replace her.

“If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.” She received my wicked eyewink.

“Bite me, fairy wench.” She whacked my upper arm. “I’m already into this up to my red roots.”

“Seriously.” My fingers bit into her arm. “Anyone connected to me is in jeopardy. I may end up on the run for the rest of my life to elude the dirtbags who want me alive and jerkoffs who’ll want me dead.”

She gave a wonky shrug. “I need a new adventure. You know you can trust me. Besides, we don’t know anyone else who has two ESP abilities. I want to know where I fit in this creeptastic world.”

“No kidding.” I linked my hand with hers.

“Damn straight.” She banged our hands down on the center armrest. “So what’s the grand plan?”

I squeezed our fingers together, released her hand. “If we get separated, contact Adam... Freshfields.” I smacked my forehead, finally remembering his last name. “I’m not a hundred percent certain I can trust him, but if he’s still alive, he’ll help you.” The neckline of my sweatshirt tightened. “Use your empathic talent to scope him out first. Then tell him everything that’s happened.” I plucked on my sweatshirt, releasing the anxiety threatening to choke me.

“Adam Freshfields? The guy voted the number one hottest catch in Silicon Valley under thirty?” I nodded. Zoe’s face transformed into her do-I-have-a-date-prospect-for-you gleam. “Oh, this is getting better by the moment.” She dry-washed her hands. “What if I can’t find him, or trust him?”

Ideas weren’t zinging into my head with my newfound superpowers. “Go to the PVD if you feel

threatened.” Who else could help her? Ronan Turncoat? Hell to the no. “I can’t risk finding my phone. It’s in the middle of this shitstorm.” I hesitated, stared long and hard at her. “Listen and don’t ask.” I downloaded the book-cover blurb of everything I’d left out earlier.

“Hot damn.” A mischievous grin lit up her face. “You’re a direct descendant of the thirteen Forbidden sorcerers?”

“According to Riley and my mom, I am the *thirteenth*. The most powerful of them all.” I nearly choked up a hairball at the idea.

“Hmmm... Riley thinks you’re the master key to unlocking Forbidden magic?” Gears turned in her mind, almost visible in her brightly widening eyes. “It explains a lot about you.”

I swatted her arm. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “Just that I can’t always read you when you’re unblocked.” My eyes bugged out. “Your thoughts waver in and out with your emotions like you’re not all there.”

She’d never once said she couldn’t read me. That’s why I kept my thoughts blocked half the time around her. “That’s because I wasn’t all there,” I muttered half to myself. I twisted in my seat, surveyed the park. The crowd had thickened. “We should blend in now.”

Using Zoe’s phone, I dialed information and connected to Adam’s hotel voicemail. “Call me.” It was the only message I felt remotely safe leaving.

I reached to jab the door button, but Zoe’s grip on my arm stopped me. “You really do have fairy blood in you, you know?”

“Thanks for rubbing it in.” The wry twist of my mouth hurt my new perfection. “According to Riley, I have all kinds of funky blood in me.”

“They said the Rift energy is reacting to those affected—”

“I know.” I mashed my fist against the door. “I sensed it miles ago.”

The lines between her eyes became gullies. “I heard a cop yak to a PVD agent that he had orders to arrest any paranormals, and to use *deadly* force on anyone who resists.”

“Then I won’t resist.” I shoved my hair behind my ears, the new length bothering me. “Let’s hit it. We’re sitting fairies in this car. Riley’s men probably aren’t far behind, and the police are the lesser of the two hells.”

We met at the front bumper. A blast of wintry air shivered down the length of me. My sweatshirt didn’t work past sundown. At least Zoe had a leopard wrapped around her.

To our left, a group of college kids milled about in the shadows of twilight. We joined them, skirting the fringes of the crowd. Zoe strode in front of me to run interference. I dipped my head to hide my glowing eyes. A racket of excited and scared voices bounced in my ears, my dread swelling to rocket launching levels. The bitterness of damp asphalt clogged my nose, sending my tail spinning into the stratosphere. A narrow froth of clouds scuttled overhead. Dusk’s first stars littered the indigo sky and freed the suffocating hold on my heart. They were the first stars I’d seen since landing in Rainy Town.

Despite my natural skewed sense of direction, the Rift enticed me to the right. I could find it blindfolded. The Japanese Gardens loomed ahead, and the circle of stones nestled beyond it in the out of bounds section of the park.

Zoe's phone vibrated against my waist, and I skipped a step in alarm. The unfamiliar shoes didn't help my natural unluck much, and I stepped into a slurping, oozing mud puddle. *Beep, beep, bad luck coming.* "Hold on." I whipped out the phone, not recognizing the local number. "Hello?"

"Blondie?" Adam's voice splintered. "Where are you?"

Relief untied a knot in the back of my neck. "I'm not at DR if that's what you're asking." Ice filled my voice, which wasn't difficult to achieve since I was freezing my butt off. The night had shot my awakening ability to trust straight to the tar pits. Until Adam gave me something concrete to chew on, I had to nibble. "Have you heard from...Ronan...in the last hour?" I had a hard time dredging his name from the cobwebs in my brain. My heart throbbed in my ears, overriding the din of fearful excitement in the air.

"Yes. He said you and Zoe escaped. You could have killed him, Aria."

More relief trickled warmth through the ice in my veins. What if I had succeeded? I didn't want Ronan dead. "Anyone else?"

"Two guards are sleeping it off at the hospital. They'll live."

A freezing sweat washed that trickle of relief away. Numb, I couldn't speak.

"Aria? You okay?" The agony in Adam's voice radiated through the phone.

"He betrayed me." I choked up. Blindly, I followed Zoe into the shadows of an overhanging evergreen, distancing us from chattering co-eds converging on our space.

"No, not true." Nothing he said dulled my misery. "I'm coming for you. Where are you?"

"How do I know I can trust you? Ronan's working for his father. He set us up at—" I shut my trap lest I stuck my muddy foot in it. "You weren't there to see him cater to his father." I spat the words out like gravel between my teeth. A gust blew a damp, frigid wind over us, and I cast a nervous glance at the ever-changing sky. "How do I know *you* didn't go Benedict Arnold too?"

Three of the college kids, two women and one man, gathered close. One reached past Zoe and tried to grab my arm.

"She's one of us," the shimmery guy exclaimed.

I caught myself staring at the pale blond guy, noticing the wimpy auras around the trio. I lowered my head, hiding my face. Their energy flirted with mine meekly. Fear surpassed my anger at the invasion of my space, and my gaze darted around suspiciously. "Come get me," I snapped into the phone.

"Where?"

"Washington Park. Near—"

"Damn it. Do you know what's going on there?"

"Thanks for the 411," I whisper-yelled. Wheeling in a circle, I tried to shun the hands reaching to

touch the slightest bit of my exposed skin.

Zoe slapped at their arms. “Give us some air here, people.”

“Twenty minutes,” Adam said. “Can you get to the Rift?”

Mr. Blond tried to grab the phone. I jerked back, tromping on Zoe’s toes, slick mud sliding me backward. She clasped my arm to keep my ass from kissing the ground and took a powder on her own butt. “I don’t know.” I mouthed “sorry,” and helped her up. I slicked mud off her behind, leaving a nasty residue on my hand.

“Try. Use the energy to defend yourself. It’s off limits to all but the scientists. The energy’s raw, so be careful. Stay out of the stones and erect a blocking shield. That’ll keep you invisible until I get there.”

“How do I do that?” I brushed against the brunette girl. She landed the most beautiful smile of devotion on me. I mean, her teeth practically glowed in the overhead lights. Her waist-length hair feathered my side, several locks twining loosely around me. All of them plucked on my aura, a natural magnetism, rather than an energy suck. Electrical heat radiated off me and they slurped it up. I had become their ray of sunlight. *All hail Aria the Queen of Fae.* As if.

“Aria! You listening to me?” Adam shouted.

His voice lugged me out of my baffled unicorn land. “What? Repeat.”

He explained how to erect the fae aural shield. “I owe you my life, Blondie. I’ll never do anything to lose your trust.” He let out a stilted laugh as though he had a hard time admitting an awkward truth. “I don’t know what Ronan did, but we’ll straighten it out.”

My heart thawed. I clutched the phone so tight my fingers grew numb. Of course, the ice age wind chill factor didn’t help. “Just get here, please.”

“Move along, folks. Playtime’s over.” A cop advanced on a group surrounding our gang of fae.

“Let’s go.” I grabbed Zoe’s hand and shoved through the trio. “Excuse us.”

“Where to?” the short girl asked.

“You’re not—” Could I abandon them here to a fate worse than death, if not death? After all, they *were* dead fae walking. Hell, I was the greatest felon of them all. I always wanted to be *somebody*, but I guess I should’ve been more specific.

I handed the phone to Zoe, the text message champion. “Give up your phone numbers. Then skedaddle before you’re arrested. Don’t tell anyone what’s happening. I’ll be in touch.”

Their auras wavered in relief and harmony. They rattled off numbers, and Zoe’s thumbs blurred on the screen.

A man shouted “hold up” behind us.

“Over there!”

A beam spotlighted us, and a crew of news people rushed over. They’d spotted us, sitting fairies on a log, and our niche of the park lit up like Christmas tree town. *Let the games begin.*

I pushed Zoe from behind. We bulldozed through the crowd, the three fairies scattering in the

opposite direction. Someone tugged my sweatshirt, then my mud slick shoes slid, and I fell forward. A large mass bashed me onto the soggy grass. I stuck out my arms to take the brunt of the hit and to keep grass stains off my face, but the force blasted the air out of my lungs. The brute rolled off me, and I sucked in air.

Scores of people talked excitedly. Zoe screamed street gang slurs at a PVD officer. A cop grabbed my wrists and wrenched my arms behind me. Fire licked my shoulders.

“Get up.” The cop with a New York accent heaved me to my feet as though I were a toothpick. I wished I was a unicorn so I could stab my horn up his ass.

Someone slapped deadener cuffs around my wrists. A spark of my energy snapped to attention and laughed at the rinky-dink technology. I spat out a blade of grass stuck on my lip. It tasted faintly of dew. Why did I know how dew tasted? It wasn’t something that’d ever been in my diet.

The three paranormals—fae, sorcerers, whatever—huddled together, an overzealous cop training a gun on them. A pair of PVD officers drove up in an unmarked van, squealing tires as they braked to an abrupt stop. Zoe disappeared into the heaving crowd.

The New York brute prodded my shoulder from behind. “Walk toward the van.”

I frantically scanned for Zoe, but the sea of people had devoured her. Camera flashes exploded in blinding light, and I hid my face in my shoulder.

The Rift’s magic invigorated me, waltzed across my skin, recharged my batteries. My ninja Catwoman powers increased with every passing moment. Dubiously, I followed the mental instructions for the shielding spell Adam taught me. Where he learned it was beyond my comprehension. The air wavered, thick, shimmery. Each time I shifted a limb, air solidified around me and a thin veil shielded me. Digging deep, my magic shorted out the electronic wrist cuffs. Invoking the final words of the invisibility spell, I scampered for an opening in the crowd. A strange mix of energy coursed through me, sweet, pure, earthy. It was more robust, more recognizable than before.

“Son of a bitch,” my cop brute yelled. “Where’d the fairy freak go?”

“Asshole, go gargle some bleach.” I backed into an open space and waved my arms, jumped up and down, but caught no one’s attention.

The three fae stood shaking in fear and anger at the rear of the van. I dashed toward them and brushed against the short girl, sensed acceptance in her touch. Amazement wiped the fright from her eyes.

“Shhh. I’m not here,” I murmured, enjoying the airy sensation of invisibility.

The other two averted their faces as the detaining PVD officer opened the van doors. Like lightning, I touched each of their cuffs. The deadeners popped and smoked but no one noticed in the darkness encroaching on the winds of trouble.

“Run when you can,” I said in the girl’s ear before zooming away.

Diversion time. I shouted, “Hey, fuzz balls.” Careful not to bump into anyone, I dashed around the

area. I touched a couple of dimwit cops, feathering my fingers over their hands. They reached for me, missed, pointed their guns at nothing, yelled and cursed as I baited them.

Pandemonium broke out, and the sharp smell of anxiety and testosterone clouded the air. I was having way too much fun by the time I realized the three fairies had disappeared.

“See ya, bozos.” Light as a leaf on a lick of wind, I jogged into the dark park. Shimmering ghost trees hid me as I searched for Zoe’s distinctive red hair and leopard jacket.

Night settled on the area, a moist mantle bogging down the air, but headlights, beams, and camera flashes set the darkness back into the early gloom of twilight. Tree limbs rustled and snapped. Wind swirled dead leaves into the air, shifting into a whirlwind of nervous mauve above my head.

“Where are you, Zoe?” The tired trees of winter absorbed my whisper. Maybe they’d arrested her for smacking a cop, something she’d do in a heartbeat. I wandered closer to the crowds and searched. Nothing.

I counted to ten, calmed my breathing, praying she was okay. Time wasn’t spinning backward. Adam and I would have to return to hunt her down. I had no idea what to do about the three fairies or the others that undoubtedly had materialized in the midst of the awakening fae-sorcery from the Void. One crisis at a time.

I rushed toward the stone circle. No GPS required. Magic chased over my skin in a long, slow possession. It tugged on me like the mother ship towing a spacepod, even as I vacuumed the vapor trails of magic inside my center of power.

Who was doing the possession? The Rift or me?

Chapter 26

Magic flooded me with the most enchanting serenity, a sense of belonging inside myself and in my life. I felt immortal, old as the universe, young as a newborn baby. Lazy spring afternoons, summers abloom with reckless abandon, air freshened with sultry promises, melting, sugary. I wanted to lap it up, bottle it, and take it home. Also my new tattoo sizzled in answer to a bizarre silent plea.

I ached for Ronan, the man who'd saved me in my apartment, the man who'd opened up a world I never knew existed, a world I fit into for the first time in my life. The sorcerer of my heart. Half of the two beings I loved so very much, each in different ways. Ways I still hadn't reconciled within myself, a fairy and a sorcerer who made up the whole of the doppelgänger. The realization left me reeling, and pain became an ember in the core of my heart. I had to force my mind off him and his potential betrayal. We may never go back to yesterday. The future was my true path, wherever it carried me into this dangerous and exciting world of the Forbidden.

Canary crime tape roped off a broad area around the Rift. Biohazard and no trespassing signs hung every twenty feet. An electronic fence emitted an electrical hum that vibrated in my ears. Floodlights illuminated each quadrant.

Several people wandered inside the marked zone, holding electronic gadgets, taking notes and readings. I remained outside the invisible fence and strode closer to a short, thin man scrutinizing the screen on a handheld device. A tall, chunky redheaded woman approached him, peering into her tablet, searching for her own cluestick. How much did these people know about the banished magic and the Forbidden?

I shifted to the left and stumbled over a rock that I swear wasn't there a second ago. I swung my arms to catch my balance.

The two scientists whirled in an excited fluster. "Who's there?" the man's voice squeaked. A series of blips and red lights flashed wildly on his electronic device.

Mindful of the face-busting terrain, I rushed into a planter of winter dormant bushes. They dashed behind me until their gadgets fell silent. The man beckoned to a second pair of scientists and the four consulted notes. I bet it took more than four scientists and lots of toys to figure out the speed of dark too.

Tiny lights bobbed in the air and streaked toward them. The swarm of large fireflies buzzed over their heads, zipped into their faces, zoomed away only to charge them again. The four swatted at the bizarre insects, and I slapped a hand over my grin, stifling a giggle. The glowing buggers wouldn't stop long enough to give me a chance to see if they were bitty fairies. Who knew what had spewed out of the Rift. The Void may have been an incubation farm for all the former magical creatures that ever existed for hundreds of years.

Carefully, I walked into the cordoned off area toward the stones. Electricity pinched me as my passing killed the ineffective deadener block. *Woe is me.*

"Fairy King, come out, come out, wherever you are." A breeze carried my whisper away.

Hands grabbed my hips from behind, tugging me into a familiar hard body. Air whooshed out of me in a moment of panic before Adam's clean, enticing aura circled me. Wow, he felt awesome, so alive, and real.

"Right here, Blondie," he whispered in my ear, then spun me in his arms.

I melted against him. "Can you see me?" I asked in a low voice. "Are we still invisible?"

"Yes and yes." Adam took my hand in his, raking his gaze from my tousled hair to my muddy shoes. "God, you feel incredible. Your magic's in my blood now."

What else was new? I was a new creature of the magical night. I defied definition. The Twilight Zone was now the Aria Zone.

"What exactly do you feel? Can you use my powers? Are you telekinetic?" Curiosity didn't kill the awe streaking up my back.

"I feel your aura in mine. Your magic enhances my new powers, but I can't draw from you and do what you can. Ronan and I are sharing each other's energy. I don't know how it works." He moved so close we became one, with a huge empty pocket. Ronan, I presumed. Was that how we'd feel with all thirteen sorcerers? What would happen when the others found their doppelgängers? I shut the gate on that mental path and inched backward to view what our magic had created.

Seeing Adam for the first time since we'd restored life to his magnificent body, I couldn't resist giving him the once and twice over. The lord of fae appearance had replaced his death-warmed-over exterior. Even in the glare of spotlights, I saw that his skin tone had deepened into the color of honey. A slight glint radiated from his vibrant, blue-violet eyes. Two beautiful fully formed, but subtle, pointed ears peeked through his thick, silky hair. Did I say magnificent? There must be a better word, but I was firing blanks.

"So, I'm a god now?" I joked, defraying my awe, letting the intangible sunlight wafting off him bathe me in its warmth.

"A goddess." Roses and lightning floated in his eyes. Rays of sunlight burned them away, leaving a rainbow in their wake.

Twilight Zone to Aria: we welcome you to your new loony bin. I clutched his arms to keep my spinning head in the air and my watery knees solid.

“Park’s off limits until ten o’clock.” A PVD officer’s loud dismissal sent my heart skipping. Yellow light washed over us and highlighted the last few people the magic and darkness hadn’t chased away.

“He can’t see us,” Adam murmured close to my ear. “Stand still, he’ll pass.”

The last three people exited the unarmed gate. I hugged Adam tighter. I couldn’t describe the attraction between us, the internal tug on everything good inside me, beyond the realm of normal or human. So different from the hot and cold wrenching confusion Ronan caused. Adam still felt as if he was part of Ronan—his lighter half—so pure and energized. On the flipside, I sensed his individual self apart from Ronan. And I had a feeling his unruly fairy glamour created much of the attraction between us. My head whirled with the array of mystifying feelings.

One thing I knew for certain, my head trusted Adam implicitly. No pinkie twitch warning me away. How far I’d come in the trust department over the last few days. It scared the bejeezus out of me. It also offered me hope that I could leave my insecurities and phobia of forming attachments at the Rift. With Adam—and Ronan—I didn’t have to hide my true nature or the bad luck, klutzy Aria.

Two officers swept lights over the area. As the beams hit the landscape, I checked out the miracles our magic had wrought. Formerly yellowed grass had transformed the ground into an emerald carpet. Dead tree limbs glistened lively, dotted with early spring buds. Life had reclaimed old mottled brown trees and bushes. Owls hooted in the tallest trees and small animals scurried among the bushes. The whole site radiated life to both the natural world and the paranormal unknown, a treasure trove of unfathomable magical artifacts.

I grinned up at Adam, who hadn’t taken his eyes off me. The lights shut down, painting the air with midnight ink, until a natural faint shimmer rose up from the stone circle. Radiant magic sparkled like multi-hued jewels on the trees and flora. “It’s beautiful.”

“You did this.” His smooth, lilting voice was a slow caress down my body.

“Not without help.” I hugged him tight. My heart dove into my stomach. “Zoe!” I clamped onto Adam’s arm. “I lost her by the visitor center. Three...fairies were almost captured.”

Adam called Jax and instructed him to track down Zoe and to look for any paranormals. After he hung up, we walked away from the energy inviting us closer to Mini-Stonehenge. “Was there a reason you came to the park?”

My teeth chattered and I shoved my hands up my sleeves. Adam shrugged off his leather jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders.

“Thanks.” I snuggled into its warmth, inhaling his familiar scent, along with a whiff of sunshine and moonlight. More elemental scents invaded my new world. “I thought the hotel might be watched. I wanted to slurp up some of the energy here while I snagged my phone.” I scanned the area. “It’s in Ronan’s backpack.” I nearly strangled on his name. “Hey, what happened to you? I don’t think Riley saw you. Did you invoke this invisibility glamour?”

Adam snuck his finger across my lips. “The magic must have naturally shielded me. I hung behind

to grab the backpack and cover our tracks.”

I shook my fist in his face. “The memo fairy hadn’t given me Ronan’s plan. He nailed us to the wall. Did you know about his scheme?” The words tasted like dirt in my mouth. I grimaced and swished my tongue over my gums. These strange elemental scents and tastes were becoming irksome. I needed elemental chocolate.

He shook my shoulders, his fingers digging into the leather. “Riley found us through luck. Ronan didn’t set us up.”

“You’re a lap behind the field if you think that.” My heel caught on a tangle of vines. A clump of limp leaves cushioned my fall to the ground. I looked at my watch. Seven thirteen. Figures. I scooted off the plant onto the moist grass and crossed my legs.

Adam crouched down. “You seriously think Ronan set us up?”

“Too many coincidences. Why did he really go to Melisande’s hotel and hide it from us? Calling his father alone from San Jose? His nasty attitude at the Rift?” I wiped my damp hands on my sweatpants. “That’s just the icing on the cake of crap.”

“He’s not exactly the most open person.” He held out his hand. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To the hotel.”

“No.” A dead flower received the impact of my fisted anger.

He sighed in frustration. “Why not?”

“It’s not safe.” I clenched my knees before I permanently deadheaded another flower.

“Do you trust me?” He stroked the back of my hand.

His touch fired tendrils of reassurance through my heart. I jerked my hand away. “Stop playing fairy tricks on me.” In the span of seconds, my instincts and trust began sparring. No romance going on there.

Adam searched my face, his eyes glowing around the rims as if embers smoldered behind them. “No games, Aria.” He rose to his full height, towering over me. “I’ll never betray you, nor lie to you. Nor have I ever. We clear on that?” His tone brooked no trash talk. “What did Ronan do that’s got you all fired up?”

My neck smarted. I jumped up, rubbing the spot, dying to rub out Riley’s life as easily. I knew I’d disabled the tracking device inside me when I blasted Riley’s campus. Why else hadn’t his apemen found me by now? Just in case, I wanted double assurances. “Can the energy here deaden a tracking device?”

Adam’s nostrils flared as his face went all Ronan scowly. His hair curled and uncurled like an angry fist.

I tugged his hand but the mountain of fairy testosterone didn’t budge. “Let’s go.”

“It’s probably a crap-shoot here, but I bet Riley stuck one in you. Ronan assured me his father wouldn’t use the trackers because your innate magic made them useless. A lie, but that’s how he

convinced his father he still had his implanted after he removed it.”

We set off toward a thicket of mist-shrouded trees, ghostly silhouettes in the dim park.

“Ronan implanted the tracking device in my neck.” I slipped on a patch of soggy grass. “I’m pretty sure I already disabled it.” I touched the puncture, zinging it with a ripple of a brain wave, and felt nothing to indicate it was still live.

“What?” Adam stopped abruptly, holding my arm steady. I guess he’d gotten used to my natural bad luck and wasn’t taking any chances of my ass kissing the ground.

Birds took flight, squawking, wings flapping. Although I hadn’t noticed anything unusual in the gloom, apprehension prickled across my shoulders. “Keep moving.” We continued trudging toward the trees.

“Was Ronan acting for his father?” Adam steered me to the left into a border of bushes along the trail.

“Who else? I awoke and he was sticking a gun thing in my neck. He flat out told me it was a tracker and don’t try to run.” A small animal scurried across our path, rustling into the bushes. I hugged Adam’s arm closer. “I thought I’d dreamed it until my neck just now burned.”

“Was Riley in the room?” We halted within the veil of trees. Branches clicked and creaked above our heads, resembling old bones in a hangman’s graveyard.

“Ronan was alone, but the room was audio and video bugged.” The faint glow from my glowering eyes extended a few inches beyond my face. “I told you he’s playing games. This isn’t how this was supposed to go down.” My right pinkie twinged. My shoulders tightened. *Stop the world, so I can escape.*

A clatter arose in the brush to our right and we spun toward it. A crunch followed in the same spot, and I peered into the deepening black night. The thickening cloud cover had stolen the last of our starlight.

“Are we still invisible?” I’d released my glamour by the Rift.

“No. I can’t hold the glamour for long. My magic really isn’t mine, you know. It’s mostly Ronan’s. You might, but wait until we need it.”

“Will mine shield you?” Several pairs of footsteps slogged through the wild park area. A spur of familiarity added a new knot of dread in my gut.

“Don’t worry about me.”

I stood on my toes and raised my lips to Adam’s ear. “It’s Ronan.”

Did he believe me about Ronan? Did I believe me? My heart twinged and my head ached, battling each other. I squeezed Adam’s hand so hard, he flexed his fingers, shaking me off. I dug my shoes into the wet ground to keep from running toward Benedict Ronan.

“Hold it together.” He rubbed my back underneath the leather jacket. Electricity tingled along the edges of my tattoo at his touch. “I feel him too. There’s more to the picture than meets the eye.”

“He was negotiating his freedom with my part of the *Illuminaria*.” The envelope helped keep the

chill off my midriff. Would I ever see the whole book?

Adam rasped his fingers over his chin. “Invoke the glamour and return to the Rift. We’ll use the energy there.” We skirted a brick planter filled with stinky, moldy compost.

“I read more of the pages than I shared with you two. I wanted something to believe in that didn’t come out of your mouth or Ronan’s,” I explained as if I was sitting on the witness stand.

“I get it.”

“I guess Ronan thinks I betrayed him by holding out. I needed to understand how crucial it was to keep them from Riley’s hands. You’re right about your magic belonging to Ronan. The doppelgängers alone don’t have much innate magic...at least not yet. They pull from their linked sorcerers. It’s all in the lost pages.”

“Ronan and I figured that out. We never thought opening the Rift would change that aspect of our nature.”

I needed to tell him another crucial fact I’d learned from those pages that bothered me to the depths of my soul. “The more magic Ronan uses, the more it will hurt you. It’s the cost the sorcerers pay to wield their magic. Eventually, he’ll kill you if he uses too much magic.”

Adam sucked in a breath. I took his hand in mine, tried to peer into his faintly glowing eyes, but he averted his face. Emotion leaked into his death grip on my hand. “If he dies, you die too. If you die, he loses magic. You two balance each other out in that respect.”

Adam scrubbed a hand over his face. “God, what a mess. What would’ve happened if we’d closed the Rift, even if it was possible?”

“I don’t know. I skimmed the pages, but didn’t get a chance to read them all.”

A branch snapped in the nearby trees. Adam tugged on my hand.

Stealthily, we made our way to the Rift, trudging away from the thin air of malice nipping at our heels. I only tripped once on my thirteenth step. My aura riled up with my new infusion of magic. I tried to restrain it, but Ronan’s lure was too strong and a sliver slipped out, opening a fissure, waving a welcome to the Aria Zone sign. Ronan’s power yanked harder. Obviously, the connection between us transcended all things human and earthly. If only I could trust it once again. At that moment, my heart let my head take charge.

“She’s here,” Ronan said, unmistakably loud and clear, and oh so very near. Was he baiting me, or warning me?

“Concentrate,” Adam nearly snarled. “I can’t help you with magic until I figure out what I’m doing. You can do it. You’re stronger than he is.”

“I’m trying,” I said under my breath. Tug of war ensued between Ronan and me, weakening my tired defenses. Obviously, he’d regained his magical strength. Strong, recharged, an invisible rope of energy built between us, braided with threads of each other and Adam. Wrestling against Ronan’s power, I lost control of my glamour.

The light of two flashlights illuminated me. “There’s our wayward master sorcerer.” Riley’s

chuckle grated along my last nerve. “Stun her.”

I released Adam’s hand so as not to disclose his presence under his faltering cloaking spell. I tore off, bobbing and weaving, distracting their attention. The direction of their voices stemmed from the stone circle so I ran in the opposite direction, away from the card-carrying members of the Buzz Kill Club.

Gopher holes created a tricky path, and I feared busting my butt on any misstep. I leapt behind a cedar to calm my racing heart. Peeking around the trunk, I couldn’t make out Ronan or Riley, but Ronan’s aura glommed onto me, stroking me from head to toe, melting my insides into wanton syrup. I readied a knockout spell and threw the mental blast at one of the two bodies waving the flashlights. A grunt and heavy thump on the ground tailed my targeted knockout. With all my recent practice, it was much easier to direct my brain waves. I couldn’t contain an excited grin. *Take that, you sorry saps.*

My second blast shot forward. An infinitesimal whizzing confirmed the mind toss, but I didn’t hear a second grunt and thump. Instead, the energy swerved and boomeranged toward my sheltering tree. I lunged behind the trunk, but the deluge caught me and threw me toward the tree. I thrashed my forehead into the rough bark. Blinding white light exploded in my skull. The electrical wave of magic drove me backward in a gust of prickly wind. My legs flew out from under me and I fell, the back of my head smashing into a decrepit, crumbling log.

Chapter 27

In muffled tones, I heard my name in two distinct arias that created a whole song, Ronan and Adam's voices merging as one. Riley stood four or five feet to Ronan's left. Stars gathered in my eyes, but they didn't stop me from blasting a targeted dose of an ass-kicking snooze at Riley. He crumpled to the ground in a quiet thump. The Rift magic was already filling me up, slowly but surely.

I was one giant ache from thudding head to searing footpads. On the flipside, Ronan and Adam's magic mated with mine, a sweet intoxicating joining. Soul deep, heart bound. Warmth and sunlight flooded me, and I had the sense of Ronan and Adam's souls dipping into mine, becoming one with all that we had been, all we were destined to be. Complete again, but at what cost? Who'd spin the hard drive that clunked against my skull? My vision swam in and out of focus. I gripped my head to stop it from careening away.

Ronan knelt beside his father and checked his pulse. "She all right?"

"Don't worry, sweetheart." Adam gathered me in his arms. "Where does it hurt?"

"Where...doesn't it hurt?"

"Can you be serious for once?" Ronan's curt voice snipped my last nerve.

"Go suck on a grenade, Ronan." Whether I felt it or not in my battered body, I managed to instill a dose of animosity in my tone. "How dare you throw my magic back at me? I thought you and Dickard wanted me alive?" I spat the words out, along with a leaf that'd snuck its way into my mouth. The faint taste of azaleas coated my tongue. *Ugh*. I was sick to death of kissing the ground and slurping on nature's bounty.

"You did that?" Adam lashed out, his arm hardening on my neck. His fae magic rose, but mine wasn't receptive. In fact, I wasn't sure I could throw another knockback spell at an ant, unless lucky thirteen decided to kick in.

A sharp stick dug into my knee, giving me the encouragement I needed to stand. I approached Ronan and his father, lying prone on the carpet of woodsy debris. I pulled the gun I'd filched from Riley's office out of my back waistband and pointed it at Ronan. "Move away from him."

Sparing a frown, Ronan stood, held up his hands, and backed away. "I'm on your side, Aria."

My anger refused to be caged. "If I throw a stick, will you leave?"

Adam joined us and removed Riley's weapons, which included a nasty-ass dart gun probably filled with Riley's exclusive magic killing elixir. He tossed me a flashlight, then tied an air band around Riley's wrists and ankles, leaving me suitably impressed with his newfound abilities. Before Adam had a chance to back away, Riley was already coming to. I was also suitably impressed with my newfound control, and glad that I hadn't zapped him to heaven, or in his case, hell.

"Well, well, well." Riley sputtered out the words, struggling against the invisible bindings on his wrists. "Finally, our fae doppelgänger has arisen." Excitement trembled in his recovering voice. "You did well, Ronan, exactly what I'd hoped for."

"You used me to flesh him out?" Stunned rage thickened Ronan's voice, and he slammed a fist against a tree trunk.

The flashlight beam lit up our little Come to Jesus session. "What are you, the pied piper of magic?" I said, my mouth raring to go off on Dickwad. Ronan deserved his chance, so I bit my tongue hard.

"I suspected you had found your other half after we screwed with the Rift. His identity was a mystery until tonight. His pull on your magic had been too strong over the years. Your abilities were hampered by him, his absence. He's the missing element in my alchemic potions using your blood. So much magic had returned to Earth after the Earthquake Cluster event, the shakeup of the ley lines...so much no one knew about or could even begin to fathom. The return of the sorcerer-fae magic, and the return of the magic of the original twelve doppelgängers, latching onto the DNA of humans with an iota of ancient magic in their bloodlines. Neither one of you would have been born without the other to balance you. Now that you've bonded and opened the Rift, you'll reach your full potential. And you'll live now. So you see, in essence, I saved your lives by coercing you to open the Rift properly."

"Not that you'll be around to see it." I smirked and toed Riley's leg.

"Oh, I will, I will." Riley barked out a smug laugh. "Do you really think you can handle the purest form of magic now saturating the world without me? Like you said earlier, I have your instruction manual, and so much more."

"Please." Sarcasm drew out the word. "The bullshit gauge is going to explode. You think I'm gonna waltz into your Club Lockup and bow to your will?"

"No one has access to the *Illuminaria* or my extensive research except me. Anyone tries and it's all set to self-destruct." Riley's smugness defied his bonds. "I have your mother's blood. Who do you think was the second sorcerer to help Ronan open the Rift the first time?" My mouth hung open and he laughed. "Oh, yes. Your mother, father, and I made quite the team in our university days."

"Fat lot of good it did since you couldn't open the Rift."

"Because she wasn't strong enough. She wasn't the true *thirteenth*."

"Shut it." I stamped my foot on a pile of decaying branches, sending splinters flying into the air. "You're not all that."

"You and Ronan are just like your fathers. Idiots who didn't know any better. You need me to

teach you the ways of the Forbidden.”

I’d have frozen from shock if I weren’t already an iceberg. Adam brushed against me, and a tiny spark of electricity radiated up my arm to my shoulder.

Anger and frustration contorted Ronan’s features. “What did you say?”

“You’re not my son,” Riley said in a conspiratorial tone as if he’d waited to drop that tasty morsel for eons. “You never anticipated that one, did you? As smart as you thought you were, Ronan.”

“You...are...not,” Ronan toiled to speak through his stunned confusion, “my father?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but your mother wasn’t my great love.” Huskiness broke Riley’s steady voice. “Don’t get me wrong, your mother gave me everything I wanted. She gave me you, Ronan, from the blood of the last sorcerers on Earth. Fortunately,” he chuckled, “she was pregnant with you before we met.”

“Who’s my father?” Ronan asked, his voice weak and unsure.

“Maggie refused to tell me, only that he was a descendant of the Forbidden Thirteen and he walked away from her. The idiot had no clue how valuable you and Maggie were to the world. She later told me he’d died, and she’d burned every last shred of evidence of his identity. There were a lot of things Maggie did against my wishes.”

Ronan shook his head. “No. I got my blood from her. She was one of the Thirteen descendants.”

“Not so. She was a pathetic half-assed seer and nothing more. Maggie destroyed the evidence she’d collected about the Thirteen families so I couldn’t readily locate them. I’ve spent years trying to find Ms. Walker’s identity. Too many wasted years because of that bitch’s treachery.”

“No doubt because she learned of your plans,” Adam spit out.

“I only planned to right the wrongs of an ignorant world. The three of you together will lure the others to me. I can help them attain their abilities. It’s all spelled out in the *Illuminaria*. Without the *Illuminaria*, you’ll all kill each other. With the Rift open now, there’s no stopping the magic from returning to this world. It can’t be contained in the Void.” Riley continued spilling his secrets as if he chewed on a bargaining chip. “The Thirteen will rule this world. What’s wrong with that? How can that be a bad thing?”

“What about my doppelgänger.” Once again, I held my breath, waiting to hear what we’d suspected.

Riley chuckled. “Your ancestor ruled the Thirteen alone. She created and invoked the sorcery to destroy the world’s magic. She created twelve doppelgängers from the original Forbidden Thirteen.”

Fascination zoomed through me like asteroids hurtling toward Earth, fiercer than the fear eating my stomach lining. I couldn’t imagine whether Riley told the truth or not. A horrible mix of emotions clamped my mouth tight. Riley was willing to spill, so I zipped it. Then I’d hex his luck for eternity.

Pure hatred toward his father contorted Ronan’s face into a dark mask of murder. I knew then that his feelings for Riley had never changed. Had he been playing his father since the moment Riley captured us? No longer one hundred percent convinced he’d betrayed me, I wanted to torture and kill

Riley for Ronan's sake.

"You're a piece of work," Ronan ground out. "Do you honestly think we'll go along with your mission now, *Dad*?"

Riley clicked his tongue, his OCD as consistent as the Seattle rains. "Are you going to kill me? You going to call the cops or PVD? You won't have a choice. I've got your blood, Aria's blood. I've still got Kiera and Katrina. I've perfected advanced bio-drugs to keep you in line. The second I'm released, it'll take one keystroke on my cell and you'll be incapacitated. It's worked so far, hasn't it, *son*?"

Had he drugged or controlled Ronan all along? Hope perked up my foggy brain. Rift magic seeped into me, nudging out my headache and lethargy.

"What are you thinking?" Riley asked, remaining immobile as though patiently waiting for our magic to wear off. *Au contraire*.

"Absorbing your fairytale." Sarcasm sparked the bitter edge of my fury when I didn't want to provoke him further. Sue my mouth for being a rule breaker.

"Clever words." His eyes shone brightly in the glow of the flashlight. "It's a shame your parents didn't live to see you grow into your birthright." His gaze swerved to Ronan. "Same with yours, Ronan." He laughed in that smooth, scornful way I found beyond irritating.

Rage and loathing shattered my last nerve. "You scum sucking prick!" Satan would get his asswipe back tonight.

Riley curled up and swung out his legs, knocking me off balance. Arms and legs still bound, he lunged to my left away from us and fell back to the ground on his side. A thick cushion of air stopped my tumble and pushed me away from him. Adam's eyes glowed lavender for a second until he shut down his magic.

"I'll stick a deadener gun up your ass and turn you into a lollipop if you try that again," I said. "Thanks, Adam." I erected an aura shield around the three of us.

During that few seconds of our preoccupation, Ronan had extracted a weapon from his jacket and aimed it at Riley. Simultaneously, Riley pointed a gun at Ronan. His wrists were bound, but his fingers still moved.

"You wouldn't dare." Riley's hand shook slightly. "Your doppelgänger and your *master* Thirteen won't let you. I have the information you need to live. It will die with me, and then you'll have nothing."

"I'll have Aria and Adam," Ronan said, quietly lethal and ominous. "That's enough."

I aimed a surge of magic at Riley, a second late and a credit short.

In surreal horror, Ronan and Riley pulled their triggers. Despite the silencers on both guns, the muted shots boomed in my head. The blasts split a hole in our aura meld, splintering it on the damp breeze, diamond flecks scattering onto an ebony canvas.

A dark stain blossomed on Riley's white shirt below his heart. Slack-jawed, he slumped to his

knees.

I spun toward Ronan. Through the dim light, I couldn't see where the bullet made contact. Ronan's face betrayed no pain, but out of the corner of my eye, I'd seen him jerk. Terror skewered me and my mind leapfrogged onward.

Riley thumped on his stomach, his mouth working in his last moments of life. "I...loved you...like a son."

"Yeah, well, fathers don't murder their *sons*' mothers."

"I didn't—"

"I was there, you stupid ass. I saw the whole scene from the closet. I have it all on video," Ronan screamed, waving his fist at his pseudo-father. He advanced on Riley, and I thought he might stomp the bastard's smarmy face into the ground.

My shock knew no bounds. Why would Riley try to kill Ronan? Or had he just meant to hurt or scare him? Too bad stupidity wasn't painful. I wanted to hug Ronan, but I held on to Adam's hand, giving him my strength, curling my other fist against my stomach. Ronan needed to kill his demons his way.

The stain on Riley's chest swelled. Blood dribbled down his chin. "She...threatened...to expose me and you to...authorities." He coughed and spit. "She betrayed us. She deserved to die." He laughed a wet, gloppy sound.

Ronan's rage shot a surge of toxicity inside me. Chaos battled as both sympathy and betrayal clouded the bond that should have been springtime fresh and summertime warm. Instead, I felt autumn's wane and winter's cold.

All of a sudden, someone plunged into the scene, a dark wraith from out of storybooks charging from behind us. My watch beeped its hourly chime, a lonely sound in the hostile park, thirteen after the hour. My left pinkie twitched. *Ah, criminy*. Toe tag time.

"And you deserve this," the hooded man said, cool as dry ice. He stepped forward and shot the Dick Tator point-blank between the eyes.

Chapter 28

Ronan sank to his knees, his fist clutched to his chest. I screamed and crawled toward him, clawing the wet grass. Woozy and unsteady, I felt like I was lapping up a river of tar until I had my arms around him. I cradled his shoulders on my lap, wanting to give him all the new life inside me. Adam shoved aside the bullet-shredded jacket, revealing a crimson stain darkening the front of Ronan's gray Seahawks T-shirt. Blood drained out of my face, and I wanted to crawl inside Ronan and give him my life's blood. After all this, I refused to let him die on my watch. Not when I was so close to figuring out which side of the light and dark I would choose. *No. Idiot. Wake the hell up.* I already knew I *was* falling head-over-hard-heels for Ronan, even after he'd shattered my heart when I believed he'd betrayed me.

"Don't die, Ronan," I whispered. *Mom believed in you. I believe in you. I believe in us! Oh, God, there's no us without you.*

The mysterious intruder turned on our huddle, pushing his hood off. It was too dark to make out his features, but his eyes glommed onto my face and he smiled. "This has been a long time in coming." His voice choked on the words.

The barest Scottish accent served up another side order of crap. Was he another of Riley's bounty hunters from the pool of Celtic diversity?

"Who the hell are you?" Ronan ground out. "You kill me and you got nothing. No bounty. It's over."

"I'm Alexander Caliburn. There won't be any more killing tonight." The vaguely familiar man tucked his gun into his shoulder holster. He crouched next to me and gently applied pressure to Ronan's wound.

Adam grabbed the gun out of the man's holster and trained it on Alexander's chest.

Ronan's throat bobbed. "Aria?" He throttled my name.

Without giving the standoff a second thought, I swept tangled hair off Ronan's forehead. My tears dripped onto his cheek as I bunched his jacket over his wound, applying pressure to stem the bleeding.

"You crying over me? Don't—" A hacking cough nixed his words.

"Shhh..." I caressed his clammy cheek.

“Is he dead?”

“I think so.”

His eyes closed, eyelashes a fringe of black against his polar-white complexion. “You’re safe now...from him.”

“Stop talking, will ya.” Bands squeezed my heart.

He opened his eyes. “It’s not fatal...I’ll live.” He tried to move his left hand to feel for the injury, but I took his damp hand in mine, keeping him from moving.

“You’re all safe from me.” The man turned to me, his hand straying to my cheek. I jerked back to avoid his touch. “I’m not here to hurt you. It was never my intent.”

“Then what do you want from us?” I demanded.

Two of Riley’s guards rushed us. The moment they took in the scene and the gun in Adam’s hands, their weapons hit the ground and hands lifted in the air.

“Get Ronan in the back seat of the SUV. Then we’ll take Riley’s body to his compound before the cops make their rounds.” Adam’s authoritative voice belied the anguish emanating off him.

“You don’t recognize me?” the familiar stranger asked, emotion heavy in his voice.

“I can’t even see you in the dark.” I helped lift Ronan to his feet. “All I know is you’re the man who fired the killing bullet on Dickhead Riley. You’ve probably been chasing me all over the freaking West Coast. The bounty’s cancelled. Now get out of my way.” I pushed at him and it was like pushing a boulder.

“Aria Elle.” He held my arm, his grip warm, with something familiar in the way he said my name. Like R.L., like Dad used to so many years ago.

My knees sagged. Dad’s dead. I shook my head. “No. You betrayed me. You’re dead,” I whispered.

“It’s not true. It’s really me,” he said as Adam came between us. The guards hefted Ronan under their arms, blocking my view of him.

“Screw you and the asshole you rode in on.” I left him standing alone and ran to catch up to Ronan, Adam on my tail. I blinked back the tears threatening to unseat my tenuous new foundation.



We took Ronan to Dominion Research. A skeleton crew was on night duty, and we managed to skirt around them and avoid their questions. I had no clue what they did with Riley’s body. The mysterious Alexander took care of everything. The comfort that act brought me reminded me of my childhood, and I gave in to the security he granted me that night.

Surprise, surprise, Riley’s Scrambler guard, the one I kept sensing the ebb and tide of his magic, Carlos Sorentino, was also a doctor. Unable to trust anyone, Riley wanted his prized biochemist close at hand, guarding him. Doctor Carlos kicked into high gear to patch Ronan up. The bullet hadn’t

hit anything crucial, and Ronan would only have a short stint of physical therapy to return his arm to peak gun-slinging shape.

Blood and gore didn't bother me, but I grew dizzy at the sight of needles sewing flesh. Reluctantly, I left Ronan in Dr. Scrambler's expert hands to hunt down Zoe. Jax and Jon had found her outside the park where the police had forced her out.

I fell into her hug on the couch in Riley's office. "Did the fairies get away?"

"Did you think I'd abandon them?"

"What'd you do, promise to email the PVD team nude photos of yourself?"

Zoe knocked a finger at the side of her head. "Damn, I could've used that one." She grinned wickedly. "No, I just promised a couple of hot, single PVD officers a night on the town with a redfire frenzy and a blonde-streak bombshell."

"No way!" I tugged on her hair.

"It's not like we have to keep the date. Don't get your thong stuck up your crack." She gripped my arm. "Tell me what happened."

While we waited for Adam, I gave her the peapod version of my escapades.

"O-M-G. Your father's alive?" Tears welled in her eyes and she hugged me tight. "Is it over?" She wiped her face on the shoulder of my borrowed sweatshirt.

"Eew. Stop it." I rolled away and sagged on the couch in a comfortable recline, rubbing my shoulder against the back cushion. "For now."

She hugged her knees to her chest. "It's just the beginning, isn't it?"

The door suddenly swung open. Saved by the proverbial bell. Adam sauntered in, closed the door behind him with a quiet click. A seductive smile lit up Zoe's face, erasing her unease and fatigue. I think she might have drooled on her hand too.

She listed sideways and whispered, "If you're passing on him, he's mine."

Jealousy pricked my heart before we giggled it off. Certain now that it was Ronan in my blood, holding my heart, usurping that part of Adam's magic, I didn't know how I felt about Zoe and Adam together. First, a bone deep exhaustion anchored me, and I needed to go lick my wounds.

The droopy eyes of fatigue hardly detracted from Adam's return to hotness. He was radiant, perfect, and his eyes twinkled brilliantly. Scenes of flowers, meadows, the sun, moon, and stars flickered in his irises. It almost hurt to look at him, but I couldn't tear my gaze away. A lank of tawny-gold hair lay casually on his forehead. Long, silky tendrils framed his honeyed face. His minty aura swirled above him, and if I peered just right, I saw chinks of pink and blue with a fuse of all three colors on the edges. Life bloomed from him like a field of new springtime wildflowers. Even in his exhausted state, he exuded cheerfulness, and his charm wound around me in a silken shroud of euphoria.

He perched on the arm of the overstuffed chair across from the couch. "We're heading back to the hotel." He yawned broadly.

I sat up. Concern creased the tree bark scrapes on my forehead, stinging my skin. “I want to stay with Ronan.”

Adam rubbed the stubble sprouting anew on his chin. “He doesn’t want to see you right now.”

Hurt and guilt curved around my heart. *Oh*. “Okay.”

“It’s the drugs, Aria.”

I narrowed my eyes. What drugs? Ronan had refused a sedative and almost refused a local anesthesia while the doctor dug out the bullet and sewed him up. Then it dawned on me: Riley’s advanced bio-chemicals, advanced enough to eclipse a person’s will. Ronan had me so convinced of his betrayal, I couldn’t see beyond it. I still wasn’t one hundred percent sure of his agenda. I tried to blow the cobwebs from my brain, but the eight legs of emotions spun faster and thicker.

Adam interrupted my near short circuit. “He’ll stay and shut the place down and destroy the blood Richard collected from you, your mother, Ronan, and the girls. We already sent Kiera and Katrina home before their families called in the PVD and FBI.”

A red, raw cuticle earned my attention. “Is he safe here?” I studied my crusty sneakers, loathing the sight of them. Would life ever be safe again?

“Jax will stay. Jon will return with us.”

“Riley’s body?”

Adam stood up and held his hands out to Zoe and me. “Everything’s taken care of.” He paused for a long moment. “Alexander—your father—wants to see you.”

“He’s not my father,” I slung back.

As if on cue, the door slid open and the rat bastard sauntered into the room. There was no mistaking that the man who shot Riley was an older version of the father I remembered, the man formerly known as Patrick Walker, a name as fake as my own. Salt sprinkled his thick brown hair. His slightly flared nose and the rare blue-green eyes matched mine. The telling evidence was the round scar on the back of his right hand and the emerald and diamond Claddagh ring he always wore. He had burned himself working on his car a year before abandoning his family.

The fit and trim man had taken off his hooded jacket, exposing expensive slacks and a button-down shirt underneath. I think his Rolex probably cost more than my car. Had he lived a life of luxury while Mom, Granny, and I had scraped by?

“Can we talk alone?” he asked, his gaze sweeping past me to Adam and Zoe.

“They can stay.” Zoe and Adam surrounded me, my wingmen in a burgeoning sea of the unknown.

He gestured at a lone chair next to the couch before taking a squat. “Sit.”

My gang and I sat rigidly on the couch. Not that I was obeying him, my knees were about to turn to mush. My anger had become a limp noodle instead of a steel rod.

“Spill it. You left. I heard you were dead. Now you turn up as Alexander Caliburn. What gives?” I lashed out.

He scrubbed his hand over his face, plucked on the familiar goatee. He looked young for his age,

despite the shallow lines fanning his eyes. “Your mother and I agreed this was for the best. She knew I was leaving. I’m sorry I had to do it that way. We thought it best that you hated me so you didn’t try to track me down. Your grandmother wasn’t so keen on the idea and had written me off.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” I snorted. “She freaking hated you till the day she died. Who does that to her own son without a valid reason?”

“Preaching to the preacher.” His eyes never strayed from my face. “I stayed away to protect you, to draw others away from you, to throw them off. I was there at significant events, at your graduations, even at some of your public birthday parties. I killed the couple who abducted you from the mall in Las Vegas when you were ten.”

“What? I didn’t do that?” My mind shot back to that day. The man in the park had cupped his hand over my mouth so hard I thought I was going to die. Then they gagged me and wrapped tape across my mouth. I’d lost control of my telekinesis and thought I’d caused their car to veer off the road to slam into a tree. I’d walked away without a scratch while they hunched over in the front seats conked out.

“That’s why your mother moved you to the Bay Area. Riley had located you in Vegas. The couple worked for him. Even back then, he was looking for anyone with magic. He didn’t know who you were, though. He was just hunting anyone with extreme ESP, hoping they were one of the Forbidden Thirteen.”

I remembered the incident that triggered our move vividly. I was at the mall for my friend Laura’s birthday party. Some boys were taunting us. They started harassing Laura, calling her fat names, making rude oinking sounds. I shut three of them up with simultaneous threads of telekinesis to their brains.

Growing warm under my father’s scrutiny, I swallowed hard and waved my hand at him to continue.

“A few years ago, Melisande Aguirre infiltrated my team and stole the half of the *Illuminaria* we’d managed to piece together, which we kept in a separate location. She handed it over to Riley for a king’s ransom and her loyalty.” He held up his hand to forestall our shocked responses. “The entire *Illuminaria* belonged to your mother. It was supposed to remain in the possession of the thirteenth. That was your mother.” He paused for elaboration. “Now it’s you.”

I rocked forward, my face in my hands. “Screw me now,” I whispered. “Mom was trying to fly under the radar by shunning anything to do with the paranormal. She feared the laws and so much more. After what’d happened to the couple in the park, I feared them too.” *I feared me.*

“I played cat and mouse with Riley for years to keep him off you and your mother’s trail. I drew his people all over the world with false leads, never able to lay my eyes on him as he remained underground. I formed a team to protect you and the others. The team has been in place since the Rift first shifted the year of your births. Once Riley got his hands on the book, everything spiraled out of control. I found out he had your mother’s blood on ice, taken during our college days in Ireland. He used it with Ronan’s magic to screw up the Rift. I set up the deal where he supposedly paid me off, to

get access to his compound. He killed one of my best men, who sacrificed himself for the task by taking my place in a ruse to get inside the compound. He's the father of Matt Barlow, one of the Thirteen. Matt's safely living in our new secure compound in the Santa Cruz Mountains, not far from Adam's house." Adam and I traded shocked stares. "His father knew what was at stake for all the kids if Riley got even one of them under his control outside of Ronan. Especially you. You have the potential to call them all to you. We had to stop him at all costs." He scrubbed his face. "Unfortunately, Ronan's mother was collateral damage."

"What about my mother?" My voice sounded small and squeaky. "Granny Elle?"

"Accidents as far as we know, honey." His face blanched, and his voice grew croaky. "I'm so sorry. Your mother's accident happened before Riley discovered you were in the Bay Area, before we beefed up our security."

"But your man Barlow gave up Aria's identity and whereabouts." Adam shoved his long, thick golden hair over his shoulder as if it bothered him.

"He must have broken under Riley's torture. We'll never know. He was a good man who went to any length to save his son...and Aria." His voice softened. "We gave Riley false leads. It was just a matter of time he'd find Aria through her magic. It's too strong to hide under his detectors. He had his people and electronic detectors stationed around the world. All Aria had to do was walk down a street near a detector and bam. We're still learning the full extent of his reach."

My stomach gurgled, and I sucked in a few deep breaths to still the blooming ache. "Why didn't you just come forward once Riley sicced his dogs on me?" I demanded, having a hard time feeling out his motives.

My so-called father rose and began pacing the room. He toed aside pieces of the broken genie bottle that'd exploded during my earlier escape. "Riley had you tailed, bugged, you name it. If he even suspected I was alive, it would have blown my cover. I couldn't protect you or the others if that occurred. Your security has been my number one goal since before you were born. I refuse to jeopardize that."

Confusion reigned supreme inside me. I rubbed my temples until a knock on the door served up a side order of reality.

An unfamiliar man entered, carrying a silk-wrapped package the size of a large book. "We got it out of the safe without incident." Alexander accepted the package and dismissed the man.

My father stepped toward me. Adam tensed and I patted his knee. He'd remained silent for the newest tale to join the fairytale tome, and I appreciated his protectiveness.

"This belongs to you." My father set the package on the coffee table. "It's the original *Illuminaria* with the English translation."

Wide-eyed, I ogled the wrapped book. "Except for the missing pages."

"Except for the pages your mother kept separated. We knew the Rift had fractured and either she or you would need them to control it one day."

“How did you get it out of Riley’s safe?” Adam touched his fingertips to the cloth. “He said he had a self-destruct device on it if anyone but him tried to open it.”

“Only if his fingerprints weren’t used to open the safe.” Alexander’s implication sent a cold crawl of detached body parts up my spine.

Reverently, I peeled back a corner of the smooth cloth and unearthed the illuminated manuscript cover. It was as old as Earth, the edges slightly worn, oils fading the colors of the cover and dirtying edges of the pages. It was beautiful and full of life. I rewrapped the silk around it again and hugging it to my chest, I rose off the couch.

More of the upside down world insanity sank into my bones and I shuddered. Zoe stood and took Adam’s hand. They waited, staring at me as I fixated on the multifaceted amethyst, sapphire, and emerald genie bottle pieces twinkling beneath the overhead lights.

Finally, I leveraged my tired and sore butt forward. I picked up a piece of the rainbow glass the color of Ronan’s eyes. Thankfully, no one said a word. I was hardly able to explain the unearthly attraction to the genie bottle myself, so why spend my last brain cells to decode it for them. I clasped Adam’s comforting hand.

In the corridor, the tug on my aura fought the huge part of my heart that belonged with Ronan. The other part of my heart let Adam lead me away. I think Adam’s doppelgänger bond to Ronan would always be a part of me. I’d eventually learn to deal with it. At that moment, all my thoughts centered on Ronan, and *his* magic dominated our triad.

Silent, my father trailed us out of the building, his guards in tow. I was grateful for the chance to dwell on all I had learned that night without him pressuring me for something I couldn’t give yet. In time, I think I’ll rekindle my love for him.



The king-sized hotel bed was as close to heaven as I’d seen in days. After a quick bath, I donned one of Ronan’s extra-large T-shirts and spritzed on his cologne, taking a deep breath of him. I cranked up the heat and snuggled into the sumptuous pillowtop mattress. Zoe began squawking a song in the shower. I stuffed a plump pillow over my head and groaned. *Add to shopping list: duct tape.*

The door swished open, Fin dashed into the room, leapt onto the bed, plastering her furry body against my side.

Adam followed the pooch’s path to my heaven. He’d showered and donned a pair of sweatpants and a white T-shirt, smelling fresh and crisp of soap and shampoo, which enhanced his various underlying scents of the fresh outdoors. He perched on the edge of the bed, resting his hand on my leg.

“I missed you, Finny.” I scratched the preening pup’s head.

Adam patted Fin’s haunches. “Maybe someday we’ll find out her story.”

“Maybe now she’ll start growing.” I tweaked the pup’s ear, wallowing in her happiness.

The shower door opened and Zoe's rendition of new alternative rock thankfully trickled down the drain. Birds were safe again from the off-key screeching.

Adam leaned forward, his face close to mine. "Sleep tight." He gave me a chaste kiss on the forehead. "See you in the morning."

Yawning, I slipped beneath the covers again. "More like evening." I grabbed his wrist before he moved away. "You're okay now?"

"Would you let me sleep with you if I told you I hurt like hell?" He grinned.

I squeezed his hand and let go. "You couldn't handle the two of us." His laughter followed him into the lonely depths of the other bedroom.

Zoe swept out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam and jasmine. "Can I stick my jewelry in your safe?" she asked much too loudly. "Oops, sorry. You asleep?"

Exit sandman. "Not *now*."

"How can you sleep with that delicious fairy next door?"

"Watch me." I shoved the pillow over my face.

"You're no fun." She fake-pouted. "What's the combo?"

The question gave me pause to think, so hard it hurt. Ronan had broken into the safe, not that my choice of combination was much of a secret to someone who knew me the way he did. Had it been an act on Ronan's part? Or had he seriously tried to bargain for his freedom at my expense? Or was it his father's drugs? My baffled mind refused to ignite and I pushed out a weary breath. Reality would return with the sun...er...clouds tomorrow. "If it's not already open, it's thirteen, thirty-one."

"Well, that's sure original."

"You'd never have thought of it yesterday."

Zoe proceeded to keep the dead awake as she rustled in the closet. The lock clicked open. Fin growled, and I absently pet her.

"You know you have things in here," Zoe's oh-so-intruding voice called. "Hmm, now this is interesting." Curiosity never killed Zoe. Papers crinkled.

"What the—" I thrust the covers off, buried Fin beneath the heavy jacquard, and jumped out of bed. Zoe rushed toward me with a large padded envelope dangling from her hands. We butted heads.

"Oww." We groused in unison, rubbing our heads, giggling.

My pulse revved up. I snatched the envelope out of her hands, stared at the pages inside. Holding them to my chest, I sprinted toward the familiar envelope I'd taken from Riley's office and tossed on the desk after we'd arrived in the suite. I peeked inside to find it stuffed with photocopies of Riley's *Illuminaria* pages copied from Melisande's tablet. Ronan had faked out his father with his own book.

"Oh. My. God."

All my doubts fled. My decision became even more final. Would Ronan feel the same after all that had happened?

Chapter 29

Magic, murder, and mayhem were hell on the body. I believe I'd connected all the dots of my bruises possible to connect. Twelve hours after we'd arrived at the hotel, I left the bed better than I'd felt in forever. Zoe and Adam were talking and laughing up a riot in the living room. I wasn't jealous. Well, maybe a tiny part of me wanted to bitch slap her to San Jose. I think they were totally into each other, and if I couldn't have Adam, then I wanted Zoe to have him.

Honestly, I was glad Adam was taking everything so well. What long-term bond and head-trips would the doppelgänger hunks suffer? At some point, I too would have to deal with my own familial issues. Adam told me my father planned to remain incognito until I was ready to deal with him on my terms. More of my animosity toward him slipped away.

I strolled into the bathroom, stripped off Ronan's T-shirt, and gazed at my luminous skin. The bruises, scrapes, and cuts that had colored me like a rainbow were a distant nightmare. Fae magic had healed me faster than a snake shedding its skin. Had I also gained fae immortality? Were the fae really immortal? The nagging thoughts drifted away. I twisted my torso, scrutinized the vine growing up my back. One ebony thorn sprouted out of the bottom right of the vine above my butt crack. A reddish purple flower bloomed on a stem shooting toward my kidney. It had thirteen petals. "Weird, I tell you, weird."

An hour later, I joined Zoe and Adam eating ice cream in the living room.

They clapped.

"Ha ha."

"Ice cream?" Adam held out his freshly scooped bowl.

I pursed my mouth at the pink, brown, and white glob. "No, thanks. I don't eat ice cream."

"Who doesn't like ice cream?" He shoved the bowl closer.

I hadn't eaten ice cream since my father promised me a hot fudge sundae. "Who said I didn't like it?" Nudging him aside, I veered to the left toward the closet. I plucked out my jacket and wound my purple ombre scarf around my neck.

"Where are you going?" Adam approached, his eyes going all alpha male dark on me. I swear they mirrored a black hole.

I rose on my toes and kissed his cheek. "Running an errand. Is Jon or Jax up for a spin?"

Wariness radiated off Adam in waves of exotic spice cologne and slightly singed roses. “I’ll take you. Where?”

“No. Just me and Fin.”

His aura prickled around mine, his displeasure an odd sensation I’d have to learn to live with among all his other emotions. Along with Ronan’s, I supposed. *Allow me to introduce my selves.*

I stroked his sun-kissed cheek, loving the feel of stubbly life grazing my fingers. “Trust me.” He was like the sun, a force that had awakened me. Magic shimmered between us, sprinkled me in happy fairy dust.

He growled low in his throat, borrowing a cue from his darker doppelgänger. “Okay. Just tell me where.”

I glided my hand down his chest. Electricity popped warm pleasure in my veins, and I drew away before the allure sucked me in. “To the Rift.”

His expression clouded. “It’s not safe.”

“I’ll shield myself.”

“Why on earth would you want to go there?” Zoe piped up, clanging her bowl on the coffee table.

“Chill, you guys.”

Fin ran circles around me, tail whipping up a whirlwind. I zipped around Adam, grabbed my purse, and called out to the brothers. Knuckles rapped on the door, and Jon didn’t bother waiting for an invite.

“Come on, Finny.” I blew Adam and Zoe a kiss, grabbed Jon’s arm and wheeled him around to the door. “See you later. Have fun,” I threw over my shoulder. “Don’t do anything you’d feel guilty about later. Love you both.” I rushed Jon out and hooked Fin’s leash on her collar.

“Two hours, Aria.” I turned to see Adam give Jon a knowing look. “If you’re not back, I’m coming for you.”

Jon fidgeted in his boxers. “Um...she’s not gonna knock me out and steal my car, is she?”

I slapped his arm. “Don’t be a wuss. Let’s go.”



I had dreamed during my long sleep and awakened with visions of fairies fluttering in my head. Some had wings in all colors of the spectrum, with or without pointy ears, long hair, or short hair. They had glowing eyes and normal eyes. Short, tiny, tall, human size, bug size. Beautiful, mystical, magical. I was their goddess, little humdrum Aria Elle Walker. Forbidden sorcerer extraordinaire. The big, bad thirteenth.

Jon rolled up the privacy window. Funny guy. He could blast me with his wicked gun, yet he was leery of me. Fin hopped from seat-to-seat as if fleas had landed for a party.

Jamming my fists into my coat pockets, my right hand butted against something small wrapped in a

velvet pouch. I plucked out the pouch and a chain fell out. Unwinding it, I discovered a gold, floral-engraved heart locket on a heavy chain, along with my lucky charm focusizer. The note read: *I hope you like. Love, Adam.* Adam had stuck in a tiny picture of Ronan. My heart melted as my eyes teared up. He'd known all along, probably before I even figured it out.

I strung the sparkly box chain around my neck. The gold hung warm against my skin, and I loved the tinkling jingle my pendant made against the locket.

Twenty minutes later, we reached the park. Jon parked behind the familiar copse of ghost trees. Brushstrokes of purple and indigo painted the twilight sky. Rain was a recent memory. I grabbed the flashlight and stuck my phone in my pocket.

The door opened and Fin dashed away. "Fin. Wait!" I scrambled out of the car, grabbing hold of Jon's hand. "Hang tight, please. It might take a while."

"No way." He dug in his heels. "I can't let you go off alone."

I tugged my hand away. "I'll zip it if you do." I tried to sneak past his hulking body, but he pressed me against the limo door. "Please. I'll owe you one," I cajoled. "I swear I won't do anything to get you in trouble. You know I can handle myself."

His expression shifted faster than a professional liar on the witness stand. Scowling, he stepped back and flicked his hand. "Go."

I thumbed on the flashlight and ran toward the Rift. Currently closed 24/7, a few guards made regular rounds. I invoked the wicked cool cloaking spell, just in case. Who knew sorcerers and fairies had such fun magic? No wonder it was illegal.

A moist wind blew through my jacket and my teeth rattled. I reached the stone circle without planting my face into a tuft of grass or a crusty pine.

"Fin, where are you?" I swished the flashlight beam at the ground. A snuffle and snort resonated in the center of the stones. Rift energy wavered at my proximity, and the magically charged air swept my chills away. I slid between the two smallest jagged stone pillars and stood in the center.

Fin jumped against my knees, jiggling on her hind legs.

I laughed. "Give me a minute." I killed the beam and stuck the flashlight in my pocket. "Stand in the center with me, Miss Infinity."

Her small body vibrated against me. I closed my eyes and focused on the energy of the stones, calling on the magic that seemed to belong only to me. The ancient magic hummed in my veins. It filled me with ecstasy, encircled me in glittery sparkles. Arms held upward as if reaching for the stars, I danced and lost myself for minutes, days it seemed.

Awash in tingling electricity, I emerged from my trance. The energy dissipated and floated away in a spray of rainbow fireworks. The ritual was instinctive, something I'd never have thought up in a gazillion years before we'd opened the Rift. I grinned and spun in a circle. "Fin?" No response.

I dug out the flashlight and shined it around. "Where are you?" Dread nudged out a slice of my exhilaration. I heard a slight fluttering behind me, the swish of birds' wings, and flashed the light at

the ground.

“Did you ever wonder why I lifted my leg to pee?” a bitty exasperated voice said near my left ear. The tiny buzz saw of wings whooshed close to my head.

“Fin?” I backed up a step and saw...her...naked body fluttering in a flare of light. Gold spots sprinkled the bitty fairy’s gossamer wings of iridescent lavender and pink. She was Barbie-sized and imitated one too. Long, golden hair framed a stunning oval-shaped face, flowing down her perfectly proportioned body. I unwound my scarf and spread it open. She flew into the folds, stood on my open palm, and I gently twined the scarf loosely about her tiny body.

Fin was a shifter-fairy? *Infinity...*

“Thank the Goddess. I thought you were going to freeze me to death now that I’ve finally shifted out of that Goddess-awful canine body.” Her voice held a beautiful, lilting Irish accent. “My name is not Fin. Or Finny. Goddess, do you know what identity issues I’ve suffered from? It was bad enough I shifted into a bloody puppy, having to lift my leg to keep myself clean. I’ll never live it down.”

Foolishly, I grinned at her, my excitement banging my heart against my chest. “What...what’s your name?”

She straightened to her full height and replied with all the stature her ten-inch frame could muster, “Lorelei Wildwood, Queen of the Wildwood Clan, at your command.”

At my command? I held out my index finger and she pumped it up and down. “Nice to...er...meet you.”

“I’m very glad to meet you, Aria Elle Walker, Goddess of the Forbidden. I’ve been waiting for this day since I was a wee child.”

For little ole me? I gulped and tilted my head. “How old are you?”

“What year is it?” She laughed a tiny, tinkling sound. “I was twenty-nine when the Rift closed. I believe I’ll be twenty-nine forever.” She looked all of eighteen.

Carefully, I sat on the warm ground in the middle of Mini-Stonehenge and positioned her on my knee. “What happened back then?”

Lorelei plonked down, dangling her legs off my knee. “All the fae and sorcerers were summoned and locked into the Void, as you well know. The Rift wasn’t here, though.” She glanced around and sniffed with no small amount of disdain. “Ireland is far more beautiful than this dreary stink-hole.”

“Ireland.” Despite the warmth of the circle, I shivered. “How’d you end up here? Of all the crap-ass places, why’d they put a Rift in Seattle? I mean, the sun *never* shines here.”

Her wings vibrated through the scarf, and a glow shimmered, then winked out as she took a moment to recall. “They didn’t *put* a Rift here. These magical stones have been here since before humans inhabited the earth. Once the scared witless humans and your early ancestral sorcerers began culling the Forbidden toward extinction, some fairy clans tried to hide, knowing the end was coming. Most migrated to this part of the world to live in peace. Mountains were plentiful with uninhabited woodlands. Humans would not suspect fairies to journey to a place so foreign and far away from our

origins.”

“They knew fairies were here if they were summoned to the Void, right?”

A red glow suffused Lorelei. “Possibly.” She gripped my knuckle. “You must understand that other magical beings were in this area. The summoning magic the sorcerers used extended to all beings with magic. Fairies just outlived them all and were the last to go.”

I swallowed hard. “What other races?”

She released her grip on my finger. “I don’t know specifically, since I was not among those fairy clans that migrated here. They’re all gone now. Very little of their magic remained in the Void. Few fae were left even though our magic was dominant.”

“Plus the doppelgängers?” Cool air replaced the warmth in the circle.

“Yes, them too.” Lorelei shuddered. “Half-fairy, half-sorcerer. The residual magic from the dead is drifting out of the Rift. Eventually, it will dissipate or be absorbed by humans or the Thirteen and their doppelgängers.” Her hands fluttered up and down.

Whoa, Nelly. I shrugged the matter to the back of my mind. My brain was going to send me a bounced check charge soon. “Why is Adam so human looking without wings, and you’re so tiny—”

“Goodness, I see I have my work cut out for me.” She rolled her neck, and I think her hands went to her hips beneath the scarf. “The fae come in many varieties. As for Adam...” she sniffed as if I’d stepped in a smelly, brown pile, “...he’s a doppelgänger, born of leftover sorcery. Besides, his blood is too watered with humans and sorcerers.” Her shoulders lifted and I adjusted the scarf.

“So how did you and Fin shift? How is that possible?”

“Not much to tell there.” Her sweet lilt perked up. “When the original Thirteen were closing the final Rift after sending the doppelgängers into the Void, I shape-shifted for the first time ever into a puppy.” Embarrassment suffused her face in a cotton candy glow. “I was a little late to the summoning,” she said in a whisper that I strained to hear. “I got locked in the fuzzball’s body in stasis, where I’ve been ever since. I think the sorcerers did it on purpose. Those ancestors of yours weren’t exactly the nicest beings on the planet.”

“So I guessed. I’m sorry for everything they did to you. I plan to make it right. The Forbidden Thirteen will be a better, moral race of sorcerers than ever before.”

“There may be more of my kind hiding in the world. I want to find them.” The anguished look on her face stopped my pending inquisition. In due time, we’d hunt down her kind, if any remained or had escaped the Void.

“Can you shift back to Fin?” I asked instead. Nothing escaped the realm of reality anymore.

She placed her hands on her hips and rolled her tiny luminescent eyes. “Goddess, I suppose. Couldn’t those damn sorcerers create their shifters from tigers instead?” She smoothed her hands over her arms, tightening her wings around her miniature body. “I’d rather not test the theory at the moment. I very much like my old self and would rather remain a fairy for another eternity.”

I laughed agreeably. “No kidding. But I’ll miss Fin.”

“Posh.” She fluttered her hand at me. “You’ll like *me* better.” She gave me a beauty contestant smile, eerily similar to my own. Hmmm...I seriously doubt this world was ready for two of us. And I’d have to sound a world alert if I had a doppelgänger hanging around the stargate. She slapped my hand, her teeny palm stinging like a snapped rubber band. “You’re not a dog fan, are you?”

Heat rose up my face and I picked at a dormant bedding plant. “Well, I am a cat person.”

A papery scraping of leaves in the trees by the babbling brook reminded me of the time. “We have to go before the doppel-wardens send the Starfleet posse after me.” I gently lifted her in my hand and rose off the warm ground.

“Put me on your shoulder,” she suggested. The perfect idea freed my hands.

Another nearby crinkling and snapping alerted me to a looming presence. A tingle inside my core and the surrounding energy identified the intruder. More relief than I cared to admit to gushed through me.

“Ronan?” I whipped out my flashlight and illuminated him at the outer edge of the stones. “How’d you know I was here?”

“Adam.” He held his left arm in a sling against his chest.

Lorelei tugged on my ear teasingly. “The fairy and the barbarian. What’s a girl to do?” She giggled and pinched my lobe. I tapped her knee and gave her a sideways evil eye.

“How much did you see?” I asked.

He smiled at Lorelei. “Enough to know *Fin’s* still around.” He laughed so carefree and happy, and I fell in love with his laugh...and him all over again. “I’ll drive you back. I sent Jon away.” He extended his good hand.

Without a thought, I took it, his fingers sliding over mine, entwining and electric. Something inside me melted, and that single gesture vanquished the tension between us. The rich scent of his amber spice cologne mingling with the earthy scents of the Rift area curled through the air, aroused my senses, booted out the last of the dust on my hormones. Everything felt right in the world. My head and heart had quit warring with one another. The convoluted impact of the doppelgänger bond waned with every day as I fell more in love with Ronan.

The cuff on his wrist brushed against me. I lifted our hands and inspected the deadener. “Why the deadener? Aren’t you done with your father’s legacy BS?”

“For Adam.” He stopped walking and peered down into my face. His unfathomable stare drilled down to my southern hemisphere in spikes of heated blood. “When I use magic, it kills a little something inside Adam.” I sucked in my stomach. “When he pulls from me, it drains me. We thought it best not to use any magic until we figure it out.”

“Oh. I read about that...in the book.” I fingered my trembling bottom lip. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Everything comes with a price. Magic’s going to cost us big time. At least we have the *Illuminaria* now. It’s bound to hold answers.”

We began a careful trek to the grove. Needless to say, unlucky thirteen still loved me. I tripped in

a hole on my thirteenth step and slapped—almost squashed—poor Lorelei against my shoulder to keep her from kissing the ground with me. Maybe wrapping her in the scarf wasn't such a grand idea. Ronan circled his arm around my waist, snuggled me against his side.

After assuring Lorelei was okay and listening to her high-pitched voice ream me a new one, I turned into him. "Is your telekinesis back?"

"And more." His voice was a velvet murmur. "More magic than I've ever felt. You don't negate my magic any longer. How about you?"

"Same. More magic than ever." Electricity arced around us and my thoughts fragmented. I jumped with a rush of electricity and tried fighting the dance of magic, the spiral of desire. Despite the deadener, our auras still partied together. Thank the Rift. I think I would die if that part of Ronan and Adam didn't dance with such a vital part of me. "How's your arm?"

"Sore. It's not gonna kill me."

He sported a bandage on the right side of his neck in the exact opposite spot where he'd cut out the tracking device on the left. My mind flinched in anxiety. "What happened to your neck?" I rubbed the spot where my dead tracker was buried.

"I had the second tracking device cut out. That's how my—Richard—kept tabs on us."

"Oh." Another piece of the puzzle slipped into place. "Alex...my dad said Richard had been hunting us all over Seattle, everywhere really."

"He's a good guy, Aria. He did what he thought best to protect you and your mom. He even tried to help my mom escape Richard. They had all known each other in college."

I leaned my head on his arm. "I know. We'll get past all this. I want to know him."

Silence fell like a growing slant of sunlight warming a wintry day. Air sighed around me as real as if it touched my face with warm fingers of life and hope.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your new friend?" His deep voice broke into the coziness of our companionship.

"How much did you really see?"

"Everything." He angled his head, appraising me slowly. "How did you know to do that?"

I tapped my index finger against my temple. "I'm psychic, remember?" He scowled then grinned, and I about swooned for real, holding onto his arm to keep my knees from buckling. That trickle of desire tormenting me expanded into a rushing river. "Actually, it came to me in a dream last night."

"Hey! Don't mind me. Studmuffin and I go way back." Lorelei laughed, the scarf tickling my neck as she twittered and bounced.

"I guess we do." Ronan snorted. "You peed on my shoe once or twice."

Lorelei glowed pink in embarrassment. "You probably deserved it."

As he'd learned to ignore my barbs, he smiled at Lorelei and let her dig slide. I formally introduced the fairy-shifter to the fairy-sorcerer.

"So why did you come here?" Hope shifted my heart into park.

His arm tightened around my waist. “I had to play the part...with my father, and I didn’t get a chance to discuss it with you after we were captured. You were drugged. I was drugged—”

I squeezed his waist. “I know.” I touched the piece of the genie bottle in my pants pocket, that little part of him in the gift from his beloved mother. “No need to explain.” Relief glided down his side. “I’m sorry I mistrusted you.”

“I needed him alive to find the *Illuminaria*. You saw how lethal it is.”

“I’m glad we have it safe and sound. My dad wants to take us to his compound. It’s actually near Adam’s house in the hills.” I didn’t even want to contemplate how our life would play out next. Goodbye to the lonely days of humdrum. How would the new magic affect my luck?

The welcome to purgatory bells continued to ring for me. We had a whole new set of problems to contend with: legal, moral, and magical. Hunting down the other sorcerers and their doppelgängers. Discovering what magic may have seeped into the world since the ley line explosion and since we’d opened the Rift. Do we blab to the world? Do I hide my head in dreams of Ronan? Alas, the world couldn’t banish the Forbidden or the magic any longer. Just let them try.

Ronan stopped and looked down at me, flicking curious eyes at Lorelei. She’d fallen asleep curled against my neck, snoring softly. He cupped my face. “I got what I wanted.” His voice faded, losing its steely edge.

His warmth pushed against mine and I snuggled into him. “Which is?”

The yearning for my place in this life slipped away and I leaned into him. He brushed his lips over mine once, eased closer for a deeper kiss. His kiss possessed me, owned me, and my lips quivered in unspoken passion. I’d died and slipped into hunky kisser’s paradise. I pressed against him, and sudden white-hot desire spiked my dormant girlie parts. Magic slipped out of me and showered us in sparks. I basked in the sensation of my power flowing into him and reversing course, my gaze riveted onto his storm-tossed eyes. He jerked against me in surprise or shock. As long as he didn’t stop kissing and touching me, jerk away. Our kiss was fierce, passionate, and hotter than hell. I wanted every piece of him, body and soul, tainted power and pure, right there on the spot. With that one hot-as-molten-lava kiss, he possessed me. And I let him. Desire and satisfaction smothered my lingering doubts.

He groaned deep in his throat, his good arm pulling me to where air didn’t exist between us. My heart gave my head a high-five. Breathless, we drew away, a tiny line of confusion marring his forehead.

I smoothed the line out with my finger and said the words he needed to hear. The words in my heart. “I know who I am and I have this amazing magic inside me. But it’s nothing without your magic within me. Nothing without you.”

“What about Adam?” His right hand slid into my hair, cupped my neck.

“He’ll always be a part of me as long as you are. I’m so lucky to have the both of you in my life. But he’ll always only be my friend.” I kissed him to seal the deal.

I'd found my purpose and my heart.

"Hey!" Lorelei began sliding down my upper arm. I wrenched away from Ronan and caught her on my palm before she tumbled to the ground, twisted in the scarf. She plunked down in an indignant heap, the scarf tying her wings to her sides. The tiny fairy glanced from me to Ronan, her eyes glimmering brighter. "Got any of those chocolate peanuts? No skimping on the chocolate either."

"In the car." A disconcerted twitch of Ronan's lips revealed a flash of white teeth.

She rolled on her side, propped her head on her hand, and tweaked the cuff buckle on my jacket.

"Did I tell you I have thirteen *good* luck gold spots on my wings?"

Well, thirteen was my number.

The End



While you wait for the Forbidden Legacy Series Book 2, you might enjoy Erin Richards' Psychic Justice Series, starting with [CHASING SHADOWS](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Richards lives in sunny Northern California. She writes young adult fiction and adult romance, where you'll typically find her characters in peril, whether based in reality or a contemporary fantasy setting. Magic, murder and mayhem are all in a days' work! In her spare time, she enjoys reading, photography, and re-landscaping her backyard, even though she hates digging holes...unless she's burying fictional bodies! Erin also confesses to a fascination with American muscle cars...and reality TV shows.

Read More from Erin Richards at: [Erin Richards Website](#)

MORTALITY BITES

R.E. VANCE

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MORTALITY BITES

When I was dead, all I wanted was to be alive. Now that I'm human again, all I want to do is die.

Being alive is tough. Especially after 300 years of being a vampire. But now that I'm human again, I've decided to do what any 18 year old human girl does - go to university. I thought it would be a breeze ... after all, how many other students have the kind of life experience I have.

But after exactly one day of being a human university student, the only friend I made - an old librarian who was kind to me - was murdered. And not just murdered - ritually sacrificed. Looks like I'm going to have to dust off my huntress skills and test them out in a human body.

My name is Katrina Darling - ex-vampire, re-human-ated university student and totally pissed-off.

PART I

PROLOGUE

TODAY—

“We disappointed them,” the monster says, pulling the ropes.

The old librarian groans in pain as the ropes force his arms and legs apart so he hangs like Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man.

“Please,” the librarian mutters. “We didn’t disappoint them. The gods ... they just left. That’s all.”

The monster gives a final tug of the ropes to ensure they are secure, then calmly walks past the librarian. “No, you’re wrong. We turned our backs on the old ways. We forgot the fundamental rule when appeasing the gods,” the old librarian’s torturer—the monster—says as it browses the library’s rare items display. It pauses on the item it wants, touching the cool glass with a light, almost careless finger. The monster’s lips crook up in satisfaction. “This modern world, with its iPads and smartphones, its Wikipedia and unlimited data ... it forgot that this ... all of this ... is because they willed it. Without the gods, we would be monkeys picking the ticks off of each other’s backs. Stupid, arrogant modern world—to think that they actually believe they can go on without the gods.” With one powerful, angry fist, the monster breaks the display glass.

“Don’t do this. Please. It will not bring them back. Nothing will bring them back!”

The monster ignores the old man’s pleas, pulling the ancient obsidian blade from its stand. The monster caresses its tip. The blade is sharp and a tiny stream of red blood drips from where it tore into flesh. “Blood. We forgot about blood. About how it is the essence of true worship.”

Approaching the helpless librarian, the monster holds the blade aloft and starts muttering ancient ritualistic words.

“Stop this. Please. I beg you,” says the librarian, but he knows his pleas are useless. He’s read the history books; he knows what these old rituals entail. The fear and suffering of “that which is sacrificed”—him, in this instance—is part of this. According to the texts, the harder the one who is

sacrificed holds on to life, the closer the gods pay attention. Mustering the last of his pride, he closes his eyes and silences his cries. Death is coming—there is nothing he can do about that. But at least he can deny this monster some of the satisfaction.

The creature opens its eyes and, lifting the ceremonial knife high above its head, it cries out an ancient incantation that no human ear has heard nigh on a thousand years.

As the blade punctures his heart, the librarian utters a silent prayer—not for the gods to intervene, he knows that is useless—but as comfort to himself in his last moments. After all, this old librarian was once a priest, and old habits ... well, old habits do die hard.

Chapter 1

VAMPIRES, OTHERS, PROFESSORS AND FOOTBALL PLAYERS

YESTERDAY—

When I was dead, all I wanted was to be alive. Now that I'm human again, all I want to do is die. Or shrivel up and disappear. I've never been so embarrassed in my life.

It all started when I walked into Professor Hayes' class and some smart aleck decided to open the drapes without any warning. Light streamed through the open window and I, of course, freaked out, jumping back to avoid the sun rays ... and right into Justin Truly's arms.

Justin Truly—Junior, McConnell Hall President, straight-A student and all-around hunk—and here I was in his arms, freaking out (did I mention I was freaking out?). And why? Because I was afraid of a little bit of natural light. Oh, the horror ... the *HORROR!*

"Are you OK?" Justin asked.

"Yeah. Old habits die hard, I guess."

"Old habits?" He lifted a curious eyebrow in my direction and my heart skipped a beat.

"Yeah ..." I said, but to be honest his question hadn't penetrated my brain. He was cute before, but that eyebrow lift ... that eyebrow lift just upgraded him from *cute* to *irresistible*.

But then I remembered where I was. More importantly, I remembered *who* I was. A normal human girl—and not some three-hundred-year-old vampire. Well, *ex-vampire*. "Ahh, I mean ... I was daydreaming and ... the sudden appearance of the light startled me, and ... well, I'm a jumper."

Justin continued his oh-so-incredibly cute, curious-eyebrow trick. "I see. First-day jitters, huh?" He ran a hand through his thick, lush black locks and I just about died—again.

"I'm working on it. But like I said—"

"Old habits—yeah, I got it." He gave me a wry smile and extended his hand out. "I'm Justin."

"I know," I said, staring down at his perfectly formed fingers as if Jesus Christ Himself were offering me a drink from the Holy Grail.

"And you are ...?"

I looked up again. "Me?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, you."

I shook his hand. “Ahh, Kat. Katrina. Kat.” *Smooth, girl. Smooth.*

“Kat. I see you are aptly named.”

I gave him a curious look of my own, sans the eyebrow trick. Harder than it looked.

“You know, old habits and all. You always land on your feet.”

“Feet?” I asked. “Oh, I get it. Because I’m a jumper. And a cat. Kat.”

“Bingo,” he said, shooting his pointy finger my way.

What did that mean? Did he just shoot me dead? Figuratively speaking, of course. Or was the finger a good thing? Like he was acknowledging me in some kind of *affirmative, kudos* kind of way?

Being human is so hard.

Before I could think of anything to say back, I was saved by a stern, loud voice that cried out, “Will everyone take your seats? Now, please.”

The class was starting. Phew.

Justin gave me an *after-you* gesture and I took the nearest seat, which was way up in the auditorium, hoping Justin would sit next to me. But the sophomore football player didn’t, opting instead to walk down the steps to the front row.

A dark-skinned boy a few rows in front of me gave me a thumbs up and said in a deep foreign accent I recognized to be from West Africa (Where was that? Ghana?), “Smooth, girl. Very smooth.”

Yeah—smooth like sandpaper. So much for having a great first day.



Professor Hayes slammed two folders down on the table. “Why did the gods leave?”

Of all the questions I expected to be asked on my first day during my first class, this wasn’t one of them. Especially because no one knew why the gods left. Their GrandExodus happened four years ago and scholars, philosophers, theologians and scientists alike debated what would prompt them to go. The truth was—no one knew why they left and no one would *ever* know.

We’re not gods, and therefore god logic is not something we’re capable of.

There was a chuckle in the room.

Professor Hayes pointed in my direction and said, “Glad I was able to surprise you—and yes, a very good answer, but incomplete.”

Crap, I was speaking out loud again. It was something I did a lot. I don’t mean to, but I guess after years of being a lone hunter and creature of the night, you got used to talking to yourself. And as for being embarrassed about it, *that* was new too. Back in those days, I’d simply rip out the throats of anyone who dared laugh at me.

Talking out loud was another old habit that I really had to get under control.

Professor Hayes smiled at me, his pudgy chipmunk cheeks squishing his eyes making him look like the Santa Claus version of Clint Eastwood.

I stared back, not daring to say—or think—anything.

“You, in the back row,” Professor Hayes said. “What is your name?”

“Ahh ... me?” I started, but before I could get my name out, a voice in the front row said, “Katrina. Kat for short. Careful, Professor Hayes—she’s a jumper.”

Justin Truly.

The auditorium chattered with muffled giggles.

Professor Hayes shot Justin a look and said, “Katrina ...?” He dragged out my name like I was supposed to complete it or something.

Oh, yeah—complete it. “Darling,” I said. “Katrina Darling.”

“Miss Darling,” the professor said. “Your answer is absolutely right. We don’t know. All we do know is that the gods did exist—once—and that three days from now will mark the four-year anniversary of their departure. We also know that they did not take it upon themselves to explain their behavior, instead leaving with a simple message of ...?”

He raised his hands like an orchestra conductor and at his cue, the class sang out in harmony, “*Thank you for believing in us, but it’s not enough. We’re leaving. Good luck.*”

The gods’ last message to the world, and something that every living creature heard at exactly the same time. I’d never forget where I was when I heard that voice in my head. How could I? That was the exact moment I reverted back to human. Vampire no more. Thanks, gods.

It was a strange transition, to say the least, and abrupt as all hell. I was turned when I was fifteen, and I’d spent the last three hundred years as a teenager trapped in an immortal body. An immortal body that needed blood to survive.

When the gods left, I happened to be drinking from the neck of my—*ahem*—my latest victim: a vicar I found wandering the fields alone at night in a Scottish meadow near the town of Oban. I was halfway through with him when the gods’ message rang in my head. In an instant my fangs retracted. Unfortunately for both me and the vicar, I had bitten deep enough that my front and bottom teeth gripped flesh, and as said fangs retracted, a substantial squirt of his blood shot up into my mouth and down my throat.

I pulled away and promptly—elegantly, prettily even—threw up.

Only moments earlier, the taste of blood was something I craved. Now it was something I detested.

I would later find out that when they left, they took most of their magic with them. And me being a creature made from that very magic, I became magic-less, boring human again.

Wiping away the blood from my mouth, I thought, *What the hell just happened?* Evidently, I’d spoken this thought aloud, as per usual, because the old vicar was nodding at my question vigorously, also experiencing his own existentialist crisis. His face was painted with fear and his vestments were painted with his own blood, still streaming from his neck. But the fear on his face wasn’t of me—it was fear of whatever that message was. In some odd comradery, we walked into town together, not

speaking, not really acknowledging each other's existence.

As we passed an old pub, its TV blaring, we glimpsed images from the local news with the big bright letters that confirmed we weren't the only ones who heard the message. In fact, everyone in the world heard it. The gods were gone. What we'd all heard was true. My own newly grown human canines were proof.

But them leaving and me turning human wasn't the strangest thing to happen that night. Not by a long shot.

No, the strangest thing was the appearance of the *Others*. Seems that when the gods left, they closed all their domains, forcing mythical creatures of all religions, fables, and fairytales down to Earth. Centaurs, dragons, mermaids, nasnas, ecantado—you name them—all fell down. Fairytales raining from the sky.

And to think—prior to that day, I'd thought I was the biggest and baddest monster to roam this earthly plane. Sometimes my arrogance astounds me.

"That's right," Professor Hayes continued. "*Thank you for believing in us, but it's not enough.* Not enough for what? To sustain them? To nurture them? To hold their interest? We'll never know. All we do know is that whatever we once gave them, whatever it was that had kept them here for millennia, was no longer enough. Or perhaps it never was, and it took them that long to realize it."

Professor Hayes adjusted his glasses and let out a heavy sigh.

"Will the Others in this classroom please stand up?"

A dust of pixies, an oni demon, a raiju, three fairies, two angels, an Incan apu and a gargoyle all stood up. I considered standing myself, but I wasn't an Other. Not anymore, at least. My current human status—and desire to not embarrass myself in front of Justin Truly again—compelled me to remain in my seat.

But if I'm honest with myself, that wasn't the only reason I kept seated. Truth was, I was ashamed of my past. When I think about all my victims—my *human* victims—I just want to rip out my own throat and watch myself bleed to death.

Morbid, I know. I'm working on that, too.

Besides, I used to be a freaking *demon*. Surely that counts for something in explaining my past ... umm ... discretions.

"Others," Professor Hayes said to those standing in the auditorium, "I welcome you to my class. As your professor, I speak for everyone here when I say that I am proud to be part of the only university on this good great Earth that accepts Others as students." He eyed the seated students. "For any humans who don't approve, or who distrust them, this is what I say to you—they live among us now. Deal with it. Intolerance, hatred, fear—these happen *outside* of these hallowed halls. Those destructive ideologies have no place here. Do you understand?"

The auditorium was silent.

"I said, 'Do you understand?'"

A mismatched chorus of weak *Yeses* could be heard in the lecture room. Not the most resounding acknowledgment of Professor Hayes's ultimatum, but it would have to do. It had only been four years. Change takes time.

"Very good," Professor Hayes said, motioning for the Others to take their seats. "Let's get started. History is not going to teach itself."

Chapter 2

HISTORY IS FOR THE HYENAS

The rest of the class went pretty much like you'd expect a history class to go. Dates, events ... yadda, yadda, yadda. Given that this class focused on the Industrial Era and I'd actually lived through that, I was surprised at how inaccurate so much of the history was. I flipped through the textbook, reading about the rise of machines that forced farmers out of the fields and into cities to find work, about overpopulation and pollution which made day-to-day life miserable.

That's not what *I* remembered.

I remembered people having more time to think, to dance, to sing. To play. That social classes were beginning to break down and, for the first time ever, the common man had a chance to be more than to carry on in whatever menial profession his father did.

It was a good time. Not the best, but far better than what had proceeded it.

Not that I was going to say anything to Professor Hayes. I was a normal human girl in her late teens. Normal human girls in their late teens do not have firsthand experience with the early 1800s.

And to think that I thought this class was going to be a breeze. Now I would have to learn everything they claimed happened and replace it with everything I knew *actually* happened.

Arrgh!

The bell rang and everyone started to pack up and leave. I purposely took my time, hoping Justin Truly would come my way and talk to me. This time I would be more suave. Cool as ice. I'd be the bee's knees—no, that's not right. That was human vernacular in the 1920s. This was the new millennium, the GoneGod world. Unfortunately, I lived through a ton of those eras, each with their own particular and peculiar vernacular—plus, I had a *deeeep* love for '80s and '90s TV—so I wasn't really hip on modern slang. Yet.

What I did know was that in this era, humans didn't use words like *bee's knees*, *groovy* or *rockin'*. And one wasn't *in* or *down with it* anymore.

Modern humans were now saying things like *GoneGodDamn!* or *Empty Heaven*. I'd even heard some idiot say *Hallelujah!* Probably thought he was being clever or something.

That's what I needed to be—a modern human. Part of being a modern human meant that you didn't wait for Justin to show up. You just happened to be in his path when he did. So, in an effort to be like my contemporaries, I pretended to be engrossed in the class's textbook. When he passed, he'd stop

and say “Hi,” or maybe something cooler like “Hey.” I’d lift a casual finger as if to say *Give me a minute* before looking up as if unaware who had been standing there.

Yeah—that was what a modern human looked like. Calculatedly casual.

Besides, I didn’t need to be too modern, because—not to sound full of myself—I was cute. Not gorgeous, mind you, but cute. I had a kind of Reese-Witherspoon-in-*Legally-Blonde* or Sarah-Michelle-Gellar-in-*Buffy* vibe going for me. I had a cute but confident yet somehow helpless aura to me that I’d cultivated over the centuries of being a vampire.

I had to. It was how I hunted.

During that time, I had two main shticks to lure in my prey. The first one I called *Cute and Helpless*, and it went like this: “Oh my, Mister Big-and-Strong, it is dark outside and I’m scared. Do you mind walking me home?” That was good when I wanted a quick meal without all the fuss of screaming and running.

The second technique was reserved for when I was in a playful mood: *Cute and Terrified*. In that routine, I’d find some dark alley or secluded place and start screaming for dear life. Eventually, some macho guy came running and, well, let’s just say that there was some screaming and running on his part. I’d play cat-and-mouse with him for a bit before, you know ... eating.

I’ll admit it: I was a real bitch back then. But part of me being human again was atoning for all the bad I did when I was the monster who went bump in the night.



The other students shuffled out of the class, but no Justin. No worries. He had sat in the front of the class, so it made sense that it would take him a while to get to me. But when the auditorium went quiet, I dared a glance and saw that everyone was gone. Everyone including Professor Hayes. I was totally alone.

Except for the kid from Africa, who stared at me from two rows down. Evidently, I wasn’t cute enough for Justin to stop and talk to me.

Disappointed, I packed my stuff and stood up. As I did, the kid—who was totally checking me out, by the way, and not in a *cute* kind of way, but in a *creepy-stalker* way—kept his eyes on me. It felt like he was looking *through* me, rather than at me.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I may be human, but I wasn’t helpless. I knew things—like where all the major arteries were and which nerves crippled your prey versus the ones that absolutely paralyzed them. Plus, in my travels, I studied a variety of martial arts. A lot. I figured that I was probably one of a handful of humans with such a wide range of styles, and I’d had hundreds of years during which to practice them. But despite knowing what I was capable of, my heart still raced when I met his gaze and said in the harshest tone I could muster, “What?”

The guy didn’t flinch. He just sniffed the air and said, “You should have stood up.”

“What? When?”

“You know when.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just a girl. A *human* girl.”

“Sure you are,” he said.

“I am,” I repeated as I slung my bag over my shoulder, leaving the room as fast as I could—and feeling his eyes on me the whole way.



Out in the main hall, I saw Justin mulling about with his McConnell Hall buddies. They jokingly called themselves the Omega Omega Omega (O³ for short) Bros. Their little gang were legends on campus for throwing the biggest and baddest parties.

I think they got their name because the Latin letter *Omega* is mistakenly associated with the Apocalypse. You know—God saying He was the Alpha and Omega and all that. And given that the gods leaving were an apocalypse of sorts, I guess they were tripling down on the rhetoric. I kinda wanted to tell them that Omega didn’t mean *the end*, but rather the concept of God being the Alpha and Omega was to give Him a cyclical, renewing nature. You know, circle-of-life kind of stuff. The gods leaving made that Biblical quote kind of meaningless, anyway. But these guys were teenagers on the cusp of adulthood—they were far more interested in the cool factor of the name than anything else. Who was I to burst their bubble?

Besides—Justin made the O³s cool. He made everything cool.

The O³ Bros were standing in a line, handing out flyers alongside an Incan apu who was in the history class with us. They were jostling each other, seeming to be having a good time. It seemed Professor Hayes’ warning that we should all get along was unnecessary. Here were three humans and an Incan apu—an Other belonging to a religion that was now ancient history—and they were getting on just fine.

I tried to position myself so that Justin would hand me one of the flyers, but instead, I was intercepted by the apu. Apus were Incan nature spirits and were usually associated with a place—a forest, a river, even a town. These spirits were defenders. If you ever caused trouble in a place protected by one of these guys, you were in for one hell of a fight.

Up close the apu looked like a normal human except for one, eerie difference: he was made of rock. I don’t mean like the Thing in *Fantastic Four*, nor do I mean he was carved from stone like a gargoyle. His skin was the color of a cave floor, like it was made from slate, with tiny ridges that swooped along his forearm, giving it a weathered look.

But that wasn’t the strangest or most captivating part of him. No, that was reserved for his eyes. It is said that the eyes are windows to the soul—but this apu’s eyes were more like actual windows to the outside. Like I was sitting in a tunnel looking outside to the clear blue, endless sky. Beautiful,

eerie, intense.

The apu handed me a flyer and our fingers briefly touched. His skin didn't only look like a rock, it felt like it, too. Hard, rigid, like touching a moving stone. What's more, he had dust on his skin, and as I took the flyer a little bit of sand rolled down its front. This guy flaked sand like some humans flaked dandruff.

I read the flyer:

O³ cordially invites you to
THE END OF THE WORLD
When the gods left, they started an apocalypse.
We aim to finish it.

The O³ party—the first big party of the semester—was two days from now on the anniversary of the gods' GrandExodus.

And I was invited.

“So—you in?” His voice had an echo to it, like he was talking in a cave or something. It was a bit unsettling, because generally when one echo was present, all the ambient sounds echoed too. But here, it was only him. The general shuffle of students milling about was perfectly normal.

“Your voice ...” I said.

He smiled, like his voice was something that got him a lot of attention from ... well ... the girls. I guess we all have a shtick—and his was to impress the impressionable with his resonance. “I'm a cave apu—caves have echoes, hence my voice,” he reverberated. “Actually I was one of the twelve sacred apus of Cusco.” When I gave him a blank look, he followed up with, “Cusco was the capital of the Incan Empire in the fifteenth century.”

“Ahh, so a big deal. Five hundred years ago.”

“Oh, yeah—very big deal five hundred years ago,” he chuckled. Sticking out his hand, he said, “I'm Sal.”

“Oddly normal name for a guy like you, wouldn't you say?”

He gave me a shy smile and said, “My real name's Salkantay, as in the highest peak in the Vilcabamba mountain region. You know—the Peruvian Andes.”

I nodded. I'd been there. Granted, that was a hundred and eighty years ago, but still, I'd seen the place.

Sal closed his sky-like eyes for just a second, but I swear it felt like night had suddenly fallen. Then, opening them, a light sky with big puffy clouds returned. “Anyway,” he said, almost

embarrassed, “the guys thought it was best to give me a more, ahhh, human name. You see Nate over there—he came up with Sal.” He pointed at the shortest of the Bros, a kid with brown hair cut in a buzz, and I could see genuine affection in those impossibly beautiful eyes of his. “I think they meant it to be ironic. Something so average for someone who looks so different. But I can tell you that I am very honored to be given such a normal name. It means they don’t see me as an Other, but as a friend.”

He’s right. The fact that those guys teased him by giving him such a boring name means they accepted him as one of them.

“Boring name?”

Damn it—talking out loud again. I could feel my cheeks flush with embarrassment. “ ‘Sal’ certainly isn’t Algernon or Constantine ... so yeah, boring.”

“Yeah, but these days I’ll take boring over the alternative.”

“I suppose,” I said.

“So, the party,” he said, tapping the flyer in my hands and sending another wave of sand down the paper. “It’s this Friday. Will you come?”

“Maybe ...” I said, throwing in as much coyness as I could.

Evidently, the coyness didn’t take, because he said, “Great, see you then,” and went on to hand another flyer to three girls behind me.

I folded the flyer and put it in my purse. I waved at Justin. He gave me a subtle nod as he continued to play wrestle with Nate without losing stride. If anything were to happen between Justin and me, it wouldn’t be now. And so, taking that as my cue, I headed out to the main campus, where I hesitated at the threshold. My foot nervously hovered just behind the line where the shade met the light. Like I said—old habits do die hard.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the light. Even though I knew I was human, I still breathed a sigh of relief that I didn’t burst into a ball of flames.

Yay, me!

Chapter 3

BEGGARS EVIDENTLY CAN BE CHOOSERS & EVEN COOL KIDS CAN BE AWKWARD

The sun didn't disintegrate me—so at least one thing was going my way today. I know it's irrational for me to be scared of natural light, but you have to understand that I was a vampire one minute and then a human the next, while fang-deep in some vicar's neck. It was like someone flipped a switch. *On*—vampire. *Off*—human.

If the *vampire* switch could be switched off, for all I knew it could be switched back on just as suddenly. And if I happened to be outside ... Great balls of flame *à la moi*!

I really should start walking around with an umbrella.

Just when that thought occurred to me, my eyes were drawn to the large oak tree in the center of the quad, beside that GoneGods-awful statue of the university founder, where I spotted three human hockey players tormenting some homeless guy. Except, given his unearthly pale white skin and ruby red eyes, this homeless man wasn't a man at all. He was an Other. A type of Other I'd never seen before.

I was pretty hip with Others—able to recognize most of them on sight, thank you very much—but this one alluded me. He didn't even have any of the telltale signs as to what religion or folklore he belonged to. There was no wispy mustache so typical of Chinese traditions, no protruding lower-jaw tusks most Japanese demons had and no animalistic and oddly two-dimensional attributes you found in most Egyptian Others.

Instead, he—I *think* he was a “he”—wore baggy white pants that were scuffed and dirty but when clean would have matched his impossibly white skin. He had a long-sleeve dirty white shirt on that looked more like undergarments than a proper top. His hair was also the same white as his skin, and because the coloring matched so perfectly, it looked more like strands of skin on his head than actual dead-skin-cells-and-keratin hair. In fact, the only thing he had on him that wasn't white was his cane—an oak-wood, crooked staff that looked too flimsy to actually support someone's body weight. Not that he had much weight to him. He was absolutely emaciated. The term skin-and-bones didn't do him justice. It was more like skin-*sundried*-on-bones. Poor guy must've been dying from hunger.

The lead human—a largish guy with black hair and the kind of nose that looked like it had been broken, set wrong, then broken again—kicked the homeless guy. “Get out of here, you freak!”

A second human—a smaller, skinny guy with blond hair tied back in a ponytail that, when he

looks at pictures of himself when he is older, will be totally embarrassing—said, “Bad enough they let these freaks enroll in the school, but now we have to put up with their vagrants, too. Oh, *hell* no!” He emphasized this by spitting on the Other.

That was the last straw. I ran down the steps of the building, over to the tree, and grabbed the skinny guy. Using a move I learned from a judo master in Kyoto some hundred-and-fifty years ago, I pulled him back so that he fell over his own feet and tumbled backward.

I put myself between the other two humans and the Other and, summoning a real gem that I probably got from *Degrassi: The Next Generation* or *Beverly Hills, 90210*, said, “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” Stupid really, because *I* was picking a fight with them, and all three of these guys were way bigger than me. I really had to work on my vernacular.

The biggest one pointed at me and said, “Get out of our way, little girl. Otherwise—”

I grabbed his finger and twisted. This wasn’t a move from any martial art I knew, but more something I used against my little brother when I was human—three hundred years ago, sure, but it still did the trick. The big guy cried out in pain and tried to punch me with his free hand. I pulled back and kicked his chin, forcing his left leg out and his right knee down. Then when we were about eye-level, I punched him. Hard. In the nose.

There was a sickening *crunch!* Given how little power my punches usually packed—since I became human, at least—I must’ve been right about his nose being broken before. The thing crumpled like a paper cup. He dropped to the ground, blood pouring out of him.

His friend, a slightly smaller version of him, sized me up and decided to charge.

Using a move I learned from an aikido master in San Francisco (about forty years ago if you’re keeping track), I used his own momentum against him, guiding his body into the wall behind me. He hit face-first and dropped to his knees.

The ponytail guy stood up, saw his downed buddies and ran. The other two managed to collect themselves from the grass, the bigger guy still clutching his blood-gushing nose, and followed their friend. I half expected them to say something like “You haven’t see the last of us!” or “We’ll get you, just you wait and see!” but I didn’t get any of those cliché gems as they ran away.

Looking around to see if there were any other threats, I saw that a bunch of people were looking at me from all around the quad. And not just students. Professors, Others—heck, even Justin Truly was watching from the steps of the Arts Building across the quad. Suddenly, several of them started clapping, then hooting, then *cheering*.

I guess standing up for this Other was a ... good thing?

I realized something, blushing as my peers and professors clapped me on the back. I may not be the bee’s knees or smooth or even the cat’s pajamas, but I was heroic ... and in this new GoneGod world, that seemed to count for a lot.



After I gave a few bows and enthusiastic thumbs up, people went about their usual business. I turned to the homeless Other, fished through my bag and pulled out a granola bar that had been sitting at its bottom for weeks. I handed it to the guy, half-expecting him to eat it cellophane and all.

But he didn't. Instead, he read the wrapper in detail and, breathing a sigh of relief, handed the unopened granola bar back. "Thank you," he said.

"You can have it. I mean—eat it." I tried to hand it back.

The strange Other looked at me with a confused expression on his face. "I already did." He groaned. "Not very good."

"OK ..." I said with trepidation. I had to admit, though, that this guy looked a little better after having read the package. I was beginning to wonder if this weird Other didn't eat granola. Or oats. Or whatever this supposed nature bar was made of. Made sense—after all, you would no more give a rabbit steak than a lion a carrot. For some Others, eating mortal food was deadly. Maybe that's why this poor guy was so emaciated. Human food just didn't work for him.

"So, no granola?"

He shook his head. "No granola," he whispered.

"So what can you eat?"

"The truth?" The poor guy was so weak that he was having trouble speaking.

"Yeah, the truth," I said, trying to throw in as much empathy as I could. It was possible that this kind of Other ate something very unappealing to humans. Kappa ate algae. Pixies considered maggots a delicacy. And succubae ate— Well, succubae drew nourishment from sex. Besides, who was I to judge? For three hundred years I lived entirely off of human blood. Let she who is without sin cast the first stone. Stones firmly in pocket.

Being a bonified *Homosapien* and law-abiding citizen meant there was no way I could have sustained myself on pig and cow blood. Believe me, I tried, and it nearly killed me. But that's another story. As for these newly mortal Others, algae, maggots, and sex weren't something you could get at your local grocery store or farmer's market, so kappa learned to eat kale, pixies substituted nuts for maggots and succubae bought naughty mags for a quick snack. It must have been a rough existence, and there is rarely a day that goes by that I don't silently thank the GoneGods for taking their magic and turning me human again.

I looked down at him with an understanding smile, waiting for his answer, but the strange Other just groaned in response. OK—so be it. I took a mental picture of the guy, determined to figure out what he did eat and said, "I'll be back tomorrow. With real food. I promise."

His eyes glistened with gratitude.



I looked at my watch and saw that it was quarter past one. My next class started in fifteen minutes—

no real chance to go to the library now. Especially because I had no idea where my next class was. I was really, really, really starting to regret not going to the orientation meet-up, but it was at eight in the morning—and I hadn't seen that ungodly hour in over three hundred years.

My map was a mess, especially because I had no idea where I was and there was no convenient “You are here” mark, no “Oak Tree Quad” conveniently labeled. Just when I was resolving myself to missing my second class on my first day, a hand snatched the map out of my hands.

“Hey,” I said, getting ready to kick someone in the shins ... until I saw who had grabbed the map. My demeanor immediately changed and I tried not to swoon too hard. “Hey, Justin.”

“That was pretty amazing of you,” he said.

“What was?”

“How you kicked those guys' asses. Total jerks, by the way.”

“Oh, that. They were being bullies. I hate bullies.”

“Me too.”

Oh, great. Something we have in common, I meant to think—but wound up saying out loud. *Girl, get a grip!*

“Yeah, we do, I suppose,” he said, eyeing me curiously. “I take it that outside of being scared of light, you're also a bit quirky, too.”

“You could say that,” I blushed. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” he said, “I like quirky. And I like cats ... so, we're good here.”

I felt my blush darken three shades.

“So—where are you going?”

“Going?” I said in an absentminded tone.

He held up the map.

“Oh, yeah—class. I've got Literary Theory in Alternative Cultures now, but I have no idea where I'm going.”

“That will be over here.” He pointed at a building on the map. “Here—I'll walk you.” He held out his arm like gentlemen used to do when inviting dames to dance in the 1800s. How retro of him.

Cute and helpless—works every time.

He looked at me, his eyebrow doing that dance again. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, nothing.”

I took his arm, and as I did, his O³ Bros sang out from the top of the hill: “*Justin and Weird Girl sitting in a tree!*” Neither of us said anything, but we both looked up and smiled. This would have been a perfect moment ... had it not been for the kid from West Africa staring down at me from behind the others on the hill.

That guy was really starting to give me the creeps.

Chapter 4

LIBRARIES DON'T JUST HAVE BOOKS, YOU KNOW

My second class went a lot smoother than my first one. No mishaps with cute football players, no speaking my thoughts aloud and drawing all the class's attention on me. And no jumping at the sight of light. I'm particularly proud of that last one.

With class over, I checked my schedule: no more classes today. In fact, my next class wasn't until three p.m. the next day. Sheesh ... university life. I had fifteen hours of lectures and that was it. What was a girl supposed to do with all this free time?

I hefted the monstrosity my professor called a textbook, considered all the articles that were supplemental material (plus, let's not forget the five essays in this class alone) and realized that if I wanted to do well here, I knew exactly how I was supposed to use the rest of my time.

Reading, writing ... and not sleeping.

It was day one and I already knew that all the parties, boys and fun that *Animal House*, the *Van Wilder* series and *Revenge of the Nerds* promised were lies.

As they say in my native Scotland: Nay bother. I wanted to do well. I *needed* to do well.

I will do well here, I told myself, *even if it kills me*.

Time to hit the books. After, that was, I kept my promise to that pale white Other and figured out what he ate.

Either way, it was off to the library for me.



Finding the library was a lot easier than finding my last class. For one thing, it was the biggest building on campus, and for another, you could see all those books through the windows. No map necessary.

I walked inside and to the directory. In the old days—and mind you, by “old days” I mean five years ago, just before the Others came—you couldn't find an entire library section dedicated just to mythical creatures. That stuff was usually distributed between sections: the classics would house information about the Greeks and Romans; the Asian Studies section would have all the stuff about Japanese, Chinese, Indian and other Asian countries and religions; and if your library had a children's

section (this university, surprisingly enough, did not), that's where you'd find most other fairytales. But these days, all those books were collected into one department, aptly called: Other Studies. *Bingo*, I thought. Or did I say it out loud?



The Other Studies library was so big that it had its own building. An old converted church that was on the main campus right next to the Arts Building. It was easily half a football field, three floors high, the upper levels wrap-around balconies looking out into the center of the library where all the study tables sat. Dozens of bookshelves lined both sides of the study area and, from my angle, I could see that several dozens more shelves were on the upper levels.

I'd never seen so many books in one place.

I didn't know what heaven was like—and now that it's closed, I guess I never will. But I imagined it to be this place.

When I was a vampire, I spent a lot of time in libraries. This was before television, remember, and I was really into reading, devouring every book I could get my hands on. I did also eat the occasional bookworm—I don't know what it was, but humans who were into reading tasted sweet, like sucking on a mango.

So walking into the place, my heels lightly tapping on old, worn marble, its soft tones echoing off of wooden shelves that housed well-loved books—well, for the first time since I'd become a university student, I felt at home. I closed my eyes, lifted my hands from my side and spread out my fingers so that I could absorb this place all the more.

Of course, I thought, *I'm not really absorbing anything, but it still feels good to try to soak it all in and—*

“Ahem.”

I opened my eyes to see several people sitting at the study tables staring at me. A few were suppressing giggles, but most just gawked at me, like I was a freak or something. And they were right—I was talking out loud again, and according to TV and movies, only freaks and the criminally insane talked to themselves.

There was a second “Ahem” and I turned to see an old man standing near an old oak desk. He was staring at me over the rim of his reading glasses, his bald head reflecting the lights overhead. He did up the top button of his jacket and pointed a weathered finger at a sign.

PLEASE BE RESPECTFUL OF THOSE STUDYING.

“Sorry,” I whispered and walked to the back of the room, now very conscious of the tapping my heels made with every step.



When I made it to the back of the library, I saw that books weren't the only things this massive library housed. Toward the back of the main floor were numerous rows of display cases. I walked over and found that they housed hundreds of artifacts. Some of them I recognized: an old Bleeder vampire's pricked their victims with when they wanted to slowly drain them overnight; a spiked silver collar mages used to control their pet werewolves; an obsidian ceremonial blade once used for human sacrifice; a Horn of Abundance that the desert-wandering nasnas blew to summon their nightly feasts.

They even had several of King Solomon's rings, each of their rubies trapping a protective spirit that would do the wearer's bidding. I wondered if the rings still possessed the trapped spirits ... not that it mattered. It would take powerful magic to release them—and powerful magic was in short supply these days.

But the artifacts and rings were just the tip of the mythical-artifacts iceberg. Most of this stuff I had no idea about, but this much was clear—a lot of Others donated a lot of their stuff to this place.

I walked among the artifacts, some impossibly old, others once supremely magical in nature, in awe until I wove my way to the back display, where I saw something that I never expected to see again in my life. Right there in a display case that hung on the back wall was a full Scottish uniform from the late 1800s, complete with tartan, ghillie brogues, sporran, kilt pin and dirk. I don't think it would have stood out so much if it wasn't for the fact that it was my clan's tartan—when I had a clan to call my own.

But it was more than just seeing the old crisscrossed bands of color that made up my clan's pattern. You see, at the foot of the display sat a faceplate that I hadn't seen in centuries. The faceplate façade covered the wearer's face from hairline to chin, and because it was made of iron, it also protected the wearer from attacks. That thing was built for battle. Not that you would assume so by looking at it. It was designed to look like a baby's face, complete with rosy cheeks and an innocent smile that a fool would interpret as friendly. I recognized the mask immediately. It was my *father's* ... and what he wore the night he hunted me down in the Grey Friar's abbey.

The night I killed him.

As I took a step closer to the display case, still lost in thought, I suddenly sensed a presence behind me. *What the—?*

“Can I help you with anything?”

I turned. It was just the old librarian, standing directly behind me. The old guy either had the prowess of a cat or I was too distracted to sense him behind me—probably the latter, from the look of him. Either way, he scared the bejesus out of me.

“What?” I yelped.

He lifted a finger over his lips, then in a whisper repeated, “Can I help you with anything?”

He was so close that I could smell the mint coolness of a lozenge still on his breath. He also had that old man smell to him, but not in that *I’m-over-medicated-sick-and-waiting-to-die* kind of smell. This smell said, *This body has seen and done a lot in its years, and those experiences have been soaked into my bones*. Hey, don’t judge me—as a vampire, smell was very important to me. Like a wine connoisseur’s nose, mine told me a lot about the person I was about to eat.

Old habits, and all that.

“No talking, remember?” I mouthed, giving him a serious look.

At this, he let out a muted laugh; a warm smile overtook his features. “There are degrees to which a rule can be bent without breaking it. If we are respectful, no one will mind our whispers.”

“Oh, OK,” I mouthed and turned back to the display.

He walked up to the hanging uniform and adjusted his glasses as he took a closer look. “Ahh ... this is an old tartan, old indeed. It was donated to the library by the Divine Cherubs—an ancient order of vampire hunters. It belongs to their founder, one Eoghan McMahon from the clan—”

“Blane.”

He lifted a curious eyebrow. “Correct. But that is not a common clan, and the crest had been modified to represent his mission to vanquish demons. How did you ...?”

“I’m half Scottish. My dad was really into our clan’s history. I grew up learning all the patterns.”

“I see,” he said, still wearing a skeptical look. “Well, then you have heard of the great Eoghan McMahon ... it is believed he was the first Scottish vampire hunter, and the man who ultimately created the Order of the Divine Cherub.” He walked up to the display and pointed at the mask. “A baby’s face. Or more to the point—a cherub’s face. Hence the order’s name. Legend has it they wore masks like this when hunting. Angels to exorcise demons, you see.”

I sighed in grief, but the old librarian must have interpreted my exhalation as one of a bored teenager. “Don’t dismiss them too quickly,” he said. “After all, we now know that vampires and demons are real. The Order of the Divine Cherub fought them in the shadows for centuries.” The old man tapped the glass, then gave a low chuckle. “Of course, now they mostly meet in log cabins, drink whisky and talk about the good old days—but make no mistake, back in said good old days, they were a force to be reckoned with.”

I know that better than most, I thought—and did not speak aloud, thankfully.

The old librarian pointed at my father’s tartan. “Eoghan McMahon,” he said with reverence in his voice. “Legend has it his daughter was turned and—”

“And in his grief and rage, he dedicated his life to eliminating the vampire kind from the Earth. Yep—I know all about it,” I said with a sad familiarity. “A lifetime spent avenging his daughter, only to be taken down by her in Edinburgh on the night of Hogmanay.”

The librarian nodded, his look of skepticism returned. “Scotland’s New Year’s. He did disappear

on that night, never to be seen or heard from again ... but there is no record of what happened that night. As far as the historians know, he simply disappeared. Of course, rumors abounded, but ...” He took a step forward so that he could get a good look at me. “Is there something you can contribute to his history? Something that his descendants know but has not necessarily been adopted into canon?”

“Ahh, no,” I lied. “It was just what my dad said happened. You know—a romantic ending to the vampire hunter. That kind of stuff.”

“Your father sounds like a poet.”

“You have no idea,” I said, looking at the tartan. When I was a vampire, the sight of his mask stirred no emotion in me. But now that I was human again ... I had to fight to hold in the tears. I don’t think I would have been able to do it, except for the old librarian. I couldn’t risk him suspecting what I was.

So I took in a deep breath and, summoning all the cold-hearted steel I could find in my soul, asked, “How did you get this?”

“It was donated, just as all the artifacts here were,” the old librarian said. “Most of this came from Others who now live among us—little keepsakes that were on their person when the gods left. And some of it had been passed down generation to generation, humans who had brushes with the creatures behind the veil. But now that the veil is gone, I guess they no longer felt the need to hold on to these artifacts and donated them to this display. Perhaps it helped them move on with their new lives.”

“I see. But you don’t know who donated this particular tartan, do you? So I can tell my father,” I quickly added. The truth was I was curious—I had no siblings, and as for my mom ... when I turned and my father insisted on hunting me, I did the most passive-aggressive thing I could do to him—I turned my mother, too. It was one thing losing me, but losing the love of his life to his only daughter, that must have hurt him very deeply. Exactly what Vampire Katrina McMahon was trying to do.

The old librarian looked at the display’s accompanying plaque. “It doesn’t say. I can look it up for you, but I’ll have to dig into the archives. I would be willing to do that for you later tonight.”

“That would be grand,” I said.

“Grand? That word was antiquated when I was a child.”

I blushed. “What can I say, I watch a lot of old movies.”

“I see,” he said. “Now that we have had our little chat, perhaps you can answer my original question.”

“What’s that?”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”



I told the old librarian about the strange, pale Other—what he looked like, what he wore—and as I

spoke, the elderly man picked up book after book, leafing through them as he tried to find the creature I described. After several books were pulled down from their shelves, the old librarian put his finger on a page from an old leather-bound tome and asked, “Pale white, you said?”

“Yep—I’ve seen ghosts with more color.”

“You said that he had a cane with him?”

“Not a very good one. It looked like it would crack under his weight—even if he only weighs sixty pounds soaking wet.”

“So it might not be a cane at all.”

“Possibly, but he holds on to it like it’s the only thing he has left in this world. Whatever it is, he values it.”

The librarian turned his book around and showed me a picture of a pale white Other riding a pale white horse, bow in hand. “Is it possible that the staff isn’t a staff at all, but rather an unstrung bow?”

I took the book from him to study the image closer. The creature on the horse was white, but unlike the creature I’d helped, this being was proud, strong and slightly overweight. “I guess,” I said uncertainly.

Coming around to look at the book with me, the librarian said, “Mergen. A Turkish being of wisdom. I believe that we’ve found your Other.”

“But it says here that Mergen was a god.”

“So?”

“So the gods are gone.”

“Ahh. Therein lies the rub—the gods are gone. But not all their *avatars* are.”

“Excuse me?”

“Avatars, Earthly representations of the gods. Most gods did not have avatars, but the ones that did often left theirs behind. After all, why would they need an Earthly representative when there was no guarantee that where they were going would have an Earth?”

“I know what an avatar is, I’ve seen the movie. So these avatars, are they like the gods’ Firsts?”

“Not it is my turn to say, ‘Excuse me?’ ”

I laughed softly. I was starting to like this old guy. “In a duel, when you were either too scared or too busy to participate yourself, you sent in your First. This guy is the god Mergen’s First.”

“Exactly. A First—that term is quite tragic, especially in this context.”

“Ahh, my dad—”

“The romantic.”

“Yeah, him. He was also a history buff. You know, one of those guys who’d dress up like a knight on the weekends and go ...”

The librarian nodded, smiling. “LARPing. Live Action Role Playing. I know the type.”

I diverted my gaze back to the book, pretending to be embarrassed rather than a liar. I wasn’t used to lying so much. If I ever needed to get out of a tight situation before, I usually just ripped off

someone's head and had a quick snack.

I looked at the image of the proud being riding that magnificent horse. "How sad."

"How sad indeed," the librarian echoed. I looked up, confused by his response. He gave me a knowing smile and said, "How sad that a creature, once-upon-a-time proud and important, be reduced to a beggar, unable to defend himself against three scared human teenagers."

"Unable, or unwilling," I said.

"Hmm?" He lifted an old, gray eyebrow. "Elaborate."

"This Other's bow tells us he's a warrior, and myth tells us he's a sage—in other words, the wise warrior. And what do all wise warriors have in common? They only fight when there are no other options. Mergen knows that if he retaliates against those bullies, he will only scare them more. So they'll come back with more force, and it will never end. He also knows he can't kill them. Not in the GoneGod world. That would only cause more fear, more hatred."

"So he takes the beating."

"Because he is wise enough to know that in the long run, that is his best option."

"That hardly seems fair," the librarian said. "And not every Other agrees. If you watch the news, we see plenty of Others fighting back."

"Which is good for the individual, but not the group. Overall, they're making it worse for other Others. The Others have to first prove they're not a threat before we can start talking about what's *fair*."

"Indeed," the librarian sighed. "Fairness will only come to them after they endure much that is not fair. So if an Other cannot fight back using their fists and weapons, how, then, do they fight back? After all, they cannot exist as humanity's whipping dogs forever."

"No, they can't," I agreed.

"So?"

I don't know what to tell this old librarian, I thought. It's not like I have all the answers. Besides, what he's asking doesn't have an answer. Not yet. The Others will have to wait and see what happens and—

"I disagree," he said, eyeing me curiously. "And I don't appreciate being called 'this old librarian.' "

Crap, I'd been talking out loud again.

"Then again—I *am* old, and a librarian ..."

"Ahh, I'm sorry. I meant to *think* that, not say it."

"Doesn't make me less old."

I chuckled at this, glad he wasn't taking what I'd said too seriously. "Granted. But I don't know your name, and the 'old' thing ... well, I tend to think out loud. A lot, and not on purpose. Sorry about that. It's a bad habit that I'm working on—"

"Please don't," he said, his eyes serious. "Those thoughts you *accidentally* share are always the

honest ones. This world needs more people saying what they think and thinking what they say. And as for my name: Old Librarian will do ... for now.” He put out his hand.

I never thought about it that way before, but he was right. Over my three hundred years, I spent a lot of time without any living person in sight. Talking to myself was always a way to combat the loneliness. But what came out tended to upset me and I’d have long, bitter arguments—my voice unwaveringly honest, versus my rationalizing, compromising inner thoughts.

I looked at his hand for a long moment before taking it in mine. “Nice to meet you, Old Librarian.”

“And nice to meet you, Peculiar Girl. Now that those pleasantries are out of the way, I wish to disagree with your earlier point. ‘Wait and see’ is *not* all they can do. Far from it.”

“I don’t see what else they *can* do. Not without causing a lot of harm to themselves.”

“True, change is hard. Still, there are ways to minimize the ire they will inevitably draw on themselves as they work for a brighter future. Organized protest and passive resistance, to name a few.”

“Like the Suffragettes and Civil Rights movements. Like Gandhi. Mandela.”

“Yes, but those are grand examples. Back when I ran my congregation, I saw many brave men and women who fought for equal rights in small but very meaningful ways. There were plenty of Rosa Parks refusing to go to the back of the bus that never made it to the news. Plenty of brave souls who stood up to bullying without ever being recognized for their bravery. And no single one of them invoked change. But the sum of their deeds ... that is another story altogether.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, but I nodded anyway. I’d mull over his words later. Turning back to the book, I said, “If you’re right and he is Mergen’s avatar, we still don’t know what he eats. All it says is that he’s Turkish and that he’s the deity of Wisdom and Abundance.”

“That’s a start, isn’t it?”

“I guess.” I pulled my purse over my shoulder. I supposed figuring out what that poor Other ate would take some time. “Thank you,” I said, and started for the door. I stopped with one more burning question I had to ask. “You referred to your congregation. So you were a priest before, you know, you became the Old Librarian?” I said, smiling.

He stared at me over the rims of his glasses. “Who said I am no longer a priest?”

“You did. You referred to your congregation in the past tense.”

“Indeed—but only because the flock has thinned after God’s GrandExodus. But His absence doesn’t mean that I don’t have faith anymore. Quite the opposite, in fact. I now have *proof* that the god I devoted my life to is real.”

“And gone,” I said, regretting my words instantly. I was being rude.

He nodded at this, giving me a patient smile. “And gone—you are quite correct. But my faith was not contingent on His presence before He left. That has not changed just because I know He is gone.”

“So why *have* it? Faith? Sounds like an unnecessary burden.”

“Perhaps—but then again, our past defines our future, no matter how hard we try to bury it.”

I looked over at my father's tartan. "Maybe. But some of that stuff is best left in the past."

"Perhaps. But then again, perhaps not. You have a keen mind. Tell me, do you have a campus job, Miss ...?"

"I thought we weren't doing names, Old Librarian."

"I promise to call you Peculiar Girl, no matter what your name is. I ask for different reasons." He paused, waiting expectantly.

I obliged. "Darling. Katrina Darling."

"What a pretty real name you have, Peculiar Girl," he smirked, not unkindly. "You have a keen mind, and your banter is something I think I would enjoy. Do you have a job? Or rather, would you like one?"

"A job?"

"I need someone to help me catalog and organize this place. The pay is abysmal and the job can take you into the wee hours of the night—but you will have unfettered access to all this." He gestured around him to the shelves of books bursting with knowledge and the display cases packed with history. "And perhaps we will have time to debate the past and contemplate the future while enjoying the present."

That would be nice, I thought. "I like working nights," I finally said. "I'm kind of an insomniac."

"Very well then. I shall put your name down as the new assistant librarian. Officially it is ten hours a week, which means I will only pay you for a fraction of the time you'll be working."

"Great," I said, wondering if *great* was the right response when basically agreeing to be an indentured slave.

"Great, indeed. Address?"

"Gardner Hall. Room zero-zero-one."

He wrote that down on a little notepad he'd pulled from his breast pocket and said, "You start tomorrow."

He stuck out his hand. I shook it, then headed to the door. At the threshold, I stopped. I wanted to turn around and tell him how he made this scared freshman feel welcome and how much I appreciated having not only a job but a bit of a purpose in my new life. But instead, all I mustered was an awkward "Ahh ... thanks," before leaving.

If I had known that would be the last time I'd see Old Librarian alive, I would have maybe tried to say something a little bit more meaningful.

And I would have asked him for his real name.

PART II

PROLOGUE

He stands perfectly still in the moonlit night, near the statue of the university founder. He is under the canopy of the large oak tree and is facing west because although it is near midnight, the moon has yet to fully rise. That will happen in the coming hour. For now, he stands and waits.

He waits for the moon.

And for it to call to him.

In the old days, he would have assumed the form of a hyena with his fellow pack members. They would have all faced west, just as he is now, together waiting for the moon to reach its apex. They would have then sung out to her in pitch-perfect unison, thanking her for her lunar light under which they would hunt.

They would praise her beauty and love her for being the mother of night.

Then the pack would let the frenzy of the hunt take over.

But that was years ago, before the gods left. Now that the gods are gone, his pack has disbanded. Some embraced their humanity. Some left the old lands to seek new opportunities in this new GoneGod world. Some refused to accept the change and still go out nightly to praise the moon goddess. And some could not handle the change, choosing forever-lasting death over this new life.

But Egya—Egya is different. A hybrid among his fellow hyenas. He chose to both embrace his humanity and honor his past. The gods may be gone—but the moon goddess still hangs above him. Of that much he is sure.



The moon is nearing her apex—in moments she will have fully risen. Egya is preparing his howl, summoning the low guttural hum within.

It is good that he is alone in this field. His roar is mighty and it would scare any human

unfortunate to happen by.

But just as he is about to unleash his howl, he sniffs someone approaching.

He does not need to see her to know who she is: the Other pretending to be a human. The one who lost her magic, just like him. Moving with the silence of an experienced predator, he stalks around the tree, out of her sight. Then he stands perfectly still, tracking her movements not with sight and only partially with hearing.

He mostly tracks her with smell. The gods may have taken his hyena form from him, but they did not take his superior sense of smell—not all of it, at least.

She stops by the statue, some trace of her former instinct telling her someone is near. But she embraces her human side far too much, and she suppresses her instincts, choosing to ignore them and move on rather than stay and explore possible dangers.

Egya lets out a low disapproving growl. Her past—her Otherness—it is a gift. A gift she denies.

And this angers the former were-hyena.

This angers him greatly.

PART III

Chapter 5

ROOMMATES RUMINATE

I got back to the dorms at dusk and saw with alarm that my dorm room door was open, which could only mean one of two things: I was being robbed, or my roommate had finally chosen to show up.

Reassuring myself that the old days of constantly being under attack were over, I walked to the threshold and looked in. When signing up for the dorms, I had two choices to make:

Would I accept a Co-Ed floor? *Check.*

And would I be happy having an Other roommate? *Check.*

The dorm admissions board put me on an all-girls floor (although the floors above were full of rowdy boys), but as for my second check, looking inside, I could clearly see they had taken me at my word. The person unpacking wasn't human.

Not by a long shot.

She was a bit taller than me with pointy ears and an impossibly perfect body. Athletes could work out all day and night and still not come close to the frame and muscle tone of this creature. I knew this right away because she was standing naked in my room. Other than that, she looked human enough, although no one would ever mistake her for one, unless they assumed she was a human twelve pies short of a baker's dozen. Her ... ahh ... *quirks* immediately disqualified her as a member of humanity.

I groaned as I watched her unpack her peculiar possessions. Of all the Others I could have been paired with, they had to put me in a room with a member of the fae—specifically, a changeling. A changeling currently severely messing up the feng shui vibes of my room.

She was stapling Astroturf to our walls.

Fae were obsessed with the outdoors; they drew their strength from the natural world. And changelings were of the warrior variety, which meant their homes needed to be of the earth and soil and loam, so they could easily heal themselves after a battle, or some hippie crap like that.

Not that that mattered anymore. For one thing, their gods—just like everyone else's gods—were gone. So no more glorious battles to heal from, and no more magical natural medicine. Besides, her roommate—me—wasn't fae. I was a human girl. OK—granted an ex-vampire human girl, but a human girl, nonetheless. I definitely wouldn't appreciate finding worms and fungus on the walls.

There was a wheel barrel in the center of my room with one of those large rolls of Astroturf used on football pitches. The changeling was using her unnaturally powerful body to unroll the bales and stick them to the walls. Mud was everywhere and the grass—which, I was tempted to remind her, was meant to be on the ground, *horizontal*—was falling onto the floor faster than she could put it up. Clearly, this frustrated the process, but she was damn persistent; she just sprayed the walls with water from a misting bottle, trying to get the soil to clump. Drops of dirty water were streaming down the walls and—

No way ... was that my brand new Hermes beige leather jacket on the floor?!

I darted in, picking it up, shaking it to get the dirt off.

She turned and gave me the biggest smile like she hadn't just destroyed our room with dirt and grass and staples. "Oh, hello!" she said. "I was wondering when you would make your entrance."

Not sure what my face looked like when she said that, but I'm sure it was a healthy mix of *incredulous* and *enraged*.

She didn't seem to notice, because she stuck out her hand and said with a lilting Irish accent, "I'm Deirdre."

I looked at her hand, not taking it. Honestly, I was more likely to bite it than shake it. After a long awkward moment, she retracted it, peering at her hand as if it had broken down. "The *Being Human* handbook said that humans greet one another with handshakes, but we did not. Did I do it wrong? Was I meant to wait for you to offer your hand because you were the new one to arrive? Or perhaps—"

"You didn't do it wrong," I said. Fae—sticklers for protocols. And this one was trying to learn *human* like an etiquette. "It's just that ..." I gestured helplessly around me.

"Oh, yes. I got these rolls of grass from something called a *hardware store*. Strange name, given the softness of the grass." She picked up a handful and took a deep breath in. "Perhaps you could aid me—I'm having trouble getting it to stick to the walls. You wouldn't happen to have the appropriate adhesive?"

When I shook my head, she handed me the staple gun.

I swear to the GoneGods I thought about shooting her with it.

But instead, like a good little ex-vampire, I put it on my desk, counted to three and asked, "And why do you want it to stick to the walls?"

"Decoration," she said. Her hands pointed at the walls, and I couldn't help but noticing her laboratory-perfect nipples pointed at me.

I looked back up at her face. GoneGodDammit, I wasn't going to have one of those cliché "college experiences" just because my roommate was a frigging supermodel—a supermodel that didn't seem to own a scrap of clothing.

"I'm pretty sure we're not allowed to staple the wall with grass," I said.

"We're not?" she said with genuine confusion.

"For one thing, we're not allowed to put holes in the walls—so that's a no to the staple gun." I

had to hand it to myself. I was remarkably calm, given how angry I was. “For another, we’re meant to keep our rooms clean. Which means no mud ... and definitely nothing that can grow mold.”

“But mold isn’t dirty—it’s natural, and the right kinds have many healing properties. Of course, there is poisonous mold. I used them to line my weapons and—”

“That’s a third thing we’re not allowed. Weapons.”

“Not even broadswords?” She turned away and bent over, giving me a perfect view of her ... well, let’s just say I’ve now seen the “dark side of the moon,” and it actually isn’t all that bad. Reaching under her bed, she pulled out this huge broadsword that would have made Braveheart’s rapier seem like a toothpick in comparison. “It’s more ceremonial than used in actual battle. That said, I did wield this when facing off against a horde of golems. Funny story—”

“No broadswords. No grass on the wall.”

“You mean no decorations at all? Even my poster?” She pointed her broadsword at the wall behind me—barely giving me time to duck out of the way—where a poster of Ryan Reynolds hung, stapled to the wall.

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yes,” she swooned, putting a hand on her breast—or her heart, I suppose. “He’s so handsome he is almost elf-like. One day I will be Mrs. Reynolds ...”

I rolled my eyes. Fae. Of their many-faceted quirks, falling in love with an image was probably their strangest. And the love was real. At least for them. I looked up at the poster in true sympathy. Ryan Reynolds would most likely be filing a restraining order against this changeling at some point in the future.

Then I looked at her perfect naked body and thought, *Then again, maybe not.*

Either way, that wasn’t my problem right now. My problem was that this changeling was tracking dirt everywhere. “I’m sorry to keep interrupting you,” I said, “but ...” I pointed at the ground around me.

She gave me a confused look.

“You’re going to have to clean all this up?” I clarified.

“Really?” she said, her voice full of despair.

“I don’t mind, but humans have rules and—”

“I broke them. First day here and I’m already screwing this up.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “Being mortal is hard,” she said, plopping herself onto her bed and sending up a fresh shower of loose soil.

I felt for her. Really, I did, despite the ruined jacket still in my hand. I was finding mortality hard, too, and I was *human* ... well, I was *born* human, at least. That gave me a lot more experience at it than her. I sat next to her and put a hand on her shoulder, still acutely aware of her nudity. Damn, even her skin felt like it was manufactured in a lab. “Mortality does bite, Deirdre—but I’m here to help. If you have any mortality questions, just ask me. I’ll steer you right.”

“You will?”

“Cross my heart.” I dropped my jacket back to the floor and made an *X* on my heart.

She looked at me curiously. Before she could ask, I said, “It’s a human expression. Means ‘I promise.’ A slightly old expression. Probably had its heyday thirty years ago, but—”

The changeling wrapped her arms around me and hugged me so tight I struggled to breathe. Damn, she was strong, too. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

I’d never been hugged by a naked fae before. It was nicer than I’d expected.

After a long second, she pulled away and put her hand over her heart—a common fae salute. “Thank you, human girl. In return for your generous offer, I give you my sword arm. This is my pledge to you. This is my ...” She loosened her fist and made an *X* over her left boob—erm, I mean her heart. “This is my heart-cross to you.”

Oh, yay ... day one and I’d already got a warrior fae as a protector.

Maybe college wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Chapter 6

DAYSTALKER, NIGHTWALKER

I helped my changeling roommate clean up and take everything outside, which involved convincing her first to put on some clothes and then not to sniff, pick at or eat the grass as we carried it outside. She really struggled with this last part; twice I caught her stuffing a handful of soil and grass into her pockets. It was slow work, but eventually we managed to get it all outside.

Unfortunately, we didn't manage to accomplish this before some of the other girls on the floor started to make fun of us. They mocked us from a safe distance (they, too, were acutely aware of Deirdre's powerful build) with comments like "Look at her *ears*" or "Eat dirt much?" Not particularly witty, but these humans were wary of picking a fight with Deirdre and, if they were totally honest with themselves, they were probably all jealous of how beautiful she was. The perfectly lithe body, high cheekbones, rosy cheeks, lush blond hair and inviting smile ... the perfect recipe for beauty. And they knew it.

So the girls stood in little clusters and watched us. Safety in numbers, I guess—schoolgirl bullying 101.

Only one of the girls broke away from a cluster of her peers to help out by giving Deirdre a plot of soil that had fallen out of the wheel barrel. She was a mousey little thing with amber hair and thick black glasses. She scurried away the second Deirdre said "Thank you." Deirdre looked hurt.

"They'll get used to you," I said. "And as soon as some more Others show up, you won't be the only freakshow on display here."

"Freak?" she asked. "What is this 'freak' you speak of?"

"You know—stranger, non-human, different. Freak."

"I see," she said and picked her wheel barrel back up. "We are freaks."

" 'We'?" I said, slightly offended.

"Me because I'm an Other. You because you help Others."

I sighed. "That's me, human freak at your service."



After helping Deirdre get the Astroturf out of our room, I left her to sweep up and went for a walk.

She was pretty upset having lost all her earth and grass, but she seemed to accept that this new GoneGod world had different rules. That said, I was pretty sure that I'd come home to her having stuffed her mattress with the leftover dirt—but at least I got most of it out of the room. Small victories.

Tomorrow, I'd figure out a way to get her to give up her broadsword. After that, we'd move on to the smaller stuff, like wearing clothes and how most of nature belonged outside.

Baby steps, Kat. Baby steps.

It was late—almost midnight—and most of the campus was closed up. The only place that was still open was Gerts, the campus bar, and given that it was a Tuesday night, even Gerts wouldn't be open much longer. Besides, I didn't feel like a drink. I *was* of the legal age—according to the moral law, in the province of Quebec, all you needed to be was eighteen.

I was nineteen.

By now, I'm sure you would correct me on that one: I was actually over three hundred years old. But the way I figured it, I was—biologically speaking—still only nineteen. I was turned at fifteen, so I figured when I returned to being human again, I would start aging from that point. I'd been human for four years since the GrandExodus—so four plus fifteen. Nineteen.

My math skills were impeccable. I was sure to make the Dean's list.

Anyway, that's how I saw it, but I wasn't sure how the rest of the world saw it. You see, ever since the Others came, moral law was challenged on multiple levels. Legal definitions had to be broadened and bastardized and reevaluated to include Earth's newest residents.

But society was still too busy dealing with angels, minotaurs, wendigos, avatars and all sorts of OnceImmortals. We half-breeds were largely ignored—partly because we were technically human, but mostly because we never went into the limelight. After centuries of hiding from humans, we were pretty good at confining ourselves to the darkness.



I walked down the hill toward the university main campus and took a deep breath. Autumn was on its way, which, being in Montreal, meant that real cold was coming. Mont-Royal was a university town with four major universities within its city limits. I went to McJames—the best of the bunch (or at least that's what other McJames students say).

Mont-Royal itself wasn't a bad place to live. European feel with North American sensibility; friendly people, not too smug; lots of bars, clubs and other places for frustrated locals to let off some steam. When I was a vampire, this would have been ideal hunting grounds. As a student, Mont-Royal was ideal party grounds. Funny how the two go hand-in-hand.

But partying and hunting aside, what made Mont-Royal special was that it was built on (and around) an inactive volcano. I wish it were a *dead* volcano, but it wasn't. Not that anyone was

worried, though. Montreal's volcano hadn't shown any signs of activity since I was born—yeah, three centuries ago. That was a good indicator that it was safe enough, right?

Then again ...

Four years ago, mythical creatures barely showed any activity on Earth, either.

And look at where we were now.

But still, a volcano was a volcano, and the locals, several decades ago, decided to hedge their it-won't-erupt bets by putting a cross at its very top. A Christian, neon-lit, bigger-than-an-upright-bus, vampire-burning cross.

And *this* was the city I chose to move to?

What's more—I actually lived *on* the volcano. If you walked up the hill, past the Royal Vic Hospital, past the McJames football stadium, you entered McJames University dorm territory. If this volcano erupted soon, us freshmen would be the first victims. Seems fitting, if you think about it.

McConnell, Molson, Gardner and Douglas Halls all sat about halfway up the hill with a large circular cafeteria that was cutting-edge architectural design ... in the 1950s. I lived in Gardner—the dorm that was the absolute closest you could find a residence to that beacon of a cross.

Every time I trekked up the hill, staring at that cross, I would just think to myself that moving here was some inner penitence or something. You don't spend three centuries as a murderous immortal demon without developing some inner masochist.

I walked onto the main campus field, which never seemed to close—too many late-night studies—and passed by Gill McJames' statue. The Scotsman explorer was a short stout man, holding his pioneer hat against the wind, cane planted firmly on the ground in one hand, the other pointing straight ahead. It wasn't a grand statue or anything. The guy was my height, and I was born in eighteenth-century Scotland—we were a lot shorter than today's average human.

I gave my fellow Highlander a pat on the head. Immediately, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. In the past, that was what happened when danger or potential prey was nearby, like a vampire's sixth sense. Maybe late studiers were finally going home, or perhaps two lovebirds were making out in the moonlight.

But I saw no moonlight lovers, no late studiers walking home, nobody. In fact, I noticed for the first time that everything around me was eerily dark—no lights, no noise, all the buildings long abandoned. I take that back. There was one light on the main floor of the Other Studies library. I guess my senses were on the fritz.

Oh well.

I peered closer at the Other Studies building. Seems the Old Librarian was still up, and I wondered if he'd be up for a visit. Maybe he would finally be able to tell me how he got my father's tartan.

Besides, I thought (out loud, probably), I'm his newest employee ... and technically it is tomorrow.



The library had one of those old wooden church doors. From the front, I couldn't see inside—all the large windows were on the sides of the building, with only two slender stained-glass displays on either side of the door.

I tried the door. Locked.

I jogged back to where I'd been to look up at window again, but there wasn't enough light to make out what was happening inside. At this point, I usually would have just given up and called it a night, but I wasn't especially looking forward to finding Deirdre naked in our dorm again (I swear! I wasn't!), and something about this whole thing was starting to make me feel uneasy. That vampire sixth sense, again, maybe? I jogged to the front door again and, pulling back on the iron knocker just within reach, I knocked on the door and waited.

Nothing.

I was about to give up when I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. When I was a predator, those hairs saved me more than once. Up until now, I had assumed they were a part of my vampiric nature. Either I had carried over some of that nature with me or that tingly feeling was my human part all along.

Either way, I had learned to trust that instinct. The door was locked, nobody was answering the knocker ... I scrutinized every inch of the door and the surrounding façade. I spotted a mail flap near the bottom of the door. I pushed it open and peered inside. Two desk lamps were lit in the study area, but from this angle, their light only revealed a couple cushy armchairs and an empty fireplace. Nothing of interest.

But I could smell something.

A smell I knew very well.

Human blood.

Chapter 7

VAMPIRES AREN'T ONLY HUMANS

Human blood. Unmistakable ... I should know. I only spent the last few centuries guzzling it down like a camel in the desert. A ... vampire camel? Whatever. Poor simile, but you get the point.

Smelling it as a human was completely different than drinking it as a vampire. As a vampire, the smell excited me, intoxicated me—drove me mad with insatiable desire. But as a human, the smell of blood made me wretch and the thought of tasting the crimson liquid made my stomach twist with nausea.

Get over it, girl, I thought as I tried to find a way into the library. It's probably nothing too serious. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that the Old Librarian had merely fallen and hit his head. That the smell of blood came from a head wound, and not a gaping throat or severed carotid artery. A few stitches and a concussion would be the worst that he'd suffer.

But the smell was way too strong for that ... and as much as I tried to lie to myself that he'd be fine, I'd been a part of enough death to know better.

The Old Librarian was dead. The part of me that was still vampire knew that.

The human part of me, on the other hand, still clung onto hope.

I pulled at the door handle again—no good. This heavy wooden door would need a battering ram to get through. If only I still had my vampiric strength. But what I lacked in strength, I made up for in smallness. The windows that lined the side of the door were narrow, barely the width of a dinner plate. But I could work with that. Now all I needed was something to smash the window with. I ran to the path leading up to the library and picked up a heavy stone lining the flower bed. Rushing back to the door, I hefted the stone and smashed it through the window.

Taking off my Hermes jacket—still muddy from Deirdre's home décor—I wrapped it around my arm and cleared the rest of the glass, silently lamenting the lacerations the leather got from the process. I'd definitely have to buy a new one now. Good thing I had money—and lots of it. Three hundred years of antique collecting and compound interest tends to do that.

Glass cleared, I sucked in my breath and shimmied through. I made it in—barely—with only my butt and my chest getting squished as I did. Evidently, those parts of me were a bit wider than a dinner plate.

Inside I wasted no more time. I let my nose guide me to the back of the library's main floor, near to where the artifacts were kept—but even without that sickly smell as my guide, a part of me knew this was where I'd find the old man.

As I got closer, the smell of blood got stronger and stronger. I braced myself as I turned the corner for what I thought I'd see.

What I saw was much, much worse.



The Old Librarian was strung up on the heavy, oak bookshelves closest to the display cases. His hands were literally nailed to the thick shelves. His feet, placed one in front of the other, were held together by a thick metal spike, which had been driven through them.

He hung in a crucified position on that shelf. I might have thought his killer was imitating the classic Christ crucifixion ... if it weren't for the stuff on the floor.

Like some Egyptian mummification process interrupted, four canopic jars had been arranged in front of him, each holding a different organ. His small intestines sat on a silver tray, his large intestines on a gold one. And as for his blood—that had meticulously been drained from his body, into large clay pots. Very little of it had been spilled on the floor. His murderer had been precise.

My eyes were drawn back up to his body. His chest cavity had been torn open and I only saw an empty hole where his heart should have been.

I groaned ... but this was not the worst part by far.

From the expression on his face, I knew that he had been awake while he was being ripped apart.

"Oh, Old Librarian," I whispered. "Why didn't you scream for help? Why didn't I hear you?"

The answer came when I looked down and saw that his tongue lay on a cloth right in front of his both. The cloth was wet, not only with blood but also mucus and saliva, which meant that the monster responsible took the time to stuff his mouth with that cloth to muffle his screams. The monster most likely cut out the Old Librarian's tongue after he died.

This didn't make sense. Too much was going on here. The crucifixion, the ceremonial draining of blood, the way the organs were distributed in the four jars ... the tongue on a cloth. It was like he was killed by a bunch of monsters from a dozen different horror movies.

I tried desperately to keep my composure. I'd played my part in quite a lot of killing. Some for fun—most of it to survive. But I had never been a part of something such as this. Say what you will about vampires—we never did this to our victims.

I turned away, having taken in as much of the scene as I dared. With my back to him, I now faced the cases housing an array of Other artifacts. Several of the display cases, I now noticed, were broken and empty. I didn't need to turn around to know they had been used in the sick killing behind me. I couldn't recall exactly which ones had been in those now-empty cases, but I breathed a sigh of relief.

when I saw one that wasn't missing—my father's old Scottish dirk.

His display case stood untouched.

As I stared at my clansman's weapons, I considered my next move. What happened here was recent, maybe even minutes from completion, which meant the killer or killers couldn't have gotten far. I could hunt them down—after all, I was pretty good at that. But I was also human now. What would a human do? A human would call the police. It would take ages for them to get down here, and the trail would probably be cold by then. But they had modern forensics and—

Crunch.

Coming from the front of the library, the unmistakable sound of a foot crunching down on glass.

The monster was still in here ... and had accidentally stepped on some of the glass I'd smashed when breaking into the library—which meant it (I can only assume something capable of committing such a horrible crime was an it) was trying to escape.

Looking at the old Scottish dirk, I knew what I had to do.

I may no longer be a vampire.

But that didn't mean I wasn't still a killer.

Chapter 8

DIRKS AND LIPSTICK

The monster stopped moving, evidently waiting to see if I had heard the glass beneath its boots ... or claws, or ... whatever passed as its feet. This monster was playing it cautious, which meant that it wanted to escape without incident.

That wasn't going to happen.

Even though the old rush of the hunt came surging through me, I fought the urge and stood perfectly still, pretending not to have heard my prey. Then I listened.

Faint breath came from the front of the library.

I slowly counted in my head, waiting, listening. In a minute, I'd make my move and either it would attack me or run. Either way, whatever I did would have to put me in the best position to take it down. I thought about the Old Librarian. He had been frail, weak—certainly not trained like I was. He wouldn't have put up much of a fight. That meant I couldn't gauge my opponent's strength on what I knew.

What I *did* know was that it was at least strong enough to string the Old Librarian up, which put it in the class of a big and strong human at the very least. I also knew that it contained the resolve and constitution to brutally tear apart a living creature—to *crucify* an innocent old man and harvest his friggin' organs—without sympathy or mercy. This most likely meant that when I did engage with it, the monster wouldn't hesitate to put me down.

But I also knew the Old Librarian was a good man who had treated me kindly. This knowledge alone was enough to lead me to one final conclusion.

This monster was going to die ...

... and I was going to be the one to make that happen.

The minute was up. The monster hadn't made another move, so it was my turn. I darted forward to my father's display case and smashed the glass with my elbow. I reached in and managed to get my hand on the dirk before powerful hands pulled me back and threw me across the room. Of course, ever the college freshman looking to impress (or at least fit in as *human*), I just *had* to go out in my Versace dove-white silk blouse. On smooth marble floor such as this, my blouse was like a sled. I slid across the floor until I hit the front door—with my head.

So much for this monster being as strong as a large human male. More like a frigging bull, or an

elephant. Maybe a bull elephant.

I probably would have spent the next minute on the floor, groaning in pain—if it weren't for the large figure bounding from above. It would have crushed me under its weight, but I regained my wits and rolled under one of the large study desks.

A black claw ripped the table back. I rolled under another table. The claw ripped away this table and I rolled beneath the next. Then another.

This perverse game of musical chairs—well, tables—wouldn't last forever. I knew I needed to get a weapon if I wanted a chance at fighting this thing, which meant I needed to put more distance between us than a few layers of lacquered wood.

I faked rolling beneath another desk, then darted between two shelves instead, using them as cover. Lucky move—the monster was wider than the space between the shelves, and as it charged, its weight pushed them apart, causing them to knock over like dominos in two directions.

Good ... just what I wanted to happen. This creature was a predator—which meant that it hunted using sight, smell, and noise. The clambering shelves and tumbling books would cover any sound I made, and all the book dust puffing into the air would mask my scent. Which only left it sight—and what I lacked in strength, I made up in smallness.

When the shelves tumbled down, they didn't fall flat, but rather tipped onto one another like drunks, creating little tunnels beneath where one shelf rested on another. Those gaps were as wide as the shelf's width—which was thankfully about twice the width of a dinner plate. Perfect for me (including my butt and chest, this time).

I crawled through the opening and listened. When I was sure the monster was on the other side of the shelves, scratching about and searching for me, I ducked into the next makeshift tunnel, then the next. Ultimate Hide-and-Go-Seek.

The monster stalked the aisles, occasionally leaping on the toppled shelves and bringing them splintering deeper into one another. But it couldn't find me. And from the sounds it was making, I could tell it was getting frustrated.

I smiled, vindicated. *This is for the Old Librarian, you bastard. Run, while you still can.*

A little cocky on my part, I know. That was the vampire in me. Either way, the monster didn't take its chance to run. It kept methodically leaping from one shelf to another, snarling.

OK—have it your way.

Slowly, carefully, I made my way to the last row and peered around. Across the aisle, I could see the Old Librarian still strung up. I don't know if it was seeing him there or if it was my fight-or-flight instincts kicking in, but either way, the brave, stupid part of me took over. I darted out of the makeshift passageway and, leaping from display case to display case—

I jumped for my father's dirk and shield.

After all these years, it took scant moments to fit the ancient artifacts in my grip, like well-oiled hinges. Weapon in hand, I turned to face the monster. For the first time I got a good look at it.

GoneGodDamn—if I had seen it earlier, I might have acted smarter. And way less brave.



The thing looked like an honest-to-the-GoneGods bulldog—if, that was, the bulldog were the size of a Highland coo, had fire-yellow eyes and snorted friggin’ steam out of its nose.

Oh well ... no use in crying over spilled milk, I thought as I held out the dirk.

It slammed two of its massive claws on the ground, gouging into the marble as it prepared to charge. I did the same, minus the marble-gouging. Given my stature, it was more like doing the two-step. Still, it was the best retort I had. If I could snort steam, I would’ve.

It sniffed. I growled.

It roared. I screamed back defiantly.

And with the pre-fight ceremony out of the way, we charged at each other.



It was big and fast, but I had something it didn’t.

A silk blouse.

At the last second I dove into a baseball player’s slide and under it, thrusting my long dagger upwards. A fountain of lava-hot blood poured out of its belly. If it wasn’t for my shield, I probably would have been burned to death. Luckily I was able to divert the stream as I rolled out from under it. Turning, I immediately abandoned my shield as it literally burst into flames, its wooden frame consumed by this thing’s blood.

The thing about Others—they don’t bleed red. Ogres bleed green, dwarves a dirt brown; angels bleed actual light and pixies dust. But fire? Only one being I knew bled fire—a jinni. God made jinn from smokeless fire. I guess that explained the flickering yellow eyes this thing had.

It reared up onto its hind legs, still spilling blood from its midsection, seeking to crush me under its weight. I rolled to the right, expecting it to try and step to the right and crush me, but instead, it swiveled to the left.

I had all of one second to consider why it would do that when its tail swiped across the floor (did I say this thing looked like a bulldog? Its tail was more like that of a dragon’s, spikes and all) and hit me hard in the chest, causing me to drop my dirk. I was pushed to the side and before I could tumble out of the way, it pinned me to the side of the wall. Its big flat-nosed face was an inch away from mine and it was bearing its fangs, long, pointy bastards dripping oily fire. I could tell it was relishing the moment before it would bite my head off—literally.

It had me, and without a weapon or any gods to hear my prayers, I didn’t have a hope in Hell of getting out of this alive.

Except we weren't in Hell—and hope was a fickle bitch that liked to wait until the last second to swoop in. This time, she took the form of my fellow classmate, the weird African guy, who leapt on the monster's back and—what the hell?—bit down on the thing's neck.

Kid—I don't know what you're trying to do, but I'm pretty sure that wasn't the best— I started to think (out loud—good to know I could still rely on my quirks in life-and-death situations) when the kid reared his head back and spat out a clump of the monster's neck, fiery blood and all.

The monster reeled back, howling in agony. Steam and lava poured out of its wound and I just managed to roll out of its waning grip.

“Holy crap, kid,” I said, running for my dirk.

The kid—who had been knocked off the beast's back—tumbled in my direction, dabbing at his blistering lips. “Holy Hell! That was hot!”

“Jinni, kid. Jinn. They bleed fire.”

“Apparently. And, for the record, my name is not *kid*. It is Egya-Boi Awooner of the Fante.”

“And I'm Connor MacLeod of Clan MacLeod,” I said.

Egya gave me a curious look and I managed to say, “What? Not a *Highlander* fan?”

Before he could answer, the monster, who had managed to pick itself up from the steaming blood-slick floor, resumed its attack. It raked its claws at us, forcing us to split apart. The creature, unsure which target to pursue, chased after me—and not because it was a “Ladies first” kind of monster. No, there was something else going on.

Not that I could ponder that particular mystery *now*.

Now I had to avoid its massive claws. I ran to the far end of the library, seeking to draw it to the display, hoping against hope that I'd be able to find something, anything to use against it. Maybe a spear or some kind of anti-jinni weapon.

Wishful thinking, but stranger things have happened ... like giant bulldog-faced, dragon-tailed, lava-spewing monsters chasing you through a college library on a Friday night.

I ran, and as fast as I was, this thing was faster. Where the hell was Egya? I couldn't hear him, and a shiver ran down my spine. If Egya ducked out of the fight, I was done for. Maybe that bite of lava had been more than he'd bargained for.

I kept running for the displays, but it involved a lot of obstacle-course dodging of the mess I'd made with the toppling shelves. Before I could get close, the creature flipped a shelf full of several heavy books over, toppling it at my feet and tripping me over.

I fell on my stomach and quickly turned so that I was lying flat on my back. The creature came close, getting ready to bear down on me. Pointing the tip of my sword straight up, I was preparing for the old stab-and-roll maneuver when I heard a howl. Egya jumped from the viewing balcony on the second floor, straight onto the creature's back.

Egya'd learned his lesson: he didn't bite the thing. This time he stabbed it with something I couldn't quite see from my vantage point. No matter. Stab as if my life depended on it, Egya!

Taking my cue from its howl, I thrust my dirk into the nape of its still-bleeding neck and then twisted my body as hard as I could to the right, gripping my sword with all the human strength I had in me—and maybe any vampiric strength still left deep down.

My sword stuck in its molten skin. Despite the heat, I continued with as much pressure as I could. I felt my sword travel through its skin another inch, then two more, and with one last effort, I managed to slash through the thing's throat—ripping a hole in it the size of the library's book-return slot.

The monster tried to scream, but without a throat, all that came out was a low, guttural hiss as it collapsed to the ground in its own molten blood.

“Damn. Remind me not to get on your bad side,” Egya said, climbing off the creature's back.

I ignored him, walking around it slowly. According to Islam, God created two types of humanity: one from mud—humans; and the other from smokeless fire—the jinn. The jinn were like us, complete with different races, ethnicities and geopolitical alliances. And although this creature had all the telltale signs of being jinn, it was more animal than sentient being. Something didn't feel right.

As I examined him, my foot hit something hard by its front left paw. Looking down, I saw my father's cherub mask on the ground, its innocent face staring up at me out of the fiery blood. The irony wasn't lost on me—here I was fighting an evil demon to avenge the death of my friend ... How many demons had my father vanquished in my name? Too many to count, I suspected.

Gingerly picking up the mask, I slipped it in my slightly torn back pocket. I'd need new jeans now, too. Add that to the list.

Egya had been watching me the whole time. Seeing his gaze, I was just about to say “Let's get out of here before the police show up,” when I heard a voice yell out, “Hold it right there!”

Two flashlights shined in our eyes. Behind the glaring light, I saw two figures approach with guns drawn.

Oh, great—campus security's here. Great timing, morons.

The voice behind the lights barked, “What did you say?”

Talking out loud again. I really, really had to stop that.

Chapter 9

HUMAN SECURITY SECURING

First the campus security came, then the cops, then the local news and finally the coroner. Not that we saw any of that. Deirdre told me later. Word had gotten to the dorms what had happened and many of the students, including her, went down to see what happened.

Egya and I were interviewed at the scene—in handcuffs—and after our statement was taken down and taken down again by every cop determined to crack the truth out of us, we were whisked away to the local police precinct in a police car, sirens ringing through the night air and drawing unwanted attention to us. Already a ton of students were out; I wanted to curl up in a fetal position at the floor of the cruiser from embarrassment and shame—and loss. Twenty-four hours had yet to pass and already I was the freak who jumps at light, gets into fights with hockey players and gets arrested for murder. The murder of the one person I'd managed to make friends with.

At least no one can say I don't make a first impression.

The nearest precinct was about a mile away. Once we made it inside, I noted that there was a disproportionate number of Others in handcuffs. Made sense—Others were the easily distinguishable minority and seeing them in chains just proved to me that the world didn't change that much just because the gods left.

Once our prints were taken (our hands had to be washed and treated for burns first), Egya and I were separated. I was guided to a room with a desk and one-way mirror. Presumably so was Egya.

Then I waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

I'd been in similar situations before, so I knew the drill. They wanted us to get nervous, because nervous people talked. The trouble with me and waiting was that, as an insomniac, former vampire who hunted in the night, when I wasn't talking to myself, I was really good at sitting perfectly still for long periods of time. It's not that I went asleep or anything. I just kind of shut off. Meditation on overdrive. When I'd go into that state as a vampire, I'd actually stop breathing. As a human, I couldn't do that, of course, but my breaths were low and shallow and infrequent. Not sure if this skill would have real world applications, but one thing I noticed happened when I did this was I made other humans really nervous. And in situations like this, I got a bit of a sick pleasure out of that.

The door flung open and the way the detective—a woman with a gray suit and olive, button-up shirt—burst in, I knew that she’d seen me through the one-way mirror and thought I’d had a seizure or something.

The movement caused me to turn. When I animated, I could see the detective visibly relax.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked.

“Meditating,” I answered honestly.

“Meditating?”

“Well, kind of. I play old movies in my head. It relaxes me.”

She raised one eyebrow. “Huh?”

“This time I was screening *An American Werewolf in London*—the original, not the remake in Paris. I was playing the scene where they were walking back to the pub and—”

“And why were you playing that movie in particular?”

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow. “Because ... did you see that thing? I kind of feel like I was attacked by a werewolf, myself. I’m sort of wondering if I’m going to turn into a giant bulldog with hot, lava-like blood.”

“I see,” the detective said, taking off her glasses and sitting down across from me. “And you do this to, what? Relax? Why do you need to relax?”

I gave the detective a wry smile. This wasn’t the first time I had found myself in an interrogation room for killing something—or killing *someone*. Caught plenty of times when I was a vampire. This was, however, the first time I was in a place like this as a human—and for killing an Other.

As a vampire, I’d wait until it got really late and bite my way out. As a human, I would need another tact. Luckily, I was one of those psychological Hannibal Lector killer vampires (as opposed to the hack-and-slash kind) and was used to playing mind games. Unhinging the detective with my meditation trick was a start. Better she was nervous than me ... but still, if I was going to get out of here, I needed to be very careful what I said and didn’t say.

So I considered her question before replying evenly, “How many people, innocent or guilty, get put in a room like this and *don’t* need to relax?” I gave subtle emphasis to the word innocent.

“You’ve got a point,” the detective said. She stuck out her hand. “Detective Sarah Wilcox. And you are?”

“Katrina Darling, but you know that already, from my statement. I suspect that you know a lot more than that, too.”

She nodded. “OK—yes—I’ve run your name through the databases. So can you imagine what came back in your file?”

I froze. It was possible that she uncovered I was an ex-vampire. I had done my best to hide my tracks. I paid a lot to get myself a long-form birth certificate, I fabricated a death certificate for a fake father who’d died prematurely from a heart attack ... I even had my bogus dad set up a trust fund for me—an accumulation of my assets collected over the centuries of long life.

In my human story, Dad was a diplomat and we'd moved around a lot—that way I could have fewer ties and less (read: zero) schoolmates to remember me. Hell, I even set up a Facebook page with doctored photos of me doing human activities in the sun as a little girl (thank the GoneGods for stock photography and photoshop).

Still, humans—the AlwaysMortals, that is—were paranoid about Others, even former Others, and had created a registry for beings like me to sign. There was even an amnesty program for vampires, werewolves, ghouls and zombies—expunging us from any legal recourse for the murders we committed when we were an Other.

But ... I never did. Technically speaking, I was breaking the law by not doing so.

Detective Wilcox turned the file around. It was thin, with only a couple visible pages. Evidently, she wasn't going to tell me what she'd found without me asking. GoneGodDammit—any upper hand I had with my meditation trick would be gone if I did. Still, I had to know.

I sighed inwardly. "What?"

"Nothing," she said with a smirk—she knew she'd just won this battle of wills. "But you were awfully nervous, given how little there is about you."

"Well, you know—it's my first time talking to a real detective," I lied.

"Sure, sure. These are unusual circumstances." She pointed at the mirror and a few seconds later a cop walked in with a file and my bag. "But we had expected more, even for a young first-year like yourself."

I shrugged. "I moved around a lot and my dad was a very private person. Before he died, that is."

"Yes, your file mentioned that. Sorry for your loss."

I nodded. She was the second person today to offer me condolences for a man who died before the *Titanic* sank.

"OK, Ms. Darling, there are a few other things we need to know." Detective Wilcox turned the file back to her and spread out some photos she pulled out of an envelope.

I had expected the photographs to be of the crime scene—the Old Librarian strung up, his organs displayed like pastry in a bakery—but instead, they were pictures of the Old Librarian alive, healthy and smiling. Then there were photos of he and I speaking beside the display cases. And finally, a photo of me standing outside the library at night—something that must have been taken just before I tried to break in. Barely two hours ago.

"These certainly tell a story," she said.

"How did you get those?"

"CCTV—there are cameras all over campus."

"Humph." I picked up the photo of the Old Librarian and looked at it. My voice softened. "Did he suffer?"

Detective Wilcox narrowed her eyes. She hadn't been expecting that question. Not at this point, at least. "Excuse me?"

“When he was killed—did he suffer?” I wasn’t playing a mind-game with the detective; this wasn’t some kind of trick like the meditation. I really wanted to know if he suffered in the end.

“I would like to answer your question, but before I do, I need to know ... what makes you ask that?”

“It’s just that the way he was killed—it was ritualistic, or psychotic, or both. Point is, it was pre-planned. His killer wanted to hang him that way, wanted to cut him open that way. Wanted to pull out his organs that way. Either the killer was doing that because he—”

“He?”

“He, she, it—whatever,” I said, annoyed with myself for the assumption the killer was a boy (this was the GoneGod world—girls were just as capable of killers as boys). That and accidentally hinting that I might know something when I didn’t. “My point is ... either the Old Librarian suffering was part of this or it wasn’t. And given how much blood and gore and dismemberment there was ... why didn’t someone hear his screams? Someone like, oh, I dunno, the police?”

The detective glared at me, but I kept going.

“Maybe the killer put him asleep before doing what ... ahh, *it* ... did.”

She folded her arms. “That’s quite the astute observation for someone with a file thinner than a rice cake.”

I shrugged. “I watch a lot of TV.”

The detective raised one eyebrow.

“A lot.”

“OK,” she said, “tell you what: I’ll answer your question if you answer mine.”

“You really going to blackmail me into speaking to you over the question of whether or not my friend suffered when he died?”

Detective Wilcox paused at this. “No, I suppose not. From blood splatter, an examination of his body and blood work that measured the presence of adrenaline and other elements, our best guess is that the initial cuts were done with him fully awake, but as soon as those preliminary steps were taken, the killer drugged him. After that, he probably didn’t feel much when he, she or *it* really started to get into it.”

Really started to get into it. Well, that’s one way of describing it.

“So you don’t know who the killer is?” I said.

Detective Wilcox pursed her lips, putting on her best poker face, but after centuries of playing mind-games myself, I knew the answer. She didn’t.

“Nothing on the cameras, then?” I asked.

Lips pursed. Poker face. Nothing.

“What about the Other Egys and I killed? He could have been acting alone, right?”

She shook her head. “No, he wasn’t. But we’ll get to him in a moment.”

She emptied the contents of my bag onto the table, which consisted of lip gloss, a vintage wallet

containing forty measly bucks, my student ID, my debit card and credit card, my phone, my dorm keys and the O³ flyer.

Oh, and my father's cherub mask. They'd confiscated that from my back pocket pretty quickly.

She picked up the flyer. "O³ is still at it, eh?"

"Excuse me?" I narrowed my eyes.

"O³—the party organizers. My cousin's one of them."

"Oh? Which one?"

She paused for a moment like she was considering not telling me, before she finally said, "Nate."

"Yeah, I know him. Sort of. More like I know *of* him. And from what I know—nice guy."

"You have no idea." She dropped the flyer, looking at my other stuff. "Very well, then, let's start by you telling me what this is." She picked up the mask.

"Give that back," I said, lunging forward. I immediately regretted doing that—just another instance where I was giving the detective the upper hand, probably even playing right into her hands—but seeing my father's mask in this cop's said hands stirred some old rage in me. I was simultaneously scared by the image of the Devine Cherub and upset that another person dared touch my father's most prized possession.

"Hold on, missy," she said, pulling back. "So this is important to you, huh? What is it?"

"Sun protector," I said. "I wear it to keep all those nasty UV rays off my face."

"Cute," she said. She dropped it on the table just out of my reach.

I don't know why I'm being difficult. I guess I'm just scared, I thought.

"Makes sense. You just saw a dead body. I've been on the force for years and I'm still not used to it."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said out loud—on purpose, this time.

"So, the mask? Care to elaborate?"

"It's ... very old. An antique, you might say." *A family heirloom, you might say,* I was careful to think silently.

"And ... *not* a sun protector, I take it."

I shook my head. "No—just something that my dad gave me. It's been in our family for generations," I admitted, completely glossing over the fact that I stole it from the library. The detective looked at me expectantly. I was lying to her by omitting certain facts, but it wasn't like I could just come out and say that I stole the mask from the library, but it wasn't technically *stealing* because it really *was* a family heirloom.

So I did what I always did in situations like this: I kept lying.

Fake it till you make it. That was basically the ex-Other motto.

"I brought the mask with me to university because ..."

"Because ...?"

I shrugged, assuming a carefully guarded look of sadness. "It reminds me of Da' ... and I'm

homesick.”

She looked up at me, putting down the pen.

“The mask—it was something my father really loved and, well, I guess I wanted to have something to remember him by.”

Detective Wilcox stared at me for a long time before finally nodding and saying, “OK—you’re free to go.” She handed me a card. “If you think of anything else, please call me directly.”

“What?” I took the card, staring at it blankly, a bit surprised this was it. “Nothing else? No questions about what I saw, felt ... did?”

“The officer on the scene already got your statement. If we need anything else from you, I’ll be sure to contact you.”

“So that’s it? I’m free to go?”

“That is what I said.”

I didn’t move.

Detective Wilcox gave me a curious look. She gestured at the mask. “We know that didn’t have anything to do with the librarian’s murder. What’s more, forensics is pretty advanced these days and we didn’t find a single hair strand, fabric fiber, fingerprint or DNA sample of yours on the scene.”

“Really? You got that already?”

She sighed. “No. But I don’t *expect* to find anything. We have campus security footage that clearly shows you leaving your dorm and going for a walk at the time of the murder. Because of those little cameras everywhere, violating your privacy rights but aiding in allowing your freedom to *have* privacy rights, you have an air-tight alibi.”

“Oh?” I said. “Oh! Well ... good thing I’m not that private of a person anyway.”

The detective gave me a suspicious look, then shook her head. She was clearly tired. “Unless there is a reason I should be arresting you ... you are free to go.” She pointed at the door.

I know that was what I wanted, but being let go so easily really boiled my blood. For one thing, I was the first person on the scene and the junior cop that took my statement barely scratched the surface of what I could tell them. Granted, a lot of what I knew stemmed from my experience as a vampire, and I wanted to protect that secret as best I could—but still! Couldn’t this self-important detective recognize an asset when she saw one?

But that wasn’t what really upset me. No, what engulfed my recently returned soul in flame was that she was letting me walk after I killed an Other. A living, breathing Other.

Is Other life so worthless that you could literally kill one of them and not go to jail? Or—even if I killed him in self-defense—can’t the authorities at least investigate with more than a passing interest? Last I checked, killing someone in self-defense at least requires an investigation. I should be calling my lawyer. I should be explaining over and over again how I had to kill him. I should—

“Actually, what you killed wasn’t a sentient Other,” she said, interrupting my out-loud thoughts. “It was a kelb. A common jinni elemental, often used as a guard dog. Which means—”

“So?” I asked, with perhaps a bit too much venom in my tone for someone who was being let go. “Shouldn’t I still be charged with something? Or at least investigated?”

“As much as you would like to be a martyr for equal Other rights by forcing me to arrest you, kelb is a type-C classification Other. It is the Other equivalent of a domestic dog or cat—although who would want something that big and vicious as a pet, I have no idea. We do not file cases against killed pets—especially when it was clearly done in self-defense. That’s up to the owner. And since the owner is clearly the killer, I doubt he or she will be filing a suit against you anytime soon.”

I took a minute to let that sink in. The creature Egya and I killed was a guard dog of sorts whose master unleashed on us. Not the killer at all.

“Oh?” I said, kind of wishing I’d asked first, ranted later—out-loud thoughts or not. “OK, then.” I stood up and put the contents of my purse back into my bag, including my father’s mask. Once that was done, I paused and looked Detective Wilcox directly in the eyes. “You said that you have footage of the murder.”

She nodded.

“So you know who the killer is?”

She gave me a look that said she couldn’t answer that.

“Come on—you’ve got to give me something. The librarian was my friend. The only friend I’ve made since I got here.”

Wilcox shook her head, cursing to herself. “This stays in this room.”

“OK—cross my heart.” I did so, to show her I was serious.

“The assailant was ... blurred.”

“Blurred?”

“Yeah—like what you see in documentaries where the interviewee wants to remain anonymous.”

“Magic?”

“We can only assume,” Detective Wilcox said. “We can gather quite a bit of evidence from the video, but a clear ID? Not as of yet. But we’ll get the bastard. I promise you.”

“Thank you,” I said. I pulled my purse strap onto my shoulder and headed out the door.

Chapter 10

HYENAS AND DENIAL ARE LIKE OIL AND WATER

The cops were less willing to take me back home than they had been to take me in. I guess it tends to be a one-way flow. Not that it really mattered—the campus was about a twenty-minute walk away. Stepping outside, I saw that dawn had already come and gone, and what greeted me was the morning hustle and bustle of a city getting ready for work.

I wrapped my ruined jacket close to my body, held my purse tight, and entered the flow of people walking to work. Mont-Royal is a beautiful city—there’s no doubt about it—but at that moment I wanted nothing more than to leave this place far behind. I mean, I had been here less than a day and already I had seen the inside of a police station.

And the inside of my only friend’s chest cavity.

But there was one more thing to consider. I killed. Yes, in self-defense, and it was only an attack dog that I felled. Granted, I killed a fire-breathing attack dog the size of a bull from the jinn’s mythical realm of Qa, but still: I killed. Coming to university was my attempt at being a normal, average human. *Normal* and *average* usually means *do not kill* ... but here I was, on day one, stabbing my dirk into someone’s neck. I could chalk it up to seeing my friend strung up like some macabre puppet, something that could believably have brought out my old instincts, but that would be a lie. Truth was, as a vampire, I was good at killing. I may have lost most of my powers when I became human, but I didn’t lose everything.

What really scared me was how easy it all went down. Once I decided that the creature responsible for killing my friend deserved to die, I acted without hesitation, guilt or remorse. Even now, after the adrenaline had worn out and the heat of the battle had cooled, I felt no regret.

Killing was too easy. At least for me.

I considered my options. I could quit college. After all, I had enough money to last me several lifetimes; given that I was human again, I only needed it to last one. I had an old Victorian mansion waiting for me near Edinburgh’s Meadows. And I had enough life experience that the so-called “college experience” wasn’t really necessary. When I was considering my options, one of the things the McJames brochure highlighted was how university helped you mature, helped you grow up.

I was over three hundred years old.

Maybe I’d already done all the growing up I need to do.

I wasn't sure what to do. Get out of here? Stay? I pulled my purse closer. I could feel the bulge of my father's Cherub mask under its plush leather. I thought about my father—the relentless hunter who never quit. What would he think about me leaving? Leaving meant quitting—and I'd never been very good at doing that.

So maybe I don't quit. There were other options. I could leave this university and go somewhere else. *There are plenty of schools that don't accept Others ... they would be less complicated and—*
“Coward.”

“Excuse me?” I said, turning to see who was calling me names.

I saw Egya sitting under the umbra of a Tim Horton's Coffeeshop canopy where three metal tables and several chairs sat. It stank of cigarette smoke and coffee dregs from early commuters. The table he sat at had no ashtray, but it did have two coffees, and from the fact that one of the cups was empty and the other one had a total lack of steam coming out of it, I guessed he had been sitting there for a while.

Which meant that he was waiting for me. Great.

He gestured to the seat across from him.

I shook my head. “I don't sit with people who insult me.”

“Then don't say things worth insulting.”

“Like what?”

“Girl—you talk to yourself. And when you are not talking in a loud voice that birds high in the sky can hear—” He pointed to the sky with long skinny arms that had firm, defined muscle. He might not have much meat on him, but there was no doubt he was strong. Also, he was wearing a tight, black polo shirt and I could see his lean muscle bulge from beneath. “—when you are not thinking loudly, you think quietly, mouthing your thoughts so that one with keen eye-sight such as myself can read your lips.” He caught my eyes with his own emerald eyes, accentuated against his dark skin. “Keen eyes like mine. Please sit—I bought you a coffee.”

“Humph,” I said, walking past him.

“I know what you are,” he called after me.

I froze, looking around at all the humans walking by.

“And I know what you are pretending to be,” he said. “Shall I announce it to the world and free you of your terrible secret? Or will you join—”

“Fine, fine,” I huffed, turning around and taking a seat. I grabbed the coffee and downed the now-tepid liquid in one gulp. Given I hadn't eaten in a while, I knew it would only be a matter of minutes before it gave me that anxious coffee buzz. Not that I cared. I wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible, away from this stranger. A finished cup implied a finished conversation. At least I think it did. I was still learning human customs.

“So,” I said, wiping my mouth on a brown paper napkin. “What do you think you know about me?”

“You are no ordinary girl,” he said, looking through me just like he had in class.

I shuddered under his gaze. “Well, thank you very much,” I threw in as much sarcasm as I could.

“Don’t mention it,” he said, either not noticing the scorn in my voice or not noticing it. “It is quite obvious. For one, you fight monsters.”

“Not usually. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and—”

“Most humans simply die when the time and place are wrong. But not you. You fight.”

“And what about you? Are you ... what, my knight in shining armor?”

He laughed at this, pointing at his orange polo-shirt logo. “I am not a knight, but I do have the horse. But come now,” he said, leaning in close, his arms resting on the cool metal of the outdoor table. “Let us address the ... what do you Westerners say? ... the elephant in the room. A funny expression for a culture that has no indigenous elephants. I, on the other hand, come from a land filled with elephants, and I can say one thing about them—we never take them inside.”

“*Très drôle*,” I said.

“Most certainly—I am very funny in my native land.”

“Ghana?”

“Again, most certainly—but how did you know?”

“I don’t think that is how you use ‘certainly.’ ”

He didn’t say anything.

“And to answer your question—it’s your accent. I spent a lot of time in Africa. All over the world, actually. My father was a—”

“Vampire,” he said, more as a statement than anything else.

“Ex ... excuse me?” I picked up my mug to hide behind a sip, forgetting that I’d finished the drink already.

“Or ghoul. But what I know for sure is that you were no shifter.”

“Again, excuse me?”

“Shifters are natural liars. You, my dear, cannot lie to save your life, let alone hide your past. And given that vampires, ghouls and zombies were the only other creatures to become human once more when the gods left ...”

“And you know all this from what? Experience.”

“Most certainly.”

I grimaced at the expression. “Just because you were a ... a what?”

“Were-hyena.”

“Don’t you mean werewolf?”

“I would if that was what I changed into, but wolves are not indigenous to my homeland. Hyenas, on the other hand ...”

“And because you were a monster, once-upon-a-time, you ... what? Think I was, too? And a ghoul, at that?”

He sipped his drink, smirking. “Possibly.”

“But ghouls,” I said, looking for a cop-out, “aren’t they ... ghoulish?”

“Not all of them. In my homeland, there were many types of ghouls, some of whom could lure their prey with promises of pleasure, both divine and carnal, and—”

“I am *not* a ghoul.”

“*Was*, not ‘am.’ I am speaking of your past.”

“OK—then read my lips. I—was not—am not—nor ever will be—a ghoul.”

“Then vampire.”

“I am *not*—”

“Again—not ‘*not*.’ Before.”

“My past? My past! That is exactly what I don’t want to speak about with anyone, let alone someone like you.” I stood up in frustration. “Am, was, will be—I’m not a GoneGodDamn—” I caught myself before I shouted, and leaned in close. “Vampire.”

Egya gave me a smug look. “Liar.”

“Asshole.”

“Most certainly,” he said with a wicked smile.



I left Egya in the wake of my rage.

GoneGodDamn it, damn it, damn it!

My anger affirmed his suspicions, I was sure, but I couldn’t help it. His accusations just confirmed what I was afraid of: *I can’t be in a place where people know who or what I am? I came here to have a new start. To forget my past. Fresh future.* Egya might tell people who I was. Or worse, they might make me sign-up with the damn government Other registration.

Dammit!

I may have been conflicted about quitting before, but now that I had someone like Egya on my tail, I just might have to leave. New start, new place ... without that were-dog chasing me.

I’m going to have to quit university, aren’t I? I groaned. *Well, at least I made it to the dawn of my second day. That’s practically a record.*

END OF PART 2

PART IV

PROLOGUE

“Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, outlines the commonalities shared by all religions.

“Origin stories: Christians, the Jewish faith, and Muslims all have the Garden of Eden; the Hopi have the Four Worlds; Shinto has the Tenchikaibyaku.

“Then, of course, there is the flood story: the Abrahamic religions have Noah’s flood; the Norse have Bergelmir’s escape; the Sumerians have the Gilgamesh flood myth.

“The parallels go on and on. Forbidden knowledge, trickster beings, concepts of an afterlife and so on ... But there is one less known, less discussed commonality that we see in almost every religion—especially when we look at their early practices. Can anyone tell me what that is?

“What? No takers?

“Very well, then. Let me tell you. Sacrifice. Almost every recorded religion is known to have some form of human sacrifice as part of their canon. Even Judaism and Christianity speak of animal sacrifice in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, to name a few. The methods of sacrifice might be different, but the purpose is universal.

“To please the gods.

“Well, we’ve all seen how that’s worked out, haven’t we?”

Chapter 11

ACTIVISTS PLAY FOOTBALL, TOO

Day two of me trying to be human and already I felt like crap.
It wasn't even 10 a.m.!

I wanted to go back to the dorms and curl up under my duvet—if I had a duvet left. For all I knew, Deirdre, that socially unversed changeling roommate of mine, might have taken out all those goose feathers to make wings for herself.

Whoever said that your time in university would be the best days of your life clearly didn't have mine in mind.

As I walked past the Eaton Centre and toward the main gain, I passed by McJames' statue, pausing to look at the dark, copper man. He held onto his hat against an endless wind as he pointed toward ... what? ... the future? The next steps in evolution?

I followed his finger and saw that he was pointing toward the Mont-Royal's train station. Maybe he was telling me to get out. Was this a sign?

Whatever! Sign or not, I wasn't going to be here for long. It was time for this girl to exit stage right and ... and ... do something else. What, I had no idea, but I'd figure it out. Determined that leaving was my best choice, I turned on my heels and headed to campus. The way I figured it, I'd wrap up some loose ends, inform Student Admin that I was dropping out and pack up my dorm. If I hurried, I could get it all done by the weekend.

As I walked to campus, I was so deep in figuring out exactly how one drops out of university that I walked right into Justin—for the second day in a row.

"Whoa," he said. "Seems the only way to get your attention is by getting in your way."

I looked up to see him smiling at me with his kind yet powerful jaw, the sun shining off his perfect black locks ... and what's more, he was holding me, two gentle hands cradling my elbows. All we needed was for him to be shirtless and me in some loosely draped corset and we could be a Harlequin romance novel cover.

"Ahh, sorry," I said, making sure to not pull away. "I've got a lot on my mind."

He didn't let go. "Yeah, well, welcome to university. A lot can happen."

Oh my, I thought. It's been a long time since I've been in a man's arms and not wanted to rip out his throat.

“Excuse me?” he said. From his confusion, I gathered he didn’t quite make out what I’d said. Thank the GoneGods—that must have been my “quiet” thinking, like Egya had called it.

“Nothing,” I swooned. “I was just saying—a lot on my mind.”

“No kidding,” he said. “I’ve been looking all over campus for you. Even went to your dorm room, but your roommate said you hadn’t been home all night.” He hesitated.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You know what happened, right? Last night?”

I nodded.

“Rumors are that you were there.”

I pursed my lips and looked down, as if in thought. After what felt like an eternity where I debated between telling Justin everything or denying it all, I eventually settled on a harmless nod. There was no point in hiding it—everyone would find out eventually. If, that was, Egya hadn’t already distributed flyers.

“Wow,” Justin said, lifting one of his hands so he could nervously run his hands through his perfect hair. “Did you see what happened?”

“No,” I said. “I got there too late. The killer was still there—”

“Did you see who it was?”

I shook my head. “No. Whoever it was had already left, and before I could look around too much their jinni guard dog attacked me.”

“Jinni *what*?”

“Jinni guard dog—think normal guard dog, only about twelve times bigger with a long, spikey tail and lava for blood.”

“And what, it attacked you?”

“Yep, but I managed to ...” I paused.

“‘To ...’?” Justin’s eyes widened as he waited for my answer.

Again I thought about lying—but the truth would come out sooner or later. *It always does*, I lamented. I looked away. I didn’t want to see Justin’s reaction when I told him.

“... to kill it.”

“What? How?”

“An old dagger that fell out of one of the display cases. I stabbed the thing—jinni or not, it wasn’t immune to being stabbed.”

“How in the ...?” he started, but trailed off.

I knew he must have been judging me for what I did, that he was probably thinking of an excuse to get away from me. Hell, he was probably afraid to leave too quickly, lest I stab him too and—

Then I felt a finger on my chin, gently guiding my face up. I let it and a second later I was looking into his deep blue, endless, concerned eyes.

“You must have been terrified,” he said.

I nodded.

“What did the police say?”

“That it was a Class C Other. Seems it’s not a crime to kill a Class C—so if you see any around ...” I made a slitting-throat gesture that was meant to be my attempt at a joke.

Justin did not laugh.

Great.

Hoping to leave my poor-taste joke behind me, I quickly added, “But given how it almost ate me, I think it’s more of an attack dog with *Terminator*-like dedication.”

“Ah-hah,” he nervously laughed. “And what about the killer? I’m guessing anyone with that kind of creature following them around for protection is an Other of a ... different ... classification?”

I stopped for a second and thought about the implication of his question. “The killer is an *Other*!”

“Um,” Justin said, “isn’t that obvious?”

“Not really. But if it *is* an other, its classification would be telling. The police can use that as a clue.”

Justin nodded, but then the implication of my words hit me like a bag of bricks.

“The police *will* use that. They’ll single out Others. That’s what you mean.” I looked up accusingly. “In other words, the killer is someone who is easily identifiable by the shape of their body, color of their skin or the extra appendages their body has.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said, drawing away. “I mean it like you said ... it’s a clue—a narrowing down of suspects, or something.”

Fine—I’ll give him a pass, but only because he’s so gorgeous. And he did seem sincere. I nodded, “That’s what the cops think.”

“And you?”

I nodded begrudgingly. “I can’t think of many humans who can summon a jinni, can you?”

“No,” he chuckled, “I can’t.”

“But still,” I said, “don’t tell anyone that the killer is probably an Other. They’re already being picked on, and it took so much work for a university to open its doors to Others. The last thing I want to do is add fuel to the already fear-filled fire.”

He winced at this.

“What?” I asked.

“It might be too late for that,” he said, handing me a flyer.

I took the red flyer and read it:

OTHER KILLER ON CAMPUS!

BEWARE, BE VIGILANT AND BE SURE TO CALL SECURITY

IF YOU SEE ANY SUSPICIOUS OTHERS ABOUT.

The flyer had a picture of an ogre lurking about, but the funny thing about the image was that it was taken from the *World of Warcraft* movie. *Real ogres don't look like that. For one thing, their skin is more of an avocado green, and it's covered in a lot more hair and—*

“You know a lot about Others,” Justin said.

“Too much,” I groaned. “I am—was—thinking about majoring in Other Studies. Hence why I was at the library.”

“ ‘Was’ majoring?”

“ ‘Am’ ... ‘might’ ... haven’t decided,” I lied. The appropriate helping verb was more like *won't* ... as in *won't be studying anything anymore*. I handed him back the flyer. “This is bad. Any Other student is a target now. Even your dorm buddy, Sal.”

“I know,” he said solemnly. “That’s why I’m going to give a speech at the candlelight vigil tonight.”

“Vigil?”

“Yeah, we’re holding a memorial. I’m going to give a speech and invite everyone to our O³ party.”

“What? You’re using this as a way to promote your party?”

“No, no,” he said, his cheeks flushing red. “I didn’t mean it like that. The whole point of the party is to start the school year in an all-inclusive, everyone-is-welcome sort of way. Others included, of all body shapes, skin colors and extra appendages.” That made me smile, which gave him more confidence. “I figured if we can get everyone to party together—you know, they’ll all get along.”

“Make love, not war,” I said.

He laughed at this, not knowing that I wasn’t trying to be funny or cute. I had attended the Mother’s Day Peace March in 1965 (well, attended the after-dusk part, at least). Nowadays, it was a cliché printed on a T-shirt. But back then, it meant something.

I looked up at Justin. “I guess I see what you’re trying to do,” I said.

“Look, I know it’s not enough, but it’s something. It will make sense tonight, I promise. Will you come?”

“To the party?”

“No—the vigil. For my speech. I’m super nervous ... I could use a friendly face.”

I didn’t say anything.

Justin gave me an empathetic smile and said, “I know you’ve been through a lot, Kat. Think about it. I could use all the support I can get.”

“What about your dorm buddies?”

“They’ll be there. The humans, at least. We’re encouraging Sal to lay low for a while.”

“OK,” I nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good.” Then, looking at his wristwatch, he said, “I’m late for class. Maybe see you tonight, but definitely see you at the O³ party?”

The O³ party was this weekend, which meant delaying leaving by a day or two. I could go and pretend that it was my goodbye party—even if no one attending knew me, knew I was leaving or cared. Still, I should attend one college party to see if they lived up to all the hype 1980s comedies promised.

I nodded at Justin.

“Great,” he said, flashing a big, perfect smile as he started to jog away. “Glad I can make you commit to at least one of them.”

And with that, he was gone, leaving me at the entrance of campus, holding the Other-hating flyer. I crumpled it up and tossed it in the nearest rubbish bin.

Arrgh—Others! I wondered if the gods knew how many problems sending them to Earth would cause. If they would have still done it.

My guess was ... yes.

I guess “hindsight is 20/20” only applies if you actually *care* about the people you’ve left behind.

Chapter 12

WISE SAGES AND PALE WHITE RIDERS

So I was stuck here until after the weekend. Fine. Just more time to get my affairs in order. Affairs—hah! All those college movies talked about hooking up with boys, falling in love, dancing, partying ... living. Sure, I saw students playing frisbee, hanging out by the founder statue and generally just chilling on campus, but what I didn't see was me being a part of that.

Maybe I don't deserve it.

"Oh shush," I growled at myself. I deserve to live and be happy just like everyone else.

Pulling my purse closer to me, I walked into the Admin building and straight to a receptionist with purple hair tied into a ponytail and hipster glasses.

"I want to drop out," I said.

She looked at me over the rims of her glasses. "Day Two jitters?" she asked.

"Day Two coming-to-my-senses," I said.

"Uh-huh. Student ID, please."

I opened my purse and handed the laminated ID to her.

She keyed my details into her computer. "A student advisor will see you shortly. Until then, have a seat."



I went into the waiting room, where three humans huddled at one end and four Others hung out on the other side. The awkwardness between the two groups was palpable. The Others were comprised of two cherubs, a gargoyle that looked like a stone dragon the size of a tomcat and an oni demon. Among the humans was the mousey girl from Gardner Hall (the one who'd handed Deirdre some soil) and a guy who looked like he was auditioning for *Small Town Hick* at the local school theater.

I nodded at Mousey Girl, giving her a knowing smile. She promptly looked away in fear, blushing as she pushed up her thick-framed glasses.

The two cherubs were both only five inches tall; one looked like a baby with a halo and dove-like wings, while the other one looked like a cute, miniature devil with bat wings. I figured them for shoulder cherubs. You know—the angels who sat on your shoulder and encourage you to do good or

bad. Given how they huddled together, I knew they were scared. Made sense ... shoulder cherubs were meant to sit invisibly on your shoulders and guide you through the murky waters of morality. They weren't used to being visible, shoulder-less and sitting in a human waiting room.

They were harmless.

The oni demon, on the other hand, looked like the manga version of the classic Western image of the Devil—red skin, pointy tail, horns, but with huge eyes and tusks that protruded up out of his lower jaw. He was clearly nervous as well, grinding his teeth together, which, because of the large metal ring in one of his tusks, made a clicking sound every time he separated his jaw.

With each tusk-grinding click, Hick Boy clenched his fists like he was just itching to charge at the oni demon. *Stupid human—you'll need a crowbar or machete to do any damage against that thing. Its skin is tougher than a coconut shell. Believe me—I once got into a fight with one of them on Zamami Island off of Okinawa's mainland when—*

Everyone was looking at me. *OK, girl*, I thought—in my head this time—*go with it*. I turned to Hick Boy and said, “You're clearly scared of this guy, otherwise you wouldn't be acting so aggro.”

“You mind your business,” Hick Boy said, in a Southern accent I couldn't quite place. Mississippi? Possibly Georgia.

How cliché, I thought before saying, “I can't mind my business when I see you trying to burn holes in that poor guy. Can't you see, he's just as scared as you are?”

“*Kawai janai*,” the oni demon boomed, at which Hick Boy stood up. So did the oni demon, while Mousey Girl screamed.

I got between human and demon, all of my five-foot-nothing frame standing between two massive bodies of aggro testosterone, and yelled, “Yes, you *are* scared. Both of you are.”

I must have said it with a force that belied my size, because both of them stopped.

Pointing at the oni demon, I said, “Do you speak English?”

The oni demon nodded, his tusk ring clicking.

“OK,” I said. “The rest of us would be more comfortable if you don't yell—and if you need to yell at all, do it in English so that everyone who can't speak Japanese can understand you.”

Hick Boy chuckled at this.

“And you,” I growled, pointing up at Hick Boy. “I thought you Southerners were all about hospitality and being good ol' Christians or whatever. Where are those Southern sensibilities your mama taught you? Huh?”

“My hospitality doesn't extend to freaks,” he said.

“Bold words for a guy in flannel. It's summer and not 1976.”

I saw Mousey Girl's eyes widen with terror. I needed to calm down the situation if I didn't want to get into yet a third fight in two days, and my sassy comebacks weren't helping. I made a calming gesture and said, “I have an idea—if everyone will sit down, I think I can fix this.”

Hick Boy and oni demon stared down at me for a long moment before finally sitting down in

agreement.

“Good,” I said, “Presumably you all are here to drop out.”

Several nods greeted me, with Hick Boy adding, “I didn’t sign up to go to school with a bunch of freaks.”

“I’ll get to you in a minute,” I said, glaring. “First, you.” I pointed at Mousey Girl. “You’re scared, right?”

She nodded.

“I’ve seen you around. You live in the dorms? Gardner Hall?”

“No, I live off campus. I came up to visit a friend, but—”

“You saw lots of weird creatures about, so you just went home where it’s safe?”

Again she nodded.

“So might I offer you an alternative? See that guy over there?” I gestured at the stone gargoyle. “He’s a protector. And given that he’s here, willing to leave this place, I’m willing to bet he has no one to protect. Do you?”

The gargoyle closed its stone eyes in despondence. It let out a long sigh that sounded like pepper being ground, then shook its head. I bent down close and tentatively put out my arm, as I’d read these little protectors preferred. Seeing my arm before it, the gargoyle’s eyes widened in awe. Without further hesitation, it leapt from the chair to my arm, its stone claws gripping my jacket sleeve. Ah, well—the jacket was ruined anyway. That grinding-pepper noise picked back up, but it wasn’t sighing. Was that ... was it purring? It seemed to like me. Up close, I saw that the gargoyle had several runes carved along its body—beautiful, really.

I walked over to where Mousey Girl sat, scowling at how she cowered in her seat as the gargoyle on my arm got closer. “Problem?” I pointed at Mousey Girl, then gestured to the gargoyle. “Meet Solution.” She still seemed nervous that the stone creature was so close, so I added, “Why don’t you two just go for a walk together? Out in public with lots of eyes watching you. The campus is a safe place to get to know each other. And if it works out ... well, this could be a win-win.”

Mousey Girl considered this before finally nodding and standing up. The gargoyle jumped off my arm and the two of them left together.

“Freaks,” Hick Boy snorted.

I turned to glare at him again, but what had just occurred had given me a change of heart. Instead I sighed.

“No, not freaks. Just different. You say your Southern sensibilities don’t extend to them. But is that the right thing to do? I mean, deep down?”

I walked over to the shoulder cherubs and, extending my hands, invited them to jump on. I carried them over to Hick Boy. He tried to move away, but before he could I said, “What? Scared of something smaller than a ferret?”

He shook his head defiantly and took a deep breath. “I don’t know what you are trying to

do, but—”

“Shh ... just listen.”

The angels began talking in his ears and—miraculously, in a world where miracles left with the gods—Hick Boy listened. The thing about shoulder cherubs is they don’t tell you what’s right and what’s wrong; they don’t even tell you *you’re* right or wrong. They tell you *your* right and wrong. Everyone has a different moral compass. Well, not *everyone* ... and some of those who *do* have one clearly need to get it recalibrated ...

Sorry. I’ve clearly let my analogy run away from me.

The point is, shoulder cherubs ... the words they whisper into your ears are *guided* by that moral compass. And whatever they were saying to Hick Boy, it worked. His shoulders relaxed, his fists unclenched and he actually smiled—not the prettiest thing, but definitely an improvement for him.

I pointed to the oni demon. “Now, you. What’s your name?”

“Takashi.”

“Good. Now, Takashi, loosen that ring in your tusk and ... smile.”

The oni demon pulled out the tusk ring and tried to smile, which, judging how big those tusks were, was not an easy task, and did not yield the most aesthetically pleasing results. It was awkward, not very human-like, but somehow endearing.

“Now, might I suggest one more thing?” I said to the two monstrous smiling buffoons. “Oni demons, amongst other things, are famous for distilling their own saki.” Takashi nodded proudly. “And Southerners are famous for their bourbon. Why not have a drink together first, kill each other later? Or at least talk it out. Can you do that?”

“*Hai.*” Takashi bowed his head, then, correcting himself, said, “Yes.”

The good angel whispered in Hick Boy’s ear, but he didn’t move. Then the devil said something and Hick Boy’s smile turned unquestionably wicked. “Don’t mind if I do.”

The two of them left at that—although that wicked smile of Hick Boy’s was a bit worrisome. Ah, well. God didn’t create the world in a day.

Phew, I thought, sitting down in a now-empty room. *That went better than expected.* Satisfied with my little display, I picked up a magazine, but before I could settle I heard, “Katrina Darling? Given that you just cleared the room, I guess you’re next.”

I looked up, expecting to see a human counselor, but what—or rather, *who*—greeted me was Medusa.

As in the one-of-a-kind, Queen-of-the-friggin’-Gorgons, *Medusa*.

“Ahh, hi,” I said, gulping, trying not to stare at her snakes. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m a huge fan.”

Chapter 13

SNAKES AND SAGES

Living for over three hundred years gives you a lot of time to see just about everything you want to see. But while Medusa was one of my idols, she'd only become *seeable* in the last four years, and I hadn't yet had the pleasure.

And believe me, the pleasure was all mine.

She was beautiful—creamy skin, flawless symmetry, everything you'd expect from a Greek goddess, all topped with the more-than-intimidating nest of vipers cascading around her head, surprisingly similar to a regular hairstyle. But what surprised me was her age. Sure, I was living proof that someone could live an incredibly long life yet still resemble a teenager, but I would never have guessed that my idol—Medusa, Queen of the Gorgons—and I would actually have something in common! As I followed her out of the waiting room, I noticed every fashionable article of clothing on her body with delight.

We have the same fashion sense! Medusa's stylish, just like me!

Oh, GoneGods, I was fangirling so hard.

Medusa led me into a tiny room just big enough for a small desk and two chairs. In an effort to maximize space, several shelves had been fashioned to the wall behind her and climbed all the way up to the ceiling. They housed all sorts of files and books, and one of them even had Medusa's purse and several of her personal effects out, like a cubby or open-ended locker. Good thing, too. This room was barely a closet.

An old PC sat on the desk. She gestured to one seat and, taking the other one, began tapping away at her keyboard. Two of her snakes rose high about her head and, using their mouths, picked up a bowl of jellybeans. They placed the bowl in front of me.

"Help yourself," Medusa said, not looking from the PC's screen.

The two snakes flicked their tongues at me. *Snake hospitality?*

"Johnny and Alfie are two of my nicer snakes," Medusa said, punching *Enter* twice on her computer keyboard. " 'Katrina Darling—Major Undeclared. Gardner resident.' Interesting—says here that under 'Roommate Preference,' you ticked *none*. An Other roommate?"

"Changeling."

She looked away from the screen. "Yikes—they're ..."

“Monumental tree-huggers?”

“Quite literally, in my experience,” Medusa said. She gave me an appraising look, not unkindly.

“But something tells me you can handle it. After all, you were quite resourceful in the way you handled the tension in the waiting room.”

“Thanks.”

“That said, I’m not sure how I feel about encouraging students to start drinking at,” she looked at her watch, “ten-thirty in the morning.”

“Yeah, well ...” I blushed. “College life,” I added lamely.

“So, you want to drop out?”

“I just don’t know if this place is for me. I mean—if my first day is any indication, then I definitely don’t belong here.”

“So drop out,” Medusa said without any hint of sarcasm or irony. “I did.”

“Excuse me? I heard that ... I mean, aren’t *you* a student here.”

“Was. They opened up the school for Others last semester and I was the first to enroll. For my one and only semester here I studied Sociology—which is really just a funny way to say ‘Studying Humans.’ I even got a 3.96 GPA. I had a full scholarship—which, given that I donated the Golden Fleece to Other Studies, they kind of owed me. Loved it here.”

“And you dropped out?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

The largest snake on her head dipped into her purse and pulled out a badge. “Thanks, Marty,” she said, handing it over to me.

Looking at the badge, I said, “You’re a Paradise Lot Police Officer?”

“Not yet, but if everything goes right, I will be in two years.”

“So what are you doing here? Isn’t Paradise Lot ...” I thought about it. “Where *is* Paradise Lot?”

“Oh, you know the place,” she said. “That island in England’s Lake District. The new home for most Other refugees. I’m not there now because the school asked me and a couple other Others to come to campus at the start of the semester to talk to humans who want to drop out because of Other attendance. They figured a familiar head of snakes such as myself”—the snakes all hissed, as if saying “Tadaaaaaa!”—“would help with the adjustment ... so, surprise, here I am.”

“And Paradise Lot Police—what’s that about?”

“I took a look around me and asked myself, ‘Where can I do the most good?’ My choices were to stay here, study humans, then get a job with some political party or activist group ... or I could go to Paradise Lot and help out my own kind there.”

“So you chose to become a cop?”

“Paradise Lot is quickly becoming the only Other-majority city in the world. You know what that means?”

“That Others enjoy a good wordplay on classic literature?”

She shook her head. “There are so many kinds of Others from different traditions, religions and folklore that the mish-mash of cultures in such a small place will mean a lot of conflicts. And right now, because Others are the newcomers, we need to prove that we can not only live on Earth but that we will be productive, peaceful citizens. If the world turns on their TV and sees fighting in Paradise Lot, their distrust of Others will only grow. I went there to do my part in keeping the peace.

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t come up here to show humans like you that we Others aren’t to be feared. After all, if the big, bad, turn-you-to-stone Medusa is a nice gal, then maybe, just maybe the other Others are nice, too. Right?”

“Yeah ... I have to say you are not what I expected.”

She leaned forward and put a hand on my arm. Several of her snakes, including the big green viper that came out of the crown of her head, winked at me. “Girlfriend—we never are,” she said with a smirk.

I chuckled.

“You have a nice laugh—and a kind smile,” Medusa said. “You’re also cute as a button, smart—a great sense of style.” She looked down at my outfit appreciatively and I enforced every ounce of my willpower to not let out a high-pitched fangirl squeak. “A girl like you should not only fit right in, you should be the belle of the ball.”

“You’d think. I mean, if you watch all those college movies ... *Animal House*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Van Wilder*—”

“—*Legally Blonde*,” we said in unison.

“Yeah,” I said, laughing. “Exactly. I mean—look at me. I’m basically Reese Witherspoon without the annoying voice.”

“So what’s the trouble?”

“Last night, it was ... it was terrible.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned. What happened that was so bad?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to rehash what happened. It did surprise me that Medusa hadn’t heard about it yet—she wanted to be a police officer, didn’t she?—but I would be feeling this way regardless of what had happened. If I were to be totally honest with myself, I was already feeling uneasy before all the stuff at the library. “It doesn’t matter,” I finally said. “Let’s just say that it’s painfully evident that I don’t fit in here.”

“Just because you had a bad day doesn’t mean you’re going to have a bad year. A day is a day. And in my experience, what happens today doesn’t predict what will happen tomorrow.”

“I think it does. If anything, it predicted that I’m not like everyone else.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Medusa said, petting her lead snake. “If I was like everyone else, I wouldn’t have Marty here keeping me company.”

“Yeah—but you’re *Medusa*. You are literally a legend! I’m just—”

“A Darling.”

“Excuse me?”

“You are Katrina Darling—*that’s* somebody.”

“Yeah, but—”

“So drop out,” she repeated.

I looked up at her, once more surprised. Wasn’t she supposed to be trying to convince me to stay?

My shocked look was met with a kind, warm smile of understanding. “Or stay—it doesn’t matter to me. But whatever you do, do so because it is where you can do the most good.”

“That’s just the thing. I don’t know if me staying will lead to any good.”

“Do you think you can do more good somewhere else? That’s why I left.”

I didn’t say anything.

Medusa’s snakes hissed impatiently and the former Queen of the Gorgons closed my file. “For what it’s worth, I think you should stay. The way you helped the students in the waiting room proves you have a knack to bridge the divide between our species. McJames could use more students like you.”

I shook my head hesitantly. “I don’t know ...”

“And you don’t *need* to know. Not right now. Just think about it. Get through the weekend. From what I hear, McConnell Hall is having a big party tomorrow.”

I smiled. She hears about parties but not on-campus murders. She’d have a rude awakening at police orientation. “Yeah—the O³ costume ball. ‘Ringing in the Apocalypse.’ ”

“The apocalypse already happened, and we’re still here.”

“I know,” I said. “If I had been on the planning committee, I would have suggested the party be called something like ‘The World Without End’ or something like that.”

Medusa tilted her head, nodding in approval. More than approval—like she was proud of me or something. It felt nice to have someone so warm and inviting look at me like that, especially my literal hero.

“Yeah,” Medusa said. “Like I said—I like your style. The weekend ... OK? If it doesn’t go well, then you can come back here and drop out. Deal?”

I didn’t move.

“Deal?” she repeated with more force in her voice. I was painfully aware of every snake on her head staring at me intently, like they were trying to turn me to stone.

I nodded. Reluctantly. “Yeah, sure. Will ... will you be here?”

“Sadly, no—I’m back to Paradise Lot later today. But someone else will be here, and I’ll be sure to put in your file that you are a special case. A very special case, indeed.”

Chapter 14

THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth (... So Help Me, GoneGods)

I left Student Admin feeling more confused than ever. TV dads (my primary source of fatherly advice, given that I ate mine a few centuries back) always tell their daughters that they don't have enough life experience to make the right decisions. They imply that life experience comes from age, from doing and seeing things. From living. I'd been alive for over three hundred years and I still didn't feel I had enough life experience to decide anything.

My stomach grumbled. Seeing that it was almost noon, I walked down into off-campus housing (affectionately known as the Student Ghetto) to find something to eat and—lo and behold—what is the first place I stumbled upon? A Döner kebab shop opening up.

Two birds, one kebab, I thought as I walked in, thanking the GoneGods for small miracles.



"I know what you are," I said. "You are Mergen—or rather, Mergen's avatar."

I found Mergen sitting in an alleyway behind the Religious Studies library (a building that was adjacent, but oddly unconnected to the Other Studies library).

At my words, a weak smile appeared on Mergen's face—and I knew that I was right. Or the Old Librarian had been right. He was Mergen. *Score one for you, librarian. Your last point before the buzzer*, I thought with a heavy heart. Mergen's eyes brightened and there was a glint of hope in them. I guess that's what happens when someone acknowledges your existence, and I suspected that in the four years that he'd been mortal, I was the first person who actually called him by his name.

The avatar was sitting on the ground, looking weaker and more emaciated than ever. His skin was also whiter. No, that wasn't it exactly—it was more ... transparent. Like he was literally fading away into nothing.

"I don't know much about you yet, except to say that you represent Truth and Wisdom—that, and

you're Turkish. Which is why I got you this." I handed him the Döner kebab, which he took with a hand so absent of flesh that bone poked from his fingertips.

Picking the cleanest plot of ground near him, I sat down and unwrapped the falafel I'd bought for myself. Glancing over at the avatar dude, I noticed his expression had changed drastically. Whereas initially he looked grateful and slightly better, now he sat staring down at the sandwich, his head hung low in despair once more.

"Oh, come on!" I said. "This is from your homeland. Are you really telling me a Turkish deity doesn't eat Döner kebabs?"

He shook his head and uttered, "The truth?" It sounded like a question.

"Yes, the truth," I said. "What *do* you eat? A friend of mine debated this very topic with me before ... well, he's gone now."

He pursed his lips, not answering, his impossibly white skin shining in the sunlight.

"Are you a vegetarian?" I asked, taking the kebab and handing him my falafel. "I am, too. At least I am now."

He took the sandwich, which was essentially deep-fried, mashed chickpeas, and sniffed it. Then he groaned.

"Look, no judgment here. If you tell me you eat kittens, I'll help you find a kitten. I won't watch you eat, but I won't judge you either," I lied. Well, maybe not *lied*. I exaggerated. I would judge him. But my judgment would fall short of condemnation. After all, I'd eaten a lot worse than kittens.

A *lot* worse.

But he just shook his head.

"OK," I said, sliding next to him. "If you can't eat that, can I?"

He handed me back the falafel.

I ripped the foil and took a bite. I felt guilty eating in front of him, but it was a necessary part of my plan. I wanted to get this guy so hungry and frustrated, eventually he'd break and tell me what he ate that was so disgusting he just didn't want to share with me.

"You know," I said, taking another bite and speaking to him around it, trying to show him just how delicious it was. "I'm not sure I'm cut out for this place."

He nodded. I couldn't tell if he was agreeing with me or simply acknowledging my feelings.

"When I first came here, I thought: here's a place where I can have a second chance. A place where no one knows me, knows what I've done, where I've been. A fresh start. A chance to become brand new."

I heard Mergen smack his lips—presumably the Turkish godly equivalent of, *I hear you, girl!*

"But then I got here ... and you know what I discovered? That you may be done with the past, but the past isn't necessarily done with you. So much for a fresh, brand new start, right?"

Mergen groaned again. And not in the *I'm-in-pain* kind of way. More like *This feels so good, it's bordering on creepy*. A little nervous that Mergen was perving out on me, I turned to see what was

making him so happy. He was looking right at me, the corners of his lips turned slightly upward in an expression that simultaneously had a grateful and *don't-stop* quality to it. But it wasn't his expression that most astonished me—it was the transformation he just went through. The avatar was still pale as ever, but he wasn't as transparent as before. And what's more, his hands had some meat to them. They almost looked normal.

“What's ... going on?” I asked, amazed that anyone or anything could change so much in so little time with no nourishment in-between.

“The truth,” he muttered.

“The truth? What are you talking about?”

Then it hit me—when I had asked him what he ate, he'd said, “The truth.” Because of the way he inflected the end of the word, I had interpreted it as a question—as in, “Do you want the truth about what I eat?” And when he didn't answer that question, I thought it was because he didn't want to tell me. But seeing how his skin fleshed out and how he perked up a bit when I told him about my own inner struggles, I realized that when I asked him what he ate and he said, “The truth,” he was telling me the truth.

This guy doesn't eat chicken or beef, lamb kebabs or broccoli. He eats Truth, with a capital *T*, the honest-to-the-GoneGods *Truth*. And me admitting what I did, me telling him how I truly felt, that fed him. “Holy crow ... you eat the Truth?”

He nodded.

“And I guess with everything going on around here, the Truth isn't in high supply, huh? People are mulling about, denying how they're fed up with the world, not really confronting what is really going on, right?”

Again he nodded, but I also noted that his skin, although still impossibly white, was gaining a little bit of meat on it.

“OK,” I said. “If I tell you some of my own Truth, will you keep it secret?”

“To my grave,” he said softly.

I believed him. After all, a creature who ate truth probably couldn't lie. That would be akin to poisoning himself.

I took a deep breath.

“I used to be a vampire. And I haven't told anyone because I'm ashamed of who I was and what I did.”

His eyes turned down and he grabbed his stomach, as if he had a belly ache.

“What's wrong?” I asked. “I didn't lie to you—it's the truth.”

“It is ... *half* the truth,” he said.

“Half the truth? What more do you want from me?”

“All of it.”

I started feeling a bit defensive. “I *gave* you all of it.”

“No ... no, you didn’t.”

“What do you mean?” I could feel my frustration rising up in me. What did this guy want? For me to bare my soul just because he was hungry? He would have to take the truth I gave him.

He gave me a knowing look. “Thank you,” he said.

“For what?”

“For trying.”

That really boiled my blood. “Trying”? *Trying!* I just told him my biggest, darkest secret—and it wasn’t *enough*? I grabbed my purse and stood up in a huff. “You know, I understand that you eat the truth and all, but you’re still a beggar. And beggars—they can’t be choosers. You should be grateful for what you can get!”

At this, his eyes widened and a satisfied smile painted his face. “Mmmm,” he moaned. “That is true. And tasty.”

I stared at him. “You’re weird.”

“Yes,” he agreed, rubbing your belly.

“And you creep me out.”

“I do, don’t I?” he said, smacking his lips.

“And I am leaving,” I said, turning on my heel.

“Yes ... that is the Truth, and it is delicious!”

Oh, brother ... I’d met a lot of Others in my life, but this Mergen guy took the prize.

Chapter 15

JESSICA FLETCHER, YOU ARE NOT DARLING

I walked up the hill in a huff, stomping my feet down with an unnecessary intensity as I made my way back to Gardener Hall. *The truth? The TRUTH?! I thought (probably out loud, if we're being truthful). He wants the Truth?! Well, maybe the Truth is that a creature like him is too weak to live in the GoneGod world. Maybe he needs to get off his high horse and eat some humble pie like the rest of us. Maybe he should burn all the magic time he has left to blow smoke up his own a—*

A couple students who were meandering down the hill looked at me as I passed by them. Not that I cared. I was too busy dealing with the “Truth”! Frustrated and dejected, I entered through the building’s front door and made my way to the basement stairs. All I wanted was my bed, my iPad and a movie. Preferably a slasher.

And I was so close to getting just that.

I was only a few yards away when I heard the unmistakable voice of my changeling roommate in the laundry room. “*Never, you foul, disrespectful urchin!*” I heard Deirdre cry out.

“What did you call me?” I heard a voice say, more in confusion than actual anger. “Look, I don’t know what your problem is, but that’s mine. I’m the one that picked it up. I get to keep it.”

“For what purpose? To display on your mantle? You did not dispatch the creature—you have no claims to keep a part of him as a trophy. This being—this piece of ‘stone,’ as you call it—deserves a proper burial. An appropriate farewell.”

“Leave him alone,” I heard another, higher-pitched voice say.

“It’s just a piece of stone.”

“Stone? Stone!” Deirdre’s rage was intensifying. I didn’t know the changeling well enough to know if she could control her temper or not, and my fear was that if she did lose it and attack this guy, she’d rip him to shreds. Literally. Changelings don’t mess around. Given all the resurrection magic that used to exist among the UnSeelie Court, they tended to destroy their victims’ bodies to the point of no return.

I stepped inside the laundry room—a bleak room painted orange and holding six machines. Two of them were running, their tumblers reverberating white noise as the smell of detergent and fabric softener wafted through the room. Inside, there was some kid with an *Iron Man* hoodie, holding his

hands up as if in surrender. A classically pretty, tall blonde stood next to him in what looked like her pajamas, holding an empty white basket.

Uh-oh. She looked like she was getting ready to scream.

The kid in the hoodie took a step back and diverted his gaze. Big mistake. He just showed Deirdre that he was scared. As a fae warrior, her instincts would be to press her advantage—any true warrior would feel the same way. Destroy your enemy however you can. And if they're weak? Just means an easier victory for you.

Deirdre pulled back her fist and took a step into him. I could see immediately that she was going to knock him to the ground and, once he was on his back, use her leverage to beat his body into the linoleum floor. Before she could do it, I darted forward and clamped her arm in mine, pulling her away from the boy.

"Unhand me!" she said, lashing out at me—but as soon as she saw who I was, her eyes widened in distress and she dropped to one knee, ashamed that she almost attacked the very person she'd recently pledged her sword arm to.

Fae protocols—sometimes they could be useful.

"I am sorry, milady," she muttered in a rushed whisper.

I rolled my eyes. "Get up, Deirdre." I tried to help her up, but she wouldn't budge.

"What's going on?" the boy said, nervously laughing at the plateau before him. "What are we—in an episode of *Game of Thrones*?" He looked around him as if expecting Jon Snow to saunter by, and laughed again, this time derisively.

Deirdre ignored him, simply offering me the stone which had apparently caused all this ruckus. Up close, I saw what she was defending. My face flushed with rage as I stared at the fine carvings of the slab, making out the details of a cat-like eye with several medieval runes surrounding it.

The gargoyle from earlier ... and the one good deed I'd done today. Seeing it, I guessed that either the Mousey Girl did this—something I highly doubted, given her demeanor—or she'd abandoned the poor guy and he was attacked by whatever misguided human thought he was doing the world a service by killing it.

And now some idiot student wants to have a piece of the gargoyle's body as ... what? ... a freaking paper weight?

"Where did you get this?" I asked the boy.

"What's the big deal? It's just a piece of sto—"

"*Where did you get this?*" Now it was my turn to get in the kid's face.

His laughter had all but dried up in his throat. "I found it. In the stadium's parking lot."

"Stadium?" I pushed into him, demanding more.

"Yeah, you know, the football stadium just down the hill. The parking lot is a shortcut up to the dorms."

I hadn't been here long, but I did know about the stadium shortcut. If you entered through the

parking lot and up the stairs into the stadium itself, you cut out the steepest part of the hill. A popular route for the lazy, drunk or overweight—or all three. Still, it didn't make sense that he'd found the remains of the gargoyle there. In the Student Ghetto, maybe, but the football stadium's parking lot? What was the gargoyle doing there?

I pushed him hard against the back wall of the laundry room.

"Liar," I growled.

"No, I swear!" he said, his lips quivering with fear. "I was walking home, up Pine Street and through the lot, and that's where I found it. There were a bunch of stones piled there, like someone had smashed a statue or something. I sifted through it and found that piece and ... and I thought it would look cool in my room."

"This isn't a piece of stone."

"What ... what is it?"

I could feel Deirdre standing behind me now.

"You really don't understand," I said, "do you? This is part of a *gargoyle*. You know—stone guardians? They tend to live on castle turrets. What you picked up and so carelessly carried around with you is the equivalent of a severed head. This is part of something that was living, breathing ... *thinking*. A creature who came to this place to make a better life for itself." I gripped the stone tighter as I clenched my teeth. "You should be reporting this to the police. Should you be helping them find his killer? What you absolutely *shouldn't* be doing is bragging to that blonde ditz about bringing home a trophy that used to be part of a *person*."

"Hey," she started, but I shot her a look that said it was not beneath me to beat her perfect little nose into her skull. She shut up.

I turned back to the guy. "This is a tragedy—not memorabilia. Do you understand that? Do you?"

He looked at me for a long, hard moment, his face so drained of expression that I couldn't tell if he was going to fly into a rage, cry or run away. The part of me that still yearned for the unbridled violence of my past wanted him to fly into a rage. I wanted him to attack me so I could smash his smug face into the wall and then beat him senseless. But I was calm enough to know that wouldn't help. If anything, it would get me expelled, possibly arrested (again). Sure, that would solve my dropping-out-of-college conundrum, but it would also sow more discontent between humans and Others. So I just stared him down, not saying anything more, waiting for him to make his decision.

What he finally settled on was a macho "Screw you," followed by him grabbing the blonde's hand as he pulled her out of the room. She dropped her basket as they left and I watched it teeter for a long moment, then finally settle on its base.

I looked down at my hand, at the face of a creature who only a couple hours ago was sitting in Student Admin seeking to quit this place. *GoneGodDammit ... I got involved and convinced him to go with the mousey girl because I thought they could get along. Idiot!*

"No, milady," said my roommate, whom I'd forgotten was standing right behind me. "It is I who is

the fool. I should have never engaged the ill-informed human. I should have—”

“Deirdre,” I interrupted. The last thing I needed was a rehash of what just happened. “Do you know how to give this gargoyle a proper burial?”

Deirdre hesitated, then nodded. “If I can learn his name, then yes.”

His name—I had no idea what his name was. Trying to help, and I hadn’t even bothered to ask his name. I didn’t bother to ask any of their names. Yet another piece of proof that I wasn’t here to connect ... I was just *here*.

Rubbing my fingers along the curves of this once living stature, I thought about how I could find his name. Maybe when he went into Student Admin ... he must have signed in, right? That was a possibility. I sighed and handed Deirdre his cracked face. “I’ll try to find that out for you. In the meantime ... take care of him?”

“As you command,” she said.

I started out of the laundry room and toward my dorm. “One more thing,” I said as I walked away. “Stop with all this ‘as you command,’ ‘milady’ and ‘my sword arm is yours’ stuff. People don’t talk like that. Not on Earth, at least, and considering you’re an Earthly being now, you’ve got to get with the program.”

“‘Program’?” She tilted her head in confusion.

“Just act like everyone else. It’s better that way.”

I stepped into the hall and Deirdre followed me.

Walking into our room, I saw that much of the soil and grass still littered the floor, but at least it was *mostly* clean. Grumbling to myself, I took off my shoes and jacket, put down my purse and, without getting into my pajamas, crawled into bed.

I closed my eyes, but could feel something—or rather, *someone*—staring at me. Without opening my eyes, I said, “What is it, Deirdre?”

“You saw his body?”

“Whose?”

“The librarian’s?”

I groaned. “How do you know about that?”

“It is now common knowledge.”

“Which part?”

“That an Other killed the librarian—and that you bore witness to his death.”

“Not exactly. The only thing I *bore* was his dead body. I showed up after he had been killed. And there’s no evidence it was an Other who killed him. That’s just an assumption based on fear-driven stereotypes. Bigotry.”

“I see, mila— ... my friend.”

I thought that was it, but when I didn’t hear her move, I opened my eyes to see Deirdre slightly bent over, staring down at me.

“Is there something else, Deirdre?”

“Yes. There will be a candlelight vigil held in his honor. I wish to attend.”

“So attend,” I said.

“Will you attend with me?”

I thought about it. The Old Librarian was my friend—I think. I had only met him once, but I did like him. Attending would be appropriate. But after all that had happened, I figured it was best to never leave my dorm room again. I seemed to get in trouble when I did. I shook my head. “I don’t think so. I’m tired and—”

“In the UnSeelie Court, vigils lasted forty days and forty nights, with the warrior class standing guard over the body, our swords always at the ready.”

“What’s your point?”

“Here on Earth, I do not believe that they observe the same customs.”

“What gave you that clue?”

“This.” She pulled out a flyer from her pocket. The same one that Justin had handed me earlier. “The invitation.”

“It’s not an in—” I started, then thought better of it. “Sorry, you were saying?”

“The invitation speaks of candles and invites people to speak. It also has several religious symbols decorating its borders. The rituals of this vigil will be different than the ones I know.”

“Again, so ...?”

“I require a human escort.”

“I’m hardly human,” I said.

“Then a being that understands human rituals,” she said, evidently not getting that I was joking. “I fear that if I go alone, I will only make a fool of myself.”

“So don’t go.”

She looked at me, as if hurt. “Vigils are a requirement for one such as I. It was our duty to attend all for whom an invitation had been issued.”

She thought she was specially invited. And because of that, she was obligated to attend. Oh, brother ... she’d have been a Latter-Day Saint’s dream come true before the GrandExodus.

I thought about explaining that flyers were just a thing humans did to disseminate information, but seeing the steel in her eyes, I knew that she not only saw it as her duty to go—it was something she *wanted* to do.

“Attend,” I said. “But don’t take your sword.”

She gave me a longing look.

“No swords, Deirdre. And you don’t need an escort. Just do what everyone else does.”

She began to blink rapidly and if I hadn’t seen this behavior before, I would have thought she was having a seizure. But rapid blinking was the fae’s equivalent of pleading. She was—in her way—on her knees, begging me to come.

“No,” I said.

More rapid blinks.

“I’m not going.”

Now the blinks were not only faster but out of sync, too. How the hell was she doing that?

“You’re not going to stop unless I agree, are you?”

She shook her head, maintaining her manic blinks.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “We’ll go. Satisfied?”

Deirdre stopped blinking and smiled.

“Good. Now if you don’t mind ...” I said, and pulled my duvet over my head.

“If I do not mind what?”

“Please be quiet and let me nap, Deirdre!”

The room went silent. Thank the GoneGods.

Chapter 16

STICKS AND STONES HURT WAAAAY LESS THAN WORDS

I woke up to Deirdre wearing my grass-green blouse, her hair tied back in a ponytail with tiny lilac flowers in her hair and a laurel wreath on her head. She was watching the news on my iPad. I guess among her fae ethics, using my stuff without permission was nowhere in sight. I thought about reprimanding her, taking it away, but then I heard the *Global News* Mont-Royal news anchor start his report with “More mythical creatures being targeted in hate crimes.”

I got out of bed and asked Deirdre to turn it up. Together, we watched in horror as two satyrs were being carted away on a stretcher, a flash of an angel bleeding light on the sidewalk as police interviewed her and three pixies crying as they were taken away in the back of a police car. What wasn’t shown was the dead gargoyle—which kind of made sense. The police, like the kid in the *Iron Man* hoodie, would have mistaken him for a pile of rubble and not a body at a crime scene.

The anchor ended his report with, “Police theorize that these attacks are in response to the death of Dr. Dewey, who was brutally murdered by an unknown Other late last night,” signing off after that.

“Dr. Dewey?”

“The librarian,” Deirdre said. “‘Dewey’ was his surname.”

Hearing his name felt like a slap in the face. All this time, I knew him as the “Old Librarian,” and that gave some distance between us. Now that I knew his name, much of that distance was lost.

I lifted my face to the ceiling, desperately trying to stop a tear from escaping. “What else is the news saying?”

Deirdre told me. It seemed that in the six hours or so that I slept there had been a half-dozen attacks on campus. All against Others. I guess the murder of the Old Librarian—ahh, Dr. Dewey—opened the floodgates of tension. Given how dangerous Others were supposed to be, there were a hell of a lot more Others being hurt at the hands of humans than humans being hurt by Others.

But isn’t that how fear works? It turns aggressors into the righteous and victims into demons.

“This is just one report,” Deirdre said. “There are other stories on other channels.” A tiny tear ran down her cheek and fell on the iPad’s screen.

“I know,” I said, my own tear escaping.

“What can we do about it?”

“Nothing.”

Deirdre sighed heavily.

“I’m sorry, Deirdre, but there’s nothing to do. We just have to wait until the anger subsides and pray that the world comes to its senses.”

“Pray? To whom?”

I didn’t answer. There was no one to pray to. Everyone knew that.

Deirdre handed me the iPad and stood up. “Perhaps tonight’s vigil will help heal some wounds. Perhaps—”

“You can’t go to the vigil, Deirdre! You’ll be in real danger there.”

She gave me a look like I was the crazy one to consider *not* going.

“Look,” I explained, “there will be a lot of angry people there. Angry humans. Humans who will want to take out their frustration on an Other just like you. There’s no way. I’m not going and neither are you.”

“But I was invited. As a fae warrior, I cannot—”

“You’re no longer a fae warrior. You are a mortal creature living in a world without gods.”

“But ... but ...” She bunched her hands together, holding them so tight that her fingers turned white with the effort. “I am *fae*.” Two more tears escaped and rolled down her cheeks. “Oberon and Titania may have abandoned us. The UnSeelie Court and Planes of Forever Green may no longer be ... but that does not make me any less fae than I was. I am fae. I will always be fae.”

With those words, she dried her eyes and looked at the clock. “The hour is near,” she said. “I will attend the vigil—with or without my human guide.”

I’d been around the fae enough to know that once they made up their minds, nothing short of divine intervention could discourage them. And since we were all out of that, I sighed and pulled an old poncho out of my drawers. “OK—we’ll go. But you can’t dress like that.”



As we made our way down the hill to campus, I expected to see the streets filled with people shouting anti-Other chants, some fights, the air thick with tension. Anger.

Hate.

But that wasn’t the case at all. Instead, Deirdre and I found dozens of students carrying cardboard signs that read various flowery stuff like:

OTHERS DESERVE THEIR PLACE.

LOVE STILL MATTERS.

WE MUST WELCOME THE MYTHICAL REFUGEES INTO OUR HOMES.

And once we got into the vigil itself, I saw students crying, more signs, a picture of the Old Librarian surrounded by flowers and candles. The hate simply wasn't here. Well, at least it felt like that ...

But I couldn't shake the feeling that this was just the calm before the storm.



We started to make our way through the crowds because, as Deirdre put it, it was our duty to light a candle in his honor. I thought it was enough we showed up, but who was I to argue with fae logic?

Whatever, I thought as we wove through the sea of bodies. *As long as we make it there and back without drawing too much attention to our—*

"Ms. Darling," I heard a voice say. "It's good to see you here."

I turned to see Detective Wilcox standing behind me. And right next to her was a boy in a hoodie who looked like he'd like to be in a million other places than on this field at this time.

"Detective Wilcox. Good to see you here, too," I said. "And hi, Nate. How's it going?"

Nate shrugged.

"OK," I said, wondering what his problem was. "Is Justin here, too?"

Nate didn't look up, simply pointing at the founder statue. "He's setting up for his big speech."

"I see that you're already acquainted with my cousin," Wilcox said.

"I am. Sort of. He mostly made fun of me. Something about *Weird Girl* and his friend, Justin."

"Is that true, dear cousin?" Wilcox said, pinching his cheeks in that exaggerated way you did to kids when you wanted to ensure them of their cuteness.

Nate pulled away in anger, slapping her hand away. "Bitch," he said.

"Excuse me?" Detective Wilcox said, seriousness flooding her face.

"Not you—*her*," Nate said.

Now it was my turn. "Excuse me?" Deirdre took a step forward, but I held out a hand. "I can handle this. Now, again, excuse me?"

Nate looked up, finally pulling his hoodie off his head. "You heard me. *Bitch*." He took a step forward.

"What is your problem?"

He pointed at the Other Studies library and whispered, "My cousin here says you're not the killer, but I saw you on with those hockey players."

"I was defending that poor Other beggar. And besides, all I did was give them a bloody nose. I didn't string them up or—"

That's when Nate pushed me. And I don't mean a gentle, get-out-of-my-way nudge. It was a full-on shove, and since I wasn't expecting it, I landed hard on my ass.

Deirdre immediately got between us, and if I had waited a second longer, she might have shoved him back. Being shoved by a human might get you on the floor, but being shoved by a pissed-off changeling—that was likely to send you to the next block.

“Don’t, Deirdre. It’s not worth it.” Deirdre gave me a confused look as I clambered back to my feet, so I added—just for good measure—“Against human protocol to fight at a vigil. Nate here dishonors the Old Librarian—”

“Dr. Dewey,” Deirdre said.

“Yes, Dr. Dewey.” I gave Nate a cold, hard stare, then flashed the fakest smile I could muster. Turning to Detective Wilcox, I noticed she hadn’t moved. She must have been just as shocked as I was. “I don’t know what your problem is, Nate,” I said, “but I *liked* Dr. Dewey. And even if I didn’t, I would have never—”

That’s when Nate spit in my face.

I lunged at him, and if it hadn’t been for Deirdre taking my *No-fighting-at-vigils* comment seriously, it would have been Nate knocked on his ass. That, and Wilcox stepping between us. From her expression, I could tell she didn’t know if she should hit me or reprimand Nate.

Pointing a threatening finger in Nate’s face, I said, “This isn’t over.”

I pulled Deirdre close and we made our way to the memorial. I glanced over my shoulder to see Nate and Wilcox watching me walk away. Wilcox still had a puzzled look on her face, but Nate ...

Nate was smiling.



We passed by students strumming guitars, singing hymns, reciting poetry, lighting candles—all paying homage to a man that virtually none of them knew. And yet I could sense that their misery was genuine. They truly felt the loss. Why? How could they lament the loss of someone they never knew? Was it fear that something happened so close to them? Fear that if it happened to him, it could happen to them?

Or maybe it was something else ... a human thing. Humans crying for humans? I doubted that, too. I’d seen so many wars and random killing—hell, I committed many of those—and I’d never seen this kind of reaction.

No, there was something else going on. But what it was, I could not tell.

And then I saw Deirdre crying and knew that it wasn’t just humans that were being affected. Whatever they felt, Deirdre felt it, too.

Wrongful, violent death shakes us all, I thought.

Deirdre nodded in agreement.

OK—so we all felt his death. Very well, then ... let me pay my respects. We got near the image of him; looking into the frozen image of his kind blue eyes, I knelt down and picked up a candle that had

gone out and lit it from the flame of another.

I stared at his image for a long moment, wondering how my life would be different here if he were alive and well—and my boss. I wondered if our friendship would have grown. I suspected it would. After all, we'd be spending a lot of time together, shelving books, categorizing the museum collection, taking care of the old building's needs. That would have been a good thing—but now it was gone.

And soon, I'll be gone, too, I thought, shaking my head and crying.



A hand touched my shoulder. I whirled to see Egya standing behind me.

“Why,” I said, “do you always show up when I least want you to? Which is to say, why do you show up at all?”

But Egya wasn't paying attention to me. He was pointedly looking everywhere else but me, his eyes shifting back and forth.

“What is it?” I said, whispering now and drawing closer.

“Look,” he said.

I turned to see that most of the people standing immediately around the memorial were looking at us, no longer speaking, just staring in silence. Their tears were turning into curled lips and clenched fists. But why would they direct their anger at me? Was it because I was there at his death? How could they know who I was? As far as any of them knew, I was just another student paying her respects. I scanned the area around me for Deirdre. She was standing about ten feet away from me, under the canopy of the old oak tree. Her hood was still over her head and she was looking down, mournful and lost in her own grief.

“Sheesh,” I said. “What's everyone's problem?”

“Come,” Egya said softly, “walk with me and watch their eyes.”

We walked over to Deirdre. As we did, everyone who was within ten meters of us looked up at our passing and stared, hate painting their faces. But that wasn't the strangest thing about this. As people fell outside of the ten meters, they'd stop staring at us and continue their conversations as if they hadn't been trying to bore holes in us with their eyes.

“A curse,” I whispered.

“Strange guess for someone who is just a human girl,” Egya said. Then he shook his head. “This is not a curse—there is too much emotion. *This* ... is a hex.”

I swallowed, digesting what he'd just said.

A hex was serious business. Think of them as suped-up versions of curses, the difference being a curse was a general suggestion that things “go wrong” for its intended victim—bad luck, disease, poverty, lost love, even death—but because it was just a suggestion, a gentle nudge that things fall apart, it can take forever to happen, if it happens at all. It is entirely possible the intended victim's

immunity (as in the case of disease) is strong enough to ward off the curse. Or perhaps the target is incredibly lucky or rich or in love, and thus the curse falls flat.

A *hex* was something else entirely. The right hex, with the right amount of time burnt for the proper amount of magic, not only causes bad luck, disease, poverty, lost love or even death—you can get really specific with its terms and conditions. Say you wanted the victim to die in a spectacular fashion, maybe get hit by a bus. No problem. The victim will find themselves wandering into a highway for no reason at all. Lost love? The intended victim will happily take photos of themselves with a sheep (in the, erm, *biblical sense*) and send it to their lover with the subject line: *I've found someone who fulfills me in ways you never could.*

Hexes were the Terminators of curses.

I closed my eyes. Even when I couldn't see the people glaring at us, I could still feel their rage. But to say that they were merely angry at us would be wrong. The hatred they focused on us was palpable. You could literally feel it. And I don't mean that as a euphemism or an exaggeration. I mean that making eye contact with them created a sense of tension that felt as if someone had wrapped a garroting thread around us and was pulling. Hard.

But I couldn't let Egya know that I—someone who was just a girl—knew the difference between hexes and curses, so mustering all the acting skills I'd learned from day-time soaps, I widened my eyes. In a worried, trembling voice, I asked, "What's the difference?"

He smirked at this question—evidently not believing my *Days of Our Lives* shock. "One is bad. One is terrible. But at least hexes have one thing to our advantage. They don't last long. Too much burnt time is needed to keep them up."

"Why us?" I whispered.

He cocked a thumb toward the library. "Not us ... *you.*"

"Me? How do you know?"

"I've been following their eyes. Always trained on you. Not your changeling friend. Not me. You."

I scanned the crowd as we reached Deirdre. Egya was right—all eyes were on me.

I nodded. "OK, it's me. But why?"

Egya shrugged. "Isn't it obvious? You disrupted the killer's ritual and he wants you to suffer for it. This killer of yours is a vengeful spirit."

"But if I am the focal point, then why aren't you affected? Or Deirdre? Why aren't you two staring at me like you wanna spill my guts?"

He shrugged again. "Because we know you."

I gave him a look. "Hardly."

"We know you enough to know you aren't our enemy. But they"—he pointed to the crowd—"they don't know you from Eve ... and that is all that is needed to turn a stranger into an enemy."

"Fine. Let's say I believe you. What kind of 'fun' exactly did I interrupt?"

“Not fun. *Ritual*. Do you really think Dr. Dewey was strung up for fun, just-a-girl?”

“Don’t call me that—and yes, why not?”

Egya narrowed his eyes like he was trying to figure me out. “What kind of killers would go to such lengths ‘just for fun’? No—the killer was performing a ritual, preparing the body for something ... bigger.”

The thought that the killer wasn’t just maiming the librarian for his or her twisted amusement hadn’t really crossed my mind. To be honest, I used to kill for fun ... I guess I assumed that if I did so, then most killers would be like me.

“What ritual?” I asked.

“I have no idea. And we don’t have time to consider this now.” Egya pointed at two boys who were starting to walk toward us. They were two of the three hockey players from yesterday—the ones who had been picking on Mergen—the big one with the now-thrice-broken nose and the short one with the unfortunate ponytail. “Their hate will turn to rage. The rage that will be directed at you—and anyone they consider to be your friend.” He gestured at Deirdre, and I could see the third hockey player walking toward her.

I walked over to Deirdre and whispered, “Pull your hood on tight and get rid of those leaves. We’re leaving.”

“Why?” she gurgled between her own tears. “We just got here and I have yet to sing ‘The Solemn Ode to the Dead.’ ”

“We’ve got to go. Now. Move it.”

Deirdre might have been a bubbling mess of emotions, but she was, first and foremost, a trained warrior. And as a trained warrior, you learn to trust the instincts of those around you—especially those you have pledged your sword arm to.

Without bothering to wipe away her tears, she plucked the leaves from her head, dropping them to the grass at her feet, and swept her hood over her head.

“Good,” I muttered. “Let’s go.” Grabbing her by the arm, I guided her toward the main gate. It was only a few feet in front of us when the two hockey players from earlier blocked our way.

“The Other lover,” Broken Nose said. His voice was comically nasally with that plaster cast covering his schnoz. “What are you doing here?”

“Same as everyone else,” I growled. “Paying my respects.” I tried to push past them.

Without warning, Ponytail pulled at my ponytail—ironic, really—at which point Deirdre grabbed his wrist and squeezed.

“Ahh—”

But before he could let out a full scream, I covered his mouth.

“Deirdre, let him go,” I said.

She did as I asked.

Broken Nose tried to intervene, but I put a finger up to his lips, just touching the bottom of his

casted nose so that his eyes watered with pain. I said, “Not here and not now. I will not let Dr. Dewey be disrespected by the lot of you. So if you want me, come get me. Bring your brood—” I gestured around us with my chin and suddenly saw that it wasn’t just the three boys I’d seen walking toward us. Three more of their hockey friends had joined them ... plus, there were a lot more students ready to join the fight all around us. I gulped and repeated, “Bring your brood. We’ll be waiting in the alleyway behind the bookstore.”

I held onto Ponytail’s mouth while Broken Nose considered this. Before he could object, I added, “Besides—look around you. See all the campus security? We don’t want them interrupting a good fight, do we?”

I pointed to several security guards mulling about.

Broken Nose looked around and nodded. “Behind the campus bookstore,” he agreed, a cocky smile creeping in the corners of his lips. “How do I know you’ll be there?”

“Because,” I said, finally pushing Ponytail away and brushing past them. “You can follow me there right now.”

“Brave girl,” Egya said, pulling in close to me.

“Not brave,” I muttered to him as we walked through the crowd. “If hexes work the way I think they do, a fight in this place will only mean we have to face off against more and more people as it grows in strength. We can take care of a half-dozen testosterone-fueled idiots, can’t we?”

Egya snorted in answer.

“But,” I continued, “I have another reason why I want an alleyway showdown. If this is a hex, then the killer must be somewhere nearby, right? He—”

“Or she.”

“—or *she*—may even join the fight. It will be easier to pick him or her out behind the bookstore.”

“Pick him or her out as we’re being stomped to a pulp,” Egya said. “Excellent plan.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. We have a changeling warrior with us.”

Egya looked over at Deirdre, who was cracking her fingers, Bruce Lee–style, as she walked just behind us. “Indeed,” he said, grinning. “Indeed we do.”

“Besides,” I said as we made our way to the main gate. “I meant what I said. Dr. Dewey deserves more than having a fight break out at his memorial.”

Just as we made our way off campus, a speaker scratched, cutting through the general noise of the crowd. Looking back, I saw Justin holding a mic attached to a portable speaker. He was standing on the rim of the water fountain base, the founder’s statue beside him. He suddenly looked like some ancient Roman god giving the opening commencement for a spring festival.

And somehow, as if the fates were conspiring against me, our eyes met as Egya continued to pull me away. I was walking out on his speech ... and he saw me doing it.

Maybe I was *also* cursed?

Chapter 17

UP, UP AND AWAY!

The main campus was a roughly square gated area that covered a dozen or so acres in the middle of the city. Immediately surrounding campus were several buildings that played supportive roles to the education of a future generation. School supply shops, buildings that housed more classrooms, the smaller libraries or study rooms, and student cafés, restaurants and bars.

The bookstore was the largest building adjacent to campus; an alleyway cut between it and the Faculty of Management building. Since the alleyway was between the bookstore and the lamest faculty building, I figured it would be empty.

I figured wrong.

Mergen was sitting there leafing through a basket of old books he probably got from some charity shop for pennies. From the way he scanned the pages, I figured he wasn't finding much to eat in Harlequin romances, old westerns and hard-boiled detective novels. Still, he wasn't looking as emaciated as he'd been just earlier today, so I guess those old trash novels weren't *completely* devoid of truth.

That, or he was still getting nourishment from my little outburst earlier.

Mergen looked up as we walked by and I considered ignoring him, but quickly realized that wouldn't work. The hex was on me—me ... and anyone considered my ally. Three of the mob following us had been on the receiving end when I defended the pale white rider, and one of them was sporting a broken nose from it. They'd see him as a bonus.

"Follow me," I said. "Your life might just depend on it."

"Mmm," Mergen said, licking his lips. "Yes, it just might."



I drew the crowd into the alleyway, careful to pull them into the far end so that we—as in my “gang”—were actually spilling out into the other exit. That way, I figured, they couldn't sneak up on us and block off our escape route. I was hoping that this way we would get there and, seeing who showed up, I'd have a fairly good sense of who the killer was. We'd fight—maybe. Normally I'd think this would digress into some posturing, a bit of blustering bravado, insults and maybe a few

shoves, before fizzling out into nothing. After all, these kids didn't want to get into a fight any more than we wanted to have one. Unless maybe their leader was going for a record and wanted his nose broken again.

But we were hexed—which means they were compelled to attack.

No worries, I thought—I'd already seen how Egya could handle himself, and Deirdre was a born warrior. Mergen was my only concern, and he was the freaking avatar of the Turkish god of war and wisdom.

"I think this is far enough," said Broken Nose, and in this dark alley, that ridiculous nasal voice was even more comical. "We don't want to be on the main road and attract the wrong kind of attention, right?"

So let's let the blustering bravado begin, I thought.

Egya and a couple of the hockey minions chuckled at this. So they weren't so far under the spell that they didn't see the absurdity of the situation. *Good,* I thought, silently this time, *I can work with that.*

I stared at an asshole who, when unhexed, had wanted to pummel a poor defenseless Other for the crime of being different. Hexed asshole and unhexed asshole were pretty much the same guy—just minus any inhibition, common sense or fear. A fight was coming. I knew it. He knew it. Everyone here knew it. Which meant there were really only two questions left to be answered.

Was the guy (or gal) responsible for the hex in the crowd?

And how long until my side ran?

I scanned the crowd. As far as I could tell, everyone was human. A hex—as powerful as it was—needed magic. And since magic left with the gods, a human conjuror was out. Sure, in the old days, a human witch, shaman, warlock or mage could have cast a spell like this, but he (or she) would have sold their soul to a demon, fae or whatever malevolent spirit said spellcaster ascribed to. But those days were gone (as was evident by my lost appetite for blood), so that meant that the caster would have to be an Other.

And there were no Others in the crowd.

The only Others here were on my side, and despite desperately wanting to be human—with all their idiosyncrasies and pettiness—I was on theirs.

All that I saw were the three assholes from yesterday and three more of their hockey friends, a group of cheerleaders, four goth kids (of everyone I saw, you'd think they'd be on our side at least) and—crap—one of Justin's frat brothers. I didn't know his name, but he had been there when Nate teased us.

Of everyone here, he was the only one who knew me—well, knew *of* me. He knew his O³ Bro and I were flirting, and that he'd have a lot of explaining to do if he went back to the dorm with my blood on his hands. Maybe I could use that.

"So," I said, "how does this start?"

“That’s a great question,” Broken Nose answered. “Since it’s going to end with your funeral, and since civility didn’t leave with the gods, I’ll let *you* tell me how this all starts.”

“We could *not* do this,” I offered.

“Oh no,” he said, sneering. “This is happening.”

Mergen affirmed this by smacking his lips in agreement. Guess this guy ate Truth even when it was being served up with a beating.

“Why?” I said, ignoring the Truth of the situation. “Come on—you have to feel that this is wrong, don’t you?” I gestured at the crowd. “Why do you all hate me so much? Most of you don’t even know me. And as for you—the only person who kind of knows me,” I pointed at Justin’s friend, “am I really that bad of a person that I deserve what’s about to happen?”

Reasoning with the angry mob—if only Frankenstein, Dracula, Quasimodo or the Beast thought of trying. Probably ... and then took one look into their rage-filled eyes and opted for the fight-or-flight options.

Justin’s friend gave me a regretful look before lowering his head. “Ah, Justin ... Justin really likes you.”

I looked at Mergen for confirmation, but he just shrugged. I guess when it comes to matters of the heart, Truth is murky. *Still*, I thought, *given that this guy is being compelled to hurt me, I’m going to give his revelation the benefit of the doubt—Justin likes me. Yay!*

“Ahh, Kat—this is not the time,” Egya whispered in my ear.

“I said that out loud, didn’t I?”

“Indeed.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. I pointed at the O³ Bro. “So if Justin, your *friend*, likes me, can I be as bad as you evidently feel about me? Or maybe, just maybe, there’s something wrong going on here.”

He shook his head, then nodded. “Maybe ... it’s all so confusing.” He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. “So muddled.”

“Friends—lend me your ears.”

“Kat ...” Egya whispered. “What are you doing?”

“Quoting Shakespeare.”

“You’re quoting a guy stabbed multiple times by his friends.”

“Whatever—just shush and let me work my charm.” I turned back to the crowd, lifted my left hand and placed my right hand over my heart. I called out, “You do not wish to hurt me—us. Don’t you see? Dr. Dewey’s killer wants to distract us by causing distrust and anger. There is an evil spell afoot, cast to sow the seeds of distrust and anger. Let us not give him—or her—the satisfaction. Let us walk away and foil this evil plan.”

I turned to my friends. Mergen groaned, but Deirdre was nodding in approval.

Egya, on the other hand, eyed me with confusion. “Why are you speaking like that?”

“Gravitas—more likely to break the spell with it than without.”

“Is it?” he asked, then, grabbing me with lightning-fast reflexes, he pulled me several inches to the right just as a beer bottle flew by. “Perhaps not as effective as you think.”

I turned to see the crowd shifting their weight from foot to foot as they prepared to advance. Looking over at Justin’s Bro, the only one who expressed doubt, I saw that he had traded his confused eyes for clenched fists. He cracked his knuckles in that *I-got-a-tough-job-ahead-of-me* sort of way and took a step forward.

So much for talking them out of this.

“OK,” I said. “Time for Plan B.”

“Plan B?” Deirdre asked, stepping forward so that she stood shoulder to shoulder with me.

“Yep, Plan B.” I kicked Broken Nose in the shin and as he went down, I punched him in the broken nose, breaking the plaster cast. The pain knocked him out cold. I looked at the remaining seventeen people and assessed my options.

Then I turned around and ran.



Have you ever been chased by an angry mob through a modern city that prides itself on being tolerant? If not, you’re missing out.

There’s a certain brand of ire that rolls off all the citizens like waves of heat as you run past them. First, they watch as you run past them, confusion painting their faces, perhaps saying to one another:

“Why are two humans and two Others being chased?”

“Is this right?”

“Aren’t we welcoming to Others?”

“Should we call someone?”

But then, as you pass by them and the hex takes hold, that confusion becomes certainty:

These four are guilty of something—not sure what, but that doesn’t matter.

What matters is they are captured—brought to justice.

Better yet—dealt with.

These four are clearly evil!

And finally: *The mob chasing them will need help. Our help.*

Which effectively meant that the angry mob grew every time we passed a pedestrian, person sitting outside or dog walker. I even saw two drivers abandon their cars just so they could chase us on foot.

We ran out of the alley and up toward the mountain. It was night, and I figured that the best place to lose them was up where there were no street lamps, limited population to fall under the hex and lots of trees casting moonshadows to hide under. Still, that meant running uphill and past Gerts, the campus bar, where a bunch of students who had opted to skip the vigil were standing outside smoking.

Before we even passed them, they were flicking away their cigarettes or pocketing their vaping devices and trying to block our way. I had to knee one of them in the—*ahem*—family jewels, and elbow another's nose to get past.

How many noses does a girl have to break to get left the hell alone?

Egya chose a more elegant solution—he jumped on a parked car and used the height advantage to jump clear over them. Elegant, indeed, especially when compared to Deirdre, who opted to clothesline several guys before they even had a chance to pocket their lighters. Mergen, however, was less suited to get past them. Deirdre and I had to double back, flattening two girls who were literally trying to tie him up with their cardigans.

We got past them just as the main mob caught up.

“We need to get out of the city!” Egya yelled. “Up there.” He pointed at the beginning of the mountain’s tree line. “If we could just get in there before they tear us apart, we might be able to lose them.”

We ran and ran some more, until finally we arrived. There was our potential salvation, a neat line of trees heralding the entrance to a vast forest—and all we had to do was cross a four-lane road ... that was currently bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Perfect!

“Jump over the hoods!” I yelled, taking a leaf from Egya’s book.

Egya nodded appreciatively, but Deirdre didn’t immediately understand my reasoning and opted to run between two cars. Before she even got through, the white reverse lights of the lead car lit up and the back car's engine revved. The two cars collided into each other as they tried to pinch her between back and front bumpers.

“Deirdre!” I screamed.

Fortunately, changelings have lightning-fast reflexes. She managed to jump straight up and onto the back car’s hood before she was caught. The driver, who, under the powers of the hex, also had fast reflexes, threw his car into Reverse. Deirdre fell. Then he floored the car again, trying to throw her into the car in front of his.

Deirdre managed to get to her feet just as I jumped onto my first hood, where that driver did the same thing, trying to knock me on my feet.

This was the worse game of *Frogger* I’d ever played—and given that I was helping Mergen cross, it wasn’t loading well for me ... at this pace, the crowd would catch up and tear us to shreds.

So I did the only thing I could think of—I jumped back off the car and opened the driver’s door. I yanked the driver out and, pushing Mergen through to the passenger’s side, made an impromptu tunnel for us.

Then I grabbed the next driver and, using a kickboxing move I learned in Bangkok, swiped her feet and knock her down on the ground. I gestured to Mergen to move his ass and we burrowed through the second car.

Two lanes crossed. *Frogger* Level 50% Complete. Only two more cars and we'd be at the tree line.

Except, by now, the two other cars were savvy to my strategy and had simply locked their doors to foil me.

Mergen and I were trapped, with the angry mob only meters behind us. I was looking for an escape when I heard the deep honk of a city bus and saw that several cars back, Egya had hijacked the transportation vehicle.

He slammed on the accelerator and the two cars in front of us slammed into each other, which stopped the cars from doing their back-and-forth trick. He'd also managed to use the sheer size of the bus to do the same thing to the cars in the fourth and final lane. This made jumping over their bonnets relatively safe. Mergen and I, thankful for the assist, wasted no time getting across the other two lanes over the tops of the cars.

"Thanks!" I yelled as we made it to the tree line. Egya honked his reply.

Once inside, we ran up the middle of the woods. My plan was to get to Beaver Lake, where there were a few buildings for us to break into and hide. I turned to see the angry mob breaking through the tree line. We were only about forty feet ahead of them, but at least, being in this brush, we were out of their line of sight.

"Come on—let's move," I whispered.

Deirdre grabbed my arm and stopped me.

"No," she said. "I have a better idea."

"What are you doing? We've got to keep moving," I said.

But Deirdre didn't move. She just placed a calm finger over her lips, shushing me. She faced the road. I could hear the angry mob only yards away. A few more seconds and they'd be parallel with us. All it would take was one of them to look to their right and we'd be sunk.

But Deirdre just stood stock still, almost defiantly so. I suddenly worried that she planned to do something stupid and attack the human mob. But Deirdre didn't attack. She ... swooned—as in lightly swayed back and forth, her feet planted firmly in place. Then, fanning out her fingers and twirling them so it looked like she was playing some invisible piano, she began to hum.

"Deirdre! Be quiet," I whispered harshly, taking a step forward. If she wasn't going to shut up, I'd have to shut her up.

Egya stopped me. "Kat ... look." He pointed at the ground.

What I saw was nothing short of a miracle.

The earth around us began to move. No, "move" was the wrong word ... moving implies that something shifted from one place to another. The brush didn't just *shift*. It grew and expanded and intertwined itself until it formed a canopy in front of us that blocked the view from the road—but what was odd was that we could still *see* the road. Like window blinds, the leaves angled themselves so that we had a one-way view out while blocking the view in. And what was most spectacular about

what was happening was the brush didn't make any noise as it twisted and angled, grew and intertwined.

It was completely silent.

The angry mob ran past us, completely unaware. I could hear Ponytail cry out, "They must be at the lake." The rallying cry of determined and violent humans followed, and we heard the scamper of feet continue along the path.

After a long minute, the footsteps faded into the darkness and we were alone.

Deirdre turned to me, smiling, proud of what she'd just done. "Camouflage—fae style," she said simply.

I nodded curtly. "How long?"

Deirdre tilted her head to one side in confusion.

"You burnt time, right? To create the magic that did this?"

She nodded.

"How long?"

She didn't answer.

"How long?" I growled.

"Twelve hours."

I stared at her. "Twelve *hours*? Do you know what you can do with twelve hours? And you wasted them—threw that precious time away—and for what? We could have outrun them."

"Kat," Egya interjected, "I disagree. We were pretty far away from them for a while, and we're even farther away now, but they're still an angry mob. Even outside of the hex. They wouldn't have let us just run away."

I looked around at my hapless crew. "That doesn't justify what Deirdre did, Egya. She wasted twelve hours of her life. For nothing."

Mergen groaned.

"Shut up—just because you don't like the taste of something, doesn't make it a lie."

Mergen smacked his lips.

"We could have outrun them," I repeated, my rage bubbling.

Deirdre stared down at the ground.

"Kat," Egya said. "The girl did what she thought was best. She sacrificed her time to save us. You should be more—"

"What? Grateful? Grateful that I'm on top of a volcano with you? Grateful that someone is trying to kill me? Grateful that my fellow students want to string me up?"

"The hex will wear off by morning."

"But how do you know? You just said they're outside the range of the hex. So how do you know?"

Egya's cold glare was all I got as an answer.

"Fine—it will wear off by morning. What do we do until then?"

Without turning around, Egya pointed up toward the huge neon cross at the top of the hill, to the right of where the mob had run. “We rest.”

“Oh, great,” I said, pushing past him. “We rest.” I trekked up the hill toward the neon cross and my bed for the night.

Here I was—an ex-vampire—sitting under a Christian crucifix, the symbol that I feared for three hundred years and now used as sanctuary, on top of a GoneGodsDamned volcano and waiting for dawn so that an angry mob hexed out of their minds wouldn’t kill me.

Great advice to stay, Medusa, I thought, not caring if it was in my head or aloud.

As I reached the cross, I wondered if there was a worse place for me to be.

END OF PART 3

PART V

PROLOGUE

“This may come off as arrogant ... but I know why the gods left.”

Cue in the dramatic pause, look around the audience, make eye contact. That’s very important—eye contact. That’s the one commonality between Others and humans—neither group can ignore eye contact. Then take a deep breath. Give them your best wicked smile. You know the one—the golden smile that has gotten you your way so many times before. The smile that says you are smart but down-to-earth. Beautiful, but somehow still approachable. Young, but wise.

“I know what many of you are thinking. How do I know something that so many scholars, philosophers, scientists, politicians and theologians don’t know? The answer is simple—they know, too. They just don’t have the balls to say it.”

Cue the fencing—just so the audience knows there is no escape.

“The gods left because we disappointed them.”

Begin the incantation. Evoke Huitzilopochtli. Evoke Shang Ti, Moloch, Kū, Re—even Yahweh. After all, the Old Testament was full of animal sacrifices. What is a human but an upgrade?

“They left because we forgot who they were.”

Push the scared little students into the center of the field. Then randomly point at someone young and frail—but pick carefully. You need the first sacrifice to be a screamer. Wait silently as the first sacrifice is tied to the tabernacle—the stone lip of the dried-up fountain. Once the virgin is secure, resume your speech.

“They left because we forgot who we were.”

Pull out the knife. The virgin will scream, so wait it out. If he or she doesn’t stop after, say, ten seconds, gag them. Remember: at this point, the party will probably think this is all part of the show. It won’t be until the blood starts flowing that they’ll realize what’s truly going on. Realize that they are all doomed to the same fate.

“Well, it’s time to remind us all—god and mortal alike—just who and what we are.”

Run the knife's tip along the virgin's body. Take it slow.

“Once that happens, they'll come back.”

Stab, stab, stab.

“Did I mention my speech was going to kill?”

Chapter 18

ON A HILL, BENEATH A NEON CROSS, WAITING FOR DAWN

Day One of University: Witness a gruesome murder and defeat a giant bulldog.

Day Two of University: Spend the morning hours being interrogated by a detective and the nighttime hours being chased by an angry mob.

And before Day Three even begins, I'm hiding out beneath a giant neon cross crowning an inactive volcano. My companions include a changeling, the physical representation of Mergen the Turkish god of War and Wisdom—a creature who feeds on, might I add, the Truth—and some guy from Ghana who thinks he knows me.

"I do know you," Egya called out. "I know what you were and who you are."

GoneGodsDammit—talking out loud again. "Private thought," I yelled back.

"I also know what you will become if you don't face your past."

"Oh, and what's that?" I hoisted myself off the mesh fence that surrounded the base of the cross and walked up to Egya. I might not have had my vampiric strength anymore, but I still knew karate, kung fu, Krav Maga, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, as well as Scottish- and aikido-based swordplay ... and I was looking for a fight.

Egya made a growling noise. Not like a dog. This sounded more like someone trying to suppress a laugh. A menacing, scary, soul-shaking laugh.

Deirdre stood behind me. "If you lay a hand on Lady Darling, I shall—"

"Yeah, yeah," Egya said, stepping back. "I won't touch her. I don't hit girls."

Mergen groaned at this, clutching his stomach in pain.

"Sentient lie detector," I said, pointing at the avatar.

"Fine," he said. "I don't hit girls ... unless in the heat of battle, and said girl," he pointed at me, "is an ex—"

"Don't you say it," I warned.

"—something-or-Other," Egya said, giving emphasis to that last word purposefully, "who is more than capable of defending herself. But I would never, ever hurt the defenseless or weak."

At this Mergen hummed and rubbed his belly in satisfaction.

I looked at Mergen, the sentient lie detector. How can that be the Truth? I thought.

"I'm not the hapless agent of chaos you think I am," Egya said. "Believe it or not, I want to

help you.”

Mergen licked his lips.

“See?” Egya said, pointing at Mergen.

“Help me? How? You mean like you did on campus?”

“I saved you.”

“Again—how? Were you the one who had to re-break a nose that probably looks like a dumpster fire by now?”

“If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have noticed the hex. And before you say anything—we all know you know exactly what a hex is ... so don’t play stupid with us.”

Mergen sucked on his fingers one at a time, as if licking off barbecue sauce.

“You”—I pointed at the ghostly white avatar—“stop that. And you ...” I looked back at Egya.

“Why do you want to help me so badly?”

“Because,” Egya said, “I know the cost of running from your past.”

“I’m not running from anything.”

“So that wasn’t you going to Student Admin to drop out just two days into the semester?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Mergen groaned and made a face like he just accidentally drank sour milk.

Deirdre looked at me, a look of hurt surprise on her face. “You are leaving?”

“No.”

Mergen spat on the ground.

“I mean, yes.”

I looked at Mergen, who continued to make a disapproving face.

“Maybe,” I said.

At that, Mergen smiled.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I admitted. “But it’s hard. I mean ...” I gestured around us. “This is only my third night here.”

“It will get easier,” Egya said. “You are only beginning your journey.”

That really annoyed me. “Look here, Yoda,” I said. “You can pretend to be the wise little sage that knows more about me than I know about myself, and you might have once-upon-a-time been a were-dog—”

“Hyena.”

“Were-pain-in-my-ass! Whatever you were, you’re not that anymore. Now you’re a human. A human like me. A stupid, worthless, broken human!” I cried out.

I don’t know what happened exactly, but saying those words unleashed something in me. I started sobbing, still speaking between gasps. “It’s just so hard. I mean—one minute you’re—a supernatural predator that eats people—and the next—you’re just—people.”

I walked over to the mesh fence and looked up at the cross, basking in its neon halo. I calmed

down, taking deep breaths and wiping the tears from my face. “Not too long ago, the sight of a cross would have sent me running. Its power protected those who believed in it from monsters like me.”

Deirdre walked up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. “A symbol that offers protection for those who wish it to.”

I nodded. “But now, here, under this monstrous thing, I feel ... nothing. Neither fear nor comfort. To me, this cross is just a piece of decoration on top of a hill.”

“But Lady Kat, is that not a good thing?” Deirdre drew in close. “This symbol can no longer cast its oppressive shadow over you. You are free.”

“But that’s just the thing. I don’t feel happy, I don’t feel free. I don’t feel anything. About this cross, about being human again, about ...” I stopped myself.

There was a long silence before Deirdre, the fae pain-in-my-ass, asked a question I did not have the courage to ask myself.

“Lady Kat, are you without ... pain?”

I nodded.

Deirdre straightened her back and lowered her hands to her side so she resembled a tree trunk without branches—the fae’s body language for concern or worry. “That is not good, Lady Kat. We fae believe that true life resides in the throes of emotion, be it comforting or adversarial.”

Tears spilled down my face once more. “When we vampires became human, there was a lot of confusion. We lost our fangs, our powers and super-human strength and senses. And we also lost our need to drink human blood. This caused us more confusion than you might think. For one thing, all the horrible things we did when we were demons came flooding back to us. Being human meant having a human conscience. And a conscience is a heavy burden.

“Most of us—at least amongst the ex-vampires I spoke to—decided on two things. One, we’d do our best to atone for what we had done. And two, we’d try to forgive ourselves. After all, it was the demon within us that killed all those people. And that demon’s gone now. That has to count for something.”

I had been staring up at the cross once more, but now I turned and looked back at everyone. “Well, it doesn’t, and I will say one thing about forgiveness. It doesn’t come easy. Because I wasn’t sure I could ever let go of the guilt, I decided to focus on atonement. That’s why,” I said, turning to Mergen, “I saved you from those hockey players, why I thought to feed you. Saving you was part of my atonement.”

I looked away. “But that’s a lie.”

“No, it isn’t,” Mergen said, dabbing at his lips.

“Fine, but it is an incomplete truth. The whole truth, the Truth, is this: We ex-vampires lie to ourselves, saying that it was the demon inside that killed ... but when you’re turned it’s not like the movies where you lose your soul or become a mindless killer. The truth is, nothing about who you are actually changes.

“You are who you are, but with an insatiable, painful hunger that—if not satisfied—will kill you. Human blood is the only way to survive as a vampire. And your thirst for it is all-consuming. When I drank from my victims, I did so because I didn’t want to die. Not because a demon was telling me to do it.

“And before you ask—pigs, cows, rats ... animal blood doesn’t sustain a vampire.

“And yes, I tried to only drink the blood of those who were evil—at first. But after years of killing, even that line gets crossed. You start to find evil in all humans, no matter how small, and you lie to yourself, saying you’re making the world better by ridding it of its scum. After a while, you don’t even bother saying that either. It just becomes a part of you. You tell yourself, you are no more evil than the man who slaughters a cow for sustenance. Being a vampire, you say, means humans have become your cattle. That is why I’m ashamed of who I was—”

“ ‘Was’?” asked Mergen, clutching his stomach.

“Am ...” I said. “Am ... I am a killer who—at first—killed because I didn’t want to die. And later because it just became a ... a normal thing to do.”

“Mmmm,” Mergen said. “The truth may be bitter ... but it is always nourishing.”

I didn’t look at the avatar. I couldn’t. I was so ashamed, and my eyes were so overflowing with tears that I couldn’t see anything. In the clarity of my Truth, the world was a blur to see.

“Maybe,” I said, “there is one more Truth to share.”

Mergen’s eyes glinted. “Please.”

I took a deep breath. “When I turned my mother, it wasn’t because I wanted to hurt or punish my father. It was because I believed that he—seeing both his daughter and wife a vampire—would agree to be turned. I wanted to have my family back. Me, mother and father, traveling the world, happy and whole. But he refused.

“On the night he died, I took him by force and made him a vampire against his will. But my father was strong. Stronger than I will ever be. Upon seeing that he could not conquer the hunger that now burned within him, he took his own life by waiting for the sun to rise. I tried to stop him, but now that he was a vampire, he was too strong for me to pull him away from the light.

“ ‘The sun will kill you!’ I cried out.

“He just shook his head and said, ‘Dying is the right thing for me to do.’

“ ‘But it will hurt,’ I said, like a petulant child scared to take her medicine.

“He just smiled in that kind way he used to do when I was little and scared. ‘Sometimes, doing the right thing hurts.’ And then he turned to face the dawn.

“And what did I do? I watched from the shadows as the morning light turned his body to ash.”

As I sobbed in full earnest now, I realized that I wasn’t crying because of the story I told. No, these tears were because I was mourning the death of my father in a way I couldn’t do when I lied to myself about who I was and why I did the things I did.

A heavy hand squeezed my shoulder. Wiping away heavy tears, I saw that Mergen was trying to

comfort me. But it wasn't the skinny, emaciated ghost-white man I had come to know.

He was fat. As in ... Santa fat.

He drew me in close and hugged me. At first, I resisted him, but as soon as I let him hold me and my face touched his shoulder, I wailed and lamented and howled and wept the tears of someone who had finally faced her past.

Chapter 19

CHECK OUT WHAT'S BEEN CHECKED OUT

After a good, long cry, I looked up at Deirdre and Egya, who were kind enough to have walked to another side of the grove to give me my space. I stood up and, wiping away tears and runny mascara, said, “OK—it’s all out of me now.” I hiccupped. “Promise.”

“Do you feel ...” Egya paused as he searched for the word, finally settling on, “lighter?”

I didn’t answer right away, taking the time to look inside myself. I felt encumbered by my tears, the heavy head that comes after a big cry. But I also felt somehow freer—like I had been wading through water and had finally gotten out of the swamp. Lighter ... yes, I did feel lighter.

I nodded.

“See, milady?” He bowed. “I am Egya, here to help!”

Deirdre walked up to me and hugged me. No, it was more like she swaddled me in her big, powerful arms. “I am so glad the black man upset you and that this white man was here to comfort you,” she said.

“Me, too,” I chuckled. “But Deirdre, in the future it’s not appropriate to—” I thought about explaining that describing humans by the color of their skin was a faux pas, but decided that was a lesson in being human that could wait for later. For now, I would try to enjoy her embrace, as tight as it was. “Oh, never mind.” I hugged the changeling back.

“So,” Deirdre said after she eventually let me go, “you will no longer leave?”

“Might not have a choice on the matter. We did just get run off campus. But right now I’m more concerned about avoiding roving gangs of Other-haters.” I smiled grimly at the absurdity of it all. “And to think, yesterday my greatest ambition was to go to the O³ party.”

“Most certainly,” Egya said. “I was going to dress as a ghost. I even bought the white sheets, complete with a pointed hood.”

“Uh, Egya ... you know that costume is—”

“A joke, Darling. A joke. I may be from deepest, darkest Africa, but we still have history books.”

“I don’t understand,” said Deirdre. “What is wrong with the black man dressing as a ghost?”

At this Egya and I laughed. Deirdre, unsure what was funny, eventually joined in, happy to see us happy. And Mergen, he seemed to be feasting from the honesty of the moment.

As our laughter died down, Deirdre said, “All I wanted to do was find my place. I am starting to

think that I will not find it here.”

I didn’t know what to say. If I was struggling to find my place here, what hope did this changeling have? “Deirdre, I thought you didn’t want me to leave ...”

Deirdre nodded, but it seemed she wanted to talk about something else. She pointed at the canopy of leaves around us and asked, “Will we be able to go home soon?”

“The hex should evaporate in the morning. We can go back to the dorm then and ...” I started, before I realized that she wasn’t talking about Gardner Hall. “Home, like ... Fae? Only if the gods come back, Deirdre.”

“They will never come back.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Gods do not change their minds.”

Mergen hummed in delightful agreement.

“And even if the hex dissipates, the humans will remember what happened this night. This will cause ...” Deirdre’s voice trailed as she tried to think of the right words.

“Further complications,” Egya offered.

“Yes ... further complications. I see little hope for us to stay.”

I sighed in agreement. “Maybe. I guess we can hold out on the hope that the O³’s party will heal the divide. Justin seems to think so. But ...” I shook my head. “None of this will matter if we don’t find out who the killer is.”

“And bring him to justice?” Deirdre asked.

“Or her,” Egya pointed out.

“Justice has little to do with it. I actually think that bringing the killer in will cause more harm than good. All we do know is that an Other is doing this with magic. Bringing them to be tried under a human court’s system will only focus a spotlight on the powers Others have. It will just cause more fear. I’m thinking ... we should just *stop* him. Or her. As in, *permanently*.”

Deirdre began stretching, as if preparing to enter a sporting competition. “Exactly, Lady Darling. Justice.”

Fae logic ... of course she wasn’t thinking human police and court systems. Fae justice was swift and permanent—and usually justified *after* the fact.

“Justice,” Egya echoed. “Justice may be blind, but I will not be so anymore. I will say what I know we have all thought. It is the Incan apu who is behind this.”

I sat up so fast that my head spun. “Incan apu?”

Egya nodded. “The Other friend of the O³ Bros.”

I thought of the tall, stone-skinned, sky-eyed Other. “Sal? I’d never thought that.”

“Then you are a fool. Or willfully blind, like Justice.”

“OK ... *Egya*. Enlighten us. How can you be so sure?”

“Think about it. Dr. Dewey was part of a ritual sacrifice. Incans, Mayans, Aztec—their traditions

demanded that human sacrifices be made to their gods. This is common knowledge, yes?”

Mergen smacked his lips.

“Common knowledge?” I asked. “Maybe to you. How do you know all this?”

Egya shrugged. “I am a student of the dead religions—which is to say, all of them.”

“Lots of religions had ritualistic sacrifices,” I pointed out, having lived through many of them.

“The Etruscans, the Old Chinese Dynasty, the Celts. Not just the Incans.”

“True, but only one of them is enrolled in this school.”

“Fine, but—”

“Just because the cave apu with baby blue eyes smiled at you doesn’t make him innocent.”

“It’s not that,” I started, but when Mergen groaned I added, “OK—it’s not *just* that. Mergen, you are really starting to annoy me.”

Mergen grinned like he was just handed an ice cream cone.

I ignored the pale rider. “We can’t just accuse Sal because he’s *different*.”

“Why not?”

“Seriously?” I said. “Ever heard of racial profiling?”

“This is different than judging someone by the color of their skin.”

“How so?” I took a step toward Egya.

Deirdre, sensing my fury, stepped between us.

But Egya didn’t give up. “Because a black man, Arab or Jew can’t cast magic simply because they are black, brown or gentile. An Incan apu can.”

I shook my head. “I refuse to blindly accuse him—”

“The jinni guard dog and the hex required magic, Kat. Any Other is a suspect. But the sacrifice—that is part of the Incan mythos. Put two and two together and you get ...” He made a fist.

“Yes, but ...”

“But nothing. You know I’m right. You must.” He looked at Mergen for confirmation, but, much to his (and my) surprise, Mergen neither smacked his lips nor groaned in disgust.

“See?” I said, as if this proved anything.

“See what? His complete lack of reaction makes my words neither true nor false. It just means that you’re still being willfully blind.”

“Oh, you self-righteous—”

“What?” he said.

“Stupid little ...”

“What else?”

“Know-it-all!” I yelled. Not my best insult. And in utter fury, I turned around and kicked the mesh fence that surrounded the base of the cross. I guess no one really ever cleaned the thing, because a cloud of dust flew up into the air, creating neon rays of light in their clouds.

Now here I was literally basking in the cross’s rays. That’s when I realized how stupid I was

being.

“Deirdre,” I said, pointing up at the neon icon, “what did you call that thing earlier?”

“The cross? A symbol that offers protection for those who wish it to.”

“Exactly ... a symbol that offers *protection* for those who wish it to. Or maybe, for those *it wishes to*. It all makes sense now!”

“What makes sense now?” Egya asked, cocking his head to one side like a confused dog.

“Sneak me back onto campus.”

“Why?”

“To confirm something.”

“Confirm what?”

“Who the killer is.”

“Confirm *what*, girl?” Egya said. “We *know* who the killer is.”

“Maybe,” I conceded. “But I have a theory that might prove otherwise. You may be right about the apu, but I think there may be more to it than that. Come down with me, help me break into the library and keep an open mind. If I’m wrong, I will hunt the apu down with you. But if I’m right, we will have saved an innocent Other from ... well ... us. Agreed?” I stuck out my hand.

Egya looked at it for a long moment. “If your theory proves false, we go after the apu without hesitation?”

“Without hesitation.”

Egya took my hand and let out an unnatural cackle.

I guess he still had a bit of hyena in him after all.



We waited until the dead of night to sneak back onto campus. By that time, the campus was deserted, but the remnants of the vigil remained. Flowers, unlit candles, homemade signs ... the relics of a human farewell.

As we made our way up the steps and into the Other Studies library, we passed the Old Librarian’s picture, and I felt as though his eyes were watching me as we passed.

Police tape still hung over the entrance, creating a barrier that was more psychological than physical. I hesitated at the yellow ribbons, but Deirdre, who did not share my cultural apprehension for the invisible barrier of authority (and who also had a great disdain toward plastic), just ripped through it and into the library.

I followed the changeling inside, praying to the GoneGods that Egya had been successful in disabling the alarm. It wouldn’t stop the cameras from recording our entrance, but given that we were all wearing wide hats Deirdre had fashioned from leaves and foliage, I doubted we’d be recognized. Once inside, I made my way to the display where he’d been strung up. We skirted the smashed

shelves and torn books still littering the expanse of the library floor. I guess with Dr. Dewey gone, there was no one to clean this mess up. At least his body was still gone ... and the CSI's clean-up crew had mopped up the blood and any other body parts that might be considered a biohazard.

At the display case, the main part of the crime scene, little plastic tents with numbers on them littered the floor. Most of them stood next to various items used in the ritual: a scalpel, three buckets holding read-stained towels (I guess the killer wanted to control the blood flow), a few vases and other decorative items that prettied up the murder. Rituals are nothing without their shrouds, vases and incense, right?

Several placeholders stood where the jars or containers with bits of body in them had been. They had been taken away as either evidence or as part of the bio clean-up. I tried to remember what was next to the lone placeholders before going over to the display and looking for the one clue I needed to confirm my theory. Walking among the ransacked display cases, I didn't have to look into more than a couple of them before I found what I was looking for. Well, several *whats* I was looking for.

"I knew it," I said.

"Knew what?" Egya said, emerging from the shadows. He held up several wires in his hands. "Disabled alarm. Elegant solution."

"The obsidian knife," I said. "It isn't here."

"So?"

"Obsidian knives are central to Mayan and Aztec ritual sacrifices—not Incan, like you'd said. The obsidian knife is missing, but not the Feast Bowl. Why would an Incan apu go through all the trouble to steal the blade, but not the other ritualistic items? It doesn't make sense."

"Again, so?" Egya said.

"So—look at what *is* missing."

I walked over to a smashed display case and pulled out the little card description, handing it to the former werehyena. He read it. "GoneGodsDamn it! I'm going to kill them all," he growled.

"I'm sure you will," I said. "And I'll be right there with you."

Mergen, hearing his unbridled rage, belched. He made a gesture that he couldn't possibly eat another bite.

LET'S PARTY LIKE IT'S YOUR LAST DAY ON EARTH

(Except It's Not and the World Already Ended)

The party started, not with a bang, but rather, a parade.

I had heard the university parties were a big deal, but this was something else.

The O³ Bros had arranged that some of the more enthusiastic participants would parade up the hill together. Hundreds of kids—all dressed up as minotaurs, valkyrie, angels, wendigos, kappas, cyclopes, elves and a whole host of Others I didn't recognize—made a slow ascent up the hill toward the area that stood between the four dorms. McConnel, Molsen and Gardner Hall served as a net, with each building standing at three sides of an uneven field all the dorms shared. In the center of the field stood an old, circular building that housed the mess hall, a large open courtyard at its center. In the center of this courtyard was an old stone fountain that hadn't worked in years.

Slowly, deliberately, the partiers poured into this courtyard, Others dressed as humans and humans dressed as Others. Some of the humans were so well-disguised that I mistook them for Others, and only after a double-, sometimes triple-take did I recognize them as human. And not from a flaw in their costume. It was their mannerisms that gave them away: an oversized dwarf running his hands through his hair in a very nervous, human way; a tiny minotaur chugging a beer; an over-accessorized valkyrie vaping.

And then there were the misinformed humans. The ones with fake vampire fangs or the ones prancing around in werewolf costumes. They clearly hadn't gotten the memo that those once-upon-a-time kinds of monsters didn't exist anymore.

Not that it mattered. In a way, I was comforted that vampires and werewolves were still something humans thought about (huh, "humans," look at me refer to them like I wasn't one of them myself).

I walked through the crowd of humans pretending to be Others when some shirtless boy shoved a plastic cup filled with beer at me and said, "Nice sword. What are you supposed to be? A Scottish baby?" He chuckled at his oh-so-funny joke. He trousers were furry and his feet looked hooved. A satyr. He even had a pan flute in his hands—nice touch. With that beer in his hand and that wicked

grin, he could have been Pan himself.

I was wearing my father's mask and my old Stewart tartan that was older than this guy's grandfather. Still, he was acting in good humor, and this was a party after all. I curtsied—not an easy feat when you have a dirk wrapped around your waist—and in my poshest British accent, I said, “A Cherub warrior, actually. And before you ask, yes, all angels are from Scotland.”

At this, he guffawed and handed me five tickets that reminded me of the coupons you won at a carnival. “You’re a funny gal. Here—beer tickets. Enjoy.” And with that, he pranced off with such grace that for a moment I thought that he might actually be Pan.

I looked at the tickets in my hand and shrugged. “When in Rome,” I muttered to myself, and made my way to the makeshift bar the O³ Bros had set up beside the fountain.



As I made my way over to the beer stand, I scanned the crowd. After what I saw—or rather, *didn't* see—in the library, I was pretty sure the killer would use the chaos of this party to enact the next phase of his plan.

Or *her* plan. I still wasn't certain about that.

There were so many people, though, all dressed up in so many disguises, that I wasn't sure how I'd ever find him. Luckily I wasn't alone. Deirdre was somewhere in this crowd, dressed like a purple ninja—the only costume that covered her face we could come up with, given our limited wardrobe. Egya wore an uninspired white sheet with eyes cut out—his version of a ghost. I guess he wasn't kidding about the costume, after all. And without the hood, he thankfully just looked like a kid under a sheet. As for Mergen—well, that guy had eaten so much Truth on the mountain that he'd literally swelled up to be the size of a plump fat man.

So we dressed him like Santa Clause.

All we had to do was find the killer. Trouble was, based on our investigations, the killer was *human*, not an Other like the hex had led us to believe. You see—and this was where I was particularly proud of my Nancy Drew skills—I noticed that the only items used in the killing ritual and the only items stolen from the library were *human* relics used in *human* sacrifice. Ancient rope, a ceremonial bowl, and the obsidian dagger.

Others—particularly the human-sacrificing kind—didn't use items like that at all. By their logic, there was too much distance between the human and victim when using a crucifix; better to bind them with magic. Granted, magic was in limited supply these days, but still, they wouldn't crucify their victims. Why use a Christian symbol to taint their own traditions, when simply tying them to a chair was enough?

And as for the ceremonial bowl—why use something as silly as a bowl, when it was much better to drink the blood straight from the source? I should know—ex-vampire here, remember?

An obsidian blade looks cool, sure, but claws are much easier to use.

All that told me it had never been an Other. But what it didn't explain was the jinni guard dog that attacked us in the library, or the hex cast on me afterward. A human cannot conjure something such as that, and so it really posed a huge plot hole for us. Until, that is—and this was the *pièce de résistance*—we found one of Solomon's rings shattered in its case.

Even though it's in the Bible, few people understand what King Solomon's rings were about. Solomon was the “wise king,” the guy who could supposedly speak to the “other world.” All that was true, but it was the nature as to *how* it was true that few understand. King Solomon could capture and control jinn. As in, otherworldly creatures which God made from smokeless fire.

What a power.

Only problem with his power was that he had to capture the jinn in gems. Gems that he fashioned to rings, bracelets, belts ... you name it.

Seems the Other Studies library inherited a boat-load of them.

Few people would know that ... *could* know that. But an Occultist bastard hell-bent on performing human sacrifice might. Knowing the power of the ring and being backed into a corner—the corner of being caught by a certain ex-vampire girl wandering into the library in the middle of the night—would have been motivation enough to release the jinni from its eternal prison. Luckily for us, the killer must have returned to the scene of the crime sometime after I'd been hauled off to the police station and returned the ring to its case. Must have thought the police would just assume it had been broken in the debacle along with so many other things, and they wouldn't put two and two together. Too bad for the killer—I'd had the last three hundred years to bone up on my history and lore. The instant I saw the broken ring, I knew the answer.

And as for the hex? That was witch's magic. Witches, just like vampires and werewolves, lost their magic when the gods left. But they didn't lose their talismans. It was perfectly conceivable that a witch might have imbued an item in her possession with a hexing spell. In fact, it was perfectly conceivable that she might have dozens of items, all imbued with various nasty, one-time spells at her disposal.

And so, all these facts led us to the same conclusion—the killer was human.

And, most likely, at this party.

Trouble was, there were an overwhelming amount of humans at this party. Talk about finding a body in a mass grave (sorry, sick vampire humor).

The line to the bar was moving at a snail's pace; given that it literally wove around the entire courtyard, I'd be here for a while. But standing in a line was just as good a place as any to look for the killer. Looking up and down the line, I saw the last person I wanted to see standing right in front of me.

The mousey girl who got that poor gargoyle killed.



I took a double take, but there was no mistaking her. There she was, dressed in a cat suit complete with fake cat ears pinned to her hair and a silly cat's tail pinned to her arse. Ironical that someone so mousey dress as a cat, but hey, I guess we all aspire to be something we're not from time to time.

I knew that I had something really important to do. I knew that confronting her would be the worst thing I could do at this moment. But I also knew that I may never have another chance to tell that bitch what a horrible thing she did. There would be no justice for that unfortunate gargoyle, but there might be a little retribution.

I leaned forward and pulled at her cat's tail. She whirled around, and her stupid mascara whiskers were in my face. Our eyes connected, and I saw the regular fear and anxiety constantly on her face. She didn't know who I was—as far as she could tell, I was some drunk cherub having a bit of fun. She tried to smile, but given how nervous she was, all she managed to pull off was a troubled smirk. I now saw that it took every ounce of her nervous, anxiety-ridden being to dress up and come to this party.

Not that I cared.

“You,” I said, dropping my posh British accent, “have been a very naughty girl.”

“I have?” she said.

I lifted my cherub mask up for a second before lowering it again.

Her eyes flashed with recognition.

“You abandoned someone who only wanted to fit in—just like you,” I said. “What's more, you abandoned someone who would have protected you. I would have thought someone as weak and pathetic as you would have—”

“Georgie,” she said, scanning the crowd. “Is he here?”

I paused. “Georgie?”

“Yeah,” she said, leaning in close. “The gargoyle. Is he here?”

They must have gotten a few extra hands at the bar. The line started moving and within seconds we were making a slow march toward drinks. “You mean you didn't ...”

I suddenly realized that I had automatically assumed she was responsible for the gargoyle's death. But in reality, I didn't know. “No ... Georgie isn't here. What happened yesterday?”

We were walking side-by-side now, and I was starting to feel like a real moron.

“We were walking home,” she said, “talking. He was telling me all about his role in protecting some medieval king. Chlo-something.”

“Chlothar the Great,” I corrected her. “It was the Gargouille who birthed where all gargoyles were born from. They rose when Chlothar was king.”

“Yeah, that's it. We had a good time, and we decided that we'd go up to the gazebo. You know, the one on the hill behind the dorms. We cut through the stadium's parking lot. It was the middle of the

afternoon, so we figured it was safe enough. And when we got in, we saw several hockey players loading up their gear in the van, laughing and having fun. You know, boys being boys.”

“And what? They saw Georgie and attacked him?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. They didn’t even look in our direction. Not until ...”

She stopped talking and her shoulders scrunched up like she was literally trying to make herself smaller. Even in a cat costume, she managed to look like a mouse.

“Until what?” I asked.

“This woman stepped out of a car. She walked over to the passenger side and opened the door. A boy our age stepped out. But she wasn’t looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on Georgie. She had a wicked smile on her face, and as we walked past she pointed at Georgie and said, ‘How convenient.’ Then ... then she *slapped* the boy. Georgie didn’t like that. Not one bit.”

“You mean some kid was being slapped by his mother?”

She shook her head. “No. First of all, the boy’s a student here. I’ve seen him around. And as for the woman—she was too young to be his mother. But she was mad. And she slapped him *hard*. Weird thing was, she wasn’t looking at him when she hit him. She was looking at us. Well, not us—at Georgie. ‘Let’s see if this works,’ she said. Her voice was eerie, like she was trying out something she shouldn’t be. Then she slapped the boy again. And again. That’s when Georgie started shaking his head and huffing. Then that crazy woman pulled out a gun and pointed it at the boy’s head. That’s when Georgie started to *really* get mad, but the woman didn’t seem worried. She just pointed at the group of hockey players who were no longer loading their gear in the van, but were now staring at her. ‘If you want him to live,’ she said to Georgie, ‘then you’ll take care of them.’ He looked at me and said, ‘Run. Please. I’ll find you later, but you must run now. Run, run, run!’ The woman giggled at this and pulled back the hammer on her pistol. That’s when Georgie’s eyes turned red and he charged at the group of hockey players. I mean, he was like a creature possessed. But that wasn’t him. He wouldn’t just attack them and— and ...” She trailed off.

“What happened after that? What did you do?”

She looked around before lowering her head in shame. “What do you think I did? I ran, just like he told me to.” She shook her head and dabbed the corners of her eyes with the end of her tail. “I shouldn’t have left. But I was so scared. And he was so angry.” Then she clamped her fists at her sides and her voice took on a bit more confidence. “But that’s why I’m here now. I’m looking for Georgie. He’s going to live with me...just like you and—”

The mousey girl so abruptly stopped walking that the people directly behind us bumped into her back. Not that she noticed. She just pointed in front of her and said, “That’s the woman who made Georgie so crazy.”

Chapter 21

SCREAMING THE GODS BACK

I looked up to see where the mousey girl was pointing, half expecting to see some crazed Occultist standing with the obsidian blade in one hand and a rain-stick in another. What I didn't expect to see was Detective Wilcox, standing next to Nate.

They stood on the far side of the fountain, too far to make out any real detail, but close enough for me to clearly make out who they were. If I could recognize them, that meant they could recognize me. For a split second, my heart started to race. Either the mousey girl had gotten all her facts wrong or Detective Wilcox was somehow involved in all this. Which meant she was probably responsible for the hex. My heart skipped a beat—until I remembered that I was wearing the cherub's mask.

I breathed a sigh of relief, then scanned the crowd for Mergen, Deirdre or Egya. None of them were in sight. The only familiar face—other than Wilcox and Nate—was the apu, Sal, standing by himself and looking pretty glum. And since Wilcox was with Nate, one of the apu's closest friends, I couldn't be sure which side he was on. Dammit!

The mousey girl turned to run away. I grabbed her arm and said, "Where are you going?"

"Away," she whispered in a rushed voice.

I looked up at Wilcox, who seemed to be scanning the crowd looking for someone. Nate, on the other hand, looked dejected, frustrated and scared.

But the mousey girl could easily get away. From where we stood, she could veer to the right and use the beer line as cover. Even if Wilcox could recognize her as the girl in the parking lot, the mousey girl would be long gone before anything could happen. "OK," I said. "Go—but before you do, I have a question. Do you know the gargoyle's real name?"

"Huh?" she said, fear filling her mascara-decorated eyes.

"The gargoyle. Georgie. Do you know his real name? We want to give him a proper burial and, well, his name will go a long way into making that happen."

I don't know if she even heard my question, or else she'd probably have started bawling from the knowledge that her new friend was dead. But her eyes were trained on Wilcox. The line edged forward. The mousey girl's terror quickly got the best of her. She pulled her arm away and disappeared into the crowd.

I was alone in the line. At least I wouldn't be recognized, which meant I could get close enough to

confirm or deny Mousey Girl's story without being detected. The line edged forward until we were almost parallel with Wilcox, with the fountain between us. As I got close enough to make out some details, I realized that the mousey girl had only been half right.

Detective Wilcox wasn't just the terrifying lady who'd gotten Georgie the gargoyle killed. She was the crazy woman who was going to get everyone at this party slaughtered.



The line was meandering along, snaking around the courtyard, closer and closer to where Wilcox was standing, and now that she was only meters away, I could see that she hadn't had only the one Solomon rings, used and abandoned at the library—she had dozens. The sharp ruby-red diamonds lined each of her ten fingers, most sporting two rings each, and at least a dozen more hung from her belt as seemingly harmless decoration. And that's exactly why I hadn't seen her wearing any yesterday. She knew she could get away with displaying them in the open at a GoneGodsDamned costume party.

The most frightening thing about her was how she wore the rings. The glass parts were facing inward, which meant that all she needed to do was clap her hands together and she'd shatter all of the rings at once. Not that she was poised to do that now, thank the GoneGods. She had one arm around Nate and another one in her jacket like she was holding—

They were standing next to the dried-up stone fountain, and now I noticed for the first time that something was different about the fountain than the last time I'd been here: it was decorated with vines and orchids and lilies and several other plants, and its stone bench-like edge had been cleared as if as a table or ... a botanical tabernacle. The perfect surface to perform a ritual on—and I knew exactly what kind of ritual she had in mind.

We took a few steps closer in the queue. As I drew nearer, one detail became clearer—she was holding a gun on Nate. Looking behind me at Sal, I suddenly realized why he was so distraught. He knew Detective Wilcox was threatening his friend. As an apu, he was bound to protect his friends in a way that went beyond fraternal loyalty. He was created to protect those in his charge. That was his purpose for being ... and right now he was helpless to protect his friend.

The rings, the trapped jinn, Dr. Dewey's murder, threatening Nate—it was starting to make sense. But there were still some missing pieces. Missing pieces I didn't have time to contemplate now.

Now I needed to stop Wilcox from going through whatever plan she had in mind.

I left the queue and walked toward the fountain, swaying like I was just another drunk reveler, until I was standing right next to Wilcox. Then, using a handy wrist move I'd learned from an aikido master in Japan, I forced her to release the gun and pulled her hand out of her jacket, while simultaneously lacing my fingers with hers. She tried to punch me with her free hand, no longer holding Nate. I rolled into the punch so as to weaken the impact enough that none of the rings would

shatter against the hard surface of my mask.

No jinn appeared. My move worked. I breathed a sigh of relief, then kicked her in the shins and laced my other hand with hers. Now we were hand-in-hand-in-hand-in-hand.

She tried to pull away and I just went with it. I might not be able to match her strength—after all, she had three inches on me—but that didn't mean I couldn't inconvenience her. And as long as my fingers were laced with hers, that meant she couldn't break the glass and release the jinn.

“What are you doing?” she yelled.

People were starting to gather around us, evidently getting into position to watch a cat fight. Well, a cherub-versus-gypsie fight. That was fine. I didn't mind an audience.

“Nate,” I said. “Run.” The way I figured it, as long as Nate was safe, Sal would be able to help. As it was, Sal was walking toward us, trying to determine if Nate was, indeed, far enough away for him to get involved.

Nate didn't move.

“Come on—run! Sal and I can take care of her.”

Wilcox and I turned in a tight circle as she tried to pull free, so Nate was now behind me. Therefore, I could only imagine that his face transformed from fear to malice the second before I heard him say, “Why would I want to do that?”

Then I felt a heavy hand grab my shoulder and pull.



GoneGodsDammit! Nate was actually trying to help Wilcox. I'd read this situation oh, so wrong.

“What the hell are you doing?” I cried out.

He leaned in and whispered, “What do you think? We're trying to get them back.”

“Them?”

“The gods ... we disappointed them when we turned our backs on the old ways.” I could feel his hot breath on me. “And now we have the ability to do it. Finally.”

“How?” I asked, as the three of us swayed in one weird dance. I wasn't about to let go of Wilcox's hands, and moving so the rings stayed intact while shrugging off Nate as he tried to pull me off her was no easy feat. It meant going with the flow, with both of them. Trouble was, they had opposite flows, and the only thing that prevented them from breaking free was that they had yet to coordinate their efforts.

“Idiot,” Wilcox hissed. “The apu is bound to protect Nate. And by threatening him, I am forcing the apu to do as I demand.”

Oops. That should have been obvious. “And what's that?”

Kind of wish I hadn't asked, because her eyes widened with anticipation and excitement. And not in the I-just-won-the-lottery kind of way. It was more like After a lifetime of being a vegetarian, I just

had my first steak and now that I know the taste of flesh, I'm never going back. My similes need work, I know, but I was under a pinch of duress at the time.

"The gods," Wilcox practically moaned, "they left because we turned our backs on them. We no longer honored them the way they wanted. We no longer paid them tribute. I am here to usher back the old ways."

"And by 'old ways,' which ones are you talking about?"

"Blood tributes," Wilcox said.

"You mean human sacrifice?"

"Is there any other kind?" Nate asked as he pulled.

We continued our dance, and all the while I saw the confusion on Sal's face. He couldn't hear our conversation or assess the level of threat against Nate. All he could do was helplessly watch as he waited for some clear indication of what to do.

"So it was Nate at the library?" I said. "You didn't release the jinni from the ring—you don't have the power. But the guard dog is a protective creature, and it released itself because Nate was threatened."

"That's what's amazing about the apu's power. He uses what is around him to protect his charges. In the library, that meant breaking the ring. At the vigil, when you so conveniently threatened Nate, Sal's protection took the form of a hex that literally turned these otherwise reasonable human beings into a roving gang of hate."

Mousey Girl's story suddenly made sense. A gargoyle's nature is to protect their charge. When Detective Wilcox threatened Nate in front of him, not only was his nature to protect Mousey Girl's safety being tested, but he was also falling under the Incan Other's spell; the two opposite forces were being pitted against each other, and Sal's spell won. Georgie attacked those hockey players because, at that moment, it was literally the only thing Sal could do to stop Wilcox from hurting Nate.

"The apu's spell contains so much beauty in its simplicity," Wilcox said. "And since I am a constant threat to Nate, there is only one solution for the apu."

"Do your bidding?"

"Do my bidding," she repeated as her eyes widened again in a maniac expression. "And my bidding is to sacrifice all these silly kids just like they did when the sun would turn black in displeasure and demand human blood as a tribute. The apu was hesitant but not as hesitant as you would expect. After all, he is a creature who was once given human tributes himself."

"But you're not really threatening Nate, so why would he—"

At this, Wilcox made a mock pouting expression. "You mean would I kill my little cousin? Without hesitation."

"Thanks, dear cuz," Nate said with venom in his own voice.

"So the solution is simple," I said. "Remove you, remove the threat—"

That's when the worst thing happened.

From behind me I felt a powerful force rip Nate off of me. I turned just in time to see Deirdre standing over Nate, her broadsword raised over her head.

“You dare harm milady?!” she cried out.

“No, Deirdre—don’t!”

But my words were drowned out by the sound of a glass shattering noise.

Wilcox’s rings were all broken, releasing an army of angry, over-protective jinn onto the party.

CHANGELINGS, HYENAS, WARRIORS AND ANGELS

What happened next was nothing short of awe-inspiring, chaotic and terrifying. Thirty-one jinn burst out of Wilcox's hands and belt. Thirty-one creatures—and not all of them were guard dogs like from the library. There were all types: a monkey-looking creature the size of a wendigo, a monster with a human head on a body the shape of a horse-sized chicken, a ten-foot-long ferret with a scorpion's tail. Hell, I even saw a couple salmon bigger than park benches swimming through the air.

Thirty-one creatures of all shapes and sizes. Thirty-one creatures, each possessing immense power. Thirty-one creatures all hell-bent on doing one thing.

Protect Nate.



I expected the jinn to just go on an all-out rampage, but they didn't. Instead, they hovered (well, those that could hover; others leered, crouched or just stood vigilantly, dozens of tiny eyes staring in every which direction) around Nate and Wilcox, employing the dead fountain as an ad hoc base of operations.

Legend said that whoever wore the broken crystal controlled the jinn. But Wilcox didn't have the power to actually *release* the jinn. That was Sal. His protective magic would have forced them out in order to protect Nate. Nevertheless, now that they were released, they were under Wilcox's control ... and as long as her commands didn't threaten Nate, they would do her bidding.

Wilcox looked around, turned to me and said, "This wasn't how I imagined this going down."

I lifted an eyebrow behind my cherub mask and scanned the crowd behind me. All eyes were on us—not surprising, given that thirty-one creatures suddenly appeared out of thin air. Deirdre was behind me in her ninja costume, her broadsword at the ready, but she was smart enough to bide her time and wait for an opening. The only eyes that didn't seem to be on us were those of Egya and Mergen, who were nowhere in sight. I could only hope that they were up to something useful.

"I was going for more gravitas," Wilcox explained. "Ah well, too late now." Fishing around in her jacket, she pulled out the obsidian blade and pointed it at the crowd. Speaking to her guard

creatures, she said, “Make sure nobody escapes.”

Jinn went every which way and the screams and panic began in earnest. I heard the loudest shouts of alarm toward the edges of the courtyard, which surprised me. I looked up and saw that someone had slid thick mesh fences across all the exits leading into the surrounding building. No escaping the mess hall, apparently. I don’t even know how they managed to install sliding cage doors like that without anyone noticing. These guys were good.

Then Wilcox pointed at the cleared-off alter on the fountain and said, “Bring me the virgin.”

A nasnas (a creature that looked like a man, if you cut him in half from navel to forehead) hopped through the crowd and picked up a large shirtless boy dressed like a Roman legioneer. “Hey,” he cried out. “I’m not a virgin! I’ve done it. Lots.”

Oh, brother. If it wasn’t so horrible, it would have been funny. But as it stood, seeing the terror in that kid’s eyes, there was nothing *ha-ha* about this moment.

I turned to Nate. “Come on, Nate—this won’t bring the gods back. This can’t.”

“You . . . you don’t know that.”

“Indeed,” Wilcox said with a laugh. “No one does. We’ll just have to try and then wait and see.”

The nasnas placed the large “virgin” on the tabernacle, and Wilcox commanded it to tie him up, handing the nasnas an ancient rope. As he was being strapped to the stone, Wilcox teased her sacrifice-to-be with the obsidian blade.

Turning to the crowd, she cried out, “I know what many of you are thinking. How do I know something that so many scholars, philosophers, scientists, politicians and theologians don’t know? The answer is simple—they know, too. They just don’t have the balls to say it.

“The gods left because we disappointed them.”

Then she began chanting. One hand on the blade, which she slowly raised above her head. The other on her gun.

“Nate,” I heard a voice say behind me. “Are you doing this?” Justin walked up behind me, perfectly in tact, not a single jinni attacking him. And then it hit me that none of Nate’s circle of friends would be harmed, just like the hex. The apu’s spell wouldn’t allow it. Five fewer people to worry about.

Justin walked past me, panting heavily. He had obviously been running. “Tell me she’s not telling the truth, Nate. Tell me you have nothing to do with this.”

Nate didn’t move as Wilcox continued her chant. Justin took another step forward, but two jinn—one resembling Swamp Thing, the other an actual dinosaur—positioned themselves so that he couldn’t progress. They didn’t attack him, mind you, but they didn’t let him through, either.

“Come on,” he said, “we can’t let her do this. This isn’t right. This isn’t *right!*”

But Nate’s expression stayed the same. He didn’t move. Nothing changed.

Justin wiped away a tear from frustration. “Why is this happening?”

“Because of me,” Sal said, his hollow voice somehow piercing the screams of all those being

corralled by the jinn like cattle.

Justin gave him a curious look. “You?”

Sal nodded. “My spell. These creatures emerged because Nate was threatened. And she possesses the rings.” He pointed at Wilcox, who laughed in agreement. “As long as she does, they will obey her.”

“Then ... turn it off,” Justin said.

“I ... I can’t. I am an apu. My magic demands that I protect those I love.”

“And do you not love *them*?” Justin said, gesturing to the roiling crowd all around them.

Sal looked around and shook his head. “I tried, but none of them have accepted me. Not like you and Nate. They give me strange looks and speak to me with trembling voices. They’re afraid of me, and because of that fear, they keep their distance.” Sal’s eyes turned from their usual crisp sky blue to a stormy gray.

“And *this* will make that better?” Justin shook his head. “This isn’t right, Sal. If you can’t love them, then at least feel *empathy* for them. Protect them, too.”

I could see what Justin was doing—he was trying to get the apu to extend his protection spell. For a moment I thought that it just might work, but then Sal shook his head, a cloudy tear falling from his face. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Fine,” Justin said. Showing exactly why he was the star of the football team, he faked past the two jinn and ran up to Nate. “If you can’t protect everyone, then maybe you can find it in your heart to choose.”

Then Justin did something that I will admire for the rest of my life. Knowing full well what would happen, he walked right up to Nate and punched him.

Right in the nose.

Man, what I wouldn’t give to be the one to punch that kid in the nose.

Deirdre glanced over at me, arching one eyebrow.

“What?” I said. “It’s the Truth.”

Where was Mergen when I needed him?



Nate fell down as if in slow-motion, and before his butt could hit the ground with a thump, I heard a sound that could only be described as rolling thunder ... rolling closer and closer to us.

“Shit!” I yelled out. “Justin!”

In one fluid motion, I slid between the dinosaur jinni’s legs and tackled Justin, pushing him behind me just as a dozen jinn turned on him, seeking to protect Nate. “Get behind me!” I pulled out my dirk and waited.

The jinn charged forward.

They would have to get through me first if they wanted Justin.

There were far too many for one ex-vampire, of course, but I figured I could cut down a few of them before they'd be able to get through me. At that moment, Deirdre appeared at my side and I realized that we might be able to dispatch more than a few before they eventually overcame us.

As far as last stands, this wasn't the worst way to go.

I readied myself, gritting my teeth behind my mask, just as my father might have once done.

But the jinn didn't attack.

Instead, they hovered about in confusion, staring at both Justin and Nate.

The jinn had been paralyzed by indecision.

Seems the apu wouldn't let them hurt *anyone* in his charge ... and this was something he took very seriously. Seems that even knowing his friend had used him and the pain and suffering that this had caused, he still could not let harm fall upon him. Say what you will about Sal—once he was your friend, he was your friend for life.

But at least the jinn weren't attacking anyone. Thank the GoneGods for small miracles.

Justin, standing behind us, cried out, "Come on. You coward! Come *on*!" But he didn't try to get at Nate again.

"Nate," I called over my shoulder, still facing the confused jinn. "You know this isn't right. All you have to do is say one word and this can all stop."

Wilcox's chanting got louder as the obsidian blade rose higher in her fist. She was going to kill that poor kid any second now, and I was stuck on the far side of the fountain, surrounded by monstrous jinn, powerless to stop her.

I might have been powerless ... but the *Truth* wasn't.

Without warning, a hail of arrows flew at Wilcox. I turned to see Mergen lumbering into view at a speed that shouldn't be possible for someone so fat. His bow was out and he was shooting arrows with a speed and accuracy that wasn't only divine in nature—it was also very badass.

Mergen must have been seven feet tall now, and just as wide, his Santa costume ripping at the seams. He looked like a Jolly Ol' Nick version of the Incredible Hulk. I guess the Truth of everyone's terror became an all-you-can-eat *foie gras*-style buffet for him, literally funneling nourishment into his being. He grew with every cry, every scream, and his size and speed made him the most formidable warrior on the field.

But as accurate and fast as his arrows were, the jinn were faster. They caught every arrow before any could hit Wilcox. Not that this deterred Mergen any. He just kept them coming.

A thought occurred to me. Every single jinn was occupied stopping his typhoon of arrows.

A diversion. Hell yeah, Mergen!

I jumped up onto the fountain, skirting all the decorations and jinn toward the side with the tabernacle. Slicing off the tail of the ferret-scorpion jinni, I jumped on the poor sacrificial legioneer and struck at Wilcox. The ferret-scorpion tried to grab me with its paws, but it was too late. I was

already up in the air again. But before I could make contact with Wilcox, two jinn zipped up between us, protecting her from mortal danger.

Mortal danger—but not pain. I brought down my dirk on the only exposed part of her—the hand that held the obsidian blade.

I missed. Sort of. I had been aiming to cut her hand clear off, but because of the angle, all I managed to do was cut through her thumb, the hilt of her dagger stopping my sword from making a clean cut.

Still, I severed her thumb. Anyone with opposable thumbs will tell you that you need a thumb to sacrifice a human.

Wilcox cried out in pain just as three jinn came on me. I was sure it was only a matter of seconds before they disemboweled me for my little maneuver, but instead, they softened my fall, gently putting me on the floor.

“What the—?” I started.

“You are willing to die to protect them,” I heard a voice echo.

I looked up to see the apu crying tears of confusion. He knelt down over me, sending a shifting dust of stone around us.

“Yes ...?” I said.

“Then you are the real protector of this realm. Not I,” he said, and his impossible sky-blue eyes became gray and sullen, matching his stoney skin. “I surrender this place to you.”

“No more spell?” I said.

“No more spell,” the apu said, lowering his head.

“No more spell? You idiots!” Wilcox said, grabbing her bleeding hand. “You served your purpose. The jinn are free from their bounds of protection, and still under my control.”

“Not all of them,” Egya said.

In all the confusion, I didn’t see him sneaking up behind her. Egya wasn’t only silent, he was practically invisible—I had no idea how he got past all those jinn defenses. Until it hit me: he’d approached without the intention of hurting Wilcox, the jinn’s new sole master. He was just some silent kid moving in this direction—that raised no alarms, didn’t set off any defenses. His willpower to control his thoughts was incredible. How could he be so disciplined?

I could learn a lot from that kid.

He no longer wore his ridiculous ghost costume, but instead was shirtless, a Ngbaka throwing knife at his waist. He held a Ngombe sword in one hand, its looping tips looking like the scythe’s evil twin, and his other hand was held aloft, holding something that glinted in the light.

Then I realized what he was up to. He held Wilcox’s thumb in his hand, the crystal ring still on the flesh. Pulling it off and letting the thumb drop to the courtyard floor, he gracefully slid it onto his own finger and said in a tone far too casual for such an awesome move, “Jinn—bring me her belt.”

In a whirl, a giant hawk circled Wilcox and faster than you could say, *Holy sh—*, the belt was in

Egya's hand.

Wilcox knew she was done. There was only one move left for her to do, and the bitch did it. Raising her nine fingers with seventeen rings, she cried out, "*Kill them! Kill them all!*"



That set them off. Oh, GoneGods, did it ever.

Jinn went every which way at once—lunging on humans as they did. I watched in horror as teeth and claws and talons (and scales, in the case of the giant salmon) lashed out at totally shocked humans, and that's when I realized there was no way to get out of this without casualties. Wilcox may only have control of half of the jinn, but that was still enough to cause mayhem and confusion.

The monkey jinni lunged at two kids who might have been dressed like dark elves (but then again, might have just been dressed goth). I leapt up and stabbed the creature in the back. It writhed in pain and turned to face me, twisting its long skeletal talon to strike my face. But I was ready for that. Ducking under its swing, I took advantage of its momentum to thrust my dirk into its neck.

It squirmed and tried to screech, but its cries of agony only forced fire-yellow blood out of its neck wound faster.

I managed to pull my dirk from its corpse and stay relatively unscathed.

One down—sixteen to go.

In the carnage, I saw Deirdre swinging her broadsword in defense as she ushered students across the courtyard. She wasn't trying to kill any of the jinn, but rather place herself between them and the students. I suppose you could say she had pledged her sword arm to the entire student body. A student body that had been less than kind to her and all Others. In that moment, I felt a surge of pride for my fae roommate.

I also caught a glimpse of Egya. He was commanding the jinn under his control to protect the innocent. He, too, wasn't going for the kill, using his long arms and powerful swing to protect those who were trying to run.

Mergen continued his barrage of arrows at Wilcox, filling the three jinn protecting her like pincushions.

But the three of them could only cover so much. This wasn't going to go well, unless—

As I watched Mergen shoot another arrow, which lodged itself in the tiny forearm of the tyronasaurus rex, I saw Wilcox pull Nate away, through the crazed crowd, flanked the whole while by a swimming salmon. As she reached a far exit, the mesh door slid open just long enough for her to yank Nate through before slamming shut again.

She was taking him to McConnel Hall.

Evidently, she thought she'd watch the chaos unfold from the relative safety of the inside.



Remember how I'd said that, while certain ex-Others had lost their *magical* abilities, they still retained a certain amount of latent skill? Sure, I didn't have a taste for blood anymore, but I'd always be a master at kung fu. Witches lost their powers to cast spells, but they could still use talismans they'd already imbued with magic. Werehyenas ... well, I wasn't quite sure *what* Egya could do.

Point is, I was determined to follow Wilcox and Nate, and a simple caged door wasn't going to stop me. A couple hundred years ago, I developed a pretty kickass ability to scale just about any building wall. Castles were my specialty. So this courtyard's perimeter walls weren't going to pose any challenge.

I left the battle to rage on without me, quickly scaling the mesh cage and using it to launch myself to the overhanging awning above. Pulling myself onto that, I leapt to the other side of the roof and, without thinking of my own safety, propelled myself into the air.

Yeah. It was pretty awesome.

When I met the ground, I let my body roll with the gravity and sprang back up, never breaking stride as I ran across the springy grass. I followed Wilcox into the building. Given how grievously wounded she was, Wilcox was surprisingly spry. She made it to the door before me and slammed it behind her, gaining a precious headstart as I wasted valuable seconds breaking the heavy glass with the hilt of my sword. I reached into the hole I'd made and unlocked the door from the inside to let myself in.

I ran up the Z-shaped stairs, only sparing a second to glance out the window at the mess hall. I couldn't see into the courtyard from this angle, but I was high enough to see the occasional jinni soar up into the open air above the courtyard. Deirdre, Mergen and Egya—as well as thirteen loyal jinn—seemed to be making short work of Wilcox's minions. The battle would be won—victory without casualties.

Well, victory with very few casualties, I thought as I made it to the seventh-floor landing.

I could hear the door to the communal bathroom fly open. Wilcox was taking refuge in a defensible room. She still had one good hand and a gun, which made her very dangerous indeed. I had no idea what her plan was. I doubt she did, either.

She'd lost, and now she was cornered.

Cornered rats don't make plans.

But they also don't hesitate to do anything bat-shit crazy to get out of said corner.

I pushed open the bathroom door. Three gunshots rang out. Looking up, I saw light stream through three bullet holes about a foot above my head.

Thank the GoneGods I'm short.

"Not 'gone' gods if you'd let me finish my ritual, you bitch!" Wilcox screamed back.

"Wilcox," I said. "It's over."

“NO, IT’S NOT OVER! They’ll come back! They have to!”

“Your ritual failed. And even if it succeeded, I doubt it would have made a difference.”

Wilcox didn’t respond. Instead, I could hear her mumbling to herself. I had to really concentrate to hear what she was saying ... and as soon as I was able to lock onto a couple words, I knew her plan.

Crap.

I burst through the door and saw exactly what I’d expected. Nate on his knees, Wilcox’s gun at his head. She was chanting the Incan incantation.

If she couldn’t sacrifice several hundred kids to the gods, then she could still give them one.

And now that Nate was no longer under Sal’s protective spell, nothing would come to possibly save him.

Nothing—except for me.

Without hesitation or second thought, I hurled my dirk at Wilcox. It whirled through the air in dazzling slow-motion. She tried to veer to the right, but she wasn’t fast enough. Instead of the sword splitting her down the center of the skull, it hit her just above her left eye.

Wilcox went down with a sickening thud.



Nate burst into tears—but not tears for his dead cousin. They were tears of relief, joy—tears of emancipation, of one who had finally found freedom. Sure, Nate had called me a bitch at Dr. Dewey’s vigil, but in all of this, he was just as much a victim as anyone else. He muttered one word over and over again, and this time it wasn’t “bitch.” It was “sorry.”

“Sorry, *sorry* ... *SORRY*.”

I thought he was looking at me, but he wasn’t. He was staring behind me. I looked over my shoulder.

It was Sal. I guess in all the chaos, the apu had found a way out of the mess hall courtyard and came up here to see if he could help, too. That’s the thing about protectors. It’s not easy for them to stop loving those they protect.

Sal walked past me, drew close to Nate and gave him a powerful hug. As he held Nate, he turned to me and said, “What now?”

I shook my head. I honestly didn’t know, and at the moment I was staring at Wilcox’s body. *I killed*, I thought as I pulled my sword out of her skull. *And not a Class C Other this time. A human. Even if I argued self-defense ...*

“No one will ever know what you did here,” Sal said.

This was one instant where I was glad for my little quirk of speaking my thoughts aloud.

What the apu did next was nothing short of astonishing.

He spread his hands out across the marble tiles of the bathroom floor, and right before our eyes

everything turned to rock, slowly absorbing Wilcox's body into it. Within moments she was gone, along with any trace of what I had done to her.



I made my way down the stairs and back across to the mess hall to find that the battle was, indeed, over. Wilcox's jinn had all been dispatched, and Egya's jinn were standing, frozen statues on the stone fountain. And as for the humans? Many were standing near Mergen, happy to have his protective presence near them. But even more rushed to the doors as Sal and I pried their gates up high enough for a safe exit.

By the time everyone had exited the mess hall and felt the refreshing air of the fields outside, the humans spontaneously decided to hoist Egya and Deirdre in the air and crowd surf them like rockstars. Egya was quick to get down—evidently, he did not like the attention, or the heights. But Deirdre—the changeling warrior—had finally found some acceptance here. They loved her for being a warrior. For being different. And for using that difference to save their lives.

None of them seemed to notice me, which was good. I'd lost my cherub mask somewhere in the climb over the mess hall, and the last thing I wanted was to be recognized. I was sure I'd be rewarded for saving them by being attacked. And I wasn't sure I had it in me to kill another, even in self defense.

I might have helped save hundreds of lives—but I did so by tarnishing my own, newly human soul.

As I wandered around the field, I happened upon an item hidden in the grass. I knelt down and, to my surprise, found the cherub mask. Touching its ceramic cheek, I imagined that I caught a glimpse of my father's own struggles in that angelic face.

Sometimes doing the right thing hurts, I thought, and then spoke aloud:

“But that doesn't make it wrong.”

EPILOGUE

Sirens climbed the hill as the students sat outside waiting for help to arrive. As best as I could tell, no one was hurt. Sure there were some scrapes and bruises, a few bloody noses and whatnot, and a hell of a lot of terrified, most likely emotionally scarred kids—but no deaths. Well, no deaths except Wilcox ... but given how Sal's magic worked, I was pretty sure her body was absorbed into the bathroom floor of seventh landing of McConnell Hall forever.

She was gone for good. But considering what she tried to do, I could live with that.

Really, I could.

I didn't wait for the police to show up. I just walked behind the mess hall and into Gardner Hall's basement, where my room and bed waited for me. I figured that if the police needed to speak to me, they could come find me where I belonged. In bed, under my covers and away from anyone or anything.

Crawling into bed, I sighed and closed my eyes. Barely a second went by before there was a knock on the door.

I ignored it.

Then another knock.

I ignored that, too.

But when a heavy fist knocked a third time, I sighed heavily, got up and opened the door.

I was expecting a cop or ten, but when I saw Justin's bloodied smile, my heart stopped beating for a couple seconds (and believe me, I know what it feels to not have your heart beat).

"You left," he said. There was no scorn or anger in his voice. Just matter-of-fact, like he was trying to process what happened.

I didn't say anything.

"The cops will want to talk to you. Well, not you, but the girl with the cherub mask."

"They'll find me eventually."

Justin smirked. "I'm not so sure. I told them I was pretty sure the girl with the angel face was actually an angel who took to the sky after she saved us."

I raised my eyebrows at him. "What?"

"I mean—not many know who you are ... I mean, *really, truly* are. And those of us who do—Sal,

Nate and, well, me—we all said the same thing. And that’s not all. Word is getting out. Dozens of students all saying you’re gone. Like Superman or something.”

“Supergirl, you mean?”

“Super-whatever,” he said, drawing me in close. With gentle hands that held my tight, he wiped away a few loose strands of hair from my face. “Thank you. And not just from me. From everyone. You saved us.”

I blushed. “I had help.”

“You did ... and we’re thankful to them, too. But the kid who emerged from the almost politically incorrect white sheet said you were the one who figured it all out. You were the one who saved us.”

“I guess,” I said, looking down.

A firm and kind finger gently lifted my chin so that I was staring directly into Justin’s impossibly beautiful eyes. “Thank you,” he said again as he leaned down and kissed me.

I resisted at first, but feeling his warm lips on my own, I leaned into it. It was the first time I’d kissed anyone. Alive, that is. I died when I was fifteen, before I’d had any serious suitors, and now that I was alive again ... well, kissing was *good*.

Eventually, we pulled away from each other and I thought, *Does this mean were an item?*

“An ‘item’?” Justin asked, laughing. “What are you—from the sixties?”

“Ahhh, actually, that expression is from the fifties,” I said. Hey, if I was going to think out loud, I might as well embrace it.

“OK, then,” he said, kissing me again. “We’re an item.”

I shook my head. “No—not yet. I need to tell you something. And I’m not quite ready. But I don’t want to start this with a lie ... so ... no. Not yet.”

He withdrew, narrowing his eyes. “Not yet, but ... there’s hope?”

Right thing to say, I thought (and this time in my head). “Oh, there’s more than hope,” I said. “But I need time to ... to figure out how to be a college student first. How about while I’m figuring it out, we have a couple dates? Real dates. Court me like I’m a Scottish gal from the nineteenth century.”

He smiled, stepped back and curtsied. “As you wish.”

“Actually,” I said, “Scottish suitors didn’t curtsy.”

“Oh ... I figured that with the skirt—”

“Kilt.”

“—they curtsied. No?”

“No,” I said, grabbing his hand and guiding him to my door. “They bowed.”

Standing outside my door, Justin bowed. “Like I said, as you wish.” And with that, the boy with impossibly beautiful eyes and perfect black hair took his leave to give me time to figure out how to be ... well, how to be human.

Again.



The next days saw a flurry of activity. Over one hundred human students dropped out, more Others moved in and the university finally found a return to normalcy that—given the circumstances—wasn't very normal.

Deirdre, Mousey Girl (whose name, I discovered, was Aimee), Egya and I buried the gargoyle, whose real name was George Paul-Henri Gardien III. We found a quiet spot not too far from the neon cross and laid his stones to rest. Since Georgie was a guardian Other, Deirdre gave him a warrior's funeral as the rest of us said our farewells.

Aimee cried.

And so did I.

But Georgie got his farewell. And in this new and terrible GoneGod world, that had to count for something.



Days passed and the routine of college life started to become ... well ... routine. Classes, dates with Justin that ended with PG-13 kissing, hanging out on campus ... the university routine I figured must have taken place in-between the wild party scenes from the old college comedies. I was just finding my rhythm when one day—about a month after the 0³ party—I opened my mailbox and pulled out a letter from the Library of Other Studies—apparently it was open again and I was to report to work starting Monday. I guess Dr. Dewey, the Old Librarian, had put in my application before he died.

GoneGodsDammit!

I mean ... Oh, yay!



Monday morning I walked into my first day of work. A funny-looking woman who wore a bright blue blazer and red pants greeted me. She had a name tag that read *Jennifer Brovavick* and a smile that said *Ask me anything*.

I handed her the letter.

“Katrina Darling? I heard they were going to send me a little helper. I was half expecting an elf.” She chuckled at her own joke, but when I did not, her face went solemn. “Sorry. I take it this must be difficult for you.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

“You did know David. Correct?”

“David?”

“Yes, the librarian who ...” She looked at the back of the room.

“Dr. Dewey,” I said. “Yes, I knew him. He was the first friend I made here.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

I nodded.

Jennifer Brovavick stood perfectly still for a moment before reaching into her jacket. “I found something amongst his stuff—he left you this.” She handed me an envelope with my name on it. “Take your time.”

She walked away, leaving me with a letter that was quite literally from beyond the grave. With hesitant hands, I opened it. Inside was a short note:

Dear Ms. Darling,

Regarding your inquiry as to who donated the McMahon tartan. Upon investigating the matter, I discovered that a Miss Charlotte Darling donated it. Suspecting that she is a relation of yours, but unable to give you her number directly due to university confidentiality clauses, I gave Miss Darling a ring and—

No, no, no, no!

discovered that she is indeed your—

“Kat ... Katrina!” I heard an old familiar voice call my name.

mother. She informed me that she will be up for a visit at her earliest convenience. I do not know if I crossed any lines by mentioning your employment at the Library of Other Studies and—

“Yoo-whooo ... Kat, dear. It’s me. It’s—”

wanted to give you a heads-up just in case I did.

Your friend,

David Dewey, the “Old Librarian”

“—Mom,” the voice called out.
I groaned. *GoneGodsDammit*.
And this time I *meant* to say it out loud.

The End



Continue the GoneGod World series in book two, *Family Matters*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R.E. Vance lives in Edinburgh with his wife, one year old kid and imaginary dog where he enjoys a beautiful city, whisky (Scottish spelling, not mine) and long walks. All he really wants is to write stories based in Paradise Lot (and elsewhere). All he really hopes for is that his child is healthy (ten fingers, ten toes and at least two eyes are a good start) and that eventually he can get a real dog so that he can have an excuse to go on even more long walks.

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FATEFUL VAMPIRES: A ROMANCE BEGINS

CHERI SCHMIDT AND TRISTAN HUNT

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Chapter 1

SAND CASTLES

*Northumberland County, England
Bamborough Castle,
Eastern Shore of the North Sea
The Year of Our Lord, 1340*

“*Y*ou’ll have to run faster than that!” Beon shouted.
Sophia giggled as she pushed herself, trying to speed up, the feel of sand beneath her feet bringing a smile to her face. As did the mirth she could hear in Beon’s voice.

As Sophia ran along the beach, she glanced up at the fortress that was Bamborough Castle, inwardly marveling at how Beon’s presence, his dark brown eyes and easy smile, brightened the dark corners of the gloomy castle she’d lived in all her life.

If only Beon could banish the scowl from Father’s brow as well, she mused, returning her focus to the beach in front of her. Was it really so taxing to be the Baron of Bamborough? Were Father’s duties truly so grim?

Another laugh from Beon let Sophia know how close he was, she squealed and ran harder. If she continued letting moments of distraction slow her down, she would lose the race yet again. Truth be told, she didn’t mind losing to Beon.

Today was that rare occasion when Beon, a young page under her father’s charge, was able to join her for some sport after completing all of his duties to Sir Lyndon, her father’s man-at-arms.

As fast as he was, Beon always won in games of chase. In fact, he won every game they played, but Sophia found she didn’t mind at all. There was very little distraction in Bamborough Castle. There was very little warmth within the cold and dim dwelling.

How could such dark eyes be so warm? The light in Beon’s brown eyes, flecked with shards of amber, somehow made its way inside the stone walls where even sunshine had no hope of entering. But Beon had, bringing something to the cold chambers that even a fire in the hearth hadn’t been able to bring. Sophia had yet to sort what that ‘something’ was exactly, but even his name was comforting as it rolled off her tongue...it had a musical quality, and Sophia loved to sing. Beon was constantly

having to correct people with the pronunciation, which Sophia found amusing. “No, no, it’s bee-own,” he would say, “with the stress on the second syllable.”

Beon was older than Sophia, three years or so, and had been living with her family ever since he came to be fostered under her father’s house. Even though it was customary for a boy to leave his home at the age of seven to serve as a page under a knight, Beon had gotten a late start, which made him slightly older than other boys had been. He’d explained that being an only child with his father away at the wars against France, his mother had held him back.

Sophia had met his mother and knew how much she worshiped the lad, showering him with praise and attention. He was quite arrogant as a result. He would tell Sophia himself with his chin jutting to the heavens that there was ‘nothing he could not do, and not do well.’ What was so infuriating to the other pages and squires who lived in the castle was that his claim proved to be true.

Beon was still considered a boy at ten years old. Sophia knew he would not begin to ignore her until he became a squire at fourteen, so until that time, she would savor the much needed amusement he brought to the castle.

Sensing that Beon had lost interest in his pursuit, Sophia slowed and watched as he veered off toward her younger brother, who was quite a bit faster. They careened toward the foamy waves until the nursemaid shouted them back.

“How many times have I told you to stay away from the water!” she said.

Catching her breath, Sophia plopped down on one of the grassy knags that bordered the beach and gazed at the Farne Islands just off the coast. Even from here, she could see it abuzz with several flocks of birds. Sometimes she could even spot a seal or two. But the birds were her favorite. She could watch them for hours. A gull swooped into view and landed several feet away from her.

“Hello again, Oliver,” Sophia said.

The gull squawked in reply.

“I don’t have many crumbs for you today,” she said, as several more birds landed close by. Sophia pulled a folded piece of burlap from her skirts and opened it to reveal a few small chunks of bread. She began to pick at the bread and toss crumbs to the eager creatures.

Suddenly Beon came thundering over a dune and her winged companions scattered. Emitting a laugh, Sophia also leaped up and took flight, thrilled the chase was back on. Panting for breath, she gathered up the hem of her skirt and scurried across the sand. Beon grabbed her waist and wheeled her up and around in a circle, spinning her like a top. She giggled uncontrollably.

“Master Beon,” Nurse shouted, “Put her down this instant! Remember your manners, young man. That is no way to treat a lady, and you’ll do well to behave yourself. The Baron would give you a lashing if he saw you handle his daughter that way!”

“Yes, mum,” Beon said with a bow after setting her back on her feet.

“That’s enough frolicking for one day. You run along back to Sir Lyndon now, like a good lad.”

“Yes, mum,” Beon answered. He smiled at Sophia just before he lit off toward the castle.

Not only was Sir Lyndon her father's man-at-arms, but he was also Father's most trusted knight. Stories of how he'd fought alongside her father in the Scottish Wars for years before she was even born had been told so many times she would never forget them. Even now, her father would rally his troops and ride off with Sir Lyndon to defend the border against the Scots or run to the aid of some other noble house that had come under attack. Once or twice they had even fought against other fiefs, either because they had dishonored her father or because they owed him a debt. Father was always up for a fight, it seemed.

Sir Everard, Beon's father, had sent him to foster at Bamborough Castle specifically because he would be a page to Sir Lyndon, as had been put down in the contract with Sophia's father, Lord Gall. Tales of how Sir Lyndon and Sir Everard had come up through the ranks together and how Sir Everard had gained much favor with King Edward III, earning himself a title and lands as a vassal to his majesty, were fresh in Sophia's mind as she made her way back toward the castle. Their day of running along the shore had come to an end.

Sophia didn't understand it completely, but Father seemed dissatisfied that the king had sent Sir Everard to the north as a trusted colleague. Pausing to peer out over the water, Sophia caught her hair as it danced in the wind as she wondered why they'd said tensions were still very high and loyalty somewhat questionable. With the sea as calm as it was at the moment, she couldn't fathom why Northumberland would be 'in constant turmoil with Scotland, France, and Italy.' If the people were truly a mix of nationalities and lineage, where could the conflict be coming from?

Sophia's father was, indeed, a fearsome man. She, herself, was afraid of him, although she knew better than to admit it. On the rare occasion that she saw him, usually at the table, he hardly spoke a word to her, and never, ever looked at her. She would swear that if he saw her in the great hall amongst a group of people, he would not recognize her. Sophia simply kept quiet, and kept her distance, as she'd been taught.

However, her father lavished attention on her younger brother. Even at her young age, Sophia understood that this was simply the way of things. She knew in her heart that her father's preferential treatment didn't feel fair, but conversely, nothing seemed amiss because it was completely and utterly normal. Most men didn't notice women, unless after they had been drinking ale in the great hall all night. Under those circumstances, Sophia had noticed that men became very attentive toward certain women. It was all very confusing. She much preferred the silence of the castle when the men were away tending to that 'turmoil' they kept going on about or hunting, which was most of the time. On those days, her mother would let her wander off daydreaming, or play hideaway in the castle with her brother. Sometimes even Beon would join the game...and win, of course. She could look for hours and never find him. Then she'd return to the spot in which they began the game only to come upon him casually eating an apple with his feet propped up on the table.

"What took you so long? I got hungry," he'd say as he chewed.

However, mirth and mischief would immediately drop from his face if Father happened to enter

the chamber. He would shoot a glare in Beon's direction, his lips pursed with disapproval noting the boy's relaxed pose. Sophia was not sure if Beon truly feared Father as much she did, but he would immediately spring to his feet and bow, showing the respect she knew her father expected to see. Then Beon would apologize and offer to leave or be of service. Father would either command him to do something ridiculous or completely ignore him altogether.

An air of tension seemed to follow her father around their dwelling much like gray storm clouds, threatening a torrent of wind, rain, and lightning in its wake. Sophia saw no other way to explain it but as a result of her father's thirst for battle. When he became too restless, he would plan a hunting party, a jousting tournament, or invade a neighboring fiefdom. When he wasn't doing any of those things, he would rage against the servants, or get into heated debates with his knights about politics, or whip a serf who was being lazy. His energy for confrontation and threshold for violence seemed boundless. When he was like this, which was basically whenever he wasn't eating, sleeping, or talking about battle, Sophia made herself scarce.

His coarse black hair and a full beard looked prickly to touch. His giant hands were always dry and cracked with blisters and cuts. However, she could never recall a time when her father had touched her. Sophia never saw him smile and she'd never heard him laugh. She certainly never witnessed him give a kind word or gesture of affection toward her mother.

"Come along, Sophia dear, do not dally!"

With images of Father stomping through her mind, Sophia had jumped at Nurse's words. "Yes, mum!" she answered as she gathered fistfuls of her skirts, turned away from the sea, and continued up the hill toward the castle.

As the garden entrance neared, Sophia let her thoughts drift toward Mother. In Sophia's mind, the name Maerwynn suited the undeniable beauty of her mother. Mother's small and fragile frame conjured up fear for her safety, however, especially when she stood beside Father with his fists clenched as they often were.

Of Scottish descent, Mother had dark orange tresses and blue eyes. Sophia would often study her parents, comparing herself as she noted which features she'd inherited. Sophia's auburn hair was a mix of her father and mother's shades. But she most definitely shared her mother's eyes of blue.

So delicately striking was Maerwynn—both in her size and features—Sophia thought of her as a fairy. Mild mannered and generally content, the servants respected how she ran the house with a gentle hand, letting them go about their business without much meddling. Sophia believed they took pity on her mother, or at the very least felt a sense of protectiveness for her. Mother invoked that feeling in people due to her size and demeanor. Sophia, even at the age of seven, was nearing her mother's height. Sophia worried she might take after her father in regards to stature, but when she compared herself to other girls her age, she found she wasn't much taller or shorter than any of them. Father was the size of a doorway and quite sturdy of constitution. Her brother, Marcel, was of the same build, she could already tell.

Sophia suspected this size difference was the reason her mother had lost three babies, two after they'd been over a year old. It pained her to think it, but Sophia could tell her unfortunate younger brother and sister had taken after Mother and were too weak to live any longer.

To add to Sophia's worries, Mother was with child yet again and was due within the next fortnight. Sophia prayed in the chapel every day for her mother and the unborn babe. The stillness of the chapel welcomed her, making it one of the places she enjoyed being the most. She also enjoyed taking the secret passage from the panel behind the armoire in her mother's chambers, down the spiral staircase to a long narrow hall, and out a panel in a small vestry behind the confessional.

The secret passageways wove within the walls all over the castle. Sophia, her brother, and Beon had discovered them by accident and then explored much of them like caves by candlelight. The tunnels were a fairly new discovery, so they hadn't yet explored them all. And with Bamborough Castle being so very large, it would take quite some time to map it all out. Creating maps had been Beon's idea, but Sophia didn't care much about that. To her, finding places in the castle where she couldn't hear Father's ranting was all that mattered.

Dropping to her knees upon the cushion in the chapel, Sophia clasped her hands in front of her, and bowed her head, saying the same prayer she said each day. "Our Father in Heaven, I come to ask that you let my little brother...or sister...live."

After thanking God for Mother, Marcel, Beon, seashells, and seagulls, she rose up and strolled about the chapel singing, finding the spots in the room that created the largest echo. She did this every day as well because she loved singing, especially in this sacred room that sang back to her. If she stood in just the right spot, the sound would surround her with a warm, humming vibration. If she closed her eyes, the sensation made her feel as though she were floating high above the castle in the night sky.

More than once, Nurse had said she was a silly girl upon finding her singing alone like this, but Sophia thought it was better to be silly than to be grumpy like father, so she would simply giggle in response and sing louder.

When Sophia tired of singing, she meandered her way back up to Mother's quarters and found her knitting beside the fireplace. Mother limned in yellow by the light of the flames was a welcoming sight. Smiling, Sophia nuzzled up beside her, suddenly feeling small and very much like the child she was. Mother set down her sewing and stroked Sophia's hair, humming a soft melody. Her mother also stroked the rounded part of her belly where Sophia's new brother or sister was growing.

"Sing to the babe, my sweet poppet," her mother cooed.

Grinning even wider, Sophia took a breath and sang while Mother continued to run fingers through her hair. After singing several lullabies her Mother had taught her, Sophia said, "Please, tell me another story from when you were a little girl, Mama."

"All right, dear...hmm, let's see...well, as you know your grandpapa was vassal to the King of Scotland and he was lord of the manor over much land in Jedburgh, just over the Scottish border

from here—”

When Mother stopped abruptly and sat forward, staring at the fire as her blue eyes widened, Sophia found herself clutching tighter to Mother’s skirts.

Sounding weaker than before, Mother said, “Better run and tell Nurse to fetch the midwife, poppet...my water just broke.” She smiled at Sophia and caressed her cheek, attempting to ease the fear written upon Sophia’s face. “Run along, darling... I’ll be fine until they get here.”

Chapter 2

A PRIDEFUL PAGE

Beon galloped toward the quintain with his lance couched tightly under his armpit, Sir Lyndon's instruction fresh in his mind. "This is a quintain, and it is used for knighthood training, specifically jousting," the man had said and then he'd pointed, "This circular target is affixed to a wooden arm that swivels atop a post when you strike it. Understand?"

Beon nodded as Sir Lyndon continued, "On the opposite end of the wooden arm is tied a sack filled with sand. Once the target is struck with the force of the lance, it will cause the sack to spin around and strike you, the would-be knight, in the back." Sir Lyndon had then winked and added, "Unless you are quick enough to duck or deflect it."

"I'll be quick enough," Beon had promptly replied with confidence.

Sir Lyndon blinked and Beon thought he detected a bit of mirth in the man's dark gaze.

The pony Beon sat astride was sweating and fatigued after having made this run with several other pages before him. But it was his turn now, and he was determined to hit the target and successfully dodge the swinging sack that had knocked every other boy off the horse in succession. He knew he would get the opportunity to make this run countless times during his training, but a first impression was always paramount, especially since he was a little older than most of the other pages and thought of himself as a cut above the rest. He would show them all he was more fit to be a knight than any of them. It was true that Beon had been told a number of times that his pride was inflated and needed to be adjusted, however, he preferred to think of it as positive thinking. How could that be a bad thing?

Mainly he wanted to impress Sir Lyndon. He had grown to think of the Knight as a second father. He was kind and light-hearted, but a firm teacher who expected the very best effort from his charges. He was the largest man Beon had ever seen. Sir Lyndon was even bigger than Lord Gall, although he was much more genteel than the Baron. He had a kind face, like a gentle giant, that could change in an instant to the face of a hardened warrior. Beon liked him immensely and respected him above all, save his own father, of course.

Knighthood training began in earnest as a page for those of noble birth or those who could afford it, and most boys started at the age of seven. Beon had been eager to begin his training too, but his duty to his family came first, and Mother had needed him. Having been ill since losing her last child,

Beon had been called upon by Father to take care of her until she was able to run the household duties once again. It ended up being a full two and a half years before Mother felt strong enough to give her blessing.

He loved his mother dearly, but by the time his tenth birthday approached, Beon was anxious to get started. During those years at home when he should have been fostering, Beon absorbed as much training as he could from the man-at-arms and other knights Father had left behind to guard Brentworth. They'd fondly ruffled his hair, commenting on how impressed with his natural ability they were, praising him for his hard work and tenacity. By the time he'd arrived at Bamborough Castle and stood in front of Lord Gall, he was positively brimming with zeal. However, Lord Gall barely looked up from the maps he was studying. The Baron's lack of interest had been difficult for Beon to adjust to at first.

"So, you're Everard's boy," Lord Gall had said, glancing over at Beon.

"Yes sir, Beon Everard at your service, sir. I won't disappoint you. I have been—"

"Too late for that. I was expecting you three years earlier." The knights standing around Lord Gall had laughed at his remark.

Beon steeled himself against the pinch of humiliation he felt, unwilling to show how the words made him feel. "But sir, I've been—"

"And you do not speak unless I give you permission. I see you have much to learn, boy—most notably, about your station in life. Well, you're Lyndon's problem now," Lord Gall had said, turning to Sir Lyndon. "Have him muck out all the stalls each morning before sunrise. That should break him of his filthy habits."

And so it went. For the first full year, until the new batch of young pages arrived to be fostered, Beon slopped out the muck in the stables. Nothing had frustrated Beon more than yet another delay in his training, but he was also wise enough to see that if he did not keep his mouth shut and do what he was told, he risked even more setbacks and that would simply not do.

During that time, he'd known quite well that all the training would be geared towards learning horsemanship and how to fight with the various weapons used by knights. Not wishing to fall behind, he'd use sticks or tools he'd found around the stables to practice his swordplay. He'd also gleaned what he could by closely watching the knights with their horses while he spread fresh hay into the stables.

Since he wasn't allowed to join in with the other pages, Beon had time to get to know Sophia and her little brother, Marcel, building a bond and friendship stronger than with any page. He'd discovered that Marcel was a good lad to plot mischief with as they mapped out the labyrinth of secret passageways here at Bamborough.

Sophia always tagged along, and Beon found he didn't mind as much as he'd first feared he would, her being a girl and all. The chestnut shade of her hair intrigued him as candlelight danced over the lighter strands, drawing out the red within the brown. The guileless look in her blue eyes

when she'd first peered out at him from behind the brocade draperies had instantly made him think of the cherubs depicted in the tapestries hung along the walls of the great hall.

Once that first year had ended, Beon found it wasn't too much of an adjustment to shift from using sticks as swords and other makeshift weapons to the wooden versions the knights used for training. Secretly, Beon wanted to skip to the real weapons, but he hoped if he proved himself with these toys first, he might be able to speed up the process. But, as it turned out, he wasn't always given a chance to show off his skills. For example, when the Knights had them recreate battles on piggyback while using wooden swords and shields. Beon was most often the 'horse' in such exercises, much to his chagrin, simply due to his size and age.

When it came to the many physical challenges, however, even if they were games, Beon was rarely in contest with anyone. Many of the lads called him an arrogant coxcomb because of it. He didn't mind their jealousy, as it only confirmed his superiority and fortified the hope that his plan to progress quickly would succeed.

Beon remembered from watching the pages and squires at home that great emphasis would be placed on endurance and strength, so he'd kept up with that as well. When it came to moving sacks of wheat to stockpile the kitchens, or piles of rocks to repair walls, or buckets of water to feed the livestock and care for the knight's horses, Beon executed the tasks without complaining as the younger boys often did. Anything was better than mucking out the stables, even though he loved being around the powerful animals.

Despite hating it at first, being restricted to the stables had given Beon yet another advantage over the other boys. Several of the knights in residence at Bamborough Castle had destriers. By spending so much time with the beasts, he knew each horse intimately, as well as the Knight it belonged to. Lord Gall's destrier was called Goliath, and the beast was as cranky as its owner. However, none was as fine as Sir Lyndon's horse. Sir Lyndon had smiled as he told Beon the story of how he had acquired it. "I was gifted this fine animal by the King himself after a victory over the Scots at Halidon Hill. Your father had also been one of the commander's of the King's army that day. That's when your family was given Brentworth, only a few short years before you were born." Beon had perked up with pride for his father when he heard the tale.

Lord Gall was often out among the knights in the lists, practicing his swordplay or instructing them in their stratagems. Again, Beon had listened as he refilled the wheelbarrow with fresh hay. He suspected this gathering of information would serve him now.

However, today marked Beon's fifth *real* day of training—his chance to keep putting what he'd learned to the test—and Lord Gall stood alongside Sir Lyndon, observing the progress of the pages. All the boys were deathly afraid of the Baron and performed even more poorly when he observed them...except for Beon. Beon was unafraid of the battle-worn baron. Perhaps because he was used to being around blustering and brave noblemen. He felt an odd kinship with the Lord Gall. Although he was a little reluctant to admit it, Beon thought they might be alike in many ways and that someday,

after he had proven himself above all other knights, he too would be a baron or even an earl. He had not been born into his nobility; his father had fought gallantly and won it. But Beon felt it was his destiny to expand his father's name, and there was no limit to his ambition.

One after another as the other pages were thrown from the pony by the swinging quintain, the Baron would laugh along with some of his other knights as the boys ended up on their backsides. Sir Lyndon never laughed. He would bark words of encouragement or instruction, but never belittle the young students the way Lord Gall was prone to do.

"You are far too soft on these lads, Sir Lyndon," Lord Gall would laugh, "Just wait till I get my hands on them—just wait till their first siege! Then they will know how soft they really are...like lambs to the slaughter!"

One boy puddled himself in his stockings at those words. Beon had felt sorry for the lad as he watched the boy's blue eyes turn glossy with embarrassment, and he decided then that he would always defend the weak when he finally became a knight.

But now it was Beon's moment to prove himself as a page. He slowed his breath and steeled his gaze on the approaching quintain. As he approached the target, Beon couched his lance as he'd been taught, substantially reducing the amount of flex in anticipation of the lunge. He steadied himself and took aim. The pony was panting furiously, but he ignored the horse's strain. Sensing the best moment, he thrust the lance forward, and...*twak!*

Beon knew he'd hit the target dead on, but Sir Lyndon's words remained sharp in his mind, and he was ready for it when the sack swung toward him. He bent his torso, ducking his head down to the side of the horse's neck. The sack whooshed above him, missing him completely, but Beon's abrupt maneuver had thrown the pony off balance, causing it to drop its head forward and hit its muzzle on the ground.

The pony's sudden slip sent Beon soaring over the horse's head as it went down in a tumble of dust and mud. While in mid-air, Beon let go of the lance and tucked into a tight roll as he hit the ground. After coming out of the somersault, he landed roughly on his feet and slid about three yards. When he came to a halt, he saw that the pony had already sprung up and started galloping toward the stable like the devil. Dust began to settle around him, and Beon noticed everyone staring at him, their eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

Suddenly the other Pages erupted in cheers. Sir Lyndon shook his head slowly and grinned like he wanted to chuckle but kept it contained. For the first time since the training exercises had begun, Lord Gall was not laughing. In fact, he had a strange look on his face, as though he tasted something very sour.

"Come here, son of Sir Everard," the Baron said.

Beon went and stood before him.

"You are unarmed. You've tossed your weapon away. You may land like a cat if thrown from your horse but much good it will do you if you have tossed away your weapon." With that, in one fluid

motion, the baron drew his sword, and, using the flat side of the blade, slapped Beon's feet from underneath him. He landed with a hard thud on his back in the mud. Heat rose within Beon, and he jumped to his feet to face Lord Gall, but as soon as he turned the Baron had the point of his blade to Beon's neck. Beon stood, frozen, panting. After a tense moment, the Baron dropped his blade and smiled coldly.

"You've got a hot one here, Sir Lyndon...it is yet to be determined if he is brave or stupid. He is certainly bull-headed and belligerent toward authority..."

"Go gently, my lord, he is still learning the ways—" Sir Lyndon began.

"Go gently indeed," Lord Gall interrupted as he swiped his long sword a second time, slapping Beon's feet from under him yet again.

"I would stay down this time, boy. You may have inherited the arrogance of your father but none of his talent or skill...*and* you still have no weapon."

Lord Gall was distracted at that moment by shouts from the castle. Servants were calling for the Baron to come at once. He left Beon and the other pages without a word. Wearing an expression of worry, Sir Lyndon followed Lord Gall.

Beon couldn't decide if he was more determined than ever to prove himself to the baron or if he hated the man. A shadow fell across him, and Beon looked up to see that all the other boys had gathered around him. Two of them reached down on either side of him and hoisted him up off the ground. They dusted off his tunic and cleared a path for him toward the stables. He nodded his thanks and walked toward the castle with head held high. As he approached, he heard a sound that sent chills down his spine. The servants had begun to wail, so much grief in the cry that Beon turned pale.

Chapter 3

WHAT BRINGS THE RAIN

Sophia watched, her vision blurry from emotions, as Mother was lowered into the ground behind the church, her body wrapped tightly in a white linen shroud. She found she'd felt utterly numb for the past day—unable to speak and unable to cry. Her prayers had been answered. Her baby brother had indeed survived. But how could she have been so remiss as to forget to pray for Mama's life? Sophia berated herself as the priest blessed her mother. The entire parish had made the long walk from the castle through the middle of the small village to St. Aidan's in complete silence. She had made this walk many times at her mother's side, holding her hand, through wind, rain, and sunshine. But never more. And it was all her fault.

Father had not spoken a word either, and his silence seemed more frightening than his typical rants. His expression told her that he was positively furious. Red-faced, a clenched jaw, and something Sophia suspected was murderous rage. Watching him closely, she wondered if he might burst at the seams. After Maerwynn had been covered over, the crowd began to disperse. Sophia kept her eyes fixed on Father, but she could hear the weeping continue as nobles and servants alike drifted away. Still, her father stood, like a stone. As the din of mourners died off, Sophia wasn't sure if anyone else remained for she refused to look behind her. She refused to look anywhere but at her father. She didn't know why, but she was looking for something. Waiting for something. A sign perhaps.

Slowly, her father's eyes traveled from the earthen mound up toward the heavens, his mouth twisted with disgust. With his eyes still lifted to the sky, he spat upon the ground in front of him. After a beat, he turned and walked away. Sophia found that she was breathing at a quick pace. What did this mean? Why was her father angry? Did he blame himself as well? Did he blame God? If her father was enraged enough to spit in God's eye, then he must have truly loved Mama. If he blamed God as much as Sophia blamed herself, then he must have had real feelings for her. A wave of emotion swept over her when a sense of intense fear seized her gut. What if Father were to find out that she was to blame for her mother's death, having only prayed for the baby's life all those days and nights?

Sophia began to cry, the tears creeping up on her, snatching her breath away. She was heaving before she knew it and was frightened by the way her body reacted to this new concern. Rushing to the mound, she threw herself onto Mother's grave, wailing. After a moment, she felt someone kneel

beside her and lay a comforting hand on her back. When the scent of lavender touched her nose, she immediately knew it was Nurse.

The woman stroked her head and hummed a low tune that calmed Sophia. Once her breathing had slowed to a more normal pace, Sophia lifted her head and laid it in Nurse's lap. When she did, she noticed that all of Father's pages had remained, along with Sir Lyndon. They stood at attention, as if on watch. Everyone else was gone. She thought it strange that they had stayed when it was apparent the rest of Father's troops were on their way back to the castle along with him.

Before she could think any further, Beon stepped from the ranks. He held something in his hands and carried it ceremoniously toward her. She sat up and wiped her face. Beon knelt before her and handed her something folded in a white linen kerchief. Furrowing her brow, she gently opened the folds. When she peeled back the last fold, a bird was revealed—a bird in flight, carved out of wood. It sat in her palm on the cloth as if against a white sky. The detail was beautiful, and just the sight of it made Sophia's heart feel warm.

The tears began to flow again as she peered up at Beon.

Speechless, Sophia just stared at him, her fingers sliding over the finely etched lines making up the wings and feathers.

As gallant as any knight, the boy rose from his knee and bowed to her. He turned and walked back toward the other pages. As he approached the line, the boys parted and let Beon continue past the church, then fell in behind, and followed him back down the hill toward the castle. Sir Lyndon bowed to her as well, before turning to leave with the others.

In awe, a shuddering breath escaped her as Sophia looked down at the bird in her hand, wishing she could fly away. But she had not the strength to do anything at all. She wasn't sure if she cared to do anything for the rest of her life.

As though the heavens began to mourn her mother as well, droplets of moisture began to fall from above and Nurse got to her feet. But Sophia was not ready to leave her mother. With one hand she clutched the little bird to her chest, and with the other, she reached forward and pressed it to the cold earth as it became mottled with raindrops.

It wasn't long, however, before Nurse bent down and pulled Sophia up gently, saying, "Come, my sweet child."

Perhaps in protest, the rain began to pour in earnest as they made their way through the gravestones and down the hill toward a future that seemed bleak and uncertain. Rising up before her, Bamborough Castle looked as though it was being consumed by mist and rain while the sandy waves crashed beyond.

Chapter 4

GET THEE TO A NUNNERY

Seven long years of intense training had passed since the dark and dreary day of the burial. Images of Sophia's tearstained face had haunted Beon ever since. And whenever he saw an angel within a tapestry or painting, he was again reminded of the heartbreak visible within Sophia's blue eyes. But as Beon knew well from experience, life was not fair. If he could find a way of keeping the destruction of death from ever touching Sophia again, he would do it without hesitation. Knowing it was simply a fanciful wish, he set the idea aside.

Beon would admit that he'd been too busy to think of the girl often, but today was different. He was literally on his way to see Sophia for the first time since her mother had died. Beon hoped during her time away from home that the innocent joy and curiosity might have returned to her eyes. Even though it was common to do so, Beon had not been pleased when Sophia was sent away to the convent on Lindisfarne Island. It just didn't seem fair to isolate her from everyone she knew so soon after her mother's passing.

The convent lay just off the coast about a day's ride north of Bamborough Castle. Lindisfarne had long been referred to as Holy Island due to its inhabitants of monastic monks and nuns who had created a bastion of faith in the secluded place. He'd been told that Sophia now lived with the nuns at the Lindisfarne Priory and the fact that it wasn't far away made him feel guilty for not seeing her until now. But aside from never being free of his duties long enough to make such a trek, it wasn't proper for a young man to even consider visiting a girl of marriageable age without very specific intentions.

Sophia had returned home for visits only a few times over the years, at Christmas mainly, but Beon had always returned to Brentworth to celebrate with his family. Whenever Father caught him staring distantly out the window, he would tease him by asking, "Do tell me, Beon, who have you left your thoughts with at Bamborough?" But he'd never been able to admit aloud that it was Sophia's angelic features filling his mind.

He'd only heard about her rare visits in passing. Sir Lyndon would give him an update now and again. For the most part, Beon's thoughts had to be occupied with his training and advancing his career as a knight. He longed to join his father on the field and make him proud.

However, the Baron still seemed extremely disinclined toward Beon. The man was impossible to impress. And the more unjust Lord Gall was in regards to his advancement, the more determined

Beon became. In Beon's mind, the Baron had intentionally delayed making him a squire, even though his fourteenth birthday had come and gone years ago, with the excuse that he had 'started late.' What did that matter if he was superior to the other pages in all areas of their training? He could best most of the squires as well, for that matter. Beon's fingers tightened around the reins at the thought, his teeth pressed together in frustration, the sound of his horse's hooves clacking against the stony path echoed in his ears.

Beon knew without a doubt that he had excelled in his studies and training. He was respected by both the younger pages and the older squires alike. Even those that were jealous of his abilities still showed him respect. In addition to building up his physical strength, Sir Lyndon had insisted that Beon increase his mental acumen by reading in his spare time. There were not many books to be found, but Beon read whatever he could get his hands on. Poetry, histories, ballads, even maps. He was learning about previous battles and strategies, and he was thirsty to prove himself once and for all. War was happening all around him, just beyond his reach. King Edward III was tireless in his conquests, whether on the front against France, or against the Scots. Not to mention the insurrections that would often occur on England's own soil. Beon was awaiting his chance to go to battle and trying his best not to let his impatience cause him to make an error.

Once again, however, instead of being given a chance to prove himself with tasks better suited to his skills, he had been sent to escort the baron's daughter home for the May Day feast and festivities. Despite being secretly curious about Sophia, Beon found he was annoyed by an errand that was yet another way of excluding him. The order had not come from Lord Gall's mouth, but Beon was sure the Baron had arranged it. Babysitting a child, charming though she may be, was a waste of Beon's precious time. Not that he minded the idea of being in Sophia's company.

Remembering her broken form beside her mother's fresh grave brought a return of the sympathy he'd felt. He'd thought it would be a knightly gesture to comfort her in some way, to honor her grief, as it were, so he had gifted her with one of his carvings. Having witnessed how the seagulls flocked around her at the beach, he'd known at once the bird was for her.

With his thoughts returning to the task at hand, Beon stared at the back of the knight he'd been assigned to travel with and frowned. Not only was this not a good time for his training to be interrupted, the knight he'd been partnered with was one of the cruelest people he'd ever met. The truth be told, Sir Bartley was even meaner than Lord Gall. For the most part, Beon was able to avoid the man because he served as one of Lord Gall's personal knights, but on this trip, Sir Bartley would be inescapable. And since Beon feared this man was watching for any missteps he might take so he could make things worse for him with Lord Gall, it was one more thing that could delay his advancement.

They made the day's ride north along the coast and planned to stay at the Barn at Beal just this side of the island on the mainland. They would take the short boat trip to the island before daylight so as to have Sophia back at Bamborough Castle before dark the next day. They'd brought along a small

pony for Sophia to ride back.

Staring out across the South Low, the small bay separating him from Holy Island, Beon watched as the setting sun cast a reddish glow on the Priory and surrounding stone structures. The Priory appeared well-worn and whitewashed from weather. Birds flew over top, the sunset catching on their wings.

Beon only allowed himself a moment of reverie before ducking into the inn after Sir Bartley. Noticing that the knight was already nursing a tankard of ale, Beon asked for his own room. He still needed to study, after all, and needed his privacy. Enjoying these rare moments alone, the master of his own charge, Beon savored the hearty stew and drank two tankards of ale while he read about courtly etiquette. He took one more tankard to bed with a candle as he continued to read contentedly, late into the night.



Told to expect her escort before dawn, Sophia was eager to leave and had made sure she was up and ready earlier than required, but she was disappointed when no one appeared to collect her. As the sun peaked its head up over the edge of the ocean, she was beginning to feel restless and annoyed. Her escort had never been late before.

Startled by a sudden ruckus behind her, she turned to see a page wearing the Gall colors of green and gold, tumbling over a stack of baskets by the courtyard entrance. Potatoes rolled in all directions as the page tried to quickly recover his dignity by chasing the tumbling tubers and gathering them back up into one of the baskets.

Sophia was too surprised even to laugh, so she just watched and waited.

As he set the basket down, having missed several potatoes, he shrugged his shoulders and dusted off his hands. When he came to full height, the rising sun cast him in a dewy glow. Intrigued by what she saw, Sophia's breath caught.

Taking in the fact that he was tall and sturdy, Sophia wondered why she'd first thought he was a page rather than a squire, at the very least. With an earnest brow and a handsome countenance, the squire carried himself with a familiar air of confidence, despite his tumble with the baskets and potatoes. His brown hair was thick and wavy as it rested on his shoulders. The young man looked like Beon, but she wasn't entirely certain if it really was him. If it was Beon, then he'd grown from a boy to man since last she saw him.

"Beon?" she asked.

Swinging around to face her, he swiped a hand over his sweaty brow and then started walking briskly toward her. As he neared, Sophia immediately knew that it was indeed Beon. "Forgive me, my lady," he said as he came to bow before her, "but would you be so kind as to direct me to Lady Gall."

“Beon...it is I...it is Sophia.” A grin captured her mouth. Did he truly not recognize her?

Beon raised his head and studied her features. He blinked a time or two and then his mouth fell slightly agape before he quickly bowed his head again. “I...I overslept, my lady. Forgive me.”

She couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her. She had never seen Beon like this before, and was marveling at how much taller he was now, so was she, of course—so, maybe she shouldn’t have been amazed by that. “Sir Beon, did you indulge in more ale than you should have last night?” she found herself asking with a laugh.

He rubbed his eyes as though trying to clear them and remained reluctant to meet her eyes. “I didn’t drink as much as Sir Bartley did, my lady.”

“Sir Bartley is with you?” she asked in dismay, as she was not fond of the man. The knight smiled even less than Father, which was never.

“And you must not call me ‘sir’ as I am not yet a knight.”

“Oh,” she said, unsure of what else to say, detecting the disappointment in his voice.

“And yes,” he went on, “I may have had one tankard too many. Forgive me for being late.”

Sophia just stood there, again unsure of what to say.

“You look...very well, my lady...all grown up,” he said, eyes remaining downcast.

“And you...I hardly recognized you.” *Why was he being so bashful?* she wondered. “You’re so tall,” she added softly, hoping the small compliment might help.

Beon looked up at her then, and they stared at each other for a moment. Perhaps too long, she thought, when he kicked a stray potato towards the baskets and rubbed a hand over his nape.

“Well, we’d better be on our way if we hope to make it to Bamborough by nightfall,” Beon finally said.

“Will Sir Bartley be joining us?” she asked out of curiosity.

At that, Beon simply shrugged his shoulders.

Sophia was surprised at how happy she was to see Beon. When she had first been sent away, she’d missed her brothers terribly...particularly Marcel, for she hadn’t a chance to know her baby brother Marcus yet. Over the past several years, however, she had enjoyed visiting less and less. Marcel was completely under her father’s charge and had no time for Sophia whatsoever. Marcus was still basically a babe, and while she did savor her time with the boy, who resembled Sophia’s mother greatly, he was always whisked away to play at arms with the older boys. Bamborough didn’t seem to hold any parts of her mother’s soul, save that in Sophia’s own heart.

She missed her mother most of all, but ever since she left the castle, Sophia felt her mother’s spirit had journeyed to Holy Island along with her and had remained close by ever since. This feeling gave Sophia strength and comfort. Much to Sophia’s surprise, life at the convent had been rather blissful. After living in such a tense and war-centric environment at Bamborough, she found comfort in the quiet solitude of the Priory. She basked in the solace of the island and the holy communion of the sisters and brothers who lived there. She went about her chores and her prayers with an open

heart and empty of ambitions, feeling her mother's spirit ever present. She would sit for hours and watch the birds and animals of the island, many of which had become so familiar with Sophia they'd eat right out of her hand.

She had taken charge of the chickens and other fowl within the monastery, as well as the flock of doves and homing pigeons. She was hoping to convince the Prior and Head Sister to allow her a falcon. They felt it was too akin to sport and fancy. However, Sophia was determined to convince them otherwise in time.

"How do you like living on the island?" Beon asked, as they finally got on the road south and could take a breath. Sophia could tell that Beon was berating himself for being tardy because he rowed across the South Low like a madman. Doing his best to make up for lost time, he had the horses saddled within minutes after arriving at the barn. When they'd finally started their journey, Beon was sweating from his efforts but showed no signs of fatigue.

"I love it, actually," Sophia replied.

Beon regarded her quickly. "Really? I never imagined you as a nun."

"No, no...only the rejected girls take the vow." Sophia laughed. "Although I don't suppose I'd mind...especially if it meant I could stay on the island forever. It's so peaceful."

"What do you mean by 'rejected?'" Beon asked.

"Well, I'm not the only lady there. Some of us have been rejected by our families—or rather, have relatives who wish to keep the girls' dowries for themselves—while others are just temporary boarders. For instance, Lady Eva is there for 'safe keeping' while her father is at war."

"Your father isn't at war."

"I know. But Mother is gone, and I guess Father..." Not knowing how to finish, Sophia found it was her turn to shrug her shoulders.

"I think it would grow tiresome living with nuns, yes?"

"Mm, not for me. There's always some chore to be done or some animal that needs feeding. And so many birds of all shapes and sizes, you wouldn't believe. I can lie and watch them circling above me...I can close my eyes and put myself in their place. Have you ever done that? Imagined yourself flying?"

"I imagine it's similar to riding a horse at full gallop, yes?"

"Well, perhaps, yes...or in a dream?"

Beon considered this while furrowing his brow. "No, I haven't."

"It's the most amazing feeling."

Beon shook his head as he smiled at her. "How old are you again? You may look grown up, but you certainly haven't lost your childish ways."

"I beg your pardon? I turned fifteen this past March. Are you calling me childish?" she asked.

"No...what I mean is...I just meant—"

"Ah, I see. Still sputtering like a child. And still my father's errand boy." As soon as she said it,

Sophia regretted her choice of words. She had been stung by Beon's words and couldn't control her impulsive counter attack. Beon raised himself up and looked down his nose at her. He was trying to look angry, but she'd seen the flicker of pain in his eyes. Without saying anything more, he huffed and kicked the sides of his horse, taking off into a gallop. After blinking in disbelief, Sophia had no choice but to follow. She grabbed the reins of her pony more tightly and took off after him.

It had been a while since she'd ridden a horse at full tilt but she found it came back to her naturally. She was her father's daughter after all. As they raced along the south road, the smell of the ocean filling her nose and the wind in her hair, she began to feel a huge grin spread across her face. Sophia felt as if she were flying, just like Beon had said. She felt exhilarated as she dashed down a slight dip in the road. When the path flattened once more, she closed her eyes, let go of the reins and stretched her arms out wide, like wings. It was the most amazing feeling she'd ever felt...true freedom. Tears of joy began to spread from the corners of her eyes and blow back toward her ears from the force of the wind. She laughed out loud.

She opened her eyes, but her smile dropped when she saw that Beon had stopped some distance ahead and was staring back at her with his mouth open. Sophia reached down and grabbed the reins again, bringing the pony to a canter and then a trot. When she reached the spot where Beon stood waiting, Sophia came to a stop.

"You were right! It's incredible—it truly feels like flying! Just like you said!" Sophia exclaimed.

"Are you mad? You could've been killed! I've never seen anything so reckless in my life!" Beon said.

"But you said...I assumed you'd done it before..."

"My training doesn't allow for silly games. Now, I was instructed to have you back by nightfall, and I intend to be a man of my word," he said, as he turned his horse south again.

"Without Sir Bartley, you mean?"

Beon shrugged his shoulders. "The horses just need to be walked for a bit. They need rest before we can run them again."

They rode in silence for a while, passing the odd traveler along the road. It was a lovely spring day, and she watched the sun slowly make its descent in the east as she and Beon ran their horses, and then walked them intermittently. Sophia noticed a lone peasant some distance ahead of them on a cart, a mule trudging along in front of it. They had only passed a couple of travelers heading south that day.

She considered Beon as he sat erect in his saddle, looking awfully serious. Still a bit pompous as well, and yet, she found she didn't mind. For whatever inexplicable reason, she had faith in his abilities as a knight even if he said he wasn't an official knight yet. She felt safe around him. Perhaps he invoked these feelings because he himself had such faith in his abilities. It didn't matter what he was doing, he approached the task with absolute faith that he was capable and would excel. She had never met someone so sure about their place in the world and so determined on a path to get there.

Sophia thought of his face as he'd stepped from the ranks of the other pages to pay his respects on

the day her mother was buried. She thought of the bird he had carved...or at least the bird she assumed he had carved. She actually didn't know for sure. The little token had come to be a source of great comfort for her, especially in the beginning. When she first arrived at the convent as a girl, Sophia would speak to the bird as if it were her mother. Often she would talk to it in her bed at night as she cried herself to sleep. As time passed and the sharp pain of loss began to subside, the bird came to symbolize that the spirit of her mother was always close by. Sophia cherished the bird, as she had cherished her dear mother.

Sophia sidled up alongside Beon and said, "I want to properly thank you for your gift."

Her voice had startled him, and she assumed it was because they hadn't spoken for several miles.

"Pardon?" he asked, looking at her.

"After my mother's death, you were the only man...well, man or boy...to offer me any comfort."

He turned his face back toward the road. "Well, it was only what any proper knight would do. Sir Lyndon agreed."

"It meant a great deal to me. I thank you, sincerely."

"You're welcome, my lady."

"I still carry it with me. Always, in fact."

He turned to look at her again. "What?" he asked.

"The bird."

Sophia reached into her skirts and produced the wooden creature. She held it out to him in the palm of her hand. He furrowed his brow as a smile of recognition broke out across his face, and he took the bird from her hand.

"My word, I'd forgotten it was a magpie."

"So you did carve it?"

"Yes, a little hobby of mine," he said, examining his work.

"Well, it meant a great deal to me...it means a great deal still."

"This one is extremely rudimentary," he said disapprovingly, handing it back to her. "I've improved much since then."

"I thank you all the same," she said.

Sophia thought she could detect a slight smile of satisfaction tugging at his lips. She smiled too as she looked to the west once again to watch the sun make its final dip past the hills. Exhaling, she took in the scenery as they moved along. She loved living at the Priory, but Sophia loved the countryside too. Refocusing on the yellow sunlight, she watched as it blazed through the silhouetted trees like a forest fire, and then extinguished itself.

As night began to surround them, she found herself asking, "How much farther?"

Again, her voice seemed to wake Beon from some deep or intense thought. He looked toward the

horizon where the sun used to be and cursed under his breath. “We’re still about a mile out,” he said. “Come, there’s a bit of light left. We’ll gallop the rest of the way.”

Even at the easy pace they’d been walking the horses, they had gained considerably on the peasant ahead of them. He was clearly visible in the dusky light. Just as they were getting close enough to pass by the unfortunate fellow, the mule that was pulling the peasant’s cart reared onto its hind legs and halted with an ear-splitting squeal. The poor beast looked positively spooked, and the peasant was shouting at the animal to no avail. The mule was fixated on the line of trees to their left and attempting to back up the road toward her and Beon. Sophia wondered what sort of wild animal could have it so frightened.

Suddenly, as quick as a gust of wind, something burst from the tree line in a single bound and collided with the peasant dead on. The beast, along with the peasant now in its clutches, flew to the right side of the road before rolling on the ground and ending in a pounce atop the poor wretch.

The man was shrieking at the top of his lungs, the sound causing a chill to slide up her spine. Sophia reached out to grasp onto Beon’s sleeve, whispering, “That poor man...can’t you help?”

“Shhh, it could hear you,” he answered, speaking so softly she barely heard him.

At Beon’s words, the creature froze and may have looked at them. Since it was really just a big black shape, she couldn’t say for sure, and Sophia thought it would be impossible for anything to have heard them with the man screaming like he was. She ached for the poor soul, but she knew now that Beon had been right in quieting her. Drawing the dark beast their way would be quite dangerous due to its size, and while most knights could have taken it on, it was obvious that Beon wasn’t yet as tall as any of the full-grown knights.

When the creature didn’t start moving their way, probably unwilling to give up its prey, Sophia searched her mind, trying to imagine what it could possibly be. But nothing its size was known to live in this area—that she knew of anyway. There had been a library at the Priory, but she’d always been drawn to books about birds. All she could think of was that it might be a wolf or wild dog. When the idea occurred to her that creatures such as those tended to travel in packs, she glanced around at the trees but saw no movement.

Now that the beast was stationary atop the flailing peasant and now that her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she could get a much better look at it. It was black and hunched over with its back to them so she couldn’t clearly recognize its shape. It appeared to be covered in long hair, but without being able to see its head or legs, she remained mystified as to what it could be.

The beast turned its head towards the peasant’s face, and then he went completely silent. In fact, he stopped struggling altogether and laid his arms outstretched, completely prone. What had happened to quiet him so quickly? It didn’t appear as though he was dead yet.

Finally realizing she was holding her breath, Sophia gasped, and the sound seemed loud in the sudden silence. The beast turned toward them at the noise, and she covered her mouth to silence her next gasp. Its eyes were a shimmering gray color, almost silver. Her heart pounded in her ears as she

feared it might come bounding their way. Something about the way it moved next made her think it wasn't an animal, though, and Sophia slowly clutched the crucifix around her neck.

Chapter 5

THE THING FROM HELL

The shadowed creature lunged into the trees along the east side of the road. Beon drew his sword. Mentally, he struggled to stop the shaking in his body, but he had never seen anything like this before. When the creature had looked at them with a pair of reflective eyes, he'd decided it must be an enormous dog. But when it had moved, he'd begun to think otherwise.

The...thing...seemed human. Like a man. A sort of man, anyway. Beon wasn't sure if it had been a trick of the light or not, but its face had appeared pale in the dimming light. And when it hissed at them before dashing off he would swear he'd seen unusual teeth—like the fangs of a predatory animal. A human with fangs just did not fit.

A terrifying and unnatural silence settled in around them, not even crickets filled the night with their chirping, and Beon tightened the grip he had on his sword.

The peasant still lay prone on the ground about forty meters ahead of where they had stopped. He wasn't moving. Had the creature killed him? Beon wanted to check on the man to see if he could help, but something told him it wasn't safe yet. And while he felt sorry for the peasant, his top priority was Sophia. He also wished he wasn't alone in his duties at the moment—even Sir Bartley would be welcome at this moment and he wondered with annoyance what had happened to the man.

Beon heard a rustling directly to his right, and before he could even turn his body, the dark figure came out of the shadows so fast he didn't have time to react. He was knocked from his horse so hard he worried some bones might have broken. Landing with a painful crash, his sword slipped from his grip, clattering to the ground. In a daze, Beon got to standing as fast as he could and grabbed his sword; glad at least that Sophia's pony had danced forward far enough she wasn't thrown to the ground.

When Sophia turned her pony around, probably to ask if he was all right, Beon held up his hand to keep her quiet.

"But—" she began, and he shot a stern look her way, hoping she would take his warning seriously.

Hating how his limbs wobbled, Beon listened intently as he blinked into the darkness that was now falling fast in the forest.

Again, there was that eerie silence.

Forced to step forward when he was suddenly shoved from behind, Beon whirled around. Already knowing the assailant could strike harder than that, Beon realized this thing was toying with him, mocking him by not using all of its strength with each blow.

Beon lifted his blade, but the attacker blew past him, wrenching his sword free of his hands again. This time the creature did not disappear into the wood but stood, perfectly still, several meters away.

There were no doubts in Beon's mind now, this thing was indeed a man, and although he had been moving so unbelievably fast, he wasn't even breathing hard. He may not have been breathing at all. Beon's head was pounding from the fall—and from utter disbelief. He had no idea what he was seeing. It was a devil...a demon...a spirit from the grave. He knew not. And he could not decide if he was awake or dreaming.

The creature-like person locked eyes with Beon as he slowly moved closer. And as the devil held his gaze, Beon found he no longer wished to escape it. To his horror, he felt a desire to be near the demon...he also felt his legs go limp...they truly could not hold his weight any longer...his thoughts became muddled...not making sense at all. The demon was so close now Beon could see the piercing quality of his eyes as if they floated out from under the inky black hood.

The next thing Beon knew, Sophia had stepped in front of him. She held something in her hand that she stretched out toward the monster. As soon as she did, the demon shrunk away a little. Beon felt a release as if his body had just been dropped by a giant hand loosening its grip. He could breathe again, and his head began to clear.

Able to focus on Sophia now, he could see that she held a crucifix. It was the crucifix she'd been wearing around her neck. She held it in her fist and jutted it toward the demon's face as if it were a weapon. The devil continued to shrink away until it turned and ran back toward the peasant, who now seemed to be stirring. Moving like a rapid river current, the creature scooped up the man as if he were a rag doll and disappeared into the forest.

When Beon's senses returned after a long moment of silence, he could hear Sophia's heavy breathing. Turning to look at her, he noticed that she was still frozen in the same position as when she'd defended him against the attacker—her arm outstretched and holding the cross.

Beon went to her gently and touched her shoulder. She startled as she looked at him with wide eyes.

"It's all right now...I think it's gone," he said. "Still, we should make haste to the castle—if we can find the horses." They had bolted during the attack. "How did you know?" he asked. When she looked at him blankly, he asked again, "How did you know to use the crucifix that way?"

Sophia was still clutching the cross in her fist like a sword and he realized she might be in shock even if she had singlehandedly saved them both.

After staring at him for a moment, she began, "There have been whisperings around the monastery...of monsters...alive and dead at the same time. Some have discovered ways of deterring them. I thought they were just stories..." Sophia stared off into the darkness and started to weep. "I

never should have left the nunnery.”

“Nonsense. You saved my life...with only...”

Beon dropped to one knee before her. “I pledge my allegiance to you. I am your servant, my lady.”

She blinked down at him. “I...what? Don’t be silly...Beon—”

He reached up and silenced her with one finger. Rising to face her, he asked, “Do you have any idea how long I have been training to become a knight?”

Before she could answer, he went on, “Long enough to have been able to protect us, I assure you, and yet you saved us both from a creature belched forth from the very depths of Hell with a pretty bobble.”



It was well over an hour before Beon was able to retrieve the horses and get on their way. At this point, Beon was dreading their return to Bamborough. He felt certain that Lord Gall would be pacing the floor—or worse yet, send out a search party at any moment. Either way, Beon would be drawn and quartered. Somehow he was sure it wouldn’t matter to Lord Gall that Sir Bartley had abandoned them. He could bid farewell to his hopes for a promotion—it would never come after this episode. What exactly had he seen, anyway? He was still in a daze from the extraordinary events he’d just witnessed.

He helped Sophia onto the pony, keenly aware of the fact that she had begun shaking. Laying his hand on hers, he said, “You’re all right. It’ll be all right. We’re quite close.”

“I—I don’t think I can.”

Beon considered Sophia and decided she looked rather frazzled. Afraid that she could still be in shock, he helped her back down off the horse and instead put her atop his own steed. He grabbed the reins of the pony and tied them to the saddle of his horse and mounted as well, planning to let it run alongside them. He sat with Sophia in front of him so he could hold onto her lest she faint. Wrapping his left arm around her waist, Beon gathered up the reins of his horse with his right hand. Sophia crossed her arms over top his as if she welcomed the warmth and protection. Something Beon could not identify brimmed to life inside his chest at her touch—a burning sensation that caught his breath and awakened his loins in a way that startled him.

As they took off in the night, Beon was suddenly very aware he had never been this close to a female other than his mother. Her hair blew in his face and smelled of the ocean and lavender. He found himself holding her tighter to his chest, and Sophia in turn, clamped her arms more tightly around his.

Beon was almost sorry when the torches of Bamborough came into view. He was feeling so many different emotions at once, it seemed the only thing that made sense in all the jumble was this stolen magical moment with Sophia. It even caused his fear of Lord Gall to melt away. *Come what may*, he

thought.

Before they got within a stone's throw, Beon brought the horse to a halt.

"Why are we stopping?" Sophia asked.

"I think...perhaps I should get off and walk you the rest of the way, my lady. For appearances."

She held tightly to his arm and laid her head back on his shoulder. "I feel so safe and warm though."

Beon's heart raced, and his mouth went dry. He suddenly felt awkward and stiff, and he had no idea what to do. He wanted to stay just as they were a little longer but the reality of the castle loomed large, as though it had eyes. The fantasy was over. Seeing no way around that encroaching reality Beon slid off the horse, and Sophia turned her face away from him bashfully. He found he couldn't look at her either.

Beon led the horses toward the gate and braced himself for the worst. Not only was he extremely tardy in completing the task given him, but he'd put the baron's daughter in mortal danger and quite possibly compromised her virtue. Beon wasn't certain about this last one, he just knew something had happened in his body that had never happened before. Best to put it out of his mind, he decided. He had no idea what Sophia was thinking and didn't dare ask. Perhaps she hadn't noticed anything.

The castle seemed quiet once as they walked toward the gates. The two sentries poked their heads out from atop the battlements and recognized him immediately. Their heads disappeared without a word, and the gate began to open. Beon and Sophia entered to find the courtyard vacant aside from a servant or two making their rounds. Beon felt a measure of relief but wasn't quite ready to count his chickens.

"You seem surprised that my father is not here to greet me. I am not surprised in the least."

Beon did not know how to respond to that, so he changed the subject. "Would you like to continue on to the stables with me?"

"I would," she said.

They walked in silence for several moments, both holding their breath. Finally, Beon could take no more and blurted, "What will you tell your father, my lady?"

She turned her head but still didn't meet his gaze. "About...tell him about what? Oh...you mean—about the creature?"

"Yes, my lady—"

"Please, Beon, call me Sophia."

"Sophia," he whispered, "I need to know—I want to do the honorable thing. As I said, I am your servant, indebted to you forever, but this is a very complicated and confusing revelation. It may be best we don't speak a word of this to anyone."

"Even Sir Lyndon?" Sophia asked.

There would be no way around Sir Lyndon, even if they'd escaped the wrath of Lord Gall by the grace of God, Beon would have to tell his mentor the truth.

“Perhaps after I return you to Holy Island...Sir Lyndon is the only one I would trust. We need to find out more about...whatever it is we saw. I’d like to get another glimpse, come better prepared, and possibly even capture the thing. If I could do that, then we wouldn’t run the risk of everyone thinking we’re mad.”

Sophia looked at Beon for the first time since arriving, gaping and frowning rather fiercely at him. “You want to return me to the convent?” she stammered.

“Well...well, yes, to make sure you arrive safely, yes.” When Sophia stared at him with doleful eyes—her frown deepening—Beon continued, “I don’t mean now...”

Sophia expelled a shuddering breath and then smiled faintly. “Of course, forgive me, I was afraid you meant right away.”

For some reason the comment made him laugh uncomfortably, and he was relieved when she joined him.

Clutching at his middle as the laugh subsided, he said, “No, no...we can’t have you missing the May Day Feast after all.”

“No...”

Another bout of silence surrounded them as their eyes held intently upon each other.

“Well, I suppose I shall bid you goodnight then,” she murmured quietly, as though she didn’t mean what she was saying.

“Oh, shall I walk you to the great hall?” he offered, secretly not wanting to leave her side just yet.

“Thank you, but no...I...thank you,” she answered, her words unsteady.

“As you wish, my lady,” he said, unable to think of a valid reason to remain in her company.

After a moment of awkward silence, Beon asked her something that had been gnawing at him the entire trip. “If you please, I would very much like to improve upon the carving I gave you all those years ago. I would return it to you in much better condition and give you—”

“Oh no, no, I wouldn’t dare part with it,” she interrupted. “I like it just the way it is.”

“In that case, I shall just have to come up with a new creation for you. A better one, I assure you.”

“Right, well...”

At that Beon knelt down and bowed his head.

“Goodnight, my lady,” he said.

When she shot a pout his way, he corrected with, “Sophia. Goodnight, Sophia.”

“Goodnight, Beon,” she replied, smiling faintly.

By the time Beon raised his head, there was nothing left of her in the darkness but a lingering scent of lavender and the sea. The waves crashed below the castle, the only sound to be heard aside from the chirp of crickets...and for reasons he couldn’t explain, he felt empty inside without her. Beon felt ill prepared to do anything about it, though. He wasn’t yet a knight, and that goal needed to be reached before he thought of...well, frivolous things like very pretty girls. Especially with the knowledge that hellish creatures were hunting people in the darkness. Knighthood was needed to fight

whatever evil he had stumbled upon that night.

So instead of exploring parts of himself he did not understand, and instead of trying to understand feelings more foreign to him than physical pain, Beon redirected his thoughts to more pressing matters. Like how to win over a man who was clearly bent on ensuring he failed in his quest to become a knight.

Chapter 6

HEARTBROKEN WITH TIME

Sophia was awash with emotions as she prepared herself for the May Day festivities that would last the next few days. Visitors would be arriving at various times throughout the feast as guests of her father and Bamborough Castle. However, she was still so confused by the events of the night prior that she didn't much feel like being a hostess. So much had happened that she was still struggling to process. That creature on the road. That ride with Beon. It was all so frightening and thrilling. Beon had been most gallant...and arrogant and brutish...yet so very sensitive and caring. To say she was 'confused' was too simple a word for what she was really feeling. She couldn't seem to narrow it all down to just one emotion let alone three or four.

Father had given her his customary cold greeting at repast of 'I see you made it home,' while it had been wonderful to see her two brothers again. Marcus was already training as a page, and Marcel was a young man now. Of course, she was happy to see that both of them appeared to be quite strong and healthy, so she did not fear an unexpected death to steal either of them away from her.

Marcus had immediately wanted to play hideaway with her, which she'd obliged, but found it only reminded her of Beon. Reaching into the little purse attached to her belt, her fingers curled around the bird he'd given her, her thumb sliding over the carved details. A part of her knew she might wear it down with the habit, but she couldn't seem to stop. Sophia took it out and looked down at it, wondering why he wasn't happy with it. She still thought it was very well crafted, so artistically done that it was hard to imagine any squire or knight coming up with something so lovely.

Breathing in the familiar air and heady memories of her Mother's solar, Sophia jumped up from the bed when Nurse entered. Her familiar smile, an expression that reached right into the woman's eyes and brightened her entire face, was such a welcome sight Sophia rushed into her arms and immediately started crying for no reason whatsoever.

"There, there, child... What is the matter?" Nurse asked, cradling her head to her shoulder gently.

"I don't know...I suppose..." She sighed before finally saying, "I still miss Mama, so terribly," she answered, but deep down Sophia knew that was only part of it.

"I know, love, we all do." Nurse guided her to sit before the fire and retrieved Mother's hairbrush as she'd done many times in the past and the sight of it caused a lump to develop in Sophia's throat that made it difficult to swallow.

Even though it had been years since her mother had passed away, Father had not allowed anything to change within Mother's chambers. Her gowns still hung in the wardrobe. Her brush, mirror, and jewelry still rested upon the vanity just as she had left it. Not only that—but the round, filigree pendant that was meant to hold a stone or a locket of hair—instead contained two tiny portraits of both her and Marcel that Mother had painted onto bits of parchment, rolled, and then tucked inside. Sophia had been extremely tempted to take it to the Priory with her as a memento of something Mother had created, but she feared what Father would do if he discovered it missing. And even though Mother's worldly possessions resided here at Bamborough, Sophia still felt as though her soul did not.

Sophia did her best to set these thoughts aside while Nurse brushed her hair. Tucking her folded hands into her lap, she stared into the flames within the hearth as they flickered and danced around the log. When Sophia tried to think of her future instead, images of the Priory and Beon overtook her memories of the past in a way that drew her eyebrows together in contemplation. The jumble of thoughts and emotions whirled inside her mind, threatening to burst. What exactly was she feeling for Beon? And why did his presence make her wish to stay here in the castle forever?

Later that evening, as she and many of the guests were still in the great hall conversing and listening to the musicians, Beon approached her and bowed.

“My lady,” he said softly.

Sophia still did not wish for him to call her that. However, as she considered the company, she could admit that it wouldn't have been proper for him to address her by name.

When she rose to face him, his eyes danced around the room warily as he whispered from the corner of his mouth, “I've not been able to find any mention of a demon like the one we saw in any of the books at my disposal. Does the Priory have a larger library?”

“Yes, the monks—”

Cutting her off, he said, “You must tell me all you know.”

“I was told that these demons—” she stopped speaking again when his wide eyes danced around the chamber once more.

“On second thought, I'm not sure if now is the best time for this conversation,” he said.

Sophia blinked, aware of the fact that no one stood close enough to overhear them. But when she noted Father's scowl directed her way, she promptly whispered, “Meet me in the chapel during my morning vespers.” Then she curtsied.

Beon followed her gaze to Lord Gall and bowed in turn, saying, “As you wish.”

Beon's posture told her he was disappointed by something. Sophia couldn't imagine why he would be disgruntled by her words and frowned after him as he disappeared into the corridor.

The next morning, Sophia rubbed at her eyes, not having slept well at all. Images of that murderous creature in the woods had caused a shadow of fear to enter her dreams, twisting the stories that played through her mind into confusing nightmares. When she realized she was safe at home, the

distressing feelings faded.

The idea of seeing Beon revived her, and she found herself taking extra time in front of the looking-glass as she prepared for their meeting. She felt silly and excited all at once, and this odd buoyancy baffled her. Even though it was completely unnecessary, Sophia took the hidden passageway to the chapel and smiled along the way, thinking of the happy memories it invoked. It was almost as though the stones of these passageways still echoed the carefree giggles she, Beon, and Marcel had emitted as they explored the dark passages. An echo that may have only resided in her mind, but she cherished the idea anyway.

Once she reached the chapel, she pushed against the panel, opening it partway to listen, making sure she and Beon would truly be alone. Moving to one of the pews when she heard no one, she waited...and waited and waited.

With a sigh, Sophia rose and began to wander the chamber. As the memories of coming here every day as a child filled her mind, she absently began singing to herself like she used to do. The old and forgotten rhymes came rushing back to her lips. Eventually, she rediscovered that magical spot in the room where the acoustics enveloped her like a warm, heavenly blanket. Sophia started spinning in place, letting her skirts billow out around her legs as she'd done when she was little—until she noticed that she wasn't alone and stopped, gasping in surprise. "How long have you been standing there?" she asked Beon. He had the strangest look on his face, and she searched his expression trying to understand it.

"I...did not know you could sing," he stammered.

"Of course I can sing and don't you know it's impolite to sneak up on someone like that? You might've frightened me to death."

Beon stepped closer, and she had to lift her chin to keep her eyes on his. "Have you been frightened? Since the woods, I mean."

"I'm all right with the sun up."

"But at night?"

"I awaken with night terrors," Sophia admitted. "But they fade once the sunlight chases away the darkness."

"I've hardly slept since we returned, but mainly because I'm devising a plan to trap the demon," he said, clasping her hands, his fingers warm to the touch. She also detected a warmth within his brown eyes she hadn't noticed the night before. As his hands warmed her own, she shivered, only then realizing how chilled she'd become waiting in the dim chapel. Dragging in a calming breath before he noticed her trembling, a stench assaulted her nose.

Taking her hands from his, she covered her nose and couldn't stop herself from saying, "You smell of manure."

"Forgive me, my lady, I failed to mention last evening that I would not be able to reconnoiter with you until my chores were complete."

“Father still has you mucking out that stalls?”

“I don’t mind, really. I love the horses...and they love me. Quite loyal, they are, and tremendously helpful to have such allies in the lists during our exercises. Your father has given me a great advantage in my training, although I doubt it was intentional.”

Sophia wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the loss of his warm touch.

“I’d offer you my robe, but...as you pointed out, it stinks...” Beon trailed off as if he’d had an idea. He next untied his robe and threw it over a nearby pew. Then came to Sophia and wrapped his arms around her from behind—just like he’d done on the horse the night before. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against him, instantly feeling better as the heat from his body enveloped hers.

“Will you please sing like that again, my lady? I don’t believe I’ve ever heard a more beautiful sound.” Feeling his breath dance over her hair, she blushed in his arms.

With her heart now pounding in her throat and her mouth going dry, she whispered, “I fear I’m shaking too much at the moment.”

Beon held her a little tighter. They stood like that in silence for a long beat. All the while, Sophia was afraid to move or speak, lest the magical moment be over. She suspected Beon felt the same when he remained just as silent and motionless.

“Do you really think you can capture it?” Sophia finally asked. And what would they do with it after they caught it?

“The demon? Well, yes. All devils have a weakness.”

“But what if it’s an angel? An angel of death.”

A gasp escaped her when he spun her around and gripped her shoulders, his earnest eyes boring into her. “My lady, how can you speak such blasphemy in a house of God? That thing was pure evil... delivered directly from the bowels of Hell, which is where I intend to return it. Now, tell me everything you know about it...you said it was alive *and* dead. What does that mean?”

Momentarily silent at his sudden intensity, she finally gathered her thoughts. “I don’t know. I’ve only heard whisperings of a creature that survives off the living blood of men. It has no beating heart, is cold to the touch, but somehow the blood gives it life.”

“And strength as well, obviously. It knocked me down like I was a stalk of wheat.”

“Yes, well, supposedly it only attacks at night. I don’t think anyone knows where it goes during the day.”

“Tell me more about its weaknesses...the devil clearly shrank from your crucifix, further evidence that it is evil by the by, so we should arm ourselves with a few more of those. Why not one for each hand?”

“Especially if they’re silver, like mine.” She pulled the chain out away from her neck, letting the cross sit within her palm for him to see it. Beon’s fingertips brushed against her skin as he lifted it from her hand. “Rumors speak of an aversion to silver...and of holy water. Oh, and garlic,” she

added.

After rubbing his thumb over the pendant, he released the necklace, and it dropped back to her chest. “Garlic? Really? Well, it is rather pungent. I have an aversion to garlic myself.”

“And light. I suppose because they are nocturnal they avoid light.”

“So we need silver crucifixes, some cloves of garlic, holy water, and a couple of strong torches. Anything else?”

“Well, the one priest I saw—the one who went off to free an afflicted village of the beast, had several sharp wooden stakes in his belt. I don’t want to think what he intended to use them for...but there you have it.”

“I would think he meant to impale the demon—”

The instant grotesque images filled her mind at his words she interrupted him. “I said I don’t want to think about it.”

“Right, yes, of course, my lady. Forgive me.”

“You really don’t need to refer to me in that way, we’re old friends.”

“It is a simple show of respect and admiration, my lady.”

“Admiration? I see... All right, Sir Beon, knight of Bamborough Castle, if you insist,” she said with half a smile.

Her smile fell away when he gave her no hint of a grin in return. In fact, he looked to be a mixture of annoyed and sad. “Have I said something wrong,” she asked.

“You seem to have forgotten that I am not yet a knight. With that in mind, you must know that I do not deserve that level of respect.”

Sophia wanted to argue that she did respect him a great deal, no matter what his title was. “No matter. A squire then?”

“Well, I shall start gathering our supplies in anticipation of your return to the Priory. Will I see you at the feast this evening?”

His answer was a poorly disguised attempt to change the subject. She grasped onto his sleeve. “You can’t still be a page, can you?”

“At the feast, my lady, will I see you there?” he asked, again blatantly hedging.

Realizing she might hurt his feelings if she continued pressing for an answer he was clearly unwilling to give, she said, “Of course you will. I mean, Father wouldn’t have it any other way. That is why he summoned me, I’m sure...to attract a suitor, now that I am of age.”

Sophia noticed Beon’s face turn pale at this, and she worried she’d said something wrong once again.

“It sounded to me like you wanted to stay on Holy Island,” he said.

“You wish for me to become a nun then?” she asked, bewildered. That hadn’t been the impression she’d gotten from him when she’d first spoken of her time with the nuns.

“No...I mean...well...” He sighed a bit sadly before finishing with, “I meant why would I be

escorting you back after the celebration if Lord Gall didn't mean for you to stay there a bit longer?"

"I don't know why Father does half of what he does, honestly. But, I..." A flood of uncertainty came rushing back. When she'd first been sent away, she'd heard that only 'unwanted' girls were sent to nunneries, unless the stay was a temporary arrangement for their safety. And quite frequently, these girls were kept in the dark as to why they were there. Since Father was not at war, what if she was one of the unwanted girls and just didn't yet know that she'd been discarded? Was she still being punished because Mother's death was her fault? Was there something wrong with her that Father recognized, while she was too witless to see it for herself?

When Father had summoned her back for the May Day celebration, she'd hoped he was now going to welcome her back home. How was she to recognize the truth? Knowing her father would not react well if she dared ask such a thing, Sophia was left to wonder.

As a sense of hopelessness filled her, she said weakly, "I didn't know he was sending me back so soon."

She may have wanted to go back if Beon hadn't been the one to bring her home again. With him here, nowhere else felt like home. Why were her thoughts such a tangle of conflicting emotions? Feeling the sting of tears, Sophia ducked her head and ran for the entrance to the secret passageway.



Beon couldn't let her rush away like that, and went after her. Knowing these passageways as well as she did, it didn't take him long to catch up with her. Taking her hand, he drew her around to face him. At the sight of tears rolling down her cheeks his stomach clenched. "I'm sure Lord Gall is just sending you back there for your safety."

"How can you know that?"

"You're his only daughter."

"And a burden..."

"Ask him not to send you back this time."

"Do you honestly think he'll listen?"

Beon's answer to that question would have been *no*, so he kept it to himself.

"My things and the girls who understand me best are still there..."

"You sound conflicted."

"I am," she admitted as she swept fingers over her cheeks, shoving away the moisture. Her focus dropped to the floor, and he wondered if there was more to this she wasn't telling him.

Catching her chin against his finger, he guided her eyes back to his. "If your father has you here to find a suitor, it means he still plans to pay your dowry rather than take it from you, meaning you won't be one of the 'rejected' girls. Let's see what happens after the festivities, shall we?"

A shuddering breath escaped her, and she nodded.



The sadness and uncertainty would not release Sophia as she absently performed her duties for the feast and for the bonfires that would follow. As she gathered yellow flowers from the nearby meadows, along with just about everyone else in the castle and surrounding village, she tried to guess at Father's plan for her, but he was impossible to read. Her father's mysterious motives were not new to Sophia, but it was far more distressing where her own future was concerned. As expected, he paid full attention to Marcel, a lesser amount of interest went to Marcus, and she was all but invisible.

Typical of this celebration, the day was consumed with decorating every window, path, and door with bouquets, garlands, and crosses, all crafted from any and all yellow flowers available. Not only that, but the small hawthorn tree in the courtyard had been draped with strands of vibrant flowers and ribbons tied to branches, which fluttered in the breeze, as well as brightly painted shells that were hung from strings, so they made a faint tinkling sound as they danced against each other. As long as she could remember the tree had served as the May Bush, but rather than bring a smile to her face, it reminded her of how much things had changed. She'd missed many a May Day, which had been one of her favorite events here at Bamborough Castle, Mother's too.

And when she remembered how lovely Mother had looked with so many sprigs of primrose and rowen flowers in her hair, Sophia's mood sank a little more. As a child, and always on May Day, Sophia had wondered if her mother wasn't simply a real fairy, but actually the queen of all fairies. How that fey queen had come to live at such a solemn castle and be her mother, Sophia had never been able to sort out, but she was certainly grateful she had. As time passed, Sophia had lost touch with the whimsical side of herself, and her heart ached over that loss as well.

As Sophia's memories of the past swam before her eyes until she might drown, a bouquet of fragrant primrose suddenly blocked her vision. Before she had a chance to turn, Beon whispered very close to her ear, "With bright yellow flowers strewn before every door, and a May Bush that puts those in other villages to shame, as they each vie for the most handsome in the land, how can anyone pout so fiercely?"

Somehow the sound of his voice had chased away the shadowy memories like a ray of sunlight breaking through storm clouds, and a smile captured her mouth so fast she couldn't help but tease him back. "I'm not pouting," she said, knowing it wasn't true.

"Will a fine show of Morris dancing banish the frown, my lady?" he asked, proving he knew she was fibbing.

This drew her gaze to his attire, and she turned to face him. Noting the fact that Beon was already wearing the bells around his knees, she asked, "I'm surprised I did not hear you coming."

Half of his mouth lifted in a smile, along with an eyebrow. "I've heard that if you pout too hard, then it can cause a temporary loss of hearing."

Sophia laughed, taking the flowers from his hand and lifting them to her nose. After drawing in the

fragrance, she blinked up at him. “You’re dancing?”

Beon nodded. “Along with the other lads, yes.”

“With sticks or white kerchiefs?” she asked, deciding she needed to see this. In their youth, he’d been too young as it was usually the men who performed the Morris dancing.

Before he could answer, however, Father’s angry voice cut into their conversation—and just that quickly, her mood plummeted. “Sophia! Stop neglecting your duties and make yourself ready! And see that Marcus is presentable as well.”

Marcus shuffled in her direction. “I don’t need her to look after me!” Marcus said.

Father’s fingers curled into fists when she did not respond, and she thought he might strike her if she didn’t do as he asked quickly. “Yes, Father!” she said, gathering Marcus by the hand and rushing toward the castle.

As the evening progressed, Sophia enjoyed the wonderful feast, the delightful Morris dancing, and the magical bonfires. As long as she kept her focus fixed upon Beon and not her father...that is.

Chapter 7

MAYPOLE DANCING, MYSTERIOUS MONSTERS, AND MISSING PERSONS

If Beon had been asked the night previous if there were many redeeming qualities about Bamborough Castle, he would have told them ‘no’ quite forcefully.

Having spent a great deal of his youth and training in this place, he could produce a thorough list of its many flaws. Beon would have a multitude of similar complaints about Lord Gall as Baron of this pile of moldy stones.

However, as Beon stood on the perimeter of the courtyard watching Gall’s daughter, Sophia, interact with the other guests, he would tell you that Bamborough Castle was the finest in the land and the only castle in which he wished to reside in all of England.

The typically dreary castle seemed much lighter with her and a crowd of smiling people in attendance to celebrate the arrival of summer. With minstrels playing, colorful banners hung, every archway and window draped with fresh flowers picked that morning while dew still clung to their petals, Beon found the scene before him vibrant and welcoming. The sights and sounds, as well as the floral fragrance, transported Beon to a world where fey reigned rather than war-crazed kings...a world where knights were not needed, and tears never filled the eyes of the innocent and weak. And yet, whenever Sophia looked in her father’s direction, that pout crept back to her lips no matter how many times Beon tried to banish it.

Dressed in a golden gown with so many forget-me-nots tucked into the plaits of her auburn hair, Sophia looked more like an Elven princess rather than the only daughter of a brooding baron. She stood beside the May Bush at the moment, pointing to the painted the shells and talking to another maiden about things Beon couldn’t hear from this distance.

Sophia truly had a way about her, Beon thought to himself. It was something that had drawn him to her when they’d been younger, but that quality held him in place now, almost as though he might have become one of the stones making up the structure of the castle. He found that he liked her even more than he’d first thought as he got to know her once again. He also felt an overwhelming desire to protect her, not only because she had saved his life and he was bound to her by duty, but because he cared for her.

As Beon thought about it for the first time, Sophia may be his only real friend. He knew all of his fellow fosters quite well, and even enjoyed their company from time to time, but Beon mainly kept to

himself, studying, doing his chores, cleaning the stalls, feeding the horses, and putting in extra practice with his swordplay, archery, and close combat after everyone else had retired.

True, he hadn't seen Sophia in years, but growing up as children together gave him the sense they really knew each other. Or perhaps it was something more...something deeper. Or perhaps he was kidding himself and just wished it to be true.

As Beon's attention was drawn back to the scene before him, it became apparent that he was not the only one who noticed Sophia had blossomed into a young lady during her absence. The squires and knights paid her special attention as well. Beon decided he was unconcerned by this because he knew that he and Sophia shared a secret and a bond that transcended the superficial attentions of strangers.

The attention of her father was another matter. The man didn't seem to notice her at all unless it was to demand something of her. Beon could see Lord Gall at a distance tearing a chicken leg apart at the long table while jabbering loudly with some of his closest knights about the latest hunt. Beon felt a twinge of disapproval. She deserved more. "You have good taste, young man."

Beon was startled to find a nobleman standing next to him. He was only slightly older than Beon and extremely refined. After taking in this man's fine apparel, it was obvious he was filthy rich. His easy smile and the smooth air about him made Beon dislike him instantly.

"Pardon me, my lord?" Beon asked.

"The yon lady you so clearly hold an affection for. Who is she?" the man asked, his eyes still casually fixed on Sophia.

"And who might you be, my lord?" Beon asked, not minding that it was rude to ask a question in answer to a question. This man might outrank him, but his arrogant tone was offensive. Beon knew this was how he got himself into trouble, and might well be the root of his difficulties with Lord Gall. Even so, he couldn't resist shoving back verbally. He was also willing to admit this man's query about Sophia had provoked him as well. The man raised a single, sophisticated brow and glanced at Beon out of the side of his eye. Did Beon feel penitent for overstepping his station so boldly? He would determine that when this conversation was over. But supposing it was wise to feign a level of meekness he wasn't really feeling, a tactic which had served him well in the past, he said "Forgive me, my lord," and bowed before the mysterious nobleman, "My name is Beon Everard, page to Sir Lyndon under the foster of Lord Gall, Baron of Bamborough, at your service."

"Aren't you a bit old for a page, Beon Everard?"

"I started late, my lord...my family needed me at home."

"A noble reason, indeed. Family is everything, is it not?"

"I agree, my lord."

"Your father wouldn't be Sir Everard of the King's guard, Lord of Brentworth, would he?"

"Why yes, you know my father?" he asked, suddenly a bit more interested in this exchange.

"I fought with him at Halidon Hill. He is a man among men."

Was the compliment genuine? Beon wasn't sure and wondered what it was about this stranger he found so unsettling. While the conversation was still rather civil, Beon detected a tension he couldn't seem to put a name to. Lithe with blond hair and steel blue eyes, there was something about the man that seemed majestic and feral all at once.

The nobleman reminded Beon of his theory that positive thinking lent itself to a confidence that inspired success, despite the fact that it frequently came off as egotistical. This man had self-assurance too, but it was different somehow. It was more like a deep, serene pool...completely still and utterly certain of itself, which was even more unnerving.

"She is a rare beauty indeed. What was her name again?"

"Lady Gall," Beon answered, unwilling to tell this man her real name. "And you are?" he repeated, not missing the fact this man had never given a proper introduction of himself.

"Good luck, Beon Everard." Evading Beon's query once more, the supercilious nobleman dipped his head toward Beon and sauntered off in the direction of Lord Gall.

"I...didn't get your name, my lord," he called after him, but the nobleman did not hear him...or ignored him. Beon stood there trying to sort out the underlying intentions of that odd conversation, but he just couldn't manage it.

He watched as Lord Gall greeted the man with feigned surprise and adulation. Beon could tell the baron must truly respect this mysterious guest, because his behavior was rare indeed.

"I see you've met Henry," Sir Lyndon said, startling Beon yet again.

"Henry?"

"Yes, Sir Henry de Percy, Lord of Alnwick. Strange man...strange family, but rather likable nonetheless."

Beon recalled that Alnwick Castle was about a day's ride southeast of Bamborough and considered the gateway to Northumberland. It is essentially the county seat, and the Percys were the 'Lords of the North,' for lack of a better way to put it. Beon had certainly heard rumors of their eccentric nature, but then, when a family is as wealthy as theirs, it often came with the territory.

"I haven't seen much of you since your journey to Holy Island. Have you been avoiding me?" Sir Lyndon asked with a knowing look in his eye.

"Yes, sir, forgive me. I overslept the morning I was to retrieve Sophia, which put us behind schedule. I'm still unsure of what happened to Sir Bartley. Anyway, due to those mishaps, we arrived back shortly after dark."

"I'm pleased to hear you only experienced 'mishaps' that night. Strange about Bartley going missing," Sir Lyndon said a bit grimly. "I was concerned for you because a villager visited Lord Gall yesterday worried that her husband had not returned home the night before. He had been traveling the south road, just as you were. So it would seem that two men have gone missing in one night. I don't see how they could be related, though."

Gulping at this news, Beon felt his heart start beating wildly within his chest. How could he, in

good conscience, not be forthcoming with Sir Lyndon about what he'd seen on the road considering the report he'd just heard?

With his thoughts so focused on Sophia, he'd scarcely considered the poor peasant who'd fallen victim to the demon. A woman had lost her husband. Was she now a widow with no way to feed her small children?

Additionally, he was afraid that if word got to Lord Gall about this, he would be punished in more ways than one, held back even longer in his quest to become a knight and at the very least, forbidden to escort Sophia back to Holy Island.

Deep down, he had also wanted the glory of capturing the demon himself. But a true knight was selfless, Beon reminded himself. A true knight did not hide in the shadows or keep secrets from his most respected friend and mentor. Yes, *friend*, Beon repeated to himself. Beon realized that as he'd been thinking of Sophia earlier, he'd somehow forgotten about Sir Lyndon. Despite the fact that Sir Lyndon was several years older than Beon and had seen many battles, there was a mutual respect that had grown between them over the years that was bordering on camaraderie. Beon knew in his heart that Sir Lyndon had his back and cared for him...much as a brother or uncle might. Beon felt the same way about him.

"I've been trying to sort out what I saw...forgive me for not coming to you sooner...I had selfishly wanted to capture the demon on my own, to prove once and for all to Lord Gall that I am worthy—"

Sir Lyndon interrupted his words by lifting one hand. His eyebrows drew together and then he said, "We'll come back to this foolishness about feeling unworthy once we've dealt with the more pressing matter. What is this talk of a demon?"

"I saw...something...a human-like creature...attack a peasant on the road—"

"The same peasant who went missing?"

Beon nodded. "I tried to stop the demon...I had withdrawn my sword, but it possessed an unnatural amount of strength, leaving me quite powerless against it. Had Sophia not frightened it off with her cross, I fear it would have killed us both."

"Thank the god's that you're both all right! What of the peasant? Could he have survived?"

"The thing carried him off into the night as though he were a slab of mutton."

"How could Sir Bartley have abandoned the two of you on such a journey? It's true that I don't particularly like him—he tends to be rather cruel—but he is a strong knight all the same."

"Could Sir Bartley have fallen prey to the creature as well?" Beon wondered aloud, but then another thought occurred to him. "Or what if—?"

"Blast it all! Are you suggesting Sir Bartley could be possessed by a devil and he was the demon you saw?"

"It might explain his disappearance."

After a long pause, in which time, Sir Lyndon seemed to ponder it, he said, "We can never know

the truth of that until we see this thing again. I have actually heard of such tales in the far reaches of Europe. Stories of flesh-eating demons, but that's all I thought they were, frightening tales to make naughty children behave."

"Sophia says that blood is their life source," Beon said.

"Yes, perhaps that was it...blood-sucking demons that would pick off young villagers like sheep if they lingered overlong within the woods when they were expected at home for supper. Other rumors say that it's the great pestilence that is sweeping across Eastern Europe, claiming hundreds of lives. Again, I'd thought the worrisome stories were just too fantastical to be real."

"Having seen it with my own eyes, I fear it could become a great pestilence."

"How does Sophia know so much about this creature?" Sir Lyndon asked.

"Certain monks from her priory have been called upon to rid villages of the epidemic. The devils appear to shrink from certain materials and objects, and from what I gleaned, can be killed with the proper use of a stake."

"Hmm. Well, it is obvious that I should be the one to return Sophia safely to Holy Island, although I had planned—"

"Please, Sir Lyndon, allow me to escort her," Beon interrupted a bit too enthusiastically. If he wasn't careful, he would reveal his fondness for her. "Sir, I must be allowed to complete my mission and see her safely home."

"Calm down, my young charge, if you had allowed me to finish..."

"Of course, forgive me, Sir Lyndon," Beon responded quickly, bowing his head.

"I had planned to join the escort either way. But with something like this lurking within the woods, we can't risk you being forced to do it alone again. Not only do I wish for both of you to be safe, but she is also a young lady now, quite clearly, and her virtue must be considered. She should really have a lady's maid about at all times."

Beon's face reddened again. "Sir, I would never—"

"I know, Beon," Sir Lyndon said, patting him on the shoulder. "Your honor is not in question. It's only a matter of appearances, as you know."

Catching onto movement out of the corner of his eye, Beon's attention was once again drawn to Henry de Percy. His insides froze when he saw Lord Gall introducing him to Sophia. Henry gave Sophia a dazzling smile and kissed her hand. Even from this distance, Beon could see Sophia blush. And suddenly, he felt he was in competition with this man who clearly possessed an advantage in that he had already won over her father, a feat Beon feared would forever evade him no matter what he did.

His hands fisted at his sides when he remembered what she'd said about Lord Gall bringing her home to meet suitors. Suitors to marry her. As the true gravity of the situation sank in, Beon felt a new level of panic that had him grasping desperately at his idea about 'positive thinking.' Could he possibly lose her to Henry de Percy?

Violent thoughts of ways he could destroy Henry filled his mind as Beon continued to watch how Sophia bashfully conversed with the nobleman, her lashes fluttering, her lips smiling.

“So? How was it seeing Sophia again?” Sir Lyndon asked with a glint in his eye as he made it known that he’d caught Beon fervently observing her every move. Beon kicked himself for being so obvious.



“I would be delighted to see you perform the Maypole dance with Sir Percy,” Father said, and Sophia found herself allowing the lord to hold her gaze as she mentally sought a proper response. She had known this was the purpose of her return home, but was she truly prepared for it? Not only was she feeling conflicted about returning to the Priory, but she was also still trying to understand what she was feeling for Beon. A part of her wanted to dance with Beon and no one else, but now she found she was also intrigued by Sir Percy.

As she stood there like a fool, not knowing what to say, Percy beamed at her with those steely blues of his, took her by the hand, and led her towards the Maypole in the center of the courtyard. Impulsively, she looked for Beon, but it was too late to dance with him even she wanted to. Father had made that decision for her.

“Why does my father refer to you as ‘Sir Percy’ when I know you to a nobleman and a lord?” Sophia finally asked as they took their dance positions.

“I prefer it that way, my lady. I am a knight, first and foremost, and a man of the people. I put very little stock in titles...a man is the sum of his actions, don’t you agree?”

Sophia nodded and smiled in agreement.

When she looked up, her eyes locked on Beon standing beside Sir Lyndon. Sophia wasn’t sure how to interpret the expression she saw written on his face. Was he encouraging her as a brother might do? Or was he dismayed to see her dancing with another man? Her gaze widened when Beon suddenly started coming her way, determination in his stride.

“Here is your ribbon, Lady Sophia,” Sir Percy said, drawing her attention.

“Thank you,” she said, not knowing what was about to happen next.

Sophia dropped her eyes to the blue ribbon in her hands, unable to face Sir Percy. What was Beon about to do? Did he mean to cut in? She was too unsettled even to look. When she lifted her eyes and noticed the other couples were preparing for the dance to begin, each person taking up one of the colored ribbons, she looked around for Beon and found him standing directly across from her with another young woman. She exhaled in relief that he wasn’t about to cause a scene that would anger Father.

The music began, and as they moved through the steps, weaving the ribbons around the pole, over and under each other as they went, Sophia discovered it was easier to look at Beon rather than her

dance partner because he was directly in front of her. With only ribbons obscuring her view of him, Beon held her gaze as they traveled around the Maypole. And even though Sir Percy was at her side, he was almost completely out of her line of sight, and therefore out of mind. She'd been wrong to assume that Beon was trying to avoid her. Instead, and rather brilliantly, he'd skillfully stolen her attention. Sophia didn't think Beon was as surprised by how well it had worked out for him as she was...if she was to judge the smirk on his face accurately.

Remembering it was proper to curtsy to her partner when the music eventually ended, and the plaited design was complete, Sophia turned to Sir Percy, presented a smile, and dipped into a curtsy as he bowed in turn.

If Beon's expression had confused her previously, Sir Percy's look had her utterly bewildered. One thing was certain, Sir Percy was definitely considering her for a bride. How did she feel about that? Would Father care if a union with Sir Percy wasn't something she wanted as well? If she knew her father, Sophia wouldn't likely have a say in the matter. She next wondered how Beon would respond if Father made a choice he didn't agree with.

Chapter 8

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS AWKWARD CHIVALRY?

The internal battle within Sophia continued, and while she was happy about getting back to the quiet routine of the Priory on Holy Island, she would have been just as happy about reliving May Day at Bamborough...as long as Beon was still there, that is.

For quite some time, the convent had felt like her true home—now and forever. However, forever seemed like it might be too long now.

She'd let go of her fears about Father discarding her when he'd been so eager for her to dance with Lord Percy. Obviously, he was working on making a match for her.

A beautiful spring day lay before the three travelers as they trotted along the road and an exhilarating wind blew up from the sea. Even so, having two escorts who had armed themselves to the hilt only made her more anxious to be off the road and safe on the island, where monks knew how to deal with that demon. Bamborough Castle seemed safe enough, but it appeared as though Father wasn't yet aware of this new danger. This thought made her consider the safety of her brothers as well. But with their young ages in mind, she'd reasoned that they wouldn't likely be too far from Father's side and would, therefore, be quite safe.

Sir Lyndon and Beon rattled along noisily with all the extra 'demon-repelling' accouterments they carried. The knights had brought along strings of garlic, several crucifixes, drams of holy water, axes, knives, spears, and stakes of both wood and iron. Sophia found it a tad reckless to go *seeking* a blood-sucking creature—why not avoid it completely?

As she watched Beon talking to Sir Lyndon, she decided to start referring to Beon as 'Knight' even though he was still just a page, because to her, he seemed more knightly than most of the men in her father's employ. Indeed, Sir Lyndon was an exception. She couldn't help but feel safe in the presence of such a giant of a man who was both fearsome and kind.

"You still haven't answered my question, Sophia—"

"That is because I am ignoring you, Sir Knight," Sophia remarked, interrupting Beon before he had the chance to tease her once more about the plethora of male attention she'd received over the course of the holiday. And when he winced at her new nickname for him, she giggled.

"I'm not yet a knight, as you well know, my lady."

Sophia shrugged her shoulders. Beon sent a frown her way. Sir Lyndon caught her glance and

offered up a wink, nonverbally encouraging her, and she giggled again.

“How many marriage proposals were you given, did you say? Was it ten or twelve?” Beon went on.

“I am ignoring you,” Sophia repeated.

“As am I,” Sir Lyndon added. “I can’t abide this blathering any longer. You’re embarrassing yourself and the lady, now cease your taunting of the poor girl or I shall have to trounce you for good measure.”

When Sophia laughed louder this time, she slapped a hand over her mouth and shot a wide-eyed look Beon’s way, wondering what he might do about being accused of teasing her when it was really the other way around.

His frown deepened, and Sophia decided he was just adorable when he frowned. “Forgive me, my lady. I meant no harm,” Beon said a bit sadly as his cheeks flushed.

She quickly regretted her words, not wishing to hurt his feelings. Because, if she were honest, she rather liked the attention she had been getting from Beon ever since the feast.

“No harm done, so there is nothing to forgive,” Sophia said, hoping to rid his face of the frown to ease her own guilt.

“Speak for yourself, my lady, for my ears are throbbing. Beon, you may be gifted in many areas but in the ways of wooing a woman you have much to learn.”

“I beg your pardon, Sir—” argued Beon, appearing horrified the conversation would take such a turn with her there to witness it.

Undaunted, Sir Lyndon went on, “I suppose it falls upon me to teach you that as well.”

Sophia found herself gaping at Sir Lyndon. Truly the man had no soul...well, that might have been an exaggeration, but it seemed Sir Lyndon would not let up on the poor lad. Sophia couldn’t quite decide if she still thought it was funny or not.

“Let us begin with a bit of civilized conversation that does not include badgering or belittling the poor lady, like so,” Sir Lyndon turned back to Sophia and addressed her with a nod of his head, “How did you enjoy the feast, my lady?”

Deciding to play along, she said, “I enjoyed it quite well, thank you. I do not recall the castle being as lively in many a year.”

Sir Lyndon turned to Beon and said, “You see? And then you follow up with an affirmation, coupled with a compliment, like so,” then turning back to Sophia he said, “I couldn’t agree more, my lady, and might I say you looked most becoming in your new gown.”

Sophia blushed and said, “Why thank you, sir, that is most kind of you to say...however, it wasn’t exactly new.”

“Well, then it must’ve been your inner beauty shining forth that made the dress anew, for I’ve never seen you look so radiant.”

Who was Sir Lyndon teasing now? Her or Beon? she wondered. Sophia knew she’d blushed a

deeper shade and looked down at the reins she was holding. “Thank you, kind sir.”

Sir Lyndon turned back to Beon and said, “And there you are. Perhaps that last bit was a tad poetic, but you get the idea... Ask her opinion on a subject, listen and agree, then give a genuine compliment. Now you try.”

“But it’s Sophia...she’s like a—well, like family.”

“No matter! Sophia is a lady now, and it is high time you learn how to speak to one. Now go on,” Sir Lyndon pressed.

“Yes, sir...ask her opinion on a subject...listen and agree...then give a genuine compliment,” Beon repeated before glancing up and briefly making eye contact with Sophia. She was still blushing and wasn’t sure if she was delighted by this game or beyond horrified. Did Beon view her as ‘family?’ He cleared his throat and continued, “What did you converse with Henry de Percy about, my lady?”

Finding she was a bit taken aback by this question, her eyes widened, but Sir Lyndon didn’t give her a chance to answer.

“No, no, no,” Sir Lyndon said, interrupting. “That’s far too specific to start out with, and it isn’t a subject you can agree or disagree on because you weren’t present to form an opinion.”

“I don’t mind, Sir Lyndon...I mean, I’ll answer the question,” Sophia said. Why she wanted Beon to know she couldn’t say.

“Very well, but for the sake of the exercise it doesn’t suit us at all,” Sir Lyndon said.

Sophia turned to Beon and said, “He asked me if I was enjoying the festivities and told me that I looked most becoming in my new gown.”

Sir Lyndon laughed. Beon seemed to be doing his best to ignore his mentor and buoyed himself up in his saddle. “Well, I...I couldn’t agree more with the man. You did look quite lovely.”

Feeling her cheeks go extremely warm, she ducked her head, letting her hair cover her face. Surely, her cheeks must be the same shade of red as an apple.

“Much improved! Perhaps you do have a talent for this after all!” Sir Lyndon exclaimed. “Or perhaps I’m just a wonderful tutor! Carry on, carry on!”

Emboldened, Beon continued, “What did you think of Lord Percy, my lady?”

“Now, now, again too invasive, too soon. Go gently!”

“I found him to be extremely charming...and different,” Sophia said, answering anyway.

“Yes, very different indeed...but you too are different, are you not, my lady? In the very best of ways, I mean,” said Beon, ignoring Sir Lyndon’s protests.

Sir Lyndon chuckled. “Masterful! Now follow with another question.”

“You didn’t find him to be a bit of a coxcomb, my lady?” Beon asked.

Sir Lyndon choked. “Not exactly suitable conversation for a—”

“No more so than you, Sir Knight,” Sophia said, again interrupting and giggling.

“Quite right, my lady, I can’t argue with you there. I am the biggest coxcomb of them all. And

justifiably so, for I would best everyone in that room, including Sir Henry de Percy, to win your favor.”

Beon’s gaze captured hers, and they stared at each other for a time as their horses continued to meander along the path. At that moment, Sophia felt she knew what Beon thought of her and he did not think of her as ‘family.’ At all. If Sophia were to hazard a guess, she would say his thoughts were more along the lines of *building* a family.

Sophia hardly paid any attention to Sir Lyndon when he shook his head and addressed Beon with a tsck, “That won’t do at all. You started out well enough with the deprecating comment about yourself, but you followed with a compliment that was cocky and self-centered.”

She watched as Beon visibly steeled himself to try again. Sophia knew what was going on and it was rather thrilling. Beon was communicating his honest feelings to her, right under Sir Lyndon’s nose. It was so bold, she found herself highly intrigued.

“My lady, do you think someone like Lord Percy could ever make you as happy as, say, someone you’ve known for most of your life?” Beon asked.

“Again, too forward for—”

Sophia interrupted Sir Lyndon to respond, “I do not, Sir Knight. I don’t think he’d stand a chance.” She held Beon’s gaze once again and for a moment everything else faded away.

Beon gave a nod and a slight grin as he said, “My lady is most wise. You have an acumen beyond your age.” Beon next performed a flourish of his hand and a bow of his head. It was a very knightly gesture.

Sophia had to look away as she blushed so fiercely she must be redder than an apple.

After taking a calming breath, she turned back.

Silence held them for a beat or two and then Beon said brightly, “I thank you for the pleasure of your company, my lady, and may I offer to fetch you some wine or sundry morsel?”

Sir Lyndon applauded and laughed. “Well done, Master Everard, well done! You will make me proud yet!” He turned to Sophia, “What say you, my lady? Do you think our young master is ready to be an effective suitor?”

“I do indeed,” she agreed softly.



The sun was beginning to set as Beon and Sir Lyndon rowed across the low to Holy Island. It was thrilling to know that Sophia’s feelings did, indeed, mirror his own. With that in mind, he questioned once again whether he should be returning her to the convent. However, no other plan made sense at this point. He needed to earn his knighthood before thinking about courting a lady such as Sophia.

The exhilarating conversation had also made him completely forget about pursuing the demon, and while he knew it wasn’t wise to set his plans to capture it aside, he found he was less motivated in

the task than he had been. He also knew it would be irresponsible to pretend it wasn't a real threat.

Beon could see no way around it. Sophia had to go back to the Priory. His heart sank at the idea, but it was the safest option.

As their boat neared the island, Beon looked over his shoulder and noticed a lady waiting at the dock who caught Sophia's eye and began to wave excitedly well before they reached the shore.

"Eva! Halloo!" Sophia called with a smile stretched across her face.

The orange light of the sun behind Sophia cast a glow around her hair and shoulders. Beon thought she was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Sophia Gall. Since he had retrieved her some days before on this very spot, she had become his everything. His life had been transformed, and he hardly recognized himself.

"Might I ask who you are attempting to capsize our vessel for?" Sir Lyndon asked as he strained to look behind him as he rowed.

Beon glanced over his shoulder a second time to see that this lady was still waving vigorously too.

Smiling broadly, Sophia said, "That is Lady Eva. We share a cell in the convent, and she is like a long lost older sister to me."

Sir Lyndon paused in their strokes to take a proper look. When the man did a double take, his jaw dropping a bit, Beon took in the fact that Sir Lyndon seemed transfixed by the lady on the shore.

Beon cleared his throat, and the knight snapped out of his trance. They finished rowing to shore and helped Sophia disembark. As soon as she was free of the boat, Eva embraced Sophia heartily and they laughed like little girls.

"Oh, I missed you, dear sister! It felt like ages passed without you here," Eva said.

"I missed you too! Oh, it's so good to see you...it's so good to be back!"

Beon's stomach clenched at that. Beginning to feel awkward, Beon stood with Sir Lyndon as they silently watched the reunion.

Lady Eva was only slightly older than he, but taller, which was saying something. She had striking black hair that was plaited to her waist and only accentuated her unusual height. Her eyes were a piercing blue, but not as piercing as Sophia's, to his way of thinking.

"May I introduce you to Beon Everard," Sophia said, finally remembering he was still standing there. "He has been fostered under my father for many years...we have grown up together." Bashfully, Sophia averted her eyes from his when she placed a hand on his shoulder by way of introduction.

Beon took Eva's hand and bowed.

"What a pleasure to meet you," said Eva, "Yes, I do remember you from stories Sophia has told of home...you are a formidable opponent at hide and seek, as I recall!" With this, she laughed a very high-pitched honking sound that was quite amusing in and of itself.

Beon had never heard such a ridiculous laugh and restrained a giggle.

"And this is Sir Lyndon, my father's most trusted knight and man-at-arms," Sophia said, smiling

toward Sir Lyndon.

He bowed abruptly and stammered, “A—a pleasure...my lady. At...at your service.”

When he arose from his bow, his face began to turn red as if he were holding his breath. Beon was feeling rather stunned at the moment. Had he really just heard Sir Lyndon stutter out his words like a silly young lad?

“The pleasure is all mine,” said Eva. “It is lovely to meet you, Sir Lydia.”

“Sir Lydia,” Sir Lyndon repeated.

“Yes, Lydia...an unusual surname, but quite—”

“Pardon me...the name is...Lydia. No, I mean to say...” Sir Lyndon continued to splutter, completely making a cake of himself, as Beon barely contained his laughter. Never in all of the years he’d known Sir Lyndon had he seen the man so utterly flustered.

“It’s Sir Lyndon,” Beon corrected, finally interjecting. “Not Sir Lydia.”

“Oh, forgive me!” Eva exclaimed accompanied by that high-pitched laugh. “Sir Lyndon! Yes, that suits you much more than Sir Lydia.”

While Beon and Sophia joined her in the laughter, Sir Lyndon continued to gape at them with the same dumbstruck look on his face.

Before things became too awkward, Beon leaned over and whispered, “Ask a question, agree, and compliment, remember?”

Sir Lyndon looked at him and blinked. Beon gave him a sardonic smile.

As an uncomfortable silence fell, Sir Lyndon cleared his throat and steadied himself. “Forgive me, Lady Eva, for today’s travel seems to have me out of sorts. But isn’t it grand weather we’re having?”

“Oh yes, simply divine weather. I’ve spent the better part of the day collecting shells along the shore.”

“The perfect occupation for a day like today. You must have a stunning collection.”

“I do! Every shape and color you can imagine.”

“I would be honored to see it someday.”

“It would be my pleasure, Sir Lyndon,” Eva said as she curtsied.

The two stared at each other for a moment longer before Beon once again spoke up, “Well, we must beg your leave, ladies. Duty calls.”

“Yes, yes,” Sir Lyndon agreed, “Duty calls.” Sir Lyndon took Eva’s hand and bowed to kiss it. “Farewell, for now, Lady Eva.”

As if by reflex, Beon reached out and grabbed Sophia’s hand. He bowed and kissed it, lingering to take in her scent.

Beon expelled a measured breath as he stood and watched the ladies retreat through the Priory gate, walking across the grounds hand in hand, giggling to one another, until they finally disappeared inside one of the main structures.

Looking to his side, Beon took in the fact that Sir Lyndon had done the same. How fascinating it was for him to see Sir Lyndon behave this way. Had he just witnessed love at first sight? If he had, he was quite happy for his mentor, as he was feeling just as star struck by Sophia.

This entire trip had brought to mind the things he'd learned when he'd studied up on courtly love, and he wanted to do something romantic and knightly for her. Beon suddenly pulled out his knife and said, "I just thought of something."

Sir Lyndon looked at him quizzically. "Should I be concerned?"

"Not at all," Beon said with a smile. "I just thought of something I could leave behind for Sophia."

"Is a bit of mayhem afoot?"

"No, just a bit of wooing."

"Even better," said Sir Lyndon.

Chapter 9

A LONGING HEART

“*I* missed you,” Sophia said as she and Eva walked along the shore, picking up shells now and again for their collections.

“Are you sure you missed me? With the magic of May Day celebrations all around you...and lords trying to woo you? I’m not sure I would have missed me.”

Sophia laughed. “Don’t be silly. It feels like home here.”

“I remember the last May Day I got to attend,” Eva said dreamily. “The Maybush was my favorite part. Or, well, maybe the Maypole was what I fancied most. Yellow flowers everywhere...that was wonderful too...” Eva’s words trailed off when she stopped, bent down, and picked up a shell. “This one would have been perfect on the Maybush if it were painted yellow, don’t you think? Did you get to paint shells for the Maybush?”

Lifting her hands for Eva to see, Sophia asked, “What do you think?”

“Oh dear, won’t the paint come off?” Eva asked when she saw how Sophia’s fingers were stained with azurite blue.

“I’m sure it will wear off.”

Pocketing the little shell, Eva resumed walking. “Enough about May Day, tell me about any handsome knights you happened to meet.”

“Seeing Beon again might have been the highlight. It has been so long since I’d seen him.”

“He is certainly a handsome young man. Isn’t he a knight?”

“Almost,” she said, knowing he would reach his goal eventually. If she knew anything at all about him, he was too determined not to. “And he’s so much taller than when I last saw him.”

“I’m sure he is.” Eva paused a moment, considering her. “He seems smitten with you.”

“Does he?” Sophia asked, feigning ignorance. For she knew must be ‘smitten’ after what he’d said on the journey north.

“Honestly, I wasn’t paying all that much attention to Beon. Tell me more about Sir Lyndon.”

Sophia smiled. “I’ve never seen him behave that way. It was as if you put him under a spell!”

Eva laughed loudly, and a gull squawked nearby. “I’d happily put him under my spell,” breathed Eva.

Sophia giggled and impulsively checked behind them to make sure there weren’t any nuns within

earshot. Eva would have to pay some kind of penance for a statement like that if they had. “My father definitely wanted me there to parade in front of potential suitors, when I wasn’t caring for Marcus, that is.”

“Marcus is the baby?”

Sophia nodded.

“I would imagine he’s taller too.”

“Indeed, tall enough to get into trouble.”

“He must be adorable by now.”

“Oh yes, adorably messy.”

“Any prospects from these ‘suitors’ your father presented you to?” asked Eva, returning the conversation to the topic of men.

Sophia shrugged her shoulders, still unsure of how she felt about the situation, but said, “There was one, yes.”

“If only I could be so lucky,” complained Eva with a sigh.

“What do you mean?” she asked, suddenly worried Eva’s family had decided to leave her at the convent.

Instead of answering her question, Eva asked, “Were there many lords to be met?”

“Lords?” she asked, knowing this excluded Beon but he was the one she really wanted to talk about.

Eva nodded.

“Well, there was one Father introduced me to...Henry de Percy, the Lord of Alnwick.”

“Oh my, I think I’ve heard of him. His family is extremely wealthy, are they not? What was he like?”

He wasn’t like Beon, she wanted to say. “Certainly handsome...and my father adores him,” was all she managed.



Sir Lyndon looked at the knife and then back at him. With a laugh, the knight asked, “Do you have a mind to stab a few monks before we start back?”

Beon laughed. “It’s nothing quite that exciting, I assure you.”

“Is it the nuns you mean attack?” Sir Lyndon asked, obviously joking.

“I won’t be but a moment or two,” Beon said, ignoring Sir Lyndon’s continued jesting as he rushed ahead, being as stealthy as possible.

“I think I need to see this,” said Sir Lyndon, sounding intrigued as he followed.

As dusk began to overtake the island and darkness loomed, Beon made his way to the courtyard, scanning the windows for any possible onlookers, and searched for just the right shrub for what he

had in mind.

“What on earth are we looking for?” Sir Lyndon asked quietly.

“A bird.”

“What?”

“Here we are, this one is perfect,” Beon said, putting his hands on his hips and taking in the boxwood hedge that was rather overgrown and wild looking. “Truly, it is a shame they do not have a proper gardener to tend to the shrubbery, don’t you agree?”

Sir Lyndon blinked at him and then asked, “I’m beginning to fear you may have lost your wits, boy? This is a bush, not a bird.”

Beon just laughed and began to slice at the branches and twigs. “Have you forgotten how much I like to carve wood?” he asked Sir Lyndon.

“Oh yes, you have quite a knack for it, as I recall.”

“Well, this is the same concept, only with a bush.”

Sir Lyndon stared at him blankly for a moment before his eyes widened with understanding. “Clever lad. I’ve got to hand it to you; you might know more about charming the ladies than I’d first thought. How can I help?”

Beon pointed to a section above him to the left. “Cut me a swath from here to there. Then I’ll come along behind you and shape it.”

The men worked like that for a half an hour, all the while listening for anyone who might happen along. As the light continued to diminish, a monk strode past the walkway and they both ducked behind the shrub next to the one they’d been carving.

“I hope he doesn’t look too closely at the unnatural shape of this plant,” remarked Sir Lyndon. “Else you might actually need to stab him.”

Knowing Sir Lyndon was jesting and afraid to respond for fear of being heard, Beon just held his breath as they waited.

When they heard the monk’s footsteps fade away and all was quiet again, they immediately got back to work.

Once he thought it was complete, Beon stood back and surveyed his work.

“It’s incredible,” Sir Lyndon said. “What are you going to do with the mess, though?”

Beon’s eyes dropped to the bits of greenery littering the ground around the shrub. Upon searching the garden, he noticed a pile of baskets beside a small shed. He grabbed up the biggest one, strode back to the bird sculpture, and began stuffing the branches and leaves inside.

“I suppose that will do,” said Sir Lyndon.

Hearing the disappointment in the man’s tone, Beon asked, “Do you have a better idea?”

“A bonfire, perhaps?”

Beon’s head lifted, thinking for a moment Sir Lyndon was serious but then laughed when he took in the amusement on the man’s face.

“I had you for a minute there, didn’t I?”

Choosing not to respond, Beon chuckled and shook his head. Sir Lyndon had such a dry sense of humor, which Beon found difficult at times to determine if he was being serious.

While looking up at the boxwood, Sir Lyndon tipped his head to the side. “I’ve never seen anything like it. I mean I’ve seen shorn hedges and round shaped bushes, but nothing like this. Where in the world did you come up with it?”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Beon said, “I don’t know, honestly.”

“I’d wager a pretty young lady with auburn hair inspired you.”

Beon couldn’t deny it.

“Well, next time we’re carving a sea shell for Lady Eva.”

“Next time?”

Instead of answering, Sir Lyndon clasped onto his shoulders and began guiding him out of the garden. “Whilst this has been fun, we’d best be going before another monk comes along.”

“Is that all you’re worried about?”

“Truth be told, I’d like to see if we can capture ourselves an evil blood-sucker and be back at the castle by dawn.”

Chapter 10

SHADOWED DEVIL

Once back on the south road, Beon and Sir Lyndon drove the horses hard, only slowing down a time or two for spots that were particularly dark or rocky. Otherwise, they trusted their steeds completely. After several hours, the moon was high above their heads. They had covered an impressive distance quickly and were almost to the spot where Beon had seen the peasant taken by the demon.

The sounds of crickets and other nocturnal creatures filled the night as they slowed to a trot. The forest had grown thick in this area, and light from the moon became patchy, making it even harder to see.

“There’s really no logical reason why the creature would return to the same spot in which he killed before,” Sir Lyndon said thoughtfully.

“No, but it’s all we have to go on. And it is logical that it would rely upon the road to provide a steady diet of passersby.”

“True.”

Just then a twig cracked to their right. Both men pulled on their reins, stopping the horses, and listened intently. They had strung the garlic around their necks, and each wielded a silver crucifix in one hand and sword in the other. Each had a pouch of holy water tucked into their belts as well as three spikes.

Beon felt extremely prepared, but there was still a great deal of uncertainty involved with this plan, which he didn’t like because uncertainty was something he could not control. Experience had taught him that when a scenario was difficult to control, then it was far more dangerous than a situation one could strategize for properly.

Suddenly, an eerie hush fell over the wood as the crickets stopped chirping, and an unnatural stillness put Beon on edge. The fear he had felt on the night Sophia saved him came rushing back to his throat. It was as if the air had been sucked out of the woods as well as his lungs. Then, after a moment, there was a whooshing sound and the forest breathed again. Crickets began to chirp, and owls began to hoot. Beon took a breath too, loosening his grip on the crucifix.

“Did you feel that?” Beon asked, afraid to make any noise for fear of the devil returning undetected if he did.

“Yes. It’s hard to explain it with words, though.”

They waited, and when the usual nightlife continued to make a ruckus, Beon said, “I don’t think it’s coming back.”

They nudged their horses into a slow trot again, but Beon couldn’t stop from keeping his ears pricked for any little shift of movement within the shadows. When several minutes had passed, Sir Lyndon broke the silence with a question that made Beon jump reflexively. “Aren’t you going to thank me for nudging you and Sophia along?”

“You...wait. What?”

“I don’t think things would have moved along quite so smoothly if I hadn’t given you a little shove in the right direction.”

“You mean...you did all that on purpose?”

“Of course,” Sir Lyndon said, giving Beon an approving smile. “I think you two will make a fine match someday.”

Beon’s face heated and he smiled.

“And, I don’t think our blood-sucker is going to show. We may have prepared too well and frightened the poor thing off,” Sir Lyndon went on.

““Poor thing?”” Beon found he was still too spooked to laugh. “Are you serious?”

“Irony, my boy, ‘tis an art.”

Beon honestly had no response for that, wondering how the knight could joke at a time like this, so he changed the subject. “Do you think it was here? When the forest was quiet, I mean.”

“Indeed...it was here. I could feel its eyes on us.”

A chill sliced up Beon’s spine at the image those words conjured within his mind.

Sir Lyndon sat in silence a moment longer as though considering this, before saying, “Come, we have about an hour until daybreak. We’ll be at the castle in no time if we nudge these horses into a gallop.”

Appearing as though it were a mountain rising from the sea, Bamborough Castle slowly became more visible as they drew closer. Once the front gates came into view, they discovered it abuzz with activity, which was rather unusual for the hour. Men were rushing into the gates from all directions, torches ablaze, trumpets sounding. It was obvious Gall was preparing for battle yet again.

As Beon and Sir Lyndon made their way into the courtyard, Lord Gall could be seen on the riser, alongside Henry de Percy, standing over dozens and dozens of men, all armed to the teeth and ready to fight.

“What you’ve heard is true,” Lord Gall was saying, “Sir Percy has confirmed that Hexham has fallen this night at the hands of the Scottish Army and their king, David. We call on all those able to fight to take up arms against this blackguard and his pathetic band of miscreants. It is up to us to squash this rabble once and for all!”

The men raised their weapons and cheered. Beon felt a buzz of excitement at Lord Gall’s words

‘all those able to fight.’ For this included him. Was he about to embark upon his first battle at last? Deep down, he’d wished for a distraction to take his mind off of Sophia, and this would certainly accomplish that task.

Hexham was a day or two due west of Bamborough. Beon wondered which direction the Scots were headed as he followed Sir Lyndon closer to the wooden riser.

Sir Percy stepped forward, and a hush came over the men as he and Sir Lyndon dismounted. “I am rallying all the Lords in the nearby country, that are not away in France with our King, to advance what troops they can muster to Neville’s Cross where we will head off the Scots advancement,” Percy said. “It is up to us, men, to protect what is ours. It is up to us to protect our country. If these Scotsmen think they can take this land simply because our King is abroad then they are sorely mistaken...if they think we are weak because our country’s fighting men are away doing battle in France then they are deadly mistaken...and they will pay with their lives!”

Again, the men erupted in cheers. As the din died down, Beon leaned over to Sir Lyndon and whispered, “Why does Lord Gall refer to him as ‘Sir Percy?’”

“Percy insists upon it. For he is also a highly accomplished knight.”

“Sir Percy has asked for the help of Bamborough, and we will answer the call!” Lord Gall shouted over the men. “Prepare for battle! We ride at dawn!”

With one last ‘hoorah’ the crowd dispersed in a bustle of activity as all began to make their preparations...all but Beon. He stood frozen for a moment before rushing to catch up with Sir Lyndon.

“Sir Lyndon, does Lord Gall mean me as well?”

The knight turned to Beon and smiled.

“Yes, Master Everard. Your first battle is now imminent.”



Sophia awakened to the sound of waves. Warm sunlight spilled in through the windowpane, heating her legs where it fell across the foot of her bed.

Stretching, she covered a yawn with her hand and then rolled to her side to get up. A part of her was eager to check in on all the birds and other animals in her care, but another part of her wanted to leave all of this behind and return to Bamborough, even if Father meant to use her as a nursemaid to little Marcus. But if she returned sooner rather than later, she might have to face a decision between Beon and Sir Percy. If Father even allowed her to have a choice, she reminded herself.

After a good night’s sleep, Sophia hoped she would settle into the same comfortable routine she’d had before Beon appeared to escort her home, but that didn’t seem to be happening. She still felt so very conflicted about what she wanted and where she wanted to be.

Reaching over, she picked up the wooden bird off her side table and stroked it. “Good morning, mama,” she said, before tucking it into her pocket so that she would have it with her all day...just as

she did every day.

Sophia rose and went to the bowl at her window, leaned over and splashed cool water on her face. After gathering up the linen to dry off, she peered out the window, blinked at what she saw in the courtyard, and then gasped. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, because she couldn't believe what she was seeing, she looked again.

Could it be? she asked herself. Reaching into her pocket, she retrieved the little bird Beon had given her and then turned back to the shrubs running along the garden path, a smile spreading across her face. One of the large hedges had indeed been carved into the shape of a giant bird...just like the one Beon had given her all those years ago. She lifted the wooden one up to compare, marveling at how accurately he'd managed to recreate it.

She just stood there, staring at it for a time, marveling at what a sweet thing Beon had done for her. It was such a beautiful sculpture. A lump of emotion developed in her throat because his thoughtfulness made her feel extremely homesick for him...and less conflicted about what she wanted.



Victorious shouts of 'the king has been captured' and 'Scotland is defeated' could be heard throughout the dark encampment as Beon returned with the other knights, squires, and pages.

Lord Gall burst out of his tent at the noise. The baron gawked like a fish when he saw the detachment of men comprised of several different houses in the region along with David the Second, King of Scotland, as their prisoner. When his eyes landed on Beon, he frowned as fiercely as ever. The proud smile Beon had been wearing immediately vanished.

As usual, Lord Gall seemed displeased by the very sight of Beon, but he prayed that would change once the Baron learned he'd helped capture the king. Beon was startled when Sir Lyndon came up behind him and said, "Are you going to help me out of my armor or not, Master Everard?"

"Of course, my lord!" he said, jumping into action.

Beon worked the laces loose that kept the backplate in place for Sir Lyndon.

"I'm immensely proud of you, Master Everard." Sir Lyndon chuckled and shook his head. "To think, all this time King David was hiding under a bridge. How did you spot him?"

"Sir Coupland dropped his shield while we crossed, I went to fetch it for him, and I noticed the king's reflection in the water." To Beon, this didn't seem like a noble victory. It wasn't as though he'd gone into battle and defeated the king singlehandedly with the skillful use of his sword. Beon had been excited to finally join his first real battle, but he found he kept wishing he was on his own warhorse with his own squire to aid him. How would he ever convince Lord Gall he was up to the task?

It's true Beon had been able to show his skill with a sword during the attack, but while Sir Lyndon acknowledged his efforts, Lord Gall hadn't been anywhere in sight. Apparently, the man had been

here at camp, in his tent, doing who knows what while the rest of them fought bravely on the field.

“You’re too hard on yourself,” Sir Lyndon said once he was free of the many plates of armor. The knight patted his shoulder and then left. “Rest well, Beon.”

Taking inventory of the damaged pieces of Sir Lyndon’s armor, Beon gathered them up and took them to the blacksmith for repair. As he passed by Lord Gall’s tent, hushed but angry voices drew his attention. Beon meant to continue on his way, knowing it was improper to listen in on conversations that were none of his business, but he couldn’t resist.

“It was your squire that spotted him. I thought you’d be happy it was one of your fosters that found him.”

“My squire?”

“I don’t recall his name.” The unidentified man snapped his fingers. “Everard’s boy. He is one of yours, is he not?”

Brilliant, thought Beon, this wasn’t going to help his advancement at all.

“Him? That pompous imbecile...and his name is ridiculously odd, like Beowulf or some nonsense I can never remember. He is the most entitled peasant I have ever met! I tolerate him to appease Sir Lyndon and keep the peace with Sir Everard...for the time being. And he’s a page, not a squire, we must be clear on that point,” Lord Gall said through gritted teeth.

Beon winced at that.

“He seemed older to me.”

“He is older, he’s just stupid.”

Beon rolled his eyes and turned to leave. This man was impossible to please!



That night, a messenger arrived with a missive from Bamborough addressed to Sophia. After having read the letter through twice, it slipped from Sophia’s fingertips, fluttering to the ground. She dragged in a shuddering breath. Slipping one hand into her pocket, she ran her fingertips over the little wooden magpie for comfort. Father had not been away at war, but he was now. The missive had been promptly sent to inform her that he meant for her to remain in ‘safe-keeping’ at the convent for the time being.

Knowing war could last for years, her heart sank even further because, as a page to Sir Lyndon, Beon could very well be at war too. How long would it be before she saw him again? Would he be safe? Would he still want her if she was an old maid by the time he returned? Perhaps she was foolish to think he ever had wanted her.

Sophia laughed without humor at her thoughts as she peered up at the bird Beon had carved into the shrub. It wasn’t just the way he had left that held her thoughts captive, but what he’d left behind.

Moonlight limned the edge of the plant in silver when the clouds shifted out of the way, letting the

light spill into the garden.

Even the scents filling her nose made her think of Beon Everard. Sophia hadn't noticed the connection until making a habit of coming out to the garden to look at his sculpture so often. He smelled fresh and earthy, as though he typically spent a lot of time outdoors, which was reasonable to assume considering his duties. It was all so frustrating, Sophia wanted nothing more than to slap him and kiss him all at once.

Somehow, by the way he had looked at her during the May Day celebration, and the way he had spoken to her, and held her upon the horse, and then left these art works behind, he'd spoiled the peace she used to feel while here at the convent. "It's not fair," she said to no one else but herself as the crickets chirped on.

When the crickets suddenly ceased their singing, Sophia tugged her cloak more tightly around herself. A silent hush fell over the garden that seemed to make the shadows grow darker. As the clouds shifted, snuffing out even more light, a chill crawled over every inch of her skin.

"What's not fair, Sophia?" asked a man, the voice of whom she didn't recognize.

Turning to the sound of the voice, she asked, "Who's there?"

"What's not fair?" he repeated.

The fact that he did not answer her question had her pulling the cloak even tighter and taking a step backward. "War," she decided to say as she continued to search the darkness for this person. He must be one of the monks, she reasoned, because he knew her name. She was out after her curfew, so perhaps he was about to chasten her.

"No, war is not fair," he agreed gently.

Sophia caught movement to her left, and she watched as this man stepped out from between the line of hedges along the path.

"Forgive me," she said, performing a quick curtsy. "I know I shouldn't be out this late...I just, well, I just needed some fresh air."

"If you were out here all night long, simply gazing up at the stars, I wouldn't mind at all." He was moving closer, and she could see that the hood of his cloak had been drawn up over his head, concealing his face even more than the shadows already were.

"I think I'm tired now, anyway," she said abruptly, deciding to rush past him to get inside. Why would he not care? Was he not one of the monks?

With fear sending its tentacles around her senses, she all but ran past him. When she did, Sophia smelled something more enticing than any fragrance that had ever filled her lungs, and she almost stopped. But when that little voice in her head that guided her soul told her she shouldn't, she kept going.

From that point on, she only visited the bird sculpture during the day, and she never did discover which monk it had been who'd spoken to her that night. This unsettling fact was yet another thing poking at her patience.

Chapter 11

BOUND WINGS

“*This* isn’t goodbye, Sophia. I shall return. I promise.”

Beon stopped as they walked along the shore of Holy Island. When Sophia hadn’t noticed he’d stopped and kept going, he chuckled, captured her by the hand, and drew her around to face him. She stumbled, trying to keep her balance at his sudden move, and stepped forward, bumping against his chest, her fingers clutching his shirt.

“Forgive me,” she said, trying to pull away.

Beon wouldn’t have it and wrapped his arms around her. Smiling down at her, he brushed a few strands of hair out of her face and tucked them behind her ear.

Since the last time he saw her, his fortune had completely turned. Despite Lord Gall’s predictable behavior toward him, Beon had been commended by his comrades and summoned, along with many of the other men who’d fought at Neville’s Cross, to join King Edward in France. He and Sir Lyndon would be sailing in two days. While he was eager to put more of his skills to the test and fight beside his father in France, he couldn’t have left without validating this connection he was feeling with Sophia. It was as though she pulled at some part of him no matter how far away he was.

“I don’t want you making promises you can’t keep, Beon Everard. You’ve wanted this your whole life, to go and fight alongside your father. I know he will be so very proud.”

Beon took her hands in his, hearing the slight tremor in her voice. Sweet of her to be so brave for him, but he could tell she was worried for his safety.

“Whilst I still wish to become a knight, none of those things are as important to me as they were before. And whilst pleasing my father remains a goal, becoming a knight so I can claim your hand has become more important.”

Sophia blushed and smiled, her chin dropping as though she meant to hide her reaction from him. Pulling her hands away, she turned and continued walking down the shore as if she were embarrassed, her fingers clutching at her skirts to keep the hemline from dragging on the sand.

Beon peered behind them and saw Sir Lyndon and Eva following at a distance. He knew they were along as ‘chaperones,’ but they appeared to be lost in their own intimate conversation. Eva’s high-pitched laugh could be heard periodically over the waves. Watching them, Beon couldn’t help but think what a lovely match they made. And the fact that they seemed more consumed with their

budding relationship than watching over him and Sophia suited him just fine.

“There’s no need to be shy, my lady. We can speak freely,” Beon continued as he caught up with her. The sun was setting to their right, and the ocean stretched out forever on their left. The last rays caught her auburn tresses and made them glow like embers.

“Is my father going?” she asked.

“No, Sir Percy has asked him to stay behind as Guardian of the North.”

“Since when does anyone tell my father what to do?”

“I’m not sure if your father wanted to go to war.”

“Why do you say that?”

“For someone who speaks tirelessly of the glories of battle, I don’t think Lord Gall lifted a finger to fight.”

Sophia looked at him with surprise, and he weighed the consequences of sharing more with her. “I regret to have to say this, but now that I’ve seen the mettle of the man in action, he has lost my esteem...”

He thought she was going to say something, but apparently deciding against it, she bit her lip and looked out over the water. Finally, she said, “I’m not sure I know what he means to do with me.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, fearing the answer.

“For a while, I feared he wanted to leave me here and forget about me, but as of late...oh, I don’t know.”

“Please explain more.”

“Well, as of late, he’s been sending letters explaining the suitors he’s considering.”

“Has he given you names of these men?” Beon forced himself to ask, his stomach clenching.

“No,” she said quietly.

“What do *you* want, Sophia?”

At the question, she turned to face him. “What I want doesn’t matter.”

“I don’t think that’s true at all.”

“In my experience, it is hubris to believe there is a single, solitary truth in this world. For all people have their own version of it.”

She walked on in silence as Beon contemplated her statement. Beon believed without any hesitation or doubt that there *were* absolute truths in life. He was surprised at her point of view. “Is that what they teach you here? That people have such bleak impressions of truth?”

Sophia shrugged her shoulders and shot him a look.

Beon tried to put the pieces of a puzzle together from what he read upon her face. She seemed pensive and glum as if she were giving up on her dreams, as though she were a bird in a cage. What could he say to give her hope? Would he be leading her into more heartache if he did? He couldn’t say for certain what was going to happen next. One thing was for sure, however, he would not let Lord Gall crush the beauty within her with his cold and traitorous heart.

He dropped to one knee before her, and her eyes widened when he took her hand into his “I vowed once to serve you. I vow again to give you everything you want in this life.”

Tears filled her eyes at his words, and he rose up to face her. “Again, you’re making promises you might not be able to keep.”

“Silly little bird, why do you doubt me?”

“It’s not you I doubt...”

“Then what is it?” he asked, brushing the moisture from her cheeks with the backs of his fingers.

“Speak to me, please.”

“I’m not sure if I know where home is.”

“I know where home is.”

Her blue eyes lifted to his. “You do?”

“It’s here...right here. It’s us. We are home when we’re together.”

She laughed, finally. “That’s not arrogant at all.”

Beon smirked at the sarcasm. “Do you remember when I used to chase you along the knags and dunes below the castle?” he asked.

“Of course I remember,” she answered, bashful again.

The memory of those times as children immediately brought a smile to his face. “Those are happy memories of home for me,” he said.

“For me as well.” Her cheeks had become a rosy shade of pink, and Beon knew he was making progress.

“I’ll wager I can still catch you.”

“Another arrogant statement.”

“Are you going to prove me wrong?” he asked, giving her a challenging smile.

Sophia just stared at him for a moment before giggling and taking off running.

Beon smiled too and took off after her. He knew he was probably still faster, simply because he was taller, but Sophia had the advantage of being barefoot. Beon could tell right away she had gained quite a lot of speed since the last time they played cat and mouse as children. The boots Beon was wearing hindered him considerably. When he was unable to gain on her, he thought about kicking them off but knew he would lose too much time doing that. He eventually caught up with her as she began to tire. Catching her about the waist, he lifted her feet from the ground and twirled her in the air before planting her back down onto the sand.

“I guess this means I failed to prove you wrong, doesn’t it?”

“You certainly made it difficult for me...you’re very fast!”

Sophia looked up and noticed a few gulls hovering over them. One of them squawked as though speaking to her. Childhood memories of seeing her surrounded by several feathered companions filled his mind.

“Oh, don’t worry Oliver, Beon is a friend. You remember Beon, don’t you?”

“Don’t tell me Oliver is still following you around in search of crumbs!”

“He is indeed,” Sophia said, smiling.

Beon looked up at the group of birds flitting above them. Another memory filled his mind, an image of Sophia riding a horse with her eyes closed and her arms outstretched. At the time, he’d thought she was mad and reckless, but he understood now that she simply wanted to be free like the birds she adored. He could only imagine how oppressive life with Lord Gall as a father must be. Beon didn’t have a horse nearby, but he wanted to give her that rush of freedom once again.

“I have an idea...do you trust me?” He asked her, as both of them continued to breathe heavily.

“I trust you, Sir Knight. You know I do,” Sophia said, imitating his intensity.

The sky was nearly dark now. Beon looked back at Sir Lyndon and Eva, almost obscured by the distance and the dim light. It looked as if their heads were touching as they walked.

“Close your eyes and take my hand,” Beon said, reaching out to her.

“It seems dark enough,” Sophia said, looking up at the moon. “Must I close my eyes?”

“I want to try something, please...it just entails a little trust, and a little more running.”

“Oh, all right then,” Sophia said, closing her eyes and taking his hand.

“Just keep your eyes closed and let me lead you. I promise I will keep you safe from harm and will not lead you astray.”

“What are you up to, Beon Everard?” Sophia asked, shaking her head.

Beon led her along the tide line where the sand was firm under their feet. He started walking at a brisker pace, his hand firmly gripping hers at arm’s length. After a moment or two, he picked up the pace to a gentle run.

“This is the strangest sensation I’ve ever had. It’s as though I’m blind but still able to move without a care...”

Beon began to run fast. Sophia started to giggle but kept her eyes closed tightly. Beon ran faster still.

Now the wind was in their hair, and the gulls called to her as they swooped. She laughed a throaty sound and held out her other arm...now both outstretched like wings, Beon still holding on to one by his fingertips. She was running full tilt now, with tears of joy streaming across her cheeks. Laughing as she used to as a child...giggles that were unrestrained and free. It was the most beautiful sight Beon had ever seen.

They slowed down and came to a stop. She grabbed his other hand as she swung toward him, opening her eyes dreamily. The moon shone back at him within those blue irises.

“That was amazing! It felt like I was flying! I felt so free!” she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Beon squeezed her close. “You might be too much of a free spirit to live in a convent.”

She squeezed back. “I do feel my wings are bound at times.”

Closing his eyes, Beon savored having her in his arms and the sense of belonging it gave him. He

wondered if she felt it too. “Do you get that sense here at the Priory or at Bamborough?”

“Both.”

“What about right now?”

She released him and looked into his eyes again, still smiling and crying at the same time. He reached up and wiped his thumb across her cheek.

“I feel at home with you,” she said.

Beon smiled at her words because it was exactly what he wanted to hear. He had often felt the urge to kiss her, but at this moment, the desire consumed him. The feeling drew his gaze to her mouth. When Beon raised his eyes back to hers, she gave him an expectant look. He thought she might be giving him permission to kiss her, but he wasn’t sure. Beon certainly didn’t want to be presumptuous or arrogant, proving her right.

He swallowed hard, his throat going dry. “Sophia?”

“Hmm?” she asked, leaning toward him, her eyes half closed as she peered at him through a fringe of lashes.

“May I kiss you?”

Her eyes widened. “You hadn’t already decided to?”

“Well, I had, but I wasn’t sure if you would be all right with it.”

“What gave you that impression?”

“I was right,” he laughed, “you’re too much of a free spirit to live in this place.”

“Do you think the nuns would be ashamed of me?”

“No, of course not,” he said promptly, fearing he’d made her question herself.

This conversation seemed to be going in the wrong direction, and Beon decided it might be best if he stopped speaking.

Dipping his head, he kissed her lips gently. A bolt of energy coursed through his body as the waves crashed behind them. When he pulled away, she pouted, prompting him to ask, “Not enough?”

“No,” she said.

Going in for another round of kissing, he stopped holding back what he was feeling inside. His mouth moving over hers as that energy gave way to heat. She clutched at his clothes and then his hair, and a reckless part of him wished he wasn’t wearing any clothing at all. He decided then that he would never let her go and he would never let anyone else steal her heart from him...and he would never let her be kept as a prisoner at this convent or at Bamborough Castle or anywhere.

The idea that he loved her crossed his mind—had loved her for years, really—but he didn’t dare share those words with her yet, especially as he was about to leave her once again. But he vowed to return and free her once and for all.



Sophia had hoped with all her might that Beon would kiss her and now that it was happening the whole world stood still. Her heart was beating as fast as a sparrow's...especially after the exhilarating 'blind run' Beon had led her through. She truly felt as though she were flying! It reminded her of the feeling she would get in the chapel when the sound surrounded her.

Beon Everard, the one who made her feel like she was where she belonged, the one who made her feel wanted, and the one she'd loved for as long as she could remember. Yes, she thought, she had loved him her whole life, perhaps longer. Having grown up with him, it seemed as though they had always been together. Even from the beginning, even when he'd been young and obnoxiously arrogant...as if it had already been written in the book of time.

His lips were soft and his scent commingled with the salty air. Sophia would cherish this moment forever, no matter what happened. She had learned not to expect very much out of life. The apathy of her father, the untimely death of her mother, the isolation of the convent, and now her one true love sailing off across the sea to fight a war on foreign soil. She would hold tight to this perfect memory and let it sustain her, whatever the outcome. Sophia braced herself for the very real possibility that she would never see Beon again.

When he finally pulled away and looked down at her, the tears were still flowing, but she was smiling.

"Will you write to me?" Sophia asked.

"As often as I can."

"I know better than to ask how long you'll be gone...it is beyond your control."

Beon nodded and then drew her close, his hand coming up to press her cheek to his chest. It was the kind of embrace that frightened her because it felt final somehow. Fear of the unknown had her stomach in knots.

"Come," he said, "There's time for one more thing before we ride south."

Beon released her and took her by the hand to begin walking back toward Sir Lyndon and Eva. She smiled when she noticed they too were walking hand in hand.

As they got closer, Beon called out, "Ho there! Are you up for another sculpture before we depart? Something to leave behind as a remembrance?"

"Sounds like a splendid idea," answered Sir Lyndon.

Sophia found herself wondering if she would survive losing Beon, especially with yet another sculpture to remind her. Forcing such horrible thoughts from her mind, she clutched onto his hand more tightly, biting her lip to keep from bursting into tears at the idea. But then again, the wooden bird and the first sculpture had been a source of great comfort for her while he'd been away. Oh, why was she so conflicted?

"You're going to make another?" Eva exclaimed and then laughed in her hysterical way. "It's been the talk of the island. We've even had some mainlanders cross the low simply to get a look!"

"And it nearly gave the Abbot a conniption," Sophia added. What would the Abbot do if there

was another?

“In that case, we’d best be extra stealthy. We don’t want to get our girls into trouble, now do we?” Sir Lyndon said.

“And why should we pay for your sins? We will deny we even know you,” Eva said, continuing to laugh.

“Perhaps we should choose a hedge on the perimeter, so as not to attract too much attention,” Beon offered.

“Ah, my young friend, we must let the shrubbery choose us, not the other way round! Artistic genius cannot be mollified!”

In spite of herself, Sophia laughed along with the others as they made their way back to the garden courtyard of the Priory grounds and the men began searching for ‘the perfect hedge.’

Sophia would admit that she found the antics between the men quite amusing. After some conspiratorial whispering between them, Sir Lyndon said, “‘Tis a fine-looking hedge, do you not agree?”

“Can you tell any difference from this one and the myriad of other wild looking hedges we’ve passed?” Sophia asked Eva.

“Um, well...if I am to be honest, the answer is no,” answered Eva, giggling.

“What are you going to sculpt this time?” Sophia asked, eager to see the creation even if she was a bit apprehensive about having it there on the grounds, haunting her.

“Let it be a surprise, my lady, for now, I think it best to bid you goodnight before you catch a chill.”

“Or worse, the Head Sister catches you out at night with two rogues,” Sir Lyndon teased. “He’s quite right, my lady, it’s best if we say our goodbyes, however difficult.”

With their final farewell upon her so suddenly, Sophia found herself rushing to embrace Beon where he stood.

“I look forward to seeing you again, my lady,” Beon said as he embraced her.

“And I you. Until then...know that you carry my heart across the sea along with you.”

Beon sketched an elegant bow and then kissed her hand. She felt Eva put an arm around her, drawing her away from a man she never wanted to let go.

As they walked slowly toward their quarters, looking back occasionally, Sophia noticed the men hadn’t wasted any time in executing their plan. Silhouetted by the moon-kissed ocean, the sound of waves rolling in the distance, they sliced away at the branches.

Chapter 12

CRUSHED HOPE

“Please, I need to see him! There may still be time!” Beon pleaded desperately.

The guards standing post outside the quarantined compound of tents housing all the afflicted soldiers refused to let him see Sir Lyndon. Drawing his blade and forcing his way in crossed Beon’s mind, but he knew these guards were simply doing their duty.

How had Sir Lyndon, the indefatigable knight who had been like a cherished uncle to Beon fallen ill? Like a nightmare, it was hard to believe it was real. Sir Lyndon was such a fierce giant, inside and out, but like so many, something small had felled him as swiftly as a fire could devour a village. Beon must be allowed to say goodbye; his guts twisted into a tangle that made him feel quite nauseous.

The war amongst countries and kings had become so overshadowed by the devastating losses from the pestilence that neither side, the French or the English, could continue the fight. The king gave orders that all were to return to England, the war was to be put on hold until this plague ran its course, or ‘wiped the French off the face of the earth for us.’

All in all, it had been a year of horror...and not only due to the massive loss of life. Ever since Beon and Sir Lyndon had surprised Sophia and Eva with a visit last summer, Beon had been stricken with homesickness for Sophia in a terrible way. The years previous had been rather glorious for Beon. He had truly become a seasoned warrior and trusted strategist for the King and his lieutenants. But the greatest glory of all had been fighting alongside his father. They had never been closer, and he could tell his father was very proud of his performance. Beon had become a man. It was completely forgotten, or at least overlooked, that he was still technically a page for he had paid his dues time and again on the battlefield. Almost all of his dreams had come true, until his luck made a dramatic turn for the worse.

Last fall, not long after he and Sir Lyndon had returned to France, his father caught the deadly pestilence that had claimed the lives of so many. Beon had watched his once mighty father wither and develop dark sores all over his body as his flesh died from the inside out. It was the most horrible thing Beon ever witnessed, and he had seen plenty of horror at war.

By the time his father passed, Beon knew he was beginning to lose his taste for fighting. For now, he just wanted to go home...home to Sophia. As more and more men died from the sweeping plague, it

became clear that the fighting could not continue. Beon and Sir Lyndon had rejoiced at the prospect of reuniting with Sophia and Eva for good.

But now, one of his truest friends in this world, Sir Lyndon, had succumbed as well. They were no longer allowing healthy soldiers to commingle with infected ones. Visiting was strictly forbidden for fear of further spreading. Beon did not care. He had to at least say goodbye to his mentor and comrade, and he tried to wrestle past the guards.

“I must be allowed to see Sir Lyndon!”

The three guards shoved him back. One spoke up and said, “If you go in, you don’t come out! The decision is yours, but think hard, laddie.”

Beon had thought hard. He’d thought of Sophia. He’d thought of his mother. Knowing he couldn’t risk becoming trapped with the sick for the sake of the women in his life, Beon backed down as he hatched a plan to see Sir Lyndon without hindering his freedom.

Shoving free of the guards and straightening his tunic, he stepped back, turned, and walked across the divide that separated the living from the dying and sank onto a makeshift bench at the fire between the two.

As varying scenarios flitted through his mind, he kept a close eye on the tent where Sir Lyndon lay.

After a couple of hours, when almost the entire encampment had gone to bed, Beon stood at alert for the changing of the guard. Once the replacements arrived, he would find the right moment to sneak around the perimeter and slip inside.

Much to Beon’s surprise, however, along with the new guards came Sir Percy as well. What was he doing here at this time of night? Sir Percy was never seen outside his tent in the evenings. It was the topic of much discussion amongst the fighting men. Some joked that he needed his beauty rest. Others thought he had some sort of night sickness or a weak constitution. The only time Sir Percy was ever seen after sunset was if a surprise attack from the French roused the encampment. Then and only then would he appear, and only in full armor, including a helmet with full visor, fighting with the ferocity of ten men, per usual.

Beon was in awe of the man and distrusted him all the same. As the years wore on, Sir Percy’s abilities became more unsettling. *How was it possible for a man to do what Sir Percy does?* Beon would ponder, knowing that he personally gave his all on the field and his abilities were quite superior to most. Somehow, Sir Percy, despite his lack of height and bulk, managed to accomplish physical tasks that would even challenge Sir Lyndon. Mystery surrounded the man. He seemed to float above them all without a care in the world, without fear of death. Something troubled Beon about the man but he had yet to put his finger on what it was exactly.

Sir Percy was wearing a black cloak and stared at his feet as he walked. When he approached the guards at the entrance, they parted for him without a word. Sir Percy disappeared inside the main tent. Instead of executing his plan, Beon waited. Had Sir Percy not been there, Beon wouldn’t have

hesitated, but something in his gut told him he'd be found out with that particular knight around.

Only embers remained of the fire when something startled Beon awake. Not knowing exactly how much time had passed, he watched as Sir Percy reemerged. This time, he had a companion, a large man, also cloaked in black, head completely concealed by a hood. Again, they both walked with heads down as if staring at their feet. As Sir Percy passed the guards with their torches, he stopped and raised his eyes slowly to meet with Beon's from all the way across the yard. Beon was so startled it caused his breath to catch. A bewildering sense of déjà vu made him think he'd seen that look before, those eyes, but he couldn't pinpoint where and when.

Sir Percy dropped his head and started walking straight toward Beon. He and his companion came to a stop to Beon's left, their faces still completely hidden.

"I'm afraid Sir Lyndon is no more. I'm sorry for your loss," Sir Percy said, his tone lacking emotion.

"What? How...so quickly? He only just became sick—"

"He decided he wanted his suffering to end," Sir Percy interjected.

Stunned and devastated by this horrible news, Beon struggled to find enough air for his lungs. "He gave up the fight? I can't believe that...I beg you, what do you mean by your comment?"

"You've seen firsthand what the infection can do to a mighty warrior, have you not?"

This question struck Beon in the gut, and for a brief moment, he hated Sir Percy for bringing up the painful memory of his father's suffering. The large man accompanying Sir Percy made to come toward Beon, but the Knight put out a hand and stopped him.

Sir Percy glided off into the night as he called over his shoulder, "I shall see you back in London, Master Everard. Safe travels until then."

Beon had reserved judgment about Sir Percy, feeling it would be unfair of him to measure his character without really knowing him, but after the callous way he'd addressed the loss of such a great warrior, Beon decided he was done reserving judgment and could now freely hate Sir Percy.



The Head Sister walked nervously into the chamber where Sophia and Eva were reading and said, "Sophia, your father is here. He has been meeting with Brother Thomas, but he bids you gather your things for a trip to London post haste."

"I'm to go to London now?" Sophia asked.

"Yes, and be quick about it, or you will draw his wrath. He seems in an awful hurry."

Sophia swallowed and caught onto Eva's wide-eyes as the Head Sister rushed away. If Father was already in enough of a mood to put the Head Sister in a dither, did she really want to go with him? Sophia saw no way of escaping it, though, and promptly set her book aside, rising to prepare for the journey.

“Could this mean a wedding or a funeral, do you think?” Sophia asked as she moved toward the door, remembering the many letters about suitors, as well as the war that had kept Beon from her these many months.

The color drained from Eva’s face, and Sophia regretted her choice of words. Of course, Eva worried about Sir Lyndon perishing in battle as much as she feared for Beon. Reaching out to her with trembling hands, Eva said, “Come, let us pray that it is a welcome home ceremony for our men at war and not—oh, I just can’t say it.”

Taking Eva’s hands into hers, they bowed their heads as Eva whispered a short prayer. The very second Eva whispered, “Amen,” Sophia left in a hurry.

When she arrived in the cloister with her small trunk in tow, her father only acknowledged her with an impatient sideways glance. He continued to speak with Brother Thomas in hushed but emphatic tones.

Brother Thomas nodded somberly to words she couldn’t hear, and panic began to rise within her.

Since Brother Thomas was the Priory expert on demon extraction as well as revealing the identity of witches and blood sucking creatures like the one she and Beon had encountered on the south road, this intensified her concerns. Could Beon and Sir Lyndon have fallen prey to that thing rather than the perils of war? With their plans to capture the beast returning to her memory, the dread within her rose.

After a moment that felt more like a month had passed, the men shook hands, and her father strode toward her.

“Come,” he said as he passed her on his way out.

Scrambling to drag her trunk along with her, she obediently followed.

The mood remained very somber among the party that traveled south to London. When it appeared to Sophia that Father had very few men left in his charge, a fraction of what normally would have accompanied him on such a journey, the worry within her intensified.

Sophia studied him, doing her best to read a man she’d never truly been able to read anyway. Not only was his detail of guards fewer in number, but Father seemed a mere shadow of his former self. He was distracted and harried and he wasn’t raging about whatever it was that had displeased him. Sophia clutched the small wooden bird in her pocket as they rode side by side, desperate for any comfort to her anxious thoughts.

The only small comfort she found in the journey was seeing her youngest brother again, Marcus, who had grown into a fine young man, resembling their mother to the point it was like being in her presence again.

Nudging her horse ahead slightly, she caught up with Marcus and asked, “What news do you have for me, Brother?”

“It’s all very sudden, according to Father. The war with France was simply called off due to the pestilence sweeping Europe. So many died there was no one left to fight. They say the plague has reached England, but Father says that it is only hearsay and not to bother with such rubbish.”

“What sort of pestilence are you talking about?” she asked, praying it wasn’t the same evil pestilence Brother Thomas and the others whispered about at the monastery.

“Some are calling it the Black Death.”

She’d heard the monks and nuns whisper of that too, but she still could not breathe freely because she did not know if the men she cared about had escaped either threat with their lives.

“Have you heard word of Marcel, Sir Beon, or Sir Lyndon?”

Marcus laughed coldly, the sound making her think of Father far more than she’d expected, and his response was just as heartless. “How should I know? None of them bother to write me. And don’t be an imbecile, Beon is still a page, therefore you mustn’t refer to him as a knight.”

At such unkind words, she couldn’t find anything else to say, and so they rode in silence for a while, so much sadness for her brother filling her heart, Sophia thought she might cry. Clearly, the absence of their mother had cost her brother dearly. Marcus was already becoming as cruel as her father.

When the silence grew to be too much, Sophia raised her chin and asked, “Why must we go to London if the war is not won?”

“The king has requested all the lords and ladies of the land attend a memorial for the fallen upon his return. It is a funeral procession as much as it is a welcome home apparently.”

Sophia felt a momentary sense of relief that one of her questions had been answered. Father had not married her off as of yet, which meant that Beon could ask for her hand now that the war was over and they could finally be together. Any relief promptly dissipated as the fear of death continued to loom, however. What if Beon was one of the many men taken by the horrible infection or the evil demon?

“Why does Father have fewer men with him than usual?” she asked, hoping the answer might explain the absence of Beon or Sir Lyndon.

Marcus shrugged his shoulders, again proving his nature had been poisoned under their father’s guidance. “Father said they were weak and fell victim to this pestilence as well.”



London was hazy in the distance as they came upon it late on a muggy afternoon. Sophia’s mouth dropped open because she had never seen anything like it. They were still a few miles away but the enormous village sprawled like an angry beast across the entire countryside. A stifling cloud hovered over it as if a storm were brewing. London was so large and looming, bustling with activity, Sophia feared to go any closer.

“Why do you stop, Sister?” Marcus asked.

“I...I don’t want to...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you...and so will Father.”

She took no comfort in her brother's words. Reluctantly, she let her pony proceed. Her brother smiled pitilessly and shook his head.

"I forget that you've never been outside of Northumberland, poor thing. This must all seem rather amazing, yes?"

More sadness pricked at her heart over the loss of innocence her brother had suffered at the hand of her father.

"Yes," Sophia echoed even though 'amazing' wasn't a word she would have chosen to explain the feelings churning inside her.

"Just stay close."

What choice did she have? she mused dejectedly.

As they rode into the labyrinth called London, Sophia gaped in a mixture of awe and horror having never seen so many people crammed into one place. She never knew there were this many souls in the world.

Movement drew her eyes up to the rooftops where people were dumping buckets of filth out of windows. The stench was so bad she almost turned out the contents of her stomach on several occasions. With so many peasants living in squalor, she wondered why Father would even risk taking them into such a place.

As the riding party got closer to the castle, the villagers gradually appeared tidier and well dressed, the houses and shops, much cleaner, and the structures taller. It was all quite a spectacle. Sophia found she couldn't stop staring at everything around her with wide eyes. Even though the living conditions had improved, she still could not get used to the grotesque odor of the place.

When Sophia was finally shown to her quarters within the castle, she was completely exhausted and fell into bed, sleep overtaking her faster than usual.



She arose the next day to a room full of sunlight and heralding trumpets. Going to the window, she peered out, curious to see this city during daylight. Large crowds of people were already lining the streets below and crammed up to the castle gate. With her gaze following the road out into the distance, she noticed the king's procession approaching.

Alongside the king's coach, several of his men walked and some rode horses. Most striking about the whole affair—but in a somber sort of way—was that every man and every horse wore black. No one cheered as the procession approached the gates, reminding her of the dark event this day signified. Even the sky seemed to be mourning the loss of so many souls, and Sophia's sense of grief made her throat constrict.

Just as she was about to get dressed, a knock sounded at her door. Upon opening it, Sophia blinked when a woman rushed inside saying a bit curtly, "My name is Constance, and I am your lady's

maid. We must make you presentable.”

The woman then went right for her trunk and swung it open. With a look of pure disgust upon her face, she lifted Sophia’s black gown, quite wrinkled from travel, and said, “This will never do.”

Without giving Sophia a chance even to respond, Constance took the dress and left. Deciding to stay in her nightshift, Sophia assumed the woman had gone to find something else in the proper size, and so she sat down on the edge of the mattress to wait.

Returning with another black dress of a better quality, Constance proceeded to clothe Sophia in the many layers proper ladies wore at court when not living in a convent. Constance was a very quiet person, Sophia mused to herself as the woman plaited her hair. Once finished, the somber lady’s maid led her through the corridors, which were oddly deserted. After making several twists and turns Sophia began to smell food cooking, which made her stomach rumble.

Eventually, they came to a great hall with black banners draped on the walls and long tables stretching the length of the space for hundreds of guests. Servants were bustling about with trays of food and drink. Sophia’s mouth watered at the sights and smells surrounding her.

Before she was able to start searching for Father and Marcus, a man said, “Lady Gall, what an unexpected surprise.”

Turning, Sophia found Henry de Percy grinning at her.

She promptly dipped into a curtsy and offered up a forced greeting, as she wasn’t exactly happy to see him. “Lord Percy. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Please, my lady, do call me Henry. I hope I didn’t frighten you.”

“No...I was just...well, it was just unexpected is all. Weren’t you fighting with the King in France?”

“I traveled ahead of the procession.”

Sophia forced a polite smile even though his comment didn’t make much sense to her. How was it possible to travel from France faster than the others? An awkward silence stretched out between them, and to banish it, she said, “I’ve never seen so many people in my life.”

“I am in agreement, my lady, I long to return to the quiet of Northumberland.”

“I doubt Alnwick is as quiet as Holy Island.”

“Ah yes, and how are the Brothers and Sisters of Lindisfarne these days? Still penitent, I presume? They’re not rubbing off on you are they, my dear lady, for it would be a shame to tame that wild streak I can see within you,” Sir Percy said with a wink.

“Wild streak, my lord?” That didn’t sound very ladylike, and his phrasing made her feel uncomfortable.

“Yes, you appeal to the very nature of beasts, do you not? Creatures of all kinds are drawn to you, naturally, or as I’ve heard.”

“Beasts of nature? You’ve heard this, my lord...from whom, may I ask?” Sophia asked, thinking that comment was even stranger than the last. Words like ‘beast’ made her think of monsters, and she

was honestly struggling to keep the smile on her face from faltering.

“I have a wild streak as well, my lady,” he said instead of explaining who was telling him such things.

Sophia suddenly felt smothered and longed, almost frantically, for some fresh air.

Just as she was seeking an escape, doors at the far end of the hall burst open, and the other knights started to flood into the chamber.

“Shall we?” Sir Percy said, indicating the tables.

“Forgive me, Lord—or, uh...Henry, I should probably find my father and brother. They will be looking for me.”

“Of course, my lady. And I will look forward to continuing our conversation.”

He bowed, and Sophia curtsied, thinking she wasn't looking forward to any such thing. She presented one last forced smile and took her leave in a hurry, searching for Beon's head of dark hair. When she didn't see him, she next sought Sir Lyndon, as he was a head taller than most and would be easier to recognize.

When neither one of them could be found, the panic within her at their absence intensified until her head was whirling, and she felt a little dizzy. As any and all remaining air from the chamber vanished—escape became the only thing she could think about while struggling to fill her lungs.

Sophia rushed through the closest doorway, entering a large corridor, and she paused unsure of which way would take her to the gardens. Spotting a servant, she asked to know the fastest way out. When Sophia finally made it to a wide balcony overlooking a courtyard near the stables, she bent forward and sucked in big gulps of air.

She still felt breathless and knew she was fast approaching a full panic as thoughts of Beon being one of the fallen filled her mind. Letting her tears begin to fall, she braced herself against the parapet, fearing she might collapse at any moment.

As she was looking out across the courtyard below, she thought she saw someone resembling her brother, Marcel, emerge from the stables. Then a tall, man with long dark hair came into view. Beon? she thought but couldn't seem to find enough air to call out his name. With her vision blurred as it was, she couldn't be certain and worried she was imagining what she wanted to see.

Sophia dropped her head and closed her eyes, trying to clear her head as well as her vision. She drew air in slowly through her nose and then blew it out through her mouth. When she opened her eyes again, her focus fell on a large shrub in the shape of a bird and the tears returned. Desperate to get a better look, she looked for a way down to the courtyard and saw a staircase to her left. Rushing to it on wobbly legs, she hoped she could make it to the bottom before fainting.

While gripping the banister tightly, Sophia finally reached the garden and ran toward the bush. Once there, she blinked up in wonder. This was for real, wasn't it? Had Beon really so boldly carved away at one of the hedges at the king's court? Doing so at the monastery had been incredibly bold of him, but here seemed even more so. Was this simply a magical coincidence?

When it all became too much for her, and she felt black closing in around her, she knew she was falling to the ground, but couldn't do anything to stop it. Someone called out her name as she lost her grip on consciousness.

Chapter 13

WHEN BIRDS AREN'T ALLOWED TO FLY

Having caught her as she fell, Beon carried Sophia through the hallways as a servant lead them to her quarters. Marcel ran ahead to fetch Lord Gall. Once they reached her chambers, Beon gently laid her on the bed. He went to the basin, doused a linen, and wrung out the excess water. Sitting down beside her, he laid the cool cloth on her forehead and stroked her cheek.

So beautiful, like a sleeping angel, he thought. Sable tresses framed her heart shaped face. Beon was reminded of how she resembled the innocent cherubs depicted in the tapestries at Bamborough Castle, the only cheerful things to be found in the entire cold structure, aside from Sophia herself...at a time when they'd both been younger, innocent and not tainted by the realities of life. Parts of him wanted to return to that time of simplicity when the most pressing matters they worried about were mapping out the hidden passageways and running along the beach as the sea rolled over their bare feet.

Beon knew, however, that such thoughts were not practical or realistic, so he instead imagined the future he wanted, and he knew without a shadow of a doubt that he wanted that future to be with Sophia and no one else.

With her cheeks so flushed with color, Beon believed she'd simply become overheated, and hoped she'd wake up soon. She couldn't have been exposed to the plague already, could she?

The servant stood by with a bowl of broth for her to drink once she awakened, but when time stretched on, and she never roused, Beon patted at her cheeks gently. "Sophia, my lovely little dove, please wake up. I'm here. It's me, Beon."

She frowned and mumbled in her sleep, but still didn't open her eyes.

When he spoke her name once more, she groaned and then asked sleepily, "Are you real?"

With a chuckle escaping him, he gathered her hand into his and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Yes, of course, it's me, my lady. Oh, how I missed you... Are you all right? How do you feel?"

When she didn't respond to his questions, he frowned and patted at her cheeks once more. Thinking that getting some fluids into her might do some good, he reached for the small bowl of broth held by the servant. Beon turned around and tucked one arm beneath her shoulders to prop her up and then pressed the bowl to her lips.

Once the liquid touched her lips, she opened her mouth and drank a little, but she still didn't fully

awaken. Again, she moaned, her head lulling back.

Lowering her back to the pillow, Beon handed the bowl back to the servant.

Rising from the bed to pace the chamber, he forced himself to stop looking at her mouth because wild thoughts of kissing her awake kept filling his mind. And if she did return to consciousness while his mouth covered hers, Beon knew he would not be able to resist acting on those thoughts, sending the servant away and begging her to make love to him so he could tell her with every part of himself that he loved her more than anything in this world.

Well aware of the fact that this line of thinking was inappropriate, Beon dragged fingers through his hair, wishing the temptation to act on such thoughts wasn't so great. Getting control of himself, Beon instead focused on how he could make Sophia his bride in the honorable way.

It was time to speak to her father. It was time to stand up and stake his claim. Beon would ask for her hand in marriage this very day. He would finally take her away from all the people and worries crushing her spirit, and they could live happily at Brentworth, for he was now the lord and vassal of the land. Even though he wasn't yet a knight by title, he was a lord.

Doing this sooner than later would also help his poor mother cope with the loss of Father. Sophia's bright spirit and smiling face would give Mother happier things to think on, a much needed distraction to help her heal from the heartache.

Suddenly the door burst open, and Lord Gall stormed inside with Marcel close behind. Lord Gall looked rather pale and withered since Beon had last seen him three or four years prior. However, he still had the same cold and angry glare as he scanned the people in the chamber with harsh disapproval.

"What are you doing here?" he barked at Beon.

"Your daughter swooned, and I carried her—"

"You are dismissed," he interrupted, then turned his scowl toward Sophia. "Wake her up!" he said to Marcel as he snapped his fingers.

Marcel rushed forward and slapped at her cheeks firmly enough Beon found himself grinding his teeth together. He suspected Marcel didn't mean to be so rough with her, supposing a younger brother might not consider such things, so he restrained himself from reacting.

When Sophia remained unconscious, he worried that she might still be overheated and getting her lady's maid in here to strip the confining stays and gown off her body would be the most helpful solution. With Lord Gall in the room, however, he didn't think it was possible to get her the help she needed, seeing as how it wasn't really his place. So he decided it was now or never if he was going to make a claim for Sophia's hand. "My lord, might I have a quick word?"

"I have asked you to leave, Master Everard, this is a family matter and none of your concern."

Beon's face flushed with anger, but he took a breath to steady himself and keep his calm. Understanding a little of how this man's mind worked, and that he would need to feel like he was in control, Beon dropped to one knee before Lord Gall and bowed his head. Keeping his voice firm

Beon said, “My lord, I humble myself before you and ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage. After my father’s passing, his land and title have been bequeathed to me. I can promise your daughter will have a good life in my care.”

“What is this nonsense? I have already given my blessing to Sir Percy. You are wasting your breath. Now for the last time, get the hell out of my sight.”

Beon looked up in shock. “But, my lord, I would be willing to offer *you* a dowry rather than the other way round. Surely that is a more attractive offer than whatever terms you’ve agreed to with Sir Percy.”

“Even if it were, the answer would still be ‘no.’ Even for all the gold in Christendom. For *you*, the answer will always be ‘no.’”

“What have I ever done to offend you, my lord?” Beon asked, some of what he was feeling slipping into his tone. He knew he was letting his temper get the better of him, but there was only so much he was willing to take from this wretch of a man.

“You are arrogant and self-righteous. You think you are superior to me and everyone around you. You are now and have always been dead wrong. You are a commoner. A peasant. And that is why you will always remain but a servant to me.”

Beon stood and faced Lord Gall, “My lord, I have born your mistreatment of me since the first day I arrived on your doorstep, and I have accepted your ill will with grace and dignity, but—”

“Master Everard, you will hold your tongue and remember your place, or I will have you dishonorably discharged from my service and hung for insubordination. If you care anything at all about your father’s good name, I would think very carefully about what you do or say next.”

Beon fumed. Instinctively his hand clamped around the hilt of his sword, wanting so badly to draw it and challenge Lord Gall right then and there. A number of things kept him from actually doing it, however. The first one being that Marcel was in the room and while Beon believed him to be a better man than his father, this wasn’t the best time to test out his loyalties. The next one being that if he were reckless enough to push the matter now, he risked the situation escalating out of control. Again, reasoning that it was best to keep his head and come up with another plan, Beon promptly backed down.

“I will take my leave.” He gave a slight nod and then moved for the door.

Once alone in the hallway and the door had shut behind him, he cursed aloud.

“Yes. Unfortunately for you, we have the same good taste in women.” Beon spun to find Sir Percy leaning against the wall just outside of Sophia’s chambers. “I’m afraid there are many casualties in this little game of love and war, Master Everard. You’ll get over it.”

“This is not a game, my lord,” Beon breathed, his nostrils flaring.

“Oh, I imagine you’ll find that, with time, it is all a great game of strategy.”

“We are talking about Lady Gall’s life and happiness.”

“No, we’re talking about a business arrangement between her father and myself. I also happen to

be quite enamored with the lady. I look forward to awakening the wild beast within her.”

Beon sputtered in disbelief at the man’s audacity and vulgarity. “If it’s money you need—?”

Sir Percy laughed, cutting him off. “Money is not what I need, Master Everard. It is a challenge I seek. And I do admit to taking a great deal of pleasure in torturing Gall, the ignorant lout. I’m sure I will grow tired of it eventually, but until then, Lady Gall will bring me quite a good deal of pleasure.”

His callous implications towards Sophia sent Beon into a blinding rage, and he drew his sword, raised it over his head, and brought it down on Sir Percy. But the knight grabbed Beon’s wrist with a swiftness and strength that surprised him, their faces inches apart. Sir Percy smiled and shoved Beon backward so that he smacked against the opposite wall of the corridor.

“I’m going to forgive this infraction because of your obvious feelings for the girl, but let me give you some sound advice. Keep your head, Master Everard. Literally.”



Father’s angry voice greeted Sophia as unconsciousness began to loosen its grip on her, and she opened her eyes. Blinking, she took in her surroundings. As her vision cleared of sleep, she noticed Marcel listening as Father ranted about something Beon had done. While she had heard him complain about Beon in the past, she listened more carefully as she tried to remember why she was sleeping during the day and why Father and Marcel were in her chamber.

When Father looked her way and noticed she was awake, he growled in his typical way, “Make yourself presentable. You must come before the king immediately for his blessing on your marriage.”

With her thoughts still foggy, Sophia was utterly speechless as she tried to process what her father had just said.

“Marriage?” she managed to ask, frowning at how coarse her voice sounded.

“To Sir Percy.” When she stared at him, dumbfounded and trying to sit upright, he ground out, “I told you to stop dallying and make yourself presentable.”

Trying to steady herself, and trying to give herself time to process this, she scooted toward the edge of the mattress and dropped her feet to the floor. With hands braced on either side of her hips, she asked, “I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

“He asked for your hand. I agreed to it, and there is nothing more to discuss. You are now betrothed,” he said as though she were quite daft.

“I agreed to no such thing,” she argued.

Father frowned at her for so long, she began to squirm under the pressure, and then he began to laugh. It wasn’t a jovial sound at all but more of a mocking laughter that made her feel small.

Sophia opened her mouth to protest the arrangement yet again, when Marcel said, “Sir Percy is the better choice by far.”

“What? Better than whom?”

“Beon, of course.”

“That worthless boy is still a page, or have you forgotten that?” Father asked Marcel as though she weren’t sitting right there.

That’s when the memories came flooding back, and she gasped, her eyes going wide. “Beon is alive?”

Again, they stared at her.

“He’s really alive?” she repeated when the silence stretched on.

“It does not matter if he is alive or not, Sophia.”

Yes, it does! she thought, feeling elated, confused and frustrated all at once.

“Both men asked for your hand,” explained Marcel. “But Father has made the choice for you, as is his place to do so.”

“Beon asked for my hand?” she asked, her heart soaring at the thought.

Shaking his head, Father said, “Don’t look so pleased, my dear. Beon left you behind rather than challenge me when I gave him my answer.”

Again, struggling to comprehend information that did not fit what she knew of Beon, Sophia just sat there as her world caved in around her. Unable to meet their eyes, she stared down at her lap as the tears began to fall.

“Prepare yourself to meet the king so he may grant his blessing or I might be tempted to beat you back into unconsciousness for being so damn insolent. And stop your weeping. I will not tolerate such weakness.”

Shocked, horrified, and confused, Sophia continued staring at her lap, unable to control the tears that would not stop flowing as Father and Marcel left the chamber.

Chapter 14

AN EXCHANGE OF PRISONS

In a way, Sophia would say she felt like a ghost as she walked the corridors of Bamborough Castle. How could she not feel dead inside? It had been the longest fortnight of her life because she hadn't heard from Beon since learning he was alive, so what Father had said must be true. Beon must have abandoned her. She couldn't blame him, could she? Dealing with Father's rants would drive anyone away. It was foolish of her to think otherwise, and she knew that. She knew quite well this was just how things were and she was powerless to change it.

She longed to go back to the convent, but Father had also refused that request. With his face going a disturbing shade of red, she'd understood it was time for her to stop fighting it.

Perhaps she was overreacting and would be quite happy with Sir Percy, but even as she thought that, it seemed unrealistic. Despite his elevated title, handsome face, and wealth, he just didn't appeal to her. He never had, and would never hold her heart. A heavy sigh escaped her, and she let her fingers glide along the wall as she slowly made her way to the garden.

Sophia, just like any other day, walked amongst the hedges, blind to the beauty there. The roses seemed to have lost their vibrancy and scent. The birds could not catch her attention with their song. The air felt stifling. The storm clouds seemed to enjoy matching her sullen mood, as though they mocked her with their raindrops and dreary shades of gray.

However, the sky was clear and blue today, and the sun was reaching its fingers into almost every crevice of the garden. Even still, Sophia felt like a lifeless stone. The sun taunting her with its rays and saying, *I'm surrounding you with warmth, and yet you're still cold inside.*

It didn't matter how happily the sun shone, Sophia found that her mind naturally gravitated toward the worst possible outcome in any situation of import. But that was only because the worst possible thing always *did* happen. Her heart had broken when she'd heard of Beon's father and Sir Lyndon not surviving the Hundred Year War. Her heart had broken for Beon as well. She'd mourned just as she assumed he must be mourning.

With arms wrapped around herself, Sophia paused when her eyes fell onto a shadow stretching out toward her on the path. It was in the shape of a bird and hadn't been there on her previous walks. When she lifted her eyes and saw the boxwood casting the shadow, she blinked. There, towering above her and limned in golden sunshine, was a sculpture of a bird just like the wooden magpie Beon

had given her so many years ago. Having abandoned the bird within a box she kept in her bedchamber, just as Beon had abandoned her, she did not have it in her pocket to compare the two.

She knew with absolute certainty that this had not been here before.

“He’s back?” she whispered as her first smile in days captured her mouth. Sophia turned and then stopped abruptly when she saw that two more shrubs had been carved into new shapes as well. These hedges had been sculpted into the shape of two people, a man and woman facing each other, holding hands. It was stunning, and Sophia thought it was the most beautiful sculpture yet. She would say it was even better than the one Beon and Sir Lyndon had created on their last night on the island, which was a series of several seashells alongside one another, culminating in an open oyster with a pearl nestled within its mantle.

“Beon?” she called quietly, hoping he was still nearby.

Truth be told, Sophia had wanted to shout his name, but couldn’t risk such a thing if Father happened to be nearby.

When he didn’t answer, she said it again, “Beon, where are you?”

Sophia waited and waited, and he did not appear. If she lingered any longer the sunlight would burn her pale skin, a curse of having auburn hair. With her shoulders sagging and her thoughts in turmoil, Sophia decided it was best for her to make her way back inside.

When she returned to her bedchamber, feeling ill and thinking she might skip supper, she froze when she noticed a man stretched out upon her bed. In a casual pose, his arms were tucked behind his head and his legs were crossed. Sophia stepped forward to get a better look at his face.

“Beon!” Sophia clapped both hands over her mouth when she realized she’d practically shouted his name. “What are you doing?” she whispered, casting a glance toward the door nervously. When no one entered, she turned back to him and lowered her hands.

“I’m here to kidnap you.”

She glanced at the door once more. “I...um, I don’t think that will go over well with my father.”

“Your father can rot in Hell. I’m not letting you marry Sir Percy.”

“But I don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Yes, you do.”

“You know I don’t.”

“Come here,” he said, ignoring her.

Sophia’s eyes widened at the huskiness in his voice, confused by the way the rumbling sound made her feel inside. “Whilst you lay upon my bed? ‘Tis scandalous.”

“Because you almost became a nun or because you don’t love me?” he asked, lifting one dark eyebrow.

“You know I love you,” she breathed.

“Then what are you waiting for?” he asked, his arms outstretched as he sat upright.

What was she waiting for? And why had she ever believed he’d abandoned her? Based on the

look he was sending her way, the thought seemed silly now.

Moving to him, she struggled to fight off the sadness within her. Father would kill him if he found out he was here and he would eventually find out since there was plenty of evidence on display in the garden.

When she got close enough for him to reach her, his hand shot out, and he dragged her onto the bed with him. Sophia gasped, but couldn't bring herself to pull away as his arms enveloped her. She was again reminded of how his warmth could penetrate her soul even in those guarded places the sunlight couldn't reach.

She found herself hugging him back and snuggling against his shoulder. "Is this really happening? Are you really here?"

"I agree that it feels like a dream," he whispered, his fingers caressing her hair along with his breath as the heat of his exhale touched her skin. "But it's not a dream. You'll let me kidnap you, won't you?"

Worry for his safety brought her head up, and she peered into his warm brown eyes, wishing reality wasn't what it was. "Father will have you hung, or he just might end you himself."

"I'll end him first if he's foolish enough to try it."

"But my father is powerful and strong..."

"Ouch," he said, frowning at her for the first time since she'd seen him there upon her bed. "Do you really have so little faith in my skills?"

"I've lost faith in everything, to be perfectly honest."

"How is it you're the one who has lost faith when you've lived amongst people who are shining examples of conviction, when my life has been consumed by the practice of war?"

Sophia had no response for that. Partly because she was so surprised and partly because he was absolutely right.

"Your bedchamber is an absolute disaster, by the way. How can you find anything amongst so much clutter?"

She laughed, taking in the many garments littering her floor, draped over the chair beside the fire, and the collections of shells covering just about every table and window ledge available. "What? Now you're complaining about the cleanliness of my chamber when *you* snuck in, uninvited like a bandit?"

"Well, I am here to steal something."

"Me, as you said before."

"That's right."

"And what if I refuse for your own safety?"

He set her aside so he could rise from the bed and stretch one hand out to her. "We just went over that, didn't we? Or do I need to repeat myself?"

Sophia was tempted to take his hand, but she knew what Father was like. He would never let this

be. Beon could end up dead, and she couldn't live with herself if she ever let that happen. "No," she said, folding her arms over her chest to keep from throwing herself into his arms.

"'No' we haven't been over it, 'no' you don't need me to repeat it, or 'no' you won't let me kidnap you like a proper Neanderthal?"

She found herself laughing but shook her head. "No, I'm...I'm just going to stay and marry Sir Percy...to save you."

Scooping her up from the bed, he said, "I'm not giving you a choice in the matter."

"Tell me something else I don't already know."

Beon gave her a stern look for that. "Could you be any more stubborn?"

"No, because you're easily more stubborn than me."

"I guess you're right, but that suits me just fine," he said as he strode toward the secret passageway in Mother's solar, that led to the chapel, that would get them outside unseen.

Fearing for his life, she resisted more fervently. Sophia tried to push away, but he held her fast. She beat her fists against his chest and kicked her legs to no avail. Beon simply held her, waiting, as though her thrashing about wasn't a struggle for him in the least. Finally, she stopped and said, "I missed you so much."

"And I you, my little songbird."

Just before he ducked into the passageway, he lowered his lips to hers and kissed her so sweetly she knew she would die if she lost him again.

Once they arrived at a little hunting cottage that was hidden within the woods, Beon drew her into his embrace again, crushing her tightly to his chest.

After Beon had started a fire in the hearth, he turned to face her. As she read the intensity within his expression, Sophia wasn't quite sure what to do, or how to react to him.

"Are we ever going to go back?" she found herself asking.

"Wouldn't that defeat the point of kidnapping you?"

"I guess it would," she answered. Sophia couldn't imagine what Father would do when he found out she was gone. Just thinking about it was frightening enough, so she forced herself not to.

"Are you going to kiss me again?"

"Do you think kidnappers kiss their victims?"

"I honestly wouldn't know. And I don't feel like a victim." Father made her feel victimized, but Beon never had.

"The sun has set," he said as he drew closer, lifting one hand to glide the backs of his fingers over her cheek.

Sophia bit her lip and smiled. "So I noticed."

"Should we turn in for the night?"

She glanced over her shoulder at the one bed in the cottage. "My father would not—"

"Let's not talk about that man, shall we?"

Beon was right, she didn't want to talk about Father either.

When she didn't say anything, Beon removed his boots and moved to the bed, stretching out over it. "Are you joining me?" he asked with that husky voice again.

Sophia hesitated. His earlier question about what she wanted came back to her mind. She didn't need to think for long to know that she wanted Beon in her life forever and moved forward, removed her slippers, and crawled onto the mattress with him.

They kissed for a while and they talked quietly long into the night.

Sophia wasn't sure when she'd fallen asleep. All she knew was that sleeping while surrounded by his arms and the entire length of his body touching hers, felt like the most blissful slumber she'd had since the Priory.

Sophia awoke from her dreams to an odd noise and she searched the moonlit room for the source of that sound. Rising from the shadows like a demon from Hell was Sir Percy. A patch of moonlight illuminated the smirk upon his mouth. As silently as a wraith, he moved forward to loom above them.

Reflexively, Sophia opened her mouth to scream, but with a movement so fast his arm was a blur, he silenced her and lifted a finger to his lips. "If you don't wish for me to drain every ounce of blood from Beon's body, then you will allow me to return you to Bamborough where you belong...for our wedding ceremony."

Her lips opened in a silent scream when he grinned and she saw the fangs visible within his mouth. Sophia immediately remembered the monster that had murdered the peasant on that darkened road so many years ago.

The demon, the pestilence, the creature from Hell elusively evading detection for so long, was Sir Percy.

When he bent forward and his eyes locked onto hers, Sophia felt herself going limp, any strength she may have possessed draining from her limbs. As the evil magic within his gaze overpowered her, Sophia could do nothing as this demon unraveled her from Beon's sleepy embrace and carried her limp form away into the night.

Chapter 15

IF ONE CANNOT OVERPOWER, THEN OUTWIT

Ever since that awful night when Sophia had been kidnapped twice, her anxiety had been steadily rising. Father had no idea she'd even gone missing, and he so often paid little attention to things around him that he hadn't noticed Beon's sculpted shrubs either. Just looking at them pinched her heart with sadness.

As Sir Percy had carried her through the night, Sophia had discovered a lot about his inhuman powers that shed light on past mysteries. He had traveled so incredibly fast it was as though he'd somehow used the wind to carry them along. He'd occasionally expelled his breath into her face, and the fragrance of it was so magically intoxicating, she hated herself for wanting more of it. Sophia quickly realized that he'd used this potion like breath to subdue the peasant he had taken on the road. As it overpowered her in the same way, Sophia had wondered if she was about to suffer the same fate. But as the days had passed, she'd come to believe she wasn't just food to Sir Percy.

Once they'd returned to Bamborough Castle, he'd brought her inside with more stealth than any thief, and tucked her into bed. Because of the evil magic within him, she was powerless to move or even speak. She'd fallen asleep quickly and only realized the spell had released her by the time the sun awoke her the next day.

Knowing Beon would come to take her back, she'd sent a missive with one of Father's squires explaining what had happened. She hadn't see Beon since.

Her heart ached as she pondered it, but she hoped he was wise enough to listen this time. The demon was just too powerful to be defied and she would rather remain Percy's prisoner than lose Beon to death, so she kept silent about all of it.

Since that night, Sir Percy had visited her regularly from Alnwick. Each time arriving unexpectedly during the day to make sure she hadn't tried to escape or told anyone his secret. And each time, the evil magic lurking within him remained completely undetectable, which helped her understand why no one would ever suspect Sir Percy was a creature capable of murdering that peasant. No one would ever know, which begged Sophia to question: Who else around her was a vampire? Sophia became untrusting and fearful of anyone she rarely saw at night. Of course, she was doubly sure that Percy kept even closer watch over her at night, when his powers were at their height.

She would study Sir Percy whenever he joined them for the noonday meal and conversed with her

Father. For all to see, he appeared like any other human, as long as the sun was visible in the sky. His conversation with her father was always civil outwardly, but she could feel the tension between the men and knew there must be secrets involving this arrangement she might never know.

Sophia had also noted that when the sun was setting, Sir Percy would become bashful about looking anyone in the eye and would quickly find any excuse to leave. Again, she was the only one who knew the real reason why he behaved this way.

Knowing she was powerless against the monster lurking beneath the surface, Sophia couldn't help but fear him. But when he'd requested moments alone with her, he'd never been cruel, and so she believed he didn't mean to drain the blood from her body once she became his bride. What then did he have planned for her? This was something Sophia found herself wondering about often.

On the day before the wedding, Sir Percy had requested to speak with her in private, as he'd done a few times prior. Sophia boldly decided to ask the question most on her mind. "What will happen to me after we're married?"

"I shall to turn you into a vampire as well," he said casually, as though he'd simply been suggesting they take a leisurely stroll along the shoreline to collect pretty seashells.

When she gaped at him in horror, he said, "As a vampire by my side, I'll be able to spoil you with jewels for all of eternity."

To Sophia, an eternity sounded like a very long time to be married to a monster. She honestly didn't want jewels either, so the offer did not appeal to her and never would. Although, the thought did cross her mind that if Beon had been the one to make this proposal, Sophia knew she just might say yes.

"How will you do that?" she next asked, unsure if she wanted to know, but an odd curiosity she would probably regret later had made her ask anyway. When he explained, it was indeed a query she regretted.

Henry brushed his fingers along the column of her neck and said softly, "I'll simply bite you without draining the life from you." He kissed her neck and then added, "That alone will be enough."

"A vampire's kiss then?"

Amusement danced across his face at that. "Kissed by a vampire. Well put, my lady, I think I will adopt that phrase from now on."

"Why didn't you attack Beon and me when you...um, do I want to know what happened to that peasant?"

He ignored the second part of her question, which she supposed was her answer. "So bold and so lovely you were when you tried to save Beon with your bare hands. I was intrigued and enraptured."

"It wasn't because of the silver cross?"

At that question, he simply chuckled.

"How did you become a vampire?" It was another query she could later regret knowing the answer to, but, as before, Sophia was too curious not to ask.

Henry's glanced at the door. Moving toward it, he tipped his head to the side and listened for a time. Did he think Father was listening in on their conversations? Sophia wondered. Turning back to her he smiled, invited her to sit with him, which she did reluctantly, knowing she truly had no choice in the matter. "My sister, Lilith, was a sorceress."

"A what?"

"A magical being—born that way."

"Then you're a sorcerer too?"

He sighed. "No, I didn't inherit the gift. A few of my sisters did, though."

"Like Lilith."

Nodding at that, Sir Percy continued, "Ardat and Irdu are very powerful sorceresses. Lillu is a sorceress also, but not quite as gifted as the other two. I have not seen Lilith or Lillu for quite some time now."

He looked up at her and then back to his hands as he twisted a ring around his finger before he continued, "Lilith created vampires as a way to punish Benjamin. They were in love...and happy it seemed...until she told him she was a sorceress. Benjamin was rather dejected by this news because he was human. In anger, he turned his back on her and called her a 'curse to humanity.' So she took her revenge by cursing him for all eternity."

Sophia swallowed hard. "You're going to curse me?"

Her eyes widened when he laughed at her. How could he possibly think this was funny? Having lived so many years at a convent, Sophia was sure becoming cursed would doom her to Hell.

At her horrified look, he laughed even harder, and she frowned at him. "I believe it's a gift and not the punishment Lilith meant it to be," he finally said.

"How can you possibly think that?" Sophia asked unable to believe he didn't see himself as cursed. In her mind, he was horrifying.

"We're getting ahead of ourselves. Lilith had meant for Benjamin to live his life alone and isolated because he was now this vicious and bloodthirsty creature. I don't know the details, but he learned by accident that he could turn other mortals into vampires by biting them without draining them to the point of death. With this discovery, one by one he surprised all of Lilith's siblings, including me, by turning us into vampires. Can you imagine what poetic justice that was for him? She'd unwittingly given him the power to punish her own family just as she had tried to punish him."

"How did he manage to do that if two of her sisters are sorceresses like her? Couldn't they have stopped him with magic?"

Again, Lord Percy chuckled. "Little did Lilith know, but she'd made him too powerful, and he was able to overcome all of them, even the ones gifted magically. This is why all sorcerers hate vampires. They actually fear them, knowing they could be turned into vampires too."

"Cursed you mean."

"No, not cursed," he repeated. "That was yet another troubling thing for Lilith. We all decided we

liked being vampires.”

Sophia blinked at him, thinking he was insane.

Lord Percy tapped her lightly on the end of her nose and said, “Don’t look at me like that. It truly is an improvement. Sorcerers who are born with magical gifts live a very long time, centuries even. Because of that, they seem immortal, but they’re not. They will eventually die or could be killed, although, not easily. Since I did not have the gift of magic, I never would have lived as long as Lilith or the others, but now that I’m a vampire, I can live even longer than her.”

“And how long have you been alive...thus far?”

“Only one hundred and eighty-seven years...thus far. And just getting started.”

When she continued to stare at him like he was a devil born from the bowels of some dark abyss, he took her hand into his. Sophia allowed it, again. Her lack of choices in life was something she’d grown accustomed to even though she hated it. She thought about fighting back, but she couldn’t get past the futility of it when she was always being oppressed by people stronger than her. With her teeth clenched together, she vowed to manage it one day. If she could not overpower those who stole her freedom, then she would learn how to outwit them.

When his thumb glided over her knuckles, she shuddered in annoyance, making him smirk. The arrogant expression made Sophia hate him even more than she did already. Could she live with such a man? Forever? Or could she talk him into draining her rather than turning her into an immortal monster like him?

Since Sophia had come to know Henry well enough to understand he would not likely agree to kill her, she next wondered if *he* could be killed, noticing he’d skipped over that point in his story. Sophia didn’t want this information so she could attempt to kill him, of course. Attempting something like that was too lofty a goal for her at this point. But really, so she could end herself when the time came.



Sophia paced the floor of her chamber the night before her wedding day...the night before her wedding to a creature that turned her stomach. As the hours dragged on it became plain to Sophia that she would not be sleeping at all tonight. She found some comfort knowing that at least Eva would be by her side come noon tomorrow for this dreaded wedding.

However, Eva was suffering too, and Sophia would not forget that. And conversely, while weddings were typically a day of celebration, it was not for her. How could it be? Eva knew this also. Sophia was grateful for her moral support, even if grief subdued it.

It had been pure torture to hear of Eva’s reaction to the passing of Sir Lyndon. Sophia’s heart broke for her dear friend.

She hadn’t known until now that some solace had come to Eva in the form of more garden sculptures.

Sophia had thought it very kind of Beon to travel to the Priory alone, just to comfort Eva over the loss of a man who'd meant so much to the both of them. Beon had carved a likeness of Sir Lyndon into one of the tallest hedges and stood beside it looking up at Eva's window.

Tears had rolled down Eva's cheeks as she described how Beon's face was like stone as he placed his fist over his heart.

Thinking of Beon reminded her that his gaze felt like fire when it fell upon her. And though it had been some weeks since Sophia had seen him, it was as if she and Beon's souls were communicating even while forced to remain at a distance. For years it had been that way. For years it would probably continue.

"Beon turned the grounds into a masterpiece of topiary garden art at the Priory," said Eva, drawing Sophia from her thoughts. "It helped soothe some of the pain."

Sophia's heart broke once again when she realized the sculptures he'd done might be the only legacy of their love to remain on this earth.

Eva was to be Sophia's bridesmaid for the ceremony, but she was so bereft after hearing about Sir Lyndon that Sophia felt guilty for enlisting her.

Sophia wrung her hands, biting her lip as she tried to think of a way out of this marriage. *Outwit*, she reminded herself, *but how?* She could run. Escape through the passageways and hide somewhere. But where? Where would she go? She could find Beon again...surely he would know what to do, but then she would be putting him in danger. Sophia had no doubt Henry would follow through with his promise to kill Beon. No, she must go and speak to her father one more time. *Outwit*, she thought once more. Could she outsmart Father?

Sophia left her solar resolutely and made her way through the cold and dark corridors to her father's wing of the castle and found him at his papers.

"Father, I beg a word, if you please," she said, curtsying.

He was startled by her presence, as if he were off in another world.

"What on earth are you doing about at this hour? You should be in bed or preparing for the wedding."

"I've come to speak with you."

"We have nothing to say to each other."

"Respectfully, Father, I disagree. If you will please hear me—"

"You have nothing to say that I could possibly want to hear, now leave."

"I am no longer a little girl, and you cannot control me."

"Can't I?" he asked coldly. "You are my daughter, and that is all either of us need know."

"Why do you treat me with such loathing?"

"How I treat you is my right!"

"I refuse to marry Sir Percy!" she shouted.

The room fell silent. The look on Father's face told her that he was equally surprised by the

outburst. While she was proud of herself for speaking up, she knew she hadn't come close to outsmarting him.

Lord Gall rose from his desk and walked around the table to stand in front of Sophia. She didn't back down. She didn't care anymore.

"You will do as you are told or there will be consequences, girl."

"How could Mother have ever loved you?"

Shock and fury registered on her father's face. "How dare you! Your mother was a saint who understood me completely."

"You are so cruel and uncaring!"

"Silence yourself or I will make you regret this show of insolence."

"I'm glad she's not alive to witness your dishonorable and cowardly treatment of me. She's better off dead, and so am I!"

The back of Lord Gall's hand flew to Sophia's cheek, and she was knocked to the floor with the force. Once the stunning realization of what had just occurred thundered through her mind, Sophia's face began to throb and burn. Doing her best to ignore it, she slowly got to her feet and faced her father once again, standing as tall as she could, her legs shaking slightly.

The look in her father's eyes was that of fear, shame, and disbelief. But in an instant, the anger returned.

"Listen to me and listen well. You will marry Henry de Percy. There is no choice in the matter."

Retreating, Sophia was quite aware of the fact that she'd failed to outwit her father...but that didn't mean she wouldn't try it again while better prepared.

Chapter 16

FROM HERO TO LEGEND

Even though Sophia had sent him a letter explaining that Sir Percy was, in fact, the devil they'd seen attacking the peasant, Beon could not and would not let this end. He understood Sophia was terrified for his life, but he was determined to destroy the demon and get her back.

Beon walked along the parapet of the north curtain wall looking for the best place to lower a rope. If he and Sophia were to escape Bamborough without being noticed then the north wall was the only option as it was the least guarded and the lowest to the ground. The conventional wisdom was that if an attack were to occur, it would most likely come inland from the west or from the sea to the east. The main gate was to the south toward the heart of England and always heavily guarded, but the marshy plain directly to the north was a natural deterrent to any living thing unless you were a flock of birds.

With the castle full of guests for the wedding, including the impending arrival of Sir Percy and his brood, the trick would be keeping themselves undiscovered. But if they waited until late enough when the guards changed, Beon believed they could pull it off.

Beon had spent the past week devising an escape plan for Sophia ever since the kidnapping hadn't worked. Beon knew he was lucky to still be alive and while he prided himself on his skill with stratagems, he felt the odds were stacked against a successful getaway. But he had to try. He simply could not allow Sophia to marry Sir Percy—a vampire. Beon felt his life would be over if he failed.

Perhaps he should try and expose Percy to Lord Gall. Perhaps Gall knew Percy was the demon and was helpless to disobey his wishes for that reason. Perhaps Gall was a vampire himself. It would certainly match his cheery disposition. Whichever it was, Beon wanted to get Sophia as far as from her father and Percy as possible.

Another problem was that he hadn't been able to speak with Sophia to discuss the plan, which was imperative for the scheme to work. Knowing her as he did, Beon thought it was likely that by now Sophia had given up hope completely. For his sake, she would. But *he* hadn't given up yet, despite the nature of the beast he was up against.

Suddenly, he noticed movement below him, just outside the castle wall. Beon studied the darkness more carefully. The moon created some illumination on the grounds below, but mainly shadow. He held perfectly still and peered down into the dappled light of the thin tree line and the craggy rocks,

the constant crash of the waves to his right.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up as a cloaked figure emerged from the shadows and slowly made its way to the middle of the grassy knoll that separated the castle from the marsh beyond. The intruder's face was concealed with a hood, and Beon felt in an instant it was the same demon he had seen on the south road. But how could it be Sir Percy? Beon had thought for certain the man was hiding in his chamber due to some fabricated ailment, as was his pattern. The figure looked up and Beon swallowed, unsure if he should call for the other guards. He was certainly safe where he was, high on the battlement, some thirty feet above the creature, but still, he wished he was armed with his garlic, silver crucifix, holy water, and stakes just to be sure.

It had been a long time since he and Sir Lyndon hunted the blood-sucking devil and the memory caused an ache in Beon's chest over the loss of his friend. Talk of the blood-suckers was much more prevalent over in Europe. The locals in France spoke as if they'd been around for ages and referred to them as 'vampyres,' which was the term Sophia had used also.

The demon below him suddenly removed his hood and Beon nearly fell off the parapet when he saw the man's face. Sir Lyndon? It couldn't be. Beon blinked and attempted to call out...to call Sir Lyndon's name, but no voice came forth.

The ghost said nothing, just stared at him. He began to feel unsteady from shock and...something about Sir Lyndon's eyes made Beon feel drowsy. He must be dreaming. It was all too unbelievable to be real. As a fog of confusion filled his mind, Beon lost his balance and slipped over the edge. The deadly consequence of this never crossed his mind until he felt himself being caught by Sir Lyndon and settled back onto his feet. Beon instantly sank to the ground since his legs just wouldn't support him any longer.

"I like this dream," Beon said, smiling up at his friend. "It's so good to see you, Sir Lyndon."

"It's good to see you too, old friend. But you mustn't look at me. And you mustn't call me Sir Lyndon anymore...you may call me Seth."

"Hmm. Is that your first name? All these years and I don't believe I ever knew your first name."

Sir Lyndon covered his face with the hood and stepped away from where Beon was sitting on the ground. After a few moments, Beon began to feel more clear-headed.

"What...did I...how did I end up down here?" He quickly rose to his feet eyeing the hooded figure suspiciously. "Am I awake? Are you truly Sir Lyndon?"

"You are awake, you just fell victim to the curse magic. Literally."

"Curse magic?"

"I cannot look upon anyone at night lest they become faint."

"You're not making any sense, man...let me see your face."

Sir Lyndon slowly turned his face toward Beon with his eyes shut. He still looked like the Sir Lyndon he'd always known.

"How is this possible? You died...you died from the plague."

“I would have died if Sir Percy hadn’t...cursed me,” Sir Lyndon said.

“He cursed you?”

“Or, rather, saved me. I’m still not sure. I have such powers now...you wouldn’t believe. He came to me on my deathbed and asked if I wanted to live in exchange for my service. I didn’t believe him. He wasn’t making sense. We’ve all seen what the infection does. No one survives. The next thing I knew, he was baring these awful fangs that hadn’t been there just moments before, and he bit me...right here.” Sir Lyndon indicated a spot on his neck.

Horror struck Beon in the gut, and he instinctively backed away. “Are you telling me that you’re now the very same kind of demon as Sir Percy? The same as that creature on the south road...a blood sucker?”

“Beon, please, I am still myself, I just—”

“Live off the blood of innocent men!”

“That’s why I’m here, listen to me, please! I can’t do it...I can’t kill...it’s not in me. I’ve been hunting game instead, and it has satisfied my thirst successfully.”

“Your thirst for blood!”

“Yes, that is the curse. The curse is that we are damned to an eternity of sucking the life out of the living. We are immortal, although our hearts stop beating at night, therefore dead, but more alive than ever we were as living men. I have the speed of six horses. I can see in the dark for miles. I can hear every sound being uttered inside the castle at this very moment. I can hear your heart beating.”

In the note Sophia had sent him, she’d only said that Sir Percy was the demon they’d seen and that he was a vampire. She hadn’t sent a letter since—probably hadn’t been able to—so Beon found he was reeling with the weight of this information. “No man should be given that power. This is the devil’s work. No man could be trusted with the weight of that kind of responsibility.”

“I believe you could, Sir Everard.”

“I am no knight, Sir Lyndon, no need to address me as such.”

“You are more a knight than any knight I’ve ever known. Kneel,” Sir Lyndon said as he drew his sword.

Beon again took a step back as his hand flew to the hilt of his own blade. “Cautious as ever, I see. I taught you well. Beon, your training is complete. Now kneel, you arrogant git, before I change my mind,” Sir Lyndon continued.

Beon could see a grin on the man’s face below his hood. If this was a dream, Beon figured he might as well play along, and he knelt down on one knee. Sir Lyndon touched the tip of his sword to Beon’s right shoulder, and then his left. “Do you, Beon Everard, pledge your life to the code of honor and discipline of knighthood?”

“I do,” Beon answered solemnly. He couldn’t believe this was happening and yet, it seemed only right that Sir Lyndon would be the one to knight him, however unofficial it may be.

“Rise, Sir Everard, and welcome to the brotherhood of knights.”

“This is exceedingly strange,” Beon remarked.

“No stranger than my next proposal.”

“And what is that?”

“Let me bite you.”

Beon laughed out loud.

“It is the only way to insure we get our women safely away from this place,” Sir Lyndon continued.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Deadly.”

“I would never... I mean how could you think that I would? Whatever you are, or think you are, you’re still bound by honor to God and country, as am I. Our debt is to humanity. That is where our responsibility lies...as knights and as men.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Beon, just imagine what we could do together. We could create our own order of knights...immortal knights, fighting against the rise of cursed magic and the harm it would do humans. There is an entire magical world beyond the one that mortals can see, Beon. A world filled with powerful and terrible creatures that I have only begun to learn about. The great mortality seems to have brought this world to prevalence. We could save countless lives.”

“But how do you know you won’t abuse such power? How do you know I wouldn’t?”

“Would you?”

“No, I bloody well wouldn’t!”

“I know. And neither will I. The curse doesn’t seem to change one’s true nature.”

Beon was thunderstruck. His head was spinning and his world upside down. “I... I need time...” he said.

“You don’t have much. What is your plan of escape? And I must ask. How is Eva?” Sir Lyndon asked with a smile.

“She mourns for you terribly. Good heavens, she’ll be happy to see you. Wait a minute...how do we explain this?”

“Very carefully. First, tell me your plan.”

Beon took a breath and began, “Sophia must request proxies for the ceremony. She will cite the fear of kidnapping by monsters along the roads in search of blood...no offense.”

“None taken.”

“Once the multiple brides are assembled, Eva included, we will have the old nurse deliver a veiled proxy to Lord Gall while Sophia and Eva use the secret passageway from her mother’s chambers to hide until all the men have been dispatched to hunt them down...thus the rope from the north wall to make it look like they left from here.”

“All very clever, but how to get them out of the castle?”

“I will leave her a page’s clothing in the passageway...then she’d catch up with me and the search

party dressed as a boy. We'd eventually splinter off from the group and go into hiding."

"Where?"

"Holy Island I think is safest."

Sir Lyndon nodded his approval. "Not bad, Beon."

"Thank you, Sir Lyndon."

"Please, you are to call me Seth from now on."

"All right...Seth. What do you think?"

"I think you forget your greatest asset."

"What's that?"

"Me."

Beon's eyes went wide. "How fast did you say you were?"

"Hop on my back, the way we used to train you in the lists." Beon climbed onto Seth, piggyback style.

"Ready?"

"I suddenly feel like a lad of ten summers once again."

"Feeling immature, are you?"

"I don't mean it like that."

"Feeling young and foolish again, then?"

"I don't mean it like that either."

"Are you quite finished blathering like an idiot?"

"Do you want me to be finished?" Beon said, jesting now.

"Do you wish to live to see tomorrow?"

"That would be ideal, I think."

"Then shut up and hold on tight."

Chapter 17

OVERWHELMED

So upset over her failure in challenging Father, Sophia couldn't go back to her chamber and face Eva yet. She needed some time alone to reconsider her options, if she even had any at all, that is.

Knowing Sir Lyndon's chamber would be empty, she took the secret passageways to the door, lifted the latch, and pushed it open.

Sophia was surprised to find a candle burning on the bedside table, and for a moment she feared she'd been wrong to think it remained abandoned. But as she took in the items within the chamber, she recognized them as Beon's belongings. Beon's armor and some of his books were stacked in the corner. There were a few wood-carvings on the table along with a quill, parchment and several more open books. Sophia felt her shoulders relax a little. While she was disappointed Beon was not in the room, she still found comfort being surrounded by his belongings. And since Father had never found out about his attempted kidnapping, she supposed she shouldn't be surprised to discover that he'd still remained so close even though she hadn't seen him. Clearly, he'd done as she'd asked in the letter and kept his distance.

Thinking he was the cleverest man she'd ever known, she went and sat on the mattress. *Beon will know what to do*, she told herself, and she believed it with all her heart. Beon might already have a plan. She would just wait for him, and they would figure it out together.

For the first time in a week, Sophia smiled as she tucked herself in beneath the blankets. She thought about the night Beon had taught her to 'fly.' How carefree life was then. Look at her now, no matter what happened today her life was going to change dramatically. She just wanted to fly away from it all like a bird in search of warm weather.

She reached into her pocket and clutched the little wooden carving that was now and always a comfort to her, like having her mother close by.

"Oh, mama, please guide me."

Sophia closed her eyes as tears of fear and exhaustion began to run down her cheeks. As self-doubts gathered in around her, she buried her face in Beon's pillow and began to cry...disappointed in herself for not being as strong as she wanted to be.



Beon's eyes were watering as the cold night air blew hard against his face. He clung to Seth's shoulders with all his might and still felt as if he'd be blown away by the wind given the sheer speed at which they were traveling. Beon was in utter disbelief.

They'd traveled several miles in a matter of moments, and as the north wall of Bamborough came back into view, Seth slowed down.

Suddenly, nearly scaring Beon out of his wits, Seth leaped up the castle wall as easily as if he were hopping over a fallen tree in the forest, and they landed as quiet as a fox on the parapet above. Beon immediately crouched and began looking around for the guards.

"They're sleeping," Seth said.

"How do you know?"

"I told you, I can hear every sound in this castle, including the guards snoring."

"Incredible. All of this is truly incredible."

"So, what do you say? Will you join me?"

"I still...I just don't know. I need more time. You're talking about changing who I am...forever."

"I'm talking about protecting Sophia and countless others from an incredible power that could be used for evil against them."

"I see that. It is an awesome power, this 'curse magic.' So much so that it could be the vilest temptation that Satan ever put forth on the earth. Perhaps I am meant to resist it as a man of honor and truth and light."

"Don't you see, that is precisely the reason why you would make a good vampire?"

"Ha, that is a contradiction in terms...good vampire."

"I don't believe that. I can't believe it."

"Come now, man, the curse is clearly born of evil and darkness...it is clearly born of the devil himself."

"No, it was born of a witch...or a sorceress rather. Actually, I'm not sure."

As Sir Lyndon told him a tale about a woman called Lilith and her siblings, Beon's head was once again reeling. Sir Lyndon, Seth, that is, his closest ally, practically a brother, was a blood-sucking vampire! He still could hardly believe he wasn't dreaming. Had he eaten something strange before going to bed?

Sir Lyndon continued to speak, and Beon found himself clutching at his hair in shock. Did Sophia know what he now knew? And if she did, what must she be coping with? Alone.

"What became of Lilith's siblings?"

"They have become very wealthy and powerful. Vampires have the unique advantage of having one foot in the world of men and one foot in the world of magic. This 'clan' is known as the family de Percy here in England. Sir Percy is Lilith's eldest brother, Pothos."

Beon shook his head. “I suspected you were going to say that. So we’re going up against the oldest and strongest wickedness the world has ever known. What became of Lilith? Perhaps she can help us if we side with her.”

“No one knows. Many battles have been won and lost between vampires and sorcerers in the magical world, and continue to this day. Other mythical creatures have joined the fray as well, Percy says...taken sides, as it were, over the years.”

“Other creatures? Like what, pray tell.”

“Werewolves, centaurs...fairies.”

“You’ve seen these things?”

“No, no, not at all. I’m still getting used to all this myself, but I tell you, there is a whole world of magic out there...and they are the ones with the real power.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this. But I’m damn well glad you’re on my side, I can tell you that.”

“From what I gather, up until now, there have been relatively few vampires. It seems the Percy’s were very greedy with their power and have only recently started to increase their numbers. I don’t know if it is a result of the Great Mortality or the cause, but the number of vampires is growing. Sir Percy is plotting a take over...he’s slowly amassing an army of warriors like myself. His ambition knows no bounds.”

“You say he’s been creating more vampires...he’s amassing an army...he’s joining houses with Gall...sounds like he’s got his eye on taking over the country.”

“Yes Indeed, and that’s just a step to taking over all of Europe. Seth stopped abruptly as if he heard something that caught his attention.

“What is it?” Beon whispered, thinking one of the guards must have awakened.

“It’s Sophia, you must go to her. She is in my old quarters. She must be looking for you. She’s crying.”

“What?” Beon said as he turned to go, but Seth stopped him.

“Beon, I will be close by. Please think about what I have proposed. We’ve no time to lose.”

“I will.”

“I may have a plan to get the ladies out. It must be after Sir Percy has left the premises, however, otherwise he will be able to sense my presence. Oh, and you must tell the ladies not to speak or even whisper to each other once the plan is in effect...he will be able to hear them. Once they’ve disappeared, it would be best if they hid in the underground cellar to conceal their heartbeats. Wait, what time is the ceremony to begin?”

“Midday.”

“Oh, the devil take it,” Seth said as he began to pace along the stone battlement, “We must wait until nightfall before making an escape, my powers are greatly diminished during the day. My heart resumes its beating, and I am more or less human again.”

“This is madness! How are they supposed to remain hidden from a man with supernatural powers the entire afternoon until—hold on, that means Sir Percy is weakened as well, yes?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“So once the ladies are discovered missing, and we all go in search of them, why don’t we find the right moment to kill this devil.”

“Since I’m still discovering what I can and cannot do, I don’t fully understand his capabilities either. Or his weaknesses. I honestly don’t know if he can be killed yet. He thinks I’m out hunting right now. When he discovers I have disappeared in the morning, he will become highly suspicious and even more alert.”

“Even though his powers are diminished during the day? But how?”

“Our senses are still more heightened than mortals, even during the day.”

“All right, so if the ladies keep quiet and make their way to the cellar, you believe they can stay hidden until nightfall.”

“Yes, I think that should work.”

“I could also leave them all of our old defenses against vampires for good measure.”

“It wouldn’t hurt. Until we know what works against them, I think it’s best to try everything.”

“All right then, we have our plan,” Beon said as he turned to leave.

“Do you think Eva will still...want to be with me?” Seth asked weakly.

Beon forced a smile. “What makes you think she’ll want to marry a dead person, old man?”

“Not dead,” Seth said defensively, “just not exactly living—oh, I don’t bloody well know, but I have to try. I love her.”

Beon nodded and put a hand on Seth’s shoulder before leaving.

Making his way back to Seth’s old quarters, the night’s events were still a whirl inside his head. Even though he was feeling overwhelmed with all of this new information, he set that aside to prepare himself for seeing Sophia again and attending to her needs before opening the door.

The chamber was cast in an orange glow from the last of the embers simmering in the hearth. Still, Beon could make out Sophia’s dark form on the bed. She had her back to the door and appeared to be sleeping.

He slowly walked over, in disbelief that the woman of his dreams could possibly be in his bed. When he leaned over and saw her angelic face, Beon was becoming more and more convinced the entire evening was a dream. How did Sophia know he was staying in this room? How could Seth have known she was here? Was Seth even real? Beon felt exhaustion wash over him at all the overwhelming and nonsensical thoughts. He wanted this to be real. He wanted Sir Lyndon to be alive, he wanted Sophia to be in his bed, he wanted to believe all this could be a reality, but there was no way. This was most definitely a dream. It was the only explanation that made any sense.

As the weight of a week of sleepless nights hit him squarely in the head, he decided to indulge the beautiful apparition before him and lay down beside Sophia. Cupping the curve of her warm body,

Beon put his arm around her. He was in heaven. Beon breathed in the scent of her hair, sea salt, and lavender. He remembered their ride in the night all those years ago and squeezed her to him tightly. Beon began to feel himself drift off into blissful oblivion when a soft voice said, “Beon?”

“Yes, my lady,” he answered sleepily.

She exhaled at his reply. “Oh, thank the heavens! I was afraid Sir Percy had found me here.”

Panicked by her possible meanings, he asked, “Does Sir Percy often hold you like this?”

“No, of course not. You’re just suffocating me with your heavy arm, so I feared you might be him.

I mean I hoped it was you. I mean, I just didn’t know for sure.”

“Are you having those pre-wedding jitters I keep hearing about?”

“Most definitely.” Beon detected a note of emotion in her voice, confirming that she had been crying as Sir Lyndon had said.

She was pretending to be strong, but he knew better. “What’s wrong?”

“What isn’t wrong?”

Chapter 18

MISPLACED LADY

Sophia must've fallen asleep crying, she thought, as she blinked her eyes open. When she suddenly became acutely aware of movement behind her, her eyes widened. She was lying on her side, facing the wall but she could tell that someone was there with her, in her bed. Was it Sir Percy, come to claim his prize? Was it actually her wedding night? Perhaps she'd blocked out the entire day's events...or was this another nightmare?

An arm came around her and squeezed. Holding her breath, she lay perfectly still. The man's arm was so strong and heavy Sophia began to feel trapped. When the person clutching her relaxed and his breathing became slow and steady, she decided to venture a peek.

Turning her head slightly, she looked over her shoulder. Reality came crashing back and Sophia remembered where she was.

"Beon?" she asked, needing to know for certain that it was him.

"Yes, my lady."

Exhaling in relief at the sound of Beon's voice, she felt the tension slip free of her body. "Oh, thank the heavens! I was afraid Sir Percy had found me here."

A long pause came before his next words. "Does Sir Percy often hold you like this?"

"No, of course not. You're just squishing me with your heavy arm and so I feared you were him and not you. I mean I hoped it was you. I mean, I just didn't know for sure."

"Are you having those pre-wedding jitters I keep hearing about?"

"Most definitely." Except it was far worse than he even knew.

"What's wrong?"

"What isn't wrong?" she asked, wondering if he could hear how upset she had been.

"Care to tell me about it?"

"Your arm is still making it difficult for me to breathe," Sophia said.

When he released her, Sophia sat up, and Beon slowly followed suit.

Drawing her knees to her chest, she wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on top. "It's good to see you. Is it that obvious something is wrong?"

"It's good to see you too. And yes. Have things improved since Percy kidnapped you away from me?"

Things had only gotten worse. But just being near Beon made her feel safe again. Or safer, at least, and most of her panic receded. “Was it hard for you to listen to my advice and stay away?”

“Of course it was hard. Pure torture might be a better way of describing it. At first, I wasn’t going to stay away, but I’m not an idiot. I knew if I was to defeat Percy then I needed a better plan than just whisking you away in the middle of the night.”

“I’m sorry to sneak into your chamber... I just needed somewhere no one would find me.”

He frowned at her. “Has Percy harmed you in any way?”

“He’s only talked to me.”

“About what?”

“About his curse, which he doesn’t see as a curse at all.”

“He might be right.”

“What do you mean? How could you know anything about it?”

“Seth told me.”

Sophia looked at him and waited for him to explain, but when he didn’t, she asked, “And who is Seth?”

“Seth is Sir Lyndon. That’s his first name apparently,” he said with awe in his tone.

“You spoke to the ghost of Sir Lyndon? That’s almost more absurd than discovering Sir Percy is a vampire.”

“No, Sir Lyndon is alive and—”

Impulsively, Sophia slapped Beon soundly across the face. How could he not have told her this?

Beon blinked and rubbed at his cheek. “What was that for?”

“I’ve been grieving him...and watching Eva grieve him! Why did you keep this from me?”

Beon gaped at her and then said, “Wait a minute...slap me again.”

“You’re not making any sense at all.”

“Again, please.”

Growing annoyed, Sophia slapped him but good across his left cheek. “Satisfied?”

“Ow,” he said as he rubbed at the red handprint forming on his face.

Resisting a laugh, she asked, “Striking you actually made *me* feel better...is that strange?”

“A little,” Beon said, smiling. “At least I know that I’m not dreaming.”

Sophia stared at him while she tried to process the meaning of that. “We’ve been sitting here talking, and you thought you were dreaming?”

He shot a crooked smile her way. “You are here...in my bed, aren’t you? I just had to be sure it wasn’t a fantasy that only existed in my head...well, that and the fact that Sir Lyndon is alive. It’s all quite amazing. Especially since he is now a vampire.”

At that news, words failed her. When the silence stretched on, he asked, “You’re very quiet. Are you going to slap me again?”

“Should I?”

“Do I deserve it?”

“If you don’t explain yourself further, then yes.”

“Sir Percy turned Sir Lyndon into a vampire for an army he’s building. I mean, I suppose he also saved Sir Lyndon’s life. He really was dying. One bite from a vampire does it, I guess.” Beon studied her face and then asked, “You don’t seem as surprised by this as I thought you would be.”

“I am surprised that Sir Lyndon is still alive, but not about Sir Percy turning him into a vampire because he plans to do the same to me.”

“For his army?” Beon asked, sounding rather bewildered by it.

“No. As his bride.”

Anger made the muscles in his cheek flex.

“What are we to do? I don’t want to marry him...I’d rather die...”

“Please, don’t say things like that.”

She released her knees and turned to face him. Fighting a return of the tears, she took a breath, lifted her eyes to his, and admitted, “I went to Father, and he refuses to listen. I tried to be strong, but just ended up making him angrier than I’d ever seen him.”

Beon’s eyes went wide with alarm as she turned her face to the light. “Sophia! Who did this to you?” he asked, gently turning her chin with his fingers to examine the bruise.

“Father,” Sophia said, touching her cheek. She hadn’t realized it had left such a visible mark.

Beon’s face went a dark shade of red just before he slammed his fist down on the bed and the wood slats beneath them creaked under the strain as if they might snap. “I will challenge him. I will go to him and fight him to the death!”

Beon stood and made for the door but Sophia scrambled from the bed, captured his arm and pulled him back. When his face turned toward her, she kissed him.

For a moment, Beon was the only one in the world who existed. Every single worry and fear fled her mind for that blissful stretch of time.

When Sophia finally released Beon from the kiss, he said, “Let me avenge you.”

“I can’t allow you to challenge my father. I want to be with you, forever, not send you off on an errand that could get you killed. Now, what is your plan to get us out of here? You have a plan, don’t you?”

“I do. That’s all I’ve been thinking about.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

Beon nodded and looked toward the closed door. He swallowed hard and then, practically whispering, said, “Sir Lyndon...Seth, please come to the door.”

Suddenly, a gust of wind caused the door to rattle. Once the wind calmed, the door rattled again with three slow knocks.

“Come in,” Beon said.

The door creaked open, and there, as large as an oak, stood Sir Lyndon.



Beon awoke to a loud ruckus in the dormitory hall. Soon after, a harsh pounding sounded on his chamber door. Lord Gall burst into the room with two of his guards. They scanned the room quickly.

Lord Gall was clearly furious about something. Beon's first thought was that someone had caught Sophia on her way back into the castle and she had confessed to being in his chamber. Beon momentarily felt like an idiot for not thinking of that strategy sooner. Had Sophia claimed to be 'ruined' by Beon, they would have been forced to wed. On second thought, however, Lord Gall was so desperate for money and the prestige of joining houses with the Percy clan he cared nothing for propriety. It's possible he still wouldn't have budged.

"Where is she?" he spat.

A flood of anger returned, his fingers curling into fists. Beon wanted nothing more than to punch the man in his arrogant face for striking Sophia.

"I've no idea, my lord," Beon answered, concerned for Sophia himself. Why did Lord Gall think she was missing? Had Percy taken her this time?

"You will rouse yourself and aid in the search immediately. If I find that you've had anything to do with this, you will be hanged."

Lord Gall left in bluster of clattering steel and curses. Beon quickly got dressed, wondering where on earth she could be. This wasn't part of the plan. She was to go directly back to her chamber, instruct Eva as to her role in the ruse, and then behave as if all were normal until just before the ceremony. Beon was starting to panic.

When he left the dormitory moments later, he could see the castle was abuzz with activity. Guests and guards alike were searching high and low, inside the tents set up for guests in both the inner and outer baileys, calling Sophia's name periodically. Beon stood frozen for a moment, wondering if he should grab his horse and search outside the castle, when a female voice shouted, "Over here, my lord, she's in the chapel! I found her, my lord!"

Beon dashed toward the chapel, along with many of the others who'd been searching. *Please be all right*, he silently prayed. As he arrived, Sophia was being led out of the chapel by a scullery maid, most likely the woman whom he had just heard shouting. Sophia looked both surprised and indignant. Lord Gall was upon her the moment he saw her.

"What do you mean by disappearing? We've had the entire village up after you!"

Sophia looked at him coldly and said, "I was praying for my salvation."

Lord Gall went to grab her by the arm, but she shook him off violently. Beon was rather proud of the stand she was taking, but he was also concerned this would lead to Lord Gall hitting her again. Beon felt his body tense as he mentally prepared to stop him if he did.

"You will return to your chambers immediately and prepare for the ceremony," Lord Gall seethed through gritted teeth.

“I demand proxy brides for my wedding. With rumors of monsters abroad, I fear for my safety.”

This statement brought whispers and grumblings amongst the crowd. It seemed they agreed with her sentiment. Lord Gall took in the audience gathered around them and acquiesced immediately.

“Then you shall have them. The bride must be safe on her wedding day.”

Beon was again impressed with how Sophia had comported herself. He considered it a stroke of brilliance to make her request a public announcement and force her father’s hand. “I hereby decree that all maidens in attendance at today’s festivities will be dressed in white and veiled.”

Sophia and her father made their way toward the great hall and into the main part of the castle as the rest of the people in attendance went about their business.

Beon had some preparations of his own to attend to. He felt emboldened by Sophia’s display of unwavering confidence and knew that she would execute her part of the plan without fear. Beon found himself highly attracted to this side of Sophia and smiled to himself as he headed back toward the stables to complete his morning tasks.

More guests arrived throughout the morning, but there were extra hands to help with the horses being brought in, so Beon took the opportunity to slip away and complete his preparations for the escape. Once back at the dormitory, he gathered up the stash of stakes, holy water, and crucifixes he and Sir Lyndon had used to hunt vampires, as well as some boy’s clothing left behind by the pages and squires who had not returned from the war. He stuffed them all into a sack and made his way across the bailey toward the kitchen to pick up strings of garlic.

“Master Everard. What a pleasant surprise.”

The cold recognition of the slithery voice sent chills up Beon’s spine. He turned to face Sir Percy and give a slight bow. “Good morning, my lord, and congratulations on your wedding day.”

“That’s very generous of you. I thank you, humbly. I do admire a man who can swallow his pride, but then I always knew you were a lad of substance, Master Everard.”

Beon’s cheeks flushed with anger as he managed to say, “You are most kind, Sir Percy, now if you will excuse me,” and he turned to leave.

“Before you go, I would like to present my sisters,” Sir Percy said, stopping him. As his teeth clamped together, he turned to face the blackguard once again.

The two women standing behind Sir Percy stepped forward, smiling. They had a sense of conceit about them and never broke eye contact with Beon as they curtsied. “Arianna and Irina de Percy.”

Beon bowed in turn. “It is an honor to meet you both,” he said, “but I thought you had four sisters, my lord. Where is the rest of your family?”

As soon as the words left Beon’s mouth, he inwardly kicked himself. Sir Percy’s ears pricked as the corners of his mouth turned up into a forced smile.

“Aren’t you the inquisitive one, Master Everard. How kind of you to ask after my kin. Our sisters have lived abroad these many years and are thus, unable to attend this blessed event.” There was an awkward moment of silence that hung between them before Sir Percy continued, “Are you traveling

somewhere?”

Beon had completely forgotten about the sack he was carrying.

“Oh, no, I was told to clear out the dormitory to make more room for the servants of our guests.”

“Ah, yes, helpful to the last, aren’t we, Master Everard. I wonder if you can do one more thing for me. Call it a wedding gift.”

“I am at your service, my lord.”

“I’d like you to personally guard the front gate during the ceremony and subsequent festivities. I’m told my bride fears another kidnapping may be afoot.”

Percy smiled and Beon felt a wave of panic course through his entire body. Did Sir Percy already know of their plan? Had he discovered Seth was missing and captured him? Beon suddenly felt all alone, and now that Sir Percy intended to cut him off from the interior of the castle, he wouldn’t know if something went wrong.

“I will do everything I can to keep her safe, my lord,” Beon said, bowing his head in hopes of hiding his thoughts.

“Yes, you will, won’t you?”

Chapter 19

WITH THE DEVIL'S HELP

Sophia's heart was pounding furiously as she and Eva got dressed in their white gowns. They didn't speak a word but exchanged encouraging glances now and again. Sophia had decided not to go into the intricacies of Sir Lyndon's 'state' with Eva since time was so short. She simply told her that he was, in fact, alive, had survived, and made his way back for her. Eva had been overcome with tears of joy. Now, after hearing the scheme for their escape, she was as focused as Sophia in the task.

Handmaids and servants were bustling in and out of her Mother's old chamber, assisting the bride-to-be, as well as the number of other young women enlisted to be the bridal proxies. While Sophia had known that having multiple brides at a wedding was a fairly common safety precaution, especially amongst noble families, it hadn't struck her until after she'd left Beon's chamber how she could use it to her advantage. She might just be about to outsmart her father after all—and Sir Percy, too.

Aside from Eva, there was one more person Sophia had to entrust with her life in order for the escape to work, and that was Nurse. She was older now, but still spry...and still a loyal confidant to Sophia, like a kind and loving grandmother. Ever since Sophia's mother had died, Nurse was given charge of the household duties and overseeing the servants. Everyone in the castle referred to her as 'Madam Kemp,' but she would always be 'Nurse' to Sophia.

A beautiful woman entered the chamber whom Sophia had never seen before. She had inky black hair and striking green eyes. There was something familiar about her Sophia couldn't place. She strode right up to Sophia and greeted her with a smile.

"I regret we have never met until now, my dear. I am your aunt, your father's sister, Sabine."

"Oh, I'm very pleased to meet you," Sophia said with a curtsy.

"You are lovely, my dear...so much of your father in you, but without the hard edges," Sabine said with a wink. Sophia liked her aunt immediately. Sabine held out a parcel wrapped in linen and string. "I'll leave you now...but I wanted you to have this. I made it." With a wave, she was gone.

Sophia untied the string and opened the cloth. Inside was a beautiful bowl.

"Please put on your veils, ladies, let's see how everyone looks," Nurse commanded over the din in the room. Once all the girls had hidden their faces, the Nurse gave a nod of approval. "All right, I

think we're ready. All those who are not in the wedding party, please clear the chamber."

That was their cue. Now that it was time, Sophia's palms became cold and sweaty, and her heart began to pound again. In the bustle of servants leaving the room, she and Eva ducked behind the dressing panel in the far corner. Nurse had all the brides line up two by two in front of the large wooden doorway. She placed the two who looked most like Sophia and Eva in color and stature at the very back of the line. With all the girls in front of her, facing out toward the hallway, Nurse glanced back toward the dressing panel and blew a kiss.

Sophia felt tears well up in her eyes. Nurse touched her hand to her heart and bowed her head as if to say goodbye. Then she turned away from Sophia and Eva, took a deep breath, and stood to wait for the heralds to announce the procession.

After a moment, two men dressed in the house colors appeared in the hall, stood on either side of the entryway, lifted their heralding trumpets, and began to play.

"And, forward at a pace, ladies," Nurse said.

The group began to move forward in time with the music. As they proceeded down the hall, the heralds walked alongside them, carrying the tune as they went.

Servants and onlookers filed in behind the procession until they all disappeared around the far corner in the direction of the chapel.

Thank goodness Eva was there, for Sophia might have remained paralyzed in that very spot for hours. She shook Sophia out of her trance and guided her to the armoire. They quickly stepped out of their gowns and tucked them inside a linen sack before grabbing a candle and slipping into the secret passage, wearing nothing but their undergarments.

The dark and narrow passageway was much colder with bare feet and little clothing. They hurried as quickly as they could in hopes of coming across the garments Beon had left behind sooner rather than later. Sophia had told Eva they couldn't speak a word, or even make a sound, for fear of spies. The slightest whisper and they might be detected. They were as silent as mice as they made their way through the dark and dusty passage.



While stationed at the front gate, just as Sir Percy had asked, Beon stopped the monk and his horse drawn cart as he approached. The wagon he toted was stocked with four barrels of wine for the festivities. The monk wore a rather large crucifix and a string of garlic around his neck. The wagon had quite a bit of garlic strewn about it as well.

Beon smiled at the hooded monk, and whispered, "Ho, Brother, you must be one of those vampire hunters I've heard about." The monk lifted his hood slightly to reveal a smirking Seth. "I thought vampires were repelled by garlic," Beon whispered.

"Aye, but only because of the putrid scent," Seth laughed.

“I don’t find this amusing. Will it protect the ladies or not?”

“I believe it will prevent Sir Percy and his sisters from detecting their scent.”

“You believe?”

“I hope.”

“You hope?”

“It’s a good repellent for humans and vampires alike. Let’s leave it at that, shall we? It can’t hurt to conceal the smell of human blood.”

“Well, that’s encouraging.” Beon sighed. He was going mad with worry, and this new information wasn’t helping.

“Look, I noticed I could smell nothing other than the garlic when in its presence. It should mask the lavender always lingering around Sophia. I’d wager she rolls in lavender. It’s lovely, indeed, but it makes her stand out.”

“Are—are you serious?”

“About which part?”

“The lavender!”

Seth chuckled. “Are you daft? You know I have an affinity for irony?”

When Beon just shook his head, Seth went on, “Other than being repelled by food in general, garlic itself seems harmless. I’m sure we’ll discover many inconsistencies between the reality of vampires and the folklore. Now you need to calm yourself, Sir Everard.”

Beon looked at Seth. He had never been called ‘Sir Everard’ before.

“Yes, yes. Thank you. You’re right.”

Seth put his hand on Beon’s shoulder and smiled kindly.

Beon was about to turn toward the guards at the gate and tell them to open it when a young page ran up to them.

Winded, the lad exclaimed, “He knows!”

“Be specific, boy, what happened?”

“Forgive me. When the bridal procession came to a stop before the altar, Sir Percy frowned and started whispering something to his sisters. They promptly rose from their seats, left the chapel, and then...” The lad paused to catch his breath again.

“And then?” ask Beon on bated breath.

“And then Sir Percy shouted, ‘you betrayed me, Gall! You!’ And he pointed at Gall as he said it!” the boy repeated, pointing to show them how. “And...oh! This part was scary. Sir Percy was hissing he was so angry. And then...” Again, the lad paused as his voice rose in pitch. “And then Sir Percy asked, ‘What have you done with her?’ I wasn’t sure at first, but then I thought he must be talking about the bride.”

“That’s right,” agreed Seth.

“Percy noticed as quickly as I imagined he would. Are you ready?” Seth asked Beon.

“I’m ready,” he said.

“I’m not finished, sir,” said the page.

“Forgive us. What else?” asked Seth.

“Then they called the prox...pro...p...”

“Proxy?” supplied Seth.

“That’s right, the proxy brides. They called them out into the corridor and then, Sir Percy...this part is scary too...he, Sir Percy I mean, demanded all the brides...all six of them...or were there eight? Anyway, he demanded they all take off their gowns!”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The coverings,” said the page.

“Huh? Do you mean their veils?”

“Yes, those! He demanded they take them off.”

“Percy definitely knows then.”

“Without a doubt.”

“Am I done now?”

When Seth nodded, the page dashed off the way he’d come.

Fighting off a few chuckles at the boy’s innocence, Beon asked, “Was I that adorable when I was young?”

Seth laughed. “No, you were far too serious, I’m afraid. Still are.”

Beon shook his head and smiled as he turned to the guards and announced, “Wine for the wedding feast. Let the brother pass.”

As the gate lifted, Beon’s thoughts returned to Sophia and he swallowed hard, hoping he’d put the items he left for the ladies in the right place...much time had passed since he’d traveled the passageways.

MELEE

Eva suddenly stopped, sucking in quick bursts of air through clenched teeth. Sophia looked back at her, questioning with her eyes. Eva turned up the sole of her foot to reveal a nasty splinter. Without hesitating, Sophia knelt down with the candle and plucked the thorny wood free. The wound started to bleed immediately, and Eva gasped. Sophia placed her hand over Eva's mouth.

Once Eva collected herself, she nodded sharply. Removing her hand, Sophia gave Eva the candle. Then she reached down and ripped off the hem of her shift and started wrapping Eva's foot with the material.

Biting her lip for fear they'd made too much noise already, Sophia took Eva by the hand, and continued on. When they came to the intersection where the clothes should be, they found nothing. Disheartened, Sophia decided to keep going straight a little farther, thinking Beon might not have known exactly which passage they were using.

As worry began to cause a lump to form in the back of her throat, she saw a sack at the next intersection.

"Finally, a stroke of luck," whispered Eva.

Sophia lifted a finger to her lips and watched the passageway from which they'd just come, sure she was about to see Sir Percy rematerialize as he had done in the cottage. However, it was still daylight, and she didn't think he could find them as easily as he had at night, but that didn't mean the man wasn't crafty enough to sort it out anyway.

In haste, they each put on a tunic, stockings, and boots, along with the belts stocked with silver stakes, and strings of garlic for their necks.

"I don't think I've ever seen you look so dangerous before," said Eva softly. "But why don't we have swords instead of stakes? This is highly unusual."

Sophia shot her a look for speaking again. "No time to explain."

The trumpets were still sounding when they finally reached the little door, and Sophia silently said a prayer of thanks to Nurse for taking her sweet time.

Wincing when the hinges squeaked rather loudly, Sophia peered out and listened, making sure the corridor was indeed empty. Again, taking Eva by the hand, they ducked out from behind the tapestry and ran down to the stairs leading to the cellar.

Finding a place to crouch behind some shelves, Sophia jumped reflexively when someone at the top of the stairs said, “Four barrels? But we only sent for two. Ah well, go ahead and leave two outside the kitchen and take the other two down the cellar, if you would, Brother.”

A moment later, a monk came down the stairs carrying a wine barrel and set it on the floor. The monk removed his hood, revealing the welcome sight of Sir Lyndon as he scanned the dark room.

Sophia let out a sigh of relief.

Eva squealed happily, burst from her hiding place, and ran to him, throwing herself into his arms. As Sir Lyndon took her face into his hands, Eva started weeping. “Oh, Sir Lyndon, it is so good to see you’re alive!”

“Shhh, my love...yes, all is well. It is wonderful to see you too.”

Witnessing the reunion had Sophia in tears as well. After wiping the moisture from her cheek, she froze when the trumpet playing ceased abruptly, and all fell silent.

Sir Lyndon indicated for Eva to quickly get in the barrel. Once she was tucked inside with a lid Sir Lyndon had cut holes into, he turned to head up the stairs.

Drawing his hood up, he paused, looked down at Sophia, and said, “Stay with Eva. I’ll fetch the other barrel.”

Upon returning with a second barrel, Sir Lyndon secured Sophia inside, and then began transporting them to the wagon.

Even though she felt a bit unsteady as the barrel rocked with Sir Lyndon’s movement, Sophia felt surprisingly safe inside. But she knew this sense of security would not last.

Once the sun had set later that day and Sir Percy regained all of his vampire powers, she had no doubts he would search for her. He could find them just as he had before and Sir Percy would not leave Beon alive a second time...

Pressing one hand against the side of the barrel as the movement forced her to rock forward, a sense of panic gripped her insides at the worries going through her mind. But reminded herself that Sir Lyndon was also a vampire and could better protect them this time.

“Brace yourself, my lady,” said Sir Lyndon, his voice muffled by the wood surrounding her. “I’m about to tip you onto the cart with the other barrels.”

As she rocked sideways, rolled a little, and then settled against another barrel with a soft thump, she heard Eva ask, “What was that?”

“Just the barrel with Sophia in it. Not to worry, my love,” Sir Lyndon responded.

“Oh! What a relief! I was sure we’d been discovered!”

With a chuckle, Sir Lyndon said, “You will be found if you don’t remain silent.”

“Oh dear, I keep forgetting. Please forgive me, Sir Lyndon.”

“Please, call me Seth.”

“That’s your Christian name then? Oh, ‘tis lovely—”

“My lady,” Seth said, cutting her off. “You must be quiet.”

“Yes. Sorry,” said Eva.

Sophia had forgotten to call him ‘Seth’ as well. For as long as she had remembered, he had been Sir Lyndon to her, so she assumed she might still forget.

Sophia shifted to get a bit more comfortable, knowing she might be inside this thing for a while, but when shouts rang out, tension returned to her body. Had they already been discovered?

The barrels bounced a little when Seth took his seat and got the cart moving. As they rocked and swayed toward the gate, she prayed they would get out before anyone guessed at their hiding place. “We’re almost—” began Seth.

Almost what? Sophia wanted to ask but knew it was best to stay quiet.

When the cart rocked again, as Seth disembarked, she held her breath to try and hear what was happening.

After a long pause, Seth said quietly, “Sit tight, ladies, I must dispatch this villain.” He chuckled and then said, “Only jesting. There’s just something blocking the way.”

Hearing his footsteps fade away, Sophia wasn’t sure if he was just saying that so as not to worry them. From what she could hear—that being the constant shouts and the sharp ping of blades connecting—there could very well be several villains to dispatch.

As time dragged on with the sounds of battle going on around them, Sophia began to feel smothered in such a confined space. She was getting to the point she wanted to claw her way out when the clash of steel drew closer. Mentally fighting to slow her breathing, she tried to calm herself, lest she give their hiding place away.

Sophia barely had time to brace against the sides of the barrel when something struck the cart, and the barrels shifted, bumping into each other.

Eva squeaked in surprised, and Sophia prayed she hadn’t been heard.

Suddenly, one barrel popped free of the cart, thumped to the ground, and all of the others followed.



Beon was still standing guard outside the main gate when men came running out of the castle. He assumed Lord Gall and Sir Percy were part of that melee, but it was hard to pick them out from his vantage point.

The clash of knights continued, and Beon was relieved to see them not paying any mind to the monk and his cart of wine barrels. He could hear Lord Gall barking orders to his men to find Sir Percy. Where had the man gone if they were searching for him? he wondered as he too began scanning the grounds.

He could see the cart down near the kitchens. It appeared to be about full now, so he would wager that Sophia and Eva were tucked safely inside two of them by now.

The castle grounds were alive with combat, but from what he could tell, their plan was moving along without incident. The fact that Sir Percy wasn't accounted for did pose a problem, however, so Beon continued looking for the man.

Beon was completely taken off guard when he caught movement from the corner of his eye and realized a man was running toward him, sword raised. Quickly realizing he'd just found Sir Percy, or rather, Sir Percy had found him, Beon drew his own blade and braced for the attack.

"Where is she?" growled Sir Percy, his blade cracking sharply against Beon's as he defended himself.

"Have you lost track of one of your sisters?" Beon asked, playing dumb.

Sir Percy narrowed his eyes in anger and attacked with more vigor. The man's strength was so astounding Beon feared he might not be up to the task. He'd known Percy would be unstoppable at night, but he hadn't expected daylight to be a challenge as well.

"At first, I'd only thought you two had dallied. I'm beginning to think it was much more than that." Percy said striking with such force that Beon fell to one knee.

"I beg your pardon. What are you insinuating?"

"She'll still be mine," Percy said as he thrust forward again.

Beon ducked and rolled. Once he came to rights, he countered with a wide sweep of his blade. "Sophia will have what she wants," Beon said, "and she does not want you."

Sir Percy easily dodged Beon's sword and came down like thunder overhead once more. "You won't be able to escape me again."

"I know what you are," said Beon, acknowledging mentally that it was a bold move to call the man out, but he did it anyway.

"Do you now?" asked Sir Percy, appearing unfazed.

"I'll find a way to stop you."

Sir Percy came at him again, but with such force this time, Beon's sword was wrenched from his grip and he felt the tip of his opponent's blade prick his chest. "Not only are you young and foolish, but you're too arrogant to live."

"He's there!" Beon heard a man shout from the battlements above him.

When Sir Percy saw the mass of Gall's knights headed their way, he said, "As night falls, you'll wish you hadn't challenged me, Everard."

After watching Sir Percy disappear into the trees, Beon turned his eyes back toward Seth. The knight had started toward the gate with the horse and cart but had to pause when a group of battling knights got in his way. Redirecting the horse off of the path to get around them, Seth began working his way closer, but then stopped again to clear something out of the way.

The shouts of women drew Beon's eyes to the left. Recognizing the two females fighting against

men in Bamborough colors as Percy's sisters, Beon felt regret that Gall did not know he was dealing with vampires. His men—on Gall's order he was sure—were busy trying to capture the sisters. Either the man didn't know the truth or Lord Gall was an arrogant fool. Sir Percy had just threatened Beon's life for challenging him in regards to Sophia, so this affront would certainly get Lord Gall killed. Guilt pricked at Beon's conscience for failing to do the honorable thing and alert Lord Gall to the true nature of his future son-in-law. Not that he would have listened.

With Seth on his side, Beon felt empowered. Of course, if he became a vampire too, that clash of swords would have gone quite differently. He could admit that the idea intrigued him.

Arianna and Irina displayed the same level of strength as Percy. To most it wouldn't have been obvious the sisters were immortal magical beings, even now, as they fought fiercely against men twice their size, they mostly seemed spry and clever, but Beon suspected the men had little hope of actually capturing them.

Irina finally shoved one of the knights away from her. Stumbling backward, he bumped into another cart loaded with hay. With just enough of a slope to gain momentum, the hay cart careened toward Seth's cart of wine barrels. When it struck the cart's wheel, the strap holding the wine in place broke, and all of the barrels tumbled to the ground.

Fearing Sophia and Eva might be injured, Beon started for the barrels, but he stopped when Seth signaled him to halt. Realizing if he rushed to check on Sophia and Eva their hiding place would be revealed, so he took a breath to calm himself. Trusting Seth to take care of the ladies, Beon watched in awe as Arianna and Irina dashed up the steps to the north wall and were gone before anyone could catch up with them.

BY LIGHT OF CANDLES

Beon clenched his jaw as he watched Seth inch his way through the sea of men with his horse and cart. It was taking so long, he noted the knights who had gone after Sir Percy return from the hunt empty handed and he wasn't surprised in the least.

He was learning that only an order of vampire knights like Seth could have accomplished the task. This thought brought Seth's offer to mind yet again. Seth truly did need more knights on his side to successfully fight against these powerful beings. Vampires had an unfair advantage. But was he ready to become a vampire too? Beon still wasn't sure.

"We march for Alnwick post haste. Ready yourselves for battle!" Lord Gall barked, "He's on foot for now, but could easily acquire a horse along the way. With any luck, we'll beat him there and launch a surprise attack."

"No chance of that." Beon turned his head to find Seth beside him atop his cart.

"No chance of what?" Beon asked.

"They'll make it to Alnwick before Sir Percy."

"Right," Beon said, still feeling shaken by his encounter with Percy and numb from his fear of this plan working. And although it would seem the extraordinary turn of events had worked in their favor, it had done nothing to ease his tension.

They were completely alone at the gate now. Seth handed him a monk's habit, and he ducked behind the wall to throw it on. After taking the seat next to Seth in the cart, they rode off, turning north on the main road.

"No one pays any mind to two monks, do they?" Beon asked.

"Not in my experience," answered Seth.

"Is it something you have a lot of experience with, then?" Beon asked, teasing now.

"Indeed. I'm an expert on such matters."

"Are you now?"

"Can we get out yet? I'm developing a cramp," asked Eva.

"We haven't traveled far enough to be safe, my lady. I'm sorry," answered Seth, his eyes searching the forest around them.

Beon thought he'd heard Eva sigh, but the sound was muffled by the wood. And Sophia's silence

troubled him after witnessing that tumble the barrels had taken. From the corner of his mouth, he asked in a whisper, “Do you think they’re both all right?”

Seth nodded, and Beon exhaled in relief.

Silence sat between as he began to process all that had happened.

Seth interrupted his thoughts by saying grimly, “I see no other way but for you to turn. Percy will come for our women and for us.”

“I know,” Beon said.

“It is a strange feeling to be riding in the opposite direction of the battle. Seems to go against my nature,” Seth said.

They’d been traveling for a while, and Beon kept imagining what it must be like for the ladies inside the barrels. “Do you think it’s safe to set them free now?”

Seth glanced toward the sun that still rested in the sky. It was sinking toward the horizon, however, and both knew their situation would change as the sunlight diminished. “I do.”

Beon turned and stepped back into the cart. “As you were saying, I believe our fight is here now, with the women we love. Our duty is to them. We need to leave this other life behind and start anew.”

After taking his dagger from its sheath, Beon pried the first barrel open and then the other.

Reaching a hand out for each of the ladies, he hoisted them out of the barrels. Having completely forgotten they were dressed as boys, Beon was shocked at the sight of them.

Eva thanked Beon earnestly and then joined Seth up front. Still holding Sophia by the hand, they looked at each other with weary smiles as they knelt in the back of the cart.

“Bumpy ride?” he asked her.

She laughed. “Bumpy is one way of describing it.”

“Is there another?”

“Bruising,” she grumbled as she rubbed at her knees.

“And harrowing?” he offered.

“That too,” she agreed.

“Just watching was harrowing for me, I must confess.”

“I survived it, I guess.” With a heavy sigh, Sophia looped her arms around his middle and rested her head on his shoulder.

Wrapping her into his embrace, he dropped his chin against her hair and watched as the sun began to set.

Beon had thought long and hard about where they should hide. He had desperately wanted to return to Brentworth, but bringing his mother into this mess was out of the question. She had suffered enough. Besides, Newcastle was south, just like Alnwick and they did not want to be traveling the same direction as Gall. Holy Island seemed the only choice. It was certainly remote. They could take sanctuary there for as long as needed. Hopefully, the brothers and sisters wouldn’t mind, or notice, a vampire or two amongst them...for Beon had in fact decided Seth was right. He must turn so he could

join this fight.

They stopped in Middleton along the way, at the tiny village of Elwick. After arranging for two rooms, the ladies went to change, enjoy a hot supper, and rest.

As Seth cared for the horse, freeing the beast from the cart, Beon watched the sun sink closer to the horizon, and he worried he'd again find Sophia gone in the morning. The fear prompted a question, "Sir Percy won't find us tonight, will he?"

Shaking his head, Seth said, "Did you forget about the garlic hung all over the cart?"

"I did forget about that."

"How could you forget with that stench?"

"You still have faith in...something so, well, so simple?"

"You've lost faith?"

"You make it sound like I've lost faith in God. Are we still talking about garlic and its vampire repelling properties, because I thought we already established that it wouldn't work?"

"I was. And I said it *might*."

"You're doing that 'irony' thing on me again, aren't you?" Beon said as he rolled his eyes.

"You make it far too easy."

Beon shook his head and sighed, feeling exhaustion set in.

"And entertaining," added Seth with a chuckle as he turned and started back towards the inn. "And no, I think Sir Percy will have his hands full protecting his land from Gall's 'surprise' attack. As for the garlic, I believe it did aid in masking the ladies' scent during our escape."

Once they got settled into their rooms, Beon took one look at the bed and had to lay down for a moment or two. He must have dozed off instantly because he awoke to Seth nudging him in a most annoying way and saying, "Wake up, I've got a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" Beon asked sleepily. "Is it morning?"

"No, you've only been asleep for a quarter of an hour."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to understand. Now stop dallying and get changed. You can't come dressed as a monk."

"I can't?" he asked, blinking in confusion. "Where are we going?"

"Well, I suppose you could come as you are, but it would cause quite a stir, and you'll look silly whilst standing next to me in my fine tunic." Seth grinned broadly and ran his hands over the emerald green tunic he was wearing.

"I fear I didn't pack for a special occasion. And how could my being dressed as a monk cause a stir?"

Pointing, Seth ignored his question and said, "Put that on."

Upon the bed lay a blue tunic and a pair of black trousers. "Where did you get those?"

"Where else does one get clothing?"

Beon rubbed the sleep from his eyes while he frowned up at the man. “Is it your aim to vex me with confusion?”

“Yes, that is my goal.”

“What?” Beon asked in surprise.

“Get changed, posthaste...and do something about that pile of straw on your head that you call hair.”

Once Beon was dressed, and he’d tamed his hair, Seth patted him on the back and remarked, “Rather astounding where one finds himself from day to day, wouldn’t you agree, Sir Everard?”

“Yes indeed,” Beon said, still completely bewildered by Seth’s odd behavior.

“Come with me to church.”

“To pray?”

Seth marched out of the room without another word so Beon had no choice but to follow.

Once they stepped inside the sanctuary, Beon was greeted by the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen. Standing before him with stained glass windows, lit candles, and almost as many flowers as a May Day celebration for a backdrop was Sophia, dressed in a white wedding gown, her sable tresses plaited with little white flowers tucked in between the sectioned strands. Beon drank in the sight of her. She was mythical in his mind and he was indeed glad he wasn’t dressed as a monk any longer.

It was impossible for Beon not to match Sophia’s smile as he went to her. Instinctively, he knelt down before the woman he’d dreamed of making his bride and took her hand into his, pressing a kiss to her fingers before looking up at her.

“Rise, Sir Knight, and claim your bride,” Sophia said.

“How I have prayed this day would come. I can scarcely believe it. I...haven’t even asked for your hand...forgive me...will you marry me, my lady...will you marry me a thousand times over?”

“I will,” Sophia said and touched his cheek.

Seth cleared his throat, and Beon turned to see that a priest was waiting at the end of the aisle. So enchanted by Sophia as he was, Beon hadn’t noticed anyone else was in the room.

He noticed Eva who was also dressed in a white wedding gown, her hair styled similarly to Sophia’s.

“Shall we?” Seth asked.

Beon nodded, and the two couples proceeded to walk, side by side, toward the altar. Surreal and rather unexpected, Beon found it made the occasion all the more special.

There, as the sun’s last beams were devoured in the west and spilled in through the windows of the small church, Beon and Sophia were married.



“It’s dark outside,” Sophia whispered.

Beon could hear the fear in her voice.

“This will be different than the cottage. We have Seth with us. And we’re smothered in garlic, remember?”

“What if that didn’t work?”

“Seth is convinced it did.” Drawing her into his embrace, he cradled her head to his shoulder and stroked her hair. “I trust the man with my life, and with yours.”

“Percy is much older. What if he knows how to elude a new vampire like Seth?”

It was possible, Beon thought. But she needed to get her mind off of these nightmarish thoughts. Glancing toward the door adjoining their rooms where he knew Seth would be on high alert for any danger, Beon let dread and doubt slide free of his mind. This was their wedding night, and he was keen to focus on what mattered now, in this moment. Making Sophia his wife was what he’d wished for these long years and now it was a reality. Loving her completely, as only a husband can, and kissing her with the intensity he felt in his heart was what he’d dreamed about during their time apart. But now, finally, the fantasy had become life. No more waiting.

“And what if—?”

“Where should I start, do you think?” Beon said abruptly so she couldn’t continue voicing her worries. “Shall I first strip this gown from your body or should I pluck these lovely flowers from your hair?”

Speechless now, she blinked up at him with those pretty blue eyes of hers.

Smiling, Beon pulled one of the primrose flowers from her hair and took in the fragrance before dropping it to the floor, then reached for another. He bent forward to kiss her while he continued blindly unraveling the plaits in her hair, uncaring of where the flowers fell.

He felt her fingers grasp onto his tunic and he smiled against her lips, knowing she was already distracted by the feelings stirring her blood rather than thoughts weighing on her mind.

Drawing away, Beon watched as auburn tresses dropped down around her shoulders, the red strands catching the flickering glow of candles lighting the chamber and the fire warming it.

Beon motioned for her to turn around and said, “I think I should start on those laces next, don’t you agree?”

“No,” she said with half a smile touching her lips.

“No?” he asked. What? She couldn’t be talking about consummating, could she?

Sophia giggled and reached for the hem of his tunic. “You first.”

Raising his arms as she drew the material up over his head, he said, “You just might be as good at dry humor as Seth.”

“Am I?” she asked so seductively, he found himself quite intrigued.

His breath hitched when she boldly reached for the drawstring of his trousers and Beon decided he was more than intrigued by this side of her, he was utterly spellbound. To him, she was as enchanting as any siren, so magical and mythical it was hard to believe she was real...and finally his.

Once he was nude, he noticed a flicker of uncertainty on her face and her cheeks bloomed with color at the sight of him, proving her purity and innocence.

“Now, may I start on the laces of your gown?” he asked. If she said no again, he would shamelessly beg.

Smiling and biting her bottom lip, she promptly turned away from him. Reaching up, Sophia dragged her hair over her shoulder to uncover the lacing.

Unable to stop himself, Beon ran the backs of his fingers down her neck before he started tugging the laces free. He smiled when a faint shudder worked its way over her body at his touch.

Piece by piece, Beon freed her of every garment she’d been wearing until it all lay in a pile beside the flowers on the floor.

A bit more bashful than before, Sophia didn’t turn to face him right away. Taking her by the hand, he said, “Let’s get under the covers before we catch a chill, shall we?”

Even as he spoke, he saw goose pimples spring up over every inch of her skin. Drawing her towards the bed, she finally turned to face him. Beon caught his breath again and couldn’t help the smile on his face, which he was sure had to be ridiculously enamored.

Without speaking another word, they snuggled in beneath the covers, and Beon savored the way they matched each other with the ardor of each kiss and caress they shared.

Sated and more tired than he’d expected to be, Beon held Sophia close, realizing he loved her so much he would be lost without her. No, he thought, changing his mind. ‘Lost’ wasn’t strong enough. He’d be devastated.

With Sir Percy still out there, Beon found he wasn’t able to hold onto the blissful feeling of peace he’d found lying with Sophia on their wedding night. She could be taken away from him far too easily unless he took Seth’s offer to create this new order of vampire knights. The risk was too great not to become a vampire.

“Can we leave the candles lit?” she asked snuggling closer to his side.

Beon knew they’d almost burned to the bottom and would be going out soon. Hoping the dwindling fire would be enough illumination to make her feel safe, he said, “Of course we can.”

“I can’t get the image of Sir Percy rising from the shadows to steal me away out of my head.”

“I can only imagine how terrifying that must have been. Sing something for me, my little songbird. Singing always makes you feel better.”

Beon could feel her smile but she remained silent, so he added, “And remember, we have Seth now.”

“A demon to protect us from a demon,” she said.

“I can’t think of Seth that way.”

“It certainly doesn’t fit the Sir Lyndon of our youth, does it?”

After pausing, Beon finally made himself ask, “What if I were to make the same change by choice?”

A MYTHICAL ROMANCE BEGINS

Waking the next morning within the circle of Beon's arms was a welcome change to the grim routine that had become Sophia's day-to-day existence. With him, Sophia felt lighter and happier than she ever had. Life had seemed so uncertain and bleak just a day earlier, she was almost afraid to believe this could truly be her new reality.

By the grim look on Beon's face, Sophia could tell he had something heavy weighing on his mind. She rolled to face him and asked, "Care to tell me what has you frowning after such a wonderful night?"

"We should prepare to leave. We're traveling on to a secret castle Seth purchased as he made plans to separate himself from Sir Percy."

Somehow Sophia didn't think their travel plan, secret or not, was the thing drawing his eyebrows together. She rose to one elbow and scooted closer, so she was looking down at him, her hair draping over his shoulder. "Since we made it through the night without Sir Percy interrupting our much-needed rest, my mood is much lighter."

This brought a smile to his mouth, and she was reminded of all the passionate ways he'd kissed her last eve, her cheeks heating as the memories washed over her.

Perhaps thinking about the same thing, Beon traced a finger along her jaw before drawing her closer for a kiss that caused her entire body to heat up.

Pulling away, he looked into her eyes and said, "I confess that my spirits are higher too, but we still have some serious decisions to make."

Sophia knew exactly what he was talking about—becoming a vampire wasn't something she wanted to talk about. Not last night, not now.

When she said nothing, Beon pressed a kiss to her forehead, rose from the bed, got dressed, and started packing up their things.



They'd only been able to obtain a second horse, so as they traveled, Sophia rode with Beon while Eva rode with Seth.

Seth had been making his case for the three of them to ‘turn’ since they left the inn, and Sophia was beginning to dread the conversation to come because she hadn’t decided what she wanted yet. While the idea of feeling safe from Sir Percy was appealing, the thought of drinking blood was not. She just wasn’t sure if she was willing to make such a big sacrifice, especially since many things about this curse remained unknown to them.

“I don’t think there’s any other way, my love,” Beon finally said after the group had been silent for some time.

Tears immediately stung the back of her eyes, because she felt like she hadn’t had enough time to ponder it thoroughly. Fighting them back before they spilled down her cheeks, she nodded her head and sighed heavily. “I know... In light of all we’ve learned the past two days...but I just.”

“Yes, there’s a world of cursed beings out there that mean us harm. It is my duty as a knight and as a husband, to protect you. And the thought of spending immortality with you by my side—well, I can’t imagine a more blissful life.”

“I’m not ready...I can’t...I mean, just not yet.” Of course, the idea of being with him for eternity appealed to her, which is why she was so confused about it all.

Beon looked at her with concern. “I understand you’re frightened, but this is for your protection—well, for our protection.”

“Please don’t make me, Beon. Not until I’m ready!”

“All right, all right, my love...not until you’re ready.”

“I will wait as well,” Eva interjected.

“Eva,” Seth said with surprise.

“I must stand with Sophia in this. She and I will turn when she is ready.”

Seth cast his eyes heavenward, sighed, and then mumbled to himself, “Agree and compliment. Agree and compliment.” After pausing for a beat or two, he finally added, “Beon, I find we have ladies who are not only lovely but wise beyond their years and therefore unwilling to make a hasty decision, even on matters as pressing as this.”

Catching on to the reference of Seth’s advice when wooing a lady, Beon nodded and said, “Indeed, so it will be.”

Sophia did not miss the fact that while the men were allowing the ladies to wait, it did not mean Beon would wait with them. She knew Beon was moving ahead with this plan. “When will you...do it? When will you make the turn?”

Beon considered her tenderly before saying, “Tonight.”

Sophia couldn’t stop the flood of tears that burst forth, and her shoulders slumped.

She felt Beon lean forward and press a kiss to the back of her head as she sat before him on the horse, his breath heating her skin beneath. “Come now...it’s not as if I’m dying. Well, not really.”

“Perhaps we should have a little funeral,” Seth said, obviously trying to lighten the mood with a little humor, but it only made Sophia cry harder.

“Sophia, I assure you, I can detect very little difference in Seth. He’s still spouting as much silly nonsense as he was before.”

Seth gaped in surprise for a moment, and then he burst out laughing. “Well done, my love, you’re a quick study in the art of irony.”

Eva let her signature high pitched laughter and Sophia couldn’t help but smile a little. While Seth’s jest had only made Sophia weep more, Eva’s finally drew giggles out of her.

“Yes, you see there? The biggest adjustment Beon will have to make is properly managing his unusual strength,” said Seth.

Sophia felt a mixture of excitement and fear as Seth’s castle came into view. It was massive with tall turrets at every corner. The dark color of the stone and the gothic details embellishing the structure made it look menacing, and Sophia imagined it might be the perfect place for a secret order of vampire knights to operate from. The cloud-strewn sky overhead reflected on the water of the inlet it overlooked, and while she would miss the sea at Bamborough, she decided this would do well enough.

“Welcome to Vyndon Castle,” said Seth proudly as he led them inside. “Once we have enough men in our garrison, this place will be lively indeed.”

““Vyndon?”” asked Beon.

“I thought it best if I renamed it, don’t you agree?”

“Sure, but why Vyndon?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

A moment of silence had passed before Beon said, “*V* for vampire and the rest for Lyndon, is that right?”

“Do you have a better idea?” Seth asked, frowning at Beon’s tone.

After passing his gaze over the cavernous great hall, Beon shrugged his shoulders and said, “Works for me.”

“Great!” Seth clapped his hands. “As the daylight is waning quickly, I think it best if we prepare your last supper.”

“I’m sorry, ‘last supper’ did you say? What do you mean by that?” asked Beon.

“Well...I must confess that I left out one drawback to this curse.”

“Another drawback besides the fact that it’s a *curse*?” Sophia asked.

“It’s a minor detail.”

“And that detail is?” asked Beon a bit nervously.

“You will no longer be able to taste food.”

Sophia watched Beon’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed.

Silence settled around them before Beon squared his shoulders and announced, “Anything to keep Sophia safe.”

“Are there other ‘drawbacks’ to this curse you’ve neglected to tell us?” Eva asked. “I do fancy a

good custard tart or a lovely elderflower fritelle. You know the one, it's dripping with so much honey it seems as though your fingers are sticky for a week. Just the thought of not being able to taste those only renews my decision to wait a bit."

"Other drawbacks?" Seth held onto his chin in a thoughtful pose. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not exactly sure."

The silence stretched on longer this time, but again, Beon notched his chin a bit higher and said firmly, "The two of us together could better combat Percy and his sisters. I cannot leave you alone in this."

Knowing by the determination in his voice that Beon would not change his mind, Sophia said, "As there are no servants yet, I will prepare your last meal."

This drew a smile to his face, and he looked at her with devotion. "Truly, I am grateful to have you."

Turning to Eva, Sophia asked, "Do you know how to make fritelles?"

"I do, but a recipe would be helpful."

"I stocked the larder in preparation for our arrival," said Seth.

"Shall we see what there is for us to make a fine supper then?" Sophia asked Eva.

"I would be happy to help."

Upon entering the kitchens, Sophia immediately noticed a book that she assumed would contain recipes. Pulling it down from the shelf, she opened it and found directions for making fritelles as well as oatcakes, crispels, fish pies, pike in brase, rye bread, leek soup, and spiced cabbage.

As Sophia listed off the ingredients, Eva gathered them together and set them on the big cutting board in the center of the kitchen. "Oh, just looking at all these items makes me so hungry I could eat a mangy horse, and then go back for the knight."

Laughing, Sophia said, "Oh my, you are hungry! I hope you can hold out until this feast is prepared as we only have two horses at the moment."

Sophia checked the recipes again and then went out into the garden to see which herbs were available for the fritelles, hoping to find either elderflower or clary.

Still exploring her new home, Sophia took it all in as she made her way to the kitchen garden. Planted geometrically was just about every plant she'd seen at the Priory and more. Unable to resist them, Sophia plucked a few gooseberries.

Just as she spotted the elderflowers, she heard Beon say, "This seems like a fine garden for us to walk hand in hand whilst we begin our new life together as vampire and mortal, wouldn't you say?"

Turning to face him, she laughed and asked, "Couldn't you have said man and wife instead?"

Beon shrugged his shoulders. "I see a perfect boxwood to sculpt into a bird that would delight my little dove."

He considered the sky as the colors of sunset had only just begun rising from the west. "Once we've had supper, Seth plans to make the turn..."

Sophia had plucked a few elderflowers but paused in her task at his words. “Don’t do it, please, Beon.”

“I know it’s difficult to understand. All that’s happened is so unbelievable...but listen to me when I tell you that *nowhere* is safe any longer. We must protect ourselves from the evil that surrounds us. That is the duty of a knight. A knight adapts and uses all the tools at his disposal to protect what he holds dear...and you, Lady Everard, are what I hold dear. I am bound by life and blood to do all in my power to safeguard you, those we love and this country. I have no choice but to take up the sword against evil. I have no choice but to follow this dark path and do my best to shed light upon it and cast out the demons that would destroy us.”

“By becoming a demon yourself?”

“What choice do I have?”

He didn’t have a choice. Her conversations with Sir Percy had been enough for her to know that. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am that I didn’t have to marry Sir Percy.”

“I find I’m equally relieved.”

She looked up into Beon’s eyes with such love brimming over in her heart she thought it might burst. Beon had grown to become every bit the man Sophia knew he would be. Sophia dropped everything she was holding and slung her arms around his neck, kissing him with more hunger than she’d ever had for food. He reciprocated with such passion that whatever fears and doubts still lingered faded like the waning sunlight.

“Come,” he said, pulling away from her.

Gathering up the items she needed for supper, Sophia followed Beon inside.



Seated at the long table in the great hall, it did seem rather sparse with only the four of them there, and Beon tried to imagine it filled with vampire knights. The last rays of sunlight spilled in from the narrow windows running along the west wall. The space was clean and furnished, but it still seemed empty. Even the fire they had built within the great hearth seemed lacking in some way.

Beon knew he needed to help Seth build this order of knights they’d been discussing. Within the depths of his soul, he knew it was part of his purpose in life to do this. To save as many people as they could from vampires like Sir Percy.

And it was somewhat uncomfortable to consume a meal with Seth in attendance when he basically just watched them eat with a bit of envy written within his expression. Beon knew he too would soon be in the same position, and as he bit into the rather delectable crispel, he couldn’t help but reconsider his decision.

Knowing it might not be wise of him, mainly because it could weaken his resolve, Beon asked, “Is food truly flavorless?”

“Yes,” said Seth, shuddering at the thought of it.

“I can’t even imagine that.”

“The textures are all you feel since the taste is gone.” Seth shuddered again.

“And that’s a problem?”

“Well, soup is just wet. Meat is slimy, and pastries are... I honestly don’t know how to explain it.”

Feeling quite satisfied with his last meal, Beon leaned back in his chair and stared at his empty trencher. On second thought, perhaps it had been a mistake to indulge in a last meal because it could make him miss food more. But no matter how he circled the problem facing them, this threat, he could find no other solution. Seth interrupted his thoughts by saying, “Ho there. Are you still with me? It seems as though you’ve gotten lost in contemplation.”

Beon chuckled and said, “Yes, old man, I’m still with you.”

“Have you decided to join me and become the first knight of our order? Am I turning you into a vampire tonight?”

Beon held out his left wrist toward Seth and said, “I’m ready.”

“Hold on,” said Seth “I’m not sure if I’ve shared enough information with you yet.”

“Such as?” Beon asked settling his arm back down onto the table.

“I don’t know how long it was between Sir Percy biting me and my transformation...it could’ve been a moment or a month.”

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose it doesn’t. But the sooner the better, I say.”

Beon offered up his wrist again but turned to look at Sophia when she suddenly took hold of his other hand. “I love you...I’ll be right here,” she said.

Seth cast a glance toward the windows as the rays of sunlight faded to black, and then he said, “Now I must ask you to look in my eyes. Ladies, it’s time for you to look away.”

Black, Beon thought, Seth’s eyes were such a dark shade of brown that they were almost black. While held within his trance-like gaze, Seth blew into his face. As a strange magic filled his lungs, it began to muddle his mind and make his limbs feel boneless. Beon sank against the back of his chair, fearing he might fall. But he didn’t care if he fell or if he died, at this point, all he wanted was a bite. Even though he was rather alarmed at that idea, he also realized he actually *wanted* Seth to kill him.

Seth took hold of his arm, opened his mouth with fangs now visible, and began to lean over his wrist.

“Wait!” Sophia said, grasping onto his sleeve frantically.

What is it? Beon wanted to ask, but couldn’t.

“Can vampires have children?” she asked.

Silence fell for a time, and Beon closed his eyes. With this magic clouding his mind as it was, he honestly didn’t give a fig about children. If Seth would just get on with draining him, that would suit him just fine.

“I—I’m not sure if they can. I know that Sir Percy and his sisters are quite old and they do not have children. So if I were to hazard a guess, I would say no, they can’t,” answered Seth.

Sophia tugged on his sleeve, probably trying to get him to focus on her. Beon was listening, but he couldn’t do much more than open his eyes and look at her. “Please, Beon, don’t do this until we know for certain.”

“You want children?” he managed to ask as the spell began to dissipate.

“You don’t?” She sounded hurt.

Beon bent forward and pressed the palms of his hands against his temples as he tried to clear his head. Once he felt less wobbly, he said, “I...well, I guess I hadn’t really thought of it, but I think you’re right, we can’t risk this until we know. I don’t think I could bare it if we never had any children.”

Beon glanced at Eva, and when he noticed how pale she looked, it was obvious she had just realized that she and Seth would never be parents.

Eva fidgeted uncomfortably and then rose from her seat. “I think it’s time to clear away this mess.”

“I’ll help,” Beon said. He kept his hands on the table to test his balance, but it would seem the magic had completely released him from its grasp.

Helping to gather up bowls and trenchers, they all brought it to the kitchen.

Beon stopped cold when he saw the state of the kitchen, however, because it was an absolute disaster. “Is Vyndon Castle infested with trolls or some other such creature?” he impulsively asked Seth, half joking, for only a mythical being could create such a mess.

Eva started laughing so hard, Beon feared she might hurt herself while Sophia looked extremely guilty. “Hold on. Am I to understand Sophia did this?”

And his gorgeous wife, the woman who still reminded him of angels, the woman who fulfilled all of his fantasies, just shrugged her shoulders while biting her lip.

Chapter 23

MYTHICAL BEINGS FROM HEAVEN AND HELL

Sophia was so happy Beon had not yet become a vampire that he found it a bit disconcerting. She was practically skipping as they headed toward their bedchamber. This concerned him because while he wanted to ensure they started a family first, he still meant to become a vampire knight. Was she hoping he'd changed his mind? And if she was, how would he convince her otherwise? And how many children did she want? Please, God, he prayed as she dragged him along the corridor, please not an entire brood of angelic-faced, naughty little cherubs...running about...making all kinds of noise...demanding hugs and kisses as they press sticky fingers against his cheeks...

Just before they got to their chamber, he had seriously considered breaking free of her grasp, running the other direction, and begging Seth to bite him posthaste. But as she swung the door open and turned to face him, the beauty looking up at him with such an incredibly tempting 'come-hither' look on her face, he lost any resolve he might have had. Bring on the misbehaving little monsters, he thought, because he just couldn't deny her.

While walking backward, Sophia grasped onto a handful of his gambeson and drew him in after her. Holding her eyes with his, Beon yanked the clasps running up the front of his gambeson free, shrugged out of the garment, and threw it to the side. Once he'd discarded his shirt, she silently asked for help in undoing the laces running up the back of her dress by turning away from him and moving her hair out of the way.

Making quick work of that too, it wasn't long before they tugged the dark blue drapes surrounding the four-poster aside and fell into bed. As he made love to his wife, Beon never once thought of children or vampires until after their bodies had been sated...whether by lips moving over lips, fingers linked with fingers, or just skin against skin, Beon found such contentment that he was grateful she'd stopped him from turning when she had.

He didn't yet know what it would be like to live as a vampire but he did know what life was like as a man, so how could he squander these moments just to defeat a ruthless villain? He shouldn't, and he hadn't.

As she drifted off to sleep with her head resting on his shoulder, and as the candles burned low, Beon gathered up a lock of Sophia's soft hair and wrapped it around his finger as he pondered their

plans. A part of him never wanted any of this to change, but another part of him ached to fight and defend the weak just as he'd trained for years to do. The war within himself waged on.

Beon was just about to drift off to sleep when a sound from somewhere *within* the chamber wrenched him from the edge of unconsciousness. Everything inside him tensed as he mentally prepared for a fight.

As if a ghost had just materialized from the shadowed corner of the room, Sir Percy came into view and then moved toward the bed. Having prepared earlier by tucking weapons beneath the pillows, Beon untangled himself from his wife's sleeping form and grabbed a silver stake with one hand while he lifted up a dagger with the other. Reminding himself what it was like to be spellbound by curse magic from the vampire's eyes, Beon took great care not to make eye contact. Watching his body was the only way to track his movements.

The demon stepped closer and simply laughed. "I will admit that it was clever of Seth to use garlic to mask your scent. I would have found you sooner if not for that."

As Beon rose from the bed and moved away from it, hoping to draw this fiend away from Sophia, Sir Percy continued, "The stake will not harm me either, in case you're thinking it will."

When Sir Percy turned his face to look at Sophia while she slept, Beon lifted both weapons above his head and stepped forward.

Before he could take another step, the door flew open and smashed against the wall so hard, the handle broke through the plaster and got stuck in the wall.

In a blur of motion that was impossible to track with his eyes, Seth engaged Sir Percy. Wishing he could be of more help, Beon remained aware of the fact that Percy had found them so fast, he wouldn't likely have had time to make the turn anyway.

The vampires crashed into the wall, cracking many of the stones with the force. Bits of rock thumped to the floorboards as Beon searched his mind for some way to help Seth.

Sir Percy threw Seth toward the opposite wall of the chamber, causing just as much damage and waking a shocked and horrified Sophia in the process. Of course, how could he expect anyone to sleep through a clash of vampires right in their own bedchamber?

With her jaw-dropping and her eyes widening, it was clear it hadn't taken her long to grasp what was happening. "Don't look at their eyes," he warned when she looked toward the scuffle.

"Took you long enough," Seth said, as he and Percy circled each other like wolves.

Only because they'd paused in their fight did Beon see that Seth's clothes were tattered from battling with the vicious vampire.

"Sophia, stay there," Beon said when he noticed that she was taking up the second stake hidden beneath their pillows.

Sir Percy laughed darkly. "I've come for my revenge, and I will have it."

Eva appeared in the open doorway, and Beon wanted to roll his eyes. Couldn't these women understand the level of danger here? Beon made shooing motions with his hand, urging her to get to

safety, but it seemed as though the silly woman was too shocked even to move.

Sir Percy regarded all four of them before finally addressing Seth, “I make you into this great warrior, and this is how you repay me?”

“You never knew me if you thought I would go along with your plan to build an army of monsters like yourself so that you can rule the world with terror.”

“What a disappointment you turned out to be, Sir Lyndon. You know, the Great Mortality presented a most unique opportunity for us to reign over vampires, as well as men. Perhaps the entire magical world.”

“You don’t actually think I’ll let you get away with it, do you?”

“You don’t honestly think you can stop me, do you?”

Percy turned his eyes on Sophia and said, “Your father was extremely foolish to think he could attack me.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, looking down at the silver stake in her hands, clearly remembering the magic within his gaze and that she must avoid it.

Beon didn’t have time to process what happened next until it was too late. He simply blinked and Sir Percy was there, directly in front of them, transfixed on Sophia as her fingers tightened around the stake, knuckles turning white. “Your father promised you to me,” he said as he reached out and touched the ruffled edge of her nightshift. The fact that he dared even touch his wife while she stood beside him made Beon’s blood boil.

Wanting to cleave the demon in two, and wishing he had his sword at hand, Beon thrust the dagger into Percy’s chest, only it didn’t do any more damage than tear a hole in his shirt. With blinding speed, Sir Percy delivered a terrible blow to his head, and he went down, dropping the stake as he tried to catch himself. It took him a moment to gather his wits, head bursting with so much pain it blurred his vision, Beon staggered to his feet.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, the flash of lightning illuminating the sky with a flicker of white.

In a blur, Seth captured Sir Percy and slammed him into the bed. The wood splintered, and the substantial piece of furniture was demolished in an instant. Again, both men tussled with such speed that Beon couldn’t follow their movement until Seth was sent crashing through the wall and Sir Percy immediately lit off after Sophia once more.

Beon could tell she didn’t know what to do when Sir Percy clasped onto her chin and blew into her face. But she didn’t collapse like he thought she would have. Confused as to how she had resisted the power of that dark magic better than he had, Sir Percy began to chuckle. “Clever lady, you held your breath.”

Seth returned and engaged Percy once more. The two vampires wrestled, neither one of them making any progress over the other.

Beon gaped in horror when Sophia lifted the silver stake high above her head and brought it down onto Sir Percy’s back. Again, the stake failed to pierce the man’s body, proving yet another one of

their theories false. Was there truly no way to destroy the devil? As he'd watched this battle carry on, however, Beon had come to understand that if Seth had not been alone in this fight, they would have easily prevailed. As it was, they were too evenly matched. If two vampire knights of such caliber, fighting for life and love would have been enough to protect three mortals, then an entire garrison of such knights would be unstoppable.

Another flash of lightning lit up the chamber, the storm drawing closer as Beon looked on feeling utterly weak and human in this moment.

Sir Percy was able to send Seth flying into the chair beside the hearth, and he again turned toward Sophia. "I knew you were a feisty little wild thing...worth every bit of trouble, I'm sure."

Recovering as fast as he had before, Seth took the stake from Beon's hands and thrust it into Sir Percy's back. It sank in and pierced the man's heart.

Percy howled in pain and tried to pull the stake from his back, but his arms weren't long enough to reach it. Another flash of lightning flashed across the sky. The stake reflecting the light as it flickered.

As Percy's knees failed him, Seth lifted him up and threw him toward the window. Beon watched as the man's body crashed through the glass and fell to the ground below. They all rushed to the window to peer out. But to everyone's dismay and horror, his body was nowhere to be seen. "He could not have survived that, could he?" Beon asked.

"He must have," said Seth, sounding utterly astounded.

"He won't come back, will he?" asked Sophia.

Beon turned to face her and drew her up against his body when he thought she might collapse. "I certainly hope not."

"This means you're going to turn into a vampire as quickly as possible doesn't it?" she murmured against his bare chest.

Beon was about to respond to that when he noticed Eva still standing in the doorway, her eyes wide, her face drained of color, and her lips trembling.

When Seth saw her, he rushed to her side, gathered her up into his arms, and carried her back to bed.

Chapter 24

AN ORDER OF MYTHICAL KNIGHTS

“There’s something very different about you,” Beon said as the morning sun bathed the chamber in a golden hue. She and Beon were lingering in bed as they often did, both of them lying on their sides facing each other.

“What do you mean? Is this a good ‘something different’ or a ‘bad something different?’”

He laughed. “It’s definitely a good something. Hmm...I’m not sure how to describe it, though.”

Beon studied her as he pondered it, his fingers running through her hair.

A month had passed since Sir Percy had found what Seth and Beon were now calling ‘Order Headquarters,’ but he had not returned. The two men frequently speculated as to the reasons why. They all feared he was still building an army and that it was only a matter of time before he arrived with hundreds of vampires rather than confronting them on his own again.

Because of this concern, they were building their own army. In that month, their garrison of knights had grown to a hundred and fifty-two. Beon was not yet numbered amongst them, however, much to Sophia’s relief.

She was quite aware of the fact that she was the only one who remained relieved by this, however. The fact that it was a great sacrifice for Beon to wait was not a kindness she would forget. He was doing it all for her...or really for them, so they could have a family before it was no longer possible. She’d seen how he watched the vampire knights practice in the lists at night when their powers were at their strongest. She could tell Beon was dying to join them and eager to be that powerful. So not only was she relieved that he had waited, but she wrestled with a mixture of gratitude and guilt over it as well.

Having seen how Seth was able to take on Sir Percy fed the guilt she was feeling. As the threat of Sir Percy remained, she knew Beon could protect her without aid *if* he too were a vampire. The sense of bliss they had enjoyed fed the gratitude because it was like none Sophia had ever known.

“The rays of sunshine are casting a halo of fire around your head as it touches your auburn hair,” he said.

“Is that what’s different about me, a halo?”

He smiled and shook his head. “And I’m always reminded of strolls along the beach when I peer into your eyes.”

“I’m not used to you being so sentimental. What is this about?”

He laughed again. “I still haven’t sorted it out. It’s almost as though you glow.”

“Are you sure it’s not just the sunlight making me ‘glow?’”

With a chuckle still rumbling within him, Beon rolled, rose from the bed, and began getting dressed. “I’m sure it’s not the sunlight.”

Sophia did the same. “You do realize you’re not making any sense, don’t you?”

Once they were dressed, he reached a hand out to her and said, “Shall you we go down for repast?”

Taking his hand, she said, “It does feel a bit odd with only the two of us seated alone at that enormous table for each meal.”

“As the only mortals here, I don’t see that changing.”

“And when you become a vampire, it will be only me.”

“I’ll sit with you and pretend to eat.”

Sophia wasn’t sure how to respond to that as she tried to envisage it.

“And you will be joining me at some point, won’t you?”

Knowing he meant that she would also become a vampire, she sighed and said, “Yes, for you I will.” As they made their way to the great hall, she imagined drinking blood and knew it would be a struggle, but she felt it only right that she be willing to make the same sacrifice for Beon that he was going to make for her.



To pass the time, Beon carved every shrub on the premises into varying shapes of topiary art. Over the years, he’d found that working in the garden was always something that helped clear his mind. He was able to strategize, theorize, and look to the future of what this new order of knights could mean to the world. He’d pondered the design for their coat of arms, what colors it should be, and the motto they should hold themselves to.

He’d mentally debated what animals should represent their order. When he’d sculpted one shrub into a lion, an image had begun to take shape. As the king of beasts, portraying undying courage, Beon felt a heraldic lion perfectly suited an order of vampire knights.

Considering the shrub beside it, a fierce drake came to mind, its teeth bared and its talons raised. Once he’d finished sculpting the dragon and stood back to consider his work, he’d known this creature represented them as well. The mythical reptile symbolized a guardian of treasure, and Beon immediately thought of Sophia. But not only was their goal to guard the lives of those they cared about, but protect all mortals from creatures bent on using their unfair advantage to gain power over the helpless.

As the time for supper neared, Beon sat before the fire in the great hall and sketched out what he

was envisioning for their crest, imagining the rings, banners, and tapestries they would have crafted to signify their order of knights.

Seth came up from behind him and read aloud the motto he'd just scripted along the bottom in Latin. "'Shame to him who evil thinks.'"

Beon watched as Seth moved around and sat in the chair facing him. "What do you think?"

His comrade bent forward and propped his elbows on his knees. "I think it perfectly suits the Order of Curse-Bound Knights and I can't wait to see it woven into a tapestry and hung above this very hearth."

Silently Beon added two swords criss-crossing in the center to symbolize power, freedom, and purification. It wasn't likely the Order would be able to eliminate all the vampires like Percy who would do harm in the world, but with the rise of such a 'plague,' the knights would save as many mortals as they could.

"I've been instructing the men to call you Lord Beon rather than Sir."

Lifting his eyes from the paper, Beon looked at Seth with surprise.

"I need them to respect you as much as they do me," he continued.

"But...I'm not a vampire yet and unless—" Beon couldn't ignore the fact that he was again waiting to progress as others moved ahead without him. Of course, the reason he'd spent so many years as a page was different than why he was remaining mortal.

"You will be soon enough, and we're starting this undertaking together."

Would it be soon enough? Beon wondered. Sophia wanted children, and as far as he knew, she wasn't with child yet.

As if the thought of her conjured her presence, Sophia entered from the kitchens as she wiped a white substance off her hands onto the pair of trousers she was wearing. He opened his mouth to comment on her boy's attire, but closed it when she held up her hand and said, "You've already teased me adequately for donning the male clothing...it just makes cooking so much less distressing."

"How so?" he asked with a laugh as she sat down beside him. "And why are you toiling in the kitchen when we have a cook to do that now?"

She brushed a lock of hair out of her face, leaving a streak of white across her forehead, and then gave him a sheepish look. "It's so enjoyable for me, I just can't seem to resist."

"And?"

"And I enjoy making delectable things for you to eat."

"You forgot to explain the distressing bit."

Sophia bit her lip and shot him a guilty look. "Oh, well, it's less distressing to wear trousers because I don't need to worry about my gowns getting soiled."

"Do I even want to see what the kitchens look like this time?"

"Probably not."

Finding this silly side of her charming as well as amusing, Beon looped an arm around her and

pressed a kiss to her cheek, taking in the fact that she smelled of cloves, nutmeg, and sugar. “Who will you cook for when we both become vampires, my lady?”

Her eyebrows drew together, and she pouted. “Are you saying that will happen soon?”

“I’ll turn first, as we discussed.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to avoid being close to you at night like Eva is always complaining about,” she said rather sadly.

Beon glanced at Seth before returning his eyes to Sophia. “Not to worry, my aim is to honor your wish, we’ll wait until we have a baby.”

“Speaking of nighttime,” interjected Seth. “I feel the sun setting.”

“You can feel that?” Beon asked.

“Well, I’m not sure if that is the best way to phrase it. It’s more like I know the sun is setting because I can feel the curse magic awakening.”

“That sounds alarming,” said Sophia.

Seth considered them for a beat or two before tipping his head to the side and considering Sophia more closely. “I can hear something different about you, my dear.”

Sophia’s eyes rounded. “That sounds even more alarming. What do you mean?”

“Your heart...I’ve noticed it beats...strangely these last few days.”

“What?” Beon asked, also growing alarmed at this information.

“It’s muddled...or faster. I don’t know...”

“You can actually hear it now?”

Seth nodded. “Not perfectly just yet. As it is still daylight, or dusk rather, I believe I could hear it more clearly if I set my ear against her chest. But as the magic rises, I can easily hear it from a distance.”

“If it sounds irregular to you, does that mean I’m about to die of some heart malady?” asked Sophia sounding a bit panicked.

“I won’t let that happen,” said Beon, unwilling to even imagine how he would cope at the loss.

“How could you prevent it?” she asked.

“I would insist Seth turn you into a vampire to save you.”

She shot a horrified look Seth’s way at that.

The man chuckled and said, “I think you two are getting a bit ahead of yourselves. As I said, the sound is faint at the moment. Let’s have a proper listen once the sun fully sets to put your minds at ease, shall we?”

Sophia linked her fingers with Beon’s a bit frantically as they waited.

Seth dropped his eyes to the floor as he sat before them in silence. After a few moments had past, in which the only sound to Beon’s ears was the crackling of the fire, Seth gasped in surprise and raised his head abruptly, an unusual look on his face that Beon couldn’t interpret.

“You’re making me nervous. What is wrong with me?” demanded Sophia.

“I hear *three* heartbeats, not two,” he finally announced.

“Three?” Beon asked.

“That’s right.” Seth pointed. “One heartbeat within you, and two within Sophia.”

Beon felt his jaw drop when he finally caught onto what Seth was saying.

“A bit slow, aren’t you?” teased Seth “Perhaps fatherhood has already addled your brain.”

EPILOGUE

FOUR YEARS LATER

While lying on her back, Sophia watched the gulls in the sky above her, swooping and dancing, their shapes silhouetted against a pale blue. Bending her knees, she dug her toes deeper into the warm sand, loving the feel of it between her toes. The melody of her favorite lullaby rose from her lips as she sang. The words of the cheerful rhyme seemed the best way to express how content she was feeling...until sand was suddenly kicked in her face.

Spitting the grains from her mouth, Sophia sat up, blinking. The frown fled her face when she watched her little girl, Nadia, waddle past, emitting a string of excited giggles and screams. Beon was closing in fast behind her, and when he scooped the girl up into his arms, he swung her high in the air before planting her feet again. Nadia continued to giggle uncontrollably as she took off running once more.

“That’s a good girl, Nadia, make him work for it! He’s growing soft!” Seth shouted from beside Sophia.

Eva laughed in her hysterically high-pitched honking manner, which in turn caused Mother Everard and Nurse to start giggling as well. The entire clan had decided to venture out for a picnic on this fine day. Ever since Beon had visited his mother and found out the king had named he and Seth Lords of the North, and given them the lands and titles formerly belonging to her father, Lord Gall, the family had decided to stay at Bamborough during the summer months. Beon had invited his mother to stay with them whenever they were there.

Having Beon’s mother in her life was like a sweet balm to Sophia’s soul...almost like having her own mama back. She was gentle and kind and loved Nadia as only a grandmother could. It was a dream come true that they were all together and it made Sophia deliriously happy, and the halls of Bamborough Castle now echoed with laughter. Sophia really didn’t know the details of what had happened to Father. She just knew that he’d attacked Sir Percy and then never returned.

Beon appeared lunging over a nearby knag with Nadia on his shoulders amidst a gaggle of titters that never seemed to cease when they played on the beach like this.

“Lord Beon! I thought I taught you how to treat a lady! Now release your daughter at once!” Nurse teased, and Sophia remembered when Beon twirled her around like that too. A fond memory for sure.

“Thank goodness you were around to instruct him, Madam Kemp!” Mother Everard laughed.

“Pardon me, but I thought I was the one who taught Beon how to treat a lady. Ask a question, agree, and compliment...the secret to success...” Seth’s interjection brought more laughter...and honking, in the case of Eva.

“You’re both wrong,” Beon said as he set Nadia free and then crawled toward Sophia, his voice going husky, “it was this beautiful creature who taught me how to treat a lady.”

“You’re a work in progress, Sir Knight.”

Sophia squealed and laughed when Beon captured her about the waist and tickled her. In the tussle, she’d wound up on her back again.

After pressing a ticklish kiss to her neck, he rose up, propping himself on his elbows. Beon peered down at her for a long moment, an unspoken question in his eyes. Before he said anything, however, he leaned closer and kissed her gently on the lips.

When the others cheered at such a public display of affection, Sophia felt her cheeks heating.

Beon released her mouth and held her gaze once more, that question still visible within his expression, and she was prompted to ask, “Dare I ask what you’re thinking?”

“Nadia turns five in a fortnight.”

Sophia frowned at that. It wasn’t a question, but then as she thought about it, she realized it was. They’d agreed to discuss his turning into a vampire again once Nadia was five years old.

A bit of panic constricted her lungs at how fast this day had come. Beon was right to ask it of her...she knew that...he’d been so patient in letting them have this time together as mortals.

Knowing there’d been recent whisperings of Sir Percy and his vampire sisters continuing to recruit more followers in hopes of returning with an army to fight them, in addition to the countless battles they’d had over the years, this wasn’t a decision they could keep putting off. The Order had thus far successfully hindered Percy’s diabolical plan to rule the world, and the ancient vampire wanted revenge.

As Beon waited for her response, Sophia looked over at Nadia playing with a seashell, and she knew it was time. She knew Beon would do anything, make any sacrifice to keep that little girl safe, and so would she.

After taking a measured breath and then releasing it, Sophia looked up at Beon and said, “Yes.”

Trailing a finger over his stubbled jaw as she processed what this change would mean, she added, “I’ll miss peering into your eyes whilst we lay in bed each night.”

“Does the idea of blindfolding you once the sun goes down intrigue you?”

She blinked at that, trying to sort out what the smirk on his face meant. “I might be curious to see what you have in mind. But what are you going to do about your magical breath?”

“I mean to keep you completely intoxicated with it.”

“What about when I become a vampire as well?”

“We’d best enjoy it while it lasts then.”

“What makes you so sure it’s going to be enjoyable for me?”

“We won’t know until we try, will we?”

“So cheeky! What am I going to do with you?”

“Could I offer a few suggestions?”

Sophia laughed. “I think you should shut up and kiss me again.”

“I find I very much like the way you think.”

The End

Thanks for reading!



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Cheri Schmidt, author of the successful Fateful Vampire Series, and Tristan Hunt, a seasoned narrator, decided to start writing together in 2016.

Having come from artistic backgrounds, Cheri as a photographer and designer, Tristan as a musician and performer, they've often joked while embarking on this unexpected journey that they are 'two creative, non-writers, writing together.' But the union has been a natural progression of two storytellers at heart working together to bring Cheri's books to life through audio over the past three years. The duo worked so well it was only natural to begin telling the stories together moving forward.

Cheri writes from her home in Virginia and Tristan writes in California, symbolic of two very different perspectives enriching the tales they tell!

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PICK YOUR POTION

WITCH'S BREW COZY MYSTERY BOOK 1

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Pick Your Potion (Witch's Brew Cozy Mystery 1)

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WITCH'S BREW COZY MYSTERY BOOK 1

Gypsies, vamps, and weres... these are just some of the people powerful witch Claudia Crestwood and her friends protect.

In the city of Hartford, Connecticut—years before Salem, there were witch trials. Now the paranormal coexist with humans, more or less. With the help of her hippie aunt and cousins, her gypsy uncle, and other paranormal friends, Claudia stands on the line between humans and paras—helping to keep the peace.

When a human customer dies after an incident at the coffee shop, Claudia must dig into the case to protect the café and the coven. Threats have been made and what's worse, she's harboring a hunter wanted by the police in her basement. A hot and powerful wizard starts showing up in the shop when Claudia needs help and is at her worst. Intriguing and annoying... She isn't sure she can trust him and his reclusive family but it's time for her to dig deeper into the magical world.

Chapter 1

I fumbled with the grinder that had, of course, locked up right in the middle of the morning rush. Coffee and tea sounded like such a calming business, but people were serious about their coffee and not patient about waiting for it.

The sighs and mumblings of the backed-up line of customers registered, but I had to focus on the matter at hand or I'd make a mess and it'd only take longer. Magic would help, but there were too many humans watching me far too closely.

"Claudia," my cousin Iris whispered from the back.

I gave her the in-a-minute finger and turned to Brad, one of our new baristas. "Try and get that loose. I'll be right back."

"Right, boss," he said.

Vampires. I liked hiring them, mostly because they took the night shift, lived on expired blood from the blood bank, and their handsome faces brought in the lady customers who ordered the pricier drinks. This one seemed as tame as any of those I employed. But vamps liked structure and following a leader. I was so not that leader. I was a twenty-five-year-old witch with a long line of caffeine deficient customers.

"And make me a green tea with a double shot of calming potion when it gets slow," I said as I wiped my hands on a towel.

Potions were what my aunt cleverly named the shots other places used. Some were just flavor, and others had herbal benefits or vitamin mixes. Our PMS potion might get snickers from men, but the female customers swore by it.

The coffee shop remained a great cover for my coven's deeper purposes. We helped paranormal creatures who didn't want to hurt humans. We could all coexist, or so my hippie aunt believed. She was working the counter in one of her flowing printed dresses, no bra and wicker shoes.

Iris tapped her foot on the floor to get my attention and waved me over faster.

I picked up the pace and joined her. "What's up?"

"Dad has someone in the basement," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

I shrugged and admired the mermaid braid she'd put her honey blonde hair in today. She and her identical twin sister, Violet, were always on trend, even if they were hippies like their mom. Her tank

dress flowed in a red paisley today.

“He needs you,” she added.

“Why? The cells are free if he needs to lock up anyone,” I replied. Hosting any werewolves who needed a secure place during the full moon was also part of the routine.

“I don’t think it’s that. Please go check. I’ll cover for you up here. I don’t have a class until ten.” She grabbed the towel from my hand.

“Good luck, that grinder likes to spit out grounds.” I was sort of happy to be free.

“Every job helps us to help others.” Iris smiled.

Her good mood probably had as much to do with cute and eternally youthful Brad as helping people. I wished I could be as cheery and sweet as my cousins about cleaning. I mean, they were like my sisters. My aunt and uncle raised me after my parents died. I was only five when that happened, so I should’ve taken more of their teaching to heart, but I still had my mom’s draw to dark magic and big powers. Strong powers weren’t bad, as long as they were used for good. I had to watch the slippery slope.

I didn’t have the sweet blonde hair either. I had pure black hair that I jazzed up with a shimmering purple strip to be more like my sisters; they had purplish names, anyway.

I walked down the stairs. The old brick building was full of spirit energy and history. Hartford, Connecticut attracted paranormal creatures because, decades before Salem, it’d had its own witch trials here. That meant witches and paranormal creatures naturally had a right to be here. It also meant we clashed with the local human population, at times.

Owning a coffee shop brought the gossip and the news to me organically. This way, our coven had a finger on the pulse of the human world just in case we needed to push the paranormal further underground for our safety. Witches and wizards were the crossover, after all. Mostly human but with the ability to develop some powers. I had more than my share.

The basement was a maze. Storage was separate. The cages were in the back. There was a small room where vamps or hunters sometimes crashed when they had nowhere else to go. Uncle Vinny had someone on the cot and was grabbing gauze from the first aid kit.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing, he’ll be fine. We just need to hide him here for a while,” Uncle Vinny replied.

“Sure.” I trusted my uncle but still wanted to talk to my guest and feel him out.

My uncle’s phone beeped. “I have to take this. Just give him the rundown.”

Uncle Vinny took the call and spoke his native language.

I studied the visitor. Mid-twenties, handsome, beat up and scratched but still smug enough to smile and act like he wasn’t in pain.

“Ryan Jones,” he said.

The Jones was a lie, but most hunters used fake names. “Claudia Crestwood. You’re a hunter?” I asked.

He nodded. “What’s your uncle speaking? I can’t place that language.”

“Rom,” I said.

“Like Romanian?” Ryan frowned.

“No, like Romani. He’s a gypsy. Where are you from?” I asked.

“South Carolina most recently. I was tracking a werewolf that just refused to be contained during the full moon. He kept killing. He killed his family and just didn’t care, anymore. He went into a mall just before moonrise. A couple of stores were having midnight sales or staying open around the clock before Christmas for shoppers. I had to take him out. But I was on video. I killed the werewolf, but he turned back into human form once he was dead.” He winced and put pressure on his leg.

“I know how werewolves work. So, you got tagged for murder by the local PD?” I tried to assess his wounds. “You need a hospital to check out internal injuries. At the very least you need stitches.”

“Nah, just a little rest until things calm down. You’re a gypsy witch?” he asked.

“I’m not a gypsy. My aunt is my mother’s sister; Vinny married into the family. Sorry, no gypsy blood here. You can stay, but you have to follow the rules.” I propped a hand on my hip.

“Sure,” he said.

“No meddling in my uncle’s cases unless he asks you for backup. No upsetting my coven or my family. Stay out of my coffee shop. Don’t upset my customers or the staff.”

“No problem. Relax.” He grinned.

He was sexy but used to being in control. No doubt I would be a challenge. His broad shoulders and strong arms were tempting, but you had to be tough to be a hunter. Then again, hunters often died young. My uncle had lots of scars, and he was semi-retired. Now, he acted as advisor to the younger hunters in the area.

“That’s not all. I have vampires who work here, mostly at night. They have plenty of blood supplied, so they don’t kill people. You don’t bother them or intimidate them. If you stay for a full moon, I house werewolves. You don’t antagonize them.” Some hunters liked to keep the fear in the paranormal creatures so they stayed in line. I’ve found friendship worked better than threats.

“I only hunt those who’ve killed humans and refuse to take help in containing themselves.” He held up his hands.

The answer was politically correct, but my instinct said he liked the kill. A little more Faith than Buffy.

“I never met a gypsy before. Think he’ll take me to stay with them?” Ryan asked.

“Why would he? With that smirk and the flirty attitude you’re giving me now... Those guys would beat the crap out of you if you even looked at their daughters. Gypsies are the original hunters. They’d teach you a few lessons.” I grabbed the backup first aid kit from the shelf. He’d need it.

“Original hunters?” he asked.

“Think about it. Nomads who traveled light with their families. Men went out and did the work; women stayed home—protecting their kids. It looks old-fashioned, but they all are fighters. The

groups were rumored to be associated with poverty, crime, and trouble because they were hunting the creatures that lived in the shadows and hurt humans. That's not an easy life, is it?"

"No, it's not. Makes so much sense. How did I not know that?" He chuckled.

"You do, now. So, respect them and stay away because those guys travel in groups, fight anything bare-handed, and make *The Walking Dead* look like a vacation when they go after someone. From the looks of you, you'd mess with the wrong daughter."

"Then, I'm lucky your dad isn't a gypsy." He grinned.

I shook my head. "You don't know what my dad is. Could be worse than a gypsy. I'll send down some food, coffee, and bottles of water. Don't leave the basement."

Uncle Vinny came back. "Got a plan?"

"He can stay until you patch him up and find another place. I don't want him around the twins too much. You need to make a plan for as soon as he can travel," I said.

"I understand. Think you can heal him?" Uncle Vinny asked.

"Probably, but he needs to be stronger. He's faking strength, right now, but I can feel he's weak. Let Aunt Mandy stitch up the wounds, clean him up, then he can rest. When he's stronger, we'll do a healing session or a few." I texted an order to the sandwich shop next door. Somehow, soup seemed in order, and theirs was the best.

"Okay, I'll tell her. You arrange the food and maybe see if the vamps can spare some clean clothes. He's a mess." Uncle Vinny shook his head.

"It happens. With all the video cameras out there, your job gets harder and harder," I said.

"People see what they want to see on them." Uncle Vinny sighed and headed upstairs.

I shot the young hunter a look. He didn't appear nervous, at all.

"So, what are your powers? Breaking hearts?" he teased.

I shook my head. "Healing, potions, spells, a touch of empathic vibrations—among others."

"Loaded witch. Most of the Wiccans or pagans I meet are all talk," he said.

He wanted a demonstration. "I'm not a magician here to entertain you."

"Impress me. Scare me into obeying all your rules." He winced and grinned too fast to cover his weakness.

The flirtation was a distraction for him. He was trying to forget his pain.

I stared at a dusty bottle of Jack Daniels on the top shelf. There was a ton of coffee and tea stock in the storeroom area, but in here, there were other essentials. I focused and felt the bottle vibrate. I mentally yanked it from the shelf and countered gravity to keep it from freefalling. It floated lower and lower.

Ryan grabbed it and opened it fast. "You're an angel of mercy."

"No, that's my aunt. Be warned, if you make fun of her hippie ways or eccentric style, my uncle will feed you to the werewolves himself. He left the gypsies for her, and they may be different, but they've got the most stable marriage I've ever seen."

“Opposites do attract. Like a hunter and a no-harm doing but powerful witch.” He took a slug of whisky.

I tried not to blush. He was hot, even if he was full of himself. “If I have to do harm, I do it. Don’t drink too much. Auntie has all natural painkillers that will knock you out and keep you loopy.”

“All natural?” he scoffed.

“Cannabis, opium—hell, cocaine is all natural—it’s how you distill and use it. She won’t get you high, but your pain will be over soon,” I said.

“Send her in. But promise you won’t take advantage of me while I’m out of it. I want to remember.” Ryan blew me a kiss.

I glanced at the bottle in his hand, and it slipped and landed on his very bruised ribs.

“Damn it! Witch!” he shouted.

I walked up as Aunt Mandy was coming down. “He’s really in pain, poor dear,” she said.

“Don’t ‘poor dear’ him. He’s a handful. Thinks he’s hotter than hell and twice as tempting.”

She shook her head, her blonde hair swinging with her. “I’m sure it’s the pain. He’s acting tough and covering. The man is being hunted for doing his job and the human world just doesn’t understand. I’ll take care of him, for now. You get back up there.”

“Sure you don’t need help? He’s strong.” I didn’t want to help, but seeing Hot Hunter Guy stripped naked wasn’t the worst thing in the world. “The twins will fall for his flirting crap.”

“They’re in college—plenty of normal guys full of crap to flirt with there. If I need someone, Esmerelda can help. You don’t need to be around a hunter like him.” Aunt Mandy nodded.

“What do mean like him? He’s just a human. I lock up werewolves and work with vampires every day,” I said.

“This is a stranger. He could take advantage of younger women.” She waved at Esme.

Esmerelda, in her black cat form, darted down the stairs and sat in the entryway to the concealed rooms. The powerful witch would keep my aunt safe. Esme was deeply connected to the witch world and even taught private lessons to some in the coven. I somehow ended up in between humans and paranormal people.

“You two don’t have too much fun.” I smiled and let the older ladies get to work with the young fresh meat. My aunt was lying about the stranger, but I didn’t push it. We all took turns handling whatever crisis came in the back door.

Esmerelda was the perfect one to keep an eye on him. At one hundred and twenty-five years old, she’d lived most of her life as a cat. In human form, she looked about thirty, but as long as she lived more than half of her life as a cat—she could have all nine lives. She was also a powerful witch—the only one I knew that was stronger than me. I’d wanted to be her since I was a little girl. I loved cats and her power level.

“You okay?” Aunt Mandy asked.

“Yeah, I just don’t want him hanging around too long. He likes what he does a little too much. I

think.” I had no proof, only instinct and years of living with a hunter and meeting tons of them through my uncle.

“Well, if he makes a false move, Esmerelda will turn him into a frog.” Aunt Mandy smiled.

“Frog’s legs for dinner?” I teased.

“Too far. You so got your mother’s sense of humor.” Aunt Mandy smacked my shoulder and headed down. “Go upstairs and don’t let this hunter play with your mind. Men like this are players, and they look for any opening.”

I went up. My aunt often warned me off of bad boy types. My dad probably had that streak, and Aunt Mandy was worried I had my mom’s taste in men. The only thing I knew for sure that I got from my father was my hair. My mom had been a dark blonde, but still a blonde. What else did I have from my mysterious dad? It didn’t really matter, now. I pushed the tragic history out of my mind, like usual.

Brad handed me my tea.

“Thanks,” I said.

The line had gone down with the twins behind the counter. They were experts.

Iris and Violet came over. “Is he cute?”

They were freaky good at being in unison. I envied that they were never alone.

“Cute, full of himself, and dangerous,” I said. “Stay away.”

“Come on, that’s just mean,” Violet said.

“It’s the truth.” I tried to ignore the tingle still running through me. He was a bad boy hunter, and yet, I liked the attention. Thankfully, the twins had too many people looking out for them. “At barely eighteen, you two need to get degrees and careers—not entangled with hunters.”

“College boys are no better. They want to screw everything, and then, it’s over. At least a hunter risks his life for something that matters. He understands loyalty and dedication,” Iris said.

“I’d rather see everyone working to bring the vampires and weres into harmony with humans. We can make it possible for them to be safe and live with us. I want hunters to have less work.” I sipped my tea.

Iris checked her phone. “We better head to class. But you should stay away, Claudia. Really, he’s not our type of hunter.”

“So?” I asked.

She stared at her phone. “They don’t always get gypsy ways or witches. You don’t want him to pick up on anything.”

Violet bumped her sister. “Pick up on what?”

Iris shook her head. “Nothing. Hunters always want an advantage. This guy doesn’t know us or trust us, so keep your guard up, like you told us to do. That’s all. Gotta go. Bye.”

“Bye,” Violet said with a shrug.

“Bye, study!” I called. Iris seemed to know something I didn’t. Vi didn’t seem to be in on it either. Maybe Iris was being paranoid, but Aunt Mandy had wanted me away from the guy, as well. Why?

“More tea, boss?” Brad asked.

“No, thanks. Do you have any old clothes you’d like to donate? It’s for a homeless men’s shelter. My aunt said they were low.” Lying was part of the game, but Brad might freak and run if he knew a hunter was one floor below him.

“I’ll look. I’m on again for the night shift, so I’ll bring them by. It’s okay if I clock out?” he asked.

“Perfect.” I noticed his replacements walking in the door. Lifting my cup in acknowledgement, I took a deep breath. The hunter guy would leave, and a new crisis would pop up. It was all how we handled them.

I noticed my aunt’s inspirational quote of the day on the board. “*Cherish now...there won’t be another.*”

There was no arguing with that. Still, I envied Esmerelda. I’d tried to do the cat thing when I was seven and again at nine. Transfiguring into a cat was just not my area. I left that to Esmerelda and Professor McGonagall. Apparently, you had to start the transfiguring routine before puberty for it to stick and the nine lives to take hold.

Then again, did I want to see this world for the next seven hundred or more years? That seemed daunting. I’d do the best I could and enjoy my time. The crew this shift were all experienced, so I headed up the spiral stairs to our cozy reading nook. Fluffy chairs and sofas flanked shelves of books, much like the first-floor seating area.

We let the regulars go up here when it was crowded on the first floor. There was another room there with all of the coven’s needs that was always locked.

I straightened the books and plumped the pillows. A couple of black cats yawned and stretched. They were actual cats; Esmerelda used them as decoys when she turned human. I stroked their fur and found the treat box.

In the midst of my cat time, I heard the raspy voice of Mrs. O’Conner. Petting the cats again, I absorbed their purring vibrations to calm me. Some of our regulars weren’t so easy to please—and some, like Mrs. O’Conner, I wished would go to the Starbucks two blocks over.

Chapter 2

Mrs. O’Conner was a regular. A woman in her sixties who wanted things her way. Her bright red wool coat was dusted with snowflakes as she grouched at my barista.

If only my aunt or cousins were working, they knew how to soothe our grumbly customer. She wasn’t the only one who was hard to please, but she liked to argue. I sort of admired her; the woman had to be around retirement age, but she was out every day doing something. She came in seven days a week.

“No, not iced!” Mrs. O’Conner snapped.

I reluctantly went down the stairs. The barista was experienced, but the woman never ordered the same drink two days in a row.

“Ma’am, you asked for the spiced cold brew. Did I hear you wrong?” The barista was experienced enough not to take it personally. She was a middle-aged woman who needed to get out of the house once her husband had retired. I hung back to see how they hashed it out.

“Hot. I want the spiced cold brew *hot*.” Mrs. O’Conner shrugged.

“Okay. I’m sorry; I didn’t hear you say hot.” The barista turned back and worked on the odd order.

“I better not be late to work,” Mrs. O’Conner said.

“Then, get here earlier.” Esmerelda darted up from the basement in human form and grabbed some stuff from behind the counter. She and Mrs. O’Conner snarked at each all the time.

“I’m sorry for the trouble, Mrs. O’Conner. Your drink is on the house,” I said.

“What’s wrong with it?” Esme rounded the counter and approached as Mrs. O’Conner took the lid off.

“It’s iced.” Mrs. O’Conner held it out and started to turn.

“I’ll take it.” Esmeralda got a little too close and bumped our customer’s arm. The cold liquid and ice hit Mrs. O’Conner mostly.

“Crap,” I whispered to myself.

“You did that on purpose!” Mrs. O’Conner snapped.

“No, I was trying not to waste a perfectly good drink. I’m sorry.” Esme grabbed a towel from a barista and handed it to Mrs. O’Conner.

“Can everyone calm down, please?” I nudged Esmerelda. “You have work to do.”

“Fine. Send down coffee when you can.” Esme stalked off.

I took the iced coffee and threw it away. “We’ll pay for the dry cleaning.”

“I hope I don’t catch a cold from this chill. I should get my nephew to sue you.” She took the hot cup of coffee.

“For a chill?” I asked. “Would free coffee for a month make this up to you?”

“It’s a start. I should find a real coffee shop, not some little witchy joke. Potions,” she scoffed.

“If you get the Starbucks app, you can order ahead, and they have it in writing,” I suggested.

She glared at me. “You want me to go elsewhere?”

“I want my customers to be happy. This shop is an alternative to the chains. There’s a Dunkin Donuts in the other direction. They have an app, too. We have potions and customize drinks. More flavors. More blends. You might need some calming tea instead of coffee, but that’s your choice.” I had a wide variety of customers. College kids who wanted to be counter culture. Hipsters who rejected the prestige of the brands...at times. People with illnesses came in for customer brewed healing teas from my aunt.

As long as we covered our bills, I was happy. I wasn’t about competition with the big chains. Losing one customer who made others uneasy wasn’t going to upset me that much.

She shook a crooked finger at me. “You’ll never see me here, again.”

When the door closed, some of the customers clapped. I sighed and saw the relief in the smiles of my baristas. There were plenty of places to grab coffee.

“Everyone in line gets a free biscotti or muffin for the wait. I’m running next door to get some soup and stuff. There’s a friend staying the basement spare room,” I said.

The baristas would find out eventually when they needed supplies.

I swung into the soup and sandwich place that opened early for breakfast sandwiches.

“Hi, Claudia, your order is ready.” Fred was a sweet guy pushing thirty. His shop had homemade bread and soups. The smell alone made me give up the idea of ever going no carb.

“Thanks. Can you add a couple of grilled cheeses and a turkey, ham and Swiss to those? Plus a couple pints of the potato soup?” I might as well get lunch for me, Aunt Mandy, and Esme since they’d be tired from working on the hunter.

“Anything for you.” He went to work. “They say there’s a snowstorm coming. You ready?”

“Always ready. It’s New England.” I shrugged. “Soup weather. Business good?”

I had vamps to shovel the sidewalk, and they didn’t mind the cold. I had an awesome collection of knee high and thigh high boots with soles that gripped well. I was tall enough; heels weren’t necessary. I liked heels, but in winter, I could leave them.

“Business is good. I wish I had some ancestral witch connection to market like you do. It’s genius. The witch’s brew.” He complimented me on the name of my shop all the time. But about business. He had the oddest ways of flirting I’d even seen. The guy was nice, good-looking, hardworking, but

human. No wizard potential. No power.

Probably what I should be looking for, only it did nothing for me.

He hit buttons on the cash register display. “And the friends and family discount,” he said so I could hear.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said, just like every other time.

“We small businesses have to stick together. You’ve got coffee chains surrounding you. I’ve got all sorts of sandwich shop chains. Subway has soups, now. We will survive. My grandparents opened this shop.” He looked around fondly.

“I know we’ll survive. Come by for some coffee later, on the house. You can’t live on soup,” I teased him.

“Thanks. I just give you a discount; you give it away.” He took my credit card and ran it through.

I signed the slip, put my card away, grabbed my big order and headed for the door. I could’ve gotten it myself, but there was Fred opening the door for me.

“Thanks.” I left and really wished I could tell Fred that I was a serious witch. Humans just weren’t my thing. I wanted to be a powerful witch, and a guy without powers seemed dull. Of course, the flip side was that power sometimes tempted people to the dark magics.

A powerful wizard with a sense of right and wrong; was that so hard to find? Maybe it was.

I surrounded myself with ethical checks and touchstones to keep me from enjoying my powers too much that I crossed that imaginary line to the dark.

A customer held the door for me, and I slipped inside. “Thanks.”

Aunt Mandy was taking a tea break and grabbed some of the bags. We headed in the back behind the counter through the door to the kitchen. There was a break room there, as well as the usual dishwashers and sinks.

“How’s he doing?” I asked.

“More hurt than he’ll admit. I think he needs more than one healing session. There must be internal injuries.” She collected some food and other essentials. She took Esme’s food, as well.

“Esme can come up and eat,” I said.

“She wants to keep an eye on him. He’s tried to break free twice. She had to put a spell on him twice. He wants to leave,” she said.

“Let him,” I replied.

“He’s hurt. I think he’s afraid of witches, quite honestly. Most hunters have had a bad para experience that drives them to keep the peace and seek justice,” she said.

“And some just like an excuse to kill,” I added.

“He says you treated him like a prisoner,” she said.

“He’s full of crap. Scared and lashing out. Get going or your grilled cheese will be cold.” I unwrapped my meat heavy sandwich.

Another thing my hippie aunt couldn’t convert me to: vegetarianism. I found paper bowls for the

soup and poured myself some. I grabbed a fruity mixer drink from the fridge that turned out to be a sample of a new flavor. Strawberry Kiwi Grape with some green tea extract.

Aunt Mandy returned with a stern look.

“What did I do, now? I’m just sitting here.” She might as well be my mom. Part of me still felt bad for my teenage years when that was my go to excuse for being a bit wild and rebellious.

“Esme says Mrs. O’Conner wasn’t happy today.”

“She only likes you or the twins. The woman is hard to please. Normally, they get it right, but Esme is the one who splashed the coffee on her. Iced coffee, thankfully.” I didn’t want to think about the hot coffee lawsuit threats.

“She needs to rest. She needs some cat time. I’ve worked her too hard this morning.” Aunt Mandy grabbed a juice and sat down.

“She’s a really strong witch.” I rolled my eyes.

“And that hunter was in really bad shape. Still is. He could’ve bled out. Vin should’ve taken him to the hospital.” She took a bite of her grilled cheese, and it helped her relax.

“I told him that. I didn’t examine the guy too closely—he was all flirty and weird. But those leg wounds...” I shrugged.

“Herbs and magic can’t solve everything. Maybe he tangled with more than one werewolf. Is that why you think he’s not being totally truthful?” my aunt asked.

I added crackers to my soup. “I don’t know. He’s not local. He needs to go back where his people are,” I said.

“He tracked the werewolf through the Carolinas, but if he goes back, they’ll arrest him. Let Vin manage him.” Aunt Mandy finished off her sandwich and started on some soup.

“He tends to take on more than he should and help other hunters. He needs to find some home for wayward hunters and park this guy there.” I took a big bite of my sandwich.

My aunt eyed the sandwich. “You don’t mind helping werewolves. Why resist helping hunters?”

“They’re human. They have everyone out there to help them. I get he’s running from a charge that isn’t fair, but he can go to the hospital here. Where he can be treated in the best way. Then, he could move on. He’s far enough away from the scene of the crime. He’s a drain on us and trouble,” I said.

“Your uncle was trouble back in the day.” She smiled like a schoolgirl in love.

“What made you and Mom want to marry hunters?” I asked.

She went a bit pale and took a drink of her juice. “I was intrigued by the gypsy culture. I thought it was just expanding my horizons with friends, but it turned into more. Vin has a good code of ethics. Not all hunters do, I admit it.”

“And my dad?” I asked.

“Well, he wasn’t a gypsy. Your mom met him through Vin. Hunters are always running into each other on a case. Your dad handled some very dangerous vampire nests. He always tried to get the lone ones to accept help. Your mom was trying to find a way to give that help. I mean, she had the potion

for werewolves not to turn. But vampires needed to feed. It took time. You've advanced their goals. But we all take a risk," she said.

It was nothing I hadn't heard before. She never gave too many details. I'd asked many times over the years for more info, but it upset her. She lost her sister; I lost my parents. For me, it was a blurry memory of a big black werewolf. She'd lost her friend since childhood. I hated to push and upset her.

"Risk like that hunter. Next time Mrs. O'Conner comes in, I'll make sure you serve her. It's the only way to keep her happy," I said.

"Esme said she won't be back," Aunt Mandy replied.

"She always comes back. I offered her free coffee for a month. She'll be back in a day or two, complaining about the other places." I laughed.

"Normally, I'd agree with you, but Esme seemed very pleased and sure of her prediction. I should go relieve her. Let her get a real nap without keeping one eye on that kid," she said.

"I'll clean up, check on things out front, and then start the healing potion." I took a drink of my fruit mixer.

"Good. But I agree with what you said earlier today. Keep the twins away from him. You should avoid him, too," Aunt Mandy said.

"Why me?" I asked. "Iris acted the same way. Like I should avoid him. What's the problem? What don't I know?"

My aunt swallowed hard. "I don't know what she meant. You tend to take on the toughest jobs, and perhaps, she thinks you need a break. Have some fun. Esme can babysit him. She's seen men flirt for over a century. Nothing will get by her."

"I thought Esme took on some more witches for her private magic tutoring. She's got to be busy with them. Plus, he's in my shop. I have to be able to handle him if he acts up in the night." I shrugged.

"I know, and of course you can in a pinch. He's just the type who wants all the attention he can get, and he'll play games. Don't feed that. The vampires can overpower him if he acts up. Just lock him up. Esme may have more clients, but she'll always make time for you." Aunt Mandy patted my arm.

"Lock him up? What have you done with my hippie, always kind aunt who thought locking the cats out of the café level was cruel?" Something wasn't adding up.

She smiled weakly. "I want to trust everyone, but your instincts said you didn't trust him. I believe in your instincts. We need to help him but not let him cause trouble in our lives. Everything is connected, and he could cause waves of good or storms of bad. As soon as he shows signs of the bad, he must be contained. The cages are safe for werewolves—there's nothing dangerous about locking the cage to be sure he does what Vin thinks is best. Young hunters are impulsive and rash. He could run off too soon and get hurt again or an infection take over because he's weak. It's for his own good. Sometimes, we have to do bad things for the greater good."

I knew when to stop arguing. "That's quite a speech. Fine, if he acts up, the cage. The vamps will

put him there. Just the odd well check and food delivery.”

“Vamps can do that, too. I don’t think we need to get too close to this hunter,” she said.

“You don’t want any of your girls marrying hunters?” I teased.

She waved me off with a chuckle and grabbed another juice before she left.

I left a note for our overnight baristas, who had the most free time to mix up a new blend of fruit mixer. The strawberry kiwi was too sweet. It needed more of a blackberry undertone, even with the grape in the mix.

For now, I had to mix a powerful potion. They weren’t the most glamorous part of the witch world, but they packed a punch. I debated adding a backup potion of *cat got your tongue* to the main one. Shutting up that hunter would help calm things down tremendously.

Chapter 3

Walking into the coven room on the second floor, I locked the door behind me. The smell of sage and other herbs ignited the witch in me. Soothing customers and keeping my aunt happy were part of my life, but magic was my purpose.

The paranormal world felt more natural to me. Part of me would love to ignore reality and the humans, but that's how problems start. Too often, paranormal creatures would avoid humans and eventually let their guard down.

Grabbing a small cauldron, I assessed what ingredients I'd need. I gathered everything for a healing potion and began to mix it. The sooner he was healed, the sooner he could get on with his life. But my aunt said he was really injured. Should I make this potion extra strong? Then, he might push himself, and he'd relapse.

He needed to sleep more than anything. I added herbs to encourage sleeping. Once everything was in, I cleaned up. Taking the cauldron with me, I locked the room and headed down the stairs.

Sure, I got a few odd looks, carrying a straight up cauldron, but the café was called Witch's Brew. Some thought it was a joke or a nod to the old witch trials. Others knew that my aunt was part of the Wiccan religion. As long as she didn't recruit, no one seemed to care.

I headed straight downstairs and found Aunt Mandy forcing tea on the hunter. Esme sat in the corner in cat form, swishing her tail back and forth.

"Is he cooperating?" I asked.

"I'll do anything you say," he teased.

"How much have you had to drink?" I asked.

"Not much. But your aunt's pain medication is wonderful." He smiled.

"That's so you can rest. The healing will take days," my aunt replied.

Esme darted under his cot and batted out a phone. One of those pay-as-you-go burner phones a lot of hunters used to make themselves harder to trace.

"Look at this. Who did you need to call?" I asked Ryan.

"I have friends. I needed to touch base. The cops are still looking for me. Can't go back. Sorry," he said with a smirk.

"This will help." I set the cauldron down.

Esme dashed off into another area and returned in human form wearing a long dress but no shoes.

“I heard you had a problematic customer. I could take care of that for you. Ladies love me.” He laughed.

“How much did you give him?” I asked my aunt.

“He was in a lot of pain when we cleaned the wounds.” She shrugged.

Esme cleared her throat. “The customer won’t return. I’ve seen it.”

“I think she might with that free coffee offer,” I said.

“I can’t explain it, but my visions are rarely wrong,” Esme said.

I knew she was right.

“Who is dumb enough to mess with witches? You could turn her into a frog,” he said.

“I could turn you into a frog. Keep you in a cage—it’d be less trouble.” I grinned.

“And miss all this?” He gestured to his body.

He was hot. They’d left him shirtless and in nothing but boxers. The wounds were extensive and all over. Deep gashes. The werewolf or wolves had gotten a hold of him for some time.

“You’re lucky to be alive. You need to sleep, eat, get your bandages changed, and go back to sleep.” I held up the cauldron.

“That sounds boring,” he said.

Esmerelda mixed the potion and nodded. We whispered the spell over it then poured it into his glass. My aunt helped him get the glass to his lips.

He got half of the potion down. “That tingles. You ladies are too strong to let some human complain and ruin your business.”

“She didn’t ruin our business. And you’re a human, so should we not help you?” I asked.

“I’m a hunter. I know all about you. I help keep the humans from going crazy and attacking the paranormal world by weeding out the evil ones like rabid dogs.”

My aunt pushed the second half of the potion on him.

“We’d rather everyone get along, but you are a necessary evil, for now,” I said.

“You don’t like me because I know too much about you witches. But you shouldn’t let regular clueless humans push you around. You’re strong.” He gulped down the rest of it.

“I’m strong enough to put you in your place if you need it. Esmerelda could smoke you into nothing with no effort.” I smiled at her.

“Don’t forget it.” She pointed at him.

“You’re very strong. I want to help you if I can. I like you ladies.” He snuggled up with the pillow and reached out.

He grabbed my hand.

“No, grabby,” I said.

“I expected more of a hands-on healing.” He pouted.

Esme slapped him across the face. “You’re doped up enough now that we can sew up the cuts, and

that potion will help you.”

“Yeah, if you grab or touch anyone, I’ll have the vampires toss you out in the snow and drain you if you try to get back in. I don’t like gropey guys,” I warned him.

“You gave me all this. I’m used to pain, not drugs,” he admitted.

“Maybe I did overdo it,” Aunt Mandy admitted.

“No, don’t blame yourself. He should be at a hospital, not here. We can put him in a cage or tie his hands to the cot,” I suggested.

Esme nodded and waved her hand. Rope appeared and tightly knotted his wrists to the metal sides of the cot.

“You think this will hold me?” He smirked.

“It’ll slow you down if you want to grab someone. If you want to leave, we’ll let you go,” I offered.

“I’m not a good guest. I’m a lone wolf.” He laughed and howled.

I looked up. We didn’t need him freaking out the customers. “You’re tripping. No more pain meds. Maybe I should take your phone while you’re out of it.”

“No! I’m not a prisoner. I appreciate you letting me stay here, but I need to stay in touch with my friends and other hunters. I have to know what’s going on with my case.” He clutched the phone.

“He’ll be less happy soon.” My aunt got out a suture kit.

“You know what you’re doing?” he asked.

“I’ve sewn up my husband plenty.” My aunt pulled a chair up. “It’s really just his leg that needs it. I can tape the others together.”

“Fine.” I glared at the hunter. “Don’t give up your location. I’m not an accessory to anything.”

“I’d never endanger my helpers.” He hissed when my aunt stuck a needle in his skin.

“Just a little local numbing,” she said.

I turned to Esme. “You can go. I’ll watch him.”

Esme nodded and headed upstairs.

“Don’t worry. I won’t lay a hand on your aunt. Her husband would kill me,” he said.

“Not if I get you first. And I hide bodies better than hunters do.” I tossed the cup he’d been drinking from in the air. With a flick of my fingers, it was gone in a puff of smoke.

“Hot,” he said.

“Men.” I shook my head. All the good-looking ones were evil, human, or stupid. This guy was two out of three. I wasn’t convinced which two yet, but time would reveal all.

Chapter 4

Running into the darkness, I dared to glance back. I couldn't see the werewolf, but I heard the snarls and howls. I ran faster until my heart felt like it would explode in my chest. Finally, I found a tree and transfigured into a cat. I climbed the tree and went as high as I could without breaking a branch.

The sounds seemed to be coming closer. That only made the terror worse. It sounded like a pack was surrounding me.

"No!" I shouted as I sat up in bed. Even knowing it was a dream didn't stop the fear.

I hadn't had those dreams in a while. The cold sweat made me shiver, but I threw off the covers, anyway. It had to be the presence of the hunter.

The dreams had plagued me when I was young. As the memory of my mother's death faded, I just had nightmares about being chased by a werewolf myself. It didn't matter that my uncle had killed the werewolf that murdered my parents.

In this dream, I felt like I was chasing a secret. Maybe it was whatever my aunt and Iris were talking around. Hunters had never been a sore point, before but we'd never known any but gypsy hunters as far back as I could remember. I didn't really remember my dad... He was the only non-gypsy hunter I knew of. They were rare and not trusted in gypsy circles. Nothing clicked. The puzzle was giving me a headache.

I trudged to the bathroom and washed my face. My little loft apartment on the top floor was perfect for me. Open space done in dark greens and dark purples. I could be myself here. But the idea that there was a hunter in the basement of the building made me anxious.

Hunters were a necessary evil. Some vampires and werewolves always refused to coexist peacefully. The vamps wanted real hot blood from a human. The werewolves needed to hunt and experience their wolfie side. Or so they claimed.

Killing humans or other vampires or werewolves, that was murder. They had to be held accountable, and there was no prison to hold them. Human justice wasn't aware enough or evolved enough to understand the needs. No vampire or werewolf council existed to judge them or set down laws. The witch's council was a reassuring international body that brought order for us. The hunter problems were relatively few when they were gypsy hunters. They had their own way of keeping

order. But the rogue non-gypsy hunters were more dangerous.

On the flip side, some hunters were too into their work and judged unsafe. What was to stop them from someday rising up against witches? If Ryan decided I was too powerful, would he kill me?

What had kept them in check was their loner lifestyle. They had a loose network, but they called on each other only in emergencies. At least, those were the non-Romani hunters. The gypsy hunters had a network and could easily wage a war, but they respected the right of the paranormal to live. The Nazis had tried to exterminate the gypsies, so the gypsies were not about to treat others that way.

No, the loner hunters worried me more.

I checked my phone to see if there were any issues or problems. It sucked that I slept so hard I'd never hear my text notification. Luckily, my family and staff knew to call me, not just text, if they really needed me.

Brad had texted that he'd brought the clothes for donation.

Damn!

I ran my fingers through my hair and checked in a mirror that the bedhead wasn't too awful. Finding the jeans I'd worn today on the floor, I slid them back on. I'd fallen asleep in my pink T-shirt that had the café's name on it, so I stepped into my fuzzy black cat slippers and headed downstairs.

Brad and the other baristas all wore shirts in various colors with the same logo. I liked my little coffee shop, especially now when it was quiet. Some college kids and night owls occupied tables, but there was no rush or unhappy customers.

I slid behind the counter, and Brad handed me a bag.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem. It's quiet tonight. But rumor is you've got a guest," Brad said.

He leaned on the counter and then shifted his posture and wiped a towel across the prep area. The fidgeting told me he was uneasy.

"Have you heard anything from downstairs? He's supposed to stay down there," I said.

Brad shook his head. "Nothing. I just don't like the feel of him. The smell," he said.

Vampires' heightened senses were annoying, but it meant I never smelled burnt coffee. They always caught it first. But it made them jumpy if there was someone they didn't like the sense of.

"I'll check on him. He's injured so you could take him out easily. You're faster than humans, anyway," I said.

He nodded.

The blood. No wonder Brad was jumpy. He could smell the dried blood on Ryan's clothing. Even though they'd cleaned up and bandaged his wounds, his clothes were still there.

"Are you eating enough? I know the blood bank stuff isn't as good as fresh stuff, but with my aunt's supplements and some extra blood, you'll be fine." I patted his arm.

He nodded. "It's just tempting. Some hunters aren't so nice, and if I were to feed from a human again..."

"I hear ya, but don't." I wagged a finger at him. "I could eat nothing but candy or try meth. But that's not good for me. Killing humans hurts you."

"There are parties where humans let you drink. You don't kill them, just feed," he said.

"Creepy. And how long do you think you could just feed without going out for a kill the next day?" I asked.

"I understand what you're saying. But you eat meat," he said.

"I do. And if you want to stop the blood bank and go for pig's blood, there's a butcher up the street. Some vampires prefer that. It's fresher and not processed. Heat it up and go for it. You've got options, but if you kill a human or a cat, I'll stake you myself."

He grinned sheepishly. "I won't. But the blood smell—"

"I'll handle it." I took the bag with me downstairs.

"I thought I heard your voice." Ryan was up and waiting for me.

"Feeling better?" I asked as I pulled a worn pair of jeans and a pair of sweatpants from the bag. Digging for more, I retrieved a few T-shirts and set it all on his cot.

"Good enough. I'll need some of your aunt's magic in the morning." He sat up slowly.

"Change into these. I'll wash your clothes." I grabbed his jacket from the corner. His shirt was on the other side of the room. I found his pants under the bed.

"I'm not wearing another guy's underwear." He tossed the new clothes aside.

"I don't care if you go commando or stay down here naked. Those are your clothing options. These blood-encrusted rags need to be washed or the vamps will down here for a snack." I smiled.

He slid off the boxers, and I tried not to look. He was well-defined and muscled. I grabbed his boxers and turned for the stairs.

"Running away so soon?" he teased.

"I'm not running. I want the vamps to calm down, though. The sooner these are in the washer with a lot of soap, the better for you." I shot him a look.

He grunted and winced as he tugged on the sweatpants. "I'm decent."

"That's debatable," I mumbled.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. Did you pull that bandage off your leg?" I asked.

"No. It's tender but not bleeding through or anything. Wouldn't want to tempt your friends," he said.

"You don't want fight them off. Not in your condition. My aunt probably needs to get you on some natural antibiotic herbs to avoid infection." I moved closer and put my hand to his forehead. "Yeah, feels like you've got a fever."

"I'm fine. Just having hot dreams about you." He grabbed my wrist.

"That's cute. You're not that hot or charming. You're sick, and we're trying to help you."

He sighed. "You said you didn't care if I left. Now, you care?"

“No, but my uncle does. If you cooperate and appreciate the help, fine. I’m not going to turn you out to die or land in jail for doing your job. But don’t test me.”

“You’ve sent people to their death? I’ve killed. I’ve looked vamps in the eye and staked them,” he said.

“And I haven’t? I hire vamps. Not every one of them can handle being tame. If my employee slips, I stake them. Or however I see fit. That’s my responsibility.”

“Tough girl. I thought you’d make your uncle handle it,” he said.

“My uncle saved my life when I was kid. I trust him, and I’ll help. But I take care of my own messes. You don’t want to be one of them.” I poked him in the chest with my shimmering purple nail.

“No, I don’t. But I can enjoy the cat-and-mouse game. Do you turn feline like Esmerelda?” he asked.

“Not as a rule. I can transfigure, at times, but I didn’t achieve that young enough to get the nine lives ticket.” I wasn’t proud of that.

“Maybe you’re more of a dog person. Ever tried being a cute little poodle?” he teased.

“Please,” I scoffed. “I’m going. Aunt Mandy will check on you in the morning with breakfast.”

“Night,” he said.

I trudged up the stairs with the bloody clothes and went right for the washer off the kitchen area in the back. Lots of scented detergent, long presoak, heavy wash, and a note on the washer that said *Private load—see Claudia before opening*.

They could think it was my sexy lingerie or witch’s robes. I just didn’t want the vamps to open it up if all the blood didn’t come out in the first wash.

Brad was waiting for me when I stepped back into the café area.

“The clothes are in the wash. Spray some air freshener and brew some of the gingerbread blend. That has a strong scent,” I suggested.

He nodded. “You’re sure he’s a good hunter?”

“My uncle brought him here. He’s injured enough to not be a threat, now. But I’ll try to check into the case he’s running from to be sure. But it was a werewolf case, and with all the video surveillance, you know hunters are getting hunted by the human police, now,” I said.

“Okay. I can defend myself, but I don’t like the idea of you alone here with him.” He folded his arms.

“Aww, that’s sweet. But I’m not. The shop is always open with staff. Plus…” I held out my hand. The huge knife they used to cut up fruit for our mixers flew from the counter to my hand. “I think I’m good.”

He nodded and took the knife.

“Good work, everyone. I’m heading back to bed,” I said.

The baristas on night shift did the more intense cleaning and restocking. One stayed on the register, just in case. They murmured some sort of response but were all engrossed in their tasks.

As I climbed the stairs, I could smell the blood and sweat from Ryan's clothes clinging to my shirt. *Yuck*. As soon as I closed and locked the door to my apartment behind me, I stripped naked and headed for the shower.

Chapter 5

Two days later, I didn't really want to face the morning. The day before, the hunter was shivering with infection. My offers to take him to urgent care or the ER were met with glares. My aunt's antibiotic potions always worked on me, but if we'd missed some sort of internal injury or deeper infection...

I'm a witch, not a doctor!

I came down to supervise the morning rush and make myself a morning jolt with a double calming potion.

"Mrs. O'Conner still hasn't been back," said the head barista for the shift.

"She wasn't in yesterday either," Esmerelda said.

"Don't worry about her. It might take a week or two, but she gets sick of the chain stores." I straightened up a bit behind the counter then took my coffee to a quiet corner.

Esmerelda followed me. "You doubt my vision? We won't see her again."

"Okay. She'll find another café she likes better. Do you think our business is in trouble?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I think we just need a couple of signs. *If we get your drink wrong, the right one is free.* Another that says *Hot drinks are scalding, cold drinks are frigid...sip at your own risk.* Funny but cover our butts."

"All the cups are stamped with the warning that contents are served very hot." I did see the humor in her approach. "But those are funny. Why not?"

"I'll paint some up." Esme nodded.

"Maybe one that says *Our baristas are only human. If you wish to curse and yell, the owner is a real witch! Please see her.*" I laughed.

"Love it." Esme smiled.

"How is the guest today?" I asked.

Esme's smile faded fast. "He's a pain. Apparently, there was a cut in a private area. We let him have some privacy. Well, he didn't have it cleaned and treated properly, so that's the infection. Not your aunt's fault, though she's blaming herself. Like she was going to judge his thing."

"Are we sure this werewolf he took out wasn't his ex-girlfriend?" I joked.

"It is an odd place for a fight injury. Your aunt is on the case now and smearing him head to toe

with her enhanced witch hazel. That should help.”

“I just can’t believe he’s worse. I was hoping to be rid of him soon.” I sipped my coffee.

The bell over the door rang, and I glanced over. A man and a woman dressed in suits walked in and surveyed the place. Esmerelda stared at them. If she were in cat form, her back would be arched and she’d be hissing.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m going down to help your aunt.” She left calmly but quickly.

I looked back at the couple. They cut the line and flashed a badge at my head barista, who pointed me out. I took a long drink of my coffee. Was it Ryan? I had been visited once before by the police when a new hire had a sketchy past.

The duo approached me.

“Ms. Crestwood? I’m Detective Keller; this is Detective Shelley. We need to speak to you in private,” said the male cop.

“Sure. Let’s go into my office. Would you like something to drink?” I offered as I refilled my cup with black coffee from the refill station.

“No, thank you,” he replied.

I added some cream and a packet of raw sugar. As we walked to the door marked *Private*, I stirred my coffee. I didn’t want to alarm any of the staff so I didn’t ask all the questions in my head until I closed the door behind them.

They took the two guest chairs as I settled behind the desk. Normally our accountant was the only whom ever used this office. I wasn’t a desk type but there were times when privacy and professionalism were needed.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

“We were made aware of an incident that occurred here a couple of days ago. A customer of yours had coffee spilled on her?” Detective Shelley asked.

I hid my relief that it wasn’t about Ryan. “Iced coffee, yes. The customer was offered towels. It’s not like hot coffee. And she removed the lid; someone bumped into her. We offered to pay for her dry cleaning, her order was free, and she has free coffee for a month. I don’t think I could’ve done more for a relatively minor incident.”

“You know this customer?” Detective Keller asked.

“She’s a regular. Sometimes, she gets annoyed and goes elsewhere for a week or two. But we’re the best.”

“She’s a regular, but your barista got her order wrong?” Detective Shelley asked.

“She changed her order every day to suit her mood. She’d cycle between five different coffee drinks. Cold or hot, depending on the season. The barista misheard that she wanted the drink iced. She really went to the police over a little spilled coffee and a wrong order?” I leaned back in my chair.

“Was she a problem customer?” Detective Keller asked.

“She was particular. Not always pleasant, but some people are bears before they’ve had their caffeine. Nothing we’re not used to. We always made it right if something was wrong. She’d threaten to never come back before. I’d give her a week or a month of free coffee, and she’d come back. I fully expected to see her next week.” I couldn’t believe she’d file a complaint. “What sort of complaint did Mrs. O’Conner file?”

“She didn’t. Mrs. O’Conner was found dead at her home yesterday morning. Her husband was unable to wake her.” Detective Keller sounded as if he was reading the news of the day.

“Dead?” A chill ran down my spine. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think she was that old.”

“She wasn’t. Late sixties. However, she was a brittle Type 1 diabetic. She had some health issues as a result, as well as being insulin dependent.”

“Well, as long as it was natural causes. I’m sorry to hear about it. I’m not sure what I can do other than extend the free coffee to her family.” I felt awful for Mrs. O’Conner, but why were the police bothering with a coffee shop?

“Her husband is not convinced it was natural causes. She had spoken to him during the day about how upset she was by your shop. He’s convinced someone did something to harm her or that the extreme stress hastened her death. We’re visiting all the places she was the day before she passed, to be sure. You didn’t notice anything odd? Did she look ill?” Detective Shelley asked.

“No, not at all. She was feisty as ever. On her way to her job at the library, I believe. She was very active and came in nearly every day. Only brought her husband in a few times.” I shrugged.

“Did he like your shop?” Detective Keller asked.

“You’d have to ask him. He said he liked his coffee black and cheap from the pot at home. Mrs. O’Conner said he was military so he’d gotten used to black coffee that was bitter swill. He had no use for tea or fancy coffee drinks. She liked the variety,” I replied.

“Did she make any other threats besides not returning?” asked Detective Kelly.

“Not that I remember. People say things when they’re upset. We try hard to be a good part of everyone’s morning. We know they’re going off to work or school, and even stay-at-home moms need fuel to handle little ones. They want to be on time and have their coffee right. It might seem like nothing compared to solving crime, but a bad experience here can ripple through their day. I’m sorry if we gave Mrs. O’Conner a bad last day.” I still couldn’t fully process that she was gone.

“Did she frequently make comments about you being a witch or Wiccan? About the name of the shop?” Detective Keller asked.

“Oh, that. No, she didn’t mention it much. She’d been a customer for a couple years, now. She complained more when we got a new barista, because she expected them to get everything wrong or they were slower. We tried never to let her have a trainee. This time, I think she was just looking for things to complain about, because we’d done everything to fix the wrong order and spilled coffee. People lash out at the Witch’s Brew name, but there were witch trials in Hartford before Salem. It’s

part of the history and a good hook.” I smiled.

Detective Shelley smiled back. “It is. Most people speak highly of your place. Better pricing and service. Welcoming feel.”

“That’s nice to hear,” I said.

“What are these potions on your menu?” Detective Keller asked.

“Those are just a cute themed name for shots like a shot of hazelnut flavor. We have some vitamin, herbs, antioxidants, fruits, and unique flavor mixes. To keep with the theme, my aunt thought calling them potions was a fun way to stand out. Everything is perfectly safe. We have ingredient pamphlets, and it’s on our website.” I opened a drawer and handed them a pamphlet. They weren’t the first to wonder what was in a potion. Like we were secretly selling drugs or something... I wasn’t sure what they doubted, but there was nothing that’d get me in trouble.

“Thank you,” Detective Shelley said as she took the paper.

“So, nothing happened here that could’ve caused her health issues?” Detective Keller asked.

“I’m not a doctor. I’m sure her blood pressure was up from being upset. If she was in any distress, we would’ve called an ambulance. She walked out of here like she owned the place,” I said.

“Did she have words here with anyone specific? You? The barista who served her? Others?” Detective Shelley asked.

“A friend, Esmerelda. She went to get the wrong beverage and bumped into Mrs. O’Conner. No one here was out to get her or hurt her. I’m sorry she’s gone, but I don’t know what we can do for you.” I felt like they were circling something but not getting to the point.

“We need to speak to the baristas on duty that morning. As well as this Esmerelda. Just like we’re speaking to you. Mr. O’Conner is convinced that someone hurt his wife, and that it was not natural causes.” Detective Keller frowned.

“If he didn’t insist, is that what you’d assume it was?” I asked.

“A woman of her age and with those health issues, our ME feels the odds are it was natural. Now, he will be performing an autopsy, and there will be a tox screen. They’re a little backed up from the holidays, but they’ll get to it,” replied Detective Shelley.

“I’m sorry. I understand Mr. O’Conner is upset. She was very active, but we never know when our time is up.” I wrote down the staff working that morning.

“So, you didn’t take her threats about Wiccans or witches seriously?” Detective Keller asked.

“We’ve had the odd protester over the years. People don’t mind witch talk at Halloween, but around Easter, we get a few people who need to make a statement. Generally, we talk to them and show we’re not Satan worshippers or anything like that. We have an old belief system, and the point of reminding people that witch trials happened here is so we never have that sort of thing happen, again. We tolerate all religions and races and types of people here. We’re more like nature-loving hippies in a way. We just want to be tolerated. That and some free coffee usually gets them to go home.” I smiled.

“Is there any one of your coven or staff that might take that threat personally? Someone new, maybe?” asked Detective Shelley.

I rolled over the question in my mind. Esme would be the only one to take it personally, but she wasn't new. She'd never take anything Mrs. O'Conner said to heart, anyway. “No. She was an older woman who was having a bad morning. I train my staff to ignore the moods and the attitudes and focus on the coffee order. Get it right, and the rude customers go away; the happy customers are happier. Get the orders right, and they are rewarded by us. Tipping for coffee is still very hit or miss.”

The detectives shared a look.

“What?” I asked.

“In these circumstances, we would do a courtesy death investigation. Mr. O'Conner is adamant someone did something. His wife was active, taking care of her health, and her doctor confirmed she was doing reasonably well. Of course, her body was worn harder by the diabetes. She'd had some issues already.” Detective Keller consulted his notes.

“I understand. I wrote down the names of the baristas working. Esmerelda is here, now. She's a regular and a member of my coven. She helps when we need it. Beyond that, I'm not sure how to help you. I certainly hope it all proves to be natural causes, and the family can grieve in peace.” There was more. They weren't telling me something. They didn't want to tell me something critical.

“Wonderful.” Detective Shelley took the list.

“We'll be back to talk, again, I'm sure. You can keep going business as usual but understand that we might have more questions or want to inspect your equipment,” he said.

“If the equipment had been tampered with, more people would've been made ill. No one has complained, and I drink something made by our baristas every day to be sure they are doing things right. If everything hasn't been cleaned, I can tell. Quality control.” I tapped my coffee cup.

“Still, if we find more reasons to suspect murder over natural causes—we can get a warrant, and we can take anything we need. Let's hope the ME gets caught up on things sooner so we can put this to bed. Until then, don't leave the state,” Detective Keller said.

“What? Wait. I'm a suspect?” That's crazy!

“It's just a precaution,” Detective Shelley said.

“No, why am I a suspect? Everyone but her husband thinks this is natural causes. I can tell by your face you feel like you're wasting your time. Why try to freak me out? I did nothing wrong,” I said.

Detective Keller stood. “I believe you. But still, as the owner of the Witch's Brew, we may need your help getting evidence or cooperation from your employees. There is another piece of evidence we're looking into that might support more than natural causes. It might be a coincidence. It might be a joke. But we must investigate as though it was serious.”

“A serious what?” I asked.

“We don't disclose all of the evidence to potential witnesses or suspects. If you think of anything that was odd or might help, call us.” Detective Shelley handed me her card.

“I will. I’ll get Esmerelda for you if you’d like to speak to her, now,” I said.

“Fine.” Keller sat back down.

I subtly checked that my desk was locked as I picked up my coffee cup. Dashing downstairs, I tried to breathe.

I grabbed Esme by the arm. “Tell me you didn’t have any contact with Mrs. O’Conner since she left here two days ago.”

“That old bat. Why?” Esme asked.

Chapter 6

“No, no. No name calling. Promise me,” I said.

“I didn’t see her anywhere but here.” Esme shrugged.

“You didn’t run into her at a sandwich shop or a store or anywhere and argue?” I asked.

Esme frowned. “I may have gone to the library. I teach a sewing class in their extension program. The first class was yesterday afternoon, but I don’t think I saw her. Is that a crime?”

“Good question. The police are in my office. She’s dead, and her husband is insisting it’s not natural causes. That we upset her badly that morning, and someone might’ve done something to her. But she was gone by yesterday, so you’re okay.” I rubbed my temples.

“Dead?” my aunt gasped.

“Serves the old bat right. Threatening witches,” Ryan scoffed.

“What do you know about it?” I asked.

“Nothing but what I overheard. She was griping pretty loud. Over a wrong order. Really? There are bigger problems in the world.” He grabbed his glass and drank some water.

“Guess his fever is better,” I said to my aunt.

“His fever broke overnight. But he’s still very weak.” She covered him with a blanket. “Acting like a little jerk to compensate.”

“Damn, aren’t there any wizards in your coven? Seriously, I could use a guy around.” Ryan fluffed and punched his pillow.

“I’ll send my uncle down later. Get some sleep and be quiet,” I said.

“Dead?” Esme leaned against the stone wall.

“Her health was frail. You could see it in her aura. She tried hard to keep it balanced, but the littlest thing could’ve set off her heart or her head.” Aunt Mandy tidied up.

“Head?” Esme asked.

“A stroke. Either felt like they were possible if she pushed her body too hard,” Aunt Mandy said.

“She was a brittle Type 1 diabetic. But unless we goofed and put in too much or too little sweetener, I don’t see how we’d be on the hook for it. Plus, she’d be testing her blood and taking insulin accordingly,” I replied.

“She was pissed. Blood pressure up. But that’s not something we can be charged with,”

Esme said.

“They want to talk to you. Since you were there and part of the spill,” I said to Esme.

“I’ll go, too,” Aunt Mandy offered.

“No, they only wanted people who had contact with Mrs. O’Conner that morning. And if they do want to talk to you, you were down here checking on inventory. Don’t mention auras or our guest down here. I’m already getting witch questions. Do we get protestors and who makes threats about it.” I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Mrs. O’Conner made a threat, but she’s all bluster.” Esme waved it off. “I’ll tell them.”

“Tell them just what they need. Don’t offer anything. Don’t embellish,” I said.

She turned and glared at me.

“Sorry, sometimes, I forget you’re a century older than me. But you sometimes talk too much.” I smiled.

Esme nodded. She was used to having power and respect in the paranormal world. She dealt with humans in specific ways. I didn’t want her pushing too much with the police.

Esme headed upstairs, and I helped my aunt collect the trash. We took it upstairs and straight out the back to the alley. It was blowing snow, but we tossed the stuff in the dumpster and hustled back inside.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I can’t believe Mrs. O’Conner is dead. I can’t believe there is reason to believe we did anything bad to her.” I went into the employee-only kitchen area and brewed myself some tea.

“They’re just doing their job. I’m sure it’s nothing. Unless you think it’s an excuse to nose around here? That they’re looking for Ryan?” she asked in a hushed voice.

I shook my head. “At first, I thought that. But they seem like it’s routine. There is something they’re not telling me. But it was all about Mrs. O’Conner. They haven’t asked anything about you or Vinny. Nothing about a stranger hanging around. Nothing like that.”

“Let’s hope they do the autopsy and tox screen and find nothing but natural causes. We can get this off our minds. We don’t need cops roaming around with Mr. Personality down there.” I sighed then sipped my tea.

“I’ll call Vin and let him know,” she said.

“No, wait until they’re gone. I don’t want anyone acting oddly. We need to be business as usual,” I said.

“The staff needs to know,” she said.

“When the cops leave. They’ll be asking what they wanted, anyway. But I’d rather the cops not be here with all the random questions. We’ve got some vampires out there. It’s not the same team that was working.” I fished my lip gloss out of my pocket and reapplied it.

My aunt patted my shoulder. The gloss was a nervous habit when I could do nothing. Then again, it was a very frigid winter, and my lips felt chapped.

I texted the baristas who were on that morning with Mrs. O’Conner to come in for a two o’clock meeting. Lunch could get a little busy, too, but there was a lull until the evening rush, and the evening brought in various groups and loners. I wanted as few people around as possible so it wouldn’t interrupt business.

Twenty minutes later, Esme walked out of my office and escorted the detectives to the door. I was relieved when she didn’t go with them.

She walked over to me at my usual table in the back corner by the kitchen. No customers wanted that table so it was my open office area. My aunt had found a project restocking the tea bags. We carried so many varieties that the baristas got overwhelmed trying to restock them during breaks, so when she needed to escape reality, she got lost in tea.

“Everything okay?” I asked Esme.

She nodded. “They want to talk to me, again. They recorded my voice.”

I frowned. “Your voice? What a headache. I’m sorry she’s gone, but what could we have done?”

Esme shook her head. “Nothing. Don’t stress about it. They’re doing their job. They’ll make a fuss to impress the family. The autopsy and tests will show she died of natural causes, and it’ll be over. It might take a few weeks, but they can’t prove we did something that we didn’t do.”

I nodded. “I’m pretty sure that’s what the witches from the 1600s said, too. We didn’t ruin their crops so they can’t prove we did.”

“Stop making good points. Ignore the humans. Let them spin their wheels. She was too old and ill. It had to be natural. Who’d want to kill her?” Esme asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe we should start checking into her life? Just in case,” I said.

“Stay out of it,” Esme warned. “But I did predict we’d never see her, again. Sometimes, my powers are wicked weird.”

I laughed. “Talk about a bad way to have a right prediction.”

“Now, let’s talk about how to break this to the staff. Because your vamps will bolt,” she said.

On the second floor, my aunt had lit a white candle and placed it at the center of the table. She burned sage just in case Mrs. O’Conner was haunting us with any negativity.

She chanted for the soul of our dead customer as the baristas assembled for the afternoon meeting.

When we were all there, I grabbed my aunt’s hand. “Would you go watch the shop? You weren’t there when Mrs. O’Conner was.”

“But her spirit might need help,” aunt said.

“You can chant or help her reincarnate down there until a customer comes in. It’ll only be a few minutes,” I said.

She nodded and grabbed another white tea light candle. We put some on the bigger tables in the evenings for a little mood lighting, but I wasn’t a fan of open flames. I had all the proper insurance,

but customers could be careless. Enough witches had burned; I wouldn't be one of them.

"The twins are going to put together a gift basket for the family," Aunt Mandy said as she slipped out the door.

"People usually send flowers," replied Margaret, the middle-aged barista who'd made Mrs. O'Conner's drinks.

"We'll do that as well when we know when the funeral is. It seems you've all heard Mrs. O'Conner is dead. She didn't wake up yesterday morning. I don't have all the details, but apparently, she'd told her husband about her incident here and that she was really unhappy. The police think it's natural causes, *but* they have some sort of information that has them investigating until they get results back from the medical examiner."

"They came in?" asked Margaret.

"Yes, this morning. They spoke to me and Esmerelda. I had to give them all of your names, so they will likely be contacting you individually. Just tell the truth. We goofed an order. We made it right. We had a spill. We offered dry cleaning costs and free coffee."

"For a month. Too generous," Esme said.

"I'd rather be too generous than not. The point is that's all we know. I didn't see her afterward. I'm very sorry she's gone, but we didn't do anything to harm her health. She did have health issues, and odds are it will be ruled natural causes. Soon, we'll be done with the police part." I looked around. "Questions?"

"She threatened us because we're witches," said one of the younger female baristas who was also in the coven.

"She didn't do anything with it. She was just mad. A lot of people take that easy shot. Like we should magically brew things. Snap our fingers or wiggle our nose like *Bewitched*, and their coffee should be ready in seconds. We hear those comments all the time when someone has to wait. Don't look for trouble. Answer their questions, don't embellish or offer random comments. They have enough to do," I said.

"I can't believe they're investigating us for this. There are real crimes out there." Margaret sniffled back some tears.

"You did nothing wrong. None of us did. It's a shame, but she was a brittle diabetic. She had a lot of complicated medical issues. She was a balancing act. We did everything we could to make her happy. She didn't appear weak or ill, at all."

"I'm just nervous," Margaret admitted.

"That's okay. The police are used to people being nervous. Just admit you've never been questioned or anything before, so you're nervous. And you always have a right to have a lawyer with you if you want one." I pointed at them.

"That won't make you look guilty," Esme said.

"It's your right. It's not something they can use against you in a court," I replied.

Esme shrugged. “This is all worst-case scenarios. They’re just doing their jobs. Do your jobs, answer their questions, and don’t overreact.”

“Any questions?” I asked

They shook their heads.

“Great. Thanks for coming in. Don’t worry. Sorry for calling you in on your days off, but the police will be contacting you. Feel free to come in or call me anytime if you’re worried,” I said.

“Thanks,” Margaret said.

“We’re with you. Margaret made that drink right. Iced or hot was the only difference,” said Ellen, the Wiccan barista.

“Thanks.” Margaret nodded.

“We’re all in this together. We might get a little bad press or a few protesters. Handle that the same way we always do, only be even nicer. More patient because someone is dead. We just want her family to have peace knowing that it was natural. Now, go on with your days. Don’t let death consume your thoughts,” I said.

My aunt was a hippie more than a Wiccan. She’d chant and hope for Mrs. O’Conner’s reincarnation. I just hoped she found peace in the afterlife.

As the group wandered back to their day, I went downstairs. My aunt was working the counter as the twins filled a big basket with the basics.

Esme walked up. “Her husband is accusing us murder, and you’re doing a gift basket?”

I picked out darker roast coffees and black teas, plus a few samplers. “We can send it to her daughter. I know she mentioned a daughter and a grandson. The hubby will get the flowers at the funeral.”

“It’s a nice gesture,” Iris added.

“It is. I’ll write a note and take it over there. Esme, I want to talk to you about the library thing. And what the cops wanted to know.” I didn’t want to seem bossy, but I needed to know all the information.

“Can we help?” Violet asked.

“See if you can research Mrs. O’Conner’s whereabouts without bugging her family or the cops. Social media, maybe. I don’t know if she used it much. I’d like to retrace her steps, if we’re on the suspect list—who else is?” I was tech savvy, but the twins, who lacked magical powers, made up for it with tech skills. Violet was studying computer programming or something.

“No problem,” Violet said.

“Come on, Esme,” I said.

“I feel sick,” she replied.

“I’ll make you some healing tea. All the death talk and inquisition is hard on the spirit,” Aunt Mandy said.

“I could use some of that, please. We’ll be in my office,” I said.

“We did nothing wrong,” Esme said as we walked.

“I know. But being in the crosshairs is stressful, and we don’t know all the evidence they have.

Maybe a certain stealthy black cat could sneak in there?” I asked.

“Into a police station? I’ll end up in the pound.” She laughed.

“True. We can’t risk exposure of our actual magical powers. But we have to do something,” I said.

“Agreed. Getting rid of that hunter is job number one,” she said.

Chapter 7

After a night of tossing and turning I had to agree with Esmeralda. Having Ryan here with cops sniffing around was asking for trouble. With any luck, the police thing would be over with a few tests, but I had no control over any of that. I couldn't just sit around the café waiting for the cops to come back or call. There was a business to run. I hit the bank for our weekly deposit and change. Then, I stopped at a fast food place for some breakfast sandwiches and hash browns.

I dodged questions and concerns with confidence. There was only one place to get some answers, now. With a drink holder full of beverages, the food, and my inventory list, I went down to our visitor. He grumbled and hid under the blanket when he saw it was me.

"I have food, and I'm doing inventory. You can relax." I tossed a bag on him and set the coffees on the table. I pulled up a chair and ate, taking my preferred drink, just in case he thought I was trying to butter him up. I wasn't. He needed to eat, and I needed to do inventory. But info would be good.

"I knew you couldn't resist me," he said after a gulp of coffee.

"Resist, I can. Inventory must be done, and poor Aunt Mandy and Esmeralda have been down here enough. You sound like you're feeling better." I finished my food then wiped my fingers with a napkin. Another slug of coffee, and I was ready to get busy.

"You really hate having me here?" he asked.

"I have enough trouble with customers and the coven. I understand what happened to you, but the bravado. The flirting. The act. I can see through it. You're afraid. What are you afraid of?" I asked.

"Prison isn't enough? A charge for murder that I'm not guilty of? I mean, it was protecting innocent people and self-defense," he said.

"They obviously won't see it that way or you wouldn't be running." I pulled out my inventory tally from last month. It wasn't just a cover; I needed to do the job. I hated it and usually pawned it off on the cousins, but not this time.

He unwrapped his sandwich and sighed heavily. "The video shows me shooting the creature as it ran from me. That doesn't say self-defense but letting a werewolf loose in a mall?"

"I know. I understand that part. You can always argue he said he had a bomb, and you were defending the public."

"He didn't have a bomb. He had friends who will accuse me of murder and not stop," he said.

“Friends?” I turned and watched as he ate.

Ryan nodded and took a bite of a hash brown.

“Werewolf friends?” I asked.

“I didn’t know. I thought they might be. The moon was just rising.” He kept eating.

“So, these friends saw the guy shift into a werewolf? Why would they want you charged with murder if they saw the truth?” I asked.

“Maybe they knew and thought he was tame. Maybe they just want revenge. Maybe they were vampires or witches or some types that thought werewolves deserve to live and hunt because it’s their nature. I don’t know. But between the video and the witnesses, I can’t just go home. I want to, but I’d put my hunter buddies in danger.” He crumpled his trash and shot it at the garbage can.

“What about family?” I asked.

“Hunters aren’t supposed to have family,” he said.

“My uncle does. And everyone has *family* family. Like siblings and parents.”

“Except you,” he replied.

“Touché. But I had parents. They’re just dead. What about you? It’s not fair you know so much about me,” I said.

He grinned like he was getting somewhere with all his flirting. “You’ve seen nearly every inch of me. I can’t say that.”

“And you won’t. Come on. Siblings?” I asked.

“A younger sister. I won’t have her visiting me in jail for doing my job.” His face got hard, as though resolved to keep her good opinion of him intact.

“That’s sweet. Does she know what you do for a living?” I listed a new first aid kit on my list of odds and ends. Then, I wrote a number two next to it. The hunter had really tapped us out of gauze and other supplies. They weren’t used often, not since my uncle had semi-retired, but they were necessary.

“No, not really. She thinks I’m a bounty hunter. It explains the lifestyle and the guns.” He shrugged.

“I like that. Makes sense while you go after fugitive werewolves or vampires,” I replied.

“I left her a message that I’m on a hunt for a motorcycle gang that attacked a young woman. They skipped bail and went on the road together, so some hunters and I teamed up to protect people. We’ll split the bonds.” He sat up a little straighter.

“Nice story. You should write books,” I teased him.

“You get good at thinking fast and fibbing to protect others. I have to keep her safe,” he said.

“What happened to your parents?” I asked.

“My dad bailed when I was little. He went out for a drink with his buddies and never came home. Mom worked herself to death at unskilled jobs. I mowed lawns and washed cars until I was old enough to deliver pizzas. That’s how I discovered the other world.” He looked at me like I was part

of it.

Was I the enemy in his eyes?

“You discovered werewolves delivering pizza?” I asked.

He grinned and nodded. “I worked late. As late as I could. This one place delivered to a college, and they stayed open twenty-four hours. I took the shift after dinner, so I did my homework, had dinner with my sister, and then went to work until the sun came up. The owner warned me to never approach anything that looked like a stray dog. They gave me pepper spray for the dogs. And a wooden stake. There were jokes about Buffy and Lestat. I thought it was a hazing joke for the new kid.”

“Until...” I prompted.

“Until I delivered a bunch of pizzas to a frat house. There were two delivery guys—that’s how many pizzas they ordered. So, I wasn’t alone, at least. They opened the door, and it was a bloody mess. People screaming. Trying to run.”

“The vampires opened the door? You’d think they’d have enough to feed on,” I said.

“They did, but they wanted more. They had some people tied up, untouched. Later, I found that the vamps were saving those. They were virgin blood. Luckily, I didn’t have that problem. I dropped my pizzas and ran. Like a fool.” He laughed.

“They caught you,” I filled in.

“Of course. The other delivery guy, Jack, he had a stake in his pocket at least. He killed a couple before they fed on him. He had bite marks all over his body.”

“And you?” I asked.

“I ran, but there wasn’t a point. Vamps move quicker than you can blink, and more and more just kept coming. There are some really bad groups called nests that hunt together. They ended up dragging me back in the house. I fought them off and ran, trying to escape. They enjoyed watching me run in a panic, circling through the house like a cornered rat. A female tried a different approach—offered whatever I wanted if she could feed. I was tempted but got lucky. I ended up in a room where some kid had been doing pot. I grabbed his lighter and torched the ugly curtains. It set off the sprinklers, but I shouted fire. Vampires can’t fight fire.” He rolled on his back and folded his arms under his head. “They took off while it was still dark. I called for ambulances and stuff. Untied people and helped. I couldn’t help Jack.” He sighed.

“That’s very heroic. I don’t know if I’d have been that brave at sixteen,” I admitted.

“You would’ve been. Tough witch like you.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “That’s how found out about vampires and werewolves. How did you get into hunting? It’s a pretty tight network.”

“Sure. Well, my boss heard about it, and he was in the network. He didn’t want his employees getting eaten. I got some more training and met some guys. They did construction and went hunting at night. Come to think of it, they might’ve been gypsies, but no one ever talked about anything but the hunt. It was like families and other stuff didn’t exist.”

Something didn't add up. "How did that help your family? I mean, hunting doesn't pay."

"That was the problem. I dropped out of high school and worked construction during the day. The guys just fudged my age. Then, at night, I could hunt, keep my mom and sister safe from those things, and we had plenty of money from my day job."

"When did you sleep?" I asked.

"I had days off from both. If you scheduled it right, the job was covered, the hunting was covered, and everyone got just enough rest." He shrugged. "I miss that."

"I'm sure your sister appreciated the effort. Now, she can take care of herself," I said.

"She's a nurse, so she does fine. I just miss my crew and my friends. I don't know when it'll be safe to go back," he said.

"Never. The statute of limitations doesn't expire on murder. You might want to pick a new home and start over," I suggested.

"They're probably bugging my sister nonstop about where I am. If I've been in contact with her. I want to go back and protect her." He kicked at the blankets.

"She's better off without you there, and you know it. I'm sure your hunter friends got her a message safely. If you resettle somewhere, she can always relocate to join you." It was sweet that he loved his sister, but she didn't need to be tangled up in his world.

"She might be getting married. I want her to have a normal life. Your uncle had a family and hunted. Was that weird?" he asked.

"He worked in a gypsy family business and hunted with his brothers. We had enough money. Aunt Mandy taught classes in yoga and meditation. She cleaned people's auras and helped them balance. She worked out of the house, so she was always there but brought in good money. It was a happy childhood," I said.

"Do you remember your parents?" he asked.

When had this gone from getting more info about his case to sharing childhood crap? I shook my head. "That's not relevant."

"Relevant to what? We're just talking," he said.

"I want to know if there is anything you're hiding. Anything I don't know. Because we have police around, now." My history had nothing to do with the present problems.

"Mrs. O'Conner's my fault? She was sick, and her number came up. Don't blame me," he said.

"I'm not blaming you. I have cops asking questions. If they want to search the place and find you, I'm on the hook for harboring a fugitive. Is there somewhere we can move you to? Cousins? Friends? Not back home, farther away. They could be tracking you. I want you to be safe, but I want my family to be safe, as well," I admitted.

"And I thought you were one of us. Brave and willing to risk your life for the right things," he shot back.

"Claudia," Uncle Vinny said.

I hadn't heard him come down the stairs.

"Have you heard?" I asked him.

"About the customer, yes. We need to talk," he said.

"Follow me. I have to do inventory." I headed for the stockroom, deeper in the basement maze.

I started ticking off the things that needed reordering.

"It's not Ryan's fault," Vinny said.

"I know. But it adds risk. Risk for him because the cops are around. If we can move him, we should. They could be tracking him down. He's been here long enough." I wanted to protect my café and people, but Ryan would be safer not staying here.

"You think the cops aren't watching this place, just in case? Moving him now would raise suspicions and questions," Vinny said.

I sighed and kept working. "I understand. We have to be careful. Why is this all happening at once?"

He put his hand on my shoulder. "We'll make it through this. I know dealing with a human death is bringing a lot of scary attention. But this could happen to any shop. They're just doing their job. You need to simply be helpful, answer the questions, and don't offer anything beyond what they want. Don't act like you have anything to hide. Ryan is doing better, but he could open up those wounds easily if he had to run. Then, he reinfects his wounds. With the cops around, we're not moving him."

He used that fatherly tone. Even though he wasn't my father, he was the only father figure I'd had growing up. He was always there for me. Protected me and treated me like I was his. My instinct said to trust his advice. I hadn't even considered the cops could be watching us.

"You're right. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves. But I think the cops believe it's natural causes. They just need the medical proof. The family is pushing for the investigation, and I can't blame them, but we didn't do anything to her. I understand they want someone to blame, but if she asked for a sugary drink, what? We're not supposed to give it to her? We were supposed to know she was a brittle diabetic?" I was paranoid enough about peanuts and other allergies.

"No, of course not. You give them what they ask for. She had the responsibility to manage her own health and all that sugar testing stuff. Getting stressed out or spiking her blood pressure doesn't mean Esme or you gave her a heart attack later that day. That's just crazy. Grieving people want someone to blame, but the law won't fall for that. You've got nothing to worry about," he said.

"The cops seemed to indicate they had some reason to be chatting with us first. They took a sample of Esme's voice. The cops will be back." I sighed.

"Did you send over the gift basket the twins made?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I wasn't sure if it might look like we were trying too hard. If her husband is accusing us and we take him something, it'll probably only make it worse. I could try with his daughter, but I don't want to look like we're trying to smooth something over."

"You'll know when the time is right. Finish the inventory and try to have a normal day," he said.

“Fine. You spend some time with Ryan. He’s complaining there are no men around here,” I said.

“You like hiring vampires instead of human men,” Vinny teased.

“They’re more loyal and do what they’re told. I have some human guys. But they’re here to work, not entertain a guy hiding out.” I shrugged.

“I’ll take care of it. Back to work,” he said.

Once he left to chat with Ryan, I used my magic to levitate the items that needed to be reordered, filling out the list as I noted the supplies that hovered above the rest. Then, I cast another spell for anything we’d need seasonally to show itself. The heart stuff popped up. Ah yes, next month was Valentine’s Day. I added seasonal goodies and cups. Love made people splurge, and we’d sell a lot of ceramic mug sets.

Right now, I’d just love to have Ryan safely moved on and Mrs. O’Conner’s case closed. Romance was the furthest thing from my mind.

Chapter 8

That afternoon, I forced myself to stop checking the Internet and local news feeds. There was no story or mention of us anywhere. There was also no obituary yet for Mrs. O’Conner. I set alerts on both so I didn’t become obsessed with checking things. Aunt Mandy and Esme were business as usual. I didn’t know how they could be so calm.

I sat in my office, placing the orders, so we were stocked for the coming weeks based on prior use. Part of me worried that bad press could hurt sales. but I wanted to stay positive. We’d done nothing wrong. and any concerns would blow over.

A sharp knock on the door made me jump. “Come in,” I said.

Margaret walked in. “There is an older man outside the shop telling people not to come in.”

“Mr. O’Conner?” I asked, but I didn’t need an answer.

“We assume so, but he wasn’t a customer. We don’t know him. No one has spoken to him yet,” she replied.

“I will. Get me a large black coffee.” I grabbed my jacket.

January could be brutally cold in the Northeast. I had my North Face jacket and stretchy gloves on and walked out front by the time Margaret had the coffee ready.

Before leaving the café, I studied the widower. The man was in his late sixties and looked flustered. I couldn’t blame him, but this wasn’t going to bring her back.

I walked out in the bracing cold and offered him the coffee.

“Mr. O’Conner, can I help you?” I asked.

“You did this. Your shop,” he said.

“I’m Claudia, and this is my shop. I know you’re upset. I was very sorry to hear about your wife. I promise you we did nothing to hurt her.” I held out the coffee, again, but he ignored it.

“Liar. You upset her. She was never coming back here.” He pointed to the shop.

“I know. She told us. We did everything we could to make it up to her. If she didn’t want to come back, fine. One spill or a wrong order didn’t kill her. She never drank the iced coffee. The only thing she drank was what she ordered. Why don’t you come inside and we can talk about this in private?” I was getting cold, even in my fuzzy boots.

He glared at me. “Fine. It’s freezing out here today.”

I led the way and settled behind my desk, rubbing my hands together. He sat across from me and sipped the coffee.

"I understand you're upset that your wife had a bad experience here. But if she was in any way sick or unsteady on her feet, we would've called for an ambulance. We don't want to lose a customer, but when she left, she was fine. There are plenty of people who can verify that. I'm sure the police will be talking to them. They already talked to me. I'm sure you know that," I said.

He nodded. "They're not done looking into things."

"Then, why protest outside of my shop? Let the police do their job first. Your wife was a customer here for years. One bad day doesn't mean we're evil. I think she'd have come back to us after a few weeks of those chain coffee shops." I nodded.

"She hated the chains. But she was so mad at this place." He shook his head. "Even if the police can't prove anything, I know it was your fault. Maybe legally I can't prove it, but this place upset her. She had a weak heart, and too much stress wasn't good for her."

"We offered a month of free coffee. What more could we do? People make mistakes. I'm sure working at the library had its stresses, too. You want to dump it all on me?" I asked.

"Someone has to pay. I shouldn't be talking to you," he said.

He put the cup on my desk and hefted himself to his feet.

"Why?" I asked.

"There is an ongoing investigation. They told me not to. I believe you didn't mean to kill her. But you are responsible for what happens here. You're awfully young to own a place like this," he said.

I nodded. Maybe I shouldn't be talking to him either. I didn't want to cause more suspicion for myself or the café with the police.

"Maybe you should leave, then. Or I could call the police and let them know you're protesting here," I said.

"I can be outside. They said not to go in or talk to you. You're right; I should leave. But you'll be dealing with my protest plenty." He stormed out.

I followed him and watched him take up the same spot.

Aunt Mandy walked over to me. "What did he say?"

"Nothing new. He said he's not supposed to talk to me. I tried to calm him down and assure him that we would've called for help if we thought she was ill. I don't think he's reasonable, now. He's stuck in his grief." I wished I knew a way to help him, not that he'd listen to me.

"I can try to help him," she offered.

"No, I know you can help, but he won't listen. He's not ready, and coming from us, it'll only make him dig in his heels more." I leaned on the counter.

"What should we do? He'll freeze out there," Margaret said.

"Give him half an hour. If he's still there, let me know," I said.

"Half an hour?" My aunt followed me up the second floor where I wanted some peace and quiet.

“He’s got a big coat and gloves on. I’m not parenting my customers or my protesters. If he’s still there, I’ll call that Detective Shelley who left her card, so she can come and talk to him. If we just call the cops, it’ll turn into a mess.” I flopped down in an overstuffed chair.

One of the cats jumped in my lap and started purring. I needed the feline therapy.

“I meditated on this last night. We must not bury our heads in the sand and hide.” My aunt took a brush to the other cat who flipped and rolled for more attention.

“I talked to Uncle Vinny. He said we can’t move Ryan. The police might be watching us for anything unusual. I think we should act normal and not meddle.” I scratched my feline friend under the chin until she shook her head.

“I understand that. But you can deliver that gift basket and speak to the O’Connors’ daughter. Maybe she can diffuse the situation. The twins have tracked down some of Mrs. O’Conner’s day, but more details from the daughter might help. And you can feel her out to see if she feels like her father or is more reasonable. If you did nothing wrong, you have nothing to be ashamed of or fear,” she said.

“But we’re witches, and I don’t know about drawing attention to ourselves.” I looped my fingers with the cat’s tail until she turned around and head butted me.

“Esmeralda insists we ignore this and stay out of it as much as possible. Let the humans sort out what happened. I agree, but that doesn’t mean we should be rude. She was a regular customer. A condolence gift basket is appropriate. I can take it over, if you prefer,” my aunt offered.

That made me feel queasy. She was sweet and would never get us into trouble, but my aunt didn’t know how not to get involved. She couldn’t help herself. My aunt cared too much about everyone. People could take advantage of her because she’d trust them and help them. My uncle and I protected her from being taken in.

“No, thanks. I don’t want to put anyone in the middle. I’ll handle it. Tomorrow. I can’t think about it today,” I said.

“You were down there talking to Ryan for a while. Everything okay?” she asked with a smile.

“Fine. We talked a bit about things. I wanted to try and find out if there was more to his story. He told me about his family and sister. He changed the subject, sort of, and I didn’t want to start a fight.” I shrugged.

“Men. Vin won’t tell me the details of Ryan’s case more than what you know. He said it’s all hearsay because the police and mall witnesses don’t know what they were really looking at. They don’t know a werewolf or a vampire from a human. Things happen fast, and they see what they believe. Their brain makes sense of what doesn’t make sense. But if Ryan didn’t want to share, that’s unfortunate.”

“He’s not my permanent problem. Once this is over, we can move him on. He can start over somewhere else. I can’t let it hurt the café or the coven.” I scratched the cat’s ears.

“You truly believe Mrs. O’Conner died of natural causes?” Aunt Mandy asked.

I’d never questioned it. “That’s the feeling I got from the police. Her age and health. If someone

did harm her, it wasn't us," I said.

Aunt Mandy nodded. "I agree, but nothing is for sure, yet."

I stood and went down the stairs enough to see Margaret.

She shrugged. "He's still there," she said.

I took out my phone and called the detective. I didn't want to get the old guy in trouble, but I wasn't going to have him die of frostbite or catch pneumonia from being stubborn.

"You're sure?" my aunt asked.

"We don't need more bad publicity. He's bringing enough. If he gets sick or dies from exposure, I don't want that on my conscience," I said.

"Detective Shelley," the cop answered.

Chapter 9

I felt so human. Standing on the porch of Dana Stevens' Cape Cod-style home, I was tempted to use magic to get me out of this problem. Dana was Mrs. O'Conner's daughter, and I had the gift basket. That wasn't the worst part. Mr. O'Conner protesting outside of my café in the bitter cold was the problem. The police had talked him home the other day, but he was back there this morning.

I rang the doorbell as I made up a spell in my head. I could cast one on Mr. O'Conner to remove his anger or need for revenge. But the world had to have balance, so that anger would transfer somewhere else where it wasn't deserved or didn't belong. It'd be my fault. That would be a bad spell.

A woman about forty years old answered the door. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, I don't know if you have a minute to talk. I'm Claudia Crestwood, owner of Witch's Brew. I wanted to bring you this and tell you how sorry I am for your loss. We miss your mother's daily visits." I held out the basket in front of me, just in case she had some anger like her father.

"I'm not sure you should be here," she said.

I frowned. "I'm not trying to cause trouble. I just wanted to talk to you. Your father is very upset, and I can't seem to have a conversation with him. He's going to get himself sick standing out in the cold, protesting my shop, and I don't want that any more than you do."

"Come inside," she said.

We sat in a comfortable kitchen with white and blue checkered chair cushions, towels, and accents. It felt very country and sweet.

"I'm very sorry about your mother, but if we had any idea she was ill, we'd have called for help. She was fine when she left," I said.

Dana held up a hand. "That's not the issue."

"It's not?" I asked.

She set down two cups of coffee. "My mother had health issues. Her doctor believes it was natural. She went about her normal day, and there were plenty of people after you that spiked her blood pressure more than your little shop."

"I'm glad you understand. Your father is protesting outside the shop, and it's hurting my business. I

know that's nothing compared to what you're going through, but it's not safe for him. The bitter cold and his age. We'll keep calling the police for well checks on him," I said.

"I told him that's crazy. He'll give himself a heart attack. But he's convinced someone did something to Mom. Her health was stable. She'd been diabetic most of her life, so she knew how to manage that. I think it must've been her heart or something just changed. But my father won't consider that. He wanted to grow old with her." She sipped her coffee.

"I understand. He's convinced someone hurt her. We were her first stop, and he probably heard her complain about us. Is there any way you could talk to him and make him understand?" I asked.

She smiled. "I've tried. He knows she can be harsh and irritate people. But she's worked at the library for years and been part of the garden club forever. She's had the same friends all her life. Fights and getting over the fights. Ups and downs. You're the new thing. Your shop is only a few years old. She liked the old diner that was there previously. She hated the coffee chains more than your café, but she did like trying all the different stuff without it being as pretentious."

"So, your father can't blame her co-workers, friends, garden club, and so on. He probably is friends with the husbands of the garden club members. And friends' husbands."

"They did a lot of couple things. And he likes going to the library. So, in his mind, it can't be anyone there. Even though she's made her share of enemies everywhere. I know she could be hard to please." Dana rubbed her forehead.

"I'm sorry; I'm not making this easier on you. I just wanted you to know that no one at our shop had any grudges against your mother. She tried all sorts of drinks, and the baristas liked that. They get bored with the same things every day. She had high standards, but that kept my people on their toes. She never said our place wasn't clean or stocked. That made me feel good." I shrugged.

"She was very hard to please. I wish they'd just do those tests and we could know. I know there is a backup. Life in a city. The morgue and medical examiner's office are understaffed, I guess. But that's the only thing my father will listen to. Someone in authority saying it was her heart or a stroke. Or someone else confessing they did something bad." She frowned.

"Was there any enemy she especially had a problem with lately?" I asked.

Dana shook her head. "Most of the stuff is old. History that bubbles up when they disagree. But, really, I shouldn't be talking to you while the investigation is still open."

She stood, and I did, as well.

"Your father said the same thing, I don't understand why. I think you believe me that we didn't do anything to harm her," I said.

"There were some threats made. The police are investigating. I don't know who did it or why, but it's hard to ignore. It's scary to hear them. I think you should go," she said.

"Threats against you?" I asked.

She stared at me.

"Against your mother since she died?" I asked.

“I’m not supposed to talk to you or anyone about them,” she said.

“Why would you let me in your house if you thought I had anything to do with it?” I pressed.

She walked to the front door and opened it. “I wanted to hear your voice. See if it felt familiar.”

“Does it?” I asked as I approached the door.

“Please just go. I’ll speak to my father about risking his health outside in this cold. My mother wouldn’t want that. My son only has one grandparent left.” She was near tears. This really hadn’t gone as planned.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I stepped out onto the porch. “I won’t bother you, anymore. Please just know that no one hurt her at my café. And I certainly didn’t threaten anyone, just for the record.”

She closed the door in my face.

I climbed into my little green VW Bug and warmed up. That hadn’t gone at all like I’d hoped. But at least she didn’t believe we’d hurt her mother. There was a logical reason her father blamed us—anyone else would mean blaming a friend, and he couldn’t bring himself to do that.

But threats against Mrs. O’Conner? The voice sample from Esme made sense, now. Her voice was deeper with a bit of raspiness to it. Mine was much higher. Maybe I didn’t sound like whoever had threatened them. Wouldn’t they disguise their voice? I texted Detective Shelley that I needed more information. Trying to smooth things over might be making things worse, somehow.

Sipping hot tea, I sat at the back table in the café and waited for the detective. Mr. O’Conner was still blustering outside to keep people out. Fred from the sandwich shop next door had tried to convince Mr. O’Conner to go home or at least have some soup. The old man was stubborn. Detective Shelley walked up to the door, and they exchanged a few words.

Mr. O’Conner finally packed up and got into his car.

The detective came in and headed right for my table.

“Is that why you wanted to see me?” she asked and nodded toward Mr. O’Conner.

“No, but thank you. The other shop owners have tried to talk sense into him or warm him up, but he doesn’t listen to anyone.” I gestured to the chair opposite me.

“Want something to drink?” Ellen, one of our baristas, asked.

“Large hot coffee, regular,” she said.

“Refill, please. Thanks,” I said.

“What was so urgent?” Shelley asked.

“I tried to speak to Mr. O’Conner yesterday. He started talking but then said he shouldn’t be here, and we shouldn’t be talking. It seemed odd. Today, I went to see his daughter. Just to deliver a gift basket for condolence and talk about her father’s protest. His safety.”

“It’s interfering with your business,” she said.

Ellen dropped off the drinks.

“Thanks, Ellen.” I nodded and took a sip.

“Yes, fine. Mr. O’Conner is hurting my business and the other businesses in the area. I can handle it. Mrs. Stevens seems sure it was natural causes and her father is just grieving. But then, she said we shouldn’t be talking either. She mentioned threats. You took a voice sample from Esmeralda. I need to know the whole story,” I said.

“The investigation is ongoing, but we’ve gotten far enough along. There were threats against Mrs. O’Conner after she’d made her insults to your shop and witches. Her husband got a phone call at home. The voice sounded female but also distorted. He let the machine get the rest of the calls that afternoon. It wasn’t Esmeralda, and no one thinks it’s you. There was a note left in the mailbox, as well. That’s part of why we can’t dismiss the idea that someone did do something to Mrs. O’Conner. Without the threats before her sudden death, there would be much less reason to put people on the case.” She was choosing her words very carefully.

“I understand. She did threaten our witch theme and pagan ways. But more than a few people have made rude remarks. Especially if they don’t know the history of the city. Salem gets all the attention for the witch trials. It’s part of the history here, too, and brings in some tourists. People lash out when they’re having a bad day. I don’t take it personally.” I rolled my eyes.

“Thank you for confirming that Mrs. O’Conner mentioned something about you being witches. I don’t believe you mentioned that, at first,” she said.

I shrugged. “It didn’t seem relevant. No one has ever done anything more than a little protesting. We decorate for Christmas and Easter, as well as all the other major holidays. We’re not trying convert anyone.”

“But someone took offense to her threats and made ones of their own. Were members of your coven here?” she asked.

“Esmeralda. My aunt, but she couldn’t threaten a mouse in her kitchen. There might’ve been some customers. A couple of the staff are. I can give you a list, but I hate the idea of my coven being harassed. I can be sure of the staff that was here but not of all the customers. Plus, word travels.” I couldn’t believe someone would threaten a customer.

“I understand. But it means someone heard about her threats and had a problem with her enough to make their own threats, and the woman was found dead the next day. You see, we have to investigate until the medical examiner comes back with cause of death. We did ask the family to keep their distance and not talk to you or anyone else about it. Tried to keep the threats a surprise piece of information, but Mr. O’Conner can’t seem to stay away.”

“He’s upset. I just don’t want him to get frostbite or have a heart attack. He shouts at people and gets so worked up in the cold.” I shook my head. “I’m sure he loved his wife very much, but she wouldn’t want him to end up in the hospital.”

“Thank you for calling me yesterday. The patrol car took him home. The officer had a talk with him. I called him later on. I’m not sure there is anything we can do short of arresting him to keep him

from coming back. But if he's there for more than an hour at a time, call, and we'll have a patrol car take him home," she said.

"I will, and I'll let every shift manager know, in case he tries protesting overnight. I hope he's not that crazy. What a thing for your officers to do. Our tax dollars at work. Any idea how long before we get the information from the autopsy?" I asked.

"Could be another week. The results will be accurate. They are short-staffed. And there were a lot of deaths over the holidays. More than normal need to be tested and autopsied. The tox screen should be soon."

"Odds are that'll show nothing?" I asked.

"Most likely. We talked to her family and searched her things. No sign of drugs or abusing alcohol. Someone would've had to slip her poison. But to time that so perfectly that it worked overnight? I think Mrs. O'Conner got what most of us want in a death. To go to sleep one night and just not wake up." Detective Shelley smiled.

"But she was only in her sixties. I'd like to make it to at least eighty before I didn't wake up. She didn't have cancer or any other disease that might've hastened things?" I asked.

"Being Type 1 diabetic for as long as she was, it's serious. We think of people living with diabetes all the time. So it's not a death sentence, but it weakens the body and takes a toll. Type 2 can be cured and managed easier. Type 1 is rougher. I've had quite an education from her doctor and the ME. Mrs. O'Conner had some issues medically before. Her doctor wanted her to keep active but also rest and eat healthier. So, we'll let you know when we find out about the results. And if we find out who threatened her, that would go a long way to removing suspicion from your café. If you could provide me with a list of coven members who frequent your café, that'd be helpful." She nodded.

"I'll email it to you. I just can't imagine any of them making threats to a regular customer over a bad morning. Mrs. O'Conner never would've done anything. I keep expecting her to come through the door." I sipped my tea.

"Well, now, you understand why this isn't a closed case. I wish we could clear you and all your friends, but the threat specified witches. So, it sorts of shines a spotlight on your establishment. Thanks for the coffee. Send me that list by tonight, please."

Chapter 10

That night, I called a coven meeting. Technically, I had Esmeralda send the email. Everyone assembled on the second floor at ten p.m. The café was quiet but still had some customers, so we moved into my locked room.

“Did they get the results?” Ellen asked.

I sighed. “No. The autopsy could be another week or so. Hopefully, we’ll hear about the toxicology screen tomorrow. That may or may not help. The reason that the investigation is focused on us and isn’t just standard procedure is that someone made threats against Mrs. O’Conner the day she died.”

“What?” Aunt Mandy gasped.

“Yes, after she left here but before she died. Her husband let their machine record most of them for the police. As she was leaving, Mrs. O’Conner did make some comments about us being witches and the name of the café. Well, someone called her home and made threats. Someone also left a note in the mailbox that was found the next day after she had passed away.” I looked around at the stunned faces.

“So, they aren’t just picking on us because we are witches?” Ellen asked.

“No, they are following evidence. Someone left those messages. They even took a voice sample from me the day they told us about Mrs. O’Conner. They didn’t want us to know about the threats,” Esmeralda said.

“Because we’d protect each other?” Iris asked.

“Probably. I want to know who threatened Mrs. O’Conner. Someone went to a lot of trouble to find her phone number. To find her address. They were at her house. I need to be sure that we don’t have a snake in our midst. We don’t threaten people. We don’t hurt people or wish harm on them.” I made eye contact with many around the room, hoping I could discern the guilty party...if they were here.

“You really think they’re among us?” Esme asked.

“I don’t know. We must wait out the police investigation. That means bad publicity for the café. Mr. O’Conner has been protesting outside daily. And we must hope that the medical examiner has a clear cause of death. I don’t like waiting. I’m not very patient,” I said.

“We know that,” Violet said.

“What can we do?” Aunt Mandy asked.

“We could cast a spell on Mr. O’Conner to keep him at home,” Esme suggested.

“No, we’re not doing spells on innocent people unless it’s absolutely necessary. That could backfire and make us look guilty, as well.”

“It’d make us look like witches,” someone from the crowd joked.

“Cute. But since someone did something bad in the name of witches, we should find out who. That’s my first priority because I need to know I can trust my coven.” I’d worked on the spell most of the afternoon. There was a family spell book in the back. Most witches used standard spells, but I liked making my own.

I opened my hand and a red ball of light floated from my palm.

“What’s that going to do?” asked an older witch.

“Find the guilty party. Whoever threatened Mrs. O’Conner will have the red light hover over their heads,” I said.

When I pulled my hand away, the ball of light darted around the room, reading all the individuals. It zigged and zagged briefly near every woman in the room. Finally, it darted out the window.

The twins ran to the window. “It’s gone,” they said.

“Damn. Did you put a tracker on it?” Esme asked.

“No, I just wanted to rule out us,” I replied sheepishly. I was good at spells, but sometimes, I wasn’t as good at thinking things all the way through. But Esmerelda had a hundred years on me.

“Well, it wasn’t anyone here. But the police won’t accept a spell as proof, anyway,” Ellen said.

I smiled. “True, but I feel better. I know some of you are out to defend Wicca and paganism. You want to make more of a statement. I’d understand if Mrs. O’Conner’s threats upset you. We have the freedom of religion. We also have a responsibility to the paranormal creatures out there. The magical world must be protected. At least I feel like we have that obligation. If you don’t, there are other covens focused on more traditional Wiccan things. But we don’t want witch hunts, vampire hunts, or werewolf hunts. Can you imagine what big game hunters would pay to hunt a werewolf?”

“You’re giving the humans all the power,” Ellen said.

“No, I’m not forgetting our history,” I replied.

“Then, why are you keeping a hunter in your basement? Protecting them and the werewolves is a bit of a contradiction,” said one of the members.

“I understand it’s hard to reconcile for some people. Some people believe vamps and weres should run wild. If they kill, it’s their nature. But they are sentient beings capable of making choices, and choosing to kill is a crime. I won’t tolerate it. If they kill too many humans, we’ll be at war. The humans will hunt all of us down. Hunters have controlled the killing vamps and weres for centuries. It’s not a perfect system, but it works. Sometimes, a hunter is caught on tape, and the police want to charge them. So, we’re helping one. He was severely injured. Right now, the police are watching us,

so moving the hunter is not an option. Once the case is resolved, he'll move on. You have my word—I'm not running a bed and breakfast for hunters." I rubbed the bridge of my nose as tension built behind my eyes.

"Maybe the café wasn't a great cover for this. Maybe a yoga studio?" Aunt Mandy suggested.

Esme shook her head. "Yoga is too much of a trend. You'd have to change out the main offering. Pilates is more in, now."

"Fortune telling?" Iris suggested.

"The gypsies have that market sewn up. You don't want them for enemies," I said.

"Candles and incense," Violet said.

Ellen stood. "Coffee and tea is good. We do a great business, and people talk. They talk on their phones and to their friends about anything. And we baristas listen. We know who hates Trump and who secretly supports him. Who never orders anything with the witch themes—those tend to be the strict bible thumpers who like our coffee but not the theme. Most people don't care. But we get all sorts of people in here for coffee. If you go to something more new age, you lose the people we want to keep an eye on. We need to be more Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter was protested in some areas," Esme said.

"But the vast majority of kids and parents approved. It was full of witches and werewolves but made people feel good. We can do that," Aunt Mandy said.

"A Harry Potter party?" I asked.

"Maybe for Halloween. I think we can revamp the wall by the front door. That plaque dedicated to the fallen witches in the 1600s that tells people about the history—it's good, but it might be in the wrong place," Aunt Mandy said.

"Hide the truth and put out the happy fake version?" Esme asked.

"It'd probably work. Move that plaque behind the counter. Move some of the cute witches from TV and movies around, so it's a mix." Iris nodded.

"Right. What if we made up a quiz? Which witch or wizard are you? They fill out a quiz and turn it in for a free small drink and the results." Violet pulled out her phone and made notes.

"Sounds like an app," I said.

"Exactly. What, you thought paper?" Iris rolled her eyes at me.

"Never. So, campier funny witches. More 'Sabrina the Teenage Witch' and less Maleficent. Maybe Esme could sit on the counter in cat form and crack jokes like Salem?" I teased.

"We've veered off the goal of this meeting." She glared at me.

"You're right, we have. I'm sorry. The café is a cover for working with paranormal beings. Trying to keep the peace with humans by keeping an eye on them. Keeping them close rather than pushing them away. A little rearrangement of the pics can't hurt. I like that app idea. Maybe we have the TVs in the main lounge play *Sabrina*, *Bewitched*, the *Harry Potter* movies, and so on. *Hocus Pocus*, *Practical Magic*. There are plenty of those shows and movies out there. Get the DVDs cheap and

have theme weekends. It could become a thing. I get sick of news and morning talk shows that go on all day.”

“But in the morning, people are watching the weather and traffic,” Ellen added.

“True. So, the TV over the baristas stays on local weather, traffic, and news during morning rush. But the rest can play. Heck, *Charmed*. Get all of Buffy and Angel. I don’t want the staff to get sick of repeats. Mix it up, cute and light. Nothing too dark. We have the TVs on, but people generally ignore them.” I looked around.

“This is more of a business decision. Which is good. But the coven is under suspicion by cops,” a member spoke up.

I had skipped over that a bit. “That’s true, and the police might contact you to find out where you were and what you were doing. Don’t be afraid. Tell the truth. No one here did it. I trust my spell worked. But understand that we’re not about attacking anyone. Any human. That’s not going to help this situation or our overall goals.”

“So, what do we do?” Iris asked.

“Esmeralda and I came up with another spell. We’re going to find out, now, if Mrs. O’Conner’s death with natural or not. Then, I’ll know best how to proceed.” I set out the medium-sized cauldron.

Esme filled it with core ingredients and stirred. “It’ll only work if we have something that belonged to Mrs. O’Conner. What do you have?”

I smiled and pulled a little plastic bag from my pocket. “Hair from her daughter’s coat. I grabbed it as I left her house.”

“That’ll work?” Aunt Mandy asked.

“The daughter belonged to her mother. We just have to phrase it right.” I nodded to Esme.

“You can do it,” Esme said.

Great, no pressure! “Life and death. Good and evil. I ask for the truth to be revealed. Was the mother of this woman taken by nature or killed by mortal hands?” I dropped the hair in the mixture.

A puff of smoke later, and the brew turned red.

Chapter 11

“Red means?” Iris asked.

“Not natural,” I replied.

“Green would’ve meant natural,” Esme added.

“She was killed. We didn’t do it, but she was killed by someone’s actions.” I leaned slightly on the table.

“Or inactions,” Aunt Mandy said.

“Now what? The police won’t take that as evidence. Even if they would, we don’t want them to think it’s us,” Ellen said.

“Agreed. We keep it quiet since it means nothing to them,” Violet said.

“We don’t want them to take it as a confession from anyone. Whoever made those threats screwed us over, but the police aren’t on a witch hunt.” I sat down.

“Now, we wait?” my aunt asked.

I shook my head. “I have a list of where Mrs. O’Conner was, more or less. Work at the library and her garden club. The twins have been stalking her social media and her friends. So, I’ll fill in the blanks.”

“You’re going to solve the murder?” Esme asked.

“Someone has to. They’re looking in the wrong places or they think it’s just natural causes. We know it’s something more. Her daughter admitted that Mrs. O’Conner could be harsh and had some enemies. It’s worth talking to people,” I said.

My aunt frowned. “It’s dangerous.”

“I agree. You need to stay out of it. Let the police spin their wheels and figure it out. It’s not us. It’s not our problem,” Esme said.

“Yeah, we can call the cops on Mr. O’Conner every time we see him. Just wait until we get the test results and the cops do whatever,” Ellen said.

“So, let someone get away with murder? That’s not right either,” Violet said.

“It’s not a paranormal crime or problem. That’s what we should be involved with,” Esme said.

“But this case threatens our coven and our work. If it comes back with evidence that someone hurt her, we could be first in line as suspects. I’d rather know who else might’ve had a grudge or a motive.

I'm going to discreetly ask some questions and see what comes up. I can't do nothing. If you don't like it, tough. Meeting adjourned." I walked down the stairs.

I was at the library when it opened with a to-go carrier full of coffee. The staff was happy, and it broke the ice.

"This is a nice treat. What brings it on?" Mrs. Drew asked.

Mrs. Drew was the head librarian and skeptical. She was a bit younger than Mrs. O'Conner but not much.

"Well, Mrs. O'Conner was a regular customer. I know she worked here. I just wondered if anyone knows what really happened. She left my shop in good health, if not happy about an order mix-up," I said.

"And that spill. She was so upset. Her husband brought her a new set of clothes from home," said Audrey, a redheaded part-timer.

"Accidents happen. I just wondered if she seemed ill to anyone else or things got worse," I said.

"The police have been here," Mrs. Drew said. "We answered their questions."

"I understand. It's just been bugging me. We're waiting on test results. But Mr. O'Conner is so angry. He blames my shop, and I'm just trying to figure out why or what we can do," I replied.

A few of the women just shook their heads and went back to work.

"Maybe we should speak alone," Mrs. Drew said.

"Sure." I followed her into her office.

"If you're trying to throw suspicion onto us, it won't work," Mrs. Drew said.

"I'm not trying to throw anything. The police seem to think it was natural causes. It's Mr. O'Conner who seems to be pushing to find someone to blame. I know Mrs. O'Conner was fine when she left my shop. I'm just trying to narrow down when she started to show signs of illness or whatever I can find out," I replied.

"I've known the O'Connors for a long time. If there is reason to think something else happened, I'm sure Mr. O'Conner has his reasons. I don't know them. But Mrs. O'Conner was very upset about the coffee spill. Once she changed, she seemed fine. She left for a lunch with a friend of hers about noon. Nothing was wrong with her," she said.

"That's good. So, nothing happened here to upset her. Nothing weird. No arguments. No enemies?" I asked.

"Of course not. She's worked her part-time for years. We have a nice calm group of people who love books. That's all," Mrs. Drew said.

"Do you know who she had lunch with?" I asked.

Mrs. Drew shook her head. "A friend. They went to the Italian place on the corner. She came back and worked until about two. That was it. She never complained of anything. Being tired or her food

disagreeing with her. I've seen her get a bit ill in the past if she misses a meal or needs a bit more insulin, but she was on top of it and had all her stuff with her always."

"So, she'd been ill before. What happened? I mean, what if she couldn't take care of herself?" I asked.

"Audrey also has diabetes, so she knew how to take blood sugar. And depending on the results, it was either she'd need juice or insulin. But Mrs. O'Conner was so on top of her condition it was never necessary. She only told us because of her grandson. He has Type 1, as well. She made us all take a first aid class and gave us her own class on diabetes. We do a summer program with a lot of kids and some after school programs, as well, so she wanted to know her grandson was safe, even if she wasn't working that day." Mrs. Drew sighed sharply.

"I understand her caring about her grandson. Kids don't want to take care of themselves. But I'm sure she taught him to be responsible," I said.

Mrs. Drew tilted her head in a way that said she didn't fully agree. "He isn't so young. Eighth grade, I believe. He resents being sick. Avoided talking to her when he would come for programs. But what kid wants their grandma fussing over them when they're with their friends?"

"I understand. But you ladies aren't nurses. It's good to know what you can do, but it's dangerous to mess with someone else's medication. I don't think I could do that unless it was family," I admitted.

"I agree. Luckily, we haven't had that issue come up. The point is there was no sign of her being ill at all that day. She was cold and couldn't get warm, but a lot of people were saying that. It was bitter cold, and the wind whipped through people," she said.

"It is a serious winter. If that's all you remember, I'll get out of your hair," I said.

She sipped her coffee. "That's all. But thanks for the morning java," she said.

"Sure." I grabbed my purse and headed out of her office.

Audrey was sitting behind the desk. For some reason, I paused and wanted to chat with her a bit. She didn't make eye contact, so my instinct said there was something to talk about.

"Hi, Audrey. Mind if I ask you a couple things?" I asked.

She looked around and shrugged. "Mrs. Drew probably covered it all."

"I know. The big stuff. She mentioned you were also a diabetic and knew how to test blood and all of that. So, you might notice even better if Mrs. O'Conner had any signs that she wasn't feeling great when she was at work that day. Or if I missed something," I said.

Audrey shook her head. "She was fine. She generally wanted to be left alone and even more on that day."

"Just a bad day?" I asked.

She lifted a shoulder. "She and I didn't really get along, so she didn't confide in me."

"Mrs. Drew made it sound like you were her diabetic backup," I replied.

"That was her way of forgetting about it. Mrs. O'Conner always picked on me for my eating habits. She was rail thin, and I'm not." Audrey blushed.

She was a bit plump, but I could see Mrs. O’Conner being a bit critical. “She picked on you?”

“If I ate better, exercised more—I could get rid of my diabetes. She never could. I don’t know why it was such a big deal to her. I’ve always had bad asthma, and it made even gym class hard.” She sniffled.

“Don’t feel bad. I know she said some harsh things to me and my baristas, at times. But all that proves is she was unhappy and took it out on others. Did she have any real enemies here?” I asked.

“Well, she picked on me. Everyone else just avoided her. Mrs. Drew would be the closest thing to an enemy, but that was just Mrs. O’Conner resenting that they didn’t give her the top job,” Audrey said.

“But she only works part-time,” I said.

Audrey nodded. “She wanted the top job and full-time work. Her husband was retired, and he was older. He was on Medicare, but she wasn’t sixty-five yet when the job was decided. I think she is, now. Anyway, she wanted it for the benefits. But when they talked to the staff, no one wanted to work for her. Mrs. Drew is strict and dull but fair and not critical.”

“Much better. So, Mrs. Drew would have no reason to hurt her,” I said.

“Hurt her? We all thought it was natural causes,” Audrey said. Her eyebrows shot up in worry.

“Well, the police are looking around for clues or enemies. Maybe they know something they won’t tell us,” I fibbed.

“You think?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I’ve talked to all my staff, and no one did anything to her drink. I mean, if someone had added a bunch of sugar she hadn’t ordered, she’d have tasted it. If they’d used real sugar instead of an artificial sweetener, she’d feel it. But, obviously, that wasn’t the case because she didn’t get ill when she was here. It’d affect her fairly quickly, right? If someone did that?”

She nodded. “In a drink, definitely. But she always has her testing kit and insulin with her, so she’d just dose. She had her garden club later and dinner with her family. It sounds like she made it through all those things, so odds are it was natural causes in the night.”

“Probably. Thanks. I just wanted to be sure she didn’t get sick after she left my place. I didn’t want to ignore a problem if there was one,” I explained.

“You sound like a great boss. But I think you’re good. I should get back to work.” Audrey looked around.

“Of course, sorry. Blame me for asking a million questions. One more. Do you know who she was having lunch with that day?” I couldn’t help but try.

“A friend. Olive?” She frowned. “I think.”

“Thanks.” I waved as I left.

Chapter 12

Walking to the front door of my café, I barely looked at Mr. O’Conner, who didn’t bother trying to protest my going in.

“Please go home or I will call the police. You’re shivering,” I said as I pulled the door behind me against the nasty winter wind.

He didn’t move.

I walked into the busy café and met three people waiting for my attention with issues that had nothing to do with coffee or tea.

Aunt Mandy came up first. “Ryan is over the infection. He wants to help. To work or something. Vinny told him he can’t leave, now. Not with the police around.”

I nodded. “He can do inventory if he wants, but he’s not allowed up here.”

“If we could pass him off as a new hire, we might could move him on quicker,” she said.

“They’ll see him leave but never arrive. You think they won’t notice that? No. Sorry, he stays down there or I’ll lock him up,” I said.

Esme walked up next. “Nothing?”

“Nothing really. But Mrs. O’Conner was fine at the library and through lunch, so there’s no indication whatever it is came from us with any delay. She wasn’t sick. No one saw her dose with insulin or anything.”

“Good. The coven is grumbling about this.” Esme headed to my table, and I followed her.

Margaret came over with my usual hot coffee.

“Thanks,” I said.

Once Margaret was gone, I asked Esme, “What are they complaining about? I’m trying to make sure we’re in the clear.”

We sat, and I took a long drink of warming mocha-flavored coffee.

Esme sighed. “They think Mr. O’Conner is making such a fuss that he’s the one behind the threats. He staged them.”

“Staged them?” I asked, trying to wrap my brain around that motive.

“Before his wife died. Once he knew she was so upset, maybe he thought it’d be good to get us in trouble. So, he had someone leave the messages and write the note. He planned to have it rattle his

wife and she'd go to the police. Get us in trouble, and his wife would have something to keep her busy and feel like she was justified."

"That's awful. Making up a threat. I don't see him doing that just for fun."

Esme gave me a look that said I was naive. "If Mrs. O'Conner is this much trouble for a coffee shop she's in a few minutes a day, imagine what a headache she is to her husband."

I opened my mouth, but instead of words, I drank some coffee and mulled over the idea. She didn't seem to be sweet to anyone.

"But he's so devoted to her. Why protest us now if he knows we didn't do anything?"

"He doesn't want them to find out it was an inside fake threat. Once the medical stuff comes back, he'll probably stop, and the case will close." Esme shrugged. "It's a theory."

"Well, Mrs. O'Conner's boss didn't like her much. Mrs. O'Conner wanted the boss' job and didn't get it. But the boss seems like she was stuck with the grouchy part-timer. I could twist that into a motive if I wanted to." I swirled my coffee cup to mix up the flavor.

"We could say your need to investigate is a way of throwing suspicion off of you." Esme shook her head.

"If they didn't know me, maybe. I'm trying to help people. I used all the money my parents left me to open this café so we had a place for the coven to meet and a way to tap into human conversations. I want to keep the peace and help everyone." I took another swig of my coffee.

"Well, the coven wants to believe you put the paranormal beings first. You have a soft spot for humans."

"We're witches. We're humans with powers. My aunt and uncle have no powers. My cousins think they might have some, but none have shown up, and they're eighteen," I said softly.

"We all know that. You and your mother were the powerful line. You really should be thinking about finding a powerful wizard and continuing that line," Esme said with a grin.

I frowned and slowly set my cup down to avoid dropping it. "You want to talk about me having kids? Why don't you have some first?"

"I can't. I can't spend half of my time as a cat and be pregnant. The baby wouldn't shift so I'd be stuck as a human and lose my nine lives."

"Or have a litter of kittens. Would they have your shifting power?" I asked.

"No, and I'm not having kittens," she whispered through her teeth.

We were at the back table near the kitchen. All the good tables were on the other side, and the nearest one was five feet away. The only ones who might overhear anything were staff, and the loudness of the machines and the TV piping in a witch movie made sure they couldn't overhear us.

"That sucks. Do you want kids?" I asked.

She shook her head. "My dad took off on my mom. I like men, but children are a burden," Esme said.

I bit my lip. I'd always felt like a burden to my aunt and uncle, and I wasn't even their kid. They

hadn't chosen to have me the way they'd tried to have the twins. My aunt hadn't been able to become pregnant again after Violent and Iris.

"You okay?" Esme asked.

"Yeah. My aunt and uncle never made me feel like burden, even though I certainly was."

"No, that's different. That's stepping up and taking care of your family. If something happened to them, I would've taken care of you and the twins. I'm only a distant cousin of your mother and aunt, but that's what family does." She patted my hand.

"I'm only twenty-five—I'm not in a rush to have a bunch of magical kids to deal with. I mean, there isn't a Hogwarts to ship them off to." That would really be nice.

She laughed. "True. You were always moving things with your mind, just because you could."

"What brought on this baby talk?" I asked.

Esme shrugged. "I think of the future of the coven. Of the paranormal people. We need powerful people to step up like you have. And consolidating power would only help you."

"So, the paranormal world is as sexist as the rest of humanity?" I asked.

Esme glared at me. "No and yes. Wicca and many pagan religions elevate women and the Goddess. Mother Earth. But, face it, power wins. A vampire king. A pack of strong male werewolves. Those aren't things to be discounted. If you had a husband who was as strong as you, there would be less grumbling and questioning. You'd have a united front."

"I don't mind being questioned. I'm not all-knowing. I can take the input and doubt and learn from it. But if I run into any super-hot wizards worth procreating with, I'll let you know," I said.

"I have a couple in mind," Esme said.

"Then, you have some fun with them," I said.

"I have my share of fun. I'm thinking of the future, long term, and so should you," she said.

"I'm not going to live as long as you will. I'm just thinking about Mrs. O'Conner and that hunter in my basement." The twins walked in. "Oh, I need to talk to the twins. Nag me later, okay?"

Esme sighed and walked to the basement stairs. I caught her shifting out of the corner of my eye. She'd pout for a bit and get over it. I was too young to get married. There was no way I'd get married just to produce ultra-powerful little witches. Kids were a lot of work, and I wasn't in a rush.

The twins sat and removed their gloves and scarves. "Hi," they said in unison.

"Hey, sorry to drag you back here. How's classes?" I asked.

"Fine," they said, again together.

"We're done for today," Iris said.

"Cool. I just wanted to ask out about who Mrs. O'Conner might've had lunch with the day of her death. All I could get was where and the name Olive," I said.

"I got this. Get me some tea?" Violet asked her twin.

Iris headed for the counter.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

Violet nodded. “Dating as a twin is tricky. Guys don’t get it. And when they can’t tell us apart, it’s really weird.”

“Yikes, another reason I’m glad I wasn’t a twin,” I said.

“You a twin? That’d be awesome. Double the powers.” She smiled and pulled out her tablet. “I remember someone named Olive on her friend list in Facebook. Old people.”

“Facebook is old, now?” I didn’t really do social media. The café had a page that we made sure was updated, quirky, and fun, but I didn’t feel the need to share.

She laughed. “When grandparents are doing it, yes. Get Snapchat.”

“Isn’t that for sexting?” I asked.

“It’s grown beyond that,” she replied.

“I’m good. Do you have info on Olive?” I asked.

“Olive Reynolds. Widowed. Lives not far from here. Why do people put so much info out there?” She sighed.

I pulled out my phone and Googled the name. Her address popped up. “Got her. Thanks! I’d have spent all afternoon on Mrs. O’Conner’s Facebook to find that. And you guys did all the work already.”

Iris returned with two big cups of tea. “Good?”

“I got what I need. Thanks. You two stay warm. Do your homework,” I said.

“You’re such a mom. Be more of a sister,” Iris said.

I shuddered at being called a mom. “Fine. Hit a party and drink until you puke. But don’t blame me when your dad tracks you down and raises hell. He never let me have too much fun as a teenager.”

“You didn’t go to college,” Violet said.

“Vi,” Iris said.

“It’s okay. I didn’t. Esme thought it was more important for me to work on powers, and I did. But I also worked part-time in coffee shops. So, I was sort of training on how to run this. Not everyone is college material, but you two are super smart, so don’t blow it. There is plenty of time for guys when you’ve got a degree,” I said.

“Such a mom,” they said in unison.

“Thanks, I needed that.” I pulled my gloves out of my pocket and suited up for the blustery outside. “I need to go bug Olive Reynolds.”

Part of me wanted to use a truth potion on these women, but if I did, they’d remember all of the questions. If I used a memory spell on them, it might work. But they might get suspicious if they couldn’t remember what we talked about. Magic worked for some, but for now, I had to try it the human way. The house was pleasant-looking on the outside. It had a cottage feel, and the street was quiet. A murderer couldn’t live here. At least, that’s how it felt.

I knocked on the door, and a stern woman opened it.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“I’m sorry to just show up. My name is Claudia Crestwood. I own the Witch’s Brew coffee shop.

Mrs. O’Conner was a regular customer. And I understand that she was a friend of yours,” I said.

I extended my hand, but she just looked at it.

“What about her?” she asked.

“As you might know, her husband is blaming my café for her death. I was hoping to find a friend of his to talk some sense into him. He’s standing out in front of my café, freezing. He’s risking his health for nothing,” I said.

“You know it’s nothing?” she asked.

I nodded. “I checked with the library. Mrs. O’Conner was fine there. If we’d done anything, she’s have been sick.”

“Really. There are slow-acting poisons, I’m sure.” She eyed me coldly.

“We’ll have to wait for the tox screen for that proof, but I don’t know anything about poison,” I said.

“Just potions. Why don’t you come in? For some tea. Warm up,” she said.

“Thanks.” I felt like I was walking into something I wasn’t ready for, but at least it was warm.

I stomped the snow off my boots. I was pointed to a proper living room for entertaining with no TV and uncomfortable furniture. I chose an armchair on one side of a cute little wooden table.

I cast a warming spell on my hands and feet while waiting for Mrs. Reynolds to bring out the tea. I hadn’t expected to be on the porch for so long.

Mrs. Reynolds brought out a tray with a fussy ceramic tea set that looked older than I was. She was being polite when I felt like she didn’t want me there. She poured the tea and handed me a cup.

“Thank you. So, you don’t like our potions?” I asked.

“My niece is a Wiccan. Pagan. Or whatever. She lives in New York City. Don’t think I’m prejudiced. Martha O’Conner criticized everyone and everything. Her husband, her daughter, and her grandson.” She sipped her tea with pursed lips.

“And her friends?” I asked.

She nodded. “Her friends, too. But she never was nasty enough to make anyone want to kill. She took care of herself. I suspect her husband is just so shocked. No one thought she could ever die. The woman would have a setback and recover. She’d come back stronger. We never thought she’d die before any of us. It’s a shame.”

“So, you don’t know anyone who really wanted to hurt her?” I asked.

“No. Her husband is upset and lost, honestly. She wore the pants in that family. I’ve invited him over for dinner, if that helps. I can try to help him forge a new routine. See his grandson, his daughter, and so on. He’ll need a cleaning lady. I can help him find one. And take him to the grocery store. Help him with those habits.” She sipped her tea.

“That’s very nice of you. Maybe you can help him see we didn’t do anything to hurt her. She had a bad day, but we’re not out to hurt our customers.” I enjoyed the hot drink.

“He told me about the threats. That someone left messages. I’m sure it wasn’t you. You’re a businesswoman. I understand that. I respect that. I worked in the office at my late husband’s dental practice. I know what it’s like when patients aren’t happy. Customers are the same. But someone in your little witch group got out of hand. You need to take control. Be the boss if that’s what you are.”

“I’m not the boss of all the witches in Hartford. If someone was offended by her comments, that doesn’t mean I’m responsible for their actions. Mr. O’Conner wants a scapegoat. I’m not going to be it. The police will get the results soon, but my business could be ruined before then. We’re seeing fewer customers. If you can convince Mr. O’Conner to stop protesting, that’d be wonderful,” I said.

“I’m not sure I have that sort of influence,” she lied with a sweet smile.

A shiver ran down my back. She was moving in on the widower a bit fast.

“I think if you compare it to your late husband’s business, I think he might. Some people must’ve lost a tooth or had a bad time. Things can’t always go perfectly. If those patients had protested outside of the office, that seriously could’ve ruined his reputation. Is it fair to do that to others without real proof?” I asked.

She shook her head and stiffened her spine. “Your shop has a good reputation. Martha hated seeing chains all over the city. She’d be upset if your place went under because of her husband’s grief. I’ll try.”

“Thank you.” Things had taken a turn, but if she could help and was willing to, I could use it.

Did she have a motive? She seemed to have a big interest in Mr. O’Conner, but was that motive for murder?

“How long were you friends with Mrs. O’Conner?” I asked.

“Oh, forever. High school. She and I competed over everything.”

“Did you always win?”

“It was usually a tie. I got head cheerleader, and she got homecoming queen. That sort of thing. We both married men with good careers. I was a little more set than she was, but my husband died. I didn’t want to win this way.” She poured more tea.

I checked out her jewelry. It looked like she’d won. But she didn’t seem the type of woman to kill for it. She probably wanted to win with a clear conscience. I’d gone to school with girls like that. “I never had a chance of winning in high school. The popular girls made fun of my hair and my aunt’s hippie ways. They asked what happened to my parents. They were normal, and that made them win. I never wanted to be a cheerleader. Homecoming queen? Maybe for a few seconds, but you can’t expect votes when you don’t participate.”

“No Wiccan club?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I was already in a real coven. I had two educations going on. But I’m happy, so that stuff didn’t matter in the end.”

“No? What happened to your parents?” she asked.

“They died when I was young. But I had my aunt and uncle, plus two cousins. My mom and aunt were both sort of the odd ones in the family,” I admitted.

“And you lost her. No wonder you didn’t want to join in in high school. Probably no close friends?” she asked.

“Not really. No. I had friends but not close.” I downed another cup of tea, this time without taking my time.

“I’m not surprised. You lost your parents. You were afraid to get attached to new people. Afraid they’d leave you just like your parents did,” she said.

“I had my family.” It couldn’t be that simple.

“Yes, you still had family taking care of you, and you loved them. It’d be hard to lose them. So, why add people to the list of ones who could hurt you? I don’t blame you. And, now, you’re worried your business could be taken from you.”

“Was your husband a dentist or a shrink?” I asked.

She smiled. “You’d be surprised how much people share at a dentist’s office. I held a lot of hands. Heard a lot of crazy reasons why people feared the dentist. The pain. The genetic problems. Emergencies. You see people when they are very vulnerable. No one likes the dentist unless they have naturally strong and pretty teeth. Don’t worry; I’ll talk to Mr. O’Conner. Hopefully, the police will close the case soon, but I can try to talk some sense into that man.”

“Thanks. I should get back to the coffee shop,” I said.

“Bundle up; it’s cold.” She walked me to the door.

Did I keep people at a distance to keep from being hurt? I never dated guys seriously. I dated, but I was never interested in relationships. I hiked out to my car and cranked up the heat as I headed back to the café. I had to deal with this work problem and then Ryan. When I got free time, I’d worry about friends and boyfriends.

Chapter 13

I was dead to the world when a vampire came pounding on my bedroom door. Snuggling under the blankets, I never wanted to move. After a day out in the harsh weather, I was finally warm, again.

“What?” I shouted.

“It’s Brad. You need to get out here. Your guest is trying to leave,” he said.

“Damn. Stop him. I’ll be right there.” I swung my legs out and shoved my feet right into the fuzzy boots. My flannel pajama pants, a gift from the twins, had frogs with little crowns on them. Some were making kissy faces, and some were winking. My cousins and I didn’t have the same taste, but the pants were warm. My legs always got cold first, but a long tank top worked just fine because my shoulders never seemed to get chilly.

I ran my fingers through my hair then grabbed a big black sweater, just in case the fight had moved outside.

I hustled down the stairs and found two other vamps blocking Ryan’s exit. He was at the top of the basement stairs. Perfect. Right where customers could see and hear him.

“Tell these walking dead things with dental issues to get out of my way,” Ryan yelled.

“You’re not leaving. Not with the police around.”

“I can’t stay down there another minute. I’m going crazy,” he said.

“Then, you should’ve left before this mess happened. I can’t help it. Get back down there and go to sleep.” I folded my arms.

“Hey, I tried to escape but you wouldn’t let me. I could help clean up here. I could learn to make coffee,” he offered.

“You just insulted my staff. You hunt vampires—they don’t want to work with you. I don’t trust you to work with them.” I waved my hand at him; that shoved him back a few steps.

“Big tough witch. That’s all you’ve got?” he mocked.

I went to the landline, while the vamps continued to cover Ryan, and called my uncle.

“He’s getting stir crazy,” he said.

“I know. I’m about to lock him up. He won’t cooperate.” I didn’t want to upset my uncle, but he had to take some responsibility for what he’d taken in and dumped on me.

"I'll be there in the morning and keep him busy during the day. You can't let him do something at night?" my uncle asked.

"I can't be up all night babysitting him and the vampires. That mix will not go well," I pointed out.

"Right. Fine. Do what you need to do to keep him under control. Night." He hung up.

"Great." I hung up the phone as the bell jingled over the door.

The wind gusted in, and I wrapped my sweater around me.

I nodded to the vamps to go deal with the customer. When I looked over to see who it was, I expected a college student on deadline or utility workers out repairing lines. We got a lot of cops and firemen who needed refueling overnight. Sometimes, nurses and EMTs. This man was none of those. He was in a dark suit with his hair slicked back. His watch was expensive, but there was something more. He was powerful. Not human power. My kind of power. I knew him.

He ordered a dark roast black with a double shot of no sleep potion.

"You'll be up all night," I warned him.

"I do my best work at night." He didn't smile. "You're Claudia Crestwood?"

"I am. Have we met?" I asked.

"I believe so, but it's been a long time. Your cousin mentioned you were having some human problems. I might be able to help," he offered.

"I've got two human problems, right now, but no, thanks. I can handle it. What cousin?" I asked.

"Esmeralda. She and my aunt are very good friends. Very old friends," he said.

"So, your aunt does the nine lives thing, too?" I asked.

He nodded. "That is a small group. I hear you're almost as powerful as your cousin. Or me."

I showed no reaction. "I'm strong enough. I'm just trying to handle my human problems without major magic. I don't want to untangle a mess by causing a bigger one."

Ryan watched from the doorway on the top step. I should lock him up. I cast a spell to cover my butt, any non-magical people would forget anything they saw in the shop, including Ryan.

"You're right. Some witches use magic too publicly or frequently and get caught up in trying to cover their tracks. Exposure is dangerous," the customer agreed.

"Exactly. I have a customer who died, and our spell says it was not natural causes. But the police think it was. They're looking into it. I'm trying to find the killer, so the widower will stop protesting my shop. And so I can get rid of my other human problem," I glanced back at the doorway.

"He is staring a lot. A former lover you don't like?" he asked.

I laughed. "Hardly. A hunter who got caught by humans, and my uncle is giving him sanctuary in my shop."

"Ryan Jones." The hunter stepped out from the shadows and extended a hand, introducing himself to the customer. The vampires behind the counter moved to drag Ryan down the stairs, but I shook my head at them. We didn't need a big incident in front of customers.

I tried to place the wizard. Remember his name. He hadn't been at school with me. From what he claimed about his aunt and Esme, he was one of the Killean family that could trace their line back to the Druids. They were handsome, powerful, and not very social. So far, this man hit all the marks. He was a year or two older than me, I'd guess.

"Bran Killean," he replied without shaking hands.

"Bran? Like *Game of Thrones*? You poor thing," I stifled a giggle.

"The Celtic name means king or raven, so it's a pretty obvious name choice for Mr. Martin since the boy chases a raven around. My middle name is no better, so Bran is it." He took his coffee and sipped it.

"I haven't seen you in here," I said.

"You sleep at night," Brad said, grinning at Bran like a fool. He'd been a step or two behind the hunter, watching him like a hawk.

I rolled my eyes. "You're a vampire, Mr. Killean?"

"No. I deal with people all day and get my work done best at night. I catnap. But I don't want to interrupt your late-night tryst." He grinned slightly.

I looked down and laughed. "Yeah. My best lingerie. Please. This hunter keeps trying to escape."

"So, let him go. Or is he a frog you turned into a prince, but he's not up to snuff?" Bran asked.

"My cousins gave me these pajamas. They're warm. This hunter has to stay. The police are probably still watching the building. It's a long story, but we saved him, and he's got to deal with helping us," I said.

"You wanted me gone as soon as I was healthy enough. I'm healthy," he said. "Help me get out of here, and I'll do anything you want."

Bran's eyebrow raised at that offer. For a split-second, I thought he might be gay. That'd be my luck. Any guy who captured my interest was gay, taken, or a bad boy, as my aunt called them.

"What could you possibly do for me?" Bran asked.

"The Killeans are a powerful magical family, Ryan. They don't need you any more than I do," I said.

"Maybe he's strong enough to make me invisible. The police never saw me enter, but they don't have to see me leave either. And make it last for a while so I can get far away." Ryan nodded.

"I'm sure Ms. Crestwood is strong enough to render you invisible. She has her reasons for keeping you around. Maybe you'd run to the police or get her in trouble, somehow." Bran shook his head at Ryan.

Then, Bran snapped his fingers. Ryan passed out right there on the floor.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"I was bored with him. He's a user. He thinks he's noble, but the only hunters I trust are gypsies, like your uncle. These types are in it for the kill." Bran looked down his nose at Ryan.

"I felt the same way, but my uncle brought him here. I couldn't say no. And then, the customer

thing happened. I don't need him being caught by the police or followed back here if he needs something. He'll make it worse, even if I made him permanently invisible," I said.

"Then, you should keep him locked up. A human with a superiority complex is more dangerous than an untamed vampire." Bran stared at my legs, again.

"Sorry, I wasn't expecting company." I tugged my sweater lower to try and cover the goofy pajama pants. "My cousins and I have very different styles. But I can't hurt their feelings."

"Those are not from Esmeralda." He laughed.

His booming laugh sent a rush through me. "No, not Esme. My uncle's children. I was raised by my aunt and uncle. They have a set of twins, only eighteen, now. I got these a couple Christmases ago. Appropriate for a single girl or a single witch."

"Still searching for Prince Charming? There has to be a better story than that." He stepped over Ryan's limp body. "Tell me."

"I'm the boss here, Mr. Killeen, not you. Brad will get you another drink of your choice on the house for the trouble. I'll get Ryan down to a cell," I said.

"I don't need a free coffee. I need to know about the frogs," he said.

I almost turned around and snapped at him. But there was a longing, a sadness about him that made me pause. "You tell anyone, and I'll deny and make you pay."

He didn't look scared. But if he knew Esme, he knew how powerful I was. My guess was he was one of her choices for me.

"Promise," I said.

"Who would I tell?" he asked.

"Senior prom. My date was just a guy who asked me. I wasn't dating him. I didn't know him well, but it meant so much to my aunt that I go. Have the prom experience and all the pictures. It made her happy. He was all hands and lips. Like I was supposed to sleep with him because it was prom. I turned him into a frog on the ride home and sent the limo back to his parents' house like that." I shrugged.

"He stayed that way for how long?" Bran asked.

"A couple hours at least. His parents were freaking out. They thought he'd been kidnapped. They put the frog in the yard. I swore up and down he was fine when he dropped me off. A perfect gentleman, which was a lie. But I wasn't going to any after parties with him. I hinted he may have gone drinking with a few friends after he dropped me off. Finally, he turned human in the backyard. Naked. He was confused. His parents thought he'd gotten plastered and went wild with his friends. They grounded him for a week." I couldn't hide my smile.

"Transfiguration at that level. Of a human. For that long, impressive for a seventeen year old," he said.

"My aunt was mad at me. Exposure. Do no harm. Sometimes, I can't help myself, but I try not to use my powers without thinking it through." I looked down at Ryan. "I don't trust him enough to let

him loose, yet.”

“Trust those instincts. We’re at war with humanity in some ways. We can never forget that,” he said.

I shook my head. “My aunt and cousins have no powers. Esme does, of course, but my uncle is a human gypsy. I don’t want to fight humans.”

“I don’t either. But if they knew the full extent of our world, we would be at war. We’re more powerful than they are.”

“Yet we don’t seek to dominate them,” I said.

“Evolution has its advantages. But I do appreciate your work here. Your involvement with humans keeps us all informed. It’s a great service, and if I can be of help to you, just call.” He handed me a card.

“I don’t inform you of anything.” I took the card anyway.

“Esmeralda does. What’s necessary. There is a network of information. We appreciate it.” He looked around. “It’s a lovely shop.”

“What do you do?” I asked.

“My family owns several businesses,” he said stealthily.

“That makes you a Soprano? Is there a paranormal mob? I never heard of that,” I said.

He laughed. “No? Well, I suppose, if there was one, we’d be it. If you cross my family, you’ll pay. Much like, if someone crossed you, he’d be a frog.”

I felt my cheeks burn. “I can do a lot worse, now.”

“I’m sure of it. We own a funeral home. A car dealership. A lawn and snow service company. A yarn and craft store my aunt insisted on that is actually turning a profit.”

“That’s convenient. Pick what you want to do, and the family buys you a business.” I knew they had money, but that’s big, big money.

“Not quite. You have to pay your dues working in a family business and make a proposal for a new one. We make our money honestly; we always have. Invest it wisely. We don’t bother others, and they don’t bother us. We do deal with humans as customers, so I understand, but we tend to use magic to resolve things quicker. Your approach is unique.”

“It sounds so calm.” I envied him.

“Your life sounds like an adventure. I hope your human death case is resolved.” He finished his coffee and tossed the cup in the trash.

“Thanks. I’m trying to solve it myself, but doing things the human way sucks.” I rubbed my neck. “I need to get this one locked up and get back to bed. I need more than a catnap.”

“Of course. But if you had something from all the suspects, you could scry for the killer,” he suggested.

“I could. But getting an item isn’t easy. And with more than one person in a location as a suspect, it would only help so much.” I shrugged.

“Do you need any help?” He pointed Ryan.

I chuckled and waved my hand. His limp body swiftly lifted off the ground. I guided him down the stairs and into a cell. I didn't look back to see if Bran was impressed or not. He wasn't what I expected from the Killean family. I'd heard they were snobs who looked down on families like mine, those with non-magical members. Also families that socialized with humans too much and willingly weren't big with the paranormal royalty. My line was old and strong, but I couldn't trace it back to Stonehenge. That stuff didn't matter to me. The idea of Bran mowing a lawn or selling cars on his summer breaks from school made me smile. Maybe Esme had better taste in men than I'd given her credit for.

Chapter 14

That morning, I had the same drink Bran had plus vanilla creamer. The caffeine jolt helped. It'd been hard to get back to sleep after such a weird first encounter. The PJs hadn't helped, but I wasn't a Goth girl. I didn't sport a witch style all the time. Okay, the frogs were lame. But it was a gift and warm.

Today, I was in all black: big black boots that went to my knees, leggings that kept me warm and a black with gray trim sweater dress that came to the edge of the boots and down to my elbows.

"Why is Ryan locked up?" my aunt asked softly as she sat at my table.

"He tried to escape last night. Attacked some vamps. I don't need him lashing out. I called Uncle Vinny. He's supposed to come over today and help soothe the savage hunter." I rolled my eyes.

"He wants you to make him invisible," she said.

"He said that last night, too. No, I can't trust him. I wish Vin wouldn't associate with non-gypsy hunters. They go rogue too much." I shook my head.

"Fine. I hope this case is over soon." She went off in a foul mood.

I wasn't in a better one. I had to meet the garden club today. I'd checked that the meeting was still scheduled, given that gardening wasn't really popular in the winter. But they still met, so I was going. They had a room at the local social center, so it wasn't like pushing in on Mrs. Reynolds in her home.

I watched the front. No Mr. O'Conner yet today, but it was early.

Esme sat across from me with a smug expression.

"What? Did you kill Ryan? I won't tell. Give the body to the cops," I said.

She pointed at me. "That's the sort of dark humor that makes people worry about you. You're normal some of the time and then sound positively evil."

"It's a quirky sense of humor. That's all." I shrugged and checked my messages on my phone.

"I heard that Bran Killeen came by last night," she said.

I nodded. "I guess he comes by a lot at night when I'm asleep. Ryan tried to run, so I had to deal with that."

"Sounds like you made an impression," Esme smiled.

"Froggy PJ bottoms and a bulky black sweater with winter boots. I'm sure I did." I put his card information into my phone. "Who does cards, anymore?"

“Polite people. You don’t have to wait for someone to put in the info and repeat it ten times. You hand over the card, and they can input the info or not. You’re smart to keep him on file.” She grabbed the card. “He’s good looking.”

“If you’ve got your eye on him, don’t worry about me. Strictly paranormal connections.” I smiled.

“Really, Claudia. You bumped into one of the men I’d love to see you with. I knew he came here, but you don’t think I could’ve maneuvered Ryan to misbehave just when Bran was about to come in,” she said.

I sat back. “I didn’t say when Ryan acted up.”

“Of course you did. Or Brad did. Someone must’ve told me.” She waved it off.

“You did something. You put a spell on Ryan to act up when Bran came within so far of the shop?” I couldn’t believe it, but it made more sense than Ryan suddenly trying to run when he knew the vampires would stop him. He didn’t have a weapon to take out the vamps. If he was serious about leaving, he’d have made a stake out of the old wooden crates we had in the basement.

Esme sighed. “Okay, fine, I did help a little. But Bran comes in so often. His aunt says how much he loves your place. The coffee, the service, and the feel of the place. I wanted you two to meet. And it’s cute you weren’t your perfectly pulled together self. You intimidate men.”

“If I do, then those men are weak. And I’m not always perfectly pulled together. Most of the time here, I wear jeans and a T-shirt for the shop with coffee stains on it.”

“Your hair is always perfect,” she said.

My black hair was thick and pin straight. “If I wanted it to curl, it wouldn’t be perfect.”

“That’s why you and Bran would be great for each other. You accept yourselves and try to help people. You’re not out trying to be something you’re not. Or pretending the world will hand you everything. Your generation has a lot of challenges, but you two weren’t coddled the way most kids your age were.”

I stared at her. “You think the twins were coddled?”

She nodded. “Your aunt never tried to change you. She guided you, raised you, but you were so like your mother and she missed her so letting you be you was more important. And you’d witnessed your mother’s death. You had scars she couldn’t erase. Trauma the twins couldn’t imagine, even now. It makes you stronger as a person. The magic, that’s impressive, too,” Esme said.

“Hardly impressive to you. But I keep trying,” I said.

“You impressed Bran. And he told his aunt already. She texted me. You need someone to push you and challenge you—that’s me. But your man should always admire you.” Esme checked her phone.

“You and his aunt. This is a full-on setup. He’s okay with that?” I asked.

“He’s a man. He thinks it’s all his idea. He ran into you, and you’re so this and that. He might have magic, but he’s still a lovable goofy man who thinks he’s the cleverest guy in the room.” She grinned.

“Then, I’ll tell him what his aunt is up to, and it’ll be done.” I picked up my phone.

Esme waved her hand and knocked my phone across the room.

“You break it, you buy me a new one,” I said.

A customer brought it over before I could go searching.

“Thanks; I’m a klutz today,” I said.

“It’s fine,” she said.

My phone rang, and Esme perked up.

I answered. “Hello, Detective Shelley,” I said.

Esme’s grin disappeared.

“Ms. Crestwood. I wanted to let you know that there was nothing found in the tox screen. No illegal drugs. No poison. Nothing, really. Her usual pain meds for arthritis and her sleeping pill, but nothing out of the ordinary. I’ve let Mr. O’Conner know, so hopefully, he will relax a bit on protesting your shop,” she said.

“Thanks. That makes me feel better. Nothing for the autopsy?” I asked.

“A couple more days. The ME was on vacation for the holidays, and so, we had a backup who was very green and slow. Then, all this cold weather, you get people dying while shoveling a drive. Or lifting salt bags into their truck. The results will be good; we just need to be a bit more patient,” she said.

“Thanks. Please let me know if there is anything I can do. Bye.” I ended the call.

“No poison. She wasn’t shot or stabbed. No one said anything about bruising.”

“Smothered,” Esme said.

“That means someone had to get into her house,” I said.

“Well, you keep doing what you’re doing. Your aunt and I will deal with Ryan. But don’t be too hard on him,” she said.

“I won’t, now that I know it’s you. For the record, Bran knocked him out—magically. I levitated him down there. If he’s complaining,” I said.

“You and Bran sound like a good team,” she said.

“I’m leaving,” I said. I went over to Ellen, head barista on the shift. “Call if you need anything. If Mr. O’Conner shows up, call the cops. It’s not even going to hit zero today.”

“Gotcha, boss,” Ellen said.

“Don’t pick that up from the guys. They’re just weird.” I smiled. The vamps called me boss, and Ellen must be hanging around with them. She was a witch with enough powers that I didn’t worry about her as much.

“They’re different and cute,” she replied.

What was it about vampires? I saw nothing cute or hot about vamps or weres. Those were things that had been done to them. Someone turned them into a vampire or a werewolf. Okay, you could be born a werewolf, but that was rare. Witches and wizards had to work at their powers and grow them. I’d rather earn my powers than be a victim. I felt sorry for vamps and werewolves...but right now, I

needed to help Mrs. O’Conner and find out who’d hurt her.

I strolled into the social center a few blocks away. There were several meeting rooms and a board listing all the groups and when they met. I felt very antisocial when I saw all of the groups. Book clubs, sewing clubs, and even a beginning Wiccan class that I had no knowledge of. I took a picture of that post with my phone, so I could follow up later on.

Putting that out of my head, I found the room for the garden club and slipped in. There were five women in the room, and they looked at me carefully.

“Can we help you?” asked one of them.

“Hi, I’m Claudia. I own the Witch’s Brew café. I understand Mrs. O’Conner was a member here?”

A few of the women exchanged looks, but one patted the seat next to her. “I’m Sara. Martha was a member. She had the most beautiful roses and exotic items. Do you garden?” she asked.

“No, I don’t really. I just came by, because I was so sorry to hear about Mrs. O’Conner, and I wondered if anyone heard anything, yet. I know her husband is very upset.” I played dumb. With this many women, one was bound to want to be a know-it-all.

“He blames you,” another woman said.

“Claudia, this is Kate. That’s Joyce, Misty, and Fran.” Sara made the introductions around the table. All the women were in their fifties or sixties, except for Misty.

“I know he blames the café, Kate. But that’s why I’ve been checking up on her friends and other things she did that day. She was fine at her job at the library and at lunch with her friends. So, whatever made her ill, I don’t think it came from my shop. I really hope the police and medical tests give us the answers as soon as possible. She was a regular customer, and I’d hate for people to believe we’re dangerous or don’t care about our customers,” I said.

“No one thinks that. When tragedy strikes, people need someone to blame,” Misty said.

Fran nodded. “When my husband died, my son wanted to know why I was out shopping. Why I hadn’t been home to call for an ambulance.”

“That’s awful. I know people in grief say and do awful things, but I just wanted to make sure that no one here saw any signs of illness. Or thought there was any foul play from any direction. I know Martha had health issues, and the police seem to think that was the cause, but I didn’t know her very well. A few minutes a day doesn’t give much insight. Martha wasn’t chatty,” I said.

“No, she didn’t disclose a lot of personal stuff to strangers. But she liked your place more than the chains. She thought you needed more flowers,” Joyce said.

“Oh, she never said that to me. It could cheer things up. Especially with this weather. Do you guys have indoor gardens?” I asked.

“We work on herbs and potted plants in the winter. We also plan our summer gardens. If you want

to win, you need to be creative.” Fran nodded.

“Win? Did Martha win a lot?” I asked.

“She did. But no one would hurt her over that,” Sara said with a chuckle.

“Right. Her question. No one we know wanted to hurt Martha or had a problem with her. She had a happy marriage. Her daughter was happily married with a grandson. Martha doted on him. She loved her work. She’d been a member of this club for two decades. Her flowers ended up in her church regularly. She made up baskets for funerals and such, as well. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to hurt her.” Joyce shrugged.

“Did she have a problem with the witch theme of our shop?” I asked.

Misty shifted in her chair. “She wasn’t a fan, but at one point, we talked about the history of the town. She complained there were so many witch-themed places. I’m a history teacher at the high school, and a lot of people don’t know about our history because Salem steals all the thunder and tourists.”

“Thanks for educating people,” I said.

“Do you want to stay for the meeting or do you have what you need?” Fran looked sharply at the clock on the wall.

“I think that’s it, unless anyone has anything else that they think I should know or want to share.” I felt like I was getting politely tossed out.

No one else spoke so I stood. At that moment, I realized how useful a card would be. The police had them, and Bran had them. I should order some.

“Well, thank you. Have a nice meeting. I’m going to hit the restroom and brave the snow.” I felt like I was babbling. It was uncomfortable, but I had sort of crashed their meeting without notice, and that wasn’t very fair.

I found the ladies room and used it. As I washed my hands, I noticed the door open. It was Sara.

“Sorry if they were rude. Those women have a schedule, and it never changes. Year in and year out. Month in and month out. They care about Martha, but some probably thought you were accusing them,” she said.

I dried my hands with paper towels and nodded. “Sorry, I should have called ahead or something. I get the feeling there is more to this than I know, and people are blaming me.”

“Mr. O’Conner is ruining your business. And people aren’t telling you everything. But we can’t talk here.” She handed me a card. “Call me after five, and we’ll set up something.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“I have to get back.” She slipped out.

I touched up my lipstick and put moisturizer on my hands before I left, so it wasn’t obvious Sara and I had been chatting. I got the feeling the people around here were regulars and noticed other people’s patterns a lot. Back to the cold weather. I had some phone calls to make and business cards to order.

Chapter 15

I called, and Sara was happy to stop by the coffee shop. Since I'd never seen any of the other ladies in my shop, I didn't think it would matter. Filling the biggest cup we had with tea, I tried to figure out what secrets the garden club had. The Wiccan meetings also had me itching to find out more, but I had to prioritize.

"Mr. O'Conner didn't show?" I asked my aunt, hoping that Mrs. Reynolds had worked her magic.

"Oh, no, he did. We called the cops." She sighed.

Sara walked in and gave me a quick smile. She ordered a lemon tea, and I gestured her to join me.

We went into my office because there were too many people who'd get nosy if I just went to my table. My aunt would come over and introduce herself at the very least.

"Please sit," I said.

"Sorry I couldn't just tell you earlier. Those women are sharks. They gossip like crazy about others, but if you tell anything about them, even the truth, they go on the attack." She set her tea on my desk then pulled off her gloves.

"It's fine. I hope this won't get you in trouble with the other ladies. I'm only looking for info that would really throw suspicion on someone hurting Martha," I said.

"That's just it. I don't think they'd actually kill her. But I know they lied to the police." She sipped her tea.

"Who lied?" I asked.

"Fran. The president of the club. She said she had no issues with Martha. They were like sisters. Always got along great. Old friends." Sara rolled her eyes.

"It's not true? Martha wanted to be president?" I asked.

"I'm sure she did, but Martha wasn't nice enough to people to be voted in. She thought her stuff was better. She was overly competitive and critical. It's about enjoying flowers and helping each other, not a war to see who has the best garden. Fran had to handle Martha when she got too snippy. But they have some older issues, as well. They were never really friends. More like frenemies," she said.

"That sounds like everyone Martha knew. Not really a motive for murder, though," I said.

"No, not that part. Fran got a divorce about seven years ago. Her husband found her with Mr.

O’Conner. It was insane. I mean, he seemed like such a devoted husband. Martha was always sort of the dominant one. There were fights. And canceled meetings. But Martha insisted they wouldn’t divorce like Fran. She never missed a meeting. She didn’t run against Fran for president after that. It was tense and weird. It all sort of calmed down eventually, and no one talked about it for years. But Martha held a grudge. Fran did, too. There used to be twenty people in the group, but with their tension and occasional dustups, the people left.” Sara shook her head.

“You think Fran is still interested in Mr. O’Conner?” I asked.

“I don’t know about that, but quality senior men are hard to find. Maybe they kept up a connection. I don’t know. I have no idea when she’d have had the chance to hurt Martha. I mean, we were all in the room together for that meeting. She was fine when she left. It’s probably nothing,” she said.

“Maybe. But I appreciate your honesty. I know they have the tox screen back with no results. So, I’m guessing it wasn’t a plant,” I replied.

“There are some lethal plants. But with Martha’s health issues, it’d be much easier to kill that way,” Sara said casually.

“I’m sorry?” I asked.

“Oh, sorry, I’m a nurse. Martha could’ve been given a huge dose of sugar water. Or too much insulin. Either would kill her. She was on high blood pressure meds. Beta blockers. If someone swapped out those pills, her heart would be under more strain. All of those wouldn’t show up in a tox screen.” Sara waved it off.

“That’s scary. They wouldn’t check for sugar?” I asked.

“Not unless the ME specifically ordered a glucose test. Insulin is naturally occurring in your body. So is sugar. You’d have to test for a level. I think she was on a sleeping pill, too. That could’ve done it.”

“A sleeping pill?” I asked.

“Well, some people take more than one. If you take too many, that’s a problem. Or she could miss taking her insulin or eating if she sleeps too long, then slip into a coma. As brittle as she is, her body would start to shut down. We had her in for kidney trouble once at the hospital. All the meds and everything takes a toll on the liver and kidneys that process them. She was so lucky she wasn’t on permanent dialysis. That’s where she was heading.”

I stared at her tea.

“I’m sorry; I’m not supposed to share her medical details. You knew about the diabetes. But I could get fired.” She fidgeted in her chair.

“It’s fine. I won’t say anything. I appreciate your help, but it was all hypothetical. I swear, no one will hear any of it from me,” I said.

“I never do that. I didn’t mean to tell that.” She frowned.

“It’s okay. You care about her. I wouldn’t be running around town, trying to find out things if I didn’t. The privacy stuff in this world has gotten out of control. But I know you have to respect it

because it's your job." I wouldn't get anyone in trouble.

"I should go," she said.

"Thanks for coming." I walked her out then turned to find my aunt.

"Good talk?" she asked.

"Did you spike her drink with a truth potion?" I asked.

Aunt Mandy frowned at me. "Esmeralda did. I assume it was useful?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Yes and no. Nothing is simple about this," I said.

"We haven't found out who threatened Mrs. O'Conner, yet. We must have a rogue witch. Esme is trying to scout that angle while you're doing this," she said.

"You think I should stop and be more with the coven?" I asked.

She leaned in. "Pushing the issue for proof on Mrs. O'Conner only makes it look like you're afraid of being accused. Or afraid someone here did it."

"So, I should let it go?" I asked.

"I know you're trying to help to keep this business going, but the customers are getting used to Mr. O'Conner. The slow down isn't as bad, anymore."

"As bad?" I asked. "It's still fewer people every day. When he's out there, it gets really quiet in here. We need closure."

"Only the autopsy will give you that. And the police's work. You're not the police. You're not a private investigator," she said.

"I know, but I need to be sure a murderer isn't getting away. What if they rule natural causes? We know it's not," I said.

She looked down.

"What? Let it go?" I asked.

"The spell could be wrong. Maybe she did it to herself?" my aunt asked.

"Suicide? No note?" I asked.

She shrugged. "You don't know. A false conviction would be worse."

"Thanks for the advice. I have to go," I said.

"Make kind choices," she said.

I tracked down Fran. Apparently, she worked evenings at a flower shop. She stared daggers at me when I walked in.

"Do you have a minute to talk?" I asked.

She nodded and led me to the back of the shop where she worked on creating some very pretty bouquets.

"I'm sorry to bother you here," I said.

"Are you?" she asked.

“I just found out some information, and I wanted to ask you about it,” I said.

“I didn’t do anything to Martha. I’m sure someone told you about the affair. It was years ago,” she replied.

“Why didn’t you just tell me, then?” I asked.

“It’s not your business. It’s history.”

I suddenly wished I’d taken an allergy pill. My nose didn’t like one of the pollens back there.

I sneezed.

“Bless you. You didn’t seem like a flowers girl,” she said.

“Thanks. Fresh flowers could trigger allergies for customers, so we don’t have them. I knew there was a reason.” I sniffed. “But, obviously, you know a side of the O’Conner family others don’t. You were involved with Mr. O’Conner. Are you still involved?” I asked.

“No. Not for years. Marriage is a long and complicated business. Things aren’t always good. You’re too young to understand that. But it’s true. You can love someone, but all the spark and the passion are gone after kids and years of taking care of them. I ruined my marriage over feeling wanted. My ex had his wounded pride. Now, he’s in a home with dementia. That’s what he gets for that.” She stabbed a rose into a vase.

That was cold, and she still took it very personally.

“But Martha forgave her husband?” I asked.

“She did. Sort of. She didn’t want the embarrassment of divorce. There was a time when people stayed together ‘til death. They only had one child and one grandchild. They didn’t want to stress out the family and cause pain. He felt very guilty and didn’t want to upset her health. I doubt he’d stray, again. But there are plenty of women interested. He’s a good-looking man for his age with a good pension.”

“So, you don’t know anyone else he’s cheated with?” I asked.

“No. And I didn’t hurt Martha. Maybe she goofed up her meds. She was always complaining about how the mail order place was changing what generics they sent her because their medical covered the cheapest stuff. And calling them only made her angrier. I think you’re looking for a smoking gun and maybe she just was getting confused. It happens.” She shrugged.

“Right. Okay. Thanks for your time.” I rubbed my nose, trying not to sneeze again.

“No man is worth killing over,” Fran said, half to me and half to herself.

“I agree,” I muttered to myself.

I left the flower shop and sneezed a few more times. My aunt was big into flowers, but clearly there was a flower out there that didn’t like me. Another dead end for the murder investigation. I needed some tea and a hot bath.

Chapter 16

I couldn't refuse a family dinner request from my aunt. She did make the best pasta and garlic bread. Being back in the home I grew up in made me feel safe. My brain buzzed with suspects and what-ifs. The twins were helping their mom in the kitchen as I sipped tea and set the salad on the table.

Uncle Vinny walked up as the girls brought out the pasta. We sat and began dishing out the food.

"That hunter is a real handful in the basement. He's all better. When is he leaving?" Violet asked.

"I thought you guys liked that flirty pain in the neck," I teased.

Iris rolled her eyes. "He's always asking us to get him things. Or help him leave. It's weird. He's hot, but something is off."

I shot my uncle a look.

"It's cabin fever. Hunters don't like to be cooped up," he replied.

"Isn't he safe here?" my aunt asked.

My uncle sighed. "He is. He probably wants to get back to work. Check on some friends and family. That's why it's better to hold him longer. The police might be watching his friends and family. He can sit tight, for now."

"I'd still like more details on the case he was involved in," I said.

"We couldn't find much," Violet said.

"What about Mrs. O'Conner's case?" Iris asked.

I sighed. "I've talked to almost everyone she met with that day. She was fine. She had some enemies, but I don't see how they had opportunity. The tox screen found nothing. So, if it wasn't a poison that struck her down later...maybe it was natural causes?"

"You think your spell was wrong?" my aunt asked.

"I chose my words carefully, but maybe I missed something. Some other option. Or maybe it was a combination of things? If her health was really bad, then one thing could trip it, and her heart gave out. We're waiting on the autopsy, but I feel like I'm missing something." I took a bite of garlic bread and chewed it while looking for that missing piece in the case.

"I agree with Esmeralda. It's not your job. If you keep meddling in police work, you'll only get more attention," Uncle Vinny said.

I stabbed my pasta with my fork and twirled. “She was threatened for threatening the witches. Maybe that’s the lead I need to follow. Who made those threats?”

“Someone calling and threatening isn’t likely a murderer. It’s like on Snapchat. People are so cruel to each other, but most people wouldn’t actually do any of the things they threaten,” Violet said.

“Threaten. Who’s threatened you?” I asked.

Uncle Vinny sat up straighter, as well.

“No, nothing specific,” Vi backtracked.

“Don’t lie to me,” my aunt shot at her daughter.

“I’m in a few pagan groups, and one girl mocks those of us without powers. We’re just pretend witches. I blocked her.” Violet shrugged it off.

“So, no one you know personally? No one from school or the coven?” I asked.

Iris and Violet exchanged a look.

“Spill it,” Uncle Vinny said.

“We sort of kept in touch with Katrina and Lily. They left their freshman year of high school when we were sophomores, but we stayed friends on social media,” Iris admitted.

“They’re your cousins. That’s not bad.” My aunt nodded.

“Well, now, they’re sixteen, and both are getting married. Married. They’re bragging about their rings and dresses. At first, it was bridezilla stuff but normal. Then, they started making fun of us for going to college. We’re alone and going to school while they’ll be married with their own homes and everything.” Violet shoved a forkful of salad in her mouth and chewed with a vengeance.

“That’s crazy. You’re not gypsies. Don’t compare your lifestyle to theirs,” I said.

“Exactly, you’re not getting married until you’re done with college. I have nothing against homemakers or stay-at-home moms, but men don’t always stick around, and you need to be able to take care of yourself,” my aunt said.

“Gypsy men stick around. But that’s not the life I want for you. Block those girls,” Vinny ordered.

“But they’re our cousins. Your nieces,” Iris said.

“We sort of grew up with them,” Vi agreed.

“You don’t need them if they aren’t respecting your life choices. You haven’t attacked theirs,” my aunt insisted.

“I get it,” I said softly.

“You do?” Vinny asked.

I nodded. “I don’t have siblings. I couldn’t cut you guys off if you went full-on gypsy. I’d miss you guys. Family is important. The less you have, the more you see it. Just ignore their attitude and be happy they’re happy. You define happy differently. When your weddings come along, you’ll be the star of the show, and nothing will be more important. You won’t rub it in anyone else’s faces, but your single friends still might feel a little jealous. Just think long term. The wedding is one day. Then, they’re wives. They’ll have a bunch of kids and be tied down to cooking and cleaning for the next

twenty years.”

The twins smiled.

“They’ll have stretch marks before they’re twenty,” Iris said.

“Kindness,” my aunt said.

“So, are we invited to the wedding?” I asked.

Vinny shrugged. “They are my nieces. Yes. But we don’t have to go.”

They gypsies hadn’t really accepted my aunt or the twins because they didn’t adopt the gypsy lifestyle. We’d been to a few weddings and parties for gypsy relations, depending on how close Uncle Vin was with them. I couldn’t believe he’d snub his own nieces.

“I don’t have to go. I know I don’t really belong, but you guys should go,” I said.

“I could always have to work,” my aunt offered.

“No, we all should go. Claudia, bring a date. It’ll make them crazy,” Violet said with a grin.

“You bring a date,” I said.

“That would look bad. Disrespectful,” Vinny said.

I rolled my eyes.

“Vi and Iris are my daughters. If I let them run wild, I’m a bad father. You’re my niece and a Gorgon. You have no gypsy blood, at all. You can bring a date,” Vin replied.

“What’s with the dating push? Esme is nagging. Now, you guys?” I asked.

“You are obsessing about Mrs. O’Conner. And your life is all about the coffee shop. You need a life,” Violet said.

“I have a life. The coven and the coffee shop are all that matter. I have a hunter in the basement. I have a dead customer. That’s a lot.” I pushed pasta around my plate.

My aunt refilled our glasses of iced tea. “You need a love life. Esme said there is a nice and very strong wizard in that Killeen family.”

“They’re recluses. I heard they’re all ugly,” Iris said.

“That’s not true. Crazy old rumors,” I replied.

My aunt and the twins shared a smile. I’d walked into that one.

“You’ve met him?” Vin asked.

“He came into the coffee shop. Apparently, he keeps vampire hours. He was nice but a bit full of himself. What does Esme know about him, anyway?” I asked.

“She’s been doing some private classes for some new or young witches. The coven classes are for everyone, powerful or not. She has some other clients,” my aunt said.

“Why didn’t she tell me that?” I asked.

“You have enough on your plate. You don’t need to do private tutoring. Your skills are still developing.” My aunt began clearing plates.

I helped her and felt better alone in the kitchen.

“Am I ignoring something?” I asked her.

“You’ve always had your own path and gifts. I never would’ve imagined you’d use the money your mother left you to open a coffee shop. If you want to follow this death case, there is a reason. You don’t want to neglect your personal happiness either.” She dished out a hot pan of brownies. “I know you’re afraid.”

I grabbed the vanilla bean ice cream from the freezer, then the scoop from the drawer. “Afraid?”

“You lost your parents young. You were loved, but you’re afraid of letting more people in because they could hurt you. As long as you have those walls up, your power can’t expand, and you won’t really be happy. The twins can’t understand, but I do. I lost my sister.” She pinched my cheek.

“I can’t rush into a relationship because you and Esme like some guy’s powers,” I said.

She nodded. “I’m not pushing you toward anyone. But he would understand your life more than a human man. You wouldn’t like a hunter either. Certainly not a gypsy.”

“You’re right.” I followed her out into the dining room, and we served dessert.

As I entered the coffee shop, I was still thinking about how well my aunt knew me. A man without powers or gifts would bore me. A gypsy would make me want to argue gender roles. A hunter would make me question every kill he made. My dating pool of interesting men was extremely small.

Was I really that narrow-minded? A human might be interesting enough. I liked humans. There were plenty in my coven without powers.

Esme was coming up from the basement as I was passing through the main area.

“How was dinner?” she asked.

“Fine. You should’ve come,” I said. Aunt Mandy always invited Esme and tried to make her feel like family. She was distantly a cousin of my mother and aunt.

“No, I’m a loner by nature. I did have a word with that hunter. He keeps trying to use the phones and get out. I’ve put a magical perimeter up for the night,” she said.

“Thanks. So, are you giving private lessons to a Killeen? Is that why you want me to go out with Bran?” I asked.

She smiled. “Bran?”

“I’ve met him. My aunt mentioned your private lessons. Does Bran have a sister?” I asked.

“No, he has a younger brother, but he doesn’t need my help. They have a cousin staying with them, now. Her parents are traveling in Europe, and she wanted to try the college thing. She’s nineteen but a freshman. She took a year off. Her magic needs work. She has powers, but her parents thought everything she did was perfect and didn’t really push her.”

“The way you pushed me?” I teased her.

“Exactly. She needs work, but her ego is so fragile.” Esme sighed.

“That’s a shame. There’s always more to learn and always someone stronger, so ego is a bad thing to get wrapped up in.” I was taught young that hard work and intention mattered. If I let my

powers go to my head, a stronger witch would put me in my place. There was a pecking order and rules to the witching world.

“How’s your human death case, Nancy Drew?” Esme asked.

I laughed. “I always liked a good mystery. But I’m stuck. No one with motive had access. They weren’t in her home that night. There was nothing found on the tox, so it had to be done fairly quickly to her. Maybe my spell was wrong?”

Esme frowned. “I don’t think so. The light left the room. Someone out there has some culpability but it might not be in the way you think. It may be beyond someone actually murdering her. She could’ve been driven to it. Something could’ve been planted or messed with in her home. I still wish I knew who threatened Mrs. O’Conner. We need to keep order or things will get worse.”

“Worse?” I asked.

“At times, humans think they must root us out. Protest and convert us. They fear us. Then, there are times when the witches feel they are stronger and they should teach humans a lesson about history and crossing people with more powers. Right now, it feels like both sides are posturing for a fight. Conservatives taking over the country. But supernatural forces are aligning. Our powers are stronger. You are vulnerable and incredibly important.”

“That’s why you want me married to a powerful wizard? Backup?” I asked.

“I’m not pushing you to do anything as serious as marriage. But networking with the powerful wouldn’t hurt you. You look too sympathetic to humans. People understand because of your parents and who ended up raising you. But they want you to understand who you are. Who your mother was. What your true potential is. Spending time with the Killeen brothers would help. The younger one is currently studying vampires in Romania, but he’ll be back in a month or so. You might like him better. He’s the same age as you and more adventurous. Bran can be a real homebody.” Esme shrugged.

“How do I socialize with them? I mean, I have a coven,” I said.

“Old witch and wizard families don’t join covens. They don’t need to. They throw parties, meet at certain clubs, and network among their own kind. I’ll bring you along next time. You’re ready. I didn’t want to upset you before,” she replied.

“Upset me? Sounds like these people are more like me.” I smiled.

“Yes and no. They were raised with magic to an extreme. They wouldn’t marry a human or do things the human way. You probably washed the dishes at your aunt’s house by hand,” she said.

I shook my head. “It was the twins’ turn. I see what you mean, though. I’ll feel like I’m behind. I already do. I should’ve been able to use those spells and find the killer.”

“Human and paranormal worlds converging makes things much trickier. We’ll open an inquiry into the threats to Mrs. O’Conner. That might help rule out witches or wizards. But it might be a human customer or Wiccan coven member who did it. Threats are easy. That would be a very human thing to do,” she said.

“You’re right. But if we can find out who did that, I’ll feel a little better. Some answers. I still

need to talk to the grandson.” I was dreading it. The kid’s online presence was smug and rotten.

“You think a kid killed his grandmother? That’s a long shot. Even with a human. But stranger things have happened, I suppose.”

I picked out a tea bag. I needed something to warm me up. “Even if he noticed anything about her feeling ill at dinner. I could try talking to Mr. O’Conner, but he’s our resident protester. He probably won’t say a word.”

She poured us two cups of hot water, and we dunked our tea bags. “Can’t hurt to talk to anyone, but minors are tricky. That can get you into trouble. Now, let’s talk about how to figure out who threatened Mrs. O’Conner...”

Chapter 17

I staked out the library and hoped Harry Stevens would follow his routine. With his grandmother's death, anything was possible. Esme was right. Bothering minors was probably a bad idea. The kid had, no doubt, been instructed not to talk to anyone, like the rest of his family. But his social media proved he was easily baited. He complained about his interfering family and being diabetic. I mentioned to the librarian that I was looking for him, so hopefully she'd help me out.

I browsed the sections on witch history, which was bigger than most since the history was local and true.

"You're that coffee lady," a young guy behind me said.

I turned and saw the kid I was after. "True. You've been in my shop." He had been in with a bunch of his friends. Kids always wanted to act older. I hit him with a curiosity spell, so he'd keep talking.

"Yep. I like the frozen drinks better. Too cold, now. Then again, you pissed off my grandma. Grandpa is still mad. I know you talked to my mom," he said.

"And you're okay talking to me?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Grandma was a pain. Don't blame yourself. But I don't know anything."

"You had dinner with her that night. She seemed fine?" I asked.

He nodded. "Nagging and complaining, as always. She wanted me to get an insulin pump because I kept forgetting my shots. It's not like I'm a baby. I'm not disabled."

"Hardly. There are much worse things to have. Some kids have cancer. Managing that isn't really in anyone's control." I shrugged.

He gave me a funny look. "So, I should be grateful I don't have a worse disease? You sound just like Grandma."

"Should I be flattered or insulted?" I chuckled. "She just wanted you healthy. When grownups can't control things, it makes them crazy. My aunt still insists on brewing me this anti-stress tea, at times. Whether I want it or not."

"Why do you let her? You could just pick up and move away. Not be nagged," he said.

"My parents died when I was little. She's all I've got in the mom department. And when I am sick or stressed, it's nice that someone cares. So, you don't want the insulin pump?" I wanted to get him

talking and relaxed. Maybe he'd let something slip.

"Do you think I want guys seeing that when I change for gym? I want to play sports, too. Girls don't think about the locker room. That thing makes me look like a wimp. Plus, everything I do has to go through the doctor. My mom is fussy enough. How did I get Type 1, and my mom didn't, but Grandma had it? How is that fair?"

I shook my head. "Not fair. Life sucks, at times. Like, now, you'll have to go to a funeral. I promise, one day you'll miss your grandma's nagging. Maybe not for a long time, but you will. I just wish I knew how convince your grandfather I had nothing to do with it. My coffee shop isn't behind something."

"Yeah. Mom said there was nothing on the tox screen. You'd think that'd be enough. Grandma had a lot of meds and issues. Until the final guy signs off and says what killed her, Grandpa won't believe anything else. Sorry."

The kid was less of a jerk than I thought. Certainly less cocky than he came off on social media.

"Thanks. At least not everyone in your family thinks my shop is evil." I smiled.

"My mom brews her own coffee at home and thinks buying fancy coffee is overpriced, but she doesn't think your place sucks."

"Thanks. Well, I'm sorry about your grandma. I hope the police determine the cause, and everyone can move on. It just seems odd that she was fine all day long and then suddenly died. But I guess that's life and death." I shrugged.

He nodded. "She did get confused, sometimes."

"Confused?" I asked.

He frowned. "Not like Alzheimer's confused. She always knew who we were and who she was. She took a sleeping pill, and sometimes, she'd forget what time it was and call at two in the morning. Or go online and buy shoes. Or make a bunch of cookies and eat them. She never remembered it. Grandpa had to check her blood sugar and everything to be safe. The docs tried to get her off that sleeping pill, but the insomnia was worse. Now, if you're so smart, tell me how to avoid this damn insulin pump."

I shifted my weight to one leg and propped a hand on my hip. "The best way to get adults to back off is show you can handle it the way it is. Test your blood on a routine, eat right, and take the shots on time and all that crap without complaint or slip up. All your mom cares about is your health. If doing it that way is too much of a hassle, you might decide the pump would be better. The other kids probably already know you're diabetic if you're testing and injecting. More kids will know, and girls talk. The pump might actually cut down on it. I'd look at both sides and decide what's best for your social life."

He half-smiled. "I didn't think about that. People do notice at lunch and stuff."

"And if you're on a team? I don't know how that all works, but sometimes, practices go long or there are tournament days when you play a few games. It could be safer with a pump regulating you

instead of risking it. If you want to be a jock, less dependence on the testing and injections can't hurt." I smiled.

He stared at me for a second as though rolling over my advice in his head. "Maybe you're right. My mom would fuss less, which helps. Thanks. I have to get going." He headed down the aisle of books.

The kid was about image. He wouldn't hurt someone, but he resented his grandmother for sharing the disease. Maybe I was chasing crazy leads.

Mr. O'Conner was outside the café, again, protesting. I cast a warming spell on him. Truthfully, he wasn't making much of a dent in our customer base, anymore. We'd put notices out on social media, explaining the situation. Most of our customers came back, yet this man persisted.

I watched him from inside.

"Want me to call the police?" Esme asked.

"No. Let him learn we won't play his game, anymore." I removed the warming spell. "He can go home or stay. No more babying him. He may be grieving, but he can't keep blaming us. The results will be in soon enough, and we can all move on."

"No luck with the grandson?" she asked.

"He didn't do it and knows nothing. He mentioned she takes a lot of meds. It might be natural. Find any suspects for the threats?" I asked.

"Not really. Some solo witches may have heard about the insult. They sometimes come in here. But there's no way to prove it. It'd just be questioning people. They'd all deny it and resent us for doubting them. We need more proof or a confession before we accuse anyone. Your reputation has taken enough of a hit. I'll ask around to my connections, but I don't want to look like we're on a witch hunt. I know it was my idea, but we can't go about it the way you're chasing down humans like they're suspects. We have to be more subtle," she said.

"Unless they were here, they'd have to have heard it from someone who was. Ugh. I don't want to think about this, anymore. I feel like I've followed every logical angle and found nothing. Maybe it is all nothing. Natural causes and some hollow threats. I'm worried for nothing. Or I missed something." I sank into a chair.

"You need to forget about it for a bit. You're obsessed, and your mind needs a break. Come back at it with fresh eyes. Go to bed and get some rest. Watch some mindless TV or read a book. Get yourself away from this stuff." She nodded.

"You're right. I'm going to go to the movies. Not be here for a bit," I said.

"Sounds like a plan. Go. I'll cover for you here," she said.

"Thanks." I needed a mental break. The only decisions I needed to make were what to see, how big of a popcorn to buy and what flavor to add to my diet soda.

Chapter 18

The movie was okay, but the time outside of my own head had worked. I felt refreshed and somehow like I'd hit the reset button on my brain. I didn't have all the answers, but I was clearer on some things. I'd wait for the human report and see how they would handle it. Redo my spells and, if it was murder, pursue the guilty party with paranormal justice.

I waved to Brad and headed upstairs to my room. I wasn't alone. A man was bent over my nightstand, using my phone.

Magically, I spun him around. The phone fell to the floor.

Ryan.

"Didn't Esme lock you up tonight?" I asked.

"No, I think she forgot." He gave me that flirty grin.

"What are you doing here? Stealing? Using my phone?"

"Who has a landline, anymore?" he teased.

"It's for the security system. And spam calls. What did you do? Why are you trying to get away so badly?" I challenged him.

"What did I do? I killed a werewolf who was killing humans. By our laws, it's fine. All the humans see is a human body, and that's bad. Even if it's collateral damage in my job, no one understands. I want to move on. Farther away. But I need to check on my sister. You don't seem to care," he said.

"You chose your job, and you're the one who has to manage your family and work. I've got my own problems." I pushed him out of my bedroom. "Wait. Collateral damage?"

"You do have your own problems. Someone was snooping down in your storeroom. I came up here to avoid being caught down there. You don't want people to know I'm here, right?" he asked.

"Define people." I magically flung him down the stairs.

"Damn, is that necessary?" he asked.

I stepped over him and walked to the counter. "You let him upstairs?" I asked Brad.

"Um, he got spooked by Belle. The other baristas are helping her stock, so he can go back. I told him to wait in the sitting area on the second floor while I had some customers. Not to go into your private room."

“Well, he doesn’t listen.” I turned when I heard the bell on the door.

Bran walked in. Perfect timing. Why did that man always show up when I had chaos on my hands?

“Bad time?” Bran asked.

“Horrid, actually.” I smiled. I magically pushed Ryan toward the basement as Belle came up the stairs.

“Sorry,” she said.

“No, it’s not you. It’s our ever-rude guest.” I pointed to Ryan. “Jail.”

He disappeared. Once I felt him there, I went further. “Locked.”

“Impressive,” Bran said.

I laughed. “Not really. I grew up with twins who were always changing places. I learned teleportation young, so I wasn’t caught up in their tricks. They tried to blame me.”

“I can’t believe that. Iris and Violet are too sweet,” Belle said.

“Kids are never perfectly sweet. We all test the rules growing up. Belle Andrews, Bran Killeen. Belle is a gypsy witch who supplies us with expired blood from the blood bank to keep our vampires fed safely. Bran is...” I paused.

“I’ve heard of his family.” Belle blushed a bit and shook his hand. “Never thought I’d meet one.”

“A gypsy? Forgive me, I thought the women stayed at home. You’re a modern gypsy?” Bran asked.

“I guess.” Belle tugged her coat tight around her. She was cute and sweet but thirty, and in gypsy years, that was an old maid.

“Belle chose a career. I think it was a better choice than getting married at sixteen,” I said.

“I’d tend to agree with you, but I don’t want to seem anti-gypsy traditions. My family takes its share of judgment. I don’t want others to think I disapprove. We all have to do what works for us.” Bran smiled at me and Belle.

The man was a flirt. Or he was this attentive and nice to every woman? Maybe I should wait for the brother to come home? I didn’t really know either of them well.

“I’d better go. Mom always waits up. Nice meeting you,” Belle said to Bran. “Bye, Claudia.”

“Bye, thanks. Sorry about Ryan. The vampires were supposed to keep a handle on him.” I shot Brad a look.

The other barista came up from the basement. “Blood is stocked.”

“Good. Hopefully, by the next delivery, Ryan will be gone,” I said.

“Great. Are you coming to the wedding?” Belle asked as she lingered at the door.

“Probably. See you there?”

She nodded. “Mom insists. Gotta go.”

I waved. “Say hi to your mom for me.”

Bran remained quiet until she left.

“Complicated culture?” he asked.

“Yes. But I’m just a guest. Belle and her sister wanted more than to be housewives.” I knew more

about the details of her family life that explained a lot, but Bran didn't need to know.

"Quite the rebels. And you're invited to a wedding?" he asked.

"My uncle is a gypsy. It's his nieces getting married. Double wedding. We're not the most popular family to go, but my aunt and uncle don't believe in cutting off family ties if they can help it. Sorry, I should go check on my horrible guest," I said.

"Your troubles tend to linger," he said.

I shrugged. "I can't force the human world to work faster."

"Want some help putting him in his place?" Bran offered.

"I can handle it." I headed down the stairs, feeling like I should invite him, but it wasn't his business or his problem.

Ryan paced in his cage. "You need to let me go. Just kick me out. You'll never see me again."

"If I believed that, I'd do it so fast your head would spin. I think you'll run back here. I don't need more headaches. Who were you calling?" I demanded.

"Does it matter? You lock me up. Cut me off from my family and friends. You hold me hostage. I could call the police," he said.

I laughed. "I'm protecting you from the police. Please do call them. I'll hand you over, at this point. My uncle will get over it."

"I need to get out of here," he insisted.

"Why? Did you kill Mrs. O'Conner? Did you think it was a favor or something?" I asked.

"No, I didn't kill her. I was beat up here that night. I couldn't even have made those threats."

"You know about those?" I asked.

"Esme vents. She thinks I don't listen. She talks to herself, sometimes. Who knows what she might've said to someone about that annoying old woman before? The threats might not even be related to the murder," he said.

"You've spent a lot of time thinking about that, have you?" I asked.

"What else do I have to do here? Oh, you're stocking too much eggnog. People don't seem to like it in their coffee. But I'd make a shake out of it," he said.

"The holidays are over, anyway," I said.

"I'd keep a minty green shake year-round. People like it. Maybe do holiday flavors in July. When it's hot and people want something cold and delicious. Peppermint and all those flavors." He shrugged.

It wasn't a horrible idea. "Thanks. Now, back to the real question. Why are you trying to blame Esme?"

"I'm not blaming her. She just talks a lot. Someone out there might've threatened the old woman to curry favor with you. Or even killed her to please you when they heard about her threats. You don't know how powerful and known you are," he said.

"Flattery crap won't work," I said.

“That part is true,” said a voice behind me.

Bran had followed me.

“What are you doing, spying on me? Nosing around my property?” I asked.

“I just want to help if I can. Esme asked if I could try and get you involved more in our world.

Your powers are known and still growing.” Bran nodded.

“Esme is more powerful,” I said.

“Barely, and she’s a century older than you. You like humans, and that’s nice, but you need to grow you powers and flex them.” Bran glared at Ryan. “This human is not worth your time.”

“You’re a stronger wizard than I am a witch. Why do you want the competition?” I asked.

He smiled. “Competition makes us stronger. You let your guard down because you’re on top. It’s good to be pushed. Challenge me.”

“Do I need to be here for this?” Ryan asked.

“I can take him off your hands for you. I promise he’ll never escape my dungeons,” Bran said.

“Not cool, dude,” Ryan said.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ll handle my own problems.” I added a magical perimeter until morning then walked up the stairs.

Bran followed me.

“I don’t think I helped,” Bran said.

“Actually, you gave me some information that helps. Esme put you up to this. Chatting with me. Helping me. It makes sense, now,” I said.

“No,” he said firmly.

“Yes. I’m not a fool. I appreciate any help to socialize with the witching world. I don’t know why it’s such a big deal. My aunt never pushed me. Esme never did either before. What’s changed?” I asked.

Bran shook his head. “I’m not sure. I know, when your mother died, it was big news in the magical and paranormal community. She was such a strong witch. Esme promised to make sure you were connected, but your aunt kept you from the groups and activities as a child.”

“You were included in them?” I asked.

“No, but that’s my family. You don’t cultivate a certain reputation by joining in everything. I knew about them. We occasionally were allowed to do something over the summer. My brother pushed for it more than I.” Bran folded his arms.

“You have a brother?” I asked.

“Esme didn’t tell you?” he replied.

I played disinterested rather than dumb. “She mentioned someone in Romania studying and also you have a cousin staying. I didn’t retain all the details. Human trouble.”

“My brother is studying the history of vampires. Myths and facts. He’d love to meet your gypsy blood fairy. My cousin is staying. She wanted to try college but needs Esme’s magical tutoring. Her

skills are lacking. Her parents let her run a bit wild and free with humans. We should really go back to boarding schools.”

“Like Hogwarts?” I laughed.

“Don’t mock it. Homeschooling and private tutors only works so well. Trying to fit into a human world makes us weak and fearful of them. We need to organize and be stronger.” He looked me dead in the eye.

“I agree there. But we can’t ignore humans. We need to know what they’re thinking and planning. Anyway, I’m sure Esme will help your cousin. When your brother comes back, please bring him by. I’d love to meet him, and Belle would, too.” I smiled.

“Why don’t we get to know each other better before that?” he asked.

“You don’t have to do anything special with me. Esme put you up to it, and it’s not needed,” I said.

“Dinner can’t hurt. Fill in some blanks about things. Then, I can escort you to the Vernal Equinox ball. My cousin says I need to get a life,” he said with a smirk.

“I’m hearing that a lot. We can blame Esme for that nugget being planted, I’m sure.” I chuckled.

“Doesn’t mean we can’t be good allies and friends—if not more. Our dating pool isn’t as massive as humans have. You might like my brother better. I couldn’t let him marry a gypsy, anyway,” Bran said.

“Let him?” I asked.

“Strong magical families have to keep their powers strong. Bring in power, not eccentricity.”

“You’re already rich and powerful,” I shot back.

“Riches can be invested, built on, preserved and grown. Power, magical power, is individual. A weak wife would hurt him,” Bran replied casually.

“Then, you don’t know much about gypsies. Many of them have the sight. Visions of the future, and the curse of a gypsy witch is one of the hardest to break. Just because they don’t socialize with your kind doesn’t mean you should underestimate me or my gypsy cousins.”

“You said you weren’t a gypsy,” he said.

“I’m not. But my uncle is, and that means I have extended family that is. I’ve known many of them all my life. I might not be as strong as you, but I know gypsy magic that you’ve never even heard of.” I smiled and picked up a cup from the counter.

Brad handed Bran his coffee, as well.

“You’ve intrigued me. We’ll have plenty to talk about over dinner. I’ll pick you up Friday at seven. I wish I could help more with your human problem, but it’s not my area. If you need anything, just let me know.”

“Thanks. See you then. And you don’t have to take me to a ball. I’m sure you have another woman you’d rather take to something that fancy.” I had to wiggle out of that.

He leaned in and smiled. “You take me to the gypsy wedding, and I’ll take you to the fancy

magical ball. You're fascinating, even if you want to get rid of me. You'll see at the ball that quality dating material in the witching world is very hit or miss."

"Rid of you? It depends how narrow-minded you really are. I like humans and gypsies. I just can't believe Esme put you up to this. It's not fair to ask you to give up your social life," I explained.

"I see you as more of an expansion to my social life. Until Friday." He took his coffee and left.

"Men," I grumbled.

Chapter 19

The next morning, I came down to the coffee shop level to find Mr. O’Conner sitting at a table. It was barely six in the morning. He sipped a black cup of coffee. I gave Brad a look, and he just shrugged.

I walked up to our favorite protester. “Everything okay, Mr. O’Conner?” I asked.

He cleared his throat. “The police called me last night. I’m sure they’ll call you, too, but I wanted to let you know I’m done. They confirmed that my wife died of natural causes. Her body just shut down. Looks like it started in her brain, but her heart gave out about the same time. They think it was a stroke. Either way, it was natural. I’m sorry I couldn’t face it.”

“It’s all right. I’ve been bugging everyone in your family and all her friends to see if there were any signs. If we missed something. We’d never do anything deliberately to hurt anyone here. Whether she liked witches and pagans or not, the first rule is do no harm to anyone. I hope you believe that, now.” A weight lifted off of me. The suspicion was gone. We were in the clear.

“I do. I think you need to see something, as well.” He picked up three shoeboxes from the floor.

“This was her insulin and testing stuff.” He opened one box.

“This was her other meds. Heart and blood pressure. She took them religiously.” He opened another full box.

“I believe you, Mr. O’Conner. I’m very sorry for all you’ve been through.”

He nodded. “She also took a bunch of vitamins and supplements. The doctor knew about it. So many pills. But she took them. She kept active. But there are no guarantees.”

“No, there aren’t. Someone mentioned she took a sleeping pill. And, sometimes, it made her do things that she didn’t remember later. Do you think maybe she could have forgotten she already took her meds and doubled up on something?” I asked.

“She never did that before. She’d eat or shop online. But maybe it could’ve happened. We’ll never know, but she was a woman who wanted to live. She liked your place here. True, she complained about the witch history and pagan symbols, but our grandson loved Harry Potter when he was little. She took him to all those movies. I reminded her of that. She insisted it was different, somehow.” He sat and closed the boxes.

“I think she just had to find flaws with things in her life. We couldn’t be perfect,” I said.

“That’s true. But she liked your place better than the chains. You cared, and you have good coffee. I’m sorry I made a fuss.” He sighed.

“I’m sorry if I gave you a hard time. I had to protect my reputation,” I said.

He nodded. “I’m just going to finish my coffee and go meet the funeral director to make arrangements.”

“If you need anything, just let Brad know,” I said.

I went into my office and called Detective Shelley.

“Ah, Ms. Crestwood, I was going to call you when I got to the station.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about the hour; it’s a hazard of my business to be up with the early commuters. Mr. O’Conner was here and said it was all natural causes. I just needed to hear it from you guys,” I said.

“It’s true. Nothing toxic found in her body. Her heart and brain showed signs of system failure. The case is closed,” she said with a tempered cheerfulness.

“Did they check her glucose level?” I asked.

“Why? That’s not standard,” she said.

I heard papers shuffling. “Well, she’s a diabetic. She was on a lot of meds. I just wondered if she accidentally took too much or doubled a dose. That might explain it. But with the results in, I guess it’s all done. Doesn’t matter, now.”

“Yep. You can move on. Any protesting issues? Mr. O’Conner seemed to take the information, and it calmed him down.”

“No, no problems. He got the answers he needed. I guess I just wanted to know more. So much trouble resolved with one exam.” I sighed.

“On behalf of the city, I apologize for the delay. I know it hurt your business, but we appreciate your patience. I advised Mr. O’Conner to mention in the obituary that she died of natural causes. It might help answer any customer questions, once and for all. Can I help you with anything else?” Shelley asked.

“No, thanks. That should help. Thank you,” I said.

The human world had made their decision. Now, if they were wrong, I had to figure it out. I had to think about it and talk it through with some people.

An hour later, I invited Esme for morning coffee in the second-floor area. We sipped coffee as I told her about Mr. O’Conner and Detective Shelley. She seemed very relieved.

“So, you think my spell was wrong? That it was natural causes?” I asked.

“Oh, no, but the humans are satisfied. That’s what matters first,” she said.

Her face froze.

“Did you have anything to do with the threats or Mrs. O’Conner’s death?” I asked.

“Certainly not.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

“I have a lot of secrets. Some I can’t tell you.” She sat back.

The truth potion worked but I had to ask specific questions to get answers.

“Who did you tell about the threats?” I asked.

“A lot of people. I was trying to find out who did it, which means you have to talk about it. But that was after.” She glared at me. “Truth potion won’t last forever.”

“I had to try. What secret do you know about me? What is no one telling me?” I asked.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She held her throat like it was a struggle.

“Okay. Who did you see the day Mrs. O’Conner was here after her incident? Who would you have told in time to make the threats or do something?” I asked.

She shook her head. “They wouldn’t.”

“I remixed the potion to confirm if it was a natural death or not.” I led her into the locked area on the second floor. She stared at the cauldron.

“Do it,” I said.

Esme said the spell this time. Red for unnatural and green for natural causes. The potion turned pink.

“Unclear,” she said.

“What do you know about me that you won’t tell me? Do you know what it is?” I asked.

“I know. I can’t. I swore. A bigger promise and stronger spell controls that more than your little truth potion. Move up to the big leagues.” She laughed.

“Who else knows this secret?” I asked.

“Your mother,” she said.

“She’s dead. My aunt?” I asked.

“Yes. And uncle. One of the twins. That’s all.” She held up her hand.

“Why are you pushing me to engage the magical worlds, now? Why not put me in those groups and activities when I was a kid?” I pushed.

“They might have discovered your secret before.”

“That would be bad?” I asked.

“It wouldn’t be good.” She glanced around.

The potion might be wearing off. She was powerful enough to try and counteract it.

“Why? What is it about? My father was a gypsy?” I asked.

“No,” she said flatly.

“Did I have a sibling who was killed?” I asked.

“No,” she said firmly.

I was running out of ideas.

“Why is it okay for me to socialize now when I don’t even know the truth? I might screw up and

reveal something. Shouldn't I know?" I demanded.

"You need allies and friends like yourself. Powerful and magical. Telling you the whole truth is not my decision to make," she said.

"Which twin knows?" I asked, more as a test since I knew.

"Iris," she said.

Esme rubbed her face and walked away from the potion mix.

"That was low," she scolded.

"I needed to know if you were protecting someone. All these weird changes happening right after this death. Are you trying to distract me?" I asked.

"Please. You need a social life. You need a husband. Don't you want a powerful family?" she shot back.

"But what secret could be so bad that you kept me from socializing all of my childhood? Why can't you tell me?" I pushed.

"We had to protect you. You were gifted. I promised not to tell you." She answered the questions in order.

"Promised who?" I demanded.

"Your aunt." She rubbed her neck. "Enough. It's wearing off. I'm going to brew an antidote, and you better watch out that I don't mess with your memory," she warned.

"You didn't tell me enough to bother with that," I said.

"Don't go interrogating your aunt or cousins either. They won't tell," Esme said.

"What could be so bad?" I asked.

"Maybe it's not. Maybe it's good. But it's not time to tell you. It's not for me to be the one to tell you either," she replied.

"And I thought you were family. You were my mentor." I put the potion away.

Esme left the locked room before I had to throw her out. I locked the door behind us and turned to face her. "I really thought I could trust you. I never doubted you before. Now, you're keeping secrets and treating me like a child."

"It's your aunt's place to tell you. Not mine," she said.

"So, I'll go push her." I headed for the stairs.

"No, not now. Not here. That's a private conversation." She slid past me to go back to work.

The next day, I sat at my table in the café and made notes about summer promotions. Ryan's ideas weren't so terrible. I had a few for the spring. We needed to make up a bit for the dip Mr. O'Conner had caused in our winter sales. A young woman walked into the café, and I felt her power. She immediately went up to Violet and started chatting. The shop wasn't busy. Maybe it was a friend from school?

I kept one eye on the chatting girls. Iris joined in.

“You should really join our coven,” Iris said.

“I don’t know about that,” the new girl said.

“You said you have powers. You should meet Claudia,” Violet said.

I lifted my head. The girls looked over at me. “Come on over.”

“This is a new girl at school, Serena Murray. She’s very into witches and pagan stuff. She’s majoring in women’s studies, and the witch trials are a huge part of that,” Iris said.

“How interesting. Nice to meet you, Serena.” I shook her hand. “You’ve got powers?”

She shrugged it off sheepishly. “Sort of.”

“Who are you related to? Which magical family?” I asked.

Serena went a bit pale. “Um. I’m staying with my cousins, right now. Killean.”

“I know Bran. He mentioned you but not your name, so I wasn’t sure. You’re welcome to join our coven, but I understand if you don’t want to.” I sipped my tea.

“Why?” Iris asked.

“Big magical families tend to sort of be their own coven—so to speak. They don’t join others where there are a lot of members without powers. The Killeans keep to themselves,” I replied.

“Yeah. I’m new to the area, so I’m trying to make friends. I think the twins are great. I love this place. Great feel.” Serena looked around.

“You’re welcome anytime. I have a fair set of powers myself. I’ve been busy with other things lately. Businesses are a lot of work,” I said.

“They told me. I can’t believe someone threatened this place. Rude and ignorant people really deserve to get a tough lesson,” she said.

“Thanks. It’s good to know there are some supporters. I’d love to hear more about your major. Maybe you could speak to our coven about the witch trials’ impact on women’s rights and history?” I suggested.

“Maybe, once I’ve had some actual classes. I took basics at a local college down in South Carolina. Then, my parents wanted to do this Euro tour thing. I wanted to keep studying. I traveled enough every summer of my childhood. I told them I’d meet up with them on summer break, but I want a degree. Bran is very supportive of that. He’s always after me to do my homework and giving me magical challenges.” She rolled her eyes.

“Sounds like a good atmosphere for your goals.”

“You should work here,” Violet said.

“Work?” Serena laughed.

“Vi, I don’t think Serena needs a job. The Killeans are quite well off.” I nodded.

“That’s downplaying it. But, yeah, let people who need jobs take them. I need a lot of study time and magical practice,” she admitted.

“Well, once you get the hang of it, you can always volunteer somewhere. If you want to give back

a bit,” I suggested.

“Sure. Maybe a women’s shelter,” Serena said.

She had a theme, and I didn’t hate it. “An excellent idea.”

“Anyone else threatening witches?” Serena asked.

“No, that was just an annoyed customer. All cleared up,” Iris said.

I leaned in. “We try not to get confrontational with our customers. Even if they’re wrong. We try to educate and invite, not attack.”

“Of course, do no harm,” Violet said.

“Absolutely!” Serena sat. “I love the karmic balance in the world. I’d never attack anyone, but I would love to teach them about karma. We don’t go protesting their churches or beliefs.”

“True,” Iris agreed.

“What’s through that door?” Serena pointed to the basement door.

“Storerooms and basement. Nothing interesting.” I shrugged it off.

“Cool. I feel like this building is very old. Full of spirits and stories. Maybe I could research it. Maybe it was an old witch’s shop? Someone who was killed?” she asked.

“I doubt it. It was built in the 1800s, not the 1600s. It’s all brick, so it holds the history in the stone. You can research the land and what was here, certainly. It might be something, but the building isn’t quite old enough for the witch trials.” I liked the girl’s spunk, but she seemed scattered. Poor Esme, trying to get her to focus on her magical studies.

“Could I get the tour?” she asked.

“Not now. I’m afraid we’re doing inventory, and the basement area is a mess. You and the twins can hang out in the coven room or the reading nook on the second floor while it’s quiet,” I suggested.

Esme walked up from the basement, and I saw Serena freeze up. “Sorry, I have to go. More homework awaits.”

Ellen walked up as Serena bolted out the door.

“Who is that girl?” Ellen asked.

“A friend from college,” Violet answered.

“We’re back to work, now. Don’t worry,” Iris added.

“I’m not worried. That girl left us a fifty-dollar tip. She can come back whenever she likes.” Ellen grinned. The twins followed Ellen back to the counter.

“She knows how to make a good first impression,” I said to Esme.

Esme walked up. “She was here?”

“Why? Isn’t she allowed? The girl is what? Nineteen? She can come in for coffee,” I said.

“Of course. I just usually keep my private lesson students away from here. I don’t want them dropping in for help or bugging me while I’m working. Boundaries are good,” she said.

Esme still looked rattled. “You can be mad about the truth potion all you want. Until you tell me the truth about myself, the secret, I won’t even begin to apologize,” I replied.

She shot me a look of disapproval.

“If you were in my shoes, you’d do the exact same thing. You wouldn’t stop until you found the truth. Neither will I.” I shot her an icy stare.

“That doesn’t involve Serena or Bran. That family is powerful. You don’t want to cross them,” she said.

“You wanted me to get involved with one of them. Now, I need to be careful? What is the deal?” I asked.

“Just be careful. Grow your powers. Don’t spend so much time worrying about the past. Some secrets really don’t matter, anymore,” she said.

“I don’t believe you for a second.” I stalked off. Who could I totally trust, anymore? My nice little world felt much darker and more complicated than it did just a week ago.

Chapter 20

I felt a bit frumpy. Black sweater dress, purple tights, black boots and a black leather jacket. But it was cold outside. Showing skin wasn't an option. I wasn't ready for that anyway. I had a lot to talk to Bran about. But it felt more like a summit meeting about issues than a date. Good thing I hadn't mentioned it to Esme or my aunt. I met him at an Italian place on the other end of town.

"You look lovely," he said.

I took the single black calla lily he offered. "Thank you. Esme mentioned she's tutoring your cousin. I didn't want any of our family to get too excited or ahead of us. My cousins and yours are young enough to..."

"I understand. Esme never married, did she?" he asked.

"No." I followed the host who sat us in a private room. Bran took my coat and held my chair. This was a showing off date. Bran was impressing me.

"Champagne?" a waiter offered.

"No, thanks," I said.

"Burgundy wine?" Bran suggested.

"Just a little," I agreed.

The waiter handed us menus and poured the wine. "I'll give you a moment."

"You really didn't need to go this fancy, Bran," I said.

"If I'm going to do something, I do it right." He sipped his wine.

"Why did you ask about Esme?" I asked.

He lifted a shoulder. "She might be living vicariously through you. She has a long life ahead of her but half of it being feline. I don't know how she does it."

"I don't either. I thought I wanted that when I was young, but I couldn't shift to feline in time. Now, I'm more relieved I didn't." I tried the wine. It was rich and earthy.

"I'm glad you didn't either. My cousin likes you, by the way. She mentioned talking to you at the café. If she gets under your feet or makes a pest of herself, let me know." He stared at the menu.

"She wasn't a pest. She knows the twins from school. She did rush off when she saw Esme, but no one wants to be cornered by a tutor when they're out with friends or getting coffee. I'm sure she'll

settle in and get comfortable.” I examined my options for dinner.

“I hope you’re not a vegetarian,” he said.

“No, I’m not. My aunt is so I can make a meal out of anything. But the Cajun chicken pasta looks good,” I said.

“Not the prime rib?” he asked.

“I prefer my steak well done. I don’t like to remember anything bled for me to eat. I’m not a vampire.” I smiled.

“So, those rumors are false.”

“You believed them?” I asked.

“No, you’re far too hot-blooded for that. I’m sure they’ll cook whatever you like however you like it.” He set the menu aside. “I hope you don’t believe the rumors about me.”

“I’m not sure what the rumors about you are. Your family is old, wealthy, powerful, and reclusive. Esme says you’re a homebody. I don’t know much else, besides what you told me about your businesses.” I sat back and waited for more.

“I’m actually quite boring. I like succeeding in business. I like when the magical world is calm and things are in order. I traveled over the summers with my parents. They moved to Ireland when my brother finished school. Couldn’t pass up an old castle.” He smiled.

I liked his smile. He cared for his family and wasn’t ashamed of it. “Who could turn down a castle?”

“It’d be much easier to manage your hunter friend in a dungeon,” Bran said.

The waiter showed up and took our order. I got the prime rib well done just to see his eyebrow arch.

Once we were alone again, I thought about a dungeon. “Do you really have a dungeon?”

“Want to see it?” he offered.

“I’m not sure. Is it empty?” I asked.

“For now, yes. Is he giving you more trouble?”

I shrugged. “He wants to leave. I want him to go. But there are issues. Finally, the cops are off of my back. We have the autopsy results for Mrs. O’Conner, so it was natural causes. I guess my spell was wrong. But I don’t know if I trust that hunter. His case is hard to get details on. Killing a werewolf who is killing humans is one thing. But I don’t think he’s telling me the whole truth.”

“Is he bound to?” Bran asked.

“No, but if he did something really wrong, I don’t want him out there as a danger to others. He landed in my basement, and I feel responsible. Why doesn’t the paranormal world handle this? Why don’t we have wizards or witches who hunt down vamps and weres who kill humans? We could handle it better,” I said.

Bran nodded. “Gypsy hunters are a tradition of the human world. They protect humans from the paranormal. We could handle the bad ones if we chose to. But I’m not sure we want to make enemies

of the gypsies. There are strong witches among their numbers. They always want to be apart from other humans and from us. It's complicated."

"Why don't vampires self-police or werewolves? Like humans?" I asked.

"Some say, because they were human once, they still think of themselves as human with a little more power. Some never asked for that to happen to them. Then again, the more powerful vampires and weres believe they have a right to live how they want to live. That their nature makes them hunters and killers. Those large groups go where the carnage is so they won't be noticed."

"Like war zones?" I asked.

He smiled. "War zones. Places with rampant illness. Gypsies live in a lot of places around the world, but they move on when things get too dangerous. They'll be out of that area before you hear the word refugees. They see three steps ahead. So, then, the vampires and weres are free to feed. To feast. My brother is fascinated by it. You'd love talking to him."

"I don't want details about the carnage. I employ a lot of vampires who don't want to hurt people. They have two options. Blood bank expired or butcher blood. They attack a human, and I'll stake them myself." I shook my head.

"And werewolves? Do you help them, too?" he asked.

"Sure. If they need a potion to keep them from changing, we provide it free. If they refuse the potion or it doesn't work on them, we lock them up for the nights of the full moon. That's why I have the cells in my basement. Occasionally, we catch a newbie who doesn't know they're a were. Once they do, they can make a plan and get the potion. It works on most of them. But now, I feel like we need to police the hunters who like their job too much. Go too far," I said.

Bran nodded. "I agree. I looked into your uncle and his family. Vin was well known, and people trusted him. He's mostly retired, now, and he deserves that. The gypsies do police themselves more or less. Your friend in the basement is not a gypsy."

"No. I wonder how some of them get into it. Like my dad," I said.

"Your dad was a hunter?" he asked.

I nodded. "But not a gypsy. I've asked a few times, but my aunt just falls apart. Losing her sister nearly killed her. But I don't feel like I know much about him."

"You were very young. I was, too. I don't know anything about your father, but I'm sure we could research it. If it will make you feel better. Sometimes digging in the past only causes pain," he said.

I nodded. "It would upset my aunt. I don't know. Maybe I'll feed that hunter a truth potion and see what he really did. I won't set a dangerous man loose on the world."

"Smart. If you need help, I'm around."

"Thanks. And if you need any help with Serena, I'm here. The twins are about the same age, and I'm used to it. I guess I should've asked if you have any sisters. I've only heard about the one brother," I said.

"Just the brother. So, girls are a bit different. Serena was spoiled. She's like Scarlet O'Hara.

She'll get her way or make it her way. Her parents indulged her. She has a couple younger sisters who went with their parents. Serena wanted freedom and thought college would be it. Dorms and parties. Then, they stuck her in my custody. She needs direction and discipline."

"Wow. That's a handful. You'll put her in her place," I said.

He sipped his wine. "She's good deep down. She has the right intentions. But she doesn't always think things through. The consequences are what she needs to think about. Especially since she has magical powers. Her younger sisters aren't as gifted. Serena has powers and wasn't fully educated in how to handle them. I might need your help, as well as Esme's."

"You've got my help, but I'm not much of a teacher. Serena might have more powers than I do." I shrugged.

He stared at the wine bottle until it hovered over the table. He moved it over my glass and tipped it to refill my wine. I mentally grabbed the bottle and put it right side up and pushed back. I filled his glass then levitated the cork and plugged the wine bottle.

"Showoff," he said.

The door opened, and I hastily put the wine where it belonged as the waiter brought in our food.

Chapter 21

I'd gone on some dates in my day, but none of them ended in brewing a potion. But the vampires had texted me that Ryan was trying to escape, again.

"It needs to be strong and last. He'll fight it," I said.

Bran tossed in another handful of herbs, and the mix smoked.

I stirred it and poured it into a large glass jar.

"Got it." I mixed in some iced tea. It was triple the potion I'd given to Esme. This time, I felt no guilt.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded. "You carry this. I'll have my phone recording."

Bran led the way, and I followed.

"Let me go. It's over. I heard them talking," Ryan said.

He paced the cell like a caged wolf.

"One thing first. Drink this," I said.

"What are you doing? I don't need a drink. I need to leave." Ryan pointed at the stairs.

"Who were you trying to call from my bedroom?" I asked.

"Mind your own business," he shot back.

"That's enough." Bran waved his hand and Ryan was pressed back against the wall of the cell.

His mouth was awkwardly open.

Bran levitated the jar of tea potion into the cell and poured some down Ryan's throat.

Ryan coughed and gagged.

"Drink it or we'll feed you more," I said.

He garbled a question as more tea was poured. Bran wasn't choking or waterboarding him. Ryan had chances to breathe.

When half was in, I touched Bran's shoulder. He pulled the jar back and waited.

"Ryan, how many people did you kill chasing that werewolf into the mall?" I asked.

Ryan shook his head. "Things happen."

"How many humans were killed? You killed the werewolf, fine. How many humans were dead when it was done?" I asked.

“Four. They got in the way. You can’t leave witnesses. You don’t understand.” Ryan shook.

“You killed four people?” I said.

“No, four people were dead, in addition to the werewolf. I killed two. She killed two. They got in the way.” Ryan glared at me.

“Who is she? Your sister?” I asked.

He shook his head. “She was special. I have to know she’s okay. I can’t find her. I can’t get her on the phone. Her parents probably took her away. They never approved of me.”

“This is new. You had a girlfriend? Was she arrested?” I asked.

He laughed. “No, I’m sure she’s not arrested. She said to come here. Meet her here. But she hasn’t come for me.”

Bran and I exchanged a confused look. “Does she know to get in touch with my uncle?”

“No, she said she could get in, and we’d be gone. She had money saved up. We’d be long gone and far away. But it’s been too long. She’s forgotten about me or her family caught her. Let me out, so I can find her.” He kicked at the air.

“We could hand you over to the police, right now, so you better cooperate,” Bran said.

“Oh, please do. Without her, my life means nothing.” Ryan swatted at the jar.

“Who is this woman? What’s her name?” I demanded.

He pursed his lips and shook his head.

“Tell me her name, and maybe I can help you. Maybe you’ll both go to jail,” I suggested.

“A jail couldn’t hold her. She’d just leave. She’d be here taking me away if she really loved me.” He gritted his teeth together.

“I want a name or you’re not going anywhere,” I said.

“Serena. Serena Murray.” He fell to his knees, his shoulders slumped.

“What?” Bran snapped.

“He came up from the Carolinas,” I said.

“She set this all up.” Bran’s fists clenched.

“Calm down.” I grabbed Bran’s shoulder. “I had no idea.”

“No wonder she was asking about this place. The coven,” he seethed.

“She killed two people. I think that’s a bigger problem.” I stopped recording.

“You know her? Bring her to me, please!” Ryan, now free from Bran’s control, shook the door of the cell.

“Bring her to you? Do you know who he is? She’s his cousin. You’re lucky he hasn’t killed you, yet,” I said to Ryan.

“She loves me. I love her,” Ryan sighed.

“She’s a witch. You’re a human.” Bran shook his head.

“We have to do something. They killed people. Innocent humans,” I said.

Bran ran his hands through his hair. “She’d just escape a human jail with magic. She’ll have to be

handled by the witch's council. But him?"

"We can send him to jail. But if she loves him, she'll take him out. She was eyeing the door today. With me and Esme here, she's not the strongest witch. She couldn't take him from us. But a human jail—she could spring him," I said.

Bran looked at me intensely. "You didn't know?"

"Know? No! I had no idea he was connected to her. My uncle brought me a hunter who needed to hide out. It's happened more than once. They were never dating a witch. Or running from murdering innocent humans. He never said anything except about a sister. I don't know how to punish a witch or him for this." I wanted to call Esme.

"You were calling her? Trying to lure her here?" Bran asked Ryan.

Ryan nodded. "I had her cell number. A couple of them. I left her messages, but she never called me back. They wouldn't give me a phone. Esme took my burner phone." Ryan shot me an evil look.

"Because she's smart. If she'd trusted her instincts, she would've turned you over to the police, but we'll handle this better than humans. You might not think so, but we will make sure you don't hurt anyone, again." Bran waved at the cell.

Ryan's mouth moved, but we heard nothing.

"Nice soundproofing. What do we do with him?" I asked.

"Her first. We need to come up with a plan that's fair. Punishment. There is a system for this, but her parents would be furious if we turned her over to the witch's council. We handle it. She's under twenty-one, so she's not fully powered or considered an adult by the council. Murder."

I knew there was a council, but I had no idea their procedure for handing out justice.

"Come on; we need to go get her, now," Bran said.

"Wait. Just wait." I took his hand and led him back to the second floor. "She was asking about Mrs. O'Conner. Why would she threaten us? Were there any other threats against witches?" I said.

"She's protective. She's studying women's studies, and the witch trials are a big part of her focus," he said.

"Right. That might all be true, even though she moved here for him. She pulled all this out of nowhere when her parents were going to be gone...then she could chase down her boyfriend and run wild with him." I couldn't believe how clueless some men could be. "Serena seems sweet and clueless, but she might have set up all of this."

"Her magic needs work," he said.

"Maybe, but her scheming is top notch. Maybe she wants more advanced lessons?" I asked.

"You think she made the threats against Mrs. O'Conner?" he asked.

"Esme was tutoring Serena. No doubt they got to talking about the incident at the shop. Maybe Serena wanted to impress Esme? Like she was standing up for witches everywhere? A few threats are nothing I'd put past a teen to do as a prank. We need to find out what she actually did. We need to find out any other crimes, to be sure. We might need more truth potion." I filled up the cauldron.

He nodded. “You’re right. Serena would want to impress you and Esme. The two most powerful witches here are under attack. She’d love to be the one who rescued you. I never thought. She’s too young for that sort of a Bonnie and Clyde romance, as well.”

“Well, we’ll get the truth out of her, and we can sit down with Esme and decide what to do about all of it,” I said.

“No, not tonight. Invite her to a coven meeting tomorrow. Make it look normal. See if someone there threatened the old woman. See if anyone is helping the guy in the basement. Then, I can search her rooms and call her parents. See if they knew about him. See if she confesses to you and Esme.” He shook his head.

“She doesn’t know us that well.” I shrugged.

“Serena has a romantic streak—she might try to play on your emotions. I just want the whole story before we try to settle on a punishment. See if she really loves that hunter jerk.”

“What do we do with him? I’ll give him to the cops, but if she lets him out...” I flopped on a sofa.

“That’s why I don’t want to rush. We need to get all the information.” He sat next to me.

“Do we need to get her parents back here?” I asked.

He shook his head. “She’s an adult as far as the human world is concerned.”

“But we can punish her without her parents’ permission? Or the council’s?” I asked.

“The council will approve our punishment or amend it, but it’ll be quieter than if we had a judge come and hear the evidence or we go there. Then, news will spread.”

“Witch gossip?” I teased.

“Exactly. Just what my family doesn’t want. Serena is smart when manipulating her family, but she’s not brilliant with magic. She probably panicked and killed whoever that was at the mall when she meant to freeze them. I just want to make sure that’s all she did.” Bran nodded.

“I think we need some tea or wine. Too bad I don’t have a liquor license here,” I said.

He grabbed my hand and held it tight. “Thank you for your help.”

I looked into his dark and caring eyes. “Thank you for yours. Crazy night.”

“Fate tends to do that to us.” He leaned over and kissed me.

I froze for a second, completely thrown off guard. But he was a good kisser...

Chapter 22

I called a coven meeting for the next evening. I told Esme to bring Serena, and Bran would make sure she came. The members assembled. It'd been hard not to quiz my cousin and aunt about the secret in my life. That was selfish and crazy. I'd lived this long without details. Right now, I had to make sure two murderers didn't escape justice.

Bran would slip into the café right when the coven meeting began. If he attended the meeting, Serena would know something was wrong. But if she tried to flee or take Ryan, he'd stop them.

When everyone was there, I stood, and the room got quiet. Serena stood next to Esme with the cousins on her other side. Serena looked around, but mainly, she was looking down her nose at the mix of people.

"I wanted to apologize to you guys. The police confirmed that it was natural causes. I'm not sure if my spell was wrong. The spell said it was unnatural causes, but there might have been other issues we don't know about. Mr. O'Conner is done with the protesting. The humans have a resolution, and I don't want to upset anyone by dragging it out to prove anything. But we would still like to find out who threatened Mrs. O'Conner. We don't want to be attacking humans for their ignorance or fear. The point of the café and this coven is to reach out and have good relations with humans. If anyone knows anything about who made those threats, I want to hear about it now," I said.

Serena scoffed.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Why do you care what humans think? They shouldn't be threatening what they don't understand. All their wars are out of ignorance and arrogance," Serena said.

"That doesn't mean we threaten them. We must set an example of order," Esme said.

"What do you even know about this, Serena? You're new here," I said.

"Who is she?" Ellen asked.

"Serena Murray. Of the Carolina Murrays." Serena flipped her hair.

I nearly laughed, but she was a lot more dangerous than she was spoiled. "She's a cousin of the Killeans, staying with them. Very recently. Have you meddled with anything, Serena?" I asked.

"Meddled? That old lady threatened your café and coven. I heard that through the witch network. What's wrong with a little warning that karma might get them? She threatened us. I threatened them,"

Serena said.

“You what?” Iris asked.

“I made a phone call. I had a friend make one, too, and leave a note. No big deal. The spell was just to bug her.”

“Spell?” Bran asked from the door.

“You’re supposed to wait downstairs,” I said.

“I couldn’t help listening in. What spell?” he demanded.

She jerked her chin. “Doesn’t matter. She died too soon. The spell didn’t work.”

I cleared my throat. “We already know about the mall and the hunter. Tell us what spell you cast on Mrs. O’Conner.”

“It doesn’t matter. It was a joke. The mall was self-defense. A mistake. It went wrong.” She waved it off.

“Repeat the spell,” Bran said.

Serena flinched. “Teach this bitter old woman karma is real. Give her a mega dose of her own medicine so she knows how it feels.”

“Mega dose of her own medicine?” I wanted to curse her out. The girl made a rookie mistake. Spells couldn’t be ambiguous or the worst results always happened.

“What? She was a bitter old grouch. She deserved it. She wished bad things on you guys. She was mean to you, so she deserved people being mean to her for a bit. Karma.” Serena shrugged.

“That woman died of an overdose of insulin.” I pulled up the text on my phone from Detective Shelley. “They ran a glucose test, and she had no measurable sugar in her body. She took a mega dose of insulin and went to bed. Your spell worked and was taken literally,” I said.

“No. That’s crazy. I didn’t know she was on medicine.” Serena gasped.

“Bind her,” someone called.

Esme waved a hand.

Serena tried to walk away and found herself frozen.

“Let me go. I demand you let me go. It was natural causes. My spell was a flop. I didn’t mean to kill her. I didn’t kill her.” Serena shrieked.

“What about the humans in the mall that you killed to save your hunter boyfriend?” I played the video of Ryan confessing.

She stared at the screen, and her face went red.

“That idiot!” she shouted.

“He was under a powerful truth potion,” Bran said.

“He betrayed me. That bastard!” she screamed. Then, she took a deep breath and seemed to regroup. “It was all self-defense in the mall.”

“You followed him here. You must care about him,” I said.

“He pissed off my dad. Dad threatened him if he didn’t stay away from me. I couldn’t handle

being separated from Ryan. Especially when he went on a dangerous hunt. It was late, and he was going to take out the werewolf and be done. I went for backup. We didn't know there were humans in there doing late inventory. They surprised us. It was an accident." She bounced.

I laughed. She'd tried to stomp her foot but was frozen from the elbows down.

"Accident or not, you killed two humans that night. He did, as well. You both have to pay. Plus Mrs. O'Conner, goofed spell or not. We can call in a rep from the witch's council or handle it ourselves," Esme said.

"She is young," my aunt added.

"We will handle it and inform the council, but the punishment will be severe. You're all invited to the Killeen mansion tonight at midnight. We will set down punishment at that point. For her and the hunter. She's my cousin and my responsibility. The hunter came here because Serena knew she could get here and had a place to stay. She thought she could rescue him from hiding. They're my problem," Bran said.

"They became our problem, big time. Thanks," my aunt said.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea any of this was going on. I'll be talking to Serena's parents before we pass judgment. I'm sorry you ladies had to deal with this." He glared at his cousin.

"We? Who is we?" Serena asked.

"Claudia's business was almost ruined because of you. She had to babysit your boyfriend. They patched him up. You've been trying to get in here since you arrived in town, and now, I know why. A human hunter with no self-control. Claudia and I will decide what the consequences are. Esme, Claudia and I will collectively cast the spells needed so we can't undo it unless we all agree. Fair enough?" he asked.

I nodded. Esme and my aunt nodded, as well.

"No! That's crap. You can't touch Ryan!" she shouted.

"Oh, yes, we can. Or I could hand him over the South Carolina police, along with his confession. Would you like that better?" I asked.

"We could turn you over to the police for that, too," Iris said. "Murderer."

"Like I'd stay in jail. If I can kill someone with a remote spell, I'm obviously really strong. So, I'll overcome whatever you do to me." She struggled against Esme's binding spell.

I stepped up to the bratty little witch. "I really thought you were interesting. Your major. Your focus. It was all a lie to get into my café and my coven. To get your boyfriend back. What was the plan once you got him out of my basement? Run off and go on a killing spree?"

"No, I never wanted to kill anyone. Our plans were none of your business." She sneered at me. "He'd do anything for me. You have no idea what that's like. Poor single witch and her coffee shop with her hippie aunt and her friend who lives life like a cat more than a human. And those twins. How do you stand it? Surrounded by so many dull, boring humans. You have real powers, Claudia." She shook her head at me.

“I’ll take good humans over murderous witches any day.” I looked at Bran. “Can you contain her at home? I don’t want to put her downstairs with Ryan.”

“She won’t get away from me. See you at midnight.” He leaned over and kissed my cheek. I tried not to blush. In a flash, he and his cousin were gone.

“What was that?” Violet asked.

“Nothing. He’s forward. We had one date,” I said.

“Looks like a good one,” my aunt said.

“It was nice enough until we had to interrogate Ryan with a truth potion. Not exactly normal,” I said.

“But you’re a good team,” Esme said.

I shot her a look but shook off the scrutiny. If Bran and I worked out, we worked out. If not, we could still be good allies.

“Can we watch?” Ellen asked.

“No, Esme and I can handle Ryan. We’ll have enough witnesses and send the punishment to the council. They will no doubt approve it, but any alterations can be made quickly. Thank you, everyone, thanks for being here. It is good to know I wasn’t crazy,” I said.

“You were right, but that hunter... Vinny will want to kill him,” my aunt said.

“Well, he can’t. Even if we hand him in to the police, he wouldn’t get a death penalty. At most, it’d be manslaughter. We’ll give him a better lesson our way.” I flopped into a big chair as the coven meeting broke up.

“Your silence and support is appreciated, ladies,” Esme said.

Iris and Violet stood in front of me. “That girl is crazy,” they said.

“I don’t want you spending too much time with her.” I rubbed my forehead.

“Is she going to be free to roam around?” my aunt asked.

“Bran and I have to finalize the punishment. Now, we know she killed Mrs. O’Conner, as well. How could she be so reckless with her spells?” I sighed.

“I’m glad to see you’re working with Bran.” Esme smiled.

The twins grinned. My aunt nodded. So much for my private life staying private until I figured out if there was any future in it.

Chapter 23

Esme and I arrived around nine p.m. with Belle as another witness. She was a gypsy witch but a powered witch nonetheless and independent of my coven. Ryan was less cooperative, but he couldn't do much against our magic bindings. A young handsome man answered the door. A butler? Really?

"We're here to discuss the sentences of the criminals," I said.

"Miss Crestwood, please. Esmeralda." The butler bowed.

"This is Belle Andrews," I informed him.

"The master is in his library. The other criminal is being held in the solarium." He led the way.

We all followed and found ourselves in the solarium. Serena was still immobilized and shouted against her invisible bonds. Esme moved Ryan next to her so they could see each other, but both were bound in their own spells so they couldn't touch or even hear each other.

Ryan's anguish was clear, but they needed to understand what they had done was wrong. There were consequences, even if the human world couldn't prove it or understand what happened. They called Mrs. O'Conner's death natural. That gave them peace. But we couldn't let these two get away with their crimes.

I turned and the butler was gone.

"I feel underdressed," Belle said.

"Don't worry about it." I was in jeans and a sweater. Nothing fancy about me.

"Ladies, welcome," Bran said as he walked in.

The guy was still in a suit and looked at ease. Dark hair, dark eyes, and handsome features—I could do worse. He was definitely worth spending time with. Friends or more, who knew, right now

"We need to talk about what punishment we'll hand down," Esme said.

"Agreed. Well, my cousin's parents are very concerned that she deceived them. They won't be back until next year but have trusted me to hand down whatever sentence I see fit and to oversee her custody. I'd like to hear your thoughts on punishment first," he said.

I studied the cocky girl. "Bind her powers for three years. No magic. Restrict her to school, your home, and a charity place to volunteer and other acceptable close-by places only. Make her volunteer. Make her go to school. Coven meetings should be mandatory. Continue her work with Esme so she

understands spells before she can use them, again. All of that for a year and then assess if she is ready for more freedom to see if she can be trusted and has learned.”

“Three years without magic?” an older man asked as he walked up.

“Ladies, my cousin Vern—a vampire,” Bran introduced.

“Hello,” I said. “Yes, three years. One for every human she killed. In the third year, maybe we could restore some basic powers to see if she uses them responsibly. But she’d need to be closely monitored. Like parole.”

“Magical parole.” Belle smirked.

“She has to be held accountable,” Esme said.

“Did I miss anything?” a handsome young man asked as he entered.

“My other cousin, Harry. He’s a werewolf,” Bran said.

“Claudia, Esme, and Belle. All witches,” I said.

Harry bowed and smiled. He locked eyes with me for a split second, and I felt an odd tingle but then Harry stared at Belle.

“I’m a gypsy witch,” Belle said.

“What about the hunter? He killed the werewolf. That’s okay. But two humans?” Vern shook his head at the trapped man.

“Killing werewolves isn’t okay,” Harry said. “There are wolf runs and natural packs where wolves can run free from humans and hunters. He could’ve captured the werewolf and relocated him to a sanctuary,” Harry said.

“As long as they don’t attack humans, witches, or wizards—that’s fine,” I agreed.

Esme cleared her throat to keep us on track. “I think Ryan needs at least two years of imprisonment. He knew his job, and that it wasn’t a free pass to accidentally kill anyone. Even if it was involuntary manslaughter, there have to be consequences. But he and his girlfriend were on a spree of some sort. He was impressing her with his werewolf hunting skills.”

“Imprison him where? Not in my basement,” I said.

“We have a dungeon,” Bran replied.

“A legit, guarded dungeon?” I asked.

“Would you like the tour? We have time before midnight,” Bran offered.

“I would,” Belle said.

“I’ll go on faith, for now. I prefer to keep an eye on them,” Esme said.

“I’ll stay,” Vern said.

Harry offered his arm to Belle. She blushed and stuck near me.

“I’ll go, too,” I said.

We followed the men.

“I’m sorry,” Belle said and looked at me.

“No need,” Harry said.

“Harry, I’m not sure how much you know about the gypsy culture. Belle is a Romanichal Gypsy, and unmarried women aren’t allowed socialize with single men. Certainly not touch them. Most girls marry very young, but Belle is a rebel. She pursued a career and helps people, but her reputation is still important,” I said.

“How fascinating. How are you two related?” Harry asked.

“My aunt married a gypsy man. Belle is his second cousin. We became friends as kids. I’m a bad influence.” I grinned.

“No, you saved me. I would’ve run off rather than marry young. You showed some of the gypsies that Gorger girls could be good and close to the family and have a job.” She loosened her grip on my arm and walked a bit faster.

“Gorger?” Harry asked.

“Non-gypsy,” I filled in.

“I can’t wait to see this gypsy wedding,” Bran said.

“You’re bringing him?” Belle asked.

“Why not? He’s never been to one. It’ll be a cultural experience,” I said.

“He’ll think we’re trash,” Belle whispered.

“No, he won’t. He’ll ask a lot of questions. Don’t be ashamed of where you came from. You don’t have to marry a gypsy, but you are one.” I patted her arm and walked ahead with Bran.

The dungeon lived up to its name. Dark and cold, the walls were rock, and there were no windows. Bran conjured a light ball, and I did the same as we wound through the corridors. Finally, a large room opened. There were cells separated by rock walls. A man stood taller when he saw Bran.

“A guard, even,” I said.

“I employ a few vampires myself. My family is old and reclusive. We aren’t perfect or sweet. Humans fear us. But we are generally good. The few exceptions who are disturbed or evil are housed here,” Bran said.

Belle and Harry walked along. I hung back.

“You don’t want to see?” Bran asked.

“Your family isn’t a freak show. I’m sorry you have to do this to any of them,” I said.

“At least look at an empty cell to be sure you’re okay with Ryan staying here for two years. We don’t deny quality food, clean water, or health care. Entertainment and luxuries are restricted,” Bran said.

I walked by a full cell to an empty one.

“I see it. I see the animal. Get it out!” the old man shrieked from the occupied cell.

Harry waved it off. “He doesn’t like werewolves. He has the sight, but no control over his mind or mouth.”

I nodded and looked in an empty cell. It was dark and gloomy, but the bed looked fairly comfortable. There was a small desk along with a sink and toilet in one corner. It wasn’t overly

cramped.

“What do they do for showers? What do they do all day?” I asked.

Bran smiled. “If they cooperate, there is a shower down the hall. If they try to run, they can use the sink in their cell plus soap and a washcloth. There is a drain in the floor. It’s set up so we don’t take them out if they can’t be trusted. “

I nodded.

“As for what they do all day? They can request books from the library. But I think Ryan would benefit from some looped video rehab,” Harry said.

“Rehab?” Belle asked.

“There are people who want peace between werewolves and humans. To stop the hunting and create a better dialogue,” Harry replied.

“They should only be hunting werewolves who murder and refuse to take measures during the full moon. We have potions or confinement,” I said.

“Some werewolves want an island to themselves. Just werewolves. So they can roam free and enjoy the shift. Fight, play, and mate,” Harry said.

“Mate?” Belle said softly.

I smiled at Bran. “I’ve no objection to that sort of thing. I can’t imagine all werewolves would want that. Plenty have human family, as well as were family.”

“But is this acceptable?” Bran asked as he gestured to the empty cell.

“I think so. Thank you for offering to house them,” I said.

“Shouldn’t Serena get some time down here too?” Belle asked.

I nodded. “I think so. Even just a week or two to scare her.”

“Her parents wouldn’t like it,” Harry said.

“Tough. They’ve entrusted her to me. I think a week down here will scare her. Show her how bad the punishments could be.” Bran checked his watch. “We should go up.”

We made our way back to the solarium. An old wizard stood before the two criminals.

“Ladies, my great uncle Dutch. He is the family peacekeeper. He’ll record the crimes, the punishments, and take it to the witch’s council for approval.”

Dutch bowed. “The reading of the charges.”

As he droned on, I looked up at Bran.

“What?” he whispered.

“That kiss on the cheek at the coven meeting. Now, people think things,” I whispered back.

“Good. It was important to stake a claim before the other men in my family met you. My brother is dashing. My cousin is handsome.” He nodded.

“And Vern is eternal?” I teased.

He grinned. “Exactly. You can end things whenever you like, but I won’t have any men in my family moving too fast and snapping you up while I’m taking my time.”

“I’m not one to rush things either. But, at the wedding, you will meet my uncle who has heard about that kiss,” I warned him.

“I’ll handle him,” he said.

“Gypsy men fight dirty. A lot. Just so you know.” I was trying to find a way to say be on your guard without making it sound like I thought he couldn’t handle a fight. Of course, he could; he was a wizard.

“I can handle myself without magic if I have to. But I don’t intend to fight with anyone,” he said.

“Good plan,” I giggled.

“Shh,” Esme whispered.

“Now, the accused have a chance to speak briefly. To beg for mercy or deny a charge. First, Serena.” The old wizard waved at her.

The soundproofing came off.

“Please let me go. Bran, please. They were accidents. Things happened too fast at the mall. I was scared. And I got the spell all wrong. I never meant to kill anyone. But I need to learn, not be punished,” Serena cried.

The old wizard waved at her, and her voice was silenced. Then, Ryan could be heard.

“Let me out of here. You have no authority over me!” he shouted.

“Want to be handed over to the police? You still have warrants. You can go into the prison system,” I said.

He glared at me and began yelling threats.

The old wizard waved at Ryan to silence him.

“Both of you have been accused of ending human lives when your lives were not in imminent danger. That is illegal in the magical and human realm. The proposed penalty for each of you is as follows...”

The old wizard read over what we’d discussed.

“You’re sure you want to go to a gypsy wedding?” I whispered in Bran’s ear.

“I want to see you in a fancy dress and have a new cultural experience. The Equinox Ball will be fun for you,” he whispered back.

True, it was a fair trade of experiences. I couldn’t wait to see his face when he saw the brides’ dresses.

“If anyone present does not agree that these consequences are fair, please declare your objection, now,” the old wizard said.

The silence was clear.

“The sentences are passed. There will be three members who cast the spell so it can’t be undone by one person.” The old wizard waved us up.

Bran, Esme, and I focused on Serena first. The energy from our three spells wove red and green lights around the girl. We finished with her and worked on Ryan. Blue lights zipped around him until

the spell took full hold.

The wizard had us sign a scroll and then disappeared.

“That was quick,” Belle said.

The old wizard returned. “Approved.”

“That was quicker.” Harry laughed.

“No objections?” Esme asked.

“No, they did think you could be harder on the girl. A week in the dungeon could be a month instead, but they left that to family discretion because she is under twenty-one. I’ll put this in the family files. We take custody of Ryan and Serena.” The old wizard bowed to us. “Ladies.”

He disappeared and so did the two criminals.

I felt odd. Ryan had been in my basement for so long that I felt responsible. Part of it was relief, but I also felt like I’d failed to fully understand who I had living in my building. He could’ve killed vampires or hurt humans. I was lucky it wasn’t worse.

“You okay?” Belle asked.

“Fine. Just glad it’s over. Justice for Mrs. O’Conner and those humans at the mall.” I sighed.

“We have a midnight snack set up in the small library. Tea, cheese, crackers, cake, and wine,” Harry said.

“I could use a bite,” Belle said.

Esme stared at the empty space where Ryan had just been.

“You okay?” I asked her.

“I need to see the dungeon, now,” she said.

Vern nodded. “I’ll take her. You kids go get a snack.”

We walked into the small library, which was a huge library to me, and there were footmen dressed to serve. I wanted the full tour.

A girl could get used to servants and a dungeon.

EPILOGUE

The new reality of no one in my basement and no murder to solve set in. It was nice. But now, I had a secret to uncover. The cousins played dumb. I hadn't worked up the courage to confront my aunt, just yet. We had a gypsy wedding to attend, and she always felt out of place there. Of course, Vinny's family all wished he'd married a gypsy girl.

Esme wouldn't discuss the secret, at all. The truth potion had put up a wall between us.

So, I went to the gypsy connection. Belle and her sister Vivian both worked; they lived with and supported their widowed mother. Their dad had been pretty awful so no one in the community mocked them for being old maids. They were both gorgeous girls who could've been married as teens but they didn't want to end up with a guy who was nice but turned into a drunk or worse later on. I couldn't blame them. Uncle Vin had been called to help handle their father when he'd gotten out-of-control drunk. I'd overheard some of those stories when Vin told Aunt Mandy about it.

The gypsy sisters and I met for lunch at a burger place near their employment. Vivian worked in the morgue at the hospital. She kept the zombie population down by pushing a needle into each deceased person's ear until she hit brain matter. No one noticed, but a zombie outbreak? We'd notice that!

"Belle said Bran is hot and rich," Vivian said.

"He is. And he's nice. Ethical. Smart. So far, he's nice. You'll meet him at the wedding," I said.

We placed our orders, and I sipped a strawberry lemonade.

"What did you want to talk about if not Bran?" Belle asked.

"Did you want to talk about Harry?" I asked.

"Harry?" Vivian asked.

"A werewolf cousin of Bran's. He flirted with your sister," I said.

"He was nice, but we didn't talk or anything, really. I don't even know what he does for a living," she said.

"The Killeans own a lot of businesses. I can find out. Ask Bran at the wedding," I said.

"We can't approach a single guy," Belle said.

Vivian rolled her eyes. "He'll be with Claudia in a public place. Stop being so old-fashioned."

"What did you want to talk about?" Belle asked.

“Fine. I found out from Esme somehow that there is a secret about me or my childhood that I don’t know. No one will tell me.”

“Truth potion?” Viv suggested.

“I tried it. Whatever promises or vows they made to others are stronger than a truth potion. You two haven’t heard anything?” I asked.

Belle shook her head. “Your parents were killed by a werewolf. Vin saved you and raised you.”

“And my dad wasn’t a gypsy hunter?” I asked.

“No, we understood he came to it from a family attack. That’s how Gorger hunters usually get into the work. They were attacked or someone they loved was attacked, and they get in the hunter network. They tend to be loners. It’s a bit unusual. It was said he was friends with Vin. A responsible hunter who respected gypsy culture. They ended up married to sisters, so they were family. Vin is the one who took the heat for not marrying gypsy. Everyone spoke wonderfully about your mother. We were told to be very nice to you because of what you went through,” Viv said.

“Viv,” Belle said.

“What? She wants the raw truth of what we were told. What we know. We weren’t allowed to play with a lot of non-gypsy kids, but you needed friends and people who weren’t going to ask questions about your dead parents. I know your aunt homeschooled you for a year until you were ready to go back. Then, you seemed to be okay. You came out of the fog.” Viv smiled.

“Thanks for telling me the truth. Did anyone say it was my dad’s fault or blame anyone? My mother always liked the darker side of things. She wanted to help everyone. And got too close to the weres and vamps, some said,” I added.

“You do, too. But you have a system to help them and bring them to you. You don’t go into the dark dens of a traditional werewolf pack or visit a vampire nest. You learned from her. None of it was her fault. Or your fathers. Or Vin’s. There is a reason for hunters, no matter what Harry said,” Belle said.

“Harry doesn’t believe in hunters?” Viv asked.

“We didn’t get to talk about it much,” Belle said.

“Some weres think they should be free to shift and be natural in certain areas. Boundaries set up. Hunt smaller animals. Like a wolf would. I don’t know how I feel about that. Or how it could be monitored. But if someone said I couldn’t practice magic because I lived in a human world and had humans in and out of my coffee shop, I’d fight that,” I admitted.

“As long as they don’t kill humans. There is a reason gypsies have been tasked to be hunters for generations. Our men can handle the dark side and a good fight. If they want to hunt deer or bunny rabbits, fine. Not humans,” Viv said.

“Agreed,” I said.

“We can ask around,” Bell said. “See if Mom or anyone knows anything. They won’t tell you but us, maybe they will.”

“Thanks so much. A death where hunters and werewolves were involved, someone in the gypsy

community will know. But who knows what the secret is? It might be something totally different.” I sighed.

We sat back as our food was delivered. I grabbed the ketchup.

“I want to hear more about Harry,” Viv said.

The look on Bran’s face as we waited in the church said it all. The gypsy girls were dressed to party and the men to drink. Bran and Vin were the only two men in full suits other than the grooms, but that was okay.

I was in a silver dress that shimmered, but it was nothing like what the gypsy brides would be wearing.

“I feel like I’m lacking some rhinestones,” he said to me.

My cousins laughed. “Men don’t bling. Not like this.” Iris pointed as the doors opened.

The brides couldn’t fit down the aisle at the same time. Ten-foot wide fully hooped skirts narrowed to tiny waists. The bling was on the bodices, and both girls wore crowns. One dress was done in red, the other green. The trains went on and on.

“Those dresses have to weigh more than they do,” Bran said in my ear.

I nodded. “They’ll change for the dancing. The trains Velcro off.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” he admitted.

After the ceremony, we went to the hall adjacent to the church, and the bling only got bigger. The cakes had sparkles. The brides danced in the full gowns and cut the cake before disappearing. They came back in short skirts with bling all over.

The dancing kicked up and so did the drinking. Bran ditched his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to look less formal.

“Why are the young girls only dancing with each other?” he asked.

“Because if they dance with boys their fathers will kill them. Until they’re out and looking for husbands, there’s no contact with boys. Some girls break the rules, but this family is strict and old school.” I smiled.

“The dancing is very suggestive.” Bran looked at me instead of the dance floor. “They’re very young.”

“Gypsy kids are never kids. The little boys are little men, and the girls are women, always looking to get married. It’s their culture. But I’m glad I can dance with you and not get in trouble.” I pulled him on the dance floor.

We weren’t wild, but we did get noticed. The brides came over and dragged me to the DJ.

“You have to sing something,” the red bride said.

“No, no, it’s your wedding. You’re the stars.” I didn’t show off my singing voice much. Never outside the family. But they knew I could carry a tune well enough.

“I have to see this,” Bran said.

“It’s our day. You have to,” insisted the green bride.

“Fine.” I took the microphone from the DJ. “The song from *Pulp Fiction* about the teenage wedding.”

He gave me a thumbs up.

I walked to the front. “At the request of both beautiful brides, I’m going to sing something. Get ready to show off your twisting skills...”

The crowd went wild, and then, even the little kids were twisting like pros. I knew my audience. I couldn’t sing as low as Chuck Berry, but I saw my aunt and uncle get up and dance, as well as my cousins. Bran stood at the back and grinned as everyone got lost in the music. I wasn’t a gypsy witch, but I loved my gypsy cousins, and no one could party like they could. I hoped the teenage weddings would last, and Bran and I might have a shot, too.

For a few minutes, I was lost in song and forgot about the secret. Tomorrow. I’d get back on that investigation tomorrow.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

Hi! Welcome to the world of strong witches, hot wizards, were, vamps, gypsies and more! If you enjoyed Pick Your Potion, please grab book 2: Spells to Die For: http://cheryldragon.com/ccdragon/?page_id=194

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CC loves creating characters, especially amateur sleuths who solve crimes in their spare time. A coffee and chocolate addict who loves fast cars, she's still looking for a hero who likes to cook and clean...so she can write more!

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ECHO DOWN

BRADON NAVE

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ECHO DOWN

Even a militia of angry immortals will not keep her from rescuing him.

Tucked away within a peculiar mountain, the small Kingdom of Evrastill is home to an elite society of immortals. Carrie, one of the Society's younger members, has endured several challenges during her days within the Kingdom.

As other members enjoy individual skills of the mind and body...Carrie has yet to acquire her skill—her magic.

Although disheartening, her lack of magic is not Carrie's primary concern. Many years before, the treacherous actions of the Society's Council led to the separation of Carrie and the object she valued above all else—Charlie.

The decades passed, leaving Carrie unaged, but changing the views and minds of those of the Council. When Carrie's plea to collect him is finally obliged, even a militia of angry immortals will not keep her from finally rescuing him.

The adventure sends Carrie and her immortal friends on a dangerous quest. With her eternal happiness at stake, Carrie will leverage everything to reclaim what has been taken from her, but is she too late?

When dark secrets and enemies are revealed, only then will Carrie learn the identity of her gift... her magic. It has been lurking within her...aching for the opportunity to be unleashed.

Chapter 1

Their voices, crisp as the autumn air filling his lungs, soothed his soul—their boisterous praise cut through the slight gusts of wind and chattering birds.

With guides on either side assisting his balance and maintaining his stability, he walked blindly toward the cheerful singing.

As always, there were no faces; no shapes or shadows.

“Happy birthday to you! Haaappy birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear, Charlie...happy birthday to you!”

Heavy clapping had him taking the hand of one of the assistants, grasping it appreciatively. Today was his day.

“Charlie, we’re going to help you to your chair over here and then we’re going to help you blow out all eighty-eight candles on this cake.”

Shuffling over the foliage, the smell of fallen leaves was quickly overpowered by sweet icing and a freshly baked cake.

Securely seated in his chair, he offered his audience a smile—assuming they were either smiling back or ignoring him.

“What’s your wish going to be this year, Charlie?” The cool palm of her hand cupped his face—comforting and soft.

“I have all I need. Thank you.”

“What then, do you want this year?”

Flooding and rampant, the thoughts poured thickly over him—so much—too much. “I’m tired. I wish to rest.”

“Right now? You want to rest right now?” The voice to his right was Jessica’s, a sweet caretaker from the home.

“No, Jessica. Right now, I’d like a piece of that cake you all have for me.”

“You heard the man, let’s not keep him waiting.”

Forks on porcelain and talk of something called Pinterest had him longing for the impromptu celebration to cease so that he might retire to a cool quilt and frumpy lounging attire.

Cake consumed and small talk had, he made his way across the yard on the arm of Jessica.

Thick and warm, the familiar scents of the nursing home were a stark difference to the fresh fall breeze outdoors. Down the hall, he made his way, past the mindless ramblings of Minerva Hopkins. Past the broadcasts of Fox News and CNN—and to his own piece of the universe. Escorted to his rocking chair, he thanked his attendant and sent her on her way.

The sweetest moments of the day were those spent drifting to daydreams. It'd been decades since he'd lost his eyesight, yet when he dreamt, each color was vividly stunning—each scene a perfectly orchestrated memory from another world.

Sounds of the hallway—medication rounds and the corralling of Minerva, chased his slumber—leaving him rocking and irritated.

Eighty-eight years...and for what? Even Minerva had visitors on Sundays—busy grandchildren with poor manners. He had nothing. There were no visitors, no framed faces for him to reference. There were no long-winded tales of younger years that he could reminisce on. There was only his chair, his dreams, and the comfort of knowing that he was organic in nature, and would soon drift eternally.

Certainly, there would be no cake for him next year, but rather a memorial brick with his name on it near the large pond the other residents spoke of and were so fond of.

Extraneous cruelty would be walking into yet another worthless year's celebration. No more birthdays...enough. Surely, an old man can rest—dream and be left in peace indefinitely.

His quilt to his chest, the chair rocked softer. His head tilted backward, he envisioned he were eleven and leisurely swaying with the winds from a tire swing—and then he was fading.



“Mr. Jacobson?” The gruff voice was Tony's, and but two feet from him. “Charlie it's time to get in bed. I have your stuff ready for you if you wanna—”

“You wake me up so I can sleep? You idiot!”

“We've had this discussion, Jacobson. You sleep in your bed through the night. I don't make the rules I just follow them.”

His nightly routine typically left him feeling undignified and helpless. Finally dressed in comfortable, loose-fitting sweats, he pulled his comforter to his chin.

“You want this light on or off, sir?”

A deep sigh and he was turning from his back to Tony. “You seriously are a moron. Get the hell out of my room before my foot makes its way right up your backside.”

“Goodnight, Jacobson.”



Morning was typically announced by cardinals just outside the floor-level window, or Minerva, screeching for buttermilk and a bus ticket.

Inhaling deeply through his nostrils, he searched his thoughts mercilessly for some fragment of a nightly venture during his slumber—no dreams were there to recollect.

“Damn you...damn everything.” Wiping his tired eyes, he found himself angry...chronically angry for waking up each morning to nothingness.

The day would be long—just like the day before it and the day before it. The frustrations associated with longing to be free of it all and having the ability to fade away just out of reach was disheartening.

Once more, he maneuvered free from his bedding—feet to the cold floor—he found his house shoes, and cautiously made his way back to the chair. If there were no dreams to recall, perhaps he could have a few moments of serenity to shake the night from his bones and enjoy the cardinals.

“Hey there, Charlie! How are you this morning?” Jessica’s voice sliced through the atmosphere, startling him just as he reached his chair.

“I’m fine. I’m going to sit a spell and—”

“Oh no, you silly goose. We’ve got walking to do, and breakfast to eat, and fellowship at nine and then some sweet junior-high girls are coming all the way from—”

“I don’t care!” The force of his grasp on the back of the chair had his fingers aching. “I...I don’t care about any of that right now, Jessica. Right now, I’d like you to leave me be.”

“Well aren’t we just a grumpy Gus? Where are your walking shoes, boy? Do you need to use the bedside commode before we walk? Two rounds today...I know you can do it. Just let me grab your cane.”

Chapter 2

Poised and statuesque, she stood among the trees outside the entrance of Evrastill. The light above her tickled the ground below, only fragments penetrated through the thick branches.

No grand grates or elaborate fixtures surrounded the entrance to the Kingdom. A society of secrecy, the tunneled opening to the mountain was humble in appearance.

For hours, she'd stood anchored, awaiting the Council's decision. Surely with the upheaval and recent scandal amongst Council leadership, her request would be approved—she asked for nothing more than other society members possessed currently.

Rustling in the foliage captured her peripheral gaze. A small squirrel scurried cautiously about the forest floor until it reached her feet and then up her body—sitting on her shoulder, it removed the nut from its cheek and consumed it carelessly from the safety of her watch.

She paid little attention to its actions—her mind consumed with the situation at hand. Would her eternity be blissful—all she'd ever begged for, or would she remain hollow and wandering ever-after?

“Why do you stand alone, Carrie?”

“Nyrobie, I felt you on my thoughts.”

Nyrobie appeared from the cave's entrance and walked to Carrie.

“I didn't mean to intrude. You had me concerned.”

“You're my truest friend, Nyrobie. I've nothing to hide, my thoughts are yours to examine as you see fit.”

Facing her, Carrie noticed an uncontrollable smile curling the lips of her friend. Nyrobie pushed one of the many small, waist-long, black, braids behind her ear.

“Tell me, Nyrobie, have you been meddling in the minds of other members today?”

“Perhaps.”

“Nyrobie!”

A full smile cascaded across Nyrobie's face, her dark complexion speckled with bits of sunlight from above. “The Council will approve your request, my friend.”

The squirrel clung tightly to her shoulder as Carrie reached for a nearby tree, supporting herself

as she stared toward the ground. “You’re certain? Full approval?”

“It shall be unanimous. They’ll summon you shortly. Attempt to appear surprised.”

“Nyrobie...” Carrie extended her arms, embracing her friend as tears fled her eyes. “All this time...I’ve been waiting...all I want is my right to happiness.”

The squirrel continued nibbling from Carrie’s shoulder as they embraced.

“I know, Carrie. Let’s go get it.”

“You will be with me, Nyrobie?” She gently pushed away, examining her expression.

Nyrobie’s eyes widened as her head cocked and lowered. “I’m always with you. I’ll be with you a million years from now.”

“It may be dangerous. We’ll be so far from Evrastill, far from the Society—”

“Away from Evrastill and the Society? I’m completely sold. And I get to help my best friend obtain something as infinite as time.”

“I love you, Nyrobie.”

“And I you, Carrie. Let’s go. Councilman Aglet shall summon you momentarily.”

Carrie gently placed the chubby squirrel on the ground and followed Nyrobie into Evrastill’s entrance. The average human eye might enter the cave and look upon a damp and dangerous dwelling—nothing worth more than a curious glance prior to exiting.

Typically, any human entering Evrastill did so accompanied by a Society member. Thrill-seeking, cave-exploring humans were rarely heard of—and in the history of Evrastill, only three of them had been rescued by Society members before they perished in the vast underground system.

Deep within the mountain, the faint-blue glow of millions of crystals embedded in the mountain’s inner walls lit the path as Carrie and Nyrobie continued toward their home. The closer they got, the brighter the ambience became.

Exiting the tunnel, they looked down on the small kingdom...Evrastill...or to some, sanctuary. The Kingdom was comparable to the size of a small Midwestern town. The population was 3,776, and had been for decades.

The light cascading from the mountains’ inner walls allowed for vegetation and several streams flowed from walls and around the trees and modest stone-comprised homes.

They made their way down the stairs etched in the wall’s side until their feet met lush, green grass.

“There you two are.”

“Jerrek.” Nyrobie’s arms lifted, welcoming the approaching Jerrek’s embrace and kiss. Jerrek too, was a loyal friend. He and Nyrobie had been joined seventy-six years prior—their bond was as solid as the mountain around them.

Tall, broad, and muscular, Jerrek’s gifts were impressive. The ability to lift a one-thousand-pound boulder with one’s physical being was something most any member the Society could achieve—Jerrek had mastered the ability to do such wonders with his mind. His strength and loyalty secured his

place as a future councilman within the Society.

“I hear you’ve been summoned, Carrie.” Jerrek stepped to Carrie, offering her a friendly kiss on the cheek.

“Indeed, I have, Jerrek.”

“Splendid. I’ve been wanting to venture out for something other than solitude.”

Carrie looked to her friends—both side-by-side. “Jerrek...you will accompany us?”

His boisterous laugh had his head flailing backward. “You ask silly things, Carrie. Next to Nyrobie and my parents, you are my dearest friend. You think what, you and my bride should leave Evrastill on an epic adventure while I wait here for your return? Besides...he’s my friend too. I’m going.”

“Thank you, Jerrek!” Carrie embraced him.

“Enough you two. If a Council informant sees your actions they might know I’ve pried into Aglet’s thoughts.”

As they decoupled, Jerrek lifted Nyrobie in his arms, cradling her like a child. “You’re a fool to think he doesn’t know already. The man has been breathing for nearly four-thousand years. I’m sure he’s well aware when his ideas are accessed.”

Setting Nyrobie down, he kissed her atop the head. “As well, I’m sure he was expecting it.”

“Aglet is kind, Nyrobie. The current Council Leadership will reunite our kingdom.”

“I’m sure, Carrie. Let’s hope that Aglet is kind when you stand before him. Here comes his assistant to fetch you now.” Nyrobie smiled as the three of them began walking in the direction of the Council-Hall. The building was the pinnacle of the Society. It stood as the place of judgment, union among Society members, and more recently it housed the heated evisceration of the Council.

For centuries, the Council was comprised of twelve elders—all of which were set on maintaining and enforcing a stringent code of existence on Society members.

Carrie embraced the majority of her kingdom’s laws. Many of their beliefs acted as a cornerstone for their very being. Some beliefs, however, were as archaic as the Kingdom itself.

Walking into the solid-white ivory Council Hall, she controlled her pace—her head held high as she was escorted in front of the elders. No Society member could sit on the Council prior to his or her one-thousandth year. However, by human standards, none of the Council members appeared any older than Carrie.

She stood in front of the twelve members, all robed and seated behind the historic ivory-white table.

“Carrie, my dear. You’re well?” Councilman Aglet stood. Piercing-blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair gave him an intimidating appearance which demanded respect.

“I am, Councilman.”

“Good. We shall proceed.” He took his seat. “For centuries, our society has existed in peace and harmony beneath the war-torn world belonging to mankind. Their cruelty is evident in bounds. Our

Society has prospered, not because we have coexisted, but because we have so staunchly opposed that.”

His words had Carrie’s heart racing, believing the Council would indeed deny her request.

“Through the years our values have kept our people grounded and gracious for the gifts we’ve been given. As well, we have learned through our attempts to protect the human species, that their people aren’t entirely cruel. In fact, along with sharing similarities in physical features, our people share many of other qualities as well. Our society must understand that the average human enjoys a brief life, and during that life, they are young and viable for but a brief portion. It is impossible, by our standards, for humans to gain the maturity and knowledge needed to become anything more on an individual level in such a fleeting stretch of time. This, however, is not about that...not entirely. This is about a cultural shift taking place within our society. Each of our unified members are unified only because they are bound by something no words can accurately portray. Once unified, those couples are by one another’s side indefinitely. Carrie, if you would have come to this council one-thousand years ago, claiming to have not only bonded to a human, but asking permission to comeingle and unify...you would have been executed. Even a year ago, you’d have been laughed out of the Hall.”

He smiled at her, her respirations slowed.

“But as we move forward and advance, we must look at these situations individually. Carrie, you have proven yourself of a sound mind and a genuine asset to the Society. Without further delay, Carrie, do you understand completely what you are asking of the Council?”

Her dry throat was nearly incapable of producing the words, “I do.”

“You understand that a union of such will be forever lacking reproduction?”

“I do.”

“You understand that this human will be expected to follow the laws of the Society, just as a member would, and will be held so accountable?”

“I do.”

“You understand this human may never leave Evrastill once he enters.”

“Yes, Councilman.”

“Carrie, it has been decided by the Council that your request is to be granted in full. You may leave Evrastill with an experienced party of your choosing, collect your human, restore him, and bring him back to Evrastill where he will be offered immortality...and when you are ready...you will be unified.”

No longer able to maintain her composure, she kneeled to the floor, her trembling hand covering her mouth as her gaze remained downward.

“You will be held personally responsible for this mission, Carrie. Should anything go array, you will stand before us again.”

She only nodded—her voice had escaped her as her tears continued.

“You will be the second Society member to make such a request, Carrie. Councilman Andre can

attest that such a union has worked well in his favor.”

Carrie looked to Andre as she arose. He merely nodded. Councilman Andre was a monumental influence on the movement within the Society to replace several Council members. He was also the first to become unified with a human...Elinor, a woman he rescued from the surrounding tunnels nearly 186 years prior. Elinor, Joseph, and Clark were teens when they were rescued and imprisoned for nearly fifty years until they were finally offered sanctuary within the Society. They were initially shunned as they possessed no extraordinary skills, but because humans do not age within Evrastill, the Society eventually accepted them after nearly one hundred years. It was obvious that Andre had bonded to Elinor even while she was imprisoned. Now they were unified, and his pioneering efforts had made it possible for Carrie to do the same.

“Council, I appreciate your acceptance of my request. You have my full support and loyalty. I understand the risks and will accept any consequences that may stem from this mission.”

“Very well, Carrie. You may be off on your mission.”

“I may leave now, Councilman Aglet?” Carrie stared in disbelief.

“Of course, my dear. I understand there may be some...time constraints.”

“Yes...thank you. Thank you all so much.”

“That is all, Carrie.”

Chapter 3

She sat solemnly by the creek behind her father's home. She arose from the soft earth beneath her as her father approached. His smile was tired—as were his eyes. He appeared riddled with worry.

“You look beautiful, Carrie.”

“You look fetching yourself, Father.”

As he stood by her he turned to the water. “What if I retrieved him, Carrie?”

Looking to her father, she found herself momentarily at a loss for words. “Father...you know I must do this. I'm bonded to him.”

“Carrie, you are my daughter. If anything happens to you...”

Taking his hand in hers, she pulled him closer. “Father, you know the pain of losing the one you're bonded too. If I do not go to him, I too will live with that pain for all eternity. I can't continue on without him.”

“Carrie...I have accepted whom you have bonded to. If you bring him home safely—”

“When I bring him home safely, Father.”

“When...you bring him home I will honor and respect him as your unified partner. I only fear for your well-being while you're up there.”

“Father, I am eighty-eight years old.”

“Yet all they'll see when they look at you is an eighteen-year-old human female...beautiful and vulnerable in their world. Humans...some of them, will prey on vulnerability. I've never felt more empty. Please...Carrie, let me bring him home.”

Acknowledging the fear in his eyes, she kissed his cheek. “All they would see when they looked at you is a devilishly attractive eighteen-year-old human male. And you would actually be alone...I on the other hand, will have both Nyrobie and Jerrek at my side.”

Instantly her father's expression changed slightly. “Jerrek will be with you?”

“Yes, Father. Please remember we've all been up there and among them countless times, and I've studied Humanity for ages.”

“You are always with me when you are among them. Please do not ask me not to worry. Perhaps it's selfish, but if anything happened to you...I'd be here all eternity with nothing but memories.”

“If I was always in your company while above Evrastill, I was unaware, Father. I will return to you just as I am now, but with my beautiful human man on my arm...and you’re going to love him. That’s just how it will be.”

He chuckled as he rested his hands on her shoulders. “I see your mother in you—so strong and independent. I won’t sleep until you return, but you have my blessing.”

She offered a cautious grin. “Do I, Father? Will you receive him as my eternal choice? There are members of the Society that would rather see me extinguished than unified with a human.”

“Carrie...you are bonded to him. What I think matters not.”

“It matters to me, Father. I must have your complete support, there are so many here that despise my choice, I need you now more than ever.”

His gaze turned from her and settled on the water. “When I think of him...his face, I think only of your sorrow and what the Council did to you, Carrie. I think of the equating factors and how lucky I am to have you standing here now.”

“The Council is restructured now, Father. What was once a crime is now accepted.”

“The Council is fickle, Carrie...as are humans. They may love and bond to many during their wretched one hundred years. They deceive their unifications and conspire with others.”

“Not all, Father. He has never loved another. We remain bonded regardless of time and the Council’s actions. I feel our bond just as strongly now as I did then.”

His scowl and pursed lips assured Carrie his true feelings would soon erupt. “Why? I don’t understand why a human? There are so many of your own kind here. Danny is strong and such a promising member—”

“Danny? Please do not be ridiculous. You have said it yourself, Father...one cannot choose with whom they bond...they can only let it be...forever. I must let it be forever. Please, I beg you to accept him as your son.”

His expression softened as he turned to her. “I already have...here.”

Reaching into the pocket of his silk robe, he removed a blue gem, attached to a golden chain. “Restoration.”

“You would trust me with this, Father?”

“Of course. In twelve years, you will be granted your own. You will certainly need it for the journey at hand.”

“Thank you, Father. I was certain I would have to beg Nyrobie for a drop.”

“To hold Restoration is a great responsibility, Carrie. A single drop could restore a man-depleted forest, breathe life into the dead...and heal even the most macabre wounds. Mankind has waged war for reasons far less concerning than what is in your hands. If they were to learn of your secret while you are up there, they would destroy you for it.”

“The only human I plan to engage is him, Father. This mission will be simple...my concern is the transition when I return. I feel for the next forty years or so, I will be an outcast.”

“Something you should be used to by now, my dear.” His playful smile was followed by a gentle kiss on her cheek.

“I love you, Father. I must go now.”



Standing at the base of the stone steps she and Nyrobie had descended earlier, Carrie, Nyrobie, and Jerrek faced Councilman Aglet, Carrie’s father—Tarik, and several other members of the Society wishing to see them off on their journey. The human, Clark, was among them.

Dressed in dark clothing for concealment, the only additional item she stowed was the chained gem.

“Remember your training as well as your studies. If you encounter any human other than your extraction target, be mindful of your mannerisms. Remember...if you do encounter a human they will surely assume the three of you to be young humans...naïve and easily manipulated. If you find yourself at their mercy, you must refrain from inflicting injury upon them of any sort. Be off now, and the Council wishes you the best outcome.”



Stepping out into the surrounding forest, the trio took a moment to bask in the idea of independence. Smiles overtook them, and then laughter.

“Oh, how I love you two. I couldn’t do this without you. I would be friendless without you.”

“That’s not true, Carrie...the humans, Elinor, Clark, and Joseph are quite fond of you.” Jerrek’s comment had them chuckling again.

“The cardinals will meet us at the forest’s edge. They will guide us.” With this, Carrie sprang to a low-hanging branch of a large tree, speedily hoisting herself up, she leapt from branch to branch until Jerrek and Nyrobie were no longer visible; she was at the top of the tree within seconds. Peering out over the tops of the countless trees, she spotted what appeared to be the edge of the tree line.

Looking downward, she merely stepped from the tree-top, sailing to the ground through an opening in the branches—landing with tremendous force.

“It’s this way. They’ll be there within the hour.”

In seconds the three were sprinting at speeds faster than the average sparrow can fly, bounding gracefully over downed trees and ducking proficiently under branches. They’d reached the tree line only a moment later—not a single bead of sweat adorned their brows.

“Now what?” Nyrobie looked to the sky.

“We wait for our feathered friends.” Carrie eyed the ground, sitting down.

“When we’re returning, we’ll need to take turns carrying him...otherwise we’ll be out here for

days. Even the fastest human is pathetically slow.” Jerrek smiled as he sat down.

“Yes, Jerrek. I want to get him to Evrastill as soon as possible. Humans are so fragile in their surroundings. The sooner I get him home the better.” Carrie eyed the Restoration within her palm.

“It would be absolutely awful to be human...” Jerrek stared out over the surrounding mountain range as he made his proclamation. “So weak...and the aging thing is truly alarming.”

“That’s cruel, Jerrek.” Carrie’s sharp tone had both her friends looking toward her. “They know nothing else. How blessed are we that we need not have to worry of mortality and growing decrepit? How blessed are we to not age a day after our eighteenth year? How horrible it must be to awake each morning to know that one day there will be no more mornings...one day there will be nothing. And yet they persevere and carve out an existence with the little time they have. Humans may seem cruel, fragile, and even insignificant to some...but I have seen firsthand the cruelty of our own kind. And remember, the weakling you speak of is the one I am to be unified with...for eternity.”

The look on his face expressed both his shock and regret. “Carrie...I meant nothing ill of him. I meant what I said, he is my friend. I wouldn’t be here if I felt any different.”

Her anger left quicker than it had mounted. “I’m sorry, Jerrek. I know your heart.”

“Look!” Nyrobie pointed to the sky as the high-pitched calls of hundreds of small red cardinals fell upon them. The birds circled in the air above, coaxing the trio to rise to their feet. As they did, several of the cardinals swooped down, resting on their shoulders and heads.

“Your friends are beautiful, Carrie.”

“You wear them well, Jerrek.”

“Darkness will be on us soon. We shall travel to him through the cover of night and collect him before the dawn.” Carrie’s confident confession had the other two nodding in agreement. “Let’s go.”

“Carrie...what are we to do once we reach this place? We can’t walk through the entrance and retrieve him.”

“I know that, Jerrek. If my plan seems ill-planned that’s because it is. I didn’t know what the Council would decide. To grant a Society member the right to unify with a human living amongst us is one thing...to extract, restore, and introduce one is another matter entirely. I’m not entirely sure I believe this is happening.”

“And you are certain he will agree to an eternity with you, Carrie?”

“I am, Jerrek. Our bond is strongest now. I feel he is beckoning me to him.”

“Then why the hesitation, ladies? Let’s go get the boy.”

As the cardinals took flight, the three immortals darted into the trees on the opposing side of the clearing.

Chapter 4

The earthly night was all around them—strange sounds and odd smells were quite foreign. Traveling afoot, even the swiftest human would need an entire night and the following day sprinting at full-speed and without resting to reach the destination outside the mountainous and heavily wooded area—Carrie, Nyrobie, and Jerrek were approaching their destination within an hour of departing the entrance of Evrastill—their pace matched that of the cardinals above them.

The frigid air numbed her nose—something she wasn't quite accustomed to as Evrastill was ever a consistent, comfortable temperature. Soft glow of artificial light shined through the trees as the three approached a beautifully crafted building within a clearing.

“This will be your first interaction since your forced separation, Carrie. Do you need a moment to collect yourself, or at least to rest?”

“I have rested long enough, Nyrobie. My heart has never been more alive. I feel him. He's there... just there.”

“He'll wonder why you haven't come to him sooner. He'll have countless questions—”

“I know this, Jerrek. And I'll have an infinite amount of time to explain how such actions would result in my execution or worse...his end. I had to protect him from a ruthless and corrupt Council. He'll understand...we are bonded...he will understand.”

“And you are certain he will come with you, even now?”

Carrie turned to Jerrek as a Cardinal landed on her shoulder. “Yes...of course...as I said, we are bonded.”

“She speaks the truth, Jerrek. Even now he dreams of you.” Nyrobie smiled as she pointed toward the building.

“I must go now.” Turning from her friends, Carrie prompted her feathered guide to continue its navigation to him. She methodically followed the small bird across the lawn, leading to one of several windows. Peering inside, her heart fluttered to see a withered and aged Charlie, sleeping in a rocking chair. The years he'd been so painfully close, and yet pursuing him or even stealing a glance would have resulted in disastrous consequences.

A strange anxiety had loomed since finding she would be capable of securing him, and seeing him exacerbated it.

Gently opening the window, she climbed inside. Kneeling in front of the tired, haggard human before her, she took his hand and kissed it repeatedly.

Mumbling of some sort escaped his mouth, and then he was looking about. “Who’s there?”

His voice—so different yet so much the same—nearly took her breath. It had been seventy years since she had heard it.

“Charlie.”

His eyes widened as he looked in her direction. “Who...who are you?”

“Charlie...it is I...Carrie.”

With this Charlie smiled and relaxed. “I see. I’m still dreaming.”

Wiping her tears, she kissed his worn face. “No my love...this is not a dream. I have returned for you. I am here for you now, just before your light fades, I am here to assure it shines forever.”

His shaking hand reached toward the desk in front of his chair. Opening the top drawer, he slipped his finger in the opening and slammed it partially closed with the other hand. “Ah! Dammit!”

Immediately he placed his finger in his mouth. “That...that should do it. Damned if it’s the dreams or my medications. Voices and—”

“Charlie, I’m still here.”

He stared in her direction, mouth agape.

“I’m by your side now...and I will be forever if you give me that chance.”

His lip quivering was coupled with tears pooling in either eye, he reached blindly for her face. “How? How is this possible?”

“Everything has changed now, Charlie. We can love now freely.”

“You’re really here? Carrie...you’re here?”

“I am, my love.”

He reached his weathered arms forward, embracing her. “I don’t understand...”

“I know...I know you don’t but if you give the opportunity, I promise I will make sense of it.”

He cried violently yet silently onto her shoulder. “Why have you come back now? I don’t got much...much time left and...my eyes...I can’t see your face.”

“Charlie...my beautiful love. I am here to bring you back with me. And I will be doing it with the full blessing of the Council.”

“Now? You love me even now? I’m...I’m so old and raggedy. Carrie, you can’t love me when you are you, and I’m this.”

“Charlie...I have loved you since long before the day in the lilies...your face has been all that has kept me walking. I cannot go on without you.”

“Carrie...I’m tired and close to the end of my road...”

“Your road leads home with me...and it is just the beginning...please...trust me.”

Placing her hands on either of his temples, she witnessed the color of his pupils return to the dark brown she remembered.

“Oh my god! Your face! It really is you!”

“It’s me, Charlie...”

He instantly hugged her again.

“Come back with me, my love, tonight.”

“This is real? I feel like I’m on some other planet right now.”

“I am real...and if you allow me...I will restore your earthly body to the day of our last kiss...the day in the lilies. You will then return with me to Evrastill, and with the Council’s permission...we will be unified.”

“Unified? Married?”

She chuckled. “Yes my love.”

“This don’t make no sense, Carrie. How? After they took my sight I spent years in a damned mental institution...thinkin’ I was crazy myself, and wondering if I really was insane...I went my whole life without friends or family because I couldn’t shake you off my mind. And now you just show up and say all’s well? You’re certain?”

“Charlie...I was released from Evrastill’s prison, only to be shunned by my own people. I sat silently in the shadows, just hoping something miraculous would occur before you left me...and then it did. The Council is behind me...they are behind us. All you have to do is say yes and you and I will spend eternity in one another’s arms.”

His respirations hastened as he leaned forward, his hands plastered across his forehead. “This is real. I’m...I can leave with you right now.”

“Right now.”

“And...when you say eternity—”

“You remember the humans I once told you of? They haven’t aged a day since their rescue. They’re safe from time within Evrastill. You would be safe with me...in my arms for eternity.”

“Yes...yes...” His smile was fleeting and then he was grabbing his chest, his eyes widening as he looked to Carrie.

“Charlie?”

She captured him as he fell from his chair. Hoisting him in the air, she jumped out the window with him in her arms, sprinting toward the trees.

Lying him on the ground, she produced the Restoration as Nyrobie and Jerrek were quick to approach.

“Is he dead?”

“No, Jerrek.”

“He looks dead...and he certainly doesn’t look anything like the last time I saw him.”

“Enough, Jerrek! Help me!”

As they straightened him out about the fallen leaves, Carrie gently lowered the opened gem bottle to Charlie’s chapped and bleeding lips. A single, sparkling, blue drop entered the man’s mouth.

“He’s not breathing, Carrie.”

“He’s still there, Jerrek. I feel his thoughts...he’s scared.” Nyrobie’s proclamation sent tears streaming down Carrie’s cheeks.

“I’m here, my love. Please stay with me.” Lowering to him, she kissed him, their first shared kiss in seventy years.

“Why isn’t he breathing, Nyrobie?”

“I’m unsure, Jerrek.”

Carrie rested her face to his frail chest as she cried. “You will live forever in my heart, my love. Please don’t be frightened...go peacefully if you must go...and know I’m here with you.”

“This makes no sense.” Jerrek stepped forward, producing his own gem of Restoration from around his neck. Opening it while standing above, he delivered a single drop—a brilliant streaming blue into Charlie’s mouth.

Instantly Charlie’s chest expanded, his lungs filling with air.

“Charlie!” Carrie scurried backward as the three watched the human, writhing on the ground before them.

“Can’t breathe!” he worked rigorously to tear free of his dingy night gown as Carrie arose to look down upon him. The hair on his head was rapidly darkening—thickening. The muscle tone of his exposed chest and arms developed to that of a healthy eighteen-year-old man...not a geriatric human. As he thrashed about on the ground, tossing leaves and rubbish, he suddenly ceased—belly-down on the ground, breathing rapidly.

Wide-eyed and sporting the same face she’d dreamt of for seventy years, he looked to her from the ground, completely nude with the exception of the dirt and leaves.

“Ch...Charlie?”

Instantly he was grinning...not a small smile, the largest smile she’d ever seen on his face. He sprang from the ground, examining his hands and touching his body. He then looked all around him. “I can see! I can see! And look at me!” He jumped around happily displaying his agility.

“You are beautiful, my love.”

“He certainly is.”

“Nyrobie!” Jerrek laughed as he approached Charlie. “This is the Charlie I remember. With less clothing but—”

“Jerrek!” Charlie threw his arms around Jerrek.

“It is fantastic to see you as well, my friend. And this is my beautiful bride, Nyrobie.”

Charlie smiled as he walked to her. I’m real sorry I’m naked but this has got to be the best night of my damn life. You’re getting a hug too, Ny...?

Nyrobie instantly raised her arms, welcoming his embrace. “It’s Nyrobie...and I’m pleased to meet your acquaintance. You and I will be friends until the end of time, I’m certain.”

“Oh, Charlie...” Carrie walked to him, placing her hand on his face. “I have dreamt of this night

since the day they took you from me. I'll never let you go again."

Their passionate kiss was completed by Charlie hoisting Carrie and twirling her. He set her down—staring at her face.

"I'm really going to get to wake up to this face forever? How is this not a dream?"

"I'm not a dream, my love. We've both lived through nightmares to get here. Now...I see your breath, we must clothe you for the journey home."

"I've never felt more alive, Carrie. I'm a damn whippersnapper again!"

"Charlie," Jerrek's tone was stern. "Until you are within Evrastill you are at risk of the elements of your world. You must find clothing."

"I have some hooded sweatshirts and sweatpants in my dresser. I'll just—"

"I've got it." Jerrek dashed to the open window, leaping inside.

"I forgot how fast y'all get around."

With Charlie dressed, the four walked deeper into the woods as they awaited the cardinals to reunite in number and guide them back.

Once they were a comfortable distance from the nursing home—the glow of the lights no longer visible, the four sat on the forest floor, Charlie appeared in either shock or awe—his thick brown hair was incredibly messy atop his head.

"Are you okay, Charlie?" Carrie took his hand, kissing the back of it as she sat beside him.

"I'm still waiting to wake up...I know you say I'm not dreaming...but...I'm still waiting to wake up."

"You're silly. This is only the beginning."

"And I'll stay just like how I am right here...forever?"

"Yes...the second you enter Evrastill...you will become immortal, as I am."

"And if I leave?"

"You can't. You will never be able to leave once you've entered, Charlie...none of the humans there are allowed to."

Charlie looked to the earth beneath his shoes—so many textures and colors he'd forgotten. "There's nothing here that I need anyway. I say that's a pretty good tradeoff...this shithole for forever with you."

Still waiting on the birds, Jerrek stood and lifted an enormous rock—it looked as though it could easily double his weight. Bringing it above his head he tossed it directly upward. It soared impressively, and as it came down—directly in line with Jerrek's head, it suddenly stopped—suspended in the air a few feet above him. Jerrek was manipulating it with his mind.

"That's incredible!" Charlie jumped to his feet.

"Of everything you've borne witness to tonight, you find my Jerrek's boastful showmanship to be incredible? Only moments ago you were breathless, dear Charlie." Nyrobie rolled her eyes as the rock was gently placed at her feet.

Charlie retook his seat near Carrie. “Will I be able to do that?”

“To do what?”

“To lift monstrous rocks with my nothin’ but my thoughts.”

“Of course not, Charlie.”

“Never?”

“No. You are human. Nothing has changed in that regard. And when we enter Evrastill, you will still be human...and that’s okay.”

He offered a boyish smirk—one with years of wisdom backing it. “I can see perfectly. And did you see how quickly I was able to stand up just then? And I can sit down on the ground without assistance...that’s all the super skill this man needs. Jerrek can keep his rocks.”

“The cardinals look to be ready.” Nyrobie held her hand out as several of the red birds flocked to the surrounding trees and to them.

“That’s outstanding. They’re not afraid of you.”

Carrie chuckled as she hugged Charlie around the waist. “Of course not. We’re not human.”

“You look human to me...how the hell do they know the difference?”

“We share a deeper connection with the living things of this earth.”

“There’s so much I don’t know...how is it that I have loved you for this long and there’s so much that’s unanswered?”

“There was so much I could not tell you then...I can now. We are bonded, Charlie. You felt me with you always...did you not?”

He laughed, shaking his head slightly. “Yea...or I just thought I was completely crazy.”

“Your parent’s home...is it not still near here?”

“No. I heard it finally caved. I haven’t been there since the night I lost my eyesight.”

“Tell me what happened, Charlie.”

Leaning over, he kissed her cheek and stood. “After your people found me, one of them fellas put his thumbs on my eyes...didn’t really hurt...but I couldn’t move a lick. Next thing ya know I’m feeling around for the matches...no matter how many I struck, I couldn’t see a damn thing.”

“Do no human harm...treacherous Council!” Nyrobie shook her head, visibly angered by Charlie’s story.

“I went to hollering. When my folks found me...I told them, Carrie. I told them everything. That I’d met a girl who’d live forever...that she was gonna convince her people to let me marry her...and that I was gonna leave for her land. I told them that we were caught before we could plead our case...and one of your people touched my eyes...blinded me. I’m so sorry.”

“Charlie...you needn’t apologize...we were young and frightened.”

“My folks didn’t believe a damn bit of it. Doctor had ’em convinced I’d got a hold of a bad batch of gut-rot moonshine, and that’s what took my sight. I wouldn’t let up so they took me to a damn head doctor. Once I told them my story...I had me a new address in the State Institution. Never saw my

folks again. I thought you knew I told...I thought that's why you left me all these years—"

"We need to go...something dark lingers on the air. The birds are restless." Nyrobie lifted one of the cardinals from her shoulder, cupping it in her hands to calm it.

"Yes...I feel it as well. Let us go. Charlie, climb aboard my back." Carrie motioned Charlie to climb up.

"What? Why?"

"We need to get to Evrastill tonight and at our pace, Charlie."

"I can't let you carry me like a dang—"

Jerrek moved to Charlie, swooping him up in his arms like a sack of feathers. "We need to go, my friend. There is darkness here...it is creeping now around us."

"Silence..." Nyrobie lifted her hand while looking toward the starlit sky through the autumn-thinned branches.

Carrie watched helplessly as one of her feathered friends fell from above—crashing to the earth in the clutches of a grackle. The birds screeched and squabbled about the ground. No sooner had Nyrobie separated the winged creatures and the night was thick with the calls of hundreds of descending grackles. The black birds fell heavy on the dumbstruck cardinals as pairs of battling birds fell from the atmosphere and braches, littering the ground at Carrie's feet. Jerrek sat Charlie down, standing over him in a protective manner.

"Nyrobie! Jerrek! They're slaughtering them!" Carrie's screech was a whisper in comparison to the deafening noise around them. The ground was rolling with black and red rivals, scratching and pecking to the death. "We must do something!"

Placing her hands on either side of her head, Nyrobie closed her eyes, attempting to connect—almost instantly she was shaking her head, rushing to Jerrek. She threw her hands skyward—the cardinals capable of fleeing, did so—disappearing swiftly into the darkness around them.

Carrie, Jerrek, and Nyrobie went to work, prying the creatures from one another, freeing their red-feathered companions. Hastily they decoupled the birds until all that was left were those badly injured or no longer breathing. The ground was a battlefield of tiny victims. Some clutching to life, but most of those remaining below had lost their battle completely. The majority of the birds were red, only a few grackles among them.

"Nyrobie! Why? Why would they turn on them? This is unnatural." Carrie cried out as she collected the dead birds.

"Carrie...what I saw...those birds were of an evil agenda. Something extraordinarily sinister."

"What? No...Nyrobie the grackles have assisted me many times above Evrastill. They aren't the kindest of birds, but they are not this."

"They were led by a dark hand. There is a force against us."

"We must get back." Jerrek's panic riddled his face and widened his eyes as he looked about the forest floor. "We can't be out here like this."

“We will my love...but without the guidance of the cardinals we’ll have to find another way.”

“Nyrobie...if grackles are attacking us...who is to say humans won’t as well?”

“Calm yourself, Jerrek. We will find our way home...that is not what brings me concern.”

Placing the bodies of the birds beneath a tall tree in a respectful manner, Carrie quickly approached Nyrobie. “What then concerns you, Nyrobie?”

Kneeling down to retrieve a dying grackle, Nyrobie presented it in her hand. “This...this evil was born of our own kind. I fear it awaits us upon our return.”

“No...the Council supports us, Nyrobie.”

“Indeed, Carrie. This darkness is ancient...it’s reach far more resilient and powerful than any current Councilman’s.”

“Brennus?”

“Perhaps he and the other dismissed Council members are at the helm of this barbarism.”

“No, Nyrobie. Brennus is unswayable...but he is not evil.”

“He imprisoned you for your love of Charlie. Is that not evil?”

“I cannot see his hand in this, Nyrobie.”

“Then who, Carrie? One of the former Council members is to blame for this ghastly assault and the deaths of our small friends. Who, if not Brennus, who could it possibly be? There are few members of the Society with magic this powerful. Who might turn against us?”

“I’m unsure, Nyrobie. Can you not read them?”

“Of course not. We’re much too far from home and this is much too dark. One thing is certain...we must carry onward.”

“They’re all gone.” Jerrek stepped forward holding several red birds. “The ones that didn’t escape have perished.”

“I fear that attempting to utilize the cardinals once more will only produce the same result.”

“I agree, Nyrobie. How shall we find our way home now that we’ve sent them all away?”

“Not all of them, Carrie.” A disheveled-looking Charlie appeared from near the thicket, a cardinal perched on his index finger. “I have this little guy. His wing is hurt, but I don’t think he’s about to check out or anything.”

“You saved him, Charlie?”

“Of course, Carrie. I haven’t seen colors in decades...red this beautiful should fill the sky...not the ground.”

“That is kind. And perhaps useful. The bird can be our guide from our shoulder rather than the air.”

“Can’t you just fix it like you did me?”

Jerrek produced a hardy laugh—it bellowed through the woods. “Charlie, as much as we love the woodland creatures, we must remain strategic when dispersing such magic. We’re only granted this small amount for all eternity. I can’t be entirely certain that eternity is inclusive of battles, accidents

and mishaps...but I'm willing to bet it is."

"But Jerrek...you wasted some of yours on me."

"Wasted?" Jerrek stepped to Charlie, placing his hand firmly on his shoulder. "You are my friend, Charlie. You are one of us. It was anything but wasted."

"We must go now. I feel the night is saturated in an awful dread." Nyrobie cautiously glanced through the branches and into the ongoing darkness. "I fear our mission to be the reason for this peculiar happening."

Chapter 5

With an hours' time and a brisk, human-paced hike behind them, Charlie found himself less affected by the chaotic battle scene, and more so by the countless questions coursing through his mind. Each step brought with it the realization that his body was no-longer aged and aching. His posture was no longer slumped and painful, but sturdy and strong. The sights around him—even in the nightly hours—were nearly overwhelming. It'd been so long since he'd visually associated the bark of a tree to the way it felt beneath his fingers...let alone the brilliant-red bird, perched on his shoulder.

Each object in his path, a recollection of a memory from long ago—a life long ago. Even with his sight regained, he maintained his hands in front of him, as if invisible objects would obstruct his path.

As they came to a clearing in the woods, the sound of rushing water was heard in the distance. “I’m so thirsty, Carrie.”

She smiled sweetly, resting her hand on his face. “I understand. I hear fresh water just there.”

“Carrie...when you say...deep connection...and talk about dark reaching power...I don’t understand. Can you read this damn bird’s mind or something?”

She chuckled, petting the small animal as it sat comfortably on his shoulder. “It’s nearly impossible to describe, Charlie. Mostly because we rarely find ourselves verbalizing it. I feel this creature’s turmoil, its longing to leave your shoulder and take flight...but I also feel its sense of security while sitting atop your shoulder. Likewise, he knows my heart’s intentions, that I have his best interests in mind, and that I am dependent and grateful for his guidance.”

“So...is that mind reading?”

Again, his comment had her giggling. “No, my love, it’s something else. It’s an overwhelming awareness...but no, I cannot read this bird’s exact thoughts...nor yours for that matter. That is a skill Nyrobie possesses.”

“Nyrobie can tell what I’m thinking right now?”

“If that was something she desired, yes. I’m assuming you needn’t worry.”

“Why?”

“She has no reason to.”

“And Jerrek can move stuff with his head?”

“Any object Jerrek can lift with his brawn, he can lift with his brain. It’s an extraordinary skill and makes him quite useful among my people.”

“Do all of your people have special skills?”

“To a degree...some are younger than others and are fine-tuning. We all possess some level of healing magic; it’s most powerful when used against the effects of dark magic. Nyrobie and Jerrek’s skills are quite rare within the Society.”

“I’ll never have these things...and you’re fine marrying a man that will never have a special skill?”

She paused, her glance anchored him. “You’re a human man, Charlie...and skilled at humanly things...and I wish nothing more than to be unified for all eternity to you and only you.”

No sooner did something start making sense, and then it didn’t. Each time the chaos reached a certain level of unmanageability, he focused on her perfect face.

“Charlie...close your eyes.”

He did as Carrie asked.

“Do you feel that, Charlie?”

A warm sensation—completely euphoric—mounted in his core and continued outward to the tips of his fingers and toes—his earlobes and even his scalp. It curled his lips into an uncontrollable smile as he inhaled the autumn air. “I...do.”

“That is our bond, my love. We are bonded.”

“I felt this...in my dreams...I was never crazy.”

“No, Charlie. I need nothing else from you but this. This for all eternity and nothing else.”

“O...okay.” Opening his eyes, he immediately embraced her and their lips locked. He pulled away excitedly, “I wanna get home with you. I want to spend forever with you.”

Her smile sent his heart racing faster. The same smile had his hands and body trembling the day they first laid down together seventy years prior upon a bed of lilies in the woods near his parent’s home. Their bodies became one under the setting sun—igniting every nerve in his eighteen-year-old skin. So intoxicating was the experience that the memory felt as though the event occurred just the day prior.

“We will, my love. Let’s go.”

“Carrie.” Nyrobie approached them. “Once we have quenched our thirst we will need to run swiftly.”

“The bird still guides us—”

“The bird will guide us as we run. The lingering darkness is once again rising. I’m certain an aerial assault of lowly grackles will not occur twice. Something larger may be headed our way.”

“Nyrobie...do you truly feel a member of our own Society would do us harm? An offense of that magnitude is punishable by execution.”

“I feel safe in assuming Jerrek, you and I would be left unscathed should we be encountered...but

I do fear for Charlie's well-being outside the walls of Evrastill."

"That's preposterous, Nyrobie. No Society member would harm a human."

"You heard him yourself, Carrie. They took his eyesight. The man spent seventy years in the darkness. Is that not harm?"

A deep fear brewed as Charlie observed the conversation. Such talk was otherworldly and foreign to a man who'd lived a simple childhood, running barefoot in the mountainous backwoods.

"Girls...you don't really think whatever is after us is out to get me do you? I mean hell, I been beatin' at death's door long enough. I at least want the chance to see this world before I have to exit it. I want the chance to live."

"You will have that." Nyrobie's confident proclamation came with a reassuring hand on Charlie's shoulder. "We must move quickly. To the water...drink."

Maneuvering through the thicket, the four made their way to the crystal-clear river. Thousands of stones lined the bank leading into the water stream. Charlie's fear and anxiety parched his mouth and exacerbated his thirst, prompting him quickly toward the water.

His breath danced in the moonlight as it left his lips in the icy air. The rushing waters were calmest near the bank; the midsection of the river raged violently.

Squatting and cupping his hands, Charlie looked upon water for the first time in ages—clean, clear water. Bringing the refreshing, chilled river water to his mouth, he quenched his thirst.

The river's roar was nearly deafening—Charlie glanced down the waterway—tall evergreens lined either side of the river. The moon was bright and full and perfectly positioned within the sky above the trees and mountain tops in the distance. The beautifully crafted scene had him spellbound, and then she was screaming.

His head turned to see Carrie's eyes engorged with horror—pain in his arm—a flash of something from his peripheral vision—and then his entire being was at the mercy of the frigid river as he was knocked in and dragged under.

Kicking and punching blindly at an unseen source of confinement, his head arose above the raging waters to look upon his disappearing party—swallowed up in the darkness as he was carried away—swallowed up in the river. The last glance captured was of what appeared to be his immortal friends ambushed by wolves.

With each attempt at breath he felt himself choking—struggling to stay afloat in the chilling waters, as if a million tiny daggers were piercing him. From the left, a mouth of off-white teeth emerged from the water within inches from his face. Charlie had never actually seen a live wolf, but this drenched creature certainly resembled what he remembered them to be.

It aggressively pursued him in the rapids, its paws working vigorously to reach Charlie. Not drowning being the top priority, Charlie paid little attention to the animal as it moved closer.

Just as the wolf was upon him and the water's rage had reached a climax, Charlie realized the river was coming to an end...a drop. Unable to process exactly what was happening, Charlie found

himself falling with the water—a monstrous waterfall. There was no time to be terrified—no time to react. His arms flailed and his legs kicked as he met the water below—



Warm and inviting, the summer sun kissed the distant tree tops—the evening hours were fast upon him. A soft breeze brought with it the smell of rain from the south.

Hopping the waist high stone wall, he ran briskly through the thick weeds and into the tall pines. Making his way to the soft-flowing river, he meandered near the water's edge. Her face was heavy on his thoughts—he rocked backward on his heels—hands in his trouser pockets as he glanced skyward.

“Charlie...”

Gowned in white, her glowingly beautiful complexion and disarming eyes had his attention captured entirely.

“You...you came.”

“Of course. My word is my honor.”

“You said you might be being watched. I don't want nothing bad to happen to you because of me.”

Her soft smile twisted his thoughts to a state of discombobulation. “What bad could stem from this, Charlie? I know only of love...you are the one. There is no way around it...what must be must be.”

“I do love...I love you, Carrie. There's just so much that don't make sense to me.”

Her finger traced gently along his jawline—her eyes lured him into her kiss—soft lips, laced with honey.

“You're hurt, my love.”

The nostalgia was rapidly replaced with the nauseating memory of the previous night. “Yea. I'm fine.”

“Your father.”

Her hand slipped between his shirtless back and the suspender holding his trousers—softly circling the bruising with her index finger.

“He...I guess he was convinced I took to his whiskey. The last thing I want is that nasty shit.”

Her eyes displayed a certain sadness—a misunderstanding floated in them. “My father loves me, Charlie. He loves me dearly. Above all else, he and my mother wish for my eternal happiness. There must be a way.”

“I don't...that's what I mean, it don't make sense when you say that. What can I do? What do you need me to do?”

“Your kind...the ones among us...were rescued from the tunnels...come away with me, my love.”

Let us say I pulled you from your doom.”

The idea of escaping his parent’s decrepit shack with her was more than tempting. Excitement mounted as he smiled—nodding his head. “But we can’t...we can’t be together there...can we? I can’t be with you like I am now?”

“Perhaps with time, Charlie, and time is of an abundance in Evrastill. Until then I will come to you when eyes are turned. Come with me, Charlie. Find sanctuary from this world of cruel things.”

There was no need to attempt to convince him, he was convinced. “When?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Yes...yes I will. I swear to god I will.” Taking her in his arms, he lifted her to him. “You smell like...like vanilla and roses or some other type of flowers.”

She chuckled slightly as he sat her down. “And you smell like a boy who’s been working about the mountainside all day.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Come with me.”

Taking her hand, he was led to the calm water. He watched intently as her foot skimmed the flowing river. He nearly lost his breath as her gown fell from her silky shoulders and to the river stones on the bank—revealing her completely. He’d never seen a naked woman before—and what she possessed was much more luxurious than anything he had imagined. Nights alone he envisioned her without clothing, but his imagination could not compare to the beauty before him.

His heartbeat pounded in his eardrums as she stepped closer, gently sliding each suspender from either shoulder. Charlie instantly grabbed the waist of his trousers to secure them from falling to the ground below—his gaze remained affixed to her chest.

Taking a hand from his waistline, she placed it on her right breast. His head pounded from within his skull as she encouraged his exploration. His shaking fingers gently traced the outer edged of her areola.

She reached for his remaining hand, his grasp remained firm on the waistline of his pants. His uncontrollable excitement, which was apparent under the thin material of his trousers, had him hesitant to remove his clothing.

“Please...Charlie...wash the day away with me.”

Every hair on his arms stood to attention as her hands reached around him, tracing the small of his back—dancing along his spine.

“O...okay.” Slowly, he released his grasp on his pants; his free hand moved for her other breast.

Her fingers outlined the V of his torso prior to disappearing under his waistline—gently pulling his trousers downward. They slid to the ground without additional effort. He looked down to his own body—his reaction to her and the situation blatantly on display—and then he looked to her. Her gaze curiously danced over him as she smiled intently.

“S...sorry.”

“Whatever for?” She stepped closer.

“Um...I um...”

“To the water, Charlie.”

Charlie remained silent as they entered the river, stopping as the water came to her knees.

She turned to him. Soft as silk, he felt her hand between his legs. He nervously glanced downward to see her taking his excitement within her grasp.

The warmth extended from her grasp—an overwhelming euphoria reached into his core—leaving him nearly incapable of inhaling completely.

The sensation was like nothing he’d ever experienced before—the dizzying intoxication made it difficult to keep his eyes pried and focused.

He felt her lips on his just as every nerve within him came alive with pleasure. So powerful was the climax that he shook—reaching for her shoulder to remain standing upright as his knees nearly buckled.

Seconds later, after regaining his composure, he opened his eyes to find her smiling. To his surprise—the warmth remained within his core—there was no feeling of guilt or embarrassment which typically arose in the moments after pleasuring himself within his tiny bedroom of his parent’s home.

No words were spoken initially. She kneeled into the water, standing on her knees, she washed the water over her arms. Charlie watched her methodical movement, and then he sat down in the river beside her, washing under his armpits and splashing water in his face.

“Charlie...I will sleep soundly once you are safe behind the walls of my home, and away from the horrors of this land. I do fear, however that I will sleep in solitude until the strength of our love can shift the ideas of those leading my people.”

“Huh?”

“It will take time, but with patience and endurance, our love will be eternal.”

“But...if you really won’t get no older...and I will...isn’t that something you been thinking about? I have been.”

She laughed. “Charlie...there is much I cannot tell you now. Please know that when you come with me...age, death, and the illnesses of your people will no longer be of concern to you.”

Processing her comment—as well as what happened moments prior—he shook his head in confusion. “I don’t understand. I’ll go anywhere with you; I just don’t understand—”

“You will. With time you will come to know everything. Let us be happy in knowing your safety and preservation will be secured...all else will occur with time.”

“Okay...I guess.”

“Charlie...let our bodies become one. I’m unsure of when the opportunity to be as we are now will come again...let us become one.”

“You mean like...barneymugging?”

“What?”

“Like...sex?”

Giggling as she continued washing. She took his hand. “Why must such things have names? Are they not present within feeling?”

“You...you don’t wanna wait until we’re married? Don’t your people think that’s sinful?”

“Unification solidifies a bond...a bond two lovers hold...a bond that cannot be broken. It is our way of telling the Society that the bond is capable of withstanding eternity. Sharing bodies prior to unification is not undesirable in the eyes of my people...as long the bond exists.”

“Yes, of course I want to share with you.”

She moved behind him through the water. Her hands brought cool water to his aching back, she kissed the areas his father had pummeled the night before.

Her supple breast pressed to his shoulder blade worked to resurrect the exhilaration within him.

“Follow me.”

She stood from the water and he watched her walk toward the bank. He remained seated momentarily, viewing her slender figure and toned buttocks from behind.

She made her way to a bed of lilies just past the first large trees. He followed her, watching intently as she laid down among the flowers—motioning him to join her.

Laying gently atop her, unsure exactly of what to do next, he worked to place himself within her and finally managed with her assistance.

“I’ve never...”

“Neither have I, Charlie...let us be one.” Her gaze fell heavy on his as a collision of euphoria and enlightenment overtook him. It was more than simply seeing the world through her eyes—it was as if they were one being. The lilies around them were no longer simply flowers—the rich scent they exuded washed over him. The instinct to swat the insects dancing about the atmosphere was replaced with a longing to protect them—to reach for them.

Every smell carried on the air was easily identifiable. Every sound the neighboring river made was present. The sun’s warmth on his nude back and rear was the perfect temperature. The light of the world had never been more beautiful. Hyper-sensation to all his surroundings had his eyes widening—pooling with tears. “Carr...Carrie...it’s beautiful.”

“As are you, Charlie...as are we.”

Turning his attention from the distractions of the world around him, he focused once more on her face—beautifully framed within the flowers. Gently pressing himself into her, he embraced the overbearing pleasure the action produced. She was entirely correct—there were no names for this—no words could accurately describe the experience.

Pressing his lips to hers from above—the taste of warm honey filled his mouth. Every detail of

the encounter was completely comforting.

The idea of withdrawing and separating had him slowing his pace...he wanted the experience to last as long as possible.

Minutes later there was no point in fighting it. Their mutual climax was blatantly imminent—still within her, her sensations were his as well. Biting her bottom lip as she inhaled through her nostrils, the couple succumbed to the breathtaking result of their actions.

He didn't move—breathing heavily he remained flat atop her, her hands resting on his back as they recovered.

"I must leave you now, my love."

"No...I want to come with you tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Please..." He rose to gaze down upon her. "Don't leave me here. I can't be here after you just took me there. I'll wait as long as I have to, to be with you, but I got to know I can see you every day."

"Charlie...there is worry in your eyes. Let it leave you. We may leave now."

"Right now?"

"Yes. If we are to travel at your pace it will take us much longer to reach Evrastill."

"O...okay. I gotta...I'll be right back. You wait right here...okay?"

"Of course."

Jumping from the lilies, he ran from the trees and to the direction of his parent's home and the toolshed behind it. Only when he felt the sun's light on areas it rarely lit did he remember his nudity. "Shit!" Running back to retrieve his trousers, he saw her in the lilies.

Once dressed, he sprinted toward the toolshed, leaping over the stonewall as dusk settled on the scene. Flinging the door open, he reached for his worn leather shoes on the floor near the shelving—he preferred to be barefoot but envisioned rugged terrain on their journey. He then opened a small wooden box on the second shelf. His grandmother's wedding ring—she'd given it to him when he was eight so that he might give it to his bride. Sliding the ring in his pocket, he turned to leave.

"An unexpected journey?" In the doorway, stepping into the shadows, was an oddly dressed man—he donned a dark robe.

"Oh! Hello...you scared me."

"You're frightened, Charlie?"

"Startled...who...who are you?"

He appeared Charlie's age, around eighteen, but his mannerisms and body language were atypical.

"Charlie...you have seen much today, have you not?"

"I don't know who you are."

“Indeed. I need you to close your eyes...tightly...and step to me.”

“Huh? I need to leave. It’s about to get dark—”

“It certainly is.”

Nothing worked. His arms wouldn’t lift, his feet remained affixed in place. He stared helplessly—completely paralyzed as the man stepped closer.

“Charlie...you are scared...I feel your fear.” His eyes—wide and piercing—examined Charlie’s face. “Fear not, Charlie, even in darkness there is beauty.” Raising his hands to Charlie’s face, the man placed his thumbs over Charlie’s eyes...the world faded to black.

Chapter 6

“They’re relentless!”

Carrie’s back pressed to Nyrobie’s as they worked tirelessly to fend themselves from the wolves. “They’re unreachable, Carrie...the darkness guides them. We have no choice.”

“Nyrobie no!”

“Carrie...they will kill us...it is their desire.”

Carrie’s foot met the mouth of one of the attacking wolves, sending the animal soaring to the rushing waters of the river.

“This is unconscionable, Nyrobie.”

“We must!” Nyrobie leapt through the air and over several of their attackers. Reaching for several river stones, she began hurling them in the direction of the wolves. The stones left her hand and flew through the air at speeds that left them invisible. They accurately met their mark with brutal force—mortally wounding each animal they struck—tearing through them and sending blood and fur across the rocks and grass. The yelps of Nyrobie’s victims filled the night.

“More descend from the mountainside, Nyrobie!” Carrie reached for a fallen branch. The staff-like weapon met an oncoming wolf’s skull with sickening results. Wounding creatures of the earth was unnatural and went against everything within her.

“Jerrek has returned, Carrie!”

“He is without him!”

Jerrek swiftly joined the women—his hands in front of him—he raised at least one hundred stones high above the three of them with nothing but his mind. The rocks remained suspended in the air briefly, before they shot toward the onslaught of approaching wolves, annihilating several in a disgusting scene of evisceration and dismemberment that had Carrie turning her head from the sight.

“Why are you not chasing the river, Jerrek? Where is he!”

“There was a fall, Carrie!” The panicked Jerrek looked about the bloody chaos as more wolves rushed to them from the trees.

“The wolves are not our only enemy this night. The forest is against us, entirely. Bears, great cats, and more creatures of the sky wish to end us as well.”

Even the roar of the approaching bear was not enough to snare her attention. “What fall, Jerrek?”

Where is he? I must get to him!”

“Behind you!” Rushing past her, Jerrek’s foot met a leaping wolf.

“Where is he!” Carrie’s scream was physically visible as it left her mouth. It rippled through the atmosphere, knocking her friends to the ground and sending their attackers flying from them. The trees closest to them swayed and rattled from her rage, massive ripples tore across the river top.

“It...it cannot be.” Nyrobie’s eyes were wide with disbelief as she stared from the ground.

“Charlie!” The second wailing sent the remainder of the wolves, as well as the approaching bear, high into the air—some pierced upon the branches, others crashed to the earth and their death or fell to the rushing waters. Hundreds of river stones tore through the air on her sorrowful screams.

“Nyrobie! Silence her!”

“Carrie! Please! You will kill us!” She looked to her friends, seemingly horrified from the ground below her. So deep and coursing was her grief that it conjured an emotion she was unfamiliar with. Carrie was not only angry—something dark had awakened within her—an ache.

As if the attacking animals suddenly awoke from a rage-driven psychosis, the surviving wolves eagerly fled the scene, leaving Carrie, Nyrobie, and Jerrek amongst a plethora of corpses.

“Carrie...look to me, my friend.” Jerrek cautiously approached.

“Silence, Jerrek! Nyrobie, can you reach him? Does his heart beat still?”

A tear escaping Nyrobie’s eye had Carrie on the verge of eruption. “Only now...his dreams are of you, Carrie. He will pass on while dreaming of you.”

“No!” The word tore from her throat, sending her friend and several more stones through the air. Nyrobie landed on her feet much further down the bank.

“Carrie!” Jerrek ran to her. “You must control it!”

Looking to Jerrek, Carrie collapsed in his arms. “Send me with him! Toss me to the river! I can’t exist without him! Not for all eternity! Not when I’ve only now regained him!”

“Carrie! Let us run with the river’s waters. Perhaps his heart beats still! You must control your gift.”

Shaking her head while pushing past him, she absorbed his words. “What...what gift?”

“Carrie...you possess the echo. If the council learns of this—”

“That’s impossible, Jerrek! That skill is ancient. There hasn’t been a member with such gifts since long before us. Such talk is the stuff of legends and myths. I’m young and have yet to learn of my skill.”

“Carrie.” He walked to her, embracing her. “Do you not see your destruction?”

She glanced about the scene, trees half uprooted, and the carcasses of several wolves adorned the broken branches high above them in a macabre and eerie scene.

“That matters not, Jerrek. I must reach him...let us run swiftly.”

Nyrobie—wide-eyed and seemingly fearful, approached cautiously.

“Carrie, my friend. Your gift is extraordinary...but if the council learns of its misuse—”

“I haven’t the time for silly words and talk of nonexistent gifts. I must go to him. Either help me or return to Evrastill.” She charged past them, preparing to run.

“We are forever at your side, Carrie.” Nyrobie walked beside her. “Let us find him.”

Chapter 7

He awoke to the smell of burning wood. His lungs ached and burned as he inhaled. Looking around without moving, he came to the conclusion he was in a thick sleeping blanket of some sort and that he was still outdoors. His aching body longed for additional heat.

He coughed as his gaze rested upon his clothing draped near the fire. It's not a dream...it wasn't a dream. Sitting up, he looked about the chilly scene—the morning hours had brought snow with them. He hadn't seen a snowflake in decades, but now they fell all around him.

“Oh...easy there, Bubba. Here, you lay on back down.”

“Wha—” Attempting to talk produced a raspy, nearly inaudible voice—strained and burning.

A solid, heavily dressed and muscular man with a thick brown beard appeared, squatting down in front of Charlie. The man brought the top of the blanket over Charlie's exposed shoulders and then pulled a stocking hat down further on Charlie's head, covering his ears.

“You with me?” There was a genuine concern in the man's eyes—he looked to be in his thirties and perhaps a hunter or woodsman.

Charlie merely nodded.

“I found you on the bank just there. Your lips was bluer than the Coors can mountains. You gotta nasty bite on your arm from some critter.”

“I...need my clothes.” His voice nearly failed him.

“Huh? Bubba your skeeters were froze solid. I wouldn't recommend you puttin' them bad boys on right about now.”

“I need to go.”

“I know ya do. My wife is on her way here now to take your butt to the hospital...you're lucky you're not dead, Bubba.”

“Charlie.”

“Charlie? My name is Austin. You relax, stay in that there sleeping bag and Brenda will be here soon to take you in to town.”

“No...please...I need to go.”

“You need to rest, Charlie. Hypothermia is serious, son.”

“Stop talking to me like a child...I'm more than twice your age.”

The man simply smiled and patted Charlie's cheek with his gloved hand. "Please...lay back down and stay warm."

The cold and fatigue had Charlie incapable of offering argument. He glanced toward the thick pillow on the ground below him and rested his head to it.

"Ny...Nyrobie..."

"Say what, Bubba?"

"I feel Nyrobie...in my head."

"I'm sure you do, bud. Just relax and rest."

Closing his eyes, he could literally feel Nyrobie within his psyche, as if she were physically there. Unsure of how such dynamics operated, he merely relaxed and allowed her full range of his current thoughts—hoping it would result in a reunion.

"Damn birds..."

Instantly Charlie's eyelids flung open. He glanced about the snow-dusted evergreens to find them littered with grackles and blue jays. Their tiny eyes all peered down upon him.

"No." Charlie returned to the seated position. "No." Panic worked to resurrect within his battered, half frozen core.

"It's okay...they're scavengers."

"Run."

"What? Bubba, I don't know if you hit your head or—"

"My name is Charlie, not Bubba, and we need to run away from here."

"Okay...we will as soon as my wife gets here."

"We need to go now."

"You got no clothes, boy...balls'll shrivel up to the size of peas if you come out that bag."

"No...you don't understand."

"He certainly doesn't, does he...Charlie?" Appearing from the morning's shadows was the man Charlie despised with every ounce of his being—the man that robbed him of a lifetime of beautiful sunsets and colorful springs. The man who took his sight.

"You..."

The man smirked—chuckling lowly as he approached. "Me."

"Now...who the hell are you?" Austin stood between Charlie and the man.

The dark-cloaked man walked to Austin, extending his hand—not in a manner of greeting—but with all digits extended separately in an odd fashion.

"Are you responsible for Charlie's accident? He could have died. You kids don't need to be out here in the elements with your silly capes and—"

"Sshh."

Charlie watched helplessly from the ground as the man placed his hand on Austin's chest.

"Fear not, mortal child...only fade. No pain, only nothing."

Seconds later, Austin collapsed to the ground—his opened eyes revealed a horrendous lifelessness—breathlessness on the snowy earth.

Charlie looked to the man in horror—he remained expressionless.

“You...you killed him? Why? He’s too young...save him!”

“Silence, Charlie. You killed him...not I. You moved my hand, I had no other choice but end him.”

“No! You...you didn’t have to do that!”

“Charlie...I feel your fear...please don’t be frightened, I will not bring you pain...only eternal slumber.”

“No! Please...I don’t wanna die like this.” The idea of never again seeing Carrie’s face had tears pooling in his eyes. His voice ceased as he looked away from the approaching executioner.

To Charlie’s surprise, the man sat next to him on the ground.

“You’re cold, Charlie.”

The tears streaming down Charlie’s cheeks were nearly painful—so frigid as they met the elements. Charlie merely nodded, looking past the man and to the trees and countless birds. He focused on the beauty of the scene rather than the terror. The sun was rising over the mountains, the snow was falling on the evergreens, and he was witnessing it all for the first time in seventy years.

“Tis an odd thing, Charlie, to find myself in such circumstances. To wish, with each fiber of my being, to ease your distress and mend your ailments, and yet I’m left with the unbearable task before me...to end you.”

Charlie shook his head softly, intentionally avoiding eye contact with his guest.

“You’re frightened...I feel it within you, Charlie.”

“Yes...I’m scared.”

“NoktakVu.”

A strange tingling sensation in the tips of Charlie’s fingers had him looking toward his hands. Seconds later, his hands, arms, lips, face and any other part of him that had previously been miserably cold...was pleasantly warm and cozy—as if he were sitting somewhere tropical.

“Better?”

Charlie filled his lungs completely—the scratchy ache was no longer there—his throat no longer stung and burned. The back pains and soreness were gone and the bite from the previous evening’s attack was absent too.

“I don’t understand. You make me comfortable...better...before you kill me?”

Charlie’s question didn’t gain an immediate response. The man looked around the scene and then his gaze rested on Charlie.

“Age...time...may produce an abundance of wisdom...but even an immortal of nearly five-thousand years may find himself perplexed. I do not wish to hurt you, Charlie...your fear brings me great despair...I do not wish to see you perish.”

“Then don’t...why do I gotta die? I been dying for years now...why can’t I live?”

“What choice have you left me, Charlie? Outside of Evrastill...and already your mindless ramblings have infected your fellow man’s ear with knowledge of our existence. That man...his death will forever affect me.”

Charlie offered a disgusted glance. “Oh, I’m real sorry for you...you’re not the one dead in the snow. All that man did was help me, and you killed him. You...whatever you are...are an awful waste of five-thousand years. You’re horrible.”

The man offered a low chuckle. “And you...you would risk the sanctity of my people? You would forsake the ancestors I walk still beside for some novelty idea?”

“You make me out to be a monster. If you’re the reason them birds turned against us...that nature turned against us—”

“My powers are mightier than the river beside you. Just like the river, they can bring life...or quell a beating heart. My powers can sway the intentions of the woodland dwellers, my bidding in turn is theirs. My powers are plentiful...the product is perfection, and I do not act alone.”

“There’s...there are more of you out here after me and them? If you’re so damn powerful, why do you need more than one of you to do what you’re doing?”

He looked to Charlie—seemingly unamused by the comment. “It isn’t necessity so much as desire. We wish to stop such putrid happenings. We long to restore our foundations to their former splendor. We will abolish the radical and despicable ideas that have degraded my people to this current state of sordid rancidness. We shall diminish and dispose of all that have opposed, even if that entails acting against every natural instinct within me. I must dispose of you, Charlie...and then Jerrek...Nyrobie—”

“No! That’s the talk of a mad man. What have they done so wrong? They’ve done nothing wrong!”

“The fact that Carrie walks freely after engaging in despicable acts with a human being is exactly why you must be disposed of! She knows not her full potential. Even now she pursues you. Co-mingling of our species is as foul and unnatural as necromancy or enticing a beast of the field to pleasure you!”

“What...what are you...look at me.” Charlie produced his hand, holding it next to the hand of the cloaked man. “I’m you. I’m not some dog or—”

“You are a mortal man.”

“But I don’t have to be...and you know that. If I go into—”

“The humans of Evrastill are but lowly parasites—their immortality is unnatural and reliant on their confinement. If not for the wholesomeness of their surroundings—the billions of life-maintaining, blue crystals of our kingdom, those humans would be dust. Your eyes will never see the blue beauty of Evrastill. You will never bask in its glory. Your age will never stand still under the power of the blue ambiance; rather, your time ends naturally with death...now. You will perish here today at the base of this mountain...you are human...you will die as a human in your own land.”

“Well...I’d say you stop flapping your gums and get it over. I’m just about done hearing your

voice and I'm none too pleased that shit's gonna be the last thing I hear before you put me under."

"Ungrateful mortal." He stood above Charlie. "Rise to me...and go in peace."

"Just do what you need to do...but spare her. You got what you came for, let her go home."

"That's very noble, Charlie. You needn't worry of Carrie's wellbeing. She is destined for greatness. You feel you truly love, her?"

Peering up to the man, whose face displayed a puzzled look, Charlie sighed forcefully, nodding as he did so. "Yes. I love her more than I can put into words."

"Charlie...human love is an expression...it's more a fairytale than immortal beings residing in a mountainous kingdom for ages upon ages. Human love equates to violence, infidelity, and even war. Love to a human is just a word...the totaling factors of an evolution in animalistic instinct. Your time with Carrie produced not the bond necessary to embrace all eternity—"

"We are bonded."

The man chuckled once more. "Again...another word you shall never truly grasp, my mortal son."

Charlie clumsily stood, ensuring his covering remained secured upon his shoulders.

"From the day you placed your hands on me...took my sight...to the day she brought it back to me...her face was all that kept me breathing. I felt her every night in my sleep, like she was right there with me. When...whenever I was down I could feel her there. I feel her with me now. You can take my life...my lowly human life, but it changes nothing. That bond is there, it was there the day you blinded me, it's here now, and there's nothing you can do to break it."

The man's face was solemn—the darks of his eyes studied Charlie.

"Nestivahoon! Levushkineu keenocular, Nyrobie!" A second man emerged from the shadows of the trees. Thick, raven hair framed his olive face—his eyes were bluer than the sky above them. He wore the same cloak as the man beside Charlie—intensity laced the words leaving his mouth, a language completely foreign to Charlie. "Lemonyia, nestivahinda halvinea. DonurachVintwein!"

No sooner had the approaching man presented himself, and he was gone once more—vanished on the mountainside.

"I haven't the time for additional conversation, Charlie. Close your eyes."

"Promise me."

"What?"

"Promise me you won't hurt her."

"You are hardly in the position to negotiate, Charlie."

"I'm not negotiating...I'm begging you...please don't hurt her."

For the first time since their initial introduction, the two beings shared a gaze inclusive of something like recognition. Charlie sensed this immortal man felt the purity of his love for Carrie.

"Step away from him, Tarik." Nyrobie appeared from the riverside.

"Nyrobie..."

"I will not ask again. Step away from him."

“Foolish girl...you know of my magic.”

Nyrobie nodded politely, offering a respective smile. “Indeed. I’m fully aware of your grand capabilities. Your powers are by far more impressive than any I possess...your powers are magnificent, Tarik.”

“And yet...you would threaten me? Not the wisest choice in regard to self-preservation.”

“Tarik...your magic is bold and stunningly beautiful. Yet, your extensive reliance on it leaves you vulnerable to my physical attack. You are no match for me, Tarik. Summon each wolf, bear, and great cat of these mountains. They will not reach you before you’re broken by my hands.”

“Nyrobie...you are a traitorous fiend. You would rise against your own in the defense of a lowly mortal?”

“Charlie is one of my own...and I have already told you, I will not ask again.”

Tarik’s head cocked curiously as he moved in the direction of Nyrobie.

“Do you not see what it is you do?”

“Tarik! Do you not see? You would toss your own daughter to the wolves like scraps because you disapprove of her bond?”

“He is a human!”

“And are you not sworn by your blood to protect him? To ensure at all costs that we do all to protect his kind?”

“Their kind is a plague, Nyrobie! I would love nothing more than to protect this human...to welcome him into my home and offer him sanctuary, but their species has proven themselves volatile and unredeemable.”

“You unleashed fanged creatures of the woods upon your own daughter...what, Tarik, are you if not volatile?”

“You know as well as I she was never truly in harm’s way.”

Tarik turned from Nyrobie, marching toward Charlie. Charlie, tripping on the bedding he was wrapped in, fell to the ground. He watched in fear as the polished Tarik neared—his eyes boasting an undeniable rage. And then he was knocked to the ground from behind.

“Nyrob—” Nyrobie’s foot met Tarik’s mid-section as he crawled on the ground. The force sent him upward through the air—his arms flailing as he soared above the tops of some of the evergreens. He fell back to the earth and to Nyrobie’s awaiting attack. Charlie watched in awe as Nyrobie leapt in the air—her powerful mid-air roundhouse sent Tarik crashing into the icy river, producing a splash and nothing more. She landed with grace and poise.

“Holy shit.”

Instantly Nyrobie rushed to Charlie. “Are you okay, my friend?”

Charlie merely shook his head. He was instantly embraced by Nyrobie. “I feel your deep sorrow, Charlie. Carrie is alive...she is well and safe with Jerrek.”

“He killed him, Nyrobie.”

“What?”

“That Tarik bastard killed the man that helped me. If it wasn’t for me that man would still be alive. He’s still so young—”

“Where?”

Charlie removed his arm from the covering and pointed toward a lifeless Austin. Nyrobie rushed to the man; sitting beside him, she placed her hand firmly on Austin’s flaccid chest. Her lips muttered something Charlie could neither hear nor understand as Nyrobie rocked forward on the ground.

Within seconds the man was gasping, reaching upward in scattered confusion.

“Relax, my friend.” Nyrobie wrapped her arms tightly around Austin, securing him in place. “Just breathe...you are fine...no harm will come to you.”

Charlie couldn’t contain his smile as he witnessed Austin’s chest rising with respirations. The confused man looked about from Nyrobie’s arms.

“Hello there.” Nyrobie smiled sweetly at Austin—he continued to look confused as Charlie watched the interaction.

“My...my wife...where...”

“Your bride is fine, my friend. You are okay too.”

“The boy...the...Charlie. Is Charlie—”

“Charlie is fine as well. You, my friend, took a nasty fall and need rest.” Nyrobie gently wiped the snow from Austin’s face and beard. “You are entirely safe...you may rest now.”

Austin’s eyes closed as he relaxed into Nyrobie’s cradling embrace.

Nearly two minutes later, Charlie looked upon a snoring Austin, sleeping in the lap of Nyrobie. “You made him sleep?”

She chuckled. “No. I hold no such magic over men. Tarik’s power is truly magnificent. When applied with good intent, he can heal the most ill of humans, much like the less inspirational power I am blessed with...much like the blue crystals of my home. When Tarik’s power is expressed with mal-intention, however, I fear the effects can be devastating and long lasting.”

“Will Austin be okay?”

“The strength of my healing magic is no match for what Tarik inflicted. We intervened in time, Charlie. It will take him several days if not weeks to completely recuperate, but recuperate he shall.”

Nyrobie slid her arms completely under the soundly sleeping man, lifting him like a toddler rather than a two-hundred-twenty-pound muscular woodsman. She carried him briskly to the fire, positioning him comfortably among the bedding on the ground and resting his head on a pillow.

“We shall watch and wait for his bride to arrive...and then we too shall vanish into the surrounding.”

“Nyrobie...where are Carrie and Jerrek? There are more of them after us.”

“I know. I have been heavy on some of their thoughts. There are four of my kind that seek us now. Carrie and Jerrek are near. Your thoughts led me to you, my friend.”

“Tarik...he’s really Carrie’s father? He’s the man that took my sight all those years ago. I’ll never forget that man’s face.”

“What a foul disgrace. Charlie, the years of darkness can never be recovered. Be assured you have an eternity of fellowship and beautiful sights to behold. Your eyes will be bathed in beauty.”

“Why didn’t you know about him, Nyrobie?”

“About who?”

“About Carrie’s dad. If you know people’s thoughts, how did you not know he was against Carrie and me? How did you not know he was after us?”

“You overestimate my skill, Charlie. I do not walk about daily, collecting thoughts and invading minds freely. To enter the mind of another is comparable to entering their home. Some invite me in, they are comfortable with my presence and are insistent on my being there. Some are unaware I am there...and therefore I must lurk and sneak what I may without being noticed. And some have fortified the ability to keep me completely at bay—their thoughts are entirely inaccessible to me. Tarik is ancient, Charlie. His thoughts are locked tight.”

“I’m glad you killed him. Carrie is better off.”

Nyrobie laughed. “Killed him? Sweet Charlie, that wasn’t even a flesh wound. I’m certain Tarik is sitting scorned nearby, conjuring earthly beings to engage in what he cannot.”

“He’s alive? But...you literally whooped that man’s ass.”

“Oh...my dear friend. That was merely a jostle.”

“And the others...are they as dead-set on ending us too? They were talking some nonsense language that I’ve never heard in my life.”

“The others share the same desire as Tarik...to remove us from their equation. They speak the ancient language of my people. It is rarely heard presently and only spoken among the most ancient of the Society or when engaging in specific magic.”

“I’m certain they want to kill me. He wouldn’t kill his own daughter, would he?”

“These are former members of the Council...they will stop at nothing to preserve their idea of Evrastill and the Society. No, I do not feel he would kill Carrie. I feel there’s a darker play at hand.”

“Nyrobie...if I go to them, I honestly think they’ll be done with it. I think they’ll let you live—”

“I will hear nothing of such talk. You are one of us, Charlie. This is greater than you...it is greater than Carrie and all of us. Offering yourself as a gentle sacrifice would only amplify the intentions of our enemies. They claim to yearn for nothing more than the customs they so dearly cling to...yet they would desecrate our most sacred vows to obtain them. They turned nature on their own kind and even worse...Tarik took the life of a human being. If the Council learns of their actions, they will be executed. These rogues will stop at nothing to ensure we do not reach the entrance of Evrastill.”

Charlie looked once more to the sleeping Austin below them. “I know you didn’t have to do that, Nyrobie. Thank you.”

“If I could, I would end the death and suffering of every human of this world, but that is unnatural.

This man was ended at by the magic of my people. It was my pleasure and duty to aid him. Nothing makes my heart happier than helping them.”

“I think I hear a vehicle off in the distance.”

“Climb in my back, Charlie. Let us flee to watch from the mountainside.”

Charlie held the sleeping bag from his chest, peering down on his nudity. “I’m completely naked. I’m not climbing on anything.”

“Your clothing?”

“It’s wet and frozen—there by the fire.”

At blazing speed, Nyrobie collected the drying items. She then rushed to Charlie, tucking the clothing items and his shoes inside the sleeping bag with him. “That does it.”

“Does what?”

Nyrobie hastily took Charlie in her arms, sleeping bag and all. He clung tightly around her neck—completely taken aback. She toted him with ease as if he were made of cotton.

“Hold tightly, my friend.”

“Nyrob—”

And then they rushing from the scene. Charlie’s eyes pried just enough to witness numerous branches being avoided as Nyrobie ducked and weaved while racing through the evergreens and up the mountainside. Safe from view, she sat Charlie down. His mouth agape—he was at a loss for words.

“There...just there.” Nyrobie pointed as an awkward red box with wheels approached.

“What...what the hell is that, Nyrobie?”

“Well...that’s a vehicle, Charlie. Your people are quite fond of them. Are you not?”

“That’s amazing. It looks like something from another planet.” The red box came to a halt.

“You’ve yet to see your own people’s modern world...because of the actions of my people.”

“I’ve rode in hundreds of cars, but I had no clue that was what they looked like. What do them letters read?”

“They read Hummer, Charlie.”

Just then a brunette woman exited the vehicle and rushed to the side of Austin. She shook the sleeping man until he finally aroused to the point she was able to assist him to the vehicle. The couple did not collect Austin’s camping gear before the red box tore from the scene.

“Do you think he’ll tell her about us?”

“Oh I’m sure of it. She is his bride. I’m also certain she will find his story whimsical, enchanting, and unbelievable. She will assume it the product of the elements.”

“Yea...everyone thought I was crazy too.”

“Come, Charlie. Let us rummage through the remnants to find you some dry clothing.”

Chapter 8

“Jerrek...I have a deep sorrow within me. The darkness no longer encompasses us, it moves to strike at our core.”

Standing near a cliff's edge, overlooking the vast beauty of the region, Carrie watched the morning sun defeat the copious clouds to express its full glory.

“Dear friend...this sorrow...do you feel your bond to be broken? Do you feel Charlie no longer breathes?” Jerrek moved from the trees behind her, standing at her side instantly—his face scowled with deep concern.

“No. Our bond is ever strong. I feel security and warmth within his heartbeat. I'm certain he is with Nyrobie.”

“Why then do you worry? We will collect him once more and nothing will stop us from our destination. We will spend eternity with the ones we love most...I'm certain of this, my friend.”

Carrie hugged Jerrek. So unwavering was his companionship and loyalty that he would risk his own eternal being for her happiness. “You are the definition of friendship, Jerrek. I feel however that I have been greatly deceived.”

Jerrek instantly pushed away, his brows pointing downward—nostrils flared as his eyes ached to pull an explanation from Carrie.

“No, Jerrek, this deception is neither yours...nor Nyrobie's.”

“Your mortal's?”

“Of course not. I...I feel my father's presence near me...around me. I feel his presence in a way I can't describe, Jerrek.”

“Certainly not, Carrie. Your father—”

“My father was in full support of the previous Council, you know this, Jerrek. Let us not forget it was his Restoration that failed to revive and restore my sweet Charlie just before yours did.”

Jerrek studied the situation, his gaze settled on the snowy ground. “You truly feel Tarik could be capable of conspiring against you with such an uprising?”

“My father holds many powers, Jerrek. Where his magic strengthens, his political power lessens. I feel he has reduced to acts of desperation. I have felt this sorrow several times over during my decades. If he is not at the helm of this attack, he is involved somehow.”

“Carrie!” A chipper Charlie, dressed in very baggy clothing and toting the rolled sleeping bag, ran from the trees to her, followed by Nyrobie.

“Charlie!” She cradled his scruffy face in her hands, kissing his lips and cheeks repeatedly. “I knew you would come back to me, my love.”

“I was with you...you were with me. I felt you with me; we were back in the lilies...that day.”

She studied his face—healthy and full of life. “There are many similar memories to be made, Charlie.”

She accepted his excited embrace—he hugged her, lifting her from the ground.

“Charlie...you’re well. You do not resemble a man half-drowned and recovering from the attack of a ravenous wolf.” She turned to Nyrobie as Charlie sat her down. “Your magic now mends wounds of the human flesh, Nyrobie?”

“No, Carrie. I may only undo what dark magic has done...I did not do this.”

“Charlie, how are you walking and well? Are you not injured?”

His smile faded—his gaze never fell from hers. “He was going to kill me, but he healed me first.”

“What?” She cocked her head, awaiting his response. Her breath hastened at the thought of someone intentionally harming him.

“He healed my injuries. I’m pretty sure I had a cold, too. He took care of that.”

“Who?”

“The same man...the same man that took my sight.”

Carrie grabbed his shoulder, her grasp firm and affixed. “Charlie, who?”

“Carrie,” Nyrobie stepped closer, “it was Tarik that I came upon when I found Charlie. He is responsible.”

“No. It cannot be!”

“It was, Carrie. Your father also used his magic against a human man that assisted Charlie. I was able to reverse what he had done, but the intent was clear. Tarik was set on ending the man’s life.”

Nyrobie’s words entered her ears, yet took several seconds to penetrate and absorb. She then turned to Charlie, falling to her knees. “Forgive me! Please forgive me, my love!” She cried at his feet for but a second, and then he joined her on the ground.

“What are you doing, Carrie? There’s nothing to forgive. You did nothing wrong.”

“Your suffering was not only at the hands of my people...but my own father. He has taken so much from you.”

Charlie reached for her hand, lifting it to his lips—he offered a soft kiss. “But look what he’s given me. I have you, Carrie.”

His face, shadowed with morning stubble, and his rich, brown eyes—alive with the morning’s light, drew her into him. She wrapped her hands around him, pressing his lips to hers.

“Charlie...I will bless you with an eternity of the most beautiful memories. I cannot give you back what he has taken, but I will give you all I have. I give you all of me.”

He smiled, kissing her cheek. “Your face is the only thing I need to see, everything else is just icing. I have you...be that for ten minutes, years or thousands of years...I’m the happiest man alive.”

“Your father does not act alone.” Nyrobie kneeled to the reunited couple. “There is much magic standing between us Evrastill.”

“You’re certain he harmed a human? You witnessed this, Nyrobie?”

“I did, Carrie. His name is Austin. The man saved my life. I watched your father just...take his life with a touch.”

Carrie stood. “We have no choice. These members have proven they will recklessly disregard our most sacred vows to suit their own agenda. They are more wicked than the humans they condemn.”

“Indeed, but they are ten-thousand times more powerful.”

“That, Jerrek, is why we must stop them. We must reach Evrastill with haste and rile the Council. Aglet’s justice will be swift.”

“Carrie...your father will be executed.”

“Indeed he will, Jerrek. My father has made his decision. My loyalty is to my bond and my Council. He rivals both. Even the strongest magic cannot undo his choice and the consequences that will stem from it.”

“The only way to ensure Charlie’s safety is to reach Evrastill.” Nyrobie’s realistic proclamation had the three immortals looking toward each other for guidance.

“We have no guide, my love. How will we navigate?” Before Jerrek’s question was answered, they were interrupted.

“Might I be of assistance?” From the trees, a dark-haired man appeared. He casually strolled in front of the tree line—keeping his distance.

“Carrie! He was with him. He was one of them with Tarik!” Charlie stood, his expression a mixture of rage and fear.

“Brennus...you leave your intentions unprotected.”

“Nyrobie, I have nothing to hide. I am here to extinguish the human. Once I’ve accomplished this, perhaps we can talk reasonably.”

Jerrek maneuvered Charlie behind him. “Brennus, this is madness. Do you not hear yourself? You would end the life of a human?”

Brennus stepped closer. “He is but a blink, my young Jerrek. We are eternal. To stay eternal, we must preserve what has maintained us. Please do not resist, I will not bring your human friend pain.”

“You will not bring him anything, Brennus. Once the Council learns of your betrayal, you will be executed...you know this. Why have you forsaken your own immortality for a militia that will only be dispersed?”

“Take my immortality if it is to be spent in the presence of this vile disgrace. I will not coexist with such antics. It is as unnatural as—”

“That is all, Brennus. Go...before I kill you.”

“Jerrek...I have lived thirty of your lives...I have witnessed things that would leave you trembling like the sparrows you befriend. You will break in my hands...and you will watch as your human friend bleeds...cries...and begs for you. Or, you will step aside and allow him to return to the earth peacefully.” Brennus took an additional step in their direction.

“Enough talking.”

Before Carrie could intervene or even object, Jerrek was rushing toward Brennus. The men clashed with tremendous force—chest to chest—they met face to face, eyes level—their gazes unwavering.

With lightning speed, Brennus struck Jerrek aside the head, and then offered a tremendous side kick—sending the man sailing several feet. Jerrek landed upright—his eyes on Brennus. He charged in his direction. Fists met their mark with intense ferocity. Carrie shielded Charlie as the battle sent debris skyward.

An uppercut had Brennus falling backward. Jerrek completed the assault with a kick to the man’s midsection, sending him on a collision course with a nearby tree. He arose with maddened eyes.

Within seconds he was upon Jerrek. The attack launched on Jerrek was relentless. Each strike was strategic and left Jerrek weakening quickly—his counterattacks were consistently blocked.

“Enough!” Jerrek fell to his back his bloody hand raised, at the mercy of an enraged Brennus.

“You made your choice, my young friend. Your journey ends here.”

His mighty fist raised high, Brennus stepped to a defeated Jerrek—preparing to end his life.

“No!” Carrie’s voice sent both Brennus and Jerrek through the air. Jerrek landed safely, but badly beaten. Brennus met a man-sized boulder with incredible force. He fell to the ground and was slow to rise to his feet.

“It...it cannot be. At long last! Carrie...my dear child. You truly do hold the power of the echo?”

Carrie approached, slowly, yet confidently. She eyed her target—completely certain of her intentions. She desired to cave to it, to give into to this anger within her.

“Silence, Brennus.”

“Carrie...you haven’t the years nor the knowledge to understand what lurks within you. We will own this earth entirely, my dear. Your gift is that of an all-powerful leader. All will bow to your glory...or perish. You are a great wonder of the world...not the bride of a mortal.” His eyes were wide with appreciation.

“Bow before me now, Brennus.” Her soft command was but a mutter, yet Brennus obliged, kneeling at her feet. Her head cocked as she gazed down on the beautiful creature before her. The man who had imprisoned her, attempted to kill her beloved friend, Jerrek, and insulted her bond with Charlie. There was no attempt to quell the rage within her; rather, she embraced the anger—she found herself fascinated by where it might take her.

Her gaze still on the raven-black hair of Brennus, she allowed the mounting fury to fester—it was pleasing. “Bow before me...and perish.”

“What?”

“Perish!” Her deafening screech from above flattened Brennus on his back—sending rocks and other debris flying from around him.

“Carrie, my child...please—”

“Diiieee! Diiieee!” Raising her arms, she embraced her voice—her magnificent echo. The simple words shattered through the atmosphere, echoing throughout the land in a deafening and disastrous rage. As Carrie continued screaming, she watched her words’ work. The wrath echoed down to tear the clothing and flesh from her ancient victim, sending blood and skin from the writing man’s body and to the trembling trees surrounding the horrific scene. Within seconds there was only a bloody skeletal reminder of what was once a prominent pillar of her society—Brennus was no more—ended by Carrie, a member less than one hundred years old.

Peering at the product of her rage—the eyeless scull, absent the majority of skin and hair atop a mangled, macabre, skinned body, a disgusting feeling overtook her—a feeling of dark dread and guilt.

“Carrie!” Nyrobie ran to her. “You have killed Brennus.”

Carrie said nothing, her gaze remained affixed to the horror before her.

“Carrie!”

“What choice did I have, Nyrobie? He’d have killed Jerrek, and you and...and Charlie. He’d have killed everything I love. He left me no choice.”

Nyrobie examined the remains of Brennus; a look of disgust plastered her face. “This magic...can you contain it?”

“Of course, Nyrobie. Tend to your Jerrek. You forget you nearly lost him for all eternity.” Carrie turned from Nyrobie to see Charlie standing near a tree. His face was riddled with caution, concern, and fear.

“Charlie...my love. Forgive me. I never meant for you to bear witness to such—”

“Are you okay?” He rushed to her, his gentle touch aside her cheek offered a soothing, calming effect.

“Do you think me heartless? Do you find me vile?”

“What? No, I don’t understand what that was. But you were protecting your loved ones, Carrie. You’re anything but heartless.”

His eyes chased away any lingering anger within her. She looked once more at his ridiculous ensemble—clothing that was much too big for him—he was an innocent. She was thankful knowing she had this weapon and the ability to protect him.

Nyrobie assisted a badly battered Jerrek as they made their way to Carrie and Charlie.

“Them birds...they’re here too.” Charlie pointed toward the trees as grackles landed—spotting the tall evergreens.

“What they see, Tarik sees. He knows of Brennus, Carrie. He knows of your capabilities.”

“Indeed, Nyrobie. Perhaps their confidence fractured.”

“Carrie, you killed an ancient Society member. You annihilated him. Regardless of Brennus’ intentions, the Council will have serious concerns with your actions. To possess the gift of the echo is to carry a massive burden. You will not be allowed to leave Evrastill for this world again. You will be considered much too dangerous once the council learns of this.”

“That is not my concern at this point, Nyrobie. Once I reach Evrastill, free of those that hunt us...I may never need to leave again.”

Chapter 9

The blinding snow left the couples no choice but to delay their mindless wandering about the woods. Evening hours were fast approaching as they retreated into a shallow hillside cave. Uncharacteristically dry, the cave made a decent retreat. Carrie snuggled next to Charlie—he shivered while bundled in the sleeping bag Austin gave him.

“Nyrobie and I are going to fetch dry wood for a fire. We’ll be back shortly.”

“Be safe, Jerrek.”

“Always, my friend.”

Nyrobie and Jerrek exited the cave and into the blinding-white abyss.

“Th...that’s amazing.” Charlie’s teeth chattered.

“What, my love?”

“Jerrek looks fine...like nothing happened. Like he didn’t take an ass whoopin’ earlier.”

“Of course...it has been several hours, Charlie. We heal in minutes...not days.”

“Your people are amazing.”

“You are amazing, my love.”

His soft smile was tired—he appeared miserably cold.

“We will make it home, Charlie. All of this will not have been for nothing.”

Unzipping the bag, he invited her in with him. They laid backward—she ran her fingers through his hair as his teeth continued to chatter.

“You’re shivering, Charlie. Let me warm you.” With the bag zipped, she gently kissed him. Instantly his shivering ceased.

“You’re so beautiful, Carrie.”

“Great forces are against us, Charlie...we are lost and far from home. My father wishes you dead and I took the life of a prominent Society member today.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better...you could try singing or something.”

“Something more enjoyable.” Her hand slid between his toned lower stomach and the waistband of his pants. His choppy inhalation was coupled with wide eyes of uncertainty. She found him completely aroused within seconds in her hand. “Do you object, my love?”

“What if they come back?”

She chuckled. “What if they do? You fear we won’t have the time?”

He grinned, propping himself on his elbow, his other hand pulling the front of his pants down—allowing her better access. “You’re right. I haven’t had sex in seventy years. This ain’t gonna take long at all.”

She gently pushed him backward and maneuvered her own garment to her ankles. Climbing atop him, she placed him within her. Instantly his eyes widened—a whimsical smirk curled half his mouth—his gaze anchored to hers.

She gently rocked; each slight motion appeared to bring him almost unbearable pleasure. Biting his bottom lip, he occasionally motioned for her to slow her pace—as if the sensation was too overpowering.

She studied his expressions—his ecstasy blatantly displayed. The men of her society lacked the character she craved. They were constantly polished, each hair on their head ever in place, lacking even a trace of facial hair—never sporadic or unmanaged. Charlie was different. She yearned for the wild, thick, messy, dark hair that had no rhyme to it. Stubble on his face, the product of a lazy day or day lost in the woods—he loved his humanity and the honesty that accompanied it.

As her own pleasure intensified, she increased her stride. Almost instantly he was leaning up to her.

“Awe! Holy—”

“Shall I...stop?”

“Yes! No! Oh my...” His head flailed backward as his grip tightened firmly on the sleeping bag.

Understanding he’d neared the pleasure threshold, she decided to take him to a place he’d never been. Rocking her hips harder sent him flying forward, gasping as his arms wrapped around her, grabbing her shoulders intensely. His repeated grunts and gasps in her ear assured her she’d accomplished the mission.

He continued panting as she slowed and stopped. “Are you okay, my love?”

He remained speechless, his quivering head rested on her shoulder as he stared toward the cave floor.

“Charlie?”

“Oh...my...holy shit.”

“I’m assuming you’re satisfied?”

He laid backwards, smirking up at her with drunken-like gaze. He brought the palm of his hand to his forehead and chuckled. “Satisfied? I don’t...I don’t even know what to say. That was amazing. It’s like...it’s like the years I spent in the darkness are melting away. My destiny is with you.”

“That good, huh?”

“I mean it, Carrie. You are my everything. You always have been. I’m nothing without you but a worthless, mortal human.”

The conviction in his eyes as the words left his mouth assured Carrie he truly felt so poorly of

himself.

“Charlie...you are to be my unified partner for all eternity. I cannot stand to have you say such things of yourself. You are kind, beautiful both inside and out, and you are worth more to me than all my days—my eternity. That is not worthless.”

She kissed him once more before leaving the bedding to freshen herself in the falling snow.

She stared skyward—there were no feathered fiends lurking about the trees.

The snow fell heavy and accumulated thick on the ground. Charlie was soon beside her, wrapped still in the sleeping bag.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset with you, my love. It upsets me to hear you say such things of yourself because I know you feel they are true. To be human is beautiful...be proud of what you are. I am proud to stand next to you.”

“The things your father said...about the humans in your home being parasites, I hope your people will accept me as you do one day.”

She took his hand. “Parasites? The humans of Evrastill are contributing members of our community. To be completely honest, it’s easy to forget they are human from time to time. They’ve become quite accustomed to our ways. You, my sweet Charlie, will forever be perfect to me just as you are. My father’s words are those of a man destined for infamy and self-destruction. I can only hope the Council is merciful when they end him.”

“Maybe they’ll lock him up or something.”

“Certainly not. Above all else, a Society member must never bring harm to a human. The Council will not sway—all involved will face death.”

“I figured you’d be—”

“Charlie.” She peered about the scene. “Go back into the cave.”

“What?”

“Please.”

Charlie disappeared from her peripheral vision and into the mouth of the cave.

“I can sense you. Reveal yourself.”

The lack of response had Carrie stepping further from the entrance. “Reveal yourself now.”

“I know of your magic, Carrie.” The female’s voice was confident and clear. “I know not what lingers in your heart. I choose to remain in the shadows.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No harm will come to you. Show yourself, Elisa.”

The slender beauty appeared cautiously—snow falling around her. Her long brown hair fell free, she donned a white gown—less than desirable for combat.

Carrie casually approached. “Elisa, you too have deceived your Council?”

A single tear left Elisa’s green eye. “Carrie...I am here on my own accord. We share respect, no?”

“We do. Can you lead us home?”

“Yes.” Elisa peered toward the ground, her face riddled with concern.

“Elisa, what troubles you?”

She wiped the tears from her eyes as Carrie walked to her. “Your father...he’s returned to Evrastill. He told the Council of your magic. He said you destroyed Brennus.”

“Elisa...I had no choice. Brennus stalked us in the hopes of killing Charlie—”

“Tarik has killed Councilman Aglet, Carrie! The Society bows to your father, his followers and their magnificence.”

“It cannot be.”

“I speak the truth, Carrie. Andre has been imprisoned and is awaiting execution. The humans have been gathered and will be escorted from the entrance of Evrastill in the morning.”

“We...we must go to them...now!”

“Yes. That is why I have come. Your father will spare Andre and the humans if you return to Evrastill...without your mortal man.”

“This is not an option, Elisa.”

“If you arrive at the entrance of Evrastill with your mortal man, the humans of Evrastill will be escorted out in front of you. All the years they escaped the wrath of aging will be upon them in a matter of seconds. They will be reduced to dust within the blink of an eye.”

“He wouldn’t dare...the Society would end him. The Society loves its human members.”

“The society is horrified, Carrie. Your father’s powers are vast...you are his daughter and there is talk of you possessing the gift of the echo. The Society is unsure of your intentions.”

“They should know my loyalty.”

“They know only that you murdered Brennus and your father murdered Councilman Aglet, Carrie. Our world is in bedlam. That is what they know this second.”

“No. I will return. We can make this right.”

“I must go...I must leave now.”

“Elisa, we haven’t a guide.”

“The last of the evening’s snow will fall hours before sunrise. Look to the sky, your guide will be there.”

“You’re certain? I cannot risk my human friends falling victim to my father’s wretched hands.”

“Look to the sky, my friend.”

“You would not guide us now?”

Elisa offered a soft smile, she then hugged Carrie. “I am not returning to my home, Carrie.”

“What? That isn’t an option.”

“I have lived one-thousand-forty-two years. I’m tired, Carrie. My time here is done.”

“Elisa, no. This too shall resolve. My father will be stopped and Evrastill will be restored.”

“Indeed, Carrie. I have complete faith. Yet my heart is weary and I am ready. Eternity is too

daunting. The life of the mortals appeals to me more with each passing year. I wish to become one with this earth. I wish to rest.”

“Elisa...do not make such decisions while under such despair.”

“Carrie, I never thought I would witness such days. Our ancestors would harm humans? The same humans we’ve offered sanctuary to...and lived in harmony with. The same humans our kind are sworn to protect. How are we living in such times, Carrie?”

“Elisa, do not do this. Please, be there when the Council is reestablished. Stand with us when Evrastill becomes what it was always meant to be.”

Elisa only offered a friendly nod, turned and disappeared into the white.

Carrie returned to Charlie to find him observing curiously—still snug in the sleeping bag.

“Your friend?”

“I know her.”

“Your magic, is it something rare or special or...I mean of course your special but—”

“I don’t know what it is for certain, Charlie. I was certain my magic would present as a healing feature. The gift of the echo is something I’ve only heard in legend; I’ve never known a member to possess it. I’m uncertain what I possess is truly the echo.”

“Is it good if it is?”

“I’m unsure how to answer that. I have a new confidence and resurrected faith that we will reach Evrastill and your safety shall be secured.”

“What’s wrong then?”

“Something...something has taken residence within me. This magic, its appearance is accompanied by new emotions. I’ve felt anger before, Charlie. The day they separated us—my anger was as hot as melted iron. So many days while imprisoned I felt angry and betrayed. And when I learned of my mother’s ending...my anger had me longing to end my own existence. I have felt anger.”

She turned to Charlie, stepping closer to him. “This is different. This is a longing...some itch that I cannot ignore.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.” She kissed his cold cheek.

Several minutes later they were joined by Jerrek and a distraught Nyrobie.

“Nyrobie, what is it?” Carrie rushed to her friend as they entered the cave.

“It is Elisa. I felt her fade. I was with her...on her thoughts. I felt her fade, Carrie.”

Carrie placed her face within her hands and cried.

Jerrek stepped forward. “We found her. We were following her but we didn’t reach her in time to stop her. She walked from the mountain side.”

“It is what she wanted.”

“What? How do you know this, Carrie?”

“She was with us briefly, Nyrobie. She told us of her intentions. She told us a great deal.”

“You could have stopped her, Carrie!”

“No...I couldn't have. Her mind was set.”

Nyrobie and Jerrek walked past Carrie.

“My father has returned to Evrastill. The society knows of my secret. Councilman Aglet has perished at the hands of my father, and the Kingdom is in upheaval.”

“No!” Nyrobie's hand slapped over her open mouth.

“Elisa promised an aerial guide in the early morning. If I return to Evrastill with Charlie, it is said Joseph, Clark, and Elinor will be escorted from the Kingdom.”

“He wouldn't! The society would stop him! We have to get to them!”

“We will, Nyrobie. The guide will be here just as the snow ceases.”

“We must take Charlie. We can't leave a human without provisions in such conditions. He'll perish.”

“I know this. Charlie will be ever at my side. If my father attempts to harm the humans of Evrastill, I will end him myself.”

The hours passed slowly. The fire was started and the night had fallen. The morning hours were now upon them. Nyrobie, Jerrek and Carrie sat around the blaze, Charlie slept with his head in Carrie's lap—she ran her fingers through his hair as they waited on the snow to cease.

“Carrie, his stomach talks. He needs to eat something.”

“Yes, Nyrobie. We should all seek nourishment.”

“Humans cannot maintain long without it. We must reach our destiny this morning.”

“Look!” Jerrek pointed toward the entrance. “The snow has stopped.”

As Nyrobie and Jerrek rushed to the entrance, Carrie woke Charlie. They all met at the cave's entrance, looking skyward—so clear and crisp—yet no guide was present.

“Carrie, the dawn will be here soon.”

“She promised, Jerrek.”

With their gazes affixed to the star-filled night, the screech of barn owl captured their attention as the bird descended.

“See, there she is.” Carrie grinned happily.

“Let us run swiftly.” Jerrek patted Charlie's shoulder. Charlie merely gave his friend a sleepy nod—he was then hoisted into Jerrek's arms.

Chapter 10

The entrance of Evrastill was lit with the first rays of the morning's sun. Boisterous voices could be heard as the four of them approached. With the job completed, their guide flew swiftly away.

"We enter confidently. This is our kingdom." Carrie walked toward the entrance with her head high—only to look upon her father—Tarik, Danny, Irena, Brindle, and several other members surrounding the frightened humans of her society.

"Father!"

Instantly he was smiling and making his way slowly toward her. "Hello, Daughter."

"Take the humans back beneath. This is madness."

He chuckled. "You've yet to see madness, my child."

"Father...please do not do this. This goes against everything—"

"Enough of that! If we are to preserve our own species and way of life, we cannot continue to commit to an existence within the shadows. We cannot continue to assume their existence is priority."

"Father—"

"No...Carrie. Have you never wondered why your Kingdom is absent a king or queen, but rather has a lowly council of fickle and spineless ingrates?"

She looked to him, curious of what his shenanigans would produce.

"Evrastill had a queen, Carrie, an all-powerful queen of the ages. Her visions were pure and untainted with our self-destructive desire to aid mankind. She too processed the echo."

"I don't believe in fairytales."

"You too shall be a fairytale if you do not hear my words and heed my warning, Daughter. She had the foresight, the power and the ability to advance our Society. If we would only see our own kind as the priority and embrace our splendor...what could we accomplish?"

"This queen, if she was so powerful, where is she now?"

"They killed her. So consumed with the ideas of old, the treacherous fools destroyed the one weapon that could have forever protected us."

"Let's say I do believe you—I don't, but even if I did—there is nothing of your agenda that I find even mildly appealing. You have reduced yourself to a murderous criminal."

“And you have followed well in my footsteps, disintegrating poor Brennus. Dear, dear. What a pitiful sight that must have been.”

“Aglet was kind, Father. What reason did you have to end him?”

“Aglet was a fool, Carrie. He would lead this Kingdom into an eternity of slavery. How is it natural to continue to protect these foul beings that only destroy their earth and wage war against their own kind? Why must we continue to lurk and—”

“What would you propose? That we wage war on them? Do you not hear yourself, father?”

“Do you not? You should sit high upon the throne of eternity—leading your people to greatness. The world of opportunity dances upon your fingertips yet you use them to caress a mortal.” His hand raised slightly, he motioned to his followers in the cave.

“Carrie, you have been blinded by a toxic idea that these creatures are equal. Look upon them now...they are not equal.”

Carrie looked past her father to see the three humans led by Danny from the entrance of Evrastill and into the morning’s light.

“Father, no!”

“Watch as the years of hiding away like common roaches comes back to them like a sea of vengeance. Watch as they age to dust in a matter of seconds!”

“They ain’t aging at all. You stupid idiot.” Charlie stepped forward, pointing toward the frightened humans.

“You see, Father...another fairytale. Get them back inside...where they belong, and then I will speak sensibly with you.”

Tarik stared, dumbfounded by the fact the humans were still young and vibrant. “Take these scavengers into Evrastill as my daughter has demanded. She is to be your queen.”

“The remainder of my party will enter as well, Charlie included.”

“Charlie may join the other humans within our prison, behind our stone and locked-tight for all eternity...yet, he will be granted eternity.”

“It is you who will be locked tight.”

“I haven’t time for theory, Carrie. Charlie may take refuge within our confinement. That is my only offer.”

Carrie turned to Charlie. “It would not be an eternity, my love. This is but a blink. You will have comfortable shelter, food, and warmth...and most importantly, you will cease to age another second the instant we enter.”

Charlie’s face was racked with concern. “What if he kills me, Carrie? I’d rather die in the snow and ice than let that bastard kill me.”

“I will not. If you scurry along promptly like a good little roach, you will be spared to live a meaningless existence with your fellow humans.” Tarik stepped aside, motioning Charlie to join the three humans being ushered in.

“Join them my love. I will be at your side tonight. My father is many things but he is not ignorant. He will not harm you while I breathe.”

Tears welled in her eyes as Charlie was ushered away with Clark, Joseph, and Elinor. “He has not eaten since we restored him. He needs nourishment. He’s very chilled from our journey and needs warmth—”

“Your precious pet will be fed, watered, and tended to. We have other business at hand.”

“Where shall we convene, Father? By the soft waters near your home? Perhaps you might lie to me once more.”

“Don’t be foolish, child. We speak only at Council Hall. There is much work to be done.”

Chapter 11

Walking through the darkness of some cave, Charlie could hear only the strange language he'd heard before and the soft tears of the female human just a few feet before him. It was nearly completely black. A soft glow ahead of them became brighter—soon the backs of the party-members' heads were visible.

As the others descended, Charlie looked over the soft-blue lit, Evrastill. Clad with beautiful trees and lush grass, the community was breath-taking.

He was motioned from behind to descend the stone stairs, and so he did. The air was warm and inviting and the scents were pleasant—fresh and natural. The sound of soft-flowing water was abundant. Walking down the stairs, he gazed upon several homes—all modest in size, but beautifully crafted of mountain stone. It was the most beautiful scene he'd ever laid eyes on—even in dreams.

“Hold!” Jerrek turned to Irena and Brindle at the front of the party. “How could you? You despicable beings. How could you do this?”

Shaking his head, Brindle ran from the scene—retreating.

Irena smiled. “Move, coward.”

“I'd advise you to watch your words when speaking to him, Irena.” Nyrobie's expressionless face came within inches of Irena's. Irena's hair was black, her face a pasty white, and her eyes a soft blue. She was gorgeous, but there was a distinctive danger to her.

“Irena...these humans are your friends. We've walked next to them for over a century.”

“They are human, Nyrobie. Councilman Tarik speaks the truth. The time of change is upon us.”

“Tarik is not of the Council and you are not of my Society. You disgust me.”

Nyrobie rushed to a crying Elinor, embracing her. “You are okay my friend. This will pass.”

“Nyrobie! I thought surely, I would perish. Why could they? I don't understand?”

“We must keep moving!” Irena prompted the humans to continue. Charlie smiled hesitantly as he walked by Jerrek and Nyrobie.

Approaching the building—sturdy yet inviting, Charlie found himself taken aback. He was expecting something rugged, heavily guarded, and perhaps hostile-looking. The Evrastill prison was a modest-sized, stone building. They entered to find a singular room with several odd, crescent-shaped beds and open washrooms. The area smelled fresh and clean.

“Elinor!” A brown-haired man ran to Elinor, embracing her as the couple fell to the ground. It appeared as though two eighteen or nineteen-year-old kids were reuniting, but Charlie knew their combined age was more than likely staggering.

“Did they expose you to the outside world, my dear?”

“Yes! I was so fearful.”

“Yet it didn’t occur? You didn’t end in dust?”

“Silence! Or this day will end in your separation.” Irena smiled as she walked to Charlie. “You... you’re the one she craves? You are what she desires above all else?”

Her firm fingers grasped either side of his face as she examined his features. “You are aesthetically pleasing.”

Unsure of her intentions, Charlie felt his anxiety mounting.

“You’re fearful?”

Swallowing hard, he nodded. “Yes...yes, ma’am.”

“I will not harm you.” She released him. “You’re hungry...are you not?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Here there are nuts, berries, warm pita breads, honey, and eating leaves. Eat and rest. I imagine you will be here a while.” Irena left the building, the beautiful stone door locked behind her. There were no windows to peer from. There was only this large room and these people he’d never met.

“You must be the human, Charlie.” The brown haired man who’d been crying approached.

“How’d ya guess?”

“I didn’t guess, my friend. You possess hair upon your face and chest. You are human.”

Charlie buttoned the top of his oversized flannel. “Who are you?”

“I am Councilman Andre. This is my bride, the human Elinor. This is her brother, Joseph, and this is Clark.”

“I’m Charlie.”

“Charlie, you make the fourth human to join Evrastill. I’m displeased you must join us under such circumstances but I am certain all will end as it should. Please, come and quell your hunger. You are among friends here.”

Eying the delightful spread of assorted breads, berries, nuts, and honey, Charlie realized he hadn’t physically seen food since before his sight was taken. He walked to the table, gently grabbing what he believed to be a strawberry. He placed the plump morsel in his mouth. The taste was overwhelmingly delicious. He ravenously reached for the bread, shoving an entire piece in his mouth while his other hand dipped into a bowl of blueberries. “This is...delicious.” His words were muffled.

“Eat all you like.” Clark stood next to him. The man had light-brown hair and appeared poised and maintained like Carrie’s people, not like a human man. “And you...you’re human, like me?”

“Indeed. I have a few years on you I’m sure, but I’m human just the same.”

Andre stood near Charlie, smiling happily. “It warms my heart to see a hungry human eat. Please,

forget your manners and fill your belly.”

Charlie did just as Andre asked. The array of food was nearly addictive and had him filling his cheeks and talking with his mouth full.

Andre cleared his throat. “As I suspected...you three were safe to venture from Evrastill. This further plays into my theory.”

Charlie, still chewing, wiped his mouth and walked to the others. Their gaze on him had him feeling foolish for devouring so much prior to proper introductions.

“I was horrified, my love.”

“As was I, Elinor. Yet I had the suspicion that you would return in one piece and unaged. There is no instance in the history of Evrastill of such an occurrence. I believe the tale of dust was merely a myth to establish parameters and keep you three corralled within these walls.”

“Why? Why would we ever want to leave here? This is our home.”

“I know that, Elinor. While lobbying for your freedom from prison many years ago, I entertained a radical idea...I planted a seed within certain Councilman’s ears. What if the Society, this magnificent and mythical population, were merely an evolution? What if we are merely the product of this glorious mountain’s vast greatness...and perhaps a group of lost humans? Is it not possible that with thousands of years within this mountain’s maintaining atmosphere that special abilities develop? Some of our members do not develop special skills until they are over two hundred. Who is to say that you as humans will not eventually develop some skill under the magic of the mountain? Furthermore...who is to say that we as members of the Society are anymore immortal than humans without the glory of the mountain? You returned today rather than diminished to nothing as they so strongly believed you would. Our kind age within this mountain to the beautiful and vibrant age of eighteen years old, we then stop aging all together. Joseph...Irena, you were both eighteen and nineteen years old when you were rescued from the tunnels. You haven’t aged a day since joining us...but Clark. Clark, you were but fifteen when you entered Evrastill, and you aged beautifully to an eighteen-year-old man, just as our kind do, and then you too stopped aging. This further fuels my belief. My people are not the god-like creatures we’ve so convinced ourselves we are. We are merely the product of an extremely special mountain, and an extremely lucky group of humans.”

“So...you think I might be as fast and strong and what not as your people someday.”

“No, Charlie. That is not what I am saying. I believe the Society’s people have evolved to what they are presently by the assistance of the mountain’s powers and several thousands of years. I do however believe that our population is in fact human in a much advanced form. Therefore, it would not be foul, unnatural, or anything other than a choice for a Society member to bond and unify with a, pardon my expression, common human.”

“What are they gonna do to us?” Charlie sat on the floor, removing his shoes.

“Tarik has a sordid agenda...one that I do not understand. He foolishly demeans the beliefs that bond this society together. We have always looked after and cared for the human population from afar.

As mankind's technology and blood-lust grew...we diminished our role within their world, yet we have never struck out against them in any fashion. To harm a human is as unnatural as water falling to the sky. It should make no sense to the mind of a Society member. Yet...here we are. The four of you are imprisoned, and the three of you spent your morning believing you would be executed by the morning's fresh air. This is poisonous and eviscerates what it means to be a member of this society. Tarik's mind has twisted itself into something even he cannot recognize and I fear his infectious ideas have recruited a wretched following."

"The Echo...what about Carrie?"

"Tell me, Charlie. What did you see while you were at Carrie's side? Be truthful and lacking of exaggeration. I am skilled at detecting manipulation by your kind."

"I wouldn't lie to you. I'll never lie to you."

"Go on, Charlie. Tell me what you witnessed."

Chapter 12

Within the Council Hall, Carrie found herself seated on the opposing side of the table she'd stood in front of when the Council granted her request. Completely alone, she maintained her composure—resolving to appear confident in her every action. Her fingernails clicking atop the immaculate table echoed throughout the broad room. Creaking slightly, Carrie's gaze fell upon an opening door and an entering Danny. Danny was a creature of beauty, yet his eyes had always held a certain uneasy and distant darkness within them. It was of no surprise to Carrie to find him on the opposing side of the present situation.

“Carrie. You don't still your clothing for travel. Might I fetch something more comfortable... something more becoming?”

“Danny, why do you linger? You are of little significance here. Your role is complete; you may excuse yourself.”

His gaze set upon her like a wolf—ready to pounce and craving the sweet rush of blood. Short, dark hair and darker eyes, he was cunning and agile—but Carrie was less than concerned with his presence.

“You...you are less than a century old, Carrie. Some do not find their bond until they have walked five hundred or more years. How do you know I could not be?”

She casually rose from her seat, chuckling. “Because he is, Danny. Say what you will of my bond, but it shall stand as strong as this mountain.”

“You're a fool to think such things. Eagles do not fly in the company of sparrows...let alone nest with them. You are the rarest of the rare. You deserve an eternity of greatness. Fly with me, Carrie. The bond will develop...and grow. Fly with me.”

“I would rather fly face first into a jagged hillside than in the company of a wretched being such as you. If you truly are an eagle...then I too am a sparrow.”

“Why would you speak so cruelly to me, Carrie?”

“You are as bendable as water—willing to flow in any direction, regardless of the destination. Have you no conscience? Do you not foresee where your actions would take this society? So willing to throw away all we are, and for what?”

He strolled to her, smirking. “Your father's words are the truth, Carrie. You simply refuse to hear

and accept them.”

“Accept this as your final warning, Danny. Leave this hall...crawl back to your empty home...and do not stir when my father summons you. Do this...and I will spare you.”

His laugh filled the room—his head flying backward dramatically. “Silly, Carrie. You kill one ancient fellow and you think you can butcher all who oppose you. I find this comical.”

“Brennus wasn’t laughing.”

Danny’s expression changed, his gaze hardened—his upper lip twitched slightly. “Brennus was a friend, Carrie. I will hear no more of this. The weak of the Society are locked away within their homes, tucked tightly with their weak-minded beliefs. Only those that envision greatness roam about Evrastill on this day. I will not retreat. You will come to see your father as the visionary he is.”

“Danny...I do not hate you. I do not wish your existence to end prematurely. This rebellion will be within our history for all time. Do not let your time end in infamy, Danny.”

“Leave us, Danny.” Tarik entered the room.

As their gaze broke, Danny walked from the room, shutting the door behind him.

“It would seem as though we have some discussing to do, Daughter.”

“Indeed it would. Please...address me as Carrie. I wish to preserve the familial titles for those I consider such.”

“Sit down, Carrie.”

As she took her seat, he approached. “What a world would it be if our kind walked freely in the sun’s glorious light...every day? To expand our reach from this mountain and devour the earth’s gifts the way they were meant to be. What a world we would live in if we were the primary species. There is only a simplistic set of values that distracts us.”

“Values? My longing to assist mankind is instilled in my very being, Father. It is as natural as longing to taste clean water and fresh air.”

“What has this offered you in return, child? You are a prisoner of this mountain. Our kind is shunned and forced away from the stars...the clouds...and the humans that are left to enjoy those things continue to poison their world. Assisting that is unnatural, Carrie.”

“No. Here are my terms. Release Andre and the humans. Once the Council is reestablished, they shall decide the fate of you and your rogue crew. I will ask for leniency if you release them now and halt this crazy charade.”

“My dear...you are in no position to be presenting terms. You possess a gift you are unfamiliar with. You find yourself slowly becoming one with it. Do you not?”

“This magic is powerful, yes. You will face its wrath if you do not cease this traitorous nonsense.”

He chuckled lowly as he meandered closer—his hands clasped behind his back. “Carrie, your human friends are comfortable. If you threaten me once more...I assure you they will be anything but content.”

“I am not threatening you, Tarik . I’ve spent the majority of my existence longing for what was just within reach...my only desire in all the world. My dreams were ever-consumed with his face...with our love. I need not power, nor any riches of this mountain or this earth. I long for a simple existence under the safety of a just Council, and with my unified bond.”

“Pathetic...truly uninspiring. The Queen stares idly at her throne before turning from it to dirty her hands in the garden gathering herbs, merely hours before giving herself to a mortal.”

“I wasn’t finished. I am not threatening you. If you so much as mention harming him even once more, you will scream under my voice as it ends you.”

“Carrie, do come with me for but a moment.”

She reluctantly obliged her father; rising from her seat, she followed him from the Hall—remaining several feet behind him. As they stepped out into the community, the same community Carrie was entirely familiar with, Tarik smiled and raised his hand toward the mountainous walls as if he were presenting them to her for the first time.

“You, my dear, possess a rare and powerful gift. The echo has been said to have the ability to crush entire armies. It is mysterious, grand, and largely unexplored. I challenge you now, Carrie, end me. Loose your splendorous rage upon me. Watch me diminish to nothing...and watch too the walls of this kingdom implode under your glory.”

Carrie’s vision bounced about the blue-beaming inner walls of their kingdom. What if he is correct? Would my gift destroy this kingdom if unleashed?

“You see, my dear. If you truly love and care for your people...you will contain what lurks within you, regardless my actions. You will come to accept your true identity. You will embrace it. There is no escape. Compliance is the only option.”

The cruelty and conviction in his tone had Carrie’s throat tightening.

“Irena!” Tarik’s forceful summoning was answered within seconds. Irena appeared behind them from within the Hall.

“Yes, Tarik.”

“The human, Clark. Fetch him promptly.”

“Indeed, Tarik.” Irena vanished instantly.

“Father, no, please. Clark is my friend; he’s guilty of nothing. Please do not harm him.”

“Perhaps you shall heed my future warnings, Carrie.”

A deep dread clawed from Carrie’s core. The thought of Tarik bringing harm to Clark was unbearable. A few moments later, the human Clark was presented in the grasp of Irena. The man’s gaze remained anchored to the ground—his face wet with tears.

“Father...do not harm him. I beg you.”

“I am Father once more I see. I will not harm him. Irena will end this human, and you will bear witness to his final breath.” Tarik’s words had Clark crashing to his knees, unable to maintain his composure.

A concerned Irena looked toward Clark, and then to Tarik. “Tarik, why is this necessary. These weaklings are of no concern to our cause. He crumbles at your words like a coward—what threat could he possibly present?”

Carrie watched in horror as Tarik presented a dagger from beneath his cloak.

“He is weak, dear Irena. Are you? Does your loyalty to our advancement go beyond your words?”

“Of course, Tarik. Your vision is mine.”

“This human...of a human world and of a human mind...is one of many that will hinder our process. End him now with a humanly weapon.” Tarik tossed the dagger to Irena.

“Rise, and meet your end like a man.” Tarik’s demand was met with Clark attempting to stand—his fear shook him. Although his tears continued, he attempted to appear brave.

“Run him through, Irena. Let his heart welcome the blade of his people.”

“Father, no...don’t do this!”

“Silence, Carrie.” Tarik held his hand up in opposition.

Irena stepped to Clark, raising the blade. “I...I feel his fear, Tarik.”

“As do I, Irena. You are greater than that. Run him through.”

Irena glanced once more to Tarik—the blade met the ground before her. “I cannot, Tarik. I long to cease his fear.”

Tarik gave a boisterous, forced laugh. “Too weak, Irena. Your loyalty thus far has been highly appreciated; however, you are of no further use to me. Your journey ends with this human’s.”

The anger...the white-hot rage within her, was aching to erupt. She longed to allow her voice to control the madness taking place before her, and send her father flying. Her physical attack would need to suffice. She leapt between a frightened Irena and her approaching father. So forceful was the backhand she delivered, that it sent Tarik sailing toward the surrounding trees.

“Carrie!” Irena appeared horrified. “Your strength is unimaginable. It is true. You possess the great gift.”

“Irena. I need you take Clark back to the prison. Release Andre and the others and retreat deep within the tunnels. Andre knows the alternative route to the surface.”

“Carrie...I have heard of wicked things that roam about the tunnels.”

“Wicked things roam here. You are not safe here. If we are to battle these foes, it must not be at the destruction of the Kingdom. We will travel the back way to the surface...and they shall follow me to their end. Go.” Carrie then looked to a highly shaken Clark. “You are okay, my friend. Your journey does not end this day.”

“I am weak. I do crumble.”

“We are all weak when faced with illogical madness. Even kings can crumble, Clark.” She wiped his tears and hugged him briefly. “Not this day, my friend. We have a society to resurrect. I need you.”

He offered a hopeful smile as he and Irena turned for the prison.

Methodical in her approach, Carrie entered the thicket in search for her father. She found him

fractured near the mountain's wall. Peering down upon him, she wished only to end him and his treachery. "Your pain is extensive, Father."

"Your power...is glorious, Daughter. The capabilities just waiting to be unmasked."

"Close your eyes, Father." She stood confidently above him—her gaze piercing his as his body remained motionless below her.

"I'm healing, Carrie. I'll be upright within minutes."

"No. Your journey ends here. Close your eyes."

"Carrie! How could you?" Danny appeared. His eyes wide with shock as he looked upon a wounded Tarik. "You would kill your own father?"

"Danny...I warned you."

"And I have a warning for you, wench. Step aside or meet my magic."

Danny rushed to the aid of Tarik. "Sir...Irena and Andre have escaped with the humans."

"They leave Evrastill for the earth above?"

"No...it is believed they delve into the tunnels."

"Let them...they are doomed to peril."

"Tarik, Andre knows the tunnels well."

"Indeed. He should be mindful of what lurks within them. They will fall to the clutches of darkness, or end by my hand."

Carrie stepped closer. "Father...what evil resides within the tunnels?"

"Look around you my dear...what do you see? There is much beauty here. This kingdom is bathed continuously in the brilliance of the blue crystals."

"Speak swiftly, fool! I haven't the time for theatrics."

"Even deeper within this same mountain...the crystals shine just as boldly...yet they bask the surrounding walls in a wicked glare. The residents there are...charming."

"I do not believe you. We are all that reside in this mountain. Only bats and stranded bears roam the tunnels."

"Indeed. So much of your own world you are ignorant to."

"I should say the same of you, but enough talk. You die now, Father."

"Spare me...I ask you as your father. Please do not end my days now."

Carrie peered upon her father, rapidly healing, yet broken before her. "To spare you is to spare your agenda as well. How can I collect my friends...only to deliver them to this lunacy?"

"Carrie, if you descend into the tunnels beneath this kingdom...there will be no return. Andre is a fool to venture there."

"I believe nothing that leaves your mouth, Father."

"He speaks the truth." Nyrobie appeared—eyes wide and her mouth agape. "Tarik...your injuries leave you unguarded. Your thoughts are as vulnerable as a mouse at dusk within an open field. You are truly despicable. End him now, Carrie."

“Nyrobie.” Carrie walked to her disturbed friend. “What did you see?”

“She’ll never see again!” As an enraged Danny charged at Carrie’s closest friend, his throat met Carrie’s grip—slamming him to the ground below her.

“I...warned...you.” Both hands wrapped tightly around his throat. A sickening popping noise resounded—the whites of his eyes shaded a slight pink and then a brilliant bloodshot red. So broken was his neck within her grasp, that it resembled a stocking full of sand rather than the muscular neck of nearly nine-hundred-year-old Danny. Carrie rose to Nyrobie.

“Carrie...your father has escaped.”

“We haven’t the time to track him now. We must collect our friends from the tunnels.”

Nyrobie’s eyes filled as tears streamed her face. “Oh, Carrie!”

Carrie embraced her friend. “Nyrobie...we are at war with these fiends. I had to end Danny.”

“That is not why I cry. I know your father’s crimes. They are vast.”

Carrie studied Nyrobie’s face. “What? What crimes, Nyrobie?”

“Your...your mother, Lady Victoria, she did not meet her end accidentally.”

“No! You cannot speak the truth!”

“I do. She opposed your imprisonment and your father’s disapproval. He ended her in the tunnels.”

“No...my own mother? It’s not possible.”

“I’m so sorry, Carrie.”

“I’ll kill him. I will end him in my grasp!”

“Carrie! He spoke the truth. We are not alone in this mountain. Something malicious resides below us. I fear our loved ones are in great danger.”

“Andre is ancient, if such evil exists, surely he would know of it.”

“Let us go to them, I’m not willing to take any chances. Jerrek is waiting for us now.”

Chapter 13

Chilled and damp, the tunnel was a never-ending cave of dangerous, slippery darkness. The musky smell reminded Charlie of hay bales when they were left to rot in the spring rain.

The only light source was a soft glow from a lantern Andre carried. Joseph, Clark, Elinor, and Charlie were followed by Irena. It appeared the remorseful woman was at a loss for words—perhaps she was mildly fearful. Charlie was fearful, yet the familiarity that came with near-darkness was comforting.

Each step outside of Evrastill was a step away from her and their new beginning. So much uncertainly loomed in the confined, hollow tube.

“Mind your step. The path becomes treacherous around the bend.” Andre charged on as the others shuffled behind him.

“Andre...I am wary of our destination.” Irena’s call was heard from further behind the party. She had stopped walking.

Andre halted the party and turned to her. “Irena, of all things to be wary of, you choose physical destination? What of your choices today? What of your cruel words? Keep walking.”

“I’ve heard things. Strange tales. I do not wish to venture further.”

“My dear, they are not tales. Do as you wish.”

“You would lead us to our doom, Andre?”

“I would lead you from it! You would fear what lurks in these caves yet pay not mind to what resides in your heart. Do your choices not make you wicked? Are you not evil?”

Irena appeared dumbfounded. “I oppose your views...this does not make me—”

“Were you not present when they led my bride from the entrance this morning?”

Her eyes widened. “That was not my choice.”

“Yet you stood idly by as three innocents were marched to what they believed was their death. What are you if not wicked?”

An odd breeze drifted through the tunnel—it carried with it a scent completely foreign to Charlie. It was clear Andre took notice as well. His expression sharpened as he held the lantern higher above his head, his gaze bouncing about the walls.

“Keep moving...or stay still. Either way, be silent.”

The party continued their trek—slowly, yet steadily. They were soon to an opening—a large cave with several tunnel openings leading from it.

The opening was tall, and a faint sound of rushing water was heard in the distance. Andre looked about the area; a strange purple hue tinted the walls of the cave, tiny glowing crystals illuminated the area—all a rich violet.

“An...Andre. What is this place?” Irena moved to his side, her fear detailed in the basking light from all around.

“We must keep moving beyond this place. We are unsafe here.”

The breeze was now a gust—as if someone had opened the front door on a blistery autumn afternoon—and then it was still—stagnant and still.

Charlie looked about the frightened party, the backs of their heads shivering in fear. Then his eyes settled on a new member—someone had joined them.

Elegant and poised, the cloaked woman slowly approached from the opening of one of the tunnels. Her dark hair was tucked under the hood of the cloak. “Ty-lahoon-hyzin.” Her soft voice had an eerie quality as she approached Andre.

“Milady, we wish safe passage. We seek only hours of refuge.”

As she cocked her head in the light of the lantern, Charlie stepped back in horror. Her flawless face boasted two pitch-black eyes...as if her entire sclera was a dark pupil. She lacked basic expression and moved oddly.

“You seek refuge here...in the dark...of the mountain?” Her question was but a whisper.

Andre kneeled. “We are at your mercy. We flee tyranny.”

Peering down on him, her gaze suddenly broke—she stared directly at Charlie. “Humans...you are in the presence of humans.”

She walked to Charlie, her frigid hand gently cradled the side of his face—saturating each nerve in fear. He stood motionless as the woman...creature, traced his jaw with the tips of her icy fingers.

“Beautiful.” Her accent was unidentifiable—her entirety was something unreadable. “You quiver.”

She moved from Charlie to Elinor. She studied her beauty, gently pushing loose strands of hair behind her ear. Her attention then focused on Joseph. The man closed his eyes as she stepped to him. “This creature...marvelous.” As she moved to Clark, her face came within inches. Her slender hand rested aside his cheek. Her lips rested passively to his—he visibly shook by the interaction. She seemed to be inhaling his breath. Witnessing the event was horrifying.

“Awe. Tyranny.” She gently kissed Clark’s cheek and then turned sharply to Irena. “Insidious.” Irena trembled as the cloaked woman approached. “Payment.” She reached for Irena’s arm.

“No! No...please...Andre. Andre, please!”

Andre motioned the group toward the tunnel behind the commotion. Irena screamed in fear as Charlie ran by.

“Don’t leave me with this! Please!”

The group darted past a screaming Irena—helpless in the clutches of her capturer.

They rushed into the violet ambiance—the tunnel tightened briefly and suddenly it was open and nearly as tall as it was wide and seemed to extend indefinitely. Here there was vegetation too, not trees, but thick vinery all about the walls. Smaller caves aligned this massive mother cave and no well-crafted homes existed here.

An odd scent hung heavy in the air—strange noises were all around them—Irena’s screams echoed in the back.

“I’m frightened, Andre.” Elinor cradled her face into Andre’s shoulder.

“They won’t harm you...you’re human. Cast your gaze forward—don’t look to them.”

Their hastened pace had the violet glow retreating—the screams and strange noises fading. Soon only the soft glow of Andre’s lantern was lighting the cave.

“Who are they? Have they always been below Evrastill?” Elinor’s words were chopped with fear.

“Perhaps, my love. They are wicked. Some ancients say it was the Mountain that poisoned them... others believe it was they who poisoned this part of the mountain. Legend says they were Society members...scattered thousands of years ago. They are rarely spoken of.”

“What will they do with Irena?” Elinor pulled on his sleeve.

Andre’s eyes saddened—his gaze diverted. “They will end her...cruelly and in a most macabre fashion. They despise our kind and feed from weakness and treachery. Irena will beg for her death before it is finally granted.”

“No! We gotta go back then. You said they won’t hurt humans. We can’t let them—”

“Charlie, that small township is saturated in dark magic. My power is trivial in comparison. There is nothing to do but run from her cries.”

“We could beg them. Maybe if we beg and—”

“They lack common feeling, empathy. They are truly monstrous beings, Charlie.”

“But they won’t hurt humans?”

“It is said they find beauty in humanity...they find beauty in the evil of humanity. They appreciate the cruelty and brutality displayed by mankind throughout the ages.”

“I keep hearing how cruel my kind is...but my whole life has been one big slice of shit-pie because of what your people did. Your people are just as cruel, you just don’t have the nuts to fess up to it! And now you’re just gonna walk away while that girl begs for us to help her?”

“What would you have me do, Charlie? Their numbers are staggering, their magic is ancient and comprised of an evil I can’t even begin to comprehend. There is nothing to do but spare ourselves from hearing her screams. Keep moving.”

Minutes later they found themselves walking parallel to a modest cave river. Andre’s light was fading, yet it appeared there was a soft glow from the further ahead, perhaps a small opening from the

mountainside.

Charlie looked to Clark—the man appeared disturbed, saddened, and tired.

“So...what do you do if you get sick or something? Is there a doctor or something?”

Clark smiled. “There is no illness in Evrastill. The Mountain is constantly healing.”

“Oh...that must be nice. I can’t count how many doctors I had.”

“Charlie...” Andre looked back to him from in front. “Mankind as a whole has always attempted to distance themselves from nature. They demolish grand forests to construct grand buildings. They intoxicate themselves with manmade chemicals and call them cures. These cures are merely interventions to manmade conditions. The further man separates from nature, the greater the depletion of nature’s protection. The illnesses present in man today were not so prevalent even one hundred years ago. Their world is so vastly different from the human world I knew of.”

Charlie took a moment to absorb his words. “So...in all the thousands of years...only two of your members have ever had the idea to marry people from outside of Evrastill?”

Andre smiled. “Certainly not. Yet our Council was stringent, Charlie. Society members that violate Council law are at risk of being ended.”

“But humans are cruel.”

“I love your tenacity, my friend. You and Carrie share a common boldness.”

“What are we going to do? What’s the plan? We traveled all night to get to this place, and now I’m in some damn cave walking away from it...it’s cold as hell...I wanna see my girl, and I’m done with this situation.”

“Stop here.” Andre turned to the group. It was clear there was an exit further up as daylight worked its way in. “Tarik has many supporters. They must be stopped before we can return to Evrastill.”

“Why run? Why not fight, Andre?”

“Tarik is powerful, Charlie.”

“You’re not?”

“We are safe here for now. No one knows the tunnels as well as I. Tarik would be a fool to venture through the purple glow.”

Chapter 14

“*I* feel as though our world is glass...it’s fracturing around us. We’re helpless to watch it shatter.”

“No, Jerrek. Glass may shatter, yet in its state of integrity it is capable of holding something of substance. Our world is a thinly woven sheet of lies. We watch now as they become unwoven—exposing Council secrets and Society deceit.” Carrie was confident in her proclamation as she led the trio into the tunnels.

“What shall we do, Carrie? We have no plan.”

“My plan is simple, Nyrobie. I have what my father wants. He will follow me, I will destroy him.”

“How are you so confident?”

“I have waited seventy years to rescue Charlie...nothing, even a militia of mystical immortals, will keep me from him. Certainly, not the coward that ended my own mother. He will scream under my rage.”

“Do you hear that?” Jerrek rushed in front of Carrie.

“I feel Irena! She is horrified...in pain.”

The three began sprinting toward Irena’s cries of agony—into the violet violence.

They entered the oddness, taken completely aback by the ritualistic scene.

More than one hundred cloaked figures stood around a terrified Irena. She was hoisted high upon a stake—her arms bound above her head—her legs tied tightly as well—suspended above strategically placed firewood.

“Carrie! They plan to burn her alive!”

“They will do no such thing, Jerrek.”

The crowd parted as the three walked through the middle and toward a bound, bleeding, and naked Irena.

“Release her...now...you atrocities, or you will perish.” Carrie stood confidently in front of Irena as a woman appeared holding a torch boasting a purple flame.

“Shen-iv-oknek.” The solemn woman—eyes blackened and angered—raised her arms.
“Take them.”

Seeing Irena in such turmoil had Carrie's rage boiling. "Back!" Her voice sent the woman and several others falling backward and scrambling as she peered down upon them. "Jerrek, unbind her!"

The crowd of evil immortals stared blankly—many crouched and backed away while speaking the language of old.

Jerrek worked feverishly—Irena was freed and clutching him within seconds. Jerrek held her tightly as she trembled. Backing away from the crowd and toward an exiting tunnel, Carrie looked once more to Irena's face—riddled with horror.

"Go...I'll be there briefly."

"Carrie, they are evil—"

"Go now, Nyrobie!"

Jerrek carried Irena away—Nyrobie by his side. Carrie walked confidently back toward the cloaked crowd.

"Disgusting...worthless, sinister things. Meet me now. This is the price for your wickedness!"

Her scream had many figures slamming into the surrounding walls. Crystals and large boulders alike fell from all around—crushing the fleeing beings below. Carrie loosed yet another scream—it rattled every wall around her. Dust and screams filled the area in a deafening end. As it settled, Carrie stared at the gray splendor—speckled with fading bits of purple. All was silent. In a blanket of dust and debris, Carrie looked upon her work...her own magnificence. Her father was correct—she was a queen—an unstoppable weapon.

Walking to the edge of the scene, she removed a cloak from the bedlam. Turning from the carnage, she walked toward the cave opening and to her friends.

Approaching them, she was met by a shocked Nyrobie.

"Carrie! What have you done? You destroyed their entire people."

"This is true. All that harm my friends shall perish."

"We know nothing of them!"

"We know this, Nyrobie!" Carrie pointed toward a crying and shaking Irena. "They would have burned her alive had we not arrived when we did. What others have met their end in such cruel ways at their hands? Their end was justified and merciful. They should have perished in their own flames."

She kneeled to Irena. "How severe are her injuries, Jerrek?"

"Physically...superficial."

Irena hastily wrapped her arms around Carrie's neck. "For...forgive me. Please forgive me. I never knew such cruelty could exist."

"You are forgiven, my friend. Such cruelty still exists in the heart of my father and his followers. Solidify your stance now, Irena. War...large and small...has no room for disloyalty."

"I'm with you, my friend. I...I do not agree with your views entirely, but I do not wish to inflict fear on the humans. I have never felt fear like I have today. I never want to impose that on another being. Please know you will not have to question my loyalty."

"I know. Irena, how did they capture you?"

"They didn't. Andre allowed them to take me as payment for passage. He gave me to them. The... the things they did to me."

Carrie stood in shock. "He handed you to them?"

"Just before he fled."

"Come...let us find our party." Carrie wrapped the cloak around the distraught Irena; the four of them continued their journey toward the surface of the mountain.

Within a few minutes, the soft words of her human companions were entering Carrie's ears. Carrie ran toward the party. Andre and the humans appeared shocked by her presence.

"Carrie!" Charlie leapt from the ground, rushing toward her. Grabbing either side of his cold face, she kissed his lips. His frigid fingertip traced her cheek as they separated.

"Charlie...you're so cold."

"Yea...it's really chilly down here." His teeth chattered as he spoke.

"Carrie, I am pleased you have joined us." Andre approached cautiously with Elinor at his side.

"Indeed Councilman. My party of four joins you." Her gaze set heavy on his as Jerrek, Nyrobie, and Irena appeared.

Charlie looked to Irena. "You're okay! Holy shit!"

"Explain your actions, Andre." Carrie's command was clear and confident.

Andre stood firm and erect. "You would ask a Councilman for explanation?"

"What Council do you see here, Andre? What kingdom? I ask you to explain your actions as a man would."

"There is nothing to explain! Irena and your foul father would lead my bride from the safety of her home and into what she thought to be her end? Irena suffered nothing at my hand. I merely turned my back on a traitorous creature. Had I not...I to might have perished by their cruelty."

"Cruelty...Andre, they had her bound upon our arrival. They carried flames to the stake with the intention of setting her ablaze. Had we been but a moment later she would have burned to death."

"Traitors of our Society suffered the same fate only several hundred years ago. I agree...their barbarism is despicable, but the fate of Irena is not what concerns me."

"Were."

"Were what, Carrie?"

"They were despicable. Once we rescued your sacrificial offering, I annihilated their entire community. They scrambled and died beneath my glory."

"What? Carrie...their people are as ancient as our own. You ended them all?"

"I did. What were they, Andre...the truth. I want the truth of everything and I want it now. What were those people...did our society truly have a queen upon a throne...and what gift grows within me now? Speak only the truth, Andre."

Andre, with Elinor by his side, turned from Carrie. "To end an entire people is monstrous. There

was so much of them we were yet to learn and understand—”

“You just said the beings were ancient...yet you’d require time to study their maleficence?”

“They are us, Carrie—immortals of the mountain. Where we embrace an existence of purity and goodwill, they bathed in something entirely different. They are at one with their wickedness. Perhaps their existence brings about a balance. Perhaps they are necessary.”

“Their existence, it seems, would bring about torture and the death of my people. That is not necessary. That is not balance. That is deplorable and now it is no more.”

“Carrie—”

“The queen, Andre. Is this legend?”

Turning once more toward Carrie, his expression softened. “Come, let us sit and talk. There is much to discuss.”

In a circular form, next to the river of the poorly lit area, the group sat. Andre appeared nervous as he cleared his throat. “Before my beginning, Evrastill was ruled by a bloodline. The Council in place was there only for guidance...supportive in nature. The outside world was completely different and the humans above were nomadic and appreciative of our assistance. They shared our love of nature and took only from it what was needed. The Society thrived on assisting and caring for mankind. It is in our nature to guard and protect them.”

Andre took Elinor’s hand—inhaling deeply. “I’m not entirely sure how the Queen came to the throne—it is said her father, the King, lived during her rein. Much of the record of that time is no longer existent. It is said that when the King ruled...the guiding Council learned of his daughter’s gift and the power within it—the echo. The King was dethroned and Princess Iris was crowned Queen. As Queen, Iris was less than one century old. She was unfamiliar with her gift. The Society was unfamiliar with her gift. Her power only grew. The Council had a wayward agenda...Tarik was of this Council. Their ideas to leave Evrastill and take the world under the power of their Queen soon reached the ears of the former King. When he opposed...he was ended in silence.”

“My father’s treachery spans across thousands of years!”

“Perhaps, Carrie. Tales twist with age—just as roots and branches do. There is more to this tale. When the Queen learned of her father’s death—only then did the Council learn of the true destructive capability within her gift. Her rage was uncontrollable. Much of Evrastill fell to her wrath. Homes crumbled...innocents were crushed...hundreds fled to the tunnels—never to be seen again. Legend says once they settled, they’re immortal grief poisoned the crystals in that area of the mountain—turning them dark and wicked. Others say the unlucky settlers merely took root within the dark of the mountain—and the mountain poisoned them. Either way—they were once us.”

“And I ended them.” Carrie felt her eyes well with tears.

“Your father, Tarik, nearly saved Queen Iris from her end. He attempted to escape with her into the tunnels as well. In her darkest grief, she was useless to raise defense. The all-mighty echo was silenced with a humanly dagger before Tarik could evacuate her.”

“Why...why would she leave with my father?”

“He was family. Carrie...Tarik was the King’s nephew. You are of the blood.”

“What? No!”

“It is true. The Council has worked diligently to protect the secret. A cousin of the King, Lady Lira, was found to possess the echo merely one thousand years ago. She identified her madness and inability to control her gift.”

“I know of Lira. I remember tales of her and her echo.”

“Before she ended her own life, she allowed the Council to explore the echo in a structured way. The echo is by far the most powerful gift a Society member can obtain. It develops early, matures rapidly, and is seemingly difficult, if not impossible, to control once its power reaches full force. Carrie, I fear your gift shall be your end.”

Carrie felt Charlie’s arm around her shoulder, his cold hand pulling her into him. He made her feel safe—solid—bonded. “No...that’s not going to happen to me. Andre...were Iris or Lira bonded?”

“No. There has never been mention of a bond or unification.”

“I am. I have all the reason in eternity to control my gift. I have Charlie.” She stood. “We will draw our enemies from our home. They will be brought to justice and a just and kind Council will be put in place. All will be as it should be.”

“Tell me, Carrie...how should it all be?” Andre stood. “Our Society...your Society is drenched in secrecy. There is much of your own history that is foreign to you.”

“Tell me of my mother, Andre. What do you know of her end?”

His gaze narrowed, his lips produced a tiny ‘o.’ “I know only of an accident within the tunnels, Carrie. This I promise. She heavily opposed your imprisonment but had to have known of the leniency behind it.”

“Leniency? I was imprisoned for—”

“I know well of your history, Carrie. I was there. Throughout the history of Evrastill, other Society members found guilty of the same crime were executed. An ulterior motive was behind your life being spared.”

“What ulterior motive?”

“You...your father...are the only living members of the bloodline. The Council knew this. They knew if they ended Tarik for attempting to hide Lady Lira, or ended you for your disgrace, the echo and all its brilliance would potentially be lost for all time. If the Council could control the echo...they could obtain the world and all its glory.”

Carrie turned from Andre. “This gift...this echo...its power is immense but it does not hold the ability to take the world.”

Stepping closer to her...his eyes widening, Andre rested his hand gently on her forearm. “Carrie...you haven’t a clue of what grows within you. When the Council reconstructed, you and

your...situation, were of the first topics discussed. Your absurd request to rescue Charlie...a human of the outside world...was granted so expeditiously because we could not risk your wrath had you possessed the echo and lost your bond to age. It was unanimous. The new Council simply hoped he'd be collected...you'd return and live a simple eternity."

"That is all I want."

"It appears your father and the former Councilmen long for an alternative future for you. They know of your power. The gift of the echo initially appears during great adversity. Afterward, the gift's power grows within and is released as emotion. The Council thought surely...your mother's death would ignite the gift within you. They were thankful it did not."

"This entire time! Andre...I've respected you my entire life."

"Had I told you of this...what good would have come of it? Perhaps your execution or mine?"

Carrie placed her face within the palms of her hands and wept. She was soon in the embrace of Charlie. She welcomed his touch...scent and presence. "If it were not for you, Charlie...I would return to the fiends with eyes as dark as onyx and end myself. How could my entire existence be comprised of such falsehoods? Nothing holds truth."

The flat of his palm rested against her sternum—his lips pressed to her head. "Remember this, Carrie."

Almost instantly she felt the warmth of their bond as she peered through blurred vision to her partner, Charlie. "You...you are my family, Charlie." She looked to Nyrobie and Jerrek. "As well as you." Turning back to Charlie, an odd idea had her gaze diverting.

"Andre. You long to secure my eternity of peace and tranquility?"

"Indeed, Carrie."

"Splendid. You are of the Council. Unify the two of us...here and now."

Andre smirked. "Now...amongst vespers and masked in the remnants of your recent retaliation?"

Carrie peered to her dusty attire, and then to a grinning Charlie. "Now...among my dearest friends and my eternal bond."

Andre stood poised and firm—his hands clasped in front of him. "As you wish, Carrie."

Charlie's cold lips pressed to her cheek—the hair of his face traced along the side of hers' as she inhaled. The entire day had been the definition of dysfunctional, and now it was ending in their union. She hadn't any idea of what the near future had planned for them or if unification would be an option in even a few hours' time. The time was now. They'd waited long enough. The couple stood to be unified.

"Since the dawn of our people, nothing has been more sacred or everlasting than the union of two bonded members of our Society. Members that unify, do so because they believe the bond they share is as durable as time itself. Many unified members of the Society have ceased counting their years within the mountain—so staggering is their age that tallying it is tiresome and pointless. Their love and bond is as strong this day as it was the day of their unification." Andre smiled as he nodded

toward Carrie and a shivering Charlie.

“Today, we are in the presence of yet another bond. This bonded pair believes wholeheartedly that their coupling will withstand all time and they too shall tend to their love as long as this mountain stands tall. As a member of the Council, I am here to unify this bond in the eyes of the Society. Carrie, take the hand of your chosen bond.”

Carrie confidently reached for the chilled hand of Charlie, bringing it to her lips as their gaze met.

“Before us now is unification. From this second forward, you are unified under the mountain, before the Council, and within the Society.”

Charlie’s lips met hers’ as Nyrobie’s soft cries entered her ears.

“Enjoy this, beautiful...who knows where we’ll be this time tomorrow.” Charlie chuckled—their lips only inches apart.

She studied the darks of his eyes—each adorned with a touch of inpouring light. “We’ll be with one another always, my love.”

The enchanted moment was interrupted as Clark approached—his body shivered. “I’m miserable.”

“Carrie.” Andre looked about the floor of the cave. “They will not be able to last the night without fire.”

“Build your fire, Andre. You will not reside in darkness long. I’m resurfacing now to beckon my father and his followers. We will return home this very night. I will beckon him alone.”

“No.” Jerrek stepped forward. “I will accompany you. I feel that is best.”

“I agree.” Nyrobie confidently stood next to Jerrek.

“Very well.” Carrie hugged Charlie. “Jerrek and I will end this war...have faith in that.”

Chapter 15

She'd never looked upon Evrastill's entrance in such a way. It was home...yet her home housed a sinister pestilence within it—her father. All that remained unanswered...all the injustices that lingered around his existence were within the same walls she'd resided behind her entire life. She'd hugged the neck of a mongrel—kissed his cheek, and sat down to dine with him for nearly a century.

The snow was nearly blinding—thick and abundant on the ground and in the sky. The atmosphere was still—no bitter, biting wind—only soft-falling flakes.

“I've never understood the allure of the cold.” Jerrek kicked shin-high snow from his path. “Humans seem drawn to it. They play in it and some even prefer to reside in it continuously. It's very cumbersome and uncomfortable.”

“It is pretty...but of all things some humans are drawn to...snow is not the one I find most questionable.” She smiled at Jerrek as they remained still in front of Evrastill—as frozen as their surroundings.

“It's nice to see you smile, my friend.”

“This day has been long. I feel it will live on my heart all eternity, Jerrek.”

“War is only beautiful in poems and victory cries—never in present tense.”

As their gaze broke, her smile faded. “War should never be amongst...war should never be.”

“Carrie...your father is reckless. He would use you to not only further his agenda...but catapult it from some maddened idea and into action...to strike out against mankind. What choice has he left us?”

“I know, Jerrek.”

“His following...they're completely corrupted by his message. How long have they been plagued by these destructive ideas? We must stop them—”

“He killed my mother, Jerrek.” She assured her gaze was as firm as her tone. “He will die...that is not in question. Please remember it is not your father we are here to end...and it is not your childhood that was a complete lie.”

Jerrek offered a hesitant half smile. “For...forgive me, Carrie. Might I remind you that your childhood was not a complete lie. I've been your friend since you were thirteen years old, and you

have been sneaking off to collect ladybugs and play on tire-swings with Charlie since you were fourteen. None of that is false. When this is done...when this day ends...you will have a family...know that, my friend—my sister.”

She immediately embraced him as the snow collected momentarily on her lashes.

“Hello.” A voice from behind them cut through the silence—masculine and clear.

Carrie jumped and turned. “Talan. Why are you here?”

Talan was younger than Carrie—he had yet to find his gift—yet possessed extraordinary battle skills in a physical sense. He was strikingly handsome with light-brown hair and green eyes.

The intense look on his face did not showcase something sinister; rather, he seemed to be hurting...angered. An apprentice of Brennus, Carrie hoped Talan was not there to avenge his former instructor.

“This is my home.” As he stepped forward, his lip quivered, as did his nostrils as they flared.

“Talan, what are your intentions? Transparency please.”

“My intentions?” His fists balled at his sides—veins bulging in his forehead and forearms. “I should ask you that, bitch.”

“Talan—”

“He was like my father. If it...if it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t even be here. And I knew Elisa...” His hand moved to his eyes, covering them momentarily before wiping his tears. “I know Elisa is gone. She was...she was my friend, Carrie.”

Watching his tears fall—hearing his voice crack—brought on an immense guilt within her. She’d known Talan since he was a toddler.

“This is your fault, Carrie. You did all this. My home will never be the same and I hate you for that.”

She stepped closer. “Talan...you would follow the madness of Tarik...my father? You would strike out against mankind—”

“This isn’t about your dad! Or humans! I’m friends with Joseph and have been for years! This is about what you have done and the consequences I must suffer because of it. I hope Tarik wipes you from this planet and I hope he does it with a smile.”

The words leaving his mouth—coupled with the pain in his eyes had Carrie longing only to offer some form of comfort—not engage in battle...but then he was charging at her.

Before she could raise her arms in defense, Jerrek was in front of her—matching punches and body blocks. Grunts and yelps of pain echoed through the atmosphere as the men fought.

Talan’s talent was obvious as he was more than capable of matching Jerrek—a man twice his age. He soon tired however. His weakened guard resulted in a debilitating blow from Jerrek’s right fist.

Talan fell backward—unconscious. The massive strike had his body slamming into the snow-covered earth.

All was silent momentarily. Carrie watched the breath leave a victorious Jerrek’s mouth in the

chilled air and to the sky.

Her attention was turned to the treetops above them. Hundreds, if not thousands, of grackles peered down upon them. The birds sat silently—all watching from the branches. Carrie shivered at the sight of them. “Jerrek...we’re being...Jerrek!” Carrie looked to see her friend preparing to deliver a death blow to the head of an unconscious Talan. He halted at the screech of Carrie.

“Yes?”

“What is this lunacy? You would kill an unconscious man?”

“He is with them, Carrie.”

“No...he is understandably distraught. If we end all that oppose our views, we are as monstrous as them...are we not?”

“Are we not here to end those that oppose our views, Carrie?”

“We are here to end treachery and collect traitors. This young man is the definition of neither.”

At their feet, Talan coughed, spit blood from his lip and turned to his side as he whimpered.

Carrie cautiously crouched to him, touching his shoulder gently. “Talan...I am sorry for your loss. Please know if I could end your suffering, I would. Elisa was kind...I too shall miss her for all eternity. Please...please know that had I not ended Brennus...he’d have ended my friends and all that is dear to me. It wasn’t for sport.”

Talan’s eyes were pried—pouring a constant stream of tears—his expression stoic with his face flesh to the snow. “I know...yet it doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“Talan...I need to know you will not strike out against us again—”

“Why have you spared me? Why? If you truly have the power to take the world...why spare an insubordinate, gift-less nobody?” He turned to her—his gaze begging for an explanation.

“I wish not to take the world...but to live in ours and in peace. You are somebody...you are Talan, and I hope to know you centuries from now.” Her words seemed to melt the anger in his eyes.

Jerrek offered him a hand, assisting him from the ground while Carrie helped him dust the snow from his shoulders and attire.

“Talan...please, go home. Go to your home and close your door. Sip tea and wait for my visit once this is done.”

His gaze diverted, Talan merely nodded prior to dashing into the entrance.

Several seconds later, a lowly chuckle resounded from the shadows of the entrance.

“Such a merciful Queen...if only you’d shown such control when the life dear Danny was within your grasp.”

“Father?”

“Indeed.”

“Do not be so coy as to compare your puppet Danny to Talan. They are men of completely different virtues. This you know. Danny was as ghastly as you. How long have you been crouching like a common crow?”

“I am everywhere, Carrie. I am within the lowly fox—seated just beyond your view. I am in the shimmered grackles—high above your head. I am in the rabid bat—frothing and helpless on the cave floor and staring in the direction of the remainder of your party...waiting for reinforcements.”

“What?” Carrie stepped closer to the entrance as Jerrek’s face developed a look of intense concern.

“Silly girl, Carrie. You would leave your loved ones at the mercy of the winter’s chill...and all those that dwell about the shadows—now conjured and aching to do my bidding. They will pour down on them numerously...relentlessly...and rip them to shreds.”

“No! We will go to them.”

“Tis too late, Daughter. The wolf is at their door. Wolves rather. Wolves, coyotes, great cats, and badgers...all collaborating to devour your precious pet and all around him. Behold my gifts, Daughter...my glory is magnificent too...no?”

“Father, please!”

“Please, Tarik! Nyrobie...my bride!”

Tarik presented himself, grinning smugly. He held his hand up, his index finger summoning them as he turned for the entrance of Evrastill.



Charlie

The blazing fire’s heat had Charlie’s cheeks feeling as though they could crack open. His chest, legs, and belly enjoyed a toasty-warm reprieve from the winter’s rampage. His butt, back, and the backs of his arms remained cold—but he didn’t mind. His fingers had sensation, as did his nose—things were on the up and up.

“So...besides prison...what else is there to do in Evrastill?” Charlie smiled happily.

Elinor giggled. “Well, we have social gatherings...a community garden...themed dances and several committees.” Elinor was very well-spoken. “I teach humanities and have for years. Charlie, when things...when things settle...perhaps you and I can discuss some of the nuances taking place now. I would love to introduce them to my curriculum.”

“I would love that. I haven’t seen much of my world...but I can tell you all about the things I’ve heard.”

Joseph cleared his throat. “Clark and I like to race and jump hurdles...things like that. It’s only with one another as our non-human friends travel at speeds that are incomprehensible to us. It’d be nice to have a third party.”

“Yes. Definitely. I’d love to.” Charlie looked at the group sitting around him. He felt a sense of belonging—a sense of pride. “I’ve never really...I’ve never really had a place that I felt was home...ya’ know? I want this place to be home.”

Nyrobie's smile was large as she reached for his hand. "It will be, my friend. It will be for all eternity."

Before he could respond, a splash from the icy river caught their attention. Something had fallen from the opening in the roof of the cave.

Party members stood in an attempt to identify what it might have been, but it seemed to have been washed away.

"Snow?" Charlie walked from the fire to the river.

"I don't believe so, Charlie. Come back." Andre grabbed Charlie's arm and led him back to the fire.

A rustling from the opening above had the party looking toward an onslaught of snouts peering into the cave. Before they could process the oddness of the situation, wolves, bobcats, panthers, coyotes, and badgers began falling through the opening and to the waters below. Many were immediately washed away—yet others were effectively making their way to the bank.

"What is this insanity?" Elinor's scream was but a whisper next to the deafening cries of the animals. They continued coming in at a ravenous pace.

"To the tunnels! Into the tunnels!" Andre guided them as drenched cats and wolves dragged themselves ashore—exhausted—yet steadfast in pursuit.

Nyrobie, Andre, and Irena lingered behind the scrambling humans as more drenched animals made their way to the rock-slab shore.

"You sure you don't want to run away, Irena?" Charlie heard Andre ask.

"Why not just feed me to them as sacrifice, you cowardly bastard."

"Silence! Both of you!" Nyrobie's demand was solid. "These creatures are guided by the dark hand of Tarik. Their palate will not discriminate...we will all perish if we fail."

"Ahead, the smaller cave to the left of the river! Into it!" Andre's command had the party scrambling as they ducked into the darkened cave. Charlie raced ahead. He, unlike the remainder of the party, was at home in the dark. It wasn't dark long. They were soon overlooking a small canyon at the opening of the mouth of the tunnel with nothing but a slippery ledge to walk upon along the side of the inner wall of the mountain. If Charlie were to slip—the result would certainly be death by drowning in the icy water at least one hundred feet below—if it were even deep enough to break his fall without significant injury.

"Move, Charlie! They're coming!" Joseph prompted him from behind.

He cautiously slid along the jagged wall, looking over the mystical scene below. Peering back, he was thankful to see the remainder of the party following. Before his gaze returned in front of him, he witnessed a drenched wolf leap from the cave opening to its end below. The splashing sound the creature's body made when it contacted the water was horrifying—it was followed by another and another. It wasn't until a sly bobcat attempted to halt and keep from falling that the animals realized the sudden end and certain death at the opening of the cave. Once they collected their wits, they

continued their pursuit.

Nyrobie's swift kick sent the bobcat sailing and plunging to the water far below. "We must hurry! We can't fight them like this!"

Charlie was thankful to see the ledge widening as he scurried along it. His optimism was short-lived as his gaze fell upon additional four-legged fiends approaching from the opposite direction. They had found them from an alternative route and now the party was trapped upon the ledge.

"Shit! They're coming this way, too!" His fingers ached as he attempted to grip the wall behind him—his gaze diverted from the creature coming to end him. He inhaled deeply and looked to the roof of the cave—lightly lit with small blue crystals. Closing his eyes, he awaited his executioner. He'd certainly fight back, but without a doubt he was confident he'd plummet to his death. All was silent.

Charlie looked to his right to find a bewildered-looking wolf attempting to turn around on the narrow ledge rather than lunge for him. It was as if the drive to taste his blood had left the animal—and all the animals behind it.

"They're attempting to retreat!" Andre could be heard from the other side of the group.

"What happened?" Charlie leaned out, attempting to make eye contact with Andre.

"That is to be determined my young friend. Be still. Their bloodlust may return. Be mindful and ready."

Chapter 16

“Enough! We’ve ventured inward enough, Father! I beg of you! I must have assurance!” Carrie fell to the feet of her father at the last step of the stairs leading into Evrastill. She cried before him—violently, finding it nearly impossible to inhale the sweet air around her.

“A future queen would not weep at a peasant’s death, Daughter. A future queen would merely order additional peasants to remove the remnants prior to rot and infestation.”

“Oh no...” She whimpered at the idea of his demise, yet felt their bond alive within her. “Father please! I beg of you! I will do anything you ask of me. You have my word.” Her proclamation left her in spurts and cries as she remained affixed to the grassy earth below.

“I ask you to rise, Carrie. Conduct yourself properly as a queen would.”

“And I...I beg you...please...I cannot stand until I know you will spare him. Lock him away if you must, but please spare his life.” She peered to him—her eyes pleading.

“If, dear Daughter, I agree to chain your pet to the wall for all eternity rather than end him in the jaws of those surrounding him currently...you will forever bow to me.”

“Yes! I will do anything you ask, Father. Spare him...spare him and you have my solid word as a member of this Society. I will not forsake you! Please spare him!”

He chuckled lowly as he kneeled. “You are many things, Carrie...yet I’m certain you’re anything but a liar. It’s a deal. Your human is spared.”

Her face met the grass in an exhaustive release of relief.

“And to prove that I’m not completely horrendous, I’ll spare the pathetic lives of your friends. They too may reside in chains for all eternity.”

“The wolves...and cats. What about—”

“They stand at bay. You will walk with me. We will speak sensibly. You will accept the remainder of my terms and only then will your traitorous bunch be collected and marched to their eternal residence.”

“As...as you wish, Councilman Tarik.”

“Ah...I do enjoy the tone and the sound of that...but it is King Tarik, my dear.” He stood as Carrie looked to him. He gazed about the Kingdom.

“King of Evrastill today...King of the world tomorrow. All will bow to me, my sweet Carrie. All

will know my wrath if they do not. Our kind will take the earth and in turn the earth will prosper as it has never prospered before.”

“How can you be so certain, Father?”

“I have you, Carrie. I have the echo.”

“How can you be certain of such prosperity?”

“To rule is to ruin...depending on your point of view. The task of elimination is never beautiful...but we cannot continue to wait for mankind to end themselves...they’re killing our earth in the process. Genocide is now, my precious Daughter. Let us bring balance and peace.”

“I feel...I feel ill, Father.”

“Indeed. The task at hand is overwhelming and—”

“And against all we’ve ever known, Father. You cannot expect to act on this effectively. It’s unnatural.”

“Carrie...my beautiful, broken princess. Humanity is unnatural. Humans despise nature—they run from it. For a human to return to nature he must first adorn himself with humanly trinkets and manmade comforts...anything but natural. They destroy nature, and have the gall to despise locusts, rats, and flies as pests. They are the pests, Carrie. They are the disease. Let us purify the earth of them. The only humans remaining will be those tucked away within our chains and stone...a reminder for future generations of the lowly creatures that once butchered the world and their own kind.”

“My mother...I know...I know what you did.”

Tarik’s smug smirk and cocked head had Carrie wishing she could mentally remove his skull from his body.

“Her gift...a gift of greenery. Such a waste. Indeed, your mother was entirely pathetic. She took great pride in her ability to grow green grass in seconds...sprout trees in moments. I worried you’d be as lowly yet something told me you’d be brilliant and all powerful.”

“She was brilliant, Father!”

He chuckled. “Nope. She was weak. They all are, really. Look at Jerrek. He stands afar, unsure of what intervention to apply...hoping none will be necessary and his life will be spared. Your mother...she loved the odd tunnels. She loved exploring. She screamed when I threw her mercilessly from the cliff side. Her broken body soon surrounded by the...darker immortals. They delighted in her misery. I didn’t stay to witness her actual demise. I’m sure it was quite colorful. They’re rather creative down there.”

“Enough.” Her heart raced—eyes bulging as she felt the fury raging within.

“Careful, Carrie. We wouldn’t want to make a mess here like you did with our...” He laughed loudly. “To our friends in the dark of the mountain! Such glory, such magnificence! All will come to know us as the only option. All will bow or endure their end!” His hands raised high as Carrie looked upon his madness. “At long last! And it is my own seed...my spawn! Am I not a champion? Am I not worthy of a godly title? Rise with me, Daughter. Let us assume our positions among the

great! Infamy, honor...it matters not what history says...we are living history...we will walk still when the pyramids fall from age and ruin.”

“Know this...Father.” Carrie stood, fists balled, chin lowered, gaze affixed to her father’s stunned expression. “Your breath...each and every one of them, is completely dependent on his. The very instant my Charlie fails to exist, so do you. The deal will be broken...broken before me...screaming and scrambling beneath my rage as you are reduced to nothing...whilst still breathing, until you are not.”

Her words were not immediately answered. Tarik broke gaze—staring toward the ground.

“Only today...this very day, do I really know what you truly are, Father. I have seen monsters. Monsters exist because they have purpose. You are the parasite. You’ve waited in the shadows...lurking and conspiring. You haven’t the skill or magic to fulfill your cruel will, and so you raise your hands to the crystals as if you possess my gifts. You possess nothing but a girl who wishes live in peace and unification. I bend to your wickedness not by choice...remember that as you parade your enthusiasm.”

“Dear, dear, Daughter. Such a sharp and hurtful tongue. Cruel words leave quite a nasty sting—”

“You threw your bride—your bond—from the side of a cliff to be tortured by foul beings. Do not speak to me of cruelty!”

“You imbecile. Have you truly been as blind as your idiotic weakling all these years? I have never felt a bond. Not a single day.” His low tone was coupled with a face lacking any sense of expression.

“Wha...what? I don’t understand?”

“Without your mother...Lady Victoria...there could be no you...no chance of the echo’s brilliant return.”

Carrie stared at her father for seconds—seconds felt like decades. “You...you unified my mother without the bond...” Tears streamed her cheeks as she turned from him, her hand covering her quivering lips. “And then you ki...killed her?”

“Indeed!” He slapped his hands together proudly. “How is that parasitic? That, my dear, is innovation.” Pointing his finger as he said this, he continued. “So ungrateful...so unappreciative. For you’d be lacking life had I not...would you not.”

“How? Why would she agree to this?”

“What choice would she have, Carrie? Many Councilmen and Society members longed for your arrival. She too believed in the cause.”

“Please...stop speaking.” Carrie gagged, as if she were on the verge of purging. “You’re a complete hypocrite. You would speak poorly of humanly decisions...those of spousal betrayal...yet you betrayed our Society and our ways long before you threw your bride to her death. You were never even bonded to my mother...I am nothing but your weapon of destruction.”

“Come now, Carrie. Don’t fret. Much more favorable than the bride of a mountain mortal...”

wouldn't you agree? You are the future queen of all the earth, you have only to take it.”

Chapter 17

Avoiding gravity and the bewildered beasts on either side of them, the party remained steadfast aside the cliff. The air was much warmer in this area and the atmosphere was much better lit. Charlie attributed both to the presence of the sparse blue crystals in the walls and cave roof. There were nowhere near as many as in Evrastill, but their existence here seemed to play some role in the tranquility.

All was silent with the exception of the water below and the scuffling of paws surrounding them. As if the animals were at a loss as to what to do. The wolf closest appeared confused—nearly frightened and longing to run—yet would bare her teeth if Charlie inched in her direction.

“How long can we persevere in such a way, my love?” Elinor sounded exhausted from a few feet down, next to Andre.

“As long as we must. We haven’t the strength nor the numbers to overcome this. If Tarik wanted our blood spilled, we’d be gutless now.”

Charlie peered once more down the line of refugees to Nyrobie. Great despair gripped her expression. “Nyrobie! Are you...what’s the matter?”

Their gazes met—tears streamed her face. “It is Carrie. She is with Tarik and her heart aches greatly.”

“Is she in danger?”

“All in Tarik’s presence are in danger, Charlie.”

“Nyrobie! Is he going to hurt her?”

“No...no, it appears as though negotiations are at hand.”

Charlie’s back returned to the wall. Reflecting on the events that had led him to the climactic and indescribably odd scene he was playing a part in. He couldn’t help but place blame on himself. Imagining Carrie’s grief—her turmoil—it was more treacherous than the pink fangs to his right. “We need to go to her, Nyrobie.”

Charlie attempted to step around Joseph, pebbles fell from the ledge and to the rushing water below. He shivered, knowing there would be no kind-hearted mountain man to pull him to safety this time if he fell from his friends.

“Charlie!” Nyrobie’s tone startled him. “What are you doing?”

“Coming to you.”

“No, you are certainly not. Stand next to the wall and be mindful of your surroundings, my friend. We did not risk our lives to rescue you, only to have you end yours in an act of stupidity!”

Her words stung. He looked to her once more and then wriggled in between Joseph and Clark to remain silent.

His gaze on his worn sneakers—a feeling of defeat overtook his emotions. He only wanted to be with Carrie—nothing else could make anything better. Small commotion had him looking to his left to see a remorseful-looking Nyrobie by his side.

“Charlie, forgive me my friend.” Her hug was uplifting. “I am worn and the hours from my home have felt like centuries. Forgive my tone.”

They shared a smile as they separated. “It’s okay. I’m beat too. None of us know what comes next. I understand.”

“I’ll wait here with you.”

As Nyrobie stepped left, looking for a spot to snuggle into, she lost footing on the slippery, crowded ledge. She was falling merely one second later. Charlie watched her frightened face swallowed up in the water. Instinct—friendship—loyalty, whatever had Charlie jumping after her; he did so before he could think it through. His arms flailed as the screams of the party roared behind him.

Even before his submersion he was well aware of the ignorance behind his heroism. Nyrobie was incredibly strong and would likely survive this with ease...Charlie understood as he entered the frigid waters he would likely not.

He plunged deep into the rapid flow, fighting with all he had to reach the surface. It never came. Blurred vision—and then his lungs were burning—burning with icy gulps of cave-river water as they filled. His limbs grew heavy...lifeless; he sank into darkness...and unlike before...Carrie was not there to comfort him...this was his end.



Carrie

Trailing her father, his ramblings initially settled on deaf ears. It wasn’t until he mentioned an expedition from the Kingdom that she took heed to his words. Talks of isolating and alliance formation had Carrie once again feeling nauseated...and then, as they paralleled a gentle stream, something dreadful sprouted within her core. This was not the echo...oh no...this was something else entirely. This was an absence, an absence of something more valuable to her than eternity itself. This was an amplified grief that no poems or paintings could accurately portray. He was gone...Charlie was dead, she felt their bond diminish within her, leaving her hollow and open for grief to enter and fill.

“Awe...” Hitting her knees, clutching the soft grass, Carrie caught the attention of her father. He rushed to her.

“Why, whatever is the matter?”

She remained incapable of speech, nearly incapable of inhalation.

“Daughter...are you ill? Why are crouched and poorly?”

There was nothing left. From her peripheral vision, she witnessed Jerrek charging toward her. It all felt slow—as if she were submerged.

“Carrie! Carrie...what is wrong!” Jerrek’s voice offered no comfort. There was not comfort to offer. “Carrie, talk to me, my friend! Please.” Jerrek hit his knees before her, embracing her tightly. “What have you done to her, Tarik?”

“Don’t be a fool, boy. I’ve done nothing.”

“What have you done to her...?”

Carrie squeezed Jerrek’s hand firmly as her piercing gaze fell heavy upon her father’s. Looking once more to her friend, she attempted to muster a warning. “Ru...run.” She shook as she spoke.

“What?” Jerrek was clearly taken completely aback.

“Run...Jerrek. Leave...now...run...”

“Carrie I can’t leave you with—”

“Ruuuunnnn!” Her screech set Jerrek sailing toward the exit of Evrastill. He landed violently against the steps. Once his wits were collected, he hobbled from his home and out of sight.

“Daughter...we had a deal, my dear.” Clearly terrified, Tarik stepped backward.

Carrie rose to her feet—grass still clutched within her hands. The strength of her gift was something different than before—it was deeper, nearly all-consuming.

“He was precious to me...a pest to you...but absolutely precious to me. You...you long to conquer the world...yet you would criticize mankind for doing the same thing. I longed only to hear his laughter, kiss his smile...his...his beautiful smile. To feel him in my arms...hear his heart beat against mine. I wanted a small home, a smaller garden. I craved simplicity.”

“Carrie. You’re...you are floating, my dear. Come to me now. Let us talk. Perhaps Charlie may roam freely. Chains and stone are quite—”

“Do not play coy with me, father. Charlie breathes no more. He is gone. Our bond is broken.” Carrie looked below to see her feet suspended above the ground. She felt the echo dancing within her throat, waiting patiently to be unleashed. It was present also within her fingers, toes, eyes and every inch of her being. She was the echo—she was her own gift.

“Summon your followers, Father.”

“Carrie...Daughter, your human...Charles is alive. I haven’t—”

“His name was Charlie, you bastard. Remember that as your end falls upon you.”

“Carrie please! If Charlie met his end...it was not by my doing! I assure you, all those summoned do stand at bay.”

“The echo! Beautiful!” Carrie heard a man’s voice as several townsmen ran to the scene. Their faces bathed in delight as they stared up to her.

“Fools! You follow this wretchedness?” She pointed toward her father as the onlookers collected—all smiling and embracing one another.

“We will take the world!” was shouted.

At least one-fifth of Evrastill’s population had congregated—a hideous following of her father’s. They’d conveniently presented themselves for slaughter. She looked upon them—even sheep have purpose and individuality—these supporters were as pliable as the branches of willow trees. Knowing she could paint the blue crystals red with their essence had a calming effect...calming, yet not comforting.

“Deceivers of Evrastill...is this what you’ve lusted for? Your Queen?” Her question had many clapping, some crying happily.

“We would leave our walls...march to the vast lands around us. We would wipe the world of insignificance and our time would be now...now and for always.” Raising her hands and her gaze to the blue haze above her, she listened to the cheers below, her father’s being the loudest.

“Idiots!” Her fury knocked the majority to the ground—sending rippled waves through the plush, green grass. They stared up to her in horror.

“We are not the conquerors of the earth...we are not the dealers of death and destruction. You would follow one fool to soil your hands in the blood those you are sworn to protect? Would those actions differ from your interpretation of mankind’s treachery? Hypocrites...all of you.”

“We’re not hypocrites!” A defiant bystander jumped to her feet. “We’ve been stripped of our purpose—locked away within the mountain to rot!”

Her words and their meaning were clear. The people of Evrastill had long been limited in their ability to leave the walls of their home—with their interaction with mankind nearly completely reduced, it was only natural for some animosity to form. Perhaps some had felt imprisoned, unable to act instinctually.

“I assure you...all of you before me. You are not the pawns of Tarik. You are not capable inflicting pain on human flesh...bringing tears to human eyes...ending human life. If you feel in your truest heart you are...step forward.”

The crowd, many of whom remained on the ground, seemed to absorb the reality within her words. None moved forward as Carrie hovered closer to her father.

“Look upon me now, my people...my Society. Look upon your queen. Queen for but a day. This day shall be marked in our history as the end of this treachery...and the end of the echo.”

“Carrie, what madness is this?” Tarik’s eyes widened as Carrie loomed closer.

The scream created sent the majority of bystanders sailing from the scene. Those that anchored themselves to trees or watched from afar witnessed a scene of pure horror. Pinned beneath her extended shriek was a helpless Tarik. His struggles to escape were ineffective. Clothing, skin, blood,

and entrails fled the bones of the once prominent Society member—her father—her mother’s murderer.

And then even his bones met the surrounding trees and stone walls prior to her silence. Onlookers stared in horror—some ran—others approached as her feet met the soft grass.

“You may...you may take me. I will not resist...I will not fight you.” Her face rested to the grass as other Society members encircled her, chattering amongst themselves.

“Th...thank you.”

Carrie peered upward to see a smiling face...several smiling faces.

“Our Queen has ended the tyranny! The great Tarik is ended!”

Carrie glanced upon a new crowd. Several Society members assisted her from the ground, lifting her to her feet.

“Queen Carrie...you will lead us back to greatness!”

“What? No...no I will not. The Council must reunite.” Attempting to turn her attention once more to the overwhelming sorrow festering within—she only then realized it was no longer there. “I don’t...I don’t understand.”

“Understand what, Queen Carrie?”

“Stop...stop calling me...my bond is unbroken? How? He breathes?”

More members gathered in a massive crowd as an uncontrollable smile curled her lips. Something unexplainable had occurred—her bond had been resurrected.

Looking to the entrance of Evrastill, Nyrobie appeared, toting a shivering Charlie as she raced down the steps.

Carrie fell to her knees, sobbing relentlessly. “Go! Send a search party to collect Councilman Andre and the remainder of the group!”

“Of course, my Queen!” Carrie didn’t even look to see the man responding. The Society seemed to crave her guidance. She rose, racing to Nyrobie.

“What happened?”

“We were ambushed...forest creatures within the tunnels. I fell to the waters...he followed trying to save me.”

As Nyrobie placed him about the grass, Carrie was instantly by his side. “And you restored him? Nyrobie you—”

“No...my gem was lost within the river, Carrie.”

Carrie looked to Nyrobie. “How can that be? I felt our bond break...I felt him end.”

“Elinor taught me from a text book long ago. Human medicine. Cardio pulmonary resuscitation. I’d explain it to you, but it involves the exchange of breath, so I will spare you the details.”

She was incapable of speaking full sentences, incapable of controlling her tears. “Nyrobie...I love...I...love—I” Carrie wrapped her arms around Nyrobie’s neck.

“I know, my friend. I love you too. Can we finally get this boy home?”

A shivering Charlie offered a slight smile—his teeth chattering as Carrie planted kisses on his cheeks while holding his head in her lap.

Within seconds, he was lavished with warm blankets and even hot tea from various Society members.

“The party has been dispatched, Queen Carrie.” The man’s hasty proclamation caught Nyrobie’s attention.

“Queen Carrie?”

“Eh...yes. We need to talk, Ny.”

“I’m gone for but a moment and you’re now royalty? Please, tell me everything.”

Carrie smiled as she tucked the warm blankets around Charlie’s shoulders, cradling his face in her palm. “Yes. Come home with me. The day has been eventful.”

“Carrie...your father?”

Carrie couldn’t control her smirk. “It would appear as though...I am an orphan, Nyrobie.” Her smile had Nyrobie’s eyes as wide as her grin.

“Carrie! You didn’t!”

“I did.” She bit her lip as Nyrobie covered her mouth with her hand.

“Carrie!”

“I had no choice.”

“You ended his followers as well?”

“No.”

“And why is that?”

“I didn’t want to, Nyrobie. Is that wrong?”

“No. No, I think it’s fantastic. Your father, however, was an ailment. Come, let’s get this man to bed and talk over tea and make sweet soup.”



Carrie’s modest home was clad with spices and herbs, beautiful carrots and other roots were about the stone countertops.

Heavy stone and wooden furniture was in the living, dining and, sleeping areas. Nyrobie, Charlie and, Carrie sat happily at the dining table. Carrie’s gaze only left Charlie’s face long enough to sip her tea. She watched him devour four bowls of hot soup.

“Tomorrow I’ll officially introduce to your new home, my love. And perhaps some new clothing.”

“You don’t think I look fetching in this blanket?” His mouth was full as he spoke with a smile.

Jerrek walked through the door of Carrie’s home. Nyrobie instantly rushed to him. “My love. They are all safe within the Kingdom?”

“Yes. Andre, Elinor, Clark, Joseph, and Irena are being fed at Council Hall as we speak.”

“What? How odd.” Carrie stood, making her way to Jerrek. “Forgive me, my friend.”

“Whatever for?”

“Slamming you mercilessly into the Kingdom’s stone entry.”

“Oh! Yes, however could I have forgotten about being tossed like a rotten radish?” His smile assured his sarcasm.

“Tell me of these happenings at Council Hall.”

“I will...but first.” Jerrek walked to an eating Charlie, leaning over he hugged him tightly. “My friend. I thought I would never see you again.”

“I owe you all my life...several times over.” Charlie stood, wiping his mouth, and keeping remaining snug in the blanket.

“We did it.” Jerrek looked to Carrie, Nyrobie, and Charlie. Only then did it occur to Carrie that he was correct—they had.

“Yes. We did.” Carrie once again walked to Charlie, hugging him tightly around the waist. Her ear pressed flat to his chest took in the beating of his heart—young and strong.

“There is to be a celebration, Queen Carrie. As we speak, our friends are being pampered and fed and this evening the crown of old is to be placed atop your head.”

Carrie looked to Jerrek, unsure if his words were a witticism of some sort. “Crown?”

“Carrie...the Society intends to see you as their true leader. Even your father’s followers are at the Hall now, petitioning for leniency.”

“Leniency?”

“Sentences, not words, Carrie.”

“This makes no sense, Jerrek. A council...the Council is the only option. And what leniency? My father’s puppets have nothing to fear of me. I pity them; I do not wish to end or imprison them.”

“Elect a guiding council, Carrie. Lead—”

“No! I do not want this, Jerrek! I have all I want. I have you three...my family. I need nothing more.”

Nyrobie stepped forward. “Carrie...perhaps it isn’t only about what you need.”

“Nyrobie.”

“You proved today that you have the strength to control and secure the gift within you. That gift is the key to our Kingdom’s eternal safety. How can you not assume your place as our rightful leader... knowing you are of the blood?”

Carrie turned from them, defeat pushing her toward a nearby chair. She then looked to a grinning Charlie.

“This Society would never crown a queen unified to—”

“They know of and support your unification, Carrie.”

“What did you say, Jerrek?”

“They know of your unification. Times are changing, my friend.”

Boisterous voices could be heard from outside of her home—odd instruments and even singing. “They’re preparing to celebrate...me?”

“They’re preparing to celebrate us, Carrie! And Evrastill. This is could be the home we have always wanted. Your visions, your dreams could come alive. Take this gift and this crown and Kingdom and let us prosper eternally.”

She said nothing in response to Nyrobie’s statement. She merely stood methodically and made her way from her home and to Council Hall.

Never before had so many eyes glanced over her. Once a prisoner of the Kingdom, now they beckoned her to the throne.

“Please! Please, be merciful in my ending. I fear pain!” A woman named Maggie approached—red-faced and frantic. She was of the crowd supporting Tarik. The woman slumped and sobbed at Carrie’s feet as several other sobbing faces gathered around.

Leaning to her, Carrie rested her palm atop the back of the crying woman’s head. “Please stand, Maggie, and do not fear your end by my hand.” Carrie stood to face the crowd. “The purpose of a Kingdom is not to control by death and stifle individuality by stringent law. Do not fear me...do not beg for my leniency. Support me while I support you. Let us do what we were meant to do. The world above us is not so shambled that it lies a barren wasteland. There is much beauty there.”

Members from the Hall exited to hear Carrie’s words. Nyrobie and Jerrek were also in the crowd, as well as Charlie—wearing semi-damp clothing.

“Let us explore ideas, effective ways to return to what we are meant to do. Let us return to the surface sporadically to assist those creatures we love so much, not to take the earth for ourselves. To rest is to rust, and to rust an eternity would be torturous...agreed?”

Clapping and cheering became deafening. Carrie raised her hands and it was once again silent.

“Let us delve into celebration this evening. The day has been long...we have lost members, and some are mourning those losses. Tomorrow, let us elect a knowledgeable council of effective and proven leaders...enough talk of queens and crowns—”

Before she could finish her sentence the crowd was in outrage. As Carrie scanned the faces, she was thankful when her gaze met Andre’s. He walked swiftly to her.

“Andre”

“Carrie, my Queen.” He kissed her cheek.

“Please, you must convince them. I’m a simple—”

“They are already convinced, Carrie. So am I.” He smiled, producing a gemmed crown, elegant and finely polished. As he placed it upon her head, she inhaled deeply and simply let it be. She was queen. Queen Carrie.

“People of Evrastill. I present to you...our first queen in ages, Queen Carrie!”

The crowd erupted in cheer. Of all the happy faces, Carrie sought only the face of her partner, Charlie. She made her way to him as instruments played and couples began dancing around the Hall.

The celebration was in full swing.

“You’re beautiful.”

“You are beautiful, Charlie. Will you love me still with this silly thing dressing my head?”

“I’d love you with a nest of woodrats dressing your head.”

She grabbed his face with both hands, pressing his lips to hers. To feel their bond break was the worst sensation she’d ever felt. Holding him now was magical.

The evening was wrapped in dancing, a feast of various foods of the Kingdom, beautiful music, and much fellowship.

Carrie introduced Charlie to a plethora of delicious foods. She loved his expressions as he tried each new dish. They danced and mingled and made countless introductions until she noticed his eyelids looking heavy.

“Might I walk you home, husband of mine?”

The enchanted smile he gave her in response to the question would forever be painted on her memory.

“Yea...let’s go home.”

He patted his belly and yawned loudly as they made their way through the door. No sooner were they atop the soft bed and he was snoring softly. She knew he must have been exhausted. She kissed his cheek and climbed into bed with him, snuggling up to her unified partner at long last. She’d leveraged so much to be next to this sleeping human. She studied his scruffy face, kissing his cheek—clad with prickly stubble.

Running her fingers through his thick, brown hair...she thought of all the memories they would make...the life they would share. Her eternity was only now beginning...and she couldn’t be happier. She too was tired—dreadfully tired, yet she found herself longing to watch him a moment more. Her face to his chest, she too succumbed to the day’s exhaustive efforts.

The morning came with the crystals shining as brightly as Carrie had ever remembered. She awoke in the same position. She looked to see Charlie staring at her.

“Oh...good morning, my love.”

“Awe...my arm...there we go.”

“Are you injured, Charlie?”

“No...my arm was asleep but I didn’t want to wake you.”

He kissed her forehead and offered a sleepy smile. She wasted no time, her hand worked its way beneath the quilt and between his legs.

“Oh. Well...good morning to you too, my Queen.” He grinned, resting his hands behind his head.

“Clearly, you do not object.” She toyed gently with his nether parts while casually working free of the bedding.

“No ma’am. Do you mind wearing the crown?”

“Oh, hush, silly thing.”

As she climbed atop him, maneuvering him within her, his eyes instantly fluttered in ecstasy.

“Go...go easy on me.”

“As you wish, my love.”



“No...we do not have bacon or any other meat here...so silly.”

His dramatic, saddened expression had her laughing. “How could you eat salted flesh, fried within its own fat? That sounds absolutely awful.”

“It’s absolutely delicious.”

“Do you not enjoy the food here, Charlie?”

“Holy shit, yes. I’ve never tasted anything as...there is nothing that tastes like that up there. Everything here is so damn good.”

“Splendid. Are you done eating now? We can head to the hot springs.”

“Hot springs?”

“Yes. The springs. Unless you enjoy bathing in chilled rivers. The hot springs are—”

“You all just bathe naked in front of each other?”

His comment had her chuckling. “No, silly. There is privacy there, and a constant supply of fresh-running, hot spring water.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I’ll grab us some coal and a cleansing bar.” She kissed his cheek and left the kitchen. A pounding on the front door had her hastily returning.

She wasn’t surprised to find Andre and Elinor there; rather, she was taken aback by the look of concern upon either of their faces.

“Do come in, my friends. Whatever is the matter?”

“It is Elinor. I fear she is ill.”

“Ill?”

“No herbs are working. She’s been lightheaded and...I fear she came across something humanly during our venture to the outside world and within the tunnels.”

Elinor boasted a pale, exhausted look.

“Andre, human illness of any sort cannot flourish here. Please, fetch Nyrobie.”

Andre left to fetch Nyrobie as Carrie situated Elinor upon cushioned seating piece.

“Carrie...I’ve never felt...I feel awful.”

Moments later Nyrobie and Andre returned—both completely concerned.

“This makes no sense, Nyrobie. She appears ill. How might illness be here now? There is no pestilence in Evrastill.”

“I know this, Carrie.” Nyrobie, cautious in her approach, kneeled to Elinor, placing the back of

her hand to her forehead. “She is without fever.”

Nyrobie closed her eyes, they fluttered beneath her lids. Her eyes then opened wide, her hand slapped across her mouth. “It...it cannot be.”

“What? Nyrobie...what is it?” Andre leaned, pleading with Nyrobie for answers.

“Impossible.”

“What is impossible, Nyrobie?”

“Andre...your bride is with child. I feel his tiny thoughts.”

Gasps overtook the room as Elinor leaned forward—grinning largely. “With child...I am pregnant?”

“Yes. You are. Andre...how can this be? We cannot—”

“My theory is correct!”

“What theory, Andre?” Nyrobie’s question had all eyes settled on Andre, waiting on the man’s response.

“All this time...for ages the Council has led us to believe we are completely different. We are not. We are the same, only at different points on the evolutionary scale.”

“You’re...you’re saying this baby will actually happen?” Elinor wept as she asked this.

“Yes...I believe so, my love.”

Carrie looked to Charlie—they shared a wide-eyed whimsical grin.

“Which leads me to believe the remainder of theory to be true as well. Our kind cannot leave the mountain to take the earth and expect our immortality to follow us. We are powerful and immortal only because our environment allows us to be. We are forever eighteen years aged only because of the odd, blue crystals shining down on us. We are human...advanced...but human.”

Carrie gasped, crying as she raced to Charlie. “I’m so happy!”

Andre kissed his bride. “As am I! I am to be a father! I thought this would never occur!”

Elinor shook her head. “If the Council learns...couples must have been granted the blessing of the Council prior to—”

“You have the full permission and blessing of the Queen, my friend.”

Carrie’s words melted any anxiety from Elinor’s expression.

“I beg your pardon, Nyrobie...did you say, he?” Andre’s beaming smile had the room smiling with him.

“Perhaps...my apologies.”

“Are you certain?”

“I am, Andre. He is strong...healthy within your bride.”

Elinor erupted in tears of joy. “A baby boy? Am I dreaming? I could actually be a mother?”

The couple embraced, shedding tears as the idea of potentially raising her own youngsters had Carrie’s thoughts racing.

“This changes so much, Andre.”

“Yes...it does, Nyrobie.”

Charlie walked to the happy couple from the kitchen. “What if...I mean...will you be...?” Charlie scratched his head—his hair was incredibly messy. “What if he’s like me?”

Andre offered a curious grin. “Like you?”

Rocking on his heels—his face flushing—Charlie cleared his throat. “What if he’s just...regular? What if he’s like me?”

Andre stood, still smiling. He moved to Charlie, placing his hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “Charlie...you, my friend, are anything but regular. I would be honored to raise a son with such integrity and morals.”

The men shared a glance before offering one another a masculine hug, complete with a back slap. The reality of the situation began to settle. Andre was correct—they were one—they were all human.

Chapter 18

The Council Hall was buzzing with excitement. The entire Kingdom appeared rejuvenated and ready for the new era.

Seated at the Council table was Andre, Jerrek, Nyrobie, and nine new faces to the Hall. Carrie watched them mingle briefly before approaching.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Council...I am pleased to have you with me today. I believe this union will be prosperous and in the interest of our Kingdom.” She swallowed hard, pacing slowly in front of the table.

“I’m new to the Crown...this you know. Many of you are new to the Council. Yet our lack of experience leaves us ambitious...eager for answers and action.” The smiles and nods confirmed her statement.

“As we move forward, we must do so collectively. There are many questions left to be answered. How did we get here? How long have we been here? Perhaps we’ll never know. If the crystals feed our immortality and provide our magic, do they also feed our desire to aid and protect the humans of the earth above us? These legitimate enquiries should have been answered many an age ago...and yet they were left for us to unriddle. How exciting is that, my friends?”

Carrie anchored herself centered of the table, her hands behind her back, she peered down upon her newly elected Guiding Council.

“There is value in the secrecy of our existence. I will not debate that. Our home is lavished in natural gifts that would be completely depleted in a day’s time if the world above learned of their existence. However, we must get back to what we so desire, to what is ingrained in each of us. We must get back to the art of aiding our fellow humans above—acting once more as guardians.”

Her comment had each member of the Council grinning largely.

“Through training, education, and perseverance, we can once again become what we were so long ago...the protectors of those that walk the earth.” Carrie began pacing once more. “Such a task will be delicate and require much collaboration. This is why you sit before me. The stringent Council selection regulations of old, no longer apply. An eclectic alliance of ancient and young alike will lift this Society to places we’ve never been.”

Andre’s face beamed with pride as he looked to Carrie.

“I am humbled to serve alongside each of you. I know without a doubt that Evrastill will blossom and grow and I look forward to being with you centuries from now as we perfect our passion and expand our reach. So now, let us rise—we have rested too long. Let us stretch the ache from our bones and shake our stale minds free of the ways of yesterday. Let us rally, form committees, have intellectual debate, and take in the wisdom of our earthly-human allies. Let us celebrate in knowing that we have the tools and the mindset to accomplish our desires...and that is to act as the protectors...the guardians of those above. Stand with me now, my Council. Let us leave this quiet Hall for the boisterous voices of our people. They crave something loud; they crave something different. The time has come. Let us give it to them.”



Several Years Later

Tears—thick and sappy—streamed his face, trailing their way to his quivering chin. The cowering sun set not only on the day...but on the remainder of his fading hope. He hurt. It was a physical hurt looming in his core. Turning once more toward the sun, he shouted with all he had through the snow-covered trees. “Alyssa!” His breath left him and danced in the chilled air.

The incoming storms had hindered the efforts and reach of the search parties. Two nights with the temperatures reaching sub-zero was basically a death sentence for an inexperienced twenty-four-year-old hiker. Blake knew this, yet he couldn’t bring himself to walk away—to descend the mountain.

Hitting his knees, he cried violently. “Why? Why the hell did I bring...bring you...why? I can’t...I can’t live without you!” His cries carried across the still atmosphere, only the crows for company.

The previous evening, he’d gone to collect firewood among the surrounding trees. Even with years of outdoors experience, he lost his way back to her. When he finally reached their camping quarters hours later—she was gone...the note she left said she was looking for him.

Married two years prior, Blake cherished his wife more than life itself. Thoughts of going through life without her had him longing to merely lie down and rest indefinitely.

“Please...I know I...I haven’t prayed in forever. Please don’t take her from me.” His soft cries were nearly inaudible. His aching throat begged for something other than the bitter, biting air he inhaled.

“I’ll do anything...take me. Take me right now...just...don’t take her. Please, she’s already fought so hard. *You know how hard she’s fought!* Don’t...Please don’t take her away from me.”

Crouched with hands clasped, he continued his desperate plea—his face stung with nearly frozen tears. An intense, nauseating reality overtook him. He had to leave the mountainside...he had to leave now...and he had to leave without her.

Standing to his feet, using a tree for support, he slapped himself in the face. “I hate you. So,

stupid! I hate you!” Two steps later and he was vomiting the coffee and water he’d drank earlier. His nerves shook through his snowsuit as he worked to place one foot in front of the other.

As he walked, his tears fell to the snow below him. Her hypnotic laugh, the way she looked in the morning light just seconds before she woke up. She was his perfection. Thoughts of her being frightened, cold, and alone had him crashing to his knees once more. “Dammit! Please! Ally!” His voice cracked and nearly gave out on him as he called for her.

His tears continued melting the snow as the sun said its final goodbyes. Wolves called in the distance—part of him hoped they’d surround him and make short work of him. He inhaled deeply, coughing a few times as he did so. “You will always...always, be my everything, Ally Taber. You are the most inspiring, courageous, strongest human being I have ever known and you will always be in my heart...I love you...for...forgive me.” Resting his head and fists against the compacted snow, he continued crying. Knowing his mother and father would miss him dearly should he perish too, he lifted himself from the snow, and continued down the mountain.

Nearly an hour later—after each dream and near-future plan blatantly replayed in his mind—his eyes settled on the two-lane black-top, curving and hugging the mountainside as he cautiously maneuvered his way through the few remaining trees.

The sky was now pitch-black. The wind was picking up and the snow was falling heavily. The distant motor of a road plow could be heard.

Removing his glove, Blake took his phone from his snowsuit pocket. He now had one bar of service...and eighteen voicemails—the majority being from his mother. He sighed as he walked to his icy Jeep across the road. The frozen handles made it nearly impossible for his aching fingers to open the door.

Inside, he prepared himself to deliver the news...he’d failed them. He’d failed her. He’d failed everyone. Alyssa was gone. The thought of saying something so cruel seemed surreal.

The thought of his mother’s comforting voice on the other end of the line had him hesitantly pressing call on his touchscreen.

“Oh, my God! Blake! Baby?”

Even at twenty-five, Blake was a proud momma’s boy. His mother’s voice was all it took to send the man cratering. “Ma...Mamma!” He cried out into the phone—incapable of holding it to his ear.

“Blake? Blake!”

Nearly twenty seconds later, he’d gained enough composure to press the phone to his ear and deliver the dreadful news.

Shaking, his phone met his face. “I...I lost her, Mamma.”

Soft cries on the other end had him resting his head to the steering wheel.

“No, baby boy, you didn’t. She’s okay...she’s here.”

His mother’s words made no sense, but had him sitting straight up. “What? Mom! What?”

“Blake! Ally is okay. We’re at Memorial in the Intensive Care Unit now. She’s...she’s gonna be

okay, baby boy."

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! How? How, Mom? I'm coming now! Right now!"

"Blake! You listen to me, young man. You better drive sensibly on these roads! Don't think you're too big for me to bust your little ass!"

His cheeks hurt he was smiling so hard. "Mom...she's really there...she's really okay?" He cried as he asked.

"Yes...yes, Blake. She is sleeping now. She is okay. You are okay. We are all okay."

"I love you so much, Momma. I'm on my way now."

The thirty-minute drive to the hospital felt like an eternity. Blake's heart was happy, his foot danced nervously atop the gas pedal as he neared the hospital.

He didn't walk briskly, he ran through the front door, tears streaming—his eyes as wide as his smile. Tearing down the hall and through the double doors and to the first nurse he came to. "Ally Taber?"

"What?"

"Alyssa Taber?"

"Oh...and you are?"

"Her husband." His happy proclamation had the kind nurse leading him to room eighteen.

Rushing through, past their parents, he took her hand, collapsing to his knees and wailing at the bedside. "I...I'm so sorry! I love you so much! I'll never...I'll never let you go again!"

"It's okay. Hey, boy. It's okay...I'm good."

"How? How did they find you? When? I've been searching all day."

Blake felt his mother's hand upon his shoulder. "They found her at the base of the mountain...wrapped up, cozy and warm by an extravagant fire...delirious, but she's coming around."

"I'm not delirious, Mary. I told you...I was rescued. A young man, Andre. He spoke so eloquently with like a...British accent or something. He just...carried me through the blizzard down the mountain and waited until the snow crew saw the fire. He could run faster than our car, Blake."

Her voice was scratchy, her eyes were sleepy; she was perfection...his perfection. "I'm sure he can, beautiful. I'd love to thank him someday. I...I thought I lost you."

She chuckled. "Lost me? Nah boy. I beat leukemia's ass...you think a goofy mountain is gonna keep me from you? I love you, Blake."

"I love you too, Ally. I love you too."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bradon Nave was born and raised in rural Oklahoma. He attended a small country school during junior high and high school, and graduated with only three people in his class. After graduate school, he decided to devote his spare time to his passion of writing. Bradon currently lives in Piedmont, Oklahoma, with his wife and two young children.

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CROSS

D.A. ROACH

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CROSS

Ray Cross wasn't a hero; he could die too easily. But some things are worth risking death...

Ray Cross was born with a genetic disorder, resulting in a fragile body; his organs and blood vessels will rupture with any hard impact, so standing up to his best friend's controlling boyfriend could kill him.

Ray's life in Midland, MI gets decimated when his parents reveal they are not his real parents and his real father, a king from a secret land hidden in the far north of Canada, is dying and wishes to meet his son.

With his doctor and newly-met twin, Ray travels to the forgotten village of Yardis, where magic, myth, and corruption are abundant. But the longer Ray stays in the village learning the truth of his past and reconnecting with his father, King Vintras, the more he discovers an evil force threatening the king and his village.

But there's more than the king and a village tied to Yardis and Ray. He finds friendship and more from a band of brothers who are part witch, dragon, and healer. With new alliances and new abilities, Ray wars with himself on playing it safe or risking it all to save the ones he loves.

Can Ray rise above his fragile disorder to become the hero for once in his life?

Chapter 1

The bell rang, and I hurried out the doors, positioning myself in plain view where I could watch for Derek. Leo hurried over, urging me to let it go and let him handle it. Leo had always handled it, keeping the peace or laying the threats to keep me out of harm's way. But I had had enough.

Derek, emerged from the school wearing a smug smile with Lauren by his side. "Well, if it isn't Elmer himself! I heard you wanted to *have a word with me*." He said in a mocking voice.

I hated when he called me Elmer. Derek had given me the shitty nickname after I had messaged Lauren, urging her to leave him. To this day I don't regret sending that message. The controlling jerk had no right to cut me out of her life. In retaliation, he had heard the analogy I had told others about my genetic disorder. "I look normal but the glue, or collagen, that holds me together is faulty causing me to be fragile. It's like comparing a house made with screws and nails to one held together with Elmer's glue; they look the same but one can break and fall apart easily."

Lauren shot me a sympathetic smile as she tugged at Derek's hand, pleading for him to leave. He pulled out of her grasp and approached.

Leo came up on my left and quietly urged. "Cross, let it go. He's not worth the risk. Let it go."

"Yeah Elmer, better let it go. Like you always do. We wouldn't want things to escalate." He mocked. "You and your fake diagnosis have everyone fooled but me. I know the truth; you're too much of a chicken shit to fight. You let your oaf fight your—"

I charged past Leo and clocked Derek as hard as I could across his jaw. The skin on my knuckles split open instantly, revealing the bone beneath and unleashing a river of blood. I didn't care; I had landed a solid hit. Derek stumbled back, losing his balance and falling to the ground with a dumbfounded look. A crowd gathered to see the melee. I began to charge at him again, but Lauren and Leo grabbed me and pulled me away.

Beep, beep, beep! The alarm clock blared next to me, pulling me from the unbelievably realistic dream. My hand shook as it reached over to quiet the alarm. 6:45AM. I studied my hand, relieved it was intact. I hated being fragile, especially when I had to take crap from Derek Mavericks each day. "Ignore him, reason with him, explain your disorder." Yeah, none of it worked. I needed to borrow someone's normal body for an hour so I could kick Derek's ass and be done with him.

Today was my birthday, but unlike most kids on this planet, I did not enjoy celebrating getting another year older. With vEDS, another year older meant a step closer to an early death. I was still struggling with the tragic news regarding the death of my online friend, Nick Mitchell. We chatted often about vEDS, as we had that in common, and often compared notes. But he was gone and here I was, turning another year older.

After a quick shower, I grabbed my backpack and headed downstairs where Mom flitted about the kitchen and Dad was reading the paper and drinking his coffee.

“Hey, birthday boy! Happy birthday. Mom made breakfast,” Dad called to me.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart,” Mom called over her shoulder.

“Thanks. Did you save me any bacon?”

Dad pushed the plate of meat my way. “You okay? You look...” He narrowed his eyes.

“What?” I narrowed my eyes back at him.

Mom turned from the stove to look at me. Her expression dropped and she hurried over, putting her hand to my forehead to check for a temperature. “Ray, you look sickly.”

“Geez, thanks. I love you too. No, really, I feel fine. Tired, but I just woke up.”

“Maybe that’s it. You look paler, and your circles look darker. I’m glad we’re seeing Dr. Jonas this afternoon.” She returned to the eggs.

“Oh yeah? What time’s the appointment?” Dr. Jonas was a specialist that helped manage my collagen disorder.

“Right after school. Just head home, and we’ll leave once you’re here.” Mom said without turning around. “Are you having trouble sleeping?”

“No. But I’ve been dreaming a lot, and they’re pretty action-packed. Maybe if I dreamt of taking a nap I’d look more rested,” I joked.

Dad laughed, but Mom didn’t. “Here, eggs are done.” She brought the eggs over right as I reached for the orange juice. The back of my right hand connected with the hot pan for just a moment, but it hurt like hell. “Oh, Ray! Are you okay?” Mom returned the pan to the stove and returned with a wet wash rag. “Here, put this on there.” She helped me drape it over my hand. “Leave that there for a bit while you eat, then we’ll put some Silvadene on it.”

I peeked at the blistered skin and replaced the cloth. “Bad timing huh?”

Mom fixed the plate of food and poured my drink. “It was not the best way to start the day.”

After breakfast, my mom took off the rag and dried the wound with a paper towel. Then she dressed it with Silvadene and bandaged it. “Better hurry or you’ll be late for school.” She leaned forward to kiss my forehead.

I waved goodbye and started off toward school.

Midland High was in walking distance from my house, and in the two and three quarters years I had attended it, I could count the times I had to be driven on one hand. But on days like today, when the sun shone bright in the sky and the temperature was in the mid-seventies, I was glad we lived so

close. I turned onto Swede Avenue and walked on the sidewalk that led to the school. A few cars passed by, but our high school started an hour before most places of employment. The houses here were simple brick and siding homes. Their architecture reminded me of the house I saw on the *Brady Bunch* show when I was a kid. Some neighbors cared for their yards; their perfectly painted fences framed manicured lawns and flower beds. Others seemed to do nothing more than mow their “grass” which consisted of mismatched weeds and bare patches.

A large and fast moving shadow crossed the ground beneath me. I looked up expecting to see a stealth bomber or at least a huge cloud. But the sky was clear and cloudless.

Oof! I collided with a kid that looked a couple of years younger than me. “Sorry.” Where the hell had he come from? He shot an annoyed look my way before continuing away from the school. He didn’t look like anyone I’d seen around Midland. He wore grey cargo pants, a tattered red tee, and had a shaggy haircut. I shrugged it off and continued on my way.

With a couple of days before spring break, the teachers went easy on us and filled the class time with movies or busy work enforcing the most recent lesson.

Mrs. Burke turned off the ancient VHS recorder, ending today’s Romeo and Juliet lesson. “Tomorrow we will finish the movie and discuss how it compares to the text.”

At some point in the movie, I had tuned out and focused on Lauren Crosby who sat a few chairs ahead of me. Lauren and I had become close friends in middle school when she transferred in and struggled with adjusting. Her locker had been assigned near mine, but she never managed to open it. We’d joke that an evil witch had cursed her to forever be locked out of her locker, but I didn’t mind helping. And as time had passed, I had become closer friends and more attracted to her.

A crumpled piece of paper flew onto my desk.

“Score.” Derek chuckled from behind me.

I shouldn’t care what the paper said, but curiosity got the better of me.

Keep your eyes off my girl Elmer!

It was a warning from Derek Mavers, school jerk and Lauren’s boyfriend since Freshman year. I hated him.

The guidance counselor had encouraged my parents and I to be forthcoming about my condition, insisting it would make the other students sympathetic instead of cruel. Most were compassionate and respected my limitations, sometimes even offering to help make something physically easier for me, like carrying my heavy backpack. But there were a few, like Derek Mavers, who had no care for anything besides themselves. They took pride in dominating others and letting others’ misery feed their egos. Derek and his crew acted like a bunch of noisy alpha male baboons who owned Midland High.

I drew a hand giving the middle finger on the paper and lobbed it back at Derek. He opened it, and judging by the sour look on his face, I had pushed a button. He pointed his finger at me and drew his finger across his neck, threatening my end. I smiled to show I wasn’t afraid, though this was the

farthest I had ever challenged Derek. I wondered how far to push it.

I turned back around in my seat and locked eyes with Lauren. She had stolen my heart in sixth grade, and to this day, a simple smile from her would drop me to my knees, even the sympathetic one she wore now. I couldn't help but smile back at her as I thought, *Yeah, your boyfriend is a dick, especially to me, but I'm not the one who has to kiss his ugly mug.*

When the bell rang, Derek knocked my books off my desk as he walked past. "My bad." He muttered as he kicked my biology book to the front of the room with feigned innocence.

"Jerk." I knelt to pick up my scattered books and flipped Derek off. He turned in time to see it.

Good.

His mouth quirked up in a half smile, amused at my passive aggressive return.

Mrs. Burke came over with my biology book. "Don't let Mr. Mavers rattle you. He enjoys causing trouble."

I wasn't in the mood for adult advice. "Thanks," I answered while putting the book in my stack. "See ya tomorrow, Mrs. Burke." I walked out of her class to join the current of students flowing through the halls during passing period.

Lauren found me at my locker. "Hey, happy birthday. Listen, I'm sorry about Derek. He can be awful sometimes."

"Sometimes?" I chuckled to myself as I shoved my books into my locker. "You don't have to apologize for him. I'll never like the guy, and he'll probably always be a dick to me."

She reached out and gently touched my bandaged hand. "What happened?"

"Burned myself at breakfast." I pulled my hand away and shut my locker. I wished we could have more moments like this where we could chat and be together as we had in the past. "You deserve better than him." My teeth raked over my bottom lip as I debated holding my tongue or saying what I really wanted to.

Lauren looked at me, as if she anticipated what I said next.

"I should have asked you out in eighth grade when I had the chance. I would have made you happy." But I had felt so unsure of myself at the time and hadn't thought I'd make good boyfriend material. I had also been terrified at losing her friendship; any attempt to change the relationship risked losing it.

"I am happy." She sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

"Are you?" I knew the real answer. She and Derek had started off happy, but he'd become more controlling, especially when it came to our friendship. It had become a sore spot for them.

Derek came up from behind and punched the locker next to mine, startling both of us. "Looks like this conversation is over. Remember what I told you, Elmer?" He poked his finger into my shoulder hard enough that I knew I would have a bruise. "Stay away from my girl." He grabbed Lauren by her elbow and hurried her down the hall, scolding her for disappearing on him.

Lauren looked back at me, the sadness in her eyes left me regretting my confession. I didn't want

her pity; I wanted her to dump him and find someone better than Derek—anyone but Derek.

“Looks like someone’s been poking the hornet’s nest again,” Leo said from behind me.

Leo and I had met sophomore year at lunch. He was bigger and more muscular than most sophomores at our school, making him and I an unmatched pair. My disorder kept me from building muscles. I had suspected the other students kept a wide girth from Leo because of his intimidating size and looks, but that didn’t scare me.

“What did ya do this time?” He nodded toward Derek.

“Nothing. Derek’s being a possessive jerk like usual and pissing all over his territory to mark it.” My remark made Leo laugh.

“Come on, or we’ll be late for bio.”



Leo’s friendship had come at a time when Lauren and Derek had grown closer and the distance between Lauren and I had become greater. The two had started dating our freshman year, but midyear Derek started isolating her from me and controlling her social media. She stopped taking my calls and replying to my texts besides occasionally sending, “Beat it, loser!”, which obviously, Derek had sent.

I had acquaintances at school, but Lauren had been the sun in my rainy day. Her carefree way and sweet smile made me forget I had a life-threatening disorder. But as Derek pulled her farther away, my depression and anxieties about my disorder grew. My parents worried for me, more so than usual. I assured them it was temporary and I just needed time to get over not having Lauren in my life. But it was easier said than done. Every emotion I felt seemed amplified in her absence.

My parents let me be for a while, but eventually my mom had had enough. One day, towards the end of summer, my mom came in my room and said, “Something has to change. You’re been a hermit all summer, holed up in your room and cut off from the world—it’s not healthy.” She made me promise that if my social life and mental well-being hadn’t improved by October, I would see a shrink.

I didn’t need a shrink, and to prove it, I put forth a solid attempt at being more social. The perfect opportunity came when I walked into fifth period lunch that first week of school and saw Leo Palkin, a kid I’d never seen before, sitting by himself.

I chose a seat across from Leo and said hello. In fact, I said hello several times with increasing volume to be sure he heard me, but he never responded. Finally, when the bell rang, Leo stood with his tray and grunted in my direction. Some might have seen that as a negative response, but I saw it as progress.

Over the next few days, I managed to get Leo to speak actual words to me. Granted, they weren’t the nicest words, but “I don’t need a lunch buddy,” was better than nothing. After much persistence, Leo finally realized I was not going away and he finally dropped the tough guy act, well, at least

with me.



After bio, Leo and I headed out the side doors.

“Where’d you park? Back lot or side?”

“Back.” Leo led the way to his old yellow Volkswagon Bug. He’d inherited the clunker from his uncle. It had over 180,000 miles on it and plenty of rust, which Leo decided to cover with stickers.

“I love how you turned your rust bucket into a piece of propaganda.” I tried to smooth one of the stickers that had started to peel off. “This one’s barely hangin’ on.”

“Crap. Seriously? Which one?” He unlocked his side.

““Strangers have the best candy’.”

“Oh man, that one’s my favorite. I’ll have to put some glue on that when I get home.” Leo got in and reached over to unlock my side. The engine sputtered and coughed, trying to even out so he could put it in gear.

“Wow, she purrs like a kitten.” I snickered.

“Watch it, this baby takes your butt home each day.” He warned as he pushed on the gas pedal to try and help it settle. While I could walk to school in the morning, by the end of the school day, I was exhausted and the few blocks felt like a few miles. “Remind me to give you your present. It’s in the trunk. Happy birthday by the way.”

I chuckled. “Thanks, I almost thought you’d forgotten it.”

“Nah, I was just makin’ ya sweat.” Leo turned onto my street and slowed when we noticed a black BMW in my driveway. “Looks like you’ve got company. Want me to go in with you?”

“No, my dad’s car is in the driveway. Could just be his friend.” I didn’t recognize the car, and my parents didn’t have many friends. They mostly socialized with neighbors.

Leo parked on the street by my mailbox. “Wait here while I grab your gift.” He ran around to the trunk and returned a moment later with a square-ish box. “Open it,” he insisted as he shoved it into my hands.

I tore the paper and opened the brown box. “Candy cigarettes? No way! Where did you find these? Wait, there’s like fifty packs in here!”

“Twenty-four, actually, twenty-three to be exact. I had to try a pack for myself. Of course, I can only blame you since you insisted I try some the first chance I get,” he confessed. “Anyway, I remember you telling me how you remembered riding your bike to get some from the convenience store. Seemed like a happy memory from your childhood, and I saw these while shopping for new headphones. I had to get them for you. Funny thing is you can’t just buy one pack, you have to get twenty-four or nothing.” He chuckled. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks man. Best gift ever. It’s been years since I’ve...” I stopped mid-sentence when I saw *him*,

the kid I collided with this morning, walking between our yard and the Ritter's yard. He didn't see us as he turned and headed north up the street. I sat frozen in my passenger seat staring after him. What was he doing here?

"Hey man, you okay? You seem kinda spooked." Leo set his hand on my shoulder, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Huh? Oh, no. It's just that guy. I've never seen him before, and this morning I bumped into him, and now he's here."

Leo turned and searched out the front window. "What guy?"

I looked back and he was gone. "Where'd he go? He was right there! This guy walked between our yards and up the street. Where the hell did he go?"

"Is he a new neighbor or something?"

"No. I don't know. This morning was the first I'd ever seen of him." I unbuckled and got out, looking up and down my street but seeing no sign of the kid. Leo looked at me like I was crazy, but something struck me as odd about the stranger.

We entered through the unlocked front door and could hear voices coming from the kitchen.

"You will tell him tonight." The male voice giving the command sounded familiar. "I'll come for him in a week. It will give you time to say your goodbyes. We can't wait any longer."

I heard my mom sniffle as she agreed. Leo looked at me with a questioning look, but I shrugged, feeling as clueless as he looked.

"I am sorry you cannot join us. King Vintras does not want any confused feelings during this important time." The familiar masculine voice paused. The people from the kitchen came into the living room. Dr. Jonas froze when he saw Leo and I. "Raynar, good to see you. Please excuse me." He hurried past us and out the front door. Why was he here? We'd only ever seen him in the clinic.

My dad emerged from the kitchen, surprised to see us. "Hey, I didn't hear you come in."

"Does that mean our appointment is canceled?"

"Oh, yeah. He came by to chat with us, but the appointment is canceled." My dad seemed flustered.

Mom came around the kitchen corner wiping at her eyes. "Hi, honey," she cleared her throat. "I didn't hear you come in. Dr. Jonas was just here meeting with us about an upcoming trip." She walked over to the front window and looked out to the street below. "We'll tell you all about it..." She became overcome with emotion, pushing past my dad as she hurried down the hall, slamming the door behind her.

"Is she okay?" Leo asked.

"In time, hopefully." My dad looked down the hall where my mom had retreated. He turned his focus back to us and asked, "How was school?" as if nothing had happened a moment ago.

"Fine." I answered. "What's wrong with Mom? And what did Dr. Jonas want?" Mom's cries could be heard down the hall.

“We’ll talk about it over dinner.” He smiled reassuringly only the smile never touched his eyes. “I’m gonna go check on your mom. Good seein’ ya, Leo.” My dad retreated to the master bedroom where Mom had closed herself off away from the world.

Chapter 2

The overcooked roast and underdone broccoli casserole foreshadowed the tense discussion attempted over the evening meal. It began with pleasantries, “How was your day, do you have any homework?” Mom asked without pausing between the two questions.

To test my suspicion that neither of them would be tuned in enough to care what I answered, I replied with, “Fabulous day at school, thanks for asking. We had a sub for biology today, and you wouldn’t believe who it was...Satan. Yep, the man in red, pitchfork and all.” There was no response so I continued, “He assigned us six chapters in our books and told us to slaughter six animals tonight.” Both of my parents sat, pushing their food around on their plates as though I had said nothing at all. I dropped my utensils onto my plate, “Enough. Just say it. What shit bomb did Dr. Jonas drop on you today?”

They both turned silently toward me. They didn’t laugh or scold me—they didn’t do anything, and that made me even more worried. The last time my parents were this lost in their heads was the night they told me about the prognosis of my vEDS. They had taught me about my fragile body from as young as I could remember, but that night was the first time they’d ever told me that I would probably not live a long life. Forty-two years was the average life span according to statistics from a few years ago. I knew that statistics didn’t apply to everyone, but I still couldn’t help feeling like someone had stamped an expiration date on me. “Best by November 11, 2042,” like I was a piece of meat from the butcher.

“Ray, we have something we have to tell you.” Dad reached over and took mom’s hand in his before continuing. “We are not your biological parents. You were born in a remote village in the far northern regions of Canada, in a place not seen by most. Your parents loved you, but they could never be together and they were forbidden to keep you. Your father ordered us to take you far away and keep you safe. We brought you to Michigan and cared for you.” He looked to my mom who stared down at her plate.

“You’re joking.” This was the last thing I expected to hear. “You are not my parents?” I waited for a response from them but the room remained silent. “Neither of you?” Mom shook her head but wouldn’t look at me. “Why did you lie to me and make me think you were my parents?”

Silence.

“What the hell?” I stood, knocking the chair back, and stormed off to my room, slamming the door behind me.

Why did they lie for all these years? Or had I assumed they were my parents and they never corrected me when I addressed them as such? Either way, they deceived me. This was nuts. I raked my hands through my hair trying to clear away the emotion and think consider the facts.

So, I’m some illegitimate son of two young and dumb teens. it happens. It sucks, but it happens. These two people, who I had thought were my parents, cared for me for years despite not being my actual biological parents. Why? And what happened to my real parents?

My phone buzzed in my pants’ pocket. Leo. He seemed to have a sixth sense for when I needed him.

Leo: You okay?

Me: Hardly. Just got a bomb dropped on me.

Leo: ???

Me: Told me they aren’t my real parents.

Leo: WTF!? I’m coming to pick you up. Be there in 5.

Me: K

I pocketed the phone and took a deep breath.

Knock, knock. “Ray, it’s Mom, can I come in?” Her voice was soft and sympathetic.

I opened the door. The woman who I had called mom for years stood before me with a sad and worried look on her face. She stepped forward and wrapped me in a hug, holding me for a long time. I couldn’t tell if the hug was for her or me. “You are my son and you will *always* be my son. I don’t care what anyone else says. I raised you and loved you like you were my own flesh and blood, and the bond that connects us will never break.” She pulled back, and held my face in her hands. The tears she had shed left white trails down her colorful cheeks. “We love you. We always will. This doesn’t change that.”

“Why did you lie?”

“We were told to keep you safe. Our village had been attacked, and we took you and fled to Michigan, far from the happenings of home. We chose not to tell you to protect you. We couldn’t risk you going back and trying to find your parents, not till we knew it was safe. I’m sorry we deceived you, but I am not sorry that you are safe and alive.”

“Why tell me now? What’s changed?”

She sat on the corner of my bed. “Our people are free, but your father is dying. He wishes to meet you before he passes. Jonas will take you next week to meet your him.”

“Jonas? As in Dr. Jonas?”

She nodded.

“Why not you or Dad?”

There was a knock at my door, and my dad peeked in. “How’s it goin’ in here?”

“Okay.” Mom answered.

“Ray, Leo’s here.” My dad stepped aside and my friend came into my room.

“Hey, man.” Leo looked between my mom and I. “Ready to go?”

“No, Leo. Ray, we’ll talk about this later.” Mom hurried out of the room, seemingly glad for the interruption Leo had provided.

“I won’t bring him home late, Mrs. Cross.” Leo called after her, then turned to me. “You ready?”

I let out a breath. “Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

Leo and I drove around town and finally parked at Chippawassee Park to hang at the Skate Park. The sky was dark, lit only by the pale moon’s light. The park had closed hours before, but neither of us cared.

“They want me to go to some village far up north to meet my real dad. I guess he’s dying and asked to see me. What I don’t get is why does he care now, after all these years?” I folded my legs under me while Leo dangled his over the bowl.

“I don’t know. I’m still struggling with the fact that your parents aren’t your real parents. Completely mind-blowing.” Leo shook his head. “You gonna go?”

“I guess. Dr. Jonas is supposed to take me next week.” I threw a pebble onto the grassy area adjacent the skate area.

“Not your parents, or whatever they are?”

“Yeah, I don’t know.”

“Hey Cross. What else is eatin’ at you?” Leo studied me. “You can’t hide that shit from me. You’ll feel better getting it off your chest.”

I told him about Nick’s recent death from vEDS and how bad it sucked to worry that I might die young. We didn’t say much more, but I was glad to have his support.

Leo dropped me off at home. I wasn’t surprised to find my parents in bed watching the late-night news on their bedroom TV. I knocked and creaked the door open.

“Hey, you okay?” My dad asked.

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. Wanted to let you know I was home.” I turned and shut their door, then got myself ready for bed.

I pulled out my laptop and Googled “northern Canada climate”. Maps of Canada showing highs and lows filled my screen with the word “sub-arctic” written across them. Summers had mild temps with a high around 85F and winters dropped as low as -40F. One of the pages stated that with cool and short summers, the natives relied on wildlife meats and berries for food. The population in the area was scarce, probably due to the cold temps, poor growing conditions, and lack of modern resources. Which led me to my next Google search: “wifi Canada”. A map appeared with cell towers along the U.S. and Canadian border, but there was only a smattering of towers in the north.

“This is going to suck.” I shut the laptop and fell back on my bed, thinking about how this would go on record as my worst birthday to date.

Chapter 3

The next morning Mom checked my burn. It looked redder than it had the day before. She phoned Dr. Jonas and sent him pictures of the wound. He told her some tricks to try at home and prescribed an antibiotic for me. Once we picked up the medicine, my mom dropped me off at school entrance and hurried off to her job.

I started up the long front walk hoping that I was late enough to miss first period. Something in my periphery caught my attention. Near a tree, a few yards away, stood the kid I had collided the other day. His hands were deep in his pant pockets as he stared at me with interest. I realized I had stopped and stared back at him. *What did he want?* “Can I help you?” He didn’t reply. I walked toward him cautiously, not wanting to scare him off. When I was about ten feet away, he blew a frigid breath toward me, stopping, no, *freezing* me in my tracks. At first, it felt like a cold breeze, but the longer I stay stuck, frozen mid-step by this unnatural force, the more the coldness took hold. And like the winter days of my childhood, when I’d stay out too long building snowforts and sledding, the chill sunk deep into my bones and I knew it would be slow to thaw.

“That’s far enough.” He warned.

“What the hell did you do to me? Why can’t I move my feet?” I tried to push or pull out of the frozen position but had no luck.

“No good will come from your travels with the Guardian. Larkin will kill any who threaten his plans.” He turned and disappeared between two large pines. My feet remained stuck in place. *Crap!* I reached down and wrapped my hands around my frosted ankles. They were cold and hard, as if they had been pulled from the freezer. The warmth of my hands thawed them enough to free me and cause me to fall into the grass. And soon, the strange burning sensation that often occurred after coming indoors from the cold covered my skin. The effect felt dry ice, cold and frozen one moment and gone the next.

I lay back on the grass and shut my eyes as I tried to regain my grasp of reality. The warm sun that beat against my eyelids dimmed, and I opened my eyes to a clear, cloudless sky. A large shadow crossed the ground, similar to the one from yesterday. I checked the sky again, but I could not see what had cast this fast moving shadow.

With my legs thawed, I ran toward the pines where the kid had retreated. But he was gone and I

was left wondering if I magically woke up this morning in a different dimension.

The rest of the day blurred past. I didn't focus on anything during my classes. Instead, my brain tried to sort through the nuggets of information presented to me couple of days. I wondered who the flip was Larkin and what were his plans? And who was this person I kept bumping into with magical abilities?

"Cross? Earth to Cross?" Leo waved his hand in front of me, pulling me to the present. "Geez, where are you today?"

"Sorry, I have a lot on my mind with the trip coming up."

The bell rang, announcing the end of the school day. "Here, borrow my notes." Leo handed me his notebook.

"Thanks, man."

"Come on. We'll talk on the way home." Leo decided we needed a stop at the local ice cream parlor. We ordered our ice cream and took a seat at a booth in the corner of the shop.

"Weird things are happening man. I dunno." I shook my head.

"Like what? Stuff besides your parents?" Leo licked a drip as it slid down the cone.

"Like that guy I saw the other day. I saw him again."

"Oh, yeah?" Leo wiped his mouth, "Is he our age? Younger? Older?"

"Younger by a few years. He told me I shouldn't go on the trip and that if I do, Larkin will kill anyone who messes with his plans."

"Who the flip is Larkin?" Leo looked as shocked as I felt.

"Beats me."

He pointed his spoon at me. "Okay, I figured it out. The dude is a loon. Probably off his meds and fixated on you for some reason." He spooned a bite of ice cream into his mouth. "Call the cops next time you see him."

"But how would he know I was about to take a trip?" I rubbed at my forehead, trying to make sense of it all.

"Don't over think it man. Go on the pilgrimage to the frozen wasteland, do whatcha gotta do there, then come home back to your boring life in Midland. You'll stress yourself out wondering and worrying about everything." He took another bite and continued with a mouthful of ice cream. "Seriously, pay no attention to Mr. Few-Fries-Short-of-a-Happy Meal."

"He froze me. Like flat out used some magic shit on me."

Leo stopped working on the bite in his mouth and gulped it down hard.

He probably thought I was the crazy one. "I'm not kidding. I was coming at him outside of school and," I shook my head, "I suddenly couldn't move—foot in mid-air and all."

"Bullshit." He didn't believe me.

"Not kidding."

"Okay, new theory, you're the crazy one." Maybe Leo was right, maybe I was crazy. He drove me

home without another word about the strange things going on in my life.

Mom greeted me when I came into the kitchen. “Fend for yourself dinner.” She fixed herself a leftover tuna salad sandwich and sat at the kitchen table. “Your father’s working late tonight.”

“Okay.” I made myself a steaming cup of Chicken and Wild Rice soup. “Can I ask you some questions?” I took my seat across from her.

“Sure.”

“Why do they stay up there, in that village, far from civilization? I mean, if my biological father is in poor health, why wouldn’t someone take him to a hospital?”

She nodded but seemed reluctant to tell the story. “I’m afraid you may not believe me.”

“Try me.”

Chapter 4

Mom told an incredulous tale that a week ago I would have never believed, but after the recent events in my life, especially the ones involving magic, her story didn't seem as far-fetched—well, except the part about me having a twin brother named Torin and being the son of a king. I made her repeat that to be sure I hadn't misheard.

She went on to talk about my parents' forbidden love and the conflict it caused that ended in us being separated from our birth parents and the village being hidden away from the world. It was a lot to take in, and while I asked a few basic questions, I also remained fairly silent as I tried to wrap my brain around this new info.

"I thought you'd be more surprised or disbelieving." She studied me from across the table. Neither of us had had a bite of our food yet. "It's not every day that your mom tells you that you come from royalty and that the village was cursed by a scornful witch."

I nodded. It was a lot to take in and my brain attempted to fit these new puzzle pieces into the others I had. I decided to tell my mom about "Mr. Few-Fries-Short-of-a-Happy Meal," as Leo called him.

She seemed unsettled and shot off a few texts to my dad and Dr. Jonas while I ate my lukewarm soup. "Dr. Jonas thinks it best if you to come straight home from school from now on. No going out without one of us. It's important you adhere to this, Ray. We aren't sure who it is or how they found out about the trip. I mean, if he had wanted to hurt you, he had his chance. You were caught off guard, and he used some form of magic on you. We should feel lucky he only issued a warning."

"Yeah, but the trip is still on. Right?"

She nodded. "We may change when you leave to something last minute to limit the info of your departure getting out. Plus, Jonas and Torin will be with you. I'm not sure Jonas has told Torin about you yet. Probably best to sit on that information till we know for sure."

"I don't get why you kept that a secret from us." I could have at least known my blood brother this whole time.

"Jonas thought it best to keep you both separate. You know, we never knew how long we would be away. We had hoped it would be no longer than a year, but time stretched on without word from the village, and we just did the best we could. I think he still held onto the hope that any day we would

return to Yardis, our village. Your father and I gave up trying after Jonas continued to be resistant. Maybe we should have tried harder.”

I wish they would have but saying that wouldn’t change anything now. “How exactly is Dr. Jonas going to protect me from magic?” He was fit, probably in his forties, but what could he do in a fight against someone with freeze-abilities?

“Jonas, your father, and I were the strongest and most able warriors in the village. In fact, we were out on a mission beyond the boundaries when the spell was cast; that’s how we didn’t get trapped in there with everyone else. Jonas also has knowledge of potions, which can counteract some magic. You’ll be safe traveling with him.”

“I don’t want to go. My life is here, not far away. I’m sorry; I know that sounds selfish, but I’m being warned not to go on this trip and the little voice inside of me is telling me to sit my butt down in Michigan and stay put.”

Mom looked at me sympathetically. “You have to go.”

“Why? Why do I have to go?”

“Because your father is dying, and he has asked to see you.” She spoke in an even and controlled voice. “He is our king, and we took an oath to protect you until he summoned you.”

“He’s not *my* king.”

“Maybe not, but he *is* your father and you *will* go with Jonas to meet him because he is a part of who you are.” She reached across the table and took my hand in hers and gave it a squeeze.

I let out a breath, accepting defeat.

That night I barely slept. I tossed and turned as I stewed over the supernatural world begging to pull me into it.

The next morning, Leo studied my face. Concern lined his features. “You look like hell.”

“I’m tired. Couldn’t sleep.”

He snapped a picture of me and showed it to me. The image was haunting. Dark circles lined my already deep-set eyes, and I looked paler than normal. “Shit. I look as bad as I feel.”

“You should’ve stayed home and slept the day away.” Leo pocketed the phone.

“Nah, I can’t miss. The trip will eat up a few days and I don’t want to repeat senior year if I don’t have to. I’ll be fine.” I reassured him.

“Okay, I’ll see you at lunch.” Leo patted my back and headed down the hall.

I knelt down to search my messenger bag for what I needed for math.

“Hi, Ray.” Lauren. I’d know her voice anywhere. I stood and couldn’t help the smile that crossed my face. “Are you okay?” She looked as worried as Leo.

“What? Oh, yeah. I’m tired but okay.” I looked around for her boyfriend as he seemed to shadow her. “What’s up?”

“Derek isn’t here today. I feel I never have a chance to talk to you with him around.” She smiled. “I miss it.”

“I’ve missed it too.” I didn’t want to overstep my bounds. “School going okay for you?”

“It is. Hey, do you wanna grab a coffee sometime and catch up with each other?” She had a hopeful look on her face.

“Sure.” *What was I doing?*

“Great, how about today after school?” She shrugged as she asked. Was she trying to take advantage of Derek being absent so she wouldn’t have to explain anything to him?

Shit. I should say no and head home like my parents asked, but this was a golden chance to spend time with Lauren without her overbearing shadow. “Yeah, okay. Today works.”

“Great. Meet me at the back doors after school. See ya.” She hurried down the hall, smiling and looking happier than she had in a long time. Somehow accepting the invitation felt worse than poking the hornet’s nest known as Derek with a stick. This felt like taking that nest, shaking the shit out of it, and then slamming it to the ground to stomp on it. Derek would find out, and then there would be hell to pay.



Coffee with Lauren had turned into one of the best afternoons I’d had in a long time. The conversation flowed as if no time had passed between our friendship.

“Are you happy with him?” I asked.

She took a moment before answering. “Most days I am. He’s good to me, but his insecurity makes him keep me close.”

“And shuts you off from the rest of the world,” I added.

“Not the rest of the world, just you. He’s threatened by you, Ray. I think he’s jealous of how close we were.”

I hadn’t expected that. I had presumed Derek was just an ass and a control freak, simple as that. But now that she mentioned it, I had seen Lauren hang out with a few friends.

“And here we are. What do you think he’d say knowing we were having coffee together?” Would she tell him or keep this secret?

“I’m sure he’d be upset, but he’d just have to get over it.” She sat a little straighter and tilted her chin up in a defiant way making her look even more adorable that she already did.

“Well I’m glad we did this. I missed us.”

“Me too.” She smiled. I had never stopped loving Lauren or hoping that one day we would find our way back to each other. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

We paid the bill and Lauren excused herself to the bathroom.

“I can see it in your face.” The strange teen leaned against a nearby booth behind me. “You have every intention of going to Yardis. Why?” He pushed off and took the seat across from me.

“Who are you?”

He gave a half smile, then looked away. “No good will come of it. Stay away.” He stood and left the store.

“Who was that?” Lauren slid back into the booth.

“Just some guy I met a few days ago.” I didn’t feel like getting into the lengthy story with her. “Come on, I gotta get home.” I had already broken the rule of coming straight home and it landed me a visit from the guy I was trying to avoid. I considered texting my parents to tell them about the encounter but decided since I was safe, I’d wait and enjoy the last bit of my time with Lauren before facing their angry or concerned words.

Lauren pulled up to my house, and I noticed Dr. Jonas’s car parked in my driveway.

Worry took center stage as I wondered why he was here sooner than he had planned. Had something happened? Were we leaving early for the trip up north? How long would we be gone? All of these thoughts cycled through my head. Dr. Jonas had cargo tied to the top which led me to believe the trip was happening today.

I caught Lauren studying me. Her face morphed from curious to concerned, and to be honest, her expressions reflected what I felt inside.

“Ray, what is it?” She set her hand on my shoulder and rubbed it gently. Her familiar touch soothed me.

“I have to go away for a while.” I took her hand in mine. “I’m glad we went out today. It felt like old times. It’s been awhile since I’ve felt this happy.”

She smiled and my heart melted. “Me too. I forgot how easy it is to be around you. You’ll always have a piece of my heart.” She squeezed my hand. “When will you be back?”

“I don’t know. We’re going up to Northern Canada. I’m hoping I’ll be back right after spring break, but I honestly don’t know how long this will take.” I looked at Lauren and wondered how this trip would affect our relationship. Would my time away help or hurt our chances of being something more besides friends?

“But you *are* coming back?” Her focus shifted between me and my house.

I didn’t know the answer to that, so I said nothing.

“Ray?” She waited for me to look at her. “Why did you never ask me out?” Why did she care about this now?

Screw it. I was leaving, and there was a chance I might not return. What did I have to lose? What risk was there in telling her how I felt? “I didn’t ask you out because, as much as I loved you, I didn’t want to risk our friendship. It was the one good thing, my life preserver, that I had during the crappy rough waters of middle school. I didn’t think I could survive without it.” I couldn’t look at her. “It was selfish and safe, but I chose to have you as a friend rather than lose you all together.”

She scoffed, “So I ended up with Derek, who has shut you and I out of each other’s lives.” I still couldn’t look at her but I could tell she was shaking her head. “Your plan backfired, Ray. To get the things you want in this life, you need to step out of your comfort zone and take risks. I know the vEDS

makes you extra careful about things, but you can't live your life treading water. That's not much of a life. Take the risk and see where it takes you. Good or bad, at least you'll be moving forward and living this life you've been given to the fullest."

I had closed my eyes as I listened to her honest thoughts. She had always been the one who reminded me to stop worrying and enjoy the adventure before me. She had reminded me to live.

She squeezed my hand, "Ray look at me."

I opened my eyes and turned to face her, but found myself kissing Lauren. While I'd been lost in her words, Lauren had moved closer and caught me in a kiss. It took a moment for the initial shock to die off and let my hormones kick in. Her lips were soft and velvety, dancing gently over mine until I could no longer feel them. I opened my eyes, missing her lips already. Lauren sat before me, blushing. "I've been waiting five years to kiss you, Ray Cross. *That* is how you take risks!"

My head was muddled and the words for this moment had hidden themselves away, deep in the recesses of my mind. I settled on, "If I was nice, I'd care about Derek and how this affects him, but I don't really give a shit. Right now all I wanna do is kiss you again." I leaned over and pulled her closer for a longer but less nervous kiss.

As she sat back, I noticed her cheeks had flushed. "I'll figure Derek out. Good luck on your trip, Ray. Come back to me." We pecked one more time, before I exited the car.

I watched Lauren drive off before heading inside. "Let's go and get this over with," I told myself.

My parents came out of the kitchen, followed by Dr. Jonas and another high school-aged kid. He had a good two inches on Dr. Jonas and was built like a footballer.

"Raynar, this is Torin, my dependent and your twin brother." Dr. Jonas clapped his hand on the tall teen's back. "Please pack your essentials into a duffle bag. Your mother already has your medications and medical supplies ready."

"Hey." I nodded at Torin. He returned the nod but said nothing more. "Nice to meet you. I've never seen you around Midland High School."

"I don't go there. I homeschool with private teachers," he answered.

"Ahh." I turned to Dr. Jonas. "Why are we leaving today? It hasn't been a week since you came by."

"Lysa and Jaron told me your encounter with a magic user. We decided it was best to make the trip now in case our initial plans had leaked to an outside party. We want to avoid any ambushes set to deter us from our course." I wondered if Dr. Jonas knew that kid had visited me today.

"Okay, give me a moment and I'll collect my things." I headed to my room and began shoving things into a bag. Besides clothes and toiletries, I packed a journal and one of my favorite books that seemed fitting for this trip, *The Hobbit*. A duffle bag didn't hold much. I took a final look around my room, hoping I'd return soon to my life in Michigan.

"I'm ready." I walked into the living room and tossed down my bag.

"Ray, we'll call the cellphone company and see if we need to do something to get you some

service up there. You might want to power down your cell in case it's awhile before you stop and can charge it," my dad suggested.

Mom grabbed something from the entertainment center and approached. "This is for your father, King Vintras. It's a photo book showing you as you've grown throughout the years." She handed me a book wrapped in a sheer cloth, tied with a string. "And this is for you." She opened her right palm revealing a gold necklace with a rectangular medallion with an ornate symbol that looked like the fletching of an arrow carved into it. Both my parents wore this charm. "It's your father's. It is the Web of Wyrd, a powerful symbol that represents all parts of life—past, present, and future—being interconnected and influencing each other. The Guardians of our village wore them—they are spelled to hold three memories. Here, try it." I had assumed the necklaces were nothing more than a symbol of my parents' love for each other. She urged me to bow my head down making it easier for her to clasp the necklace around my neck. The medallion felt lighter than it looked. "Now, hold the pendant in your hand and say 'Vennex'."

I held it and repeated the strange word Mom had said. And for a brief moment, I saw Mom, Dad, and myself playing like a GIF on the computer screen. I was learning how to ride a bike, only I saw it through my dad's eyes. My parents high-fived and cheered as a young me wobbled about on a bike. I felt the sting of the slap, smelled the hot pavements. I sensed Mom's worry like I'd never felt it, and Dad's pride swelled in my chest. Tears pricked my eyes, and I quickly wiped them away, disguising how I felt by looking at Dad and saying, "You were totally crying there. This is just your memory."

Dad stepped toward me and pulled me into a hug. "Yup. I was. But I wanted to remind you that sometimes all you need is a little confidence and a gentle push." He pulled back and ruffled my hair. "You'll be fine with Jonas. Come back to us soon. Love you, kid." "Love you too Dad."

Mom's fingers played with an identical medallion hung around her neck. "You can load two more memories in it. Hold the medallion and think of the memory you want to store in your mind. Think about the emotions, the sounds, smells, all the things that pull you back into that moment. Then say, 'Virale'. It also will allow you to speak and translate any language."

"Thank you." I kissed her cheek. "We have to go." Dr. Jonas urged.

Mom wrapped me in a hug. I could feel my shirt dampening from her tears where she cuddled into my chest. "I love you. Stay safe." She placed a gentle kiss on my lips, then she turned toward Dr. Jonas, "Jonas, please be safe."

He nodded his answer and lead the way out to the car. My dad wrapped me in a tight hug and said his farewells. Torin, who had claimed the front seat, glared at me through the windshield as I rounded the car. I didn't know him, but the vibe he gave off was less than welcome. Was Torin and Dr. Jonas as close as I was to my parents? Even though they weren't my biological parents, they had raised me with love and care and I never once doubted their affections for me.

Chapter 5

We rode in silence, only the sounds of the wheels turning on the rough pavement and the wind rushing past filled the car. Dr. Jonas drove us over the Mackinac bridge to a town in Canada called, Sault Ste. Marie. He nearly hit a pedestrian when a self-driving Google car pulled up beside him. Torin and I shared a laugh when Dr. Jonas confessed he had never heard of such a thing and first thought it was a ghost piloting the vehicle.

My parents had insisted I keep my passport active, though I had never understood why since we had never travelled outside of the U.S.. But now the reason was clear: a passport was needed to cross from Michigan into Canada, where the village of Yardis was located.

Dr. Jonas parked in the empty lot behind a small Italian café. “We’ll grab a bite before starting off again.”

I powered on my phone and listened to the cacophony of alerts anxiously awaiting my attention. Beeps and buzzes sounded for almost a minute. Torin and Dr. Jonas stopped dead in their tracks and turned toward me with baffled looks on their faces.

“Sorry.” I shrugged and continued past them into the restaurant, scrolling through my notifications. I had several comments on Instagram and a few on Facebook. I had a text from Mom that said she loved me and several from Leo.

Leo: How’d the date, I mean coffee, go with Lauren?

Leo: ????

Leo: This place is so friggin’ quiet. Dad’s workin’ late tonight. Where u at, bro?

Leo: Tried callin’ you. Where you?

Leo: Ray????????????????????????????

I saw I had missed three phone calls from him and there was a voicemail. Before checking it, I shot off a text.

Me: Leo, I’m on that trip with Dr. Jonas and my twin. Had to leave earlier than planned. We’re up in some Canada town called Sault Ste. Marie. Torin is like a Bizarro version of me. Reminds me of Derek. Hopefully trip won’t suck.

Finally, a waitress greeted us and directed us to a table along the wall. The table had a red and white checked cloth, paper napkins, and hard plastic water cups. “Here’s the menu. I’ll be back to

take your order after I finish up with them.” She nodded toward a large party at the front of the restaurant. Besides them, there were only a couple of tables occupied.

My phone dinged.

Leo: YOU'RE ALIVE!!! Thought maybe you fell off the face of the Earth. When will you be home?

Me: IDK

Leo: I'm guessing no cell service where you are headed.

Me: Probably not—my parents said they are calling cell company to see about service but idk

Dr. Jonas and Torin ordered their drinks, and the waitress waited patiently for me.

Me: Gotta go, text you when I can.

Leo: Stay safe.

I powered off my phone and apologized to the waitress. “Sprite please.” I looked over the menu and when she returned with our drinks, we placed our orders. Torin and the doctor did not say much to each other, and I wondered if they were always this quiet or if they had a disagreement. “Dr. Jonas—”

“Please, call me Jonas from here on out. That’s what everyone where we are going calls me,” he corrected.

“Jonas...so you took Torin as your son?” I wanted to test Jonas and see his reaction, maybe get an idea of how things were between him and my twin brother.

“I am Torin’s Guardian, not his father.”

Torin shifted uncomfortably in his chair at Jonas’ words. I imagined my own father’s answer to that question and knew he’d proudly say he was my father, even if biologically he wasn’t. Torin stared off in the distance, his face emotionless, despite a growing tension I could feel between him and Jonas.

“When I became Torin’s Guardian, I had no idea how long we would be away. The barrier spell was impossible to break. I anticipated a year, but as time ticked on without word from the village, I had to start making a life in Michigan as I continued researching ways to bring the spell down.”

“That must have been hard, moving far from what you know, trying to start a new life.” My own parents, or Guardians, at least had each other during that time.

Jonas cleared his throat. “The first year with a young baby was difficult. By the second year, I put Torin in daycare and pursued my medical degree—things got better. I think we needed that time apart.”

Torin pushed his chair out and walked over to the old jukebox near the door.

“I homeschooled him to give him the best education I could. He did well; he’s a smart boy. As he got older I started combat training and hunting with him. I knew one day we’d return to Yardis and it would be important for him to have those skills. I wanted him to be ready for whatever future was expected of him, and I think he is.”

I looked over at Torin, who was glaring at Jonas. Our upbringings were completely different. “So

even though we're twins, he doesn't have vEDS. I mean, he doesn't look like he has it and I'm not sure he'd still be alive after combat training..."

"No Raynar, Torin does not have vEDS. Yours was a random mutation, a true anomaly." As much as I would never wish this disorder on anyone, including Derek Mavers, I also hoped to meet another that faced its challenges. The internet groups helped me not feel alone, but there is something to be said about meeting someone just like you in person. A heavy guitar filled the restaurant, and Torin returned to his chair without a word. Perhaps it was the vEDS that made my parents raise me different than how Jonas raised Torin. Maybe my fragile state steered them far from combat training and survival skills and instead, had them guiding me gently toward doing my best in their loving care. Whatever the reason, it made me thankful for being paired with my parents instead of Dr. Jonas. They were not my biological parents, but they'd always loved me as though I were their own.

The waitress returned with our plates of pasta and bread and asked if anyone wanted refills.

I still didn't know if Torin knew we were twins. "What about your mom?"

Torin looked up at me as he swallowed a piece of bread. "What about her?" He stared me down with an annoyed glare. Rather than push my luck, I shut up and ate a bite of spaghetti. "I never knew her," he said.

Jonas said nothing but continued eating.

"I'm sorry you never knew her. I couldn't imagine life without my mom. She's made my hard days easier."

"This is bullshit." Torin threw down his napkin and pushed off from the table. "You never knew your mom—at least your *real* mom! I'm over the happy little family reunion. I need some air." Torin stormed out of the diner.

Jonas pushed his food around on his plate, giving it far more attention than it deserved.

"What aren't you telling me?"

He didn't answer.

"I know there is more to this and I haven't figured it out yet."

The bell above the cafe door dinged and I turned, thinking Torin would come rejoin us, but instead I froze when I saw that mysterious kid I'd bumped into back home. What was he doing here? He hurried toward the restrooms.

"Do you know him?" Jonas asked as he followed my eyes as they stared after the teen.

"No, I—" I never got to finish my sentence. A muffled argument that grew louder drew Jonas's attention. He stood and hurried outside. I followed.

Torin and another teen I had never seen before yelled back and forth. Jonas approached them with his arms out in an attempt to calm the situation and figure out what was happening. "Hey, hey! What's going on?"

The café bell rang and out came the Few-Fries-Short Guy. He looked at me, and by his expression, he was caught off guard. The yelling from Torin and the other kid pulled his attention

away and he ran over to the argument.

“Ren! Let it go. Not here, not now.” Few-Fries-Short urged as he pulled at the other teen arguing with Torin. Torin towered over the kid; he was smart to urge the other kid to back off.

“Lay off!” Ren shouted back. “We tried it your way, Fenick. It didn’t work.” Ren snapped his fingers, causing a spark that quickly formed an arc of flame directed toward the side of the building.

BOOM! The ground shook and a huge fire blasted skyward.

“No!” Jonas ran to the side of the building where the explosion had originated. Torin punched Ren in the jaw causing him to stumble backward.

“Let’s go!” Fenick pulled Ren away from the fight he seemed eager to continue. Ren fought Fenick but finally gave in and ran away with him.

Torin and I caught up with Jonas. He helplessly stared at the fireball that was once his car. The extra gas filled canisters Jonas had packed for the remote parts of the trip fueled the huge inferno. All our supplies and personal items were gone.

“Your meds are in my bag.” Jonas patted the black backpack on his shoulder. “But the rest of your stuff was in the vehicle.” He shook his head.

Torin came up next to us and cleared his throat. “They’re gone.” I wasn’t surprised to hear this as Fenick seemed to evaporate into thin air each time I had encountered him.

Jonas spun and shoved Torin. “What did you do? Huh? Who the hell was that guy and what did you say to piss him off?”

Torin pulled away defensively, “Look, I don’t know who that was. He went on about wanting us to turn around and leave well enough alone. I told him to mind his own business, but the hot head wouldn’t let it go. How was I supposed to know he’d do this?” Torin motioned to the blaze.

“I knew the other one, or at least I’d seen him before,” I said.

Jonas and Torin turned and faced me.

“He said the same thing, that we should not be heading back to Yardis. Maybe it’s a trap.”

“Nonsense. They are just two punk kids causing trouble. Probably trying to scare you off.” Jonas concluded.

“Two punks with mystical talent,” Torin muttered, earning him a cross look from Jonas but a “you’re not wrong” look from me. Why was Jonas downplaying this? Torin and I exchanged frustrated glances.

Jonas pulled out his billfold and handed a few bills to Torin. “Head in and pay the bill. I’ll...deal with this, then we’ll settle in for the night at that inn over there,” he nodded down the street, “and start off in the morning.”

“What about our stuff?” Torin asked.

“It’s replaceable. We’ll get new supplies at the local shops before we head off again. We’ll have to find another way to Yardis though.” Jonas ran his hands through his hair in frustration.

“What should I do?” I asked.

“Keep a look out for those two troublemakers. They owe me a new car and an apology.” Jonas pulled out his phone and dialed 911. The few people outside of the café had come to watch the blaze at a safe distance. Thankfully, no other cars were parked out back.

I turned on my phone, snapped a shot of the blaze, and sent it to Leo.

Me: Lost our ride.

It took a moment for him to respond.

Leo: WTF! Well it’s not a party till you torch the car. What happened? You okay?

Me: Yeah, I’m fine. My stuff is gone—nothing big, except some pics and my novel.

Leo: What happened?

Me: Too complicated to text. Promise to tell you when I get home.

Leo: K. That mean you’re headed home now?

Me: I don’t think so. Spending the night in this town, then heading off, somehow, tomorrow.

Leo: K, stay safe and go roast some marshmallows! Make the most of the moment. Lol!

Me: Ha! Nice. Bye.

Chapter 6

The night at the Inn was uneventful. I phoned home and told my parents about the explosion. They were concerned, but I reassured them everyone was okay. Jonas called for a morning charter flight to some place north of here named Fort Albany. He and Torin shared a bed and let me have the other one to myself. We stayed up watching latenight TV until Jonas turned it off and reminded us of a heavy travel day tomorrow. The red neon Inn sign, glowed bright through the thin curtains.

“Hey Torin? Know why they just call this place Inn?” I asked.

“Because they couldn’t afford more letters for the sign.” We both burst out laughing at his answer.

“Alright you two, go to bed.” Jonas ordered before rolling over and going to sleep.

In the morning, I awoke to the sound of hushed voices. I stayed still, and peered through my eyelashes at Jonas talking at Torin. I couldn’t make out what he said, but I didn’t miss Torin say “I’ll do my best. I understand the importance.”

Jonas shook his head in frustration. “You’ll do your best,” he mocked. “This is not a time to try; this is the time to succeed. Whatever it takes.”

Torin clenched his fist at his side then stormed out of the hotel room. I stirred in bed, letting Jonas know I was awake. He went about getting ready without addressing me.

Once Torin returned a half hour later, we headed further into town to get essentials for the rest of our travels. We downsized to backpacks as the store didn’t have any duffel bags. It didn’t matter; I had no intention on staying any longer than I had to. My Little Debbie Oatmeal Crème Pies were replaced with Jos Louis snack cakes. Unfortunately, Duncan Dop’s Shop did not have a copy of *The Hobbit* to replace mine, so I settled for a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, figuring it was a novice read but better than the trashy romance novels they stocked. Jonas paid the bill, and at some point, he must have called for a cab, because we walked out of the store to find a yellow cab parked at the curb.

The ride to the airport wasn’t long, though Jonas grumbled in his front seat about having to change our flight plans. And that we had to cross back into Michigan to get a different plane to our next destination, Fort Albany. I Googled Fort Albany, Their web page was terribly out of date. I zoomed in on a black and white photo of a bunch of kids in old fashioned clothes. The photo reminded me of the

kids in that Our Gang DVD mom had borrowed from the library. I showed the picture to Torin.

He looked closer at it. "Who are those people?"

"Kids from Fort Albany."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. He scrolled up. "First Nation Communities" he read the banner at the top.

"Hey Jonas, how remote is this village?" I asked.

"Pretty remote."

The nervousness that I often battled sent my heart beating faster and made my breathing quicken. As much as I was up for an adventure, the worry of being so far from a qualified hospital petrified me.

"Hey man, it's gonna be okay." Torin said quietly so Jonas wouldn't hear. "Don't worry." I wondered if it was a twin thing, him sensing my unease, or was it that obvious this bothered me?

At the airport, we made our way to the charter planes where Jonas chatted with a guy a moment before telling us to follow him. We boarded the plane which was small but luxurious. Two white leather chairs faced each other and a white leather couch faced the two chairs. Torin claimed the couch and stretched his large frame across it. "You know you'll have to sit up and buckle in at take off," Jonas reminded him.

"I will. Hey, Cross, if you need to tag off and lay down for part of the trip, let me know," Torin offered as he folded his arms behind his head.

"Thanks, I'll let you know." I had been wrong; Torin was nothing like Derek Mavericks. He may have started out cold but the more I got to know him, the more I could see he actually cared about others. "This is impressive. I've never flown before, but if it's always this nice, I'll have to insist on doing it more."

"Ha," Jonas chuckled. "Even I don't travel this fancy. This was the only chartered flight willing to go to Fort Albany. It cost a pretty penny, but we gotta get there."

Our flight was a little over six hours and while the takeoff was terrifying, the ease and speed made it my new favorite way to get around. Torin and I swapped seats and took turns napping on the couch. We offered it to Jonas as well, but he said he was comfortable resting in the fancy leather chairs. The landing was a little rough, but we had made it there safely. Jonas thanked the pilot who had radioed ahead and asked for a driver to help get us further along the path.

"You the fellows that needed a lift?" A middle-aged man called to us from a black sedan.

We approached the car and Jonas asked the driver to take us to the nearest place to stay. It was a long day of traveling, and Jonas thought our hike would be more manageable after we rested. The driver pulled up to a convenience store and advised us to grab some soups, snacks, and drinks as there weren't any nearby restaurants. Torin and I waited with the driver while Jonas did a quick shopping trip. We then continued on to a lodge. The place was medium sized and probably housed twenty or so rooms. The décor was generic at best. White walls, wood doors, basic furniture, nothing

fancy or ornate. But it was clean and it had a kitchen for us to heat up our food and a shower to get clean.

We each had our own bed. I crashed early and slept like the dead. In the morning, Jonas made us oatmeal and told us we had half an hour to pack up. We packed our gear and snacks and checked out. The car from yesterday was parked out front waiting for us. Jonas walked up to the window and passed him a small piece of paper. “Good morning. Take us here, please.”

The man typed in something from the paper on his phone, then shook his head. “Your information is wrong. There is nothing out there. This is over thirty miles north west of here, in the middle of nowhere” He held the phone out to Jonas. “See? No roads lead to it. Perhaps you’ve made a mistake on the coordinates.”

“It is not a mistake. Take us as close as you can, please.” Jonas insisted as he climbed into the passenger’s seat.

Forty minutes later, the driver pulled to the side of the road. “This is the closest I can get you.”

Jonas leaned forward and studied the dash-mounted cellphone. “But it looks like the road continues another mile or two ahead. If you take us—“

“No. This is as far as I am permitted.” The driver interrupted. “The treaty forbids me to enter their land.

“The Swampy Cree Treaty?” Jonas asked.

“You know of it?” The driver turned and looked at Jonas suspiciously.

“I’ve heard of it. I thought it was just a legend.” Jonas played it cool, and the driver bought his act.

“No, it’s a real thing. When the Yardinians first came many moons ago, they were wild and hungry for a life of their own. They had no king and no way to enforce any rules so they took what they wanted and did as they pleased. Finally, my people had enough and fought hard to drive them out. We pushed them to the confines of the Great Oaks and the treaty was born. They were to elect a king and respect the boundaries, and we were to leave them to their region and not interfere unless the treaty was broken. My people believed they would only survive another winter or two but somehow they’ve made it much longer than that.” The driver explained.

“The Yardinians still exist?” Jonas asked, even though he knew the answer.

“They do, though, come to think of it, it has been many years since I have come across one. Of course, it’s been awhile since I’ve been up in those parts. The Missus found us a place south of here so I only come up to this area to help with transportation from time to time. I used to run into them at the Trading Post near the Gylos Settlement. If you don’t mind me asking, what brings you to these parts?”

“Just visiting.” He turned to Torin and I. “Grab your packs.” He handed some folded bills to the driver and thanked him. Once we exited the car, Jonas hurried over to the driver side window and knocked on it. The driver rolled down the window. Jonas opened his palm and blew gently. A purplish

dust invaded the driver's air, causing him to slump back into his seat. Jonas wiped his hand on a cloth and shoved it into his pocket and returned to lead us. "Let's go."

Shit! Did he kill the driver? "What did you do to him?"

"He's sleeping. When he awakens, he won't remember meeting us or how he got here." He said as he headed toward the forest with Torin close behind him.

I found myself stuck next to the taxi, worried for the driver.

"Raynar, let's go! He will be fine. If he wakes and sees us, I'll be forced to use something stronger that *could* kill him. You wouldn't want that, would you?" Jonas threatened.

No I wouldn't.

I looked back at the cabbie. He appeared to be peacefully sleeping, his chest rising and falling with each breath. I hurried over to Torin and Jonas. "I'm not used to this mystical stuff. Thought you might've killed him."

Jonas laughed. "I'm a doctor Raynar; It's my job to help people, not kill them."

"Dr. Kevorkian was a doctor," I muttered.

"Dr. Who?" Jonas asked. Torin chuckled, apparently having heard about the assisted suicide doctor or laughing at the nod to the epic sci fi TV show.

"Nevermind." I didn't bother explaining the reference as I followed him to God knows where.

Chapter 7

Torin and Jonas strode ahead easily, hacking away to clear the way. I had a harder time and they had to repeatedly stop and wait for me. The uneven ground, dotted with rocks and large tree roots, proved to be taxing on my body. And I soon realized the Swampy Cree Treaty must refer to this area as at least half of it was wet and swampy.

“No wonder there aren’t any roads up here.” Torin stopped and sat on a log as he waited for me to catch up while Jonas scouted ahead. “They’d have to bring in all kinds of dirt and materials to build up the ground. It’s so wet and mucky in these parts.” The bottom of his jeans were soaked. “Almost there Cross. It’s less deep on the left.”

“Thanks. I’ll only say this once because it needs to be said. This friggin’ sucks.” I stepped down into the wet and muddy terrain and nearly lost my footing.

Torin chuckled. “I’ve been on worse treks, but yeah, that wet shit is more than I signed up for.”

My entire lower half hurt, including my toes. My muscles had never worked this hard before. I had to keep my balance, turn left, climb, and crouch, and the worst was the “wet shit,” as Torin had put it, that made my legs feel like I had twenty pound weights attached at the ankles. My poor legs didn’t want to take another step and I worked hard to will them into action. Each time I stopped, I lifted my pants legs to check the bruises on my legs. They were darkening; I knew I’d be out of commission for a few days once we got to this village. My body was not made for this type of activity. It also didn’t help that years of playing it safe left me with weaker muscles. I was overall less fit than most males my age. But Torin and Jonas waited patiently, never once complaining about my frequent stops.

Focusing on my surroundings instead of my pain seemed to help. Thousands of evergreens of various types stretched as far as I could see. Small pockets of snow had collected on the branches, shielding the ground from the recent snowfall as there was only a minimal accumulation where we walked. I noticed the sun had past the midpoint of the sky and continued its slow descent, making me estimate it was early afternoon. The air here was fresher and colder than Midland.

After a few hours, the forest gave way to a large clearing where a small wood building sat at the edge of the tree line.

“It’s still here.” Jonas turned to me with a smile on his face. His expression quickly changed to

concern when he saw me. "I'll fix you up inside."

I nodded, glad we'd made it to this shack as I wasn't sure I could go much farther.

"Think anyone is in there?" Torin asked.

"I hope, but the only way to know is to go and find out." Jonas started toward the building.

The grassy clearing was even ground, but those last steps felt harder than any of the others I had previously taken. I made it to the weathered wood steps, sat down, and removed my shoes. I let out a big breath, enjoying the freedom from the confines of my sneakers.

Jonas peeked through the window and tried the door, which opened with ease. He and Torin entered, but I remained in place, not sure I could move unless I absolutely had to.

"Can I help you?" A male voice asked from within the building. The three chatted, but I couldn't make out the conversation specifics. Honestly, I didn't care about the specifics, as I didn't have much say in things. The conversation seemed light and friendly. I leaned back and relished in the warm sun soaking into my pores. The temperature in the clearing had to be at least fifteen degrees warmer than the wooded areas. I propped my feet up on my backpack to help give my blood vessels and heart a moment of peace. If they weren't throbbing with pain, I'd probably have fallen asleep. Not a cloud in the sky existed to disrupt the warm blanket the sun provided me.

But a moment later, a shadow crossed my eyelids and my warmth disappeared. I opened my eyes to see a large flying beast bat its wings and fly over the shack.

"What the...?" I couldn't see it anymore. I was curious and scared as hell at the same time. I got to my feet and hurried to the back, not bothering with putting on my shoes. I rounded the corner of the shack, but saw no beast, only the guy named Ren who had destroyed our ride a few days ago. *Crap!* Torin and Jonas were in the building and they were bound to cross paths with Ren. Another large shadow crossed the ground and I looked up in time to see a large scaled beast that resembled a dragon land in the woods behind the house and exit as a human. As he neared, I could see it was Fenick, the guy who had frozen me in place. This was too unbelievable for words.

Torin and Jonas...

I hurried to the front of the building where Torin, Jonas, and a tall teen with shaggy brown hair stood at the top of the stairs looking around.

"Torin! Jonas!" Their heads snapped my way. "We need to leave."

"Raynar, this is Poe." Jonas motioned to the new guy. "He's a healer. We need to look at your injuries."

"I'm okay. We really need to go." I urged as I sat and began putting my shoes back on. "Let's go." Only no one followed me down the stairs.

"Raynar. Come here." Jonas commanded. "Let Poe have a look."

The door opened behind him, and Ren came out onto the front porch. "Poe, we're back. Fenick and I..." He stopped when he recognized us and his expression turned from pleasant to feral.

Poe placed his hands on Ren's chest. "Backup Ren. These are guests and he's hurt." Poe's voice

held authority.

Ren let out a snarl but stepped back against the shop door, hands clenched at his side in restraint.

“Please, come in so I can check it out.” Poe kept his hand against Ren’s chest and motioned with his head for us to enter the shop. Jonas went in first. Torin followed. My eyes were trained on Ren, who had pushed Poe’s hand off of him and ran off into the green landscape. A moment later, a large reddish dragon, the size of an SUV, emerged from the foliage. Its wings, which extended a good fifteen to twenty feet on each side of it, beat hard, helping the beast arc high in the air before it circled back and sped straight for us.

“Duck!” Poe yelled out as the dragon opened its mouth blasting a fiery blaze in our direction. Thankfully no one got burned, but the heat from the blaze had been intense.

“Ren’s in a mood” Fenick appeared in the doorway next to Poe.

“When isn’t he?” Poe answered before stepping forward to yell after the dragon. “Cool off, Ren, and be back by nightfall. And don’t you dare burn down the shop!” The dragon flew out of sight.

I grabbed my pack and followed Fenick into the building with Poe closing the door behind us. Poe walked me over to a padded table in a back room and asked me to sit on it. “Sorry—no one else in the room. It messes with the energy.” He shut the door, closing him and I off from the others. I couldn’t help feeling like a lamb being lead to the slaughter, yet I didn’t feel alarmed. In fact, I felt completely calm and relaxed.

“Let’s try this again.” He extended his hand to me. “Hi. I’m Poe.”

“Ray.” I took his hand and shook it.

“Ray. Let’s put the bullshit aside and cut to the chase. I can heal you, but I need to see your injuries.”

I pulled off my dirty socks and hiked up my pants so he could see my lower legs.

He returned with a wet wash rag and cleaned the dirt from my skin. He winced as he took in the damage to my legs and feet. “Shit. Did you fall or something? You’re pretty bruised up, and then there is this thing on your ankle.” He pointed to a hematoma on my outer ankle bone.

“No. I didn’t fall. I have a condition that makes everything in me fragile, blood vessels included.” I took in the rainbow of colors smattered across my skin and the bubble of blood the size of half dollar that grew in the same spot as my previous ones, only this one was far bigger. This was the worst my legs had ever looked.

A few years back, my parents had taken me to a hematologist to ask about the recurrent hematomas. The doc hadn’t seemed concerned and had said they were inevitable with my fragile vessels. He had recommended rest and elevation to help them go down.

“Lucky you.” Poe scratched at his head. “But I can fix this.” He walked over to a cabinet and took out some supplies and set various bottles and wraps on a nearby table. “So what’s the deal with you guys and Ren? You know each other?”

“We ran into him and Fenick in Sault Ste. Marie. He torched our ride.”

Poe shook his head. “Shit. He’s a hot head. Fenick and I spend a lot of time picking up his messy pieces. He’s impulsive and annoying, but he’s not all bad.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” My skin warmed. Poe’s hands, which seemed to be glowing with a white light, enveloped my legs. He rubbed gently at the lower half of my leg as the intensity of the light and heat fluctuated. I sucked in a breath to help with the pain.

Poe looked up at me for a moment, the light dimmed with his distraction. “Sorry, almost done. Think you can you push through?”

I nodded, and he returned his focus to my legs. As the heat intensified, I joked, “I didn’t know you’d be cooking my legs for dinner.”

Poe laughed at the joke and then it stopped. My legs and feet tingled as if both had been put to sleep. “Is that it?” I looked down and saw my skin had a strange appearance to it, almost like a snake shedding its skin.

“I need to wrap them. But this is a good sign. Many blister from the treatment but this dead skin... that’s not typical. We don’t see this until the next day at the earliest. But I’m gonna wrap them anyway with this ointment to prevent infection.” He wrapped my legs in a wet gauze that had a woody smell to it. I looked like a mummy, but Poe pulled my pant legs down to cover most of the bandaging. “You can move around if you gotta, but try to sit with your legs up as much as possible.” He looked up at me and saw the question on the tip of my tongue. “You guys need to stay till tomorrow. We have plenty of beds on the top level.” He took the dirty towel to the sink. “I’m sorry about your ride and my brother’s temper. Ren will be back by nightfall, but you won’t have to worry about him while in the shop.”

“Why is that?”

“This shop or some call it, a healing outpost, was built long ago by a member of a nearby peaceful tribe called the Gylos. The Gylos healed others and stayed clear of the wars around them. The Gylos wanted to put good energy back into the world so they provided healing, magic, and tinctures to anyone in need.” He walked over and pushed against a large wooden vertical beam. “This shop was crafted and spelled to foster peace within it and protect those who sought shelter. Once you stepped off the front porch, the gloves came off and fights resumed. But as long as you touched a part of the spelled structure you were safe from enemies. People from all around would come here for healing and to trade for special goods they couldn’t readily find in their region.”

“Are you part of that Gylos tribe?”

Poe turned toward me. “Half. My father was Gylos; my mother was not. But now I’m all that’s left of the Gylos.”

“What happened to them?”

“They were massacred.” Poe showed no emotion despite the strong words he spoke as he opened the doors, revealing Torin and Jonas reclined back in chairs with their feet propped on a nearby table.

“Hope you don’t mind. We helped ourselves to some tea.” Jonas held up his mug.

“Not at all. You guys are stayin’ the night. My tinctures need some time to work on Raynar’s legs.” Poe walked over to a refrigerator near the back of the store.

Fenick came out of a back room, whistling while tossing and catching an apple. “Hey Fen, gimme a hand with these sandwiches. They’re stayin’ the night, and we’ll help them get off in the morning.”

Fenick’s face dropped at the news and he ceased tossing the apple. “But I thought...”

Poe shook his head slightly, but enough that I saw it. “Here’s the bread and meat. One for each of us please.”

Fenick said nothing more and got busy constructing sandwiches. I joined Torin and Jonas in a chair and propped up my feet.

“How are they doin’?” Jonas sat forward and touched the bandaging.

“Okay. They stopped hurting after he did the light ray thing to me.”

Jonas nodded and sat back.

“What did he do to you?” Torin questioned.

“He zapped my legs with this bright light. It felt like an intense sunburn. Then he wrapped them and told me to elevate them when I can.”

Torin’s eyebrows shot up. “Did it work?”

“He said it looks good, but we’d know more in the morning.”

Torin shook his head, though it surprised me that this seemed unreal to him. Surely, he’d seen or heard of strange healing practices with Jonas being his Guardian but then again Torin and Jonas had a different relationship than I had with my parents. “I gotta get some air.” Torin pushed off and headed out the front doors as Jonas and Fenick brought over a tray of food and drinks.

“Is he not hungry?” Poe glanced to the door where Torin exited.

“Just keep one aside for him. He won’t be gone long.” Jonas put a sandwich and some chips on his plate, then sat back. “How’d you get chips up here?”

“Dragon power.” Poe laughed. “What? It’s true. We make a trip to some of the nearby towns and trade tinctures and medicines for odds and ends every few months. Helps to have dragon shifters for brothers.” Poe smiled at Jonas. “Fenick traded for a bunch of chips last time. At first I was mad, but the customers we’ve had all bought a few bags.” Poe popped one in his mouth.

“Does Malon still come around here?” Jonas asked.

Poe grabbed a soda and took a sip, “He died a few weeks ago, they all died.”

“The Gylos? The whole tribe?” Jonas sat forward, concern etched his face. “That’s impossible. How?”

“It was a massacre. I’m all that’s left, and I’m only half Gylos.” Poe looked like he was about sixteen years old. His shaggy hair and grunge style would have fit in at Midland High.

“Half Gylos? How is that possible? The Gylos didn’t allow mating outside of the tribe.” Jonas looked about the room. “The massacre—”

Poe nodded, answering Jonas’s unfinished question. The young teen suddenly seemed so much

older as the weight of his controversial existence and the bloody aftermath weighed heavily on him. His shoulders slumped and he left out a long breath. His birth, the broken rule of mating outside the tribe, caused discord within the tribe, leading to the end of the tribe.

Jonas rubbed his stubble in thought, “But how did they...”

The shop’s front windows lit with a fiery blaze on the other side of the glass. We hurried to the door. Torin stood on the lawn in front of the shop and flung large rocks at the dragon before him. “Try it again, asshole.”

The dragon answered with another blast, catching Torin’s shoe on fire as he dodged the fiery breath. He yelped and stopped to pat it out. “Come on, switch back to your wimpy human self and fight me fair.”

The dragon let out a loud roar, shaking the ground around us.

“Enough. Ren, stop.” Poe ran out with Fenick following close behind him. Poe positioned himself between Ren and Torin. He turned to Torin. “Get inside the shop and all this will stop. Go, now!”

Torin stood there, looking like he wanted to continue the battle till one of them was bleeding or dead.

“Torin, now!” Jonas’s voice was calm but authoritative, and Torin listened. He jogged over to the shop where Jonas caught him by the arm. “Are you all right? Any injuries?”

“I’m fine.” He pulled his arm free and shoved past Jonas, probably pissed that he was asked to stand down. Jonas followed after him while I stayed back to watch Fenick and Poe calm Ren down to the point he could morph back into human form. Ren finally retreated to the trees several yards away and emerged from the forested area clothed. He passed his brothers without saying a word and rudely pushed past me into the shop. Poe followed him while Fenick hung back with me on the porch.

Fenick leaned against the porch post. “He’s got a temper. He had no clue you were staying the night. I guess the sight of your friend pushed him over the edge.”

“He really doesn’t like us, huh?”

“He doesn’t like most people. But yeah, he sees you all as a threat.” Fenick stood a few inches below my nearly six-foot stature. Of course, he was younger and had more growing to do before he topped out. He had an athletic physique but was less muscular than Torin. And his skin had a tanner complexion than my own.

“So, he controls fire and you have the freeze ray?”

Fenick laughed. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“What about Poe?”

“No fire or ice for him. He can heal.” Fenick motioned to my bandaged legs. “That’s a Gylos ability. He also can see things—some things, before they happen. That gift came from our mother’s side of the family.”

“If your mom was not a Gylos, what was she?”

“Something completely different.” He pushed off the post and headed inside, leaving me on the

shop porch with more questions than I had started with.

Chapter 8

I couldn't sleep. The couch I laid on was plenty comfortable, but I had too many questions in my head. Torin slept restlessly in his bed while Jonas lay peacefully sleeping with his back turned toward both of us.

I checked my watch. 3:25AM. Maybe I needed to pee. I walked quietly down the hall toward the restroom, careful not to wake others. Quiet murmurs slipped through the closed door near the bathroom. I paused and leaned in to listen a moment, wondering if one of the dragon bros was talking in his sleep.

"They're a threat. You said so yourself!" I could make out Ren's angry voice. "Why did you heal him? I mean, seriously, we don't need them making it to the village."

"I healed him because it was the right thing to do. They have done nothing to us—and just because the others have hatred for us, does not mean these three will feel the same." Poe, the calmest of the three, was in there working to subdue Ren's anger.

"You said your vision had them in the village warring with the armies of King Vintras. You saw something happen to one of us, something bad." Fenick sounded calmer than Ren but still concerned.

"I never said something happened to one of you." Poe calmly corrected.

"You didn't have to. Your whole demeanor changed when you talked about the vision." Ren's voice grew louder.

"Shh!" The others shushed him.

"Which one of us dies?" He lowered his voice, but there was sadness and fear beneath Ren's anger.

"Just stop Ren. You're getting all worked over this. My visions aren't perfect and you know this. If any one thing changes, even the smallest detail, the outcome is altered. And I can't just summon visions to see if they've changed."

"Mom said you might get better control of them now that the Gylos tribe and their magic was gone. She thought the magic you inherited from her would become stronger," Ren added.

"Well, I think she was wrong. If anything, it's been harder to get a read on what I'm seeing."

"Yeah, but we need you to try." Fenick sounded worried. "This vision involves us dying by their hands."

“I never said that.” Poe corrected. “I said I saw them arrive and visit the village. Then I return to our shop...” There was a small choke to his voice. “Okay, fine, yes, I did see... I saw both of you... But I never saw the cause of death. And besides, you’ve met them.” Poe answered. “Do they seem like murders to you?” No one answered, so Poe continued with a sterner tone. “Right. Listen, I’m not happy you two took matters into your own hands. If Mom finds out you two went rogue, she’ll tether your wings.” Poe cautioned. “Ren, I paid Jonas for the car and supplies you torched. You’ll have extra shifts in the shop to pay me back for the damage you caused in Sault Ste. Marie. And next time you blow up a car, pick a cheap one.”

Where was their mom anyway?

“And if you head past the outer oaks, stay together—always.” The sound of footsteps on the wood floor within the room reminded me I shouldn’t be eavesdropping.

I hurried back to our room instead of continuing to the bathroom. I peered through the cracked open doorway, waiting for the others to enter their respective rooms before heading back down the hall. I didn’t want them to suspect I had heard their discussion.

“Night, Fen.” Ren said as he passed our door.

“Night.” Fenick answered as he retreated to his room.

I waited a moment longer, and when I was sure the hallway was clear, I headed for the bathroom in hopes it was all I needed to attempt sleep again.

Chapter 9

The morning sun blazed through the small square window, shining directly on my face. After trying different positions and covering my head with the blanket, I gave up and accepted that there would be no more sleep for me. Torin slumbered peacefully across the room, but Jonas's bed was empty.

I kicked off the covers and headed toward the stairs but froze when Jonas and Poe emerged from the room across from the bathroom where the meeting of the brothers had taken place. Poe turned and headed back into the room while Jonas approached me, motioning me to come closer.

"We depart in twenty minutes." Jonas spoke in a low voice. "Poe is sending Ren on an errand. He fears that Ren is too emotionally unstable and doesn't trust what he will do to us outside of this structure. Once he leaves and the coast is clear, Poe and Fenick will help us get to the village."

I followed him into the room where he hurried over to Torin and stirred him awake. "Pack up. We leave in twenty minutes."

"Where's the fire?" Torin's voice was hoarse with sleep.

"Poe doesn't want any drama with Ren. He's sending him out on an errand and asked that we don't leave the shop till he gives the word." Jonas shoved his clothes into his bag.

"That dude is wound too tight." Torin shook his head.

"He is. Complete opposite of Poe." I unwrapped the bandage from my hand to see if my birthday burn had healed and found new skin where the blistered wound had been. It looked great. I wondered how my legs looked after the night of healing. I worried today's travels would undo his healing. "Jonas, is the village far from here?" The thought of making a journey similar to yesterday's made me shudder.

"It is, but you won't have to worry about that." Jonas answered.

A knock at the door interrupted my next question. "Jonas, it's me." Poe called through the door. "Can I come in?"

Jonas stood and let Poe in.

"I wanted to check on Ray, see how the legs are." He walked over to me and pulled up a foot stool close to me. "How are you feeling?"

"Good. Felt good to sleep and not be trekking through the forest all day."

Poe laughed as he began unwrapping my left leg. “I bet”

“I already filled them in.” Jonas came over to my side.

“Good. Ren is gathering a few things but should be gone soon.” He looked up at me. “No pain or itching?” Poe asked.

“None.”

I hoped the bruises would be almost gone and maybe the hematoma drained and flat, but I was shocked to see a shell of dead skin covering the part that had been wrapped.

“What the heck is that?” Torin came over for a closer look.

“Dead skin. Nasty, right?” Poe answered as he took out a washcloth from his pocket and wet it with a small water bottle. “Yell if it hurts.” He looked up at me for a moment before rubbing the wet cloth on my leg. The shell cracked and fell to the floor, revealing healthy, unmarred skin beneath it.

“Holy...” I stared at the smooth even colored skin. “Poe, I think you need to come back to Michigan and live with me. I could use someone with your talents to fix me up on a regular basis. With my fragile nature, you’d be one busy guy!”

Poe laughed. “It looks great. For someone who breaks easily, you also heal better than most.” Poe looked to Jonas. “Is that a thing with his condition? Quick healing?”

Jonas shook his head. “No, not typically. In fact, healing usually takes longer in vEDS patients.”

“Well, glad I could help. I’ll come let you know when Ren is off. Sit tight.” Poe gathered up the bandages and debris before heading out of the room.

Jonas lifted my leg into his lap to inspect my skin. “This is remarkable. There is not a single blemish on your skin. What did he do to you in that room? I’ve seen you after a week at camp, but you looked a hundred times worse yesterday. I don’t understand how he healed you in a day.” He examined it from all angles. “Nothing!”

“He used some sort of light energy from his hands and then wrapped the legs with some gauze that had some special liquid on it.” Unfortunately, I didn’t know any exact details about how Poe had healed me. I wondered if living near Poe and his healing powers would make me less anxious and scared of my disorder. Jonas had always patched me up and had reassured me that, if we had enough time to get to the right surgeon, I could survive a vascular event. Unfortunately, some of the patients I had met in the online support groups thought otherwise. In fact, sitting here while my fragile body healed got me thinking about my friend, Nick, and the aortic dissection that had ended his life only a few days ago. I was hard not to lose hope when a tragedy strikes so close.



I had logged on to a vEDS Facebook group to ask about a strange thing that happened with my eye. The next post that came through on the newsfeed read “Prayers for the Mitchell family. Their son Nick passed suddenly last Friday.” *Passed suddenly...* My heart broke and I felt like vomiting. There never

seemed to be a decline with vEDS. I had talked to Nick on Thursday, the day before he died. He had gushed over this girl he had fallen in love with and had talked about asking her to marry him. Nick had graduated college a year ago and was the only guy near my age in the vEDS online group. I had never met him in person, but we had grown close from chatting often online. I couldn't relate to the girls in the group or the mom's that were scared to lose their kids, so Nick and I became fast friends.

Nick had told me to take care of my body, listen to what it was telling me, and had encouraged me to fight to get Lauren back in my life. I had dismissed his advice on Lauren and joked that he was a lovesick fool. But he persisted and reminded me that love, true love for someone, made getting out of bed and facing the day, the disorder, and all the crap that came with it all worthwhile. Love for this girl made him want to fight past the physical pain and push aside the self-doubt that nagged in the back of his head. She had inspired hope in him and I secretly wished I could find someone as he had.

But the news of his death had sent me into a depression. My hope for a happy and semi-long life died with Nick that day. And ever since that day, I felt like a ticking time bomb, worried that any little thing, even a sneeze, would set me off and be my end. Nick took the meds, saw the docs, and followed the same protocol I had been instructed to follow, and still he died.



I felt lucky for having people who got me. Leo and Lauren had never accused me of faking my disorder; they also didn't treat me different than others my age.

I closed my eyes, thinking of the kiss Lauren and I had shared. She looked beautiful, with the afternoon sun creating the perfect lighting to show the yellows and blues that made Lauren's eyes a gorgeous hazel color. My fingers found the pendant. "Virale."

"You have a Guardian's charm." Jonas sounded surprised.

"My parents gave it to me."

He pulled his out and showed me his and smiled.

"Jonas, how did you know the barrier spell was gone?" He nor my parents mentioned how they found out it was time for us to return.

"Live satellite image website. This site is updated daily. I check it daily and one day it was not there, the next day I could see the village. I watched it for a few days to be sure it wasn't a temporary change before mentioning it to your parents."

Knock Knock Poe peeked into the room. "Ren is gone and Fenick is waiting. Let's go."

We grabbed our bags and followed Poe to the clearing behind the shop where a large, greenish dragon stood watching us.

"He'll take you past the outer oaks, to the farthest boundary of your village, but he will not stay with you. Head north and you find the king's stronghold." Poe escorted us to a rectangular metal frame with what looked like a two-by-four bench across it. Ropes dangled down from the top bar for us to

grip. This contraption sat a few feet away from the dragon. Poe sat on the bench and demonstrated how to hold on. He wrapped his arms around both ends of one of the ropes. “Your job is to hold tight. It’s not high tech, but it’s the best we have and the fastest way to get far distances fast.”

We took a seat on the bench with our packs on our backs. Poe helped ensure we were tethered in as best we could. Fenick, in dragon form, watched Poe, and when he gave the signal, Fenick took flight. He batted his wings hard to gain altitude, then banked right, heading back toward us. Poe stepped back and advised, “Don’t, let go.” Fenick swooped down, opening his claws and grabbing the top of the frame. In an instant, we were airborne.

Soaring high above in this open structure was a cold and terrifying experience, especially without seatbelts to hold us. Everytime Fenick banked, my bottom slid to the end of the seat, forcing me to hold onto my arm restraints a little tighter. The frozen wind stung my face and made my eyes water. The others seemed to be having the time of their lives. Torin let out an excited holler and Jonas had the biggest grin on his face. I could only guess that I looked as horrified as I felt.

Fenick, thankfully, did not fly wild. He made careful moves as he gracefully changed direction. The terrain below was a sea of mini-lakes and evergreens.. The further we flew away from the shop, the colder the air temperature became and unfortunately, it was not a quick flight.

“You doin’ okay over there Raynar?” Jonas asked.

“I’m okay. Leave me be.”

Torin chuckled from my left. “You’re doin’ great Cross.”

Jonas added, “I see the outer oaks up ahead.”

I glanced down and saw what looked like a partial ring of broccoli crowns. “You mean that dark green curve?”

“Yep,” he answered. “Be ready and hold on tight as we land.”

I didn’t think it was possible to hold on any tighter.

Fenick circled and flew us along a narrow shore of what seemed to be a dried up riverbed before lowering us toward the ground. I closed my eyes and braced for impact but it never happened. Instead, the movement of air around me slowed and shifted. The soft sound of feet hitting sand drew my attention. Torin and Jonas stood beneath me, as Fenick hovered me above the drop point. *What the hell?* This was too high to jump. I’d end up covered in bruises or worse.

“Come on Cross, jump!” Torin urged.

“No. I can’t.”

Torin looked from me to the ground and back again. I expected him to comment on how I should try it and that it really wasn’t high at all, but he bit his tongue. “Fenick, can you lower down further?” The dragon descended a few more inches. “Cross, I think that’s as low as he can get. Jump and I’ll catch you.”

“No. You can’t. You’ll squeeze my organs.” This had been embedded in my brain—stay safe, no matter what.

“I won’t. I promise. Jump and I’ll be a soft landing for you.” Torin encouraged.

“It’ll be alright Raynar, there’s no other way down.” Jonas urged. “Tuck in on yourself to keep your mid-section safe.”

I looked around, and there truly was no other way down. Anxiety flooded me and the inner voice that advocated for me in dangerous situations screamed for me to stop and not do this stupid thing. Was there another option? Yes. I could return to the shop with Fenick and wait for Torin and Jonas to return. But wasn’t the point of the trip for me to meet my biological father? And who the hell would help me disembark once I got there? Jonas was one of my physicians that knew my disorder and the restrictions, still he urged me to jump. I swallowed hard and released my grip on the ropes, curling in on myself as advised.

I felt the impact as I collided with Torin’s hard body. *Oomph!* Torin lay on the ground, and my body rolled off of his. Jonas rushed to our side. “Raynar, Ray, are you okay?”

I rolled over and sat up. “Yes, I think I’m okay.” I shook my finger at Torin. “You are *not* a soft landing.”

Torin laughed as he sat up. “And *you* are like a friggin’ cannonball.”

Jonas checked me for injuries while Torin waved to Fenick’s winged figure retreating above the foliage.

“Jonas, I’m good. I know my body and nothing feels off.” How did I come out of that jump unscathed? I’d jumped from shorter distances and ended up at the hospital getting scanned and accessing the hematomas that quickly grew. But somehow I was fine. “Let’s go.”

Jonas stood. “Fair enough. Torin, let’s head out.” Jonas found which way was north and lead us northeast into the thick forested area. We walked for almost an hour on terrain that seemed easier than the previous hike. “This used to be a tributary that fed into a larger body of water. The Yardinians planned to export and import good from here using boats. But a difficult winter altered the waterways and this once flowing river was turned into what you are currently walking on.”

Torin bent down and rubbed the sandy soil between his fingers. “So the import/export business?”

“The dreams for a successful port town dried up with that river bed.” Jonas stopped and held his hand out “Hold up, I see something.” He scaled the short tributary wall and jogged over to a tree that seemed to have an old cotton sash tied around the trunk.

“This is the boundary to the village.” He called to us and motioned for us to join him but once we got close he held out his hand again halting us. Jonas took careful steps beyond the tree. “Years ago, this place had a spell around it, trapping all within these boundaries. The people and buildings within it had been cloaked so that they were hidden away from the world.” He motioned for us to follow him. “Seems it’s gone.”

“How come you weren’t trapped inside with the others?” I noticed other trees yards away with a similar sash marking the boundary.

“I got lucky. Your Guardians, sorry, I mean parents, and I were on a mission outside of the

boundary. We came back and it was as if an invisible shield encapsulated the village. We couldn't get in, and they couldn't get out."

"What about Torin and me?" I presumed we were infants when this happened, and since we were the king's sons, we were probably kept close to our parents. "How did you get us out of the village and to Midland? Does the barrier not work on us or somethin'?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell you all the details. That is something for your father to tell. All I will say is that neither of you were within the village boundaries when the spell was cast."

I looked to Torin who shot me a confused look that probably mirrored my own. Why were we not with our parents at that time? And whatever happened to our mother? "Did you know our mother?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say I knew her." Jonas said nothing more as he picked up his pace leading us northeast through the woods.

Torin matched my pace as I trailed farther behind. "Is he always so vague?"

Torin chuckled. "When he's talking about our history and this place? Yes. Glad I'm not the only one annoyed by his short answers."

"Right? It's like 'Jonas, how was the Earth made?' And he'd answer, 'Very carefully.'"

Torin laughed harder than I'd seen him laugh before.

"Shh. Keep it down you two." Jonas shushed us as we caught up with him. "I think we're getting close; I smell a fire." I could make out the faint smoky scent on the next breeze that whooshed past.

"Watch out for traps." Jonas tossed a medium sized stone toward a pile of leaves and the leaves flew into the air as a large rope net scooped up the stone, suspending it from the lowest branch of the large tree. "They set more traps closer to the village. Stay close." Jonas advised. "I know what to look for as I helped set the traps when I lived in the village." As we continued, the smoke scent grew stronger and we could hear murmurs of voices.

Jonas came to a stop and looked narrowed his eyes. "It's not changed one bit." He muttered. I came up next to Jonas and looked past the furthest tree, where the thatched roofs of a few buildings could be seen.

"Come on. Welcome to Yardis!" Jonas exclaimed as he smiled and led us toward his childhood home.

Chapter 10

As we walked past the first wooden building, we came to a common area that resembled a marketplace. People with shaggy haircuts and tattered clothes sat crafting different items such as necklaces, knives carved from bone, and various textile goods, while others packed up carts with cloth bags and various household items. We looked out of place in our neat and colorful modern clothes. It didn't take long for the villagers to notice us. Work stopped and eyes turned to us in curiosity.

A man who looked a few years younger than my dad came over and squared up with Jonas. Jonas did not cower; he stood firmly in place, his eyes trained on the approaching man. His body tensed the closer he came. The man had six inches on Jonas and, based on his physique, appeared to have more upper body strength. His face had a deep scar from his eye to his chin and his hand rested on the hilt of the sword that hung from his waist.

Torin looked ready to pounce as he stared down the man, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Jonas." It wasn't a question. The approaching man recognized Jonas. "After all this time, you've found your way back to Yardis. I thought you had long since forgotten us." There was a bitter edge to his words.

"Kaden, you haven't changed one bit, just as ugly as I remembered. Except now you're a lot bigger." Jonas looked Kaden up and down. "And stronger."

Kaden's mean expression melted as he suddenly burst into a hearty laugh and clapped his arms on Jonas's shoulders. "Indeed, I am! I'm afraid I can't say the same for you. You look pretty much as I remembered, except I see a lot more skin where hair used to be." Kaden eyed Jonas's receding hairline and chuckled, "It's good to see you my friend."

"Good to see you too." Jonas pulled him into a hug. Torin relaxed his stance and I took a breath, relieved there would be no altercation.

"Who are these two lads?" He nodded toward Torin and I.

"Their parents are Yardinian. But these two were born in the outside world. When I learned the barrier had been taken down, I promised to take them with me to see Yardis. Hopefully they will better understand the history of their people." Jonas had twisted the truth, but I wasn't surprised as he had previously twisted other tales and omitted info about Yardis and its people. The challenge was

deciphering what was fact from fiction.

“Who are your parents? Perhaps I know them.” Kaden approached Torin who seemed unsure how to answer.

“We are twins; our parents are Jaron and Lysa Cross,” he answered, which surprised me. Why did he claim my Guardians as his parents instead of Jonas? Perhaps it was the simplest answer to stop the line of questioning.

“They were Guardians, weren’t they?” He looked toward Jonas who nodded. “Sorry, I was a teen when the barrier occurred. Well, welcome to Yardis. Come, we’ll have a drink and meal. There is much to catch up on.” Kaden started off toward a large building and Jonas motioned for us to follow. Some villagers continued with their work while others followed us with their stares. “How different does the village look to you?” Kaden pushed open a large wooden door, revealing a dimly lit tavern.

“The buildings look the same, perhaps more worn, but that’s expected with time. How are your parents? Your father was part of the Guardian watch with me,” Jonas asked as he set his bag down and took a seat on a wood bench.

“They both died along with many others. A sickness spread through the village the winter after the barrier cut us off from the world around. Our medics worked to save those infected, but we had limited resources within the boundary and some of the medicinal herbs had become scarce. King Vintras ruled that no more of medicines would be used to fight the infection, they would only use them to keep the patients comfortable. Those that were weak died, and those that were strong lived,” Kaden explained.

“I’m sorry about your parents.” Jonas said.

“Thank you.” Kaden continued. “Living in this bubble for all these years has been challenging. Those that were young or born after the barrier had been placed fared the best as they’ve known no different than the life they already lived. But the older generations have suffered. Many lost hope and failed to accept the invisible walls that held us from the rest of the world.” Kaden motioned for the barmaid. “You know, it’s a strange thing that happens when you cage those that had once been free. But stranger still, when you set them free again; anxiety and depression are often found in place of their once strong spirits.”

The barmaid came to take our orders and our conversation resumed. “And you? How have you managed with all of this?” Jonas asked.

“I am a survivor, as all Guardians are. I am used to change, and I welcome it. The only thing I dislike...” Kaden nodded toward some guards dressed in uniform sitting at a table across the room, “is them.” The table of men wore grey tunics with a red band across their left bicep.

“The king’s guards?” Jonas sounded surprised. “What about them? They weren’t such a big deal back in the day. The Guardians did most of the patrolling and held more power as far as security goes.”

“It’s changed. With the barrier up, the king’s guards took a position of power. The Guardians roles

had to be redefined as there was no danger from outside. Our job focused on hunting and trapping and the King's guards took up security. Larkin, Vintras's son, manages them. Honestly, that kid was always trouble. I think Vintras put him in charge of the guards just to give him something to do." Kaden shook his head. The barmaid returned with our drinks. Kaden took a big swig before adding. "Biggest mistake our king could have made."

I wondered if Kaden disliked the king's guards because he was envious of their status in the village. With the shift in importance making the rank of king's guards higher than Guardians, there was good argument for bitterness.

"What's so bad about them?" Torin asked.

Kaden leaned forward, keeping his eyes on the king's guards, and lowered his voice so that it was barely audible. "They, or he, hungers for control. With the barrier gone, people want to leave. But if they go, the village and kingdom will fall. And that is a problem if you are a prince, waiting for your father's last breath so that you may take the crown and throne for yourself." Kaden let out a loud and satisfied belch and returned to normal volume. "Drink up, then I'll show you where you can sleep." Kaden tipped his cup back to drink anything left in his mug. I finished my spiced berry juice that reminded me of cranberry with a hint of honey.

Kaden led us through the village center and down a small alleyway before stopping at a small stone and wood house "It's not been touched since Kyra passed." He opened the door and walked into the building. "It's not much, but there's a bed, blankets, and it provides shelter from the cold nights."

"Who was Kyra? The name is not familiar to me." Jonas asked as he looked around the scarcely decorated single room home.

"She was a few years younger than myself. She trained to be a Guardian but abandoned her pursuit as the king's guards became more powerful." Kaden bit his bottom lip. There was a sadness about him as he spoke of Kyra. "She was one of my students, but hunting and gathering in the small confines of the barrier wasn't enough for her... She wanted more."

"Were her parents Guardians?" Jonas asked.

"Her father, Tanus, was a Guardian."

"I knew him. He was a few years older than me." Jonas seemed excited to recognize the name. "Is he still alive?"

"No." Kaden shook his head. "He also passed from illness several years ago."

"How did Kyra die?" I shouldn't care, but I found myself curious about the cause of someone's passing, especially someone young.

Kaden cleared his throat. "Kyra organized a group to leave Yardis. She talked about finding a new life in the free world. The king's guard held a public execution to teach others that leaving Yardis was wrong,"

"Vintras signed off on that?" Jonas scratched his head in disbelief. "Why? Why would he order

something like that?”

“I don’t believe he did.” Kaden pushed off from the wall he had been leaning against and headed for the door. “Anyway, you’re welcome to stay. I had better get back.”

Jonas looked more concerned than ever but approached Kaden with his hand out to shake. “Thank you friend.”

They pulled close into a man hug and then Kaden left.

Jonas turned to us. “I don’t like what I’ve heard. A lot has changed since I left, and I don’t know what we’ll find at the king’s stronghold. We’ll need to be cautious. Now, let’s leave our bags here and head to meet your father, King Vintras.”

Chapter 11

In my mind, I imagined the king living in a grand castle sitting upon a grassy hill, with grey stone walls reaching for the sky, turrets on each corner and flags raised high in honor of the king and his people. But the Castle of Vintras looked far from what I had imagined. Its basic structure reminded me of the Texas Roadhouse over by the Walmart in Midland, only this place was much bigger. “Hmm, I expected something more...castle-y.”

Torin chuckled next to me. “Is that even a word?”

I shrugged.

“I’m with ya, though. Suddenly, I’m hungry for a steak and some rolls with sweet cinnamon butter.”

I looked at him in disbelief. “And a bucket of peanuts.”

Torin laughed and clapped me on my back.

“Very funny you two. Look around you. Without concrete mixers and heavy equipment, building anything this solid and large was a challenge. It may not be castle-y but it works.” Jonas sounded a little defensive. But the king’s “castle” was impressive. Stones formed a solid foundation around the entire structure and also framed the main entrance and windows. The rest of the structure was several stories high and made from solid logs and was topped with a thatched roof.

Guards walked along the rooftop spying down at us, holding some unseen object in their hands. Jonas noticed them and looked back to Torin and I. “Listen, I have no idea what it’s like in there, but we should mind Kaden’s warning and be cautious of Larkin and the guards,” Jonas warned, speaking softly.

Two of the king’s guards stood on each side of the large wooden door, spears in hand, swords hung from their waists. Leather armor protected their vulnerable parts.

Jonas stepped before them. “We are here by the request of King Vintras. I am Jonas, and I am here with two young men he has asked to meet.”

“One moment.” The guard on the right turned and entered the building, closing the door behind him. The other guard stood directly in front of the door staring at each of us. He looked younger than Jonas but older than Torin and I.

The door opened a short moment later and the second guard returned. “You may enter. Follow

me.” He led us into the building which opened up to an airy central room with tall ceilings and large colorful tapestries hanging from the walls along with, animal skins, antlers and a bear’s head mounted above what looked to be a stone fireplace. Large wood beams stretched across the interior of the thatched roof, while narrow windows did an impressive job of illuminating the large room during the day. Large wooden chandeliers with several candles hung from the beams above. One was centered over a long wooden table with about eight chairs placed around it. I wondered if the candles would provide sufficient lighting for the large room in the evening hours.

“This way.” The guard led us up the staircase and down a short hall to a set of double doors that had another set of guards on each side. “These are the king’s visitors.” One of the guards opened the door, revealing a bedroom larger than my parent’s room, with a large square window on one wall. The massive bed, crafted out of ornately carved wood, occupied most of the room. A man with grey hair and a short beard sat up in the bed studying us. Another man, dressed in a white tunic sat to his left reading a book, paying us no attention.

Jonas fell to one knee and bowed his head. “My lord, it has been a long time since our last meeting.”

“Jonas.” The man’s voice sounded rough. “Come. Have you brought my boys?”

Jonas rose. “I have. Both have grown into fine young men as they’ve recently celebrated their eighteenth year.” Jonas motioned for us to follow him as he walked toward the bedridden man. “This is Raynar. Jaron and Lysa have cared for him these years. And this is Torin, my responsibility.”

The king looked older than Jonas. His pale face exaggerated the dark shadows under his eyes. Deep wrinkles lining his face told of the village’s troubled past and his worries for its future. He took Jonas’s hand in his.

“Thank you for doing this, for caring for my children and bringing them back to me.” His eyes filled with tears. “I am so eternally grateful.” He shook Jonas’s hand and squeezed it before looking past him at the two of us.

Jonas took a seat by the large window while Torin and I stepped closer.

“Thank you for making the journey. I have thought of you both often, wondering if you are well and what you might be studying. I would like to spend some time getting to know you both over the next few days and letting you ask questions of me. I’m afraid that I do not have much time left, but I would like to get to know you both before my time ends.”

My fingers found the charm that hung from the chain around my neck.

The king noticed, “You wear a Guardian’s medallion. Did Jaron and Lysa give you one of theirs?” I nodded my answer.

“They were excellent Guardians, as were you, Jonas. Those were different times, better times. I wish I could have been a better king to my people.” He looked at Torin and me. “I wish I could have been a father to you both.”

The door opened behind us and in walked a tall guy about our age with three king’s guards behind

him. His white hair was short with longer messy bangs pointing in various directions. His pale blue eyes matched those of the king's. They narrowed as he took in everyone in the room. "What is this father? Who are these outsiders?"

"Larkin! Come, we have visitors." The king motioned for Larkin to come closer. "I want you to meet your brothers, Torin and Raynar."

Larkin looked at us both, then fell into a fit of laughter. "Oh father, it seems the medic has given you too potent a dose. You're delusional. I am your only child. These intruders fool you. Guards, seize them!"

His guards started towards us but the king called them off. "No, no. Stand down!" He commanded to the guards. "Larkin, you are wrong. They are my guests, and I speak the truth. I know this is shocking news, but it's truth. They were born outside of the barrier and have returned to me now that we are free. You should rejoice. You have brothers, Larkin!"

Larkin did not appear to be rejoicing at our appearance. His jaw worked with agitation as he glared between Torin and me.

The elated king smiled. "I only wish you had known them all along, but Malora..." He shook his head at the memory. "But now that the barrier is removed, we can get to know them."

Larkin approached Torin and me, sizing us up. "I apologize for my father. He has been ill for some time, and I'm afraid his medicine has played a trick on his mind. My mother died in childbirth. There are documents stating such, and my grandparents never spoke of any other children. I'm sorry if he has troubled you."

"Your mother, Shara, is not *their* mother." King Vintras corrected.

Larkin's demeanor shifted and he shot an icy glare at the king. "I see. You are full of surprises today father." He bit out before storming out of the room, the three guards followed, closing the door behind them. A loud crash sounded from behind the wooden doors.

"I'm sorry for his rudeness. This is news to him, and he needs time. I refrained from telling him and maybe that was a mistake. But I wanted to be sure you both were alive and well before I revealed the truth. Forgive him." The king began coughing and reached for a cup made out of bone and took a sip. "Henrick, are there rooms for our guests?" He asked the medic.

A man with reddish hair who looked to be in his thirties looked up from his book. "Every room is taken Sire. But I can make a place in one of the storage rooms where they could sleep."

"No, thank you. We have accommodations in the village." Jonas answered. "In fact, we should probably head back and get some provisions for the week." Jonas stood and approached us.

"Very well. I would very much like to have a meal with one of my sons this afternoon, if you think that's possible." The king looked to Henrick. "Am I cleared to eat in the great hall?"

"Let me check." Henrick came over and pulled back the covers. He pushed one finger on the king's shin and removed it. The indentation remained as if the finger was still compressing the skin. "You're too swollen. Lunch will be served in here with your feet elevated." Henrick helped the king

get into a comfortable position and propped his feet upon some pillows and animal skins.

“Torin, stay with King Vintras. Tomorrow Ray and the king can have time together. See you back at Kyra’s this evening.” He clapped Torin on the shoulder. “It is good to see you, my lord.” Jonas bowed his head to King Vintras.

I nodded toward the king. “Nice to meet you.”

“You as well, my son.” The king smiled at me with a genuine happiness that could be seen in his eyes.

Jonas and I stopped back at the house to retrieve his bag before we headed out in the village to pick up dried meats and mushrooms to snack on back at the house.. Jonas offered them coins he still had from when he’d lived here but gave them an option of trading their goods for a jar of honey. Many opted for the liquid gold, One woman broke down in tears as she explained they hadn’t had honey since the barrier spell went up as it physically kept them from maintaining the hive. I knew of the many uses of honey as Jonas had encouraged my parents to use it for many of my cuts, coughs, and stomach upsets. Although the small jars of honey seemed like treasure, a few bees would be worth so much more to the villagers.

Several older Yardinians recognized Jonas and warmly greeted him. They asked questions about life outside of Yardis. Some seemed curious to see these modern sights with their own eyes while others spoke nervously of the different life that existed many miles away. A few of the men pulled him close to whisper secrets of the village in his ear.

All the while the king’s guards patrolled the village, taunting and bullying the craftspeople.

The village of Yardis looked like something out of a medieval encyclopedia. Yet there was no cosmic portal that had spit the village out into our modern century. No, Yardis existed in this remote location where roads did not venture and civilization had deemed it uninhabitable. They had made a place for themselves here and had managed to survive even without the help of modern technology.

Jonas and I dined at the same tavern where we had shared a drink with Kaden earlier. There were more patrons this time of day, and thankfully, they seemed appropriately staffed as we did not wait long for a beverage.

“What’s the history of Yardis?” I asked Jonas. “Like how did this village end up here, far from the rest of the world?” Many more questions spun around my head but this seemed to be the one I was most curious about.

“We are descended from Vikings and came over from Scandinavia many years ago. Our people, the Yardinians, disagreed with the radical beliefs of the new leadership and made the decision to sail to the New World in search of a place to call home and where we could hold onto our beliefs and old ways. Our ancestors crossed the ocean and navigated the waterways to this area. They struggled at first because they were a small group and building a place where they could manufacture goods to trade with other lands took time. For the first few years, they focused on surviving, establishing the village, and building relationships with the natives. Our people were not liked by the local tribes.

They saw us as wild, barbaric people pushing our way onto their lands. And they were right. The first Yardinians to step foot on this soil were led by no one. There was no order or civility—they took what they wanted, when they wanted, and it angered the natives. But the natives rallied together with a shared goal—drive out the barbarians. They pushed us to the land within the circle of oaks and created the Swampy Cree Treaty, which stated that we elect a king and enforce rules for our village and they, the neighboring tribes, will leave us alone in peace.”

“Interesting.” Hearing the Treaty mentioned again made me think about our driver and wonder what his version of these stories would be.

“Honestly, before the barrier spell, we were finally making positive strides.” Jonas stared off remembering a time years ago.

“What were the radical beliefs that prompted their departure?” I asked.

“The new leader believed our misfortune with crops and hunting was due to our inadequate offerings. He ordered a seasonal human sacrifice and those that were against it, packed up and sailed across the country to start their new lives.” Jonas took a sip from his cup.

“What happened? What or who created the barrier?” I asked.

“Malora. She was a witch who lived in the northern wood outside of the village boundaries. King Vintras’s father, King Erik, disliked magic users outside of our race, but he especially disliked Malora. I couldn’t tell you why, though some theorized that her hut was too close to the village, while others believed she’d tried to trick Erik into wedding her. All I remembered was the hatred he had toward Malora. Many of the villagers followed the king’s lead blindly, and hated her and her daughter, many except your father. Your father was always a kind man who cared for all, even back then when the village was full of hate for anyone different.” Jonas set his cup down and motioned for the barmaid.

She refilled his drink, and then brought over two bowls of stew.

“What made the barrier disappear after all these years?” I asked.

The doors of the tavern flew open and a patrol of about ten guards entered, rushing toward an occupied table at the back. They grabbed the seated patrons and stood them up. One protested, and a guard quieted her by slitting her throat. The tavern crowd gasped while the guards removed the rest of their prisoners from the building.

“What’s happening?” Jonas asked the passing barmaid.

“They are part of Kyra’s rebellion. I’d cautioned them to halt their plans, but they had decided to move tonight while the village sleeps. And now they have been caught.” The barmaid shook her head and walked away.

Jonas looked around at the chaos in the tavern. “Let’s get out of here and lay low at Kyra’s. We can eat some of our jerky we picked up earlier there.”

I followed him out of the tavern. The prisoners lay in a line on the ground, their noses in the dirt, arms stretched out before them. A guard stood by each with their swords drawn in front of them.

“What is this? Frey!” A woman ran to one of the smaller prisoners and fell to her knees beside them. “What crime have they committed?” She yelled at the guards. “Frey is just a young boy, swept up in the excitement of his friends. He has not wronged the king or this village. Please let him go.” She begged as tears fell from her eyes.

A guard ran over to remove the woman. She latched onto her son and became dead weight to the guard.

“Why is this not done? Why do they still live?” Larkin came to stand in front of the guards. “It was a simple command. Assist those wanting to leave Yardis. I tire of hearing the chatter of people so eager to leave our village. Do you know what awaits you outside this boundary? Death. You will never make it to civilization before the wild beasts or frigid temperatures take your life. You want to leave this village, this sanctity that has provided for you and sheltered you from the harsh world around? Well, let me assist you in your departure.” In a flash, he drew his sword and thrust it into the back of young Frey. The others that lay on the ground hurried to their feet, trying to get away, but each were met with the sword’s edge and dropped to ground to draw their final breaths. Even Frey’s mother was lost in the slaughter.

Jonas took a guarded stance in front of me but he surprisingly had not tried to stop the guards. Why had no one spoken up for the injustice that had played out before us?

“Jonas,” I whispered, “do you think we’ll have any problems leaving at the week’s end?” Would Larkin prefer us gone and welcome our departure, or would he restrict us as he has the other villagers? A chill shuddered up my body, and I leaned over and vomited, but it was not enough to expel the horrifying images of the slaughter I had witnessed.

Jonas helped me stand straight. “I was just wondering the same. Come on, let’s get to Kyra’s.”

Chapter 12

Torin came in an hour or so after Jonas and I. We stayed up most of the night talking. Torin had no knowledge of the public slaughter that had happened at Larkin's hand, though he had seen the blood outside of the tavern.

Torin's account of his time with King Vintras contrasted with the violence of our evening. He spoke of a peaceful king who felt he had failed his people. Years had been spent trying to undo the spell that had caged the people and changed the way the villagers lived. The Yardinians had to inbreed animals for enough food and double up in houses to make room for growing enough to make up for what they could no longer gather. We'd noticed the herds of chickens and goats when we'd arrived, roaming freely throughout the village—and the smell of their poop everywhere.

"King Vintras spoke of two women who he loved dearly. Larkin's mother and our mother." Torin looked toward the only window in Kyra's home. His eyes squinted a moment before turning back toward us.

"What did he have to say about them?" Jonas inquired.

"He asked that I not say anything more. He would like to share the story with Ray, and I promised I would honor that." Torin stood and grabbed another hunk of cheese and returned to our small circle of chairs. "Sorry. I know you must be anxious to learn about this. He asked that you," he pointed his cheese at me, "join him for lunch tomorrow."

Jonas stood and patted my back. "I will accompany you, as I have some medicines that I have brought from home that might help the king's health." Jonas turned toward Torin. "I'm not sure if I should have you join us or allow you to explore the village tomorrow. After what we saw this evening, I'd feel better if you weren't alone. Maybe I can have Kaden escort you around."

"I don't need an escort nor do I want one. You have trained me well. I can handle myself in difficult situations. You know this." Torin stood abruptly, knocking the chair back as he stood.

"But Yardis is a different from everything you've grown up knowing. There are different rules. You did not see the executions." Jonas shook his head as he recalled the horrid memory. "I won't have you at risk. This is not up for discussion. I'll ask Kaden to guide you. If he is not available, you will remain with us."

Torin looked like an angsty teenager rebelling against his father.

Jonas must have noticed it too. “Torin, this isn’t about if I trust you or if I think you are strong enough. The king’s guard did not exist in my time. They have more power and are more militant than the Guardians ever were. Larkin seems to be pulling the strings behind the scenes. I have no idea how he has made such aggressive moves and remained unchecked.”

“Wait, you think King Vintras is unaware of Larkin’s actions?” Torin questioned. “But how? How can Larkin do these things while the king still lives?” It didn’t make sense to me either. “Doesn’t anyone stand against Larkin and his minions?”

“After what we saw tonight, I’m afraid not. Those that stand against Larkin are dealt with in a swift and deadly manner,” Jonas answered.



The sun shone through the single window. I had slept fitfully, tired and troubled from everything that happened yesterday. Every time I closed my eyes I saw Frey’s panicked eyes go blank as death took hold of him.

We cleaned up and headed out for our meeting with King Vintras. Kaden was helping clean up the remnants from last night’s bloody massacre as a small crowd of mourners watched and laid offerings of wood carvings, stacked stones, and personal items where their loved ones had been slain. Four king’s guards silently stood. I was surprised they were not mocking the mourners or forcing the villagers to leave the pools of blood as a macabre reminder of their power and message. “Cross us and be struck down.”

“Kaden. We have business with the king, but I wondered if Torin could stay with you during that time. Perhaps you can show him around and teach him about the village?” Jonas asked.

“Sure. We need to finish our job here. Grab a bucket and roll up your sleeves.” Kaden pointed to a wooden bucket near a building entrance.

Jonas patted Torin’s back. “See you at the evening meal.” Torin’s face was twisted in revulsion as he carefully stepped around the dark crimson mess.

We headed to the king’s home and this time, the guards allowed us in immediately. “Follow me.” The guard said as he led us up the stairs. As we reached the top landing, Larkin entered the open common area with several guards. Our eyes met as he gave me a most unwelcoming look.

Jonas looked over his shoulder and quietly said, “Make no waves and stay off his radar.”

I nodded in agreement. After seeing the cold and heartless side of Larkin last night, I worried for the many things he could order his guards to do to us. We represented the world outside of Yardis, the world he wished never existed to tempt his villagers away. What would keep him from laying his blade into each of us to send another message to his people?

King Vintras was deep asleep when we entered. The medic stood by the large window, looking out at the grounds below. “Henrick,” Jonas called to him.

He greeted us. “Welcome back. The king has been asleep for some time, but I expect he shall wake soon.”

“I wondered if you and I could speak.” Jonas asked. “I have medicines that might help the king, but I’d like to hear your observations on his condition and examine him first.”

“Of course. All my notes are in my room down the hall. Raynar, do you mind waiting with the king?” When I agreed, he continued, “Good, if he has any discomfort, my room is the one at the top of the stairs.”

Jonas and Henrick left and closed the door behind them. I pulled a chair closer to the bed and took a seat. Torin had said Vintras seemed like a kind king. He slept peacefully with the covers pulled up around him. There was more grey than light brown in his hair and beard. He looked older than my parents and Jonas, though they all spoke as if they were all close in age.

I pulled out my phone and powered it on. The start-up jingle caused the king to stir but not fully awaken. I muted the sound as I walked slowly around the room, hoping by some miracle, I could get a signal. No luck. I returned to the chair and checked my notifications. Two missed calls from my dad a few days ago And a text message from Lauren.

Lauren: About the other day—I can’t stop thinking about our kiss. Glad I took the risk. When will you be back? I miss you.

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. I powered my phone off and pocketed it.

“Must have reminded you of someone you love. You look happy.” King Vintras lay awake, watching me with a smile on his face.

“A note from a girl back home,” I answered.

“It must’ve been hard, coming here and leaving those you love. But I am grateful for this time with you.” He pushed up to a sitting position. His grayed hair stuck up in all different directions, and he worked to smooth it down without much success. “Is it any better?” I shook my head causing him to laugh hard. The laugh became a coughing fit that ended with him gasping for breath.

I rose and hurried to his side. “Do I need to get Henrick? Water?”

He shook his head and put his finger up for me to wait. After a moment, his breath became steady. “I’m all right. Raynar, sit, we have much to talk about. What have you been told about me and Yardis?”

“Not much. I learned you are my father and the people who had raised me were Guardians under your father’s rule. I also know there was a spell cast on this village, trapping everyone within the boundaries, and the spell was recently lifted, though I have no idea how or what lifted it. I also know you are ill and wanted to see us. That’s about it.” I debated telling him about Larkin and the horrid event that occurred the other night. I knew that would take the conversation on a different path, and with the king’s poor health, I wasn’t sure if sharing such news would push him over the edge, guaranteeing Larkin’s place on the throne.

“That’s the basic information. Do you know anything about your mother?”

“No. Torin told me nothing.”

“Good. I was young when I met her, just a prince. My father and I didn’t see eye to eye, and we definitely did not share the same views on witches and magic users outside of our people and beliefs.” He must have noticed my eyebrows raise. “Yes, I said witches. Your mother lived on the outskirts of the village, beyond the circle of oaks. Her mother, Malora, was a powerful witch and her dislike for non-witches matched my father’s hatred for witches. I often wondered if that’s what drew us together.” He let out a long sigh and looked off into the distance. “Meina was beautiful and exotic looking with her long black hair and dark eyes against her olive skin—the kind of beauty that made you stop breathing. Have you ever met someone that does that to you?” I nodded as I thought about Lauren. “Your mother was more than beautiful. She was kind, smart, passionate... The more I got to know her, the more in love I fell.” He started coughing and adjusted his position in bed. “It’s been almost eighteen years since I’ve seen her. I do not know whether or not she is still alive. If this decrepit heart hadn’t confined me to this bed, I’d be out there searching for her. But seeing you and Torin, how Torin has her smile and you have her dark eyes, it’s brought back a flood of memories.” His voice quivered as he looked away. “I loved your mother with all my heart.”

“Have you asked your Guardians to search for her?”

“Since the barrier has come down? Yes.” He faced me, his eyes appeared red and wet. “But there has been no sign of her. My Guardians returned to report a family of First Nation natives now occupy her house. They were questioned but had not seen Meina.” He looked down at his hands. “Anyway, your mother and I would meet in the forest. We’d talk for hours and explore the world around us. But she was lonely and angry with her mother for bringing her here and banning her from mixing with villagers. What was she to do all day with no one to talk to or play with?”

“I can’t imagine how lonely she must have felt. Why didn’t they move to a place where they would be accepted?” I tried to imagine King Vintras as a young boy, running off through the forests with a forbidden girl. It made him sound rebellious and made me want to hear more.

“Malora could have cared less about moving to a peaceful place,” he said. “She cared only about isolating themselves. She saw us as the intruders despite the village having been here for many years before she arrived.”

“So the village was here first but she came along and tried to kick you guys out of the area? She’s only one person.”

“Yes, but she’s a powerful witch from a strange people. Besides the barrier, she had tried countless times to cast us out. We’d suffered from days of extreme temperatures, infestations, terrible diseases, each disaster took many lives but we remained, rebuilt, repopulated and each time we came back stronger. However, the barrier, her most successful attack, did away with us. We were imprisoned for over seventeen years while she was free to do as she wished without worry of any attack on our part.” He shook his head.

“What finally broke the barrier?” I wondered if King Vintras had his own magic user who

reversed the spell since he didn't seem to oppose witches.

"I do not know. Henrick had tried for years to break through or weaken the barrier, but he had no luck. Eventually I stopped badgering him and accepted that this was our fate, that we'd never be free again. But after seventeen years, a young boy, playing tag with his friends, unknowingly ran past the boundary and barrier. The others didn't know what to do and cautiously joined him. Once they realized the barrier no longer existed, they rejoiced and ran back to tell their parents, who then reported it to me. No one knows when the barrier spell broke. We had come to respect the boundary and stopped testing it for weakness years ago. Then less than two weeks ago, we find, by accident, the spell removed." He broke into another coughing fit and pointed to a mug of water on the bedside table, which I handed to him.

Once his coughing ceased, I asked, "But you don't know what caused it to come down?"

He shook his head.

There was a knock at the door. Henrick and Jonas entered and greeted us. "King Vintras, Jonas would like to examine you. Would that be all right with you?"

"I have medicines that may help your condition." Jonas added.

"Yes, of course." The king motioned for them to approach. "Excuse me Raynar. Please stay; I'd like to finish our conversation when this concludes."

"Okay." I walked over to the window to keep out of the way. The king's room overlooked a large stone courtyard where guards were positioned at each entrance. In the center of the courtyard grew a small tree with red berries.

"Do you see the tree in the center?" The king asked. "Those berries are probably the sole reason I am still here today. No offense Henrick." Henrick did not look up at the king's mention of his name. He and Jonas were busy speaking their medical lingo. "It's true. They have potent medicinal uses in them. Henrick makes me teas and a relish from them. A little each day and sometimes more when I am swollen, helps to keep the Henrick away." The king joked and this time Henrick leveled him with a stare. "Tell me Raynar, do you have this tree where you live?"

"No. I've never seen one before today."

"I'll ask cheeses and meats with Rowan relish to be part of our mid-day meal. It's sure to cure whatever ails you." He chuckled and coughed.

"That would be nice if it was that easy, but I'm afraid it isn't." If Rowan berries cured vEDS, I and the rest of the patients would gladly grow and ingest the berries daily. But it was highly unlikely. "Jonas?" He looked up at me to let me know he was listening. "Rowan berries, are they safe for me to eat?"

"Why must you ask Jonas? It was a joke. You are young and free of medical worries, unlike my old, used up self." The king chuckled but stopped when he saw Jonas and I looking at each other, silently deciding if now was the right time to tell the King about my condition. He shrugged one shoulder up, letting me know the decision was mine to make.

“What is it? You both speak no words yet an entire conversation has transpired here before my eyes.” The king’s curiosity was peaked.

“I have a condition that causes my body to be fragile.” I rolled up my pant leg and the king gasped at the sight of my leg. They did not look different to me as I had seen them every day since I was born but others remarked that I had old man legs. The skin was mottled, showing the mapwork of blood vessels beneath the almost translucent skin. The king reached his hand toward my bare leg but quickly withdrew it.

“It’s okay. It looks strange but doesn’t hurt. See?” I rubbed my hand along the skin.

“Jonas, is this true?” The king asked.

“I’m afraid so. But Raynar takes excellent care of his body. He has yet to suffer vascular complications,” Jonas answered.

The king stared back at me. “Did I give this to you?” His voice was thick with emotion as he wiped at his eye.

Jonas set his hand atop the king’s. “Sire, there is no reason to beat yourself up with worry over how Raynar came to have this condition. I can assure you that your health issues and his are different. Raynar does not want your pity. He is here, and he is healthy. Please enjoy him and get to know your son. He is a wonderful human being, and he works hard to stay healthy and strong.”

Jonas, for as long as I had known him, always held me to a high standard and never showered me in praise or compliments. But hearing him talk about me and my disorder in this positive way filled some of the cracks inside of me, making me feel better about myself.

“And Torin? He didn’t mention any condition when we spoke yesterday.” There was sadness in the king’s eyes and I had to look away. I didn’t want him to be sad for me, and I didn’t want to be reminded of the seriousness of the vEDS diagnosis.

“Torin does not have the condition.” Jonas answered.

“Thank heavens.” The king replied. *Thank heavens no one else we know has this God-awful disorder.* It upset me, hearing the relief he felt that I was the only one affected by it. Lucky them. They could go on and live their lives free of the worries that plagued me. Torin could lift weights, join a sports team, attract the girls with his good looks and big muscles. If I lifted more than five pounds, I risked an aortic dissection or muscle tear; even sit-ups were not allowed. I was envious of Torin and all the other males my age who could stand tall and strong, compared to my five-year old boy physique. I wouldn’t wish this disorder on my worst enemy.

“Okay, I think this little white pill will help.” Jonas opened a pill bottle to show the king a pill. “You’ll want to swallow it whole in the morning with your meal. It will not make your heart problem go away, but it will help ease your discomfort and swelling and buy you some time.” Jonas set the bottle of pills on the bedside table. “Good day, Sire. I will leave you both to your visit. Raynar, see you back at Kyra’s.” Jonas nodded at me.

“Oh, I haven’t seen Kyra in some time. She’s one of my best Guardians. Do tell her I said hello

and would love a visit.” The king clearly had no knowledge of her passing or his son’s involvement in it. Henrick stilled and shook his head slightly, letting us know we shouldn’t speak of it. Jonas and I looked at each other noting the power shift in the village. Larkin had the reins and Henrick was either on Larkin’s team or wanting to protect Vintras from worry and stress. I didn’t know which was true.

“I will. Good day.” Jonas nodded and left; Henrick followed him out.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen Kyra?”

“I don’t know. Time passes differently when you are bedridden. Maybe a few weeks. Why?”

“Just curious. I wonder if you could tell me more about my mother. How did you meet her?” I wanted to know the story of how Torin and I came to be.

“My father, your grandfather, was a stern king with many rules. He was strong and no one dared cross him, but I was young and adventurous. He forbade me from venturing past the boundary. He said it was dangerous and no place for a king’s son. Now that I am older and look back at that time, I believe he made these rules so he did not have to assign people to watch me. The village was very busy, trying to build goods for trade and develop a working port for the ships to come in and out from. Unfortunately, we lost the port after a very bad winter. The tributary thawed, but the waterways had shifted. My father and his men had more important things to consider and couldn’t be troubled with a young boy and his adventures.” The king smiled. “But, there was a vast world around us, forests, lakes, and caves that needed discovering!” He sounded like an excited kid as he spoke of the land he had wanted to explore.

“You sound more like an explorer than a king, no offense.”

“I feel more like an explorer than a king.” He chuckled.

“My best friend was a Guardian in training and on his off days, we’d venture out past the boundary. But one day, while he was training, I snuck past the boundary on my own and I came across your mother. Her name was Meina. She looked different from the First Nation natives and our own, I had never seen her before. As you can imagine, growing up in a small village, you come to know everyone.”

A knock at the door interrupted his story. “I’m sorry, Sire. The lunch meal has arrived,” the female guard announced.

“Thank you, Evie.” She moved aside and two older women entered, carrying two trays of food.

“Good day, Sire.” One of the older women said as she bowed.

“Good day, Helena; good day, Freya. Thank you for this meal.” The king kindly addressed them, and the ladies left the room. “Let’s see what the feast is today.” He removed the lid and the plate of food looked delicious. There were fried eggs, pickled onions and carrots, a half a chicken, and cheese. “You’re in luck! They’ve brought cheese and Rowan relish.”

I removed my lid and found a similar meal. “This looks delicious. A meal fit for a king.” The king chuckled at my remark.

“Helena and Freya are the best cooks.” He popped the yolk of his egg and took a bite. Once he

swallowed, he continued his story. “Meina had been out collecting Chaga mushrooms. They are these large black wrinkled mushrooms that grow on birch bark. Henrick tries to get me to eat them at each meal. They’re supposed to be good for my heart, but they taste like dirt. Anyway, she saw a bear. She was scared and young, unsure of what to do. She knew she shouldn’t run, but when she saw it, her brain told her to run.” He shrugged. “The bear chased her until she fell down this forest ravine. He lost interest, but poor Meina was injured. I found her huddled near a fallen tree in that ravine, both knees bleeding badly and a twisted ankle. Despite looking tossed about from a storm, she was beautiful.” His face lit up as he recalled meeting Meina.

“So, what did you do?” I spread the Rowan relish on a piece of chicken and tried a bite. It tasted bitter, like grapefruit and cranberries. My face must have puckered because the king laughed.

“Raynar, it may be sour, but it’s better than a dirty mushroom and it is excellent for your health.” He spread his own relish over a hunk of chicken and took a bite, making a satisfied sound. “Suffer through it. You’ll thank me later.”

“It’s not bad. It’s just my brain expected something sweeter. The sourness surprised me.” I sipped my water to wash it down.

“Anyway, I approached her slowly because she looked scared.” The king sipped his drink. “I told her I wanted to help, and I asked her to wait there for me. Then I took my water skin from my pack and helped wash and bandage her knees while she told me what had happened. Because she had twisted her ankle, I had to help her get back to her small home in the forest. The next chance I had to run out near the ravine, I took it and found Meina at the top, reading from a family journal. She later confessed that she went there with hopes of running into me again.”

I finished the meal and sat back, satisfied and full of the delicious food. “So, you had regular meetups in the forest after that?”

He nodded. “We dreamed of building a life together. She spoke with her mother about the village and tried to change her opinion of the Yardinians. And I spoke to my father and mother about magic users and the benefit they could bring to the village. But no one besides Meina and I cared about making a change and unifying the two groups. Stubbornness and a fear of outsiders kept them from considering the possibilities.”

“That’s a shame.” I tried to put myself in his shoes. I thought about Lauren and how frustrating and difficult a relationship would be if her parents and my parents were against us coming together. Of course we weren’t together, but thinking this way helped me understand their situation.

“Then Meina told me she was with child. So many emotions flowed through me. I loved her and now we would have a baby born out of that love. But our love was forbidden, and I was not an average villager. There were expectations. My father had become ill and the medic gave him several months to live. I spent less time with Meina and more time learning how to rule a village.”

“But you saw her still, when you could?” I couldn’t imagine feeling torn between my dying father and the upcoming birth of my child.

“When I could, which wasn’t often enough. Each time we met, her belly seemed to double in size. We eventually found she was carrying two children and that was a lot for Meina’s small frame.” He adjusted himself in bed.

“How did her mother take the news of her pregnancy?” King Vintras’s family was probably none the wiser about he and Meina, but she could not hide that she’d slept with a man and was with child.

“She did not take it well. In fact, that was when Malora increased her efforts to attack Yardis and try to drive us away. Houses were set on fire, severed animal heads were hung from trees within the village, and Yardinians that got too close to the boundary had curses placed on them.”

“What kind of curses?” All this magic and mysticism in this world, not some parallel universe, fascinated me.

“Blindness, craziness... The most terrifying curse happened to a woman who chased her wandering child back within the boundaries. She returned to the village, terrified, and told of seeing Malora near a tree trying to entice the child to come to her. The woman grabbed the child and hurried away, looking back at Malora as she ran. Malora stood, finger pointed at them, mouth muttering some incantation. The next morning the girl awoke to find her mother lying next to her, dead with spiders crawling out from her mouth—hundreds of them.” He shook his head at the memory.

“They came out from her mouth?”

The king nodded. “The poor child had been bitten so many times that she died the same day from the horror and the pain.”

“That’s terrible. How old was she?”

“Maybe seven. Anyway, my father wanted no truce with Malora. In fact, he had ordered her dead. I feared the hunts for her would lay Meina and the babies in danger, and I pleaded with my father to call them off. But he never did. Malora must have spelled the territory around her home, cloaking them, as no one succeeded in finding them.” The king lay down, pulling the blankets up beneath his chin. “I’m sorry; I’m getting tired.”

“Do you need anything?”

“No, thank you. I need to finish the story before sleep overtakes me.” He cleared his throat and continued. “A few months had passed, and I knew that you and Torin must have been born. I desperately wanted to see you with my own eyes and to see Meina, the mother of my children. “I wasn’t sure how the cloaking worked; I only knew that countless times before, when I had escorted Meina home, her house stood in this spot. Physically, it was still there. I could feel the wood of the exterior walls beneath my fingers, but it was completely invisible. I called Meina’s name, but she did not appear or answer. I tried the door and window, but neither budged so I hid behind a bush and waited. Finally, Malora returned and uncloaked the house to enter it.” He took another long sip of water and blinked his eyes a few times. I was arguing with myself about wanting to hear the rest of the story and wanting to let the poor, sick man rest when he finally continued, “I could hear Malora and Meina arguing about something and the babies crying. I needed to hold them. I waited, and after a

while, Malora left. The house began to fade before my eyes and I ran for the door, making it just in time.

“Inside that house was my own version of happiness. Meina sat trying to soothe one of you, and she froze the moment our eyes met. She looked to the door with fear in her eyes, as if her mother would soon return and find us. She told me her mother was taking them far away from Yardis. She had begged to stay and work it out with the villagers, but her mother would not hear of it. The other baby began crying. She handed the calm baby to me while she picked the upset child into her arms and spoke gently to it. She was a loving and a perfect mother, right from the start.”

I tried to picture what the king spoke of and I wondered why my mother did not keep us. Why were Torin and I sent to Midland when our father saw that our mother was so good to us?

“I’d made a decision to leave the village and run off with Meina and the babies to make a life for ourselves. They were my life. They were what mattered. They were my family. But Malora returned and the moment she saw me there, holding one of the babies, she flew at me. Meina stepped between us and pleaded for her mother to stop.” The king began coughing again, and the fit seemed to pain him.

I sat up and handed him his water again, and he waved for me to sit back down.

“I’m all right.” He sipped some water. “Malora and I argued. I told her about my father dying, and I promised I would be a different king. I promised that Meina would sit by my side and our children would be treated with respect and loved by all in the kingdom. I meant it.” His expression darkened. “But then she tricked me. She agreed to let Meina and the babies have a life with me and said she believed my words.” His eyes filled with tears as he recalled the memory. “I loved her, but the witch took her away from me.”

“What do you mean?” What had Malora done with her daughter.

“She told me she would wait, that she wouldn’t leave and take Meina with her. Once I was king, she’d let Meina and I marry—I just needed to bring a proper dowry for Meina. If Meina tried to warn me not to trust her mother, I missed it, too blinded by the hope she had seeded in me.” He sighed. “Once I returned to the village, I learned my father had passed in my absence. I wanted to return for Meina immediately, dowry in hand—give the witch anything to have Meina and my children—but now I had responsibilities for seeing to my dead father’s wishes. I confided in Lysa, my father’s most trusted Guardian, and asked her to bring a chest of treasures in trade for Meina and the children.” The king started coughing even more, splashing water on the skins covering his bed, but he waved me away when I tried to help. “Lysa returned with the chest and grim news. The small home in the forest was found uncloaked and abandoned except for the two crying babies lying in soiled clothes in their small wooden beds.”

“Did she wait to see if Meina would return? Maybe she jumped to conclusions and got it wrong? Maybe Meina was coming back,” I suggested.

The king shook his head and slid his cup onto the table beside the bed. “She waited and waited; she didn’t bring me the news until that evening. She changed the babies soiled clothes and made sure

they were secure in the shelter of the home and returned for my instructions.” He shook his head. “Malora took my love away from me and her babies. I sent Lysa, Jaron, and Jonas to retrieve the babies. But when they returned, the barrier spell had been cast, and they were closed off from the village.”

Clapping came from behind me. Larkin must have snuck into the room at some point. He pushed off the wall. “Beautiful story, Father, no wonder you are so happy to see your new sons. Makes my mother seem like a consolation prize.” Larkin was without his guards.

“Larkin, do *not* question the love I had for your mother! You don’t know my heart. I loved your mother, but I also loved Meina. Both were smart and beautiful women, and both gave me sons that I love with my whole heart.” The king tried to sit up in bed but struggled. The afternoon had been emotionally and physically draining on him. He fell back on his pillows, coughing with his eyes closed.

“How much could you have loved this Meina? You moved on so quickly, taking my mother as your wife.” Larkin challenged. He said my mother’s name with an edge that made me hate him more than I already did. I never wanted her name to cross his lips again.

The king tensed. His mouth narrowed into a thin line as he met Larkin with an expression far more menacing than a father staring down at his errant child. For a moment, Larkin cowered, but he quickly donned his mask of indifference and left abruptly, slamming the door behind him.

The king let out a breath. “He feels threatened by your presence.” The king shut his eyes. “That is enough storytelling for today. I must rest.”

I rose and helped pull the covers around the king. He grabbed my hand. “Raynar, thank you for coming to see me. It means everything to me, to see you after all these years.” His hand squeezed mine and I tightened my grip as well. “Tomorrow I shall like to see you and Torin here together.” He loosened his grip and patted my hand before he turned over to sleep.

I let myself out of the king’s stronghold and walked back to Kyra’s. I thought about the Vintras’s story, and I wondered, where my mother had disappeared to and why had she not taken Torin and I with her? I walked through the village with my mind chasing around multiple theories; I felt the watchful eye of the king’s guards on me.

Kyra’s house was empty. I expected Jonas or Torin to be home by now, as the evening meal soon approached. I lay on my makeshift bed and let my thoughts wander to Lauren. Listening to the king’s tales of his young love made me think about the lost chance I had with the girl I loved.



The last pep rally of our 8th grade year had started. Lauren pushed past several kids and wiggled her body next to mine. Greg Jones grunted as his personal space shrunk by half because of her bold move. She didn’t bother apologizing to him.

“What’d I miss?” She beamed. It was only May, but she managed to already have a summer glow about her.

“Hey, nothing. Everyone’s still too loud for them to get it started.”

Principal Donaldson stepped up to the mic and commanded silence. After a minute, the crowd quieted enough for the rally to begin. Lauren laced her fingers in mine as she had countless times before, but as everyone’s attention was trained on the cheerleaders that bounded across the gym floor, she pulled our hands to her lips and placed a gentle kiss on the back of my hand. My face warmed and my insides turned to goo. This was new and a bold move by Lauren. I could feel her eyes on me, trying to gauge my reaction. I met her stare as firecrackers of excitement exploded within me. I picked up her hand and placed a soft kiss on the back of it, showing her that I liked this step forward.



But I had blown my chance with Lauren and instead of moving forward as she had tried to lead us, I had pulled away. It hadn’t been a week since my parents had stamped the vEDS expiration date on me. Forty-two the magic number that, from that day forward, would make me cringe. They had taught me from day one how to advocate and stay safe with my fragile body, but this had been the first time they had ever shared the average age of death in patients with vEDS. They’d regretted telling me the moment they saw my face fall. Sure, they had tried to cushion the blow by telling me of some had lived beyond that number and had reassured me it was just a number. Yes, it was just a number, but it was a low number.

Would I live long enough to marry, have kids, make a life for myself? Would I make it past forty-two or would I die in my teens as many males with this condition had? Reflecting on my diagnosis and its prognosis kicked my anxiety into high gear. If Lauren had been there, she’d have done something abnormal to get my brain thinking about something else.

Lauren was my happily ever after. She was the only girl I cared about and envisioned sharing my life with. But how could I condemn her to my short and tragic future?

I was so good at blowing a good thing. Once, she’d tried to get me to talk about what was bugging me and why I’d pushed away instead of taking the next step forward. But there had been so much to sort through, so many emotions and I’d needed to find the answers within myself before sharing them with her.

Unfortunately, it took longer than I had hoped, and when Freshman year began, Derek had taken an interest in my girl and had not been timid about taking the relationship to the next level.

“Raynar! You are here!” Jonas stood in the doorway with Torin beside him. I hadn’t heard them come in, but I was glad to see that they were okay.

“I am. I came here after talking with the king. Where were you two?” I asked.

“After meeting with Henrick, I went to look for Torin. Unfortunately, the king’s guards were taking

him somewhere to be questioned. Kaden found me and helped me locate Torin. Unfortunately, it also put us in the crosshairs and we were pulled in and questioned as well.” Jonas explained as he kicked off his boots and sat on the edge of his bed.

“What did they ask you?” I looked to Torin who turned his back to me while he changed into a clean shirt.

“They wanted to know why we were here and how we got here.” He turned and sat with his legs folded beneath him.

“You didn’t tell them about the dragons, did you?” I worried for Poe and his brothers.

Torin shook his head. “No. I told them we tapped our heels and wished to see King Vintras, and it worked.”

Jonas chuckled at the boldness of Torin. “You’re lucky they didn’t kill you on the spot.”

Torin laughed. “They didn’t catch the Oz reference. But Cross, we plan to leave tomorrow. If we wait much longer, I’m worried we may run into trouble leaving this place.”

“The king wants to see us both tomorrow, at the same time,” I told Torin.

“You both shall see him in the morning.” Jonas declared. “Then we will leave by afternoon without any announcement. Understood?”

Torin and I nodded in agreement of Jonas’ plan.

Chapter 13

The next morning, we packed our bags so we'd be ready for a prompt departure this afternoon.

"Do not tell anyone we are leaving today. We don't want to raise any alarms." Jonas cautioned us. "Let's grab a bite before heading to see the king." We headed to the tavern and sat at a table close to the door. Jonas waved to the barmaid who had served us the last time we had come in. She looked at us but turned a cold shoulder and walked away. Jonas pushed away from the table and approached the bar to have a word with a gentleman who appeared to be the owner.

Kaden came in and met eyes with Torin, then turned to leave without acknowledging us. Torin's look of disbelief turned to one of concern. "Ray, something's up. I have a bad feeling about this." He spoke in a low voice. "Get out of here and run. Hide somewhere, and we'll meet up with you at Kyra's and leave together."

"What? No!" I argued quietly. "Nothing has happened. We've done nothing wrong."

"We are a threat to Larkin and his ways. If something happens to King Vintras, we will be dealt with under Larkin's power. Something is up and the safest place for you is far from here in hiding. Now go!" Torin gritted his teeth and scanned the room, assessing any potential danger.

I stood and exited the building, and then I ran as fast as my feet would carry me. I ran in the direction opposite of Kyra's house.

A deep voice announced, "King Vintras is dead. Long live King Larkin. Seize them." Sounds of a scuffle broke out behind me, but I didn't stop to look back as guards chased after me, shouting to stop.

"I've got him." An approaching female guard dove and got ahold of my ankle. I fell to the ground, tugging and kicking to get free. Three more guards, weapons drawn, were only a few yards away. I gasped and fought. My captor now held her dagger in her free hand. I was gonna die. All this time I had worried about dying by the hands of vEDS. And there I was, facing an execution by blade.

I wanted more from this life.

I landed my hardest kick in the guard's face. She grabbed her bleeding nose just as the other guards arrived.

An explosion rocked my body. Every cell felt stretched to the point of popping. I did not enter Death's door peacefully; I rocketed through as if my presence there was long overdue.

As I floated high above the ground, I remembered hearing people on YouTube recount their near death experiences. Some spoke of floating above the scene of their death, as they watched emergency crews try to resuscitate them. The guards below stepped back and pointed at me with panicked expressions. Could they see me? Surely not. I saw my White Pony T-shirt in shreds on the grass near the female guard who had held me. My jeans lay in pieces nearby. Where the hell was my body?

“Get the archers! Hurry!” One male guard commanded. “Shield wall!”

The remaining handful of guards on the ground formed a circle with their shields encasing them in a layer of protection.

“What abilities does this dragon have?” The one commanding everyone asked.

Dragon? I bent my head and saw scaled limbs and a long, deadly looking tail extending behind me. I wanted to fly higher and found the mere thought was enough to propel me where I wanted to go. I soared high above the ground and circled back to the scene below. The guards crouched lower to hide their vulnerable bodies. Arrows flew at me from a distance and one landed in my thigh. I howled in pain, only it sounded like a monstrous roar, frightening me. I needed to land somewhere safe to tend to my wound and figure out a plan for saving Torin and Jonas.

I flew over the circle of oaks that marked the village boundary. The landscape beneath looked different from when Fenick brought us. If only I could find my way back toward the shop that Poe and his brothers kept, they could help me.

I circled the of oak ring and noticed more and more guards congregating and shooting arrows at me. I widened my path, careful not to stray too far and lose my bearings.

“One who flies in circles is either lost or protecting something.” A female voice said. I turned and saw a large sea-green and silver dragon fly up next to me. She flew all around me as though she was studying me. “You’re new. I can tell by your irregular flight pattern.” She flew so close I thought she would hit me and I swear she sniffed me. “You’re a hybrid and you’re wounded. Come. Follow me.”

She took the lead, and soon I recognized the clearing behind the shop. Remembering that Ren and Fenick dressed in the nearby bushes, I landed awkwardly on a tree in that same area, snapping the wood in half under my heavy weight, causing me to fall to the ground. I lay on the forest floor, naked and once again human. Shutting my eyes, I let out a deep breath. I was alive and surprised that I had survived the trauma I had put my body through.

“Are you alright?” The female voice called from far away.

“I’m alive.” I covered my privates with my hands in case she approached.

“Naked?” she asked.

“Yep.”

She laughed and threw a set of wadded up clothes in my direction. They landed a short distance away from me. “Try those.”

I rolled over and scooped with my good leg to get them. “Thanks. Not sure the pants will work with this arrow sticking out of my leg. Any chance you could go in the shop and ask for Poe?” I

worried about moving too much, unsure how close this was to my femoral artery. Maybe as a dragon I could handle injury, but my human form was fragile. I had years of knowing what actions could be deadly, and this qualified.

Poe appeared through the foliage, his eyes wide in shock. “Hey, I didn’t think I’d see you, or this much of you, this soon. I heard you’re part dragon! No wonder you healed so quickly last time.”

“Poe, right now all I can think about is this arrow. Help me get it out, and we can have a long talk about dragon life.”

Poe laughed and knelt down beside me. “Deal. There’s not too much blood so it probably missed the important stuff. Close your eyes and don’t open them till I tell you.”

“What? Here? Now?” I asked.

“Yes. I don’t have the man power to get you in the house. Now, close your eyes or you’ll mess up the spell and end up with half a leg.”

“Seriously? Shit.” I shut my eyes tight. His hands wrap around my thigh and the skin warmed with his magical ability. Then I felt a tug at my thigh and heard a snap. “What are you doing? Why is my leg getting cold now?”

“Ray, relax—almost done.”

“Have you done this before? Are you qualified? I’d feel better if you could just cut it short and get me to a hospital.” I panicked. I knew with my vEDS that I needed to have skilled hands operating on me that understood and anticipated complications, not a teenager with backwoods magic.

I thought of the story Beth Miller had shared on our Facebook support group. She was a mom who had lost her daughter at age fifteen to vEDS. Her daughter had been undiagnosed at the time and had gone to the ER with severe abdomen pain. They’d spent too long getting blood tests and ruling out common causes and finally had found a perforated colon. They’d taken her to surgery, but she’d died on the table. Her tissue had literally fell apart as the doctors had tried to repair her. For years, I had been told that all surgeries, unless life-saving, were out of the question, but they recently revised the precaution to state that non-elective surgery was safe if performed by a skilled surgeon with knowledge of vEDS. Removing an arrow from my thigh qualified as non-elective since I could not go through life with a rod of wood through my appendage. But I also knew that Poe, number one, was not a skilled surgeon or really any surgeon, and two, had limited knowledge about my rare condition.

My fingers found the Guardian’s medallion around my neck as I let it transport me back to my youth and the day I learned how to ride my bike. The spell of the medallion was powerful; I could smell the fresh cut summer grass, hear kids playing, and feel the wind on my face.

“Take a big breath in…” I did as Poe instructed, and then he pushed and pulled at my leg making me sick to my stomach. “It’s out.”

I rolled to the side and puked.

“I have to keep pressure on it.” He pushed down hard on the wound.

“Dammit! It hurts.” My voice choked.

“Yep, but I have to slow the bleeding.” I opened my eyes to see Poe covered in sweat. He turned toward the shop and yelled, “Mom?”

“What?” The woman’s voice sounded far away.

“I need my supplies, Mom. Bring me water, gauze, a wrap and the tincture in the blue bottle.” He looked back down at me. “You doin’ alright?”

“Yeah, the cold sensation helps with the pain. She’s your mom?”

“Yep.” He nodded.

“Makes sense. Are you part dragon too?”

“No, my dad’s genes are dominant in me. My ability to heal came from him. What I wanna know is how are you part dragon?” Poe asked. A magenta colored cloth approached, drawing Poe’s attention. “Better cover your junk. Here.” Poe handed me the sweatpants which I laid across my privates.

“Here.” She handed him a small basket with the supplies. “How is he?” His mother was beautiful. She had very few wrinkles and a slender figure that appeared to be somewhat athletic. She had dark eyes and her brown hair was accented with silver streaks.

“Good. He’s a fast healer and the arrow head came all the way through and was intact.” Poe poured water on the wound and handed the bottle to me encouraging me to drink the rest. He dabbed at my thigh with the gauze till the bleeding had slowed, then he coated a wrap with the pungent tincture from the blue glass bottle and wrapped it snug around my thigh. “Smells awful but works like a charm.” The smell reminded me of rotten eggs. “Glad you gave him Fen’s joggers; Ren would have gone ballistic if you sacrificed his,” Poe said. “Here.” He handed her the garbage and supplies. “Take this in, please? We need a guy’s minute here.”

After she left, Poe helped me pull the clothes on, then hoisted me up to a standing position. “Take it easy, today. Tomorrow you can move around more but nothing crazy. After that, depending on how fast you heal, you may be ready for normal activity.”

I hobbled toward the shop with Poe supporting some of my weight. “Poe, I’m curious, did you use magic to remove the arrow or did you yank it out?”

He turned to me with a smile. “Yanked it.”

“Dammit, I knew it.” I shook my head and chuckled.

“You wouldn’t have let me near that thing if I you’d known I was gonna yank it out. Would you?” He cocked his eyebrow.

“No. Probably not. Thanks for getting it out.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s get some food in you and set you up somewhere comfortable so you can rest. Then you can tell us what happened and where the others are.” We entered the shop, and Poe helped set me up in a comfy chair where I could prop my feet up onto a table.

His mom returned with a bowl of some sort of stew that had better flavor than the Yardinian stew. “Here, if it’s not spicy enough I can bring over some spices.”

“No, it’s fine. Tastes better than what I had in the village.” The flavors were stronger and the meat was more tender.

“Fenick and Ren bring us back spices from further south when they travel and trade with others.” She took a seat next to me and extended her hand toward me. “We haven’t properly met. My name is Meina.”

Meina—as in King Vintras’s Meina? My heart stopped beating. My mind raced to connect all the dots while a million words that begged to be spoken became lodged in my throat.

“What is it? You look troubled.” Her expression softened with concern.

I thought of the king’s stories. This woman seemed about the right age. But if she was the one the king spoke of.. “Do you know King Vintras?” I cut to the chase.

She blinked and considered what I had asked. “I have not heard that name in years. How do you know it?”

“He’s my father. I met him a few days ago. He spoke of a girl that he loved named Meina.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “He spoke of *you*.” She nodded and covered her mouth with a shaky hand. I reached over and took her free hand in mine. “He said you are my mother. Is that true?”

A sob bellowed out of her as she nodded her head, too upset to speak. I leaned closer and put my arm around her, wrapping her in as much of a hug as I could.

“I never thought I would see you again.” She looked into my eyes and smiled. “And here you are, right before me like a dream come true. What do they call you?”

“My name?” She nodded. “My name is Raynar Cross.”

Her smile grew bigger. “They kept the name I gave you! You have a twin brother that I had named Torin. Do you know of him?”

“I do.” My tone of voice sounded dismal.

“What? What is it?” She noticed and became alarmed.

“He and the Guardian who has cared for him these years were taken prisoner in Yardis.”

“Yardis? Have they committed a crime against the king?”

“No.”

She looked relieved. “Well then it is a mistake. Does the king know that Torin is his son?”

“He knows, but as I fled, I heard a guard announce that King Vintras, had died.” Meina’s eyes widened. “His son Larkin has taken power. The villagers fear him and the king’s guard.” Meina stood and began pacing the room as I continued. “With the barrier lifted, he must feel threatened that all will flee and seek freedom, so he forbids the villagers to leave and executes those that plot a safe passage away from Yardis. After the king’s guards announced the passing of King Vintras, they were immediately ordered to seize Torin, Jonas, and me. But Torin had sensed something was up and begged me to run and hide.”

My mother turned to face me. She smiled, but her eyes looked sad. “I loved your father. I don’t know what he told you about us and you and Torin, but he was a kind and loving man. I wish with all

my heart that I could have seen him once again before he passed.”

Poe entered the room and when he recognized his mother was upset, he hurried over to her. “Mom, are you okay? What’s wrong?” He wrapped her in a hug.

“Sit. We have much to tell you,” she urged.

Over the next hour or so, Meina and I told shared the story of my parents with Poe. I added the latest details about Torin and Jonas being held captive and expressed my concern that Larkin could kill them at any moment. Poe did not say much as he listened intently. When we had finished, he cleared his throat and said, “Let’s make a plan to kick Larkin’s ass and save my brother.”

Chapter 14

Later that evening, when Ren and Fenick returned, we shared the stories with them and made a plan for saving Jonas and Torin. Thankfully, due to the spell or Ren actually listening, he managed sit through the conversation without losing his cool.

After the evening meal, Poe checked my wound and we were both surprised to see how much it had healed. He rewrapped it with the smelly tincture and a new wrap and said he believed I'd be as good as new in the morning. I was thankful my body seemed stronger and healed faster, because I didn't trust Larkin and worried that there was no reason to keep Jonas and Torin alive much longer—if they were even still alive. The sooner we got them out of there, the better.

The plan was simple but dangerous. We needed to create a diversion to draw the guards and hopefully Larkin away from the castle area where I assumed Torin and Jonas would be held. The rest of us would help free them and attack Larkin. We didn't get detailed as we knew we'd have to improvise based on what Larkin and the guards did.

Fenick gave me a crash course on how to quickly change between dragon and human forms while Ren tried his best to piss me off enough to activate any special powers I might possess. He said strong emotions made it easier to transform, but after he grabbed me with his talons and dropped me into the small pond near the shop for the third time, Poe called it off. Ren changed back into human form laughing hysterically. The jerk took pleasure out of poking at me. The short training session left me better at transforming, but confident I did not have any mystical powers like fire or ice breathing, as my brothers possessed.

Poe patted me on the back. "Maybe healing is your power?" Poe suggested.

"I don't know. Honestly, I feel stronger. It's nice to not feel like I'm falling apart from doing simple everyday tasks."

Ren walked past and threw a towel my way. "Good try, buddy. Anytime you wanna have another go, let me know." He smirked as he walked away.

"Sorry about him. He's prickly on the outside but has a good heart." Poe yelled after Ren. "Hey! Tell Fenick and Mom we leave in a few minutes." Ren continued walking and raised his arm and gave a single wave, letting Poe know he heard.

"What do you think caused the change? I mean I had never changed into a dragon before."

Poe thought for a minute. “I don’t know. Maybe it changed when I healed you, like some inner switch got flipped allowing you to access the inner dragon. Or maybe there is something about this land. I don’t know, and we may never know. But I’m glad we got another badass dragon on our side.” He fist-bumped me. “Let’s go. We have a big day ahead of us.”

We headed into the shop and had a quick bite to eat. Then we grabbed some bags that Meina had packed with medic supplies, water bottles, basic weapons, and something called pemmican which consisted of fat, seed, meat, and dried fruits.

Fenick carried the contraption that Meina and Poe rode on. Ren held the bags while I was free to focus on not crashing. The plan was for Fenick and Ren to create a distraction. Poe would wait in the shadows, ready to heal either of them. Meanwhile, Meina and I would find and free Jonas and Torin.

Ren led us to the safe area on the outskirts of the village where Fenick had dropped us off a few days ago. Meina and I took one of the bags while Poe kept the other and continued on with his brothers.

Meina, my mom, reached out and grabbed my hand.

“Are you nervous?” I asked her, trying to imagine how hard it would be, seeing my children enter into danger without me being nearby to help them fight.

“I am. These people do not like our kind. At least they didn’t when I knew the village. I worry for my sons even though they are strong and capable. I guess mothers never stop worrying for their children. Even you and Torin, all these years I held you both close in my heart, thinking of you often and wondering...worrying about your fate.” She squeezed my hand and then released it. “We’d better get moving.”

She led me a different way toward the village. We stopped in a wooded area near the village’s house of worship. The building was larger than the tavern and plain in design except for the large runes carved in the structure’s wood. The king’s stronghold was beyond the temple.

“That’s it there.” I pointed ahead. “There are guards at the main door and several in the main room.” I knelt down next to Meina, who looked nervous but patiently waited and scanned the area.

“Get ready. I see Ren.” She gripped the bag tight in her hands. The sound of arrows cut through the air drawing my attention to the sky where two dragons swooped from opposing sides toward the stronghold. Fiery breath came from what I assumed was Ren. His flight pattern looked aggressive as he dive-bombed guards, picking them up and tossing them from high up. The other dragon breathed it’s icy breathe to extinguish the fires that broke out on the structure and flew to the courtyard behind the building where he released another frozen breath. “That’s it,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Meina ran faster than I thought she could run. She scaled a wall at the back of the stronghold like a monkey and then leaned down from the top, extending her hand to me. We were in the courtyard at the rear of the stronghold. I expected more resistance on this side of the wall, but another pass from Ren and Fenick disabled the guards. They stood like statues, frozen by Fenick’s frozen blast.

“We don’t have long before they thaw.” Meina did not head for the backdoor of the building,

instead she scaled a small wall and entered the palace through a window. I followed with far less grace than she exhibited. Once inside, we stayed in the shadows and noted the positions of the few guards. Worry lined their faces as all of their attention was toward the outside, where one of the dragons let out a ground shaking roar. “See that door over there?” She pointed across the room to a single wooden door with a draw bar and a guard beside it. “That’s got to be it.”

“How are we going to get in without being seen?”

Meina set the bag down and handed me a deadly looking dagger. The handle was carved from bone and the seven-inch blade was narrow and made to pierce organs. “Make the hit count, immobilize with a hit to the leg or take them down with a thrust to the heart.” She must have recognized the doubt I wore on my face. “I know you are worried and have probably never fought with weapons before, but they will not hesitate to use theirs on us, and we must try and save your brother and his Guardian.”

She was right. I only hoped that when I needed to use the dagger, I would have the confidence to do so. There was a pounding at the door, as if someone was trying to come through with a battering ram. The guards stood frozen in place, all eyes trained on the entrance.

“Let’s move.” Meina grabbed the bag and snuck toward the barred door. I followed close behind. The knocking stopped, freezing Meina and I in the shadows.

BAM!

The doors splintered and the red dragon tossed a bloodied guard from his jaws into the room and let out a roar. Meina and I hurried to the barred door, both of us assuming it was a dungeon, as the guards fought the dragon. Even the one at the door rushed to help, not even seeing us as he ran by. Meina paused and looked at Ren, worried for her son. The red dragon released a scorching breath. Guards on fire screamed, running about the room as parts of the wooden structure ignited. The others hurried to extinguish the flames. Fenick replaced Ren in the doorframe and sent an icy breath into the room. The brothers worked in concert to accomplish the goal with minimal casualties and damage. It was an impressive sight.

Meina and I pulled the bar free, and we entered a stone walled room with two doors on each side and one straight ahead. We cautiously but quickly searched our way down the hall. One door led to another set of wooden walled rooms that housed supplies such as firewood, animal food, weapons, and what looked like a small collection of gold and silver artifacts and coins. The last room held what we sought.

Torin looked up from the wooden pillory that imprisoned him. “Cross! You made it out!” King Vintras lay on an animal skin on the ground beneath the second wooden pillory that held Jonas who looked beaten.

Jonas weakly raised his head revealing one eye swollen shut and a split lip. “Thank Freya,” he muttered as his head fell.

Henrick sat beside the king with his feet in stocks looking relieved to see us. “The king, he is not

well. He needs medicine.”

I used my dagger to free Henrick while Meina used a tool to pick the locks on the stocks and pillories.

“Who is this?” Torin nodded toward Meina as he rubbed at his now free wrists and walked over to Jonas.

“I’ll tell you later. She’s on our side.” I didn’t want to delay our escape.

Meina freed Jonas, who fell to the ground. His back of his shirt had a pattern of rips; the skin beneath was striped with open wounds. Had they whipped him?

Torin fell to his knee beside him. “Dad!” He helped roll Jonas onto his side.

A weak smile crossed his face as he touched Torin’s face.

Meina had given Henrick a tincture for King Vintras, and then came over and handed her water skin to Jonas, instructing him to drink. Jonas lifted his eyes and blinked. “Meina?”

She looked surprised but didn’t seem to recognize Jonas. “How do you know me?”

Torin studied her with interest, probably piecing together that she was our mother.

“I was a Guardian, and I once spied Vintras meeting with you deep in the woods outside of Yardis.” Jonas sounded weak and tired.

“I had no idea he had been followed.” She blushed.

Jonas smiled weakly and closed his eyes.

“Dad!” Torin shook Jonas’ leg till he slowly opened his eyes.

“I’m tired son. I just want to rest.”

“We need to get you out of here.” Meina and Torin tried to help Jonas stand, but he was too weak and fell to the ground. Torin hoisted Jonas over his shoulders.

Henrick leaned over Vintras, shaking his head as he held Meina’s now-empty tincture bottle. “The king still struggles for breath...”

“The village needs to see him alive,” I said, moving to help Henrick lift a wheezing Vintras, who didn’t even seem aware of being moved. “When they see that Larkin and his men imprisoned their king, they will revolt against him.”

“We need to—” Henrick began.

“Henrick...” The familiar voice of Larkin sent my heart racing. “You’ve always meddled in my plans, bringing him back from the brink of death again and again and again. I should have killed you. But I was foolish, wanting to keep my father alive long enough to show him that I made his kingdom great again.” Two guards flanked Larkin, swords drawn. In the small room, they could still block the entrance while keeping the points of their blades inches from Torin’s and my throats. Behind them, the sounds of dragon battle still filtered—but even if Ren and Fenick had taken out the soldiers, could they fit down the small hall Meina and I had come?

“Larkin, you could never make this kingdom great.” Henrick transferred the king’s weight all on me and pointed at Larkin. “You dishonor all that your ancestors have created. People chose to follow

them because they were good strong leaders.” Henrick was letting it out. “They didn’t force people to stay as you are. They didn’t need to. You are not fit to lead these people; you only wish to keep them as obedient pets.”

Larkin seemed to vibrate with fury as Henrick spoke. Henrick did not see the blade coming. Larkin thrust his dagger deep into Henrick’s heart and turned the handle to inflict more damage. “Farewell, you opinionated, weak, waste-of-life.” Larkin withdrew his blade and kicked Henrick down and turned toward the crowd. “Who’s next?”

My anxiety pushed my heart rate high. Larkin grabbed Meina by the throat. “Let’s start with the pretty one. Perhaps we’ll have a little fun with her first.” Larkin drew his own blade, disarming Meina as she lunged at him. He nodded at the guard on me, and he stabbed. Balancing the king in my arms, I could only back away to avoid my throat being cut by his blade.

Meina gasped, meeting my eye.

In that moment, Larkin grabbed her around the neck. She stomped on his foot, and he tightened his hold, nodding to the other guard on Torin, weighted down by Jonas. “Ah, ah, ah,” Larkin said.

She stopped fighting, realizing how easily two of her sons could be killed. “Bastard,” she growled at him.

“A feisty one!” Larkin chuckled. “But really, aren’t *they* the bastards? Abandoned by both you and my father?”

Meina buckled in his arms, as if she’d fainted. As he tried to catch her limp form, she snapped her head back and into his face. He staggered, dropped his sword, and released her, grabbing his mouth with his hands. Blood and spit streamed from between his fingers. Meina kicked the knee of the next-nearest guard—the one on me.

I used that half second to lower King Vintras gently to the ground. It was macabre, but Henrick’s body served as almost a pillow.

Meina turned back to Larkin, but he was ready. He backhanded her across the face, knocking her to the ground. “You bitch,” he spat blood on her as he spoke. “How dare you do that to your king?”

“You are *not* my king!” she spat back.

As she tried to stand, he kicked her side and recovered his sword.

I exploded into my dragon form. Rock walls crumbled on each side of me, making more room for me to move. Unexpected sunlight made me blink. Torin’s and Meina’s voices shouted shock and alert, but I hardly heard them. My only focus was on Larkin who had his blade pointed at my mother’s throat.

He looked up at me, eyes wild. “Come any closer and I’ll—”

I didn’t let him finish. I snapped his head off with my razor-sharp teeth and spit it across the room. I felt the stabs of swords; the two guards, surrounded by rubble, attacked me blindly. Meina and Torin hurried to get Jonas and King Vintras out.

Once they left and I no longer had to be careful of my friends, I let loose on any guard who came

at me. Once my attackers lay in a bloody pile, I changed back into human form and stumbled into the now-exposed courtyard. I collapsed, unable to will my limbs to move another inch. The pain from the wounds seared. I closed my eyes and focused on breathing.

I lay there wondering when death would end my pain. Finally, I felt it's strong arms wrap around me and hold me close, lifting me away from danger, from life. I felt comfort in those arms as they carried me to a place far away.

Chapter 15

Heaven, or maybe it was Hell, surprisingly looked a lot like Poe's shop. Leo—Leo?!—sat asleep in a chair next to me. Kaden and Torin chatted across the room and I swore I could hear my parents' voices in the distance. Had we all died in the battle?

"Leo?" My voice did not sound like my own. I tried again after clearing my throat. "Leo!" My big friend stirred awake, and once he got his bearings, he looked at me with the biggest smile I had ever seen him wear.

"Holy crap, he lives!" Leo beamed.

"How are you here?" Whether or not I was alive or dead, Leo should be back in Midland.

"I made the trip with your parents. I guess they got sick of me coming over every day and asking for news about you. We arrived this morning. They said you were in bad shape then they brought you here." Leo shook his head.

I looked down at my arms that had clean wraps around each forearm and wondered what the skin looked like beneath them.

"Hey! Hey! Cross is awake!" Ren shouted as he entered the room. "Dude, you are a rock star in my book! Mom told us what happened in the dungeon." He nodded his head with approval. "Totally badass. I'm gonna get Poe. He wanted to know the moment you woke up." Ren's new found respect for me surprised me but I also welcomed it.

Poe entered. He looked tired but happy to see me awake. "Finally! I'm glad to see you awake, brother." He grabbed my hand and held it. His grasp seemed weaker than normal.

"Are you okay?" It concerned me to see him like this. How much had the battle taken from him?

"I am now. You saved the village. You're a hero, and the hero has to live. But you took a beating—came in here pretty torn up. I don't know if you were too weak to heal or if your vEDS played a part, but it was a struggle to keep you alive."

"That's crazy. Thanks for saving me." I squeezed his hand.

"Anytime. Hey, I heard you bravely took out Larkin and his guards. I'm proud of you man. Glad you're back." He leaned down and gave me a hug. "I'll go get Mom. She wants to see you." Poe left, and Kaden and Torin came over.

Torin gave me a masculine side hug. "Cross, you were a beast out there! You snapped Larkin's

head off and spit that jerk across the room. It was epic!”

“I wish I could have seen that.” Kaden remarked.

“Me too.” Leo added. “I can’t believe you’re part dragon.”

“Yeah, but since you’re a commoner, we’ll have to kill you at the end of this week to ensure his secret is safe.” Torin threatened.

“Funny. I’d like to see you try.” Leo countered. The two exchanged a threatening look before bursting into hearty laughter.

I thought back to Larkin’s sword at my mom’s throat. I had just met her after all these years, and I was not about to let some homicidal control freak take her out of my life. “I thought he was going to kill Mom. I remember thinking I had to save her and get him off of her, but I was afraid I’d hurt her in the process or I’d not move fast enough to save her before he...killed her.”

“So, you ripped off his head.” Leo chuckled. “Maybe you should do that to Derek the next time he’s a jerk to you.” Leo stood and excused himself to the bathroom.

Poe returned with my biological mom. She had tears in her eyes as she came to sit on the bed next to me. “You saved my life.” The tears fell from her eyes as she cuddled into my chest. I wrapped my sore arm around her.

“I couldn’t let him kill you. I only just met you, and the monster wanted to take you away from me.” Now the tears flowed from my eyes. She looked up and wiped them away. Coming in behind her were the two people whose voices I swore I had heard before. “Mom? Dad?” Seeing them here in Poe’s shop, seemed like a dream. Even though Meina was my biological mother, Lysa and Jaron had loved me as their own child. They would always be Mom and Dad to me.

Meina gave me a soft smile and kissed my forehead before stepping aside to let Jaron and Lysa step closer.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, wondering if they knew about the trouble we ran into at Yardis.

“Fenick came for us,” my father said. “He told us you were injured in battle and said Poe needed those that love you to surround you while you heal.”

“Yeah, I needed all the help I could get.” Poe added. “It helps to draw from that positive energy that only love can give.” Poe readjusted himself in the chair next to the bed, slumping with his arms folded across his chest and eyes shut.

“I’m glad you’re here. Where is Jonas?” I didn’t know what had transpired in the village after I fell unconscious or what had become of the others we rescued from the dungeon.

My mom, Lysa, came over and brushed my hair aside. “Jonas is well. He’s downstairs getting cleaned up. He told us how brave you were.”

I *had* faced my fears, but so had many others. “We *all* fought. In fact, Meina and I would have never gotten to the dungeon if Fenick and Ren hadn’t created a diversion. And Meina fought like a skilled warrior—fearless and agile. The success of the battle was not because of me; it’s because we

all fought back.”

“True,” Jonas stood in the doorway, his hair looked wet and his face looked older. “But the villagers are free because you took down their corrupt leader and helped rescue their king.”

“Jonas!” It was good to see the man who had cared for me during the trip to the village. He was alive.

“Good to see you, Raynar.” He looked about the room. “I see you’ve drawn quite the crowd.” Jonas laughed as he approached.

“What happened? The last thing I remember was fighting the guards. And then getting out to the courtyard. And...thinking I was dead.”

“I came back for you,” Torin recounted. “You were in bad shape. I worried I was doing more damage as I picked you up to carry you. But I had to get you to Poe. Once the villagers saw their king was still alive, they fought against the remaining guards. Poe began healing you and our father, King Vintras, while Fenick and Ren got the others out of the area. Then they returned to bring you both here.”

“Neither of you would have made it back to the shop without some initial healing,” Poe added, his eyes still closed.

“Did King Vintras make it?” I asked.

“He did. Mom has been by his side pretty much non-stop since he arrived.” Torin rubbed the back of his neck.

“He has heart failure and was without his medications,” Jonas explained. “Henrick could do nothing to help him after they were imprisoned. The king’s health has declined, but I’ve given him some modern medications and he grows stronger. The medications are not a cure, but he is stable.” Jonas had sympathy in his eyes. And while the news was hard to hear, I was glad King Vintras was alive.

“What about the village?” I asked. With Larkin gone and Vintras’s failing health, I wondered how unstable life for the villagers had become.

Kaden came over. “Some have chosen to stay while others are ready to explore the land further south. The king will need someone to help him manage the village. There is much to rebuild after the battle. In fact, he has mentioned that either of you would be a great successor and would like to speak with you both.”

“Oh, I’m not sure the king would want me, the dragon who bit his son’s head off, to rule with him. Better send Torin.” I nodded to my brother who stood at the foot of my bed.

“Turns out I have some of that dragon blood too.” Torin confessed.

“You turned into a dragon?” I wished I had seen it.

“No, I wish.” Torin sighed.

Jonas explained, “He was the only one who came out of battle without any scratches or wounds. I took a sample of his skin and found he’s coated in microscopic scales. It’s like he’s wearing a suit of

armor.” Poe opened his eyes and sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“I need some of that.” With my vEDS, a suit of armor would help keep me from most injury.

“You have that.” Poe answered. “I checked your skin too once I found Torin had this mutation. The more I’ve had time to think on it, the more I believe your dragon genes activated when I healed you that first time. Jonas wants to retest you for vEDS when you get back to Midland.”

“If he goes back.” Torin added. “The people need a ruler who will treat them as fair as Vintras. Who better than Cross to lead them.”

“You would be better than me.” I countered. Torin was a natural leader. “Jonas has groomed you to be a strong leader. I saw that from the moment I met you. You had the fight and perseverance above the conflict.”

Torin turned to Jonas. “Is that why you’ve kept me at an arm’s distance my whole life?”

Jonas bit his lower lip and nodded slowly. “I knew one day you would be needed here. I trained you and taught you the best I could, and I was careful not to get too close to you.”

“Did you ever think about what I wanted?” Torin’s voice had a strong edge to it.

“You are a king’s son. You and Raynar are born of royal blood. Our village—” Jonas was interrupted by Torin.

“I wasn’t even born in that village! Visiting there a few days does not make it *my* village.” Torin shook his head. “You told me we were coming here to meet our dying father. That’s it.” Torin shoved Jonas in the chest. “I don’t want to rule a village. All I’ve ever wanted is to be your son. Why couldn’t you be that for me? Why couldn’t you be more like Cross’s parents?”

My heart broke for my brother. He stormed off down the hall with Jonas following after, shouting for him to stop and talk to him. The door to the shop slammed a moment later.

I turned toward my Guardian parents, “How come you raised me different than how Jonas raised Torin?” I wondered if they doubted my ability to rule when they learned I had vEDS. The worry was always in my mind that people took pity and didn’t expect much from me. Sure, I had limitations because of the fragile disorder, but I was still a person with a sound mind, and with dreams, hopes, and beliefs.

My dad looked down at the ground a moment and then met my eyes. “Jonas had warned us not to get close. He told us that as soon as the barrier lifted, we were to bring the king his children. None of us had any idea it would take as long as it had to lift the barrier, but your mother and I aren’t sorry for the time we had with you or how we treated you. We’ve loved you since the first day we held you in our arms.”

My mother grabbed my hand. “As far as the vEDS is concerned, yes, we have cautioned you about dangerous activities to avoid, but we’ve always helped you find a safe way to do the things you’ve wanted to do. When all the kids at swim lessons were diving off the diving board, we had the instructor teach you the Ray Cross Pencil Dive. It was a way you could go off the low boards with minimal risk of injury. And all those times you wanted to ride your bike around the neighborhood with

friends, I wanted to put you in a bubble to keep you safe. But instead we bought you a walkie talkie so you could be free and check in from time to time. We know you are capable of great things and we have never for once doubted that you could lead the people of Yardis.”

My dad set his arm on my mom’s shoulder. “Why do you think Jonas wouldn’t let us go with you to meet the king? He worried we would cloud your judgement about staying and becoming the next king. It killed us not to go.” He shook his head. “But he was right. We grew too close to you and you needed to decide this on your own.”

I tried to swing my legs out of bed but found I was hooked to some tubes. “Hold up.” Poe held me back with his arm. “You have a catheter in. Let’s clear the room so I can remove it and get you checked out.” Poe urged everyone out of the room.

It was odd knowing he had to put a catheter in me. “How long was I out?”

Poe returned with a small bucket and a syringe. “Two days.” He lifted the blanket and within a minute, the catheter was removed. He pulled off the tape holding the piping to my leg and pulled the blanket over me. “Listen, I don’t know about this king business but I know about choices—make this choice for you, not anyone else. You’re at the crossroads and you get to choose which path to take. Your choice.” He wrapped up the medic supplies and excused himself to dump the bucket and wash his hands. He returned a moment later and shut the door behind him. “Seems Torin took off somewhere. Needed to blow off some steam.”

“Yeah, they really need to talk it out.” I added.

“Agreed. Now, let’s have a look at your wounds.” He began unbandaging my left arm.

“How did you know how to do this?” I motioned toward my privates.

“I have all my father’s notes on healing. Thankfully they were very detailed.” He laughed uncomfortably. Glad I wasn’t the only one weirded out by catheter bit. “Unbelievable.” He set the first wrap on my blanket. A pink line with slight bruising was all that remained on my bicep. “This had a huge gash in it.” He grabbed a jar from the bedside table and spread some ointment on the scar. “I had to pack the wounds before I could transport you back here. After I cleaned the wounds, I stitched you up but you healed so quick, I had to take the stitch out the very next day. I’m starting to think healing is your special power.”

“Oh yeah? Why is that?”

“I checked the wounds yesterday and they were almost closed, but a wound that large should have taken a normal person ten days to heal, probably six days for Fenick and Ren. But you healed up in one day!” Poe unwrapped my other limbs and put ointment on each of the scars. “I’m glad they didn’t hit any organs or blood vessels. You got lucky.”

“Why was I out cold for so long?” He had said I was out for two days.

“I don’t know. I can only guess it has to do with this rapid healing thing you got going on.” Poe closed the jar and wiped his hands on a towel. “Come on, Mom said she’d heat something up for you when you were ready.” Poe led me downstairs which seemed surprisingly empty.

“Where’d everyone go?”

“Good question. Here, sit and I’ll look around.” Poe checked the lower level and finally returned with our mom behind him.

“Poe says you might be up for some warm food.” She looked tired.

“It’s okay, a bag of chips will do. If they still have some” I didn’t want to trouble her. “Is everyone else gone?”

Poe grabbed two bottles of water and a bag of chips. He tossed them at me as he sat across from me. “Ren and Fenick took them to Yardis and then headed out to look for Torin.”

Our mom brought over a tray with sliced bread that looked familiar and smelled heavenly and two bowls of a stew. “I had made this yesterday. I think stew always tastes better the next day as all the ingredients marinate in each other.” She said with a warm smile. “Lysa and Jaron brought this bread for you. I think they called it Wonderful Bread.”

I picked it up, took a bite, and tasted heaven. “I have missed carbs so frickin’ bad. And not that it matters but it’s Wonder Bread, though it *is* pretty wonderful. Here try some!”

Meina ate the piece I had torn off for her. She did not seem as elated as I was over the non-nutritious hunk of starch. “Thank you, it was...soft.” She picked up the other bowl and tried to hand it to Poe.

“Mom, I already ate,” Poe protested politely.

“You should try some Wonder bread. It’s wonderful.” I laughed and Poe joined me.

“Seriously, Poe, you need to rebuild your strength. This will help. Eat.” She pushed the bowl into his hands. “Now, please excuse me, I want to return to Vintras and see if he needs me.” She smiled and retreated to a room on the right side of the shop.

When she was no longer in sight, Poe sat back and opened his water and took a long drink. “I didn’t think she would ever be happy again. But having this time with the man she had loved has brightened her spirits.”

“What happened? I mean with her and your dad?”

Poe let out a forceful breath. “Long story. Mom always seemed to be the unwanted child. The Yardinians hated magic users and tried to run off her and her mother. And the Gylos would not accept her because it went against the Gylos law to marry outside the tribe.”

“So, wait, how many are in this Gylos tribe?” If the tribe was small, they’d be inbred and look pretty messed up.

“There were about two hundred. My father came from the Gylos tribe but he fell in love with my mother. They didn’t have a problem with breeding outside of the tribe but when my parents decided to marry, the Gylos turned their backs on him, well most of them. He had a few friends from the tribe who would come check on him and trade goods.”

“Why did that matter? Why were they allowed to mate outside of the tribe but not marry? Makes no sense.”

“One word—Religion. Marriage in the Gylos tribe is sacred and marrying outside the tribe is blasphemy.”

“So what happened? To your Dad?”

“One day my mother went out to bring in the linens that had been hung up to dry.” He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. “I remember hearing her screaming followed by a thunderous roar. I ran to the window where I saw a large dragon attacking an army of Gylos.”

“Was your mom the dragon?”

He nodded. “I’d never seen her transform before. It terrified me. At first I thought the dragon had come and ate my mom. But by the end of the battle, she turned back into her human form. It was hard to understand. The Gylos were supposed to be peaceful healers yet they came here picking a fight.” He took in a breath and looked at me. “The Gylos charged at her, attacking her first and the battle begun. When it was over, they were all dead—every Gylos male, including my father, who had hurried to her side to fight beside her.”

“The Gylos killed your father?” I tried to imagine Poe watching this from an upstairs window as a young child.

“No.” He was silent as he looked down at the ground and said, “My mother killed him, on accident.” Poe did not look up as he rubbed at his left eye and let out a long sigh.

“I’m so sorry. When did this happen?”

“It was a few weeks ago.”

“Did you and your brothers help fight?”

“Ren and Fenick were out doing the trades. My father ordered me to stay inside. He told me he was going to speak peacefully to the men and worried my presence would only complicate things. I should have never listened to him.” He shook his head and tears fell. “I should have run out there and alerted my mom, made her aware that he was there.”

“Stop,” I put my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t do this to yourself. You don’t know that it would have changed anything. It might have made it worse.”

“I felt so helpless, standing there as my parents fought these men, as my father died.” Poe probably hadn’t had much time to grieve and vocalize the emotional event, but I could see the tension leave his body the more he opened up. “All of this over a religious law...”

He wiped the tears away. “Yeah, so when the Gylos women came to collect their dead, one came forward and apologized. Her husband had been a high council member and had incited the violence after his son had announced his marriage to a commoner. The council had been outraged with this news. So, the dad had decided to scare his kid by making an example of my family.”

“But you weren’t living within the Gylos tribe, were you?”

“No, but it didn’t matter. They came to crush all that was good in my father’s life and punish him for a choice he made years ago. Only they never anticipated facing a dragon.” He took our empty bowls to the sink and rinsed them before returning.

“That’s terrible.” Religion was good for many things, like uniting people with similar beliefs, and providing hope and purpose. But sometimes, like this instance with the Gylos, I didn’t agree with religious law. I didn’t understand why two people in love, living peacefully in the world, should be attacked, “Meina has been through so much.”

“She has. She’s been lost without him, spending more and more time away from the shop. I’ve had to look after Ren and Fennick and keep things going here.” He plopped back into the seat across from me.

“No wonder Ren and Fenick listen to you as they do.” I stretched my legs, they felt stiff from laying still for a few days.

“When they do.” Poe corrected. “Can’t believe Ren torched your ride.” He shook his head.

“Me neither. I guess Torin pissed him off.”

Poe laughed. “Not hard to do that with Ren. I swear that kid was born pissed off.”

“Can I go see him?” I nodded my head toward the room where King Vintras and Meina were visiting.

“Yeah.” Poe stood and held his hand out to help me up. “I’ll be around if you need me.”

I walked to the room and knocked on the open door. My biological parents held hands and laughed about some shared moment. They turned and greeted me.

“Raynar, come here son.” My father said as he motioned for me to come closer. “Sit, sit.”

I took a seat next to my father, across from Meina, my mother. “How are you?” I asked.

“Oh, I’ve been better.” He chuckled and coughed.

“You look better. I’m sorry about Larkin. I should have done something different, injured him instead of—”

“Raynar if you hadn’t, he might’ve killed me,” my mother said. “You acted quickly to save me. I’m alive because of you.” Her voices sounded thick with emotion.

My father said nothing, but tears filled his eyes.

“Anyway,” I stood to leave, “I’m glad you are okay, both of you.” As I stepped into the hall, I heard my father call to me.

“Raynar!” I turned to see my father trying to sit up in bed, my mother helped him. “Raynar, you mustn’t carry this burden. Your mother is correct, your quick thinking saved both of us. I am sad. I loved Larkin and wish this would have ended differently. My heart is broken over his betrayal.” He choked back his emotion and shook his head. “Never in my life would I have thought he would lock me away to take control. He knew my health was failing. Who does that to their own flesh and blood?”

My mother lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it.

“I think he worried that if villagers left, he would lose control and the village would fall apart. Did you know he murdered Kyra and the others that attempted to leave?” I asked.

He lowered his head and nodded. “I do now. Kaden told me yesterday.” He shook his head. “I had

no idea such atrocities happened by my own child while I wore the crown!”

“He made those choices, not you. He was responsible for his actions. You were bedridden and unaware of his doings. Had you known and turned a blind eye, then you would be partially responsible.”

I heard the front door open and familiar voices filled the shop. I peeked over my shoulder. “Looks like Torin is back.” I stood and patted my father’s leg. “I’ll come back later to check on you.”

“Raynar? Thank you.” I turned to look back at my father who wore a grateful smile. I nodded and left to see who the other voices belonged to.

“Hey, look who has joined the living!” Ren pulled a shirt on.

“Hey.” I looked around but didn’t see anyone else. “I swear I saw Torin come in.”

“Yeah, he’s upstairs getting some clothes on. Turns out he can morph too. Came back naked as a baby to a pile of shredded clothes!” Ren laughed as he grabbed an apple and took a bite. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Most went to Yardis but Poe, Meina, and King Vintras are here.” I answered.

Torin followed Fenick down the stairs wearing the biggest smile. He looked as if he had just come off his first thrilling rollercoaster ride. “Did you see that loop I made? It was so frickin’ amazing!” Torin finally saw me “Cross! I flew so fast. It was unbelievable!”

The new ability pleasantly distracted Torin from his previous sour mood. Hopefully he could have a civilized chat with Jonas when he returned.

“Welcome to the Dragon Club.” I shook his hand. “I can’t wait to see you in action. Congrats. It’s pretty amazing being up there in the sky.”

Torin pulled up a chair. “Glad to see you up and around.” He saw the bottom of one of my red scars sticking out from under my T-shirt sleeves. He lifted it for a better look. “Wow. This looks nothing like it did a day ago. Poe has a talent.”

“He’s pretty amazing.” I agreed

“Hey, don’t inflate Poe’s ego.” Fenick hollered. “He’ll get all full of himself and then we’ll never hear the end of it.” He walked over and knocked king’s door and entered, greeting his mom and the king as he shut the door behind him.

Ren chuckled. “He’s right. Torin, you decide if you’re gonna stay put or head back to Midland? You’re welcome to stay with us.” Ren had warmed up to us. Seemed we worked our way past his prickly exterior to his softer, loyal side.

“Thanks, I appreciate that. I’ve given it some thought but haven’t decided anything. I’m waiting to hear what the king has to say; Ray and I are supposed to meet with him later. Maybe he’ll sway me.” Torin nodded toward me. “What about you Cross? You stayin’ or heading back?”

“Like you, I need to hear what our father has to say before I decide.”

“How about we chat with him after dinner?” He suggested.

“Yeah, that’s a good plan.” I wondered if the others would be back before then. We spent the rest

of the afternoon outside. Fenick and Ren worked with Torin on dragon skills while I watched on from the porch. They had great tips on how to transform quickly. I was anxious to try some of their suggestions, but Poe'd advised me to wait another day to allow my energy to return to normal.

The three brothers took to the air to practice some maneuvers and flying longer distances and collected the others from Yardis. My parents approached holding hands and looking happy. Jonas nodded at me; he wore a troubled look. Kaden must have stayed behind in Yardis as he was not with the group. They stopped and greeted me before continuing in to help make supper.

"Jonas. Can we speak a moment?" I wasn't sure if he'd be open to my insight on his and Torin's relationship, but I felt I had to try.

"Sure." He pulled up a rocking chair next to mine. "What's up?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Torin."

"Oh?" His expression looked both curious and concerned.

"You've raised Torin different than Lysa and Jaron have raised me. I heard you explain why you did and I don't want to judge you or compare us both. But now he is eighteen, and he'll be out in the world making his own decisions. Life can be hard but no matter how hard it gets, it's nice to feel loved and have a soft place to land at home." Jonas sat quietly listening. "He's met King Vintras, he knows the crown can be his if he truly wants it, but in the end, I'd bet he'd give it all up to feel truly loved by you."

"I do love him. I just have not openly showed it to him." He confessed as he picked at the skin around his thumb nail.

"I know you love him. I'm just not sure he knows that. I think it would be all right if you let the wall down and told him how you feel. I think he needs to hear that."

Jonas nodded his head. "You're right. I just hope it isn't too late. Thanks, Raynar." He stood and squeezed my shoulder lightly.

"Hey Jonas, what caused the barrier spell to finally break after all this time?"

"I've been asking around and making notes, and I've concluded from the timing of events that the spell breaking coincides with the death of the Gylos males. Malora must have gotten the spell from the Gylos years ago, using it to cloak and cut the village off from the world. Spells tied to the life force of an individual are potent and if the male Gylos all contributed to the spell, it would be enough to encapsulate the entire village as it did. Once the massacre happened, the spell broke."

"But the Gylos don't like magic users, why would they team up with Malora?" I felt confused.

"No," He corrected. "The Yardinians under your grandfather's rule did not like magic users. The Gylos did not marry outside of their race, but they had no issues with magic users. Malora must have convinced them to help her cloak the village and trap them away from the rest of the world." He picked at the skin next to his thumbnail once again and squinted his eyes. "There was tension between the Gylos and Yardinians. King Valos, your grandfather, saw the Gylos as magic users and had ordered all trade to cease with them. I don't remember much, but I remember there was hatred

between the tribe and the village. I remember hearing my parents and their friends speak ill of the healing tribe. They talked as though they were evil and unworthy.”

“And if Malora approached the Gylos with her own issues regarding the Yardinians...”

Jonas nodded, agreeing with where my train of thought led me. “But the women and children of the Gylos tribe survived. How did the spell break if they were still alive?”

“We can only assume that the spell was tied to the life force of the males in the tribe. Gylos women have no powers and their children do not come into their powers till they hit puberty.”

I wondered what would happen when the Gylos youth grew into their powers. Would there be war between Poe’s family and the Gylos? Would the children who had lost their fathers try to attack Poe and his family? “But Poe is part Gylos, and he spoke about being trained in healing. He’s still alive, shouldn’t the barrier still be up and active?”

”But Poe wasn’t alive when the spell was cast, his life force is not tied into the barrier spell.”

The sound of my brothers’ wings batting overhead announced their return.

“Have you spoken with your father? About who the crown will pass to when he dies?” Jonas asked.

“Not yet. Torin and I will speak with him after dinner.”

He nodded. “Thanks for your input on Torin.” It was obvious to me that he loved Torin. I overheard him call Torin “son” the other day, which was more endearing than the other times he addressed him. Now he needed to help Torin understand how he felt.

“You’re welcome. It sounds like they’re headed this way. I think I’ll head in and help with dinner. See ya.”

Torin and Jonas spoke on the porch while the rest of us pushed the tables together and prepared the food. Then we all gathered and shared a meal together. When dinner concluded, the others cleaned up while Torin and I visited our father for our talk.

We helped the king get settled in and exchanged small talk before the king got to the heart of the matter. “Raynar, Torin, you both are next in line to inherit this crown. I do not have long before that day comes, and I would like to know what your feelings and thoughts are about acquiring it and the responsibilities that come with it?”

“Well, I’d be honored to take the crown and guide your people.” Torin sounded all formal as he sat up straighter.

The king narrowed his eyes and studied him a moment. “I see. Now Torin, tell me what you truly feel, not what I want to hear.” The king saw through his bullshit.

Torin cleared his throat. “The truth is I am not sure I am the best person to wear that crown, and if I was, I’m not sure I’m ready for that responsibility. The people of Yardis don’t know me, and I don’t know them. I can’t imagine they’d loyally follow someone they’ve just met.”

The king considered this and thanked Torin for his honesty. “Raynar, what about you?”

“Honestly? I thought I was coming here for a week or two and then returning home to Midland

where my home and friends are. The thought of wearing a crown and ruling a village never crossed my mind.”

“And what about the riches? It’s not much but some of the items are old and one of a kind.” The king took a sip of his water.

“I think the riches should go to help the Yardinians who want to relocate get started in their new lives,” Torin suggested.

“Interesting idea.” Vintras said between coughs. “What do you think Raynar?”

“I agree with Torin, use it to help those wanting to begin a life outside of this area. And maybe keep some back for those that stay behind. They have a lot of rebuilding to do.”

“Very well. I’m surprised neither of you have interest in the crown at this time.” Our father laid back onto the pillow and closed his eyes a moment. He looked tired. “You both are very different from Larkin, who had a thirst for power. I suppose we could have the village men battle it out as some of our ancestors did.”

“Have you considered Kaden?” I suggested. “The villagers know him and he helped us when we came to the village. He’s a Guardian and knows about fighting and survival, and he knows the land well.”

Vintras opened his eyes and looked at me. “Kaden is an interesting suggestion. I’ll consider this.” He closed his eyes again.

“We’ll leave you to rest,” Torin said as he stood.

“Thank you, my sons.” Our father pulled the blanket up around his neck.

We exited the room, and I motioned for Torin to follow me. I had questions only my mother could answer.

“Meina, may we speak with you?” I asked.

She nodded and led us to the front porch. “I wondered when we would get a chance to talk.”

“I’m sorry... I’m not sure what is appropriate to call you. I mean days ago I learned my parents were really Guardians and my biological parents lived in this remote part of Canada. I want to call you ‘Mom’ but it feels strange,” I confessed as I pulled up a rocking chair.

“Call me what feels natural to you. Meina is fine if you aren’t sure.” She assured me as she settled into her chair. “It’s strange for me too. I didn’t know either of you, or your father were still alive.”

“Can you tell us what you remember?” Torin asked.

“Very well.” Our mother told almost the exact tale our father had shared with us, only she added that she had tried to tell Vintras to not trust her mother when he left. Tears fell from her eyes and she quickly wiped them away.

“What happened?” Torin asked.

“Once the babies were born, my mother laced my meal with a truth potion. I could not stop the truth from pouring out as she interrogated me. I wanted to cut my own tongue! I told her Vintras was the father of my children and I told her our plans to run away.” She messed with the hem of her shirt

as she recalled the painful memories. “She trapped me in that house and cloaked it so no one would find it. But one day, she was careless and hurried off before checking that the house fully cloaked. Your father had been coming regularly, searching for a way in. That one day she was careless he slipped in before it cloaked.” She smiled at the memory. “I remember how surprised and elated I felt when he walked through my front door that day. He was this brilliant sun shining through the clouds.”

“What then?” I tried to remember my father’s side of the story.

“We should have just run away right then.” She sighed. My mother returned and became very angry when she saw your father holding one of you. He calmed her and explained his plan to bring me and the babies to court once he was crowned the new King of Yardis. My mother played along and told Vintras that if he brought a proper dowry we could marry. But then she tricked me into leaving the house without my babies, telling me she needed help fetching the water from the stream. She said her back was sore.” Meina walked to the edge of the porch and leaned against a support beam. “She had never transformed in front of me before nor revealed her dragon abilities to me. But I found myself high in the sky being carried further and further from my babies and my love. From up high, I could see the barrier seal Yardis off from the world and cloak them. All I could think about was my children. Who would protect them? Would they die?” She sat back down in the chair and rocked for a minute or two before continuing. “I only remember fragments of what happened next as we flew through the air. I remember feeling powerful and angry, only stronger. I remember the sound of something ripping and a pained roar. And then she fell to the hard ground below and did not move. I hurried to my mother’s side but she was already gone. I’d killed her.”

“I’m so sorry.” I couldn’t imagine living with that tragedy on my hands. And then I remembered she’d also accidentally killed her husband, too. So much pain.

“Why must everyone be so divided?” she continued, wringing her hands. “Vintras and I loved each other—you two are proof of that. But the people all around us had to take that love and turn it into war.” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry for what this has done to your lives. I never intended on making your lives so difficult.” She choked back a sob.

Torin walked over and wrapped her in a hug. “It’s okay, Mom. So much of what happened was out of your control.”

She patted his arm that he had coiled around her. “Thank you, Torin.” He released his grip and returned to his chair.

“There were so many emotions. I remember feeling out of control, blind with rage, and sick with guilt. I walked all day, naked and alone. Finally, by nightfall, I found the uncloaked hut. I expected to hear screaming babies as I approached but there was only silence. You were nowhere to be found. I searched everywhere until exhaustion took over me. In the morning, I awoke to Ivan covering me with his tunic.”

“Who’s Ivan?” I wondered.

“Sorry, Ivan was your brothers’ father. He brought me to this place and let me stay as long as I

needed to in one of the rooms.” She looked down at her hands. “He was a kind man who cared only about helping others.” He opened this healing outpost and trade shop to all. He also was a carpenter who crafted some of the best furniture. He made these chairs and all the furniture in the shop.”

“This area is not very populated, business must have been spotty.” I only knew of the Gylos and Yardinians and wondered if other tribes existed near the shop.

“It was, at times, but I helped bring back goods, like cakes, fruits, and linens, from towns further south. He charged a high price for those rare items and that’s how he stayed in business. Most that show up at this outpost are from local tribes or hunters and trappers passing through. Anyway, I left after a day and returned to my empty house. But being there alone, with two empty cribs—it was too much. I fell into a deep sadness. Ivan came to check on me and insisted I come stay with him until the sadness passed or I found my babies.” She smiled. “He was a good man to me and a good father to the boys.” She rocked slowly in the chair as she stared out into the darkening sky. “The Gylos learned about our relationship and our boys. They held a trial and found your father guilty of breaking their law. They exiled him.”

“That’s a pretty steep price for love,” Torin chimed in.

“Yeah, it’s not like he murdered someone or stole something. His only crime was loving someone outside of his tribe. And yet, they rejected him.” It seemed ridiculous to me.

Our mother explained, “Marrying outside the tribe broke their religious law. It could have been a worse punishment, but instead they chose to let him be if he left the tribe.”

“So why did they attack him years later?” Torin scratched at the stubble growing on his chin. “I mean he had his family here and a life of his own, why come at him?”

“To make an example of him. When the man on the council learned his son was set to marry a commoner, he did what he could to scare his child away from that decision. But in the end, they both died along with many others, including my Ivan. I had no idea Ivan had come to my side to fight with me. When I transformed to human form, I saw him laying at my feet in a pool of blood. His eyes, were void of life. The weapon that had delivered the fatal blow...” She looked at her own hands that trembled. “He died by my own hands. A deep claw mark had shredded his heart. I’d killed the man I loved and the father of my children.” She cried hard. I came over to hug her, Torin joined us.

“Shh.” I soothed her. “You wanted to protect your children, as all mothers should. You had no idea what they would do. Had it been one man approaching to talk, that would be a different story, but an army of men approaching means war.” I reasoned with her. “I’m so sorry that Ivan died in that battle.”

“He probably wanted to keep you safe and got too close,” Torin added as he patted her back.

We eventually calmed her and she stood. “Thank you both for listening and understanding. I did not raise you, but the people in there did a fine job of teaching you kindness.” She nodded toward the shop. “Well, we’d better get in.” We headed up to our room to retire for the night.

The next day Poe deemed me well enough to travel home. King Vintras asked Kaden to prepare to

be the new king and lead the people of Yardis when he passed on from this life. Kaden accepted the honor. Torin and Jonas stayed back to help with the rebuilding and relocating of villagers. King Vintras told them their presence bought him peace of mind, knowing his people were cared for and that Kaden had time to learn the strengths and weaknesses of the village.

Kaden demoted all the surviving king's guards to positions of hard labor and rebuilding of the village. He wanted them to have time to think about what is important and consider their consequences of blindly following orders of a tyrannical imposter. He assigned the Guardians to protection duties, as they had once before when my parents had lived in Yardis.

In the end, only a quarter of the village decided to try life outside of Yardis, where there were more towns and people. A few others worked with Poe and his family to bring goods that would make daily life easier to the village at reasonable costs. I headed home with my parents and Leo to finish out the school year.

Chapter 16

It was strange being back in my room in Michigan. The face in the mirror was my own, but something had changed. I felt different—taller, stronger, or maybe wiser. Whatever it was, I was not the same Ray Cross that had walked the halls of Midland High a few weeks ago.

Kids that had barely paid me any attention prior to my trip seemed to notice and greet me as they passed. “What’s up, Cross.” Mike Jensen, one of the smart, cool guys fist bumped me.

“Sup, Mike.”

Leo saw the exchange and approached with a confused look on his face. “Did that just happen or am I dreaming?” He pointed to Mike who was already half way down the hall. “I didn’t even know he knew your name.”

“Me either.” I laughed.

“It’s good having you back. This place was a snore without you.” Leo patted me on the back while we walked to our last class. “Hey, I heard you and Lauren kissed before you left.” I stopped walking. How did he hear about that? I hadn’t told anyone. “Is it true? Derek’s probably heard. You’d better make sure I’m with you when school gets out.”

“Who told you?”

“Damn man, it *is* true. You’re playing with fire. Leslie asked me if it was true.” Leslie was Lauren’s closest girlfriend, but giving her that title was a stretch since most of Lauren’s time was spent with Derek.

“And you said...?”

“I asked her what drug she was on because you wouldn’t be stupid enough to do something like that when Lauren and Derek were together.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Listen, I’ll have to get my other books from my locker after class. You should come with me. At least for a day or two.”

“Leo, look, I know you’re worried, but he’s never tried to hurt me, at least physically. Plus, I may not be as fragile as I was a few weeks ago. Jonas has to run some tests when he returns, but I feel less fragile.” I probably could have tested my own fragility by inflicting a small injury upon myself and monitoring how I healed.

“Okay, listen. At least don’t leave the school without me. Wait for me by the front doors.” He must have seen the reluctance on my face because he resorted to pleading. “Cross, do it for me man. If—*if*

something were to happen, I'd live with guilt the rest of my life. For me."

"Okay, front doors." Lauren wasn't at school today and Derek hadn't treated me any different earlier in the day during class. He didn't know. He wouldn't have been able to keep his cool during the whole period without showing his anger in some way.

I didn't like Derek, and I never pretended to. It wasn't a jealousy thing. He wasn't a nice guy, at least to me, and before the kiss, I had never done anything to earn his hatred and bullying.

Maybe things would have been different if he hadn't been such a control freak and worked to keep me out of Lauren's life. Or maybe Lauren and I would have kissed anyway. Lauren and I were good together. Our friendship had been strong and the love we had for each other was not the fast, intense and all-engulfing love of a crush, but the slow burning kind that could stand the test of time.

But Lauren had kissed me. She made the move and crossed the relationship line. Of course, I didn't try to stop her. But now we had to deal with the aftermath. Sooner or later, Derek would find out and there would be a confrontation.

As our bio teacher droned on, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

Lauren: Ray, Derek found out about the kiss. I'm out sick, but Leslie blabbed and said he's pissed. I'm so sorry. It's my fault let me handle him. Wanted to give you a heads up.

I showed it to Leo, who's eyebrows raised with worry. Seemed we'd be having a chat about that kiss sooner rather than later.

"You're coming with me to my locker." Leo pointed at me as he commanded.

When the bell rang, I followed my friend to his locker. The halls slowly emptied as the students left to head home. There had been no sign of Derek, and I hoped we wouldn't see him. Lauren was the one in the relationship with him, and I didn't know where she wanted to take this relationship.

Leo and I lingered longer inside the school on purpose in hopes Derek would give up if he had wanted to confront us outside. We didn't wait long, maybe five or ten minutes longer, just enough to thin the crowds.

"Good plan. Looks like there's just a few kids waiting for rides. My car's in the shop, so I'll walk you home." Leo unlocked his bike from the bike rack and walked with me as we set off for my house. It was an unseasonably warm day for late spring in Midland. The sun shone bright without a cloud to hide behind and the temperature must have been in the mid-eighties. "Feels like summer."

"It does. It's a lot warmer here than in Yordis."

"No kidding." Leo chuckled. "Shit. Look." He nodded ahead at the corner where Derek and two of his friends stood watching us intently. "Keep walking and don't engage them."

"Took you long enough. What were you two doing? Making out?" Derek and his buddies crossed the road and stood a few feet before us, blocking our path home. His friends laughed at Derek's condescending wit.

Leo and I stopped. This was happening now, and there was no avoiding it. We could run, but they'd probably catch us, and if they didn't, we'd still have to face them the next day or the next.

“What do you want Derek?” I needed to face this head on.

“I want to know if the rumor is true. Did you kiss *my* girlfriend?” No one laughed now.

“It’s true.” I didn’t elaborate or apologize.

He looked away a moment. When he turned back he narrowed his eyes. “See, this was why I didn’t want you anywhere near her. You had feelings for her all this time, and you couldn’t respect our relationship.” His words were ironic as he wanted me to respect their relationship, and yet he didn’t respect my friendship with Lauren.

“You know, I’m glad you mentioned that.”

“Cross!” Leo warned quietly. “Don’t engage.”

Unfortunately, Derek heard him. “Yes, Cross, don’t engage.” He mocked. “Let your big buffoon fight your battles for you like always.”

Leo pushed his bike into the grass and stood ready to throw a punch beside me. “Come on Derek. You tryin’ to pick a fight? I’ll fight ya.”

I grabbed Leo’s tense forearm. His fists clenched tight at his side. He shot me a side glance, and I released his arm.

“Grab him.” Derek motioned for his two buddies to act. They attempted to grab Leo, but my friend put up a fight. Leo took Jimmy McDaniels out but Reggie Fox had Leo pinned with his knee in Leo’s chest. I ran over and dove at Reggie, knocking both of us to the ground. Reggie rolled over and punched me in the jaw before I could get on my feet. Leo stood and looked ready to pounce on Reggie. Reggie faced him, ready for the attack, but Derek came up behind Leo and kicked the back of his knees dropping him to the ground. Reggie started toward Leo, but never made it as I tackled him. I pinned him, holding down his wrists.

Reggie began howling in pain. “Stop, stop, let go!” His words became whimpers. “Please. Stop.” My left hand turned white and small crystals covered the back of it while and my right hand glowed red. What was happening? I let go of his wrists and found clear blisters emerging out of his reddened skin in the area I had held him. *What the hell?*

I sat back on my heels looking at him with shock, trying to understand what had just happened while Reggie curled in on himself holding his wrists close. “Are you okay?” I asked

When I reached out to touch him he pulled away and screamed, “Don’t touch me!”

I raised my arms to let him know I wouldn’t touch him. My hands had returned to normal.

“Cross!” Derek yelled my name. I turned to find him holding a knife to Leo’s neck.

“He’s bluffing.” Leo knelt on the ground, one armed pulled behind his back, the blade resting against his skin.

“Let him go Derek. This has gone too far. Put the knife away and let him go.” Inside, I warred with the dragon wanting to surface and end this situation. It wanted out, but the image of Larkin’s decapitated body came to mind. I did not want to kill Derek; I wanted him to let Leo go.

“You went too far with Lauren.” He pointed the knife at me as he yelled the words. Leo took a

chance to get free. He rolled forward, pulling Derek, who had hold of his arm still, with him. They tussled on the ground, both trying to gain the upper hand. The silver blade flashed above, below, and it was hard to keep track of it. My hands began changing temperatures again. I held them together before me in hopes the opposing temperatures would cancel each other out. The left hand turned white while the right had a reddish glow. I could feel the two temperatures pushing against each other, violently warring to not be affected. It was too much, like taking two very strong magnets and trying to force the two positives together. I squeezed the hands together for a moment before they blasted open with something that looked like a horizontal tornado shooting out of them. The spiral blasted Derek over forty feet away from the scene. The tornado disappeared, but my hands still had polar opposite temperatures. Derek stood and shook himself off, then stormed toward us angrily. I put my hands together again and felt the strong repulsion. Then I pointed my clasped hands at a nearby garbage can and released the tornado once again. The metal cylinder flew at Derek, throwing dirty diapers and half eaten food upon him. "Get out of here, and let Lauren choose who she wants. Jerk!"

"Holy crap Cross, I think you found your power." Leo laughed with a shocked look on his face.

Derek took off in the opposite direction leaving Jimmy and Reggie. Leo and I helped them both up and drove them to a hospital. They agreed to keep what they saw quiet. Of course, we told them if they blabbed about it, there was a good chance they'd be committed to the mental health ward. After all, who would believe a teen could shoot tornados and burn and freeze someone with his bare hands?

We headed to my house where my mom bandaged up Leo. She cautioned me to learn control over my powers and to not share them with commoners if I could help it.

We fed Leo supper and then I walked him out. "Leo, you're crazy as hell, but the most loyal friend a guy could have. Thank you for always having my back." We hugged briefly.

"You're welcome. You're like my brother. I'll always look out for you, even if you're Mr. Tornado and don't need me."

"Ha! Get outta here. Love ya, man." I gave him a shove. He waved as he got on his bike and rode home. I peeked my head in and told my mom I needed to talk to Lauren. She reminded me not to be home late and told me to watch in case Derek surfaced.

Lauren lived several blocks over. I walked up her front concrete steps and rang the bell. Lauren answered. "Ray, what are you doing here? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Are you okay? You weren't at school."

"Oh, my aunt died and the funeral was today. Are you sure you're okay?" She asked again, this time studying me closer.

"Can we talk?"

She nodded and came out to sit on the steps with me. "What's going on?"

"I need to know about your feelings for Derek. Do you still want to be with him? And please tell me what you truly feel and not what you think I want to hear." I looked away and fiddled with my

nail beds.

“I care about him, but I don’t love him anymore. After we went out the other day, I realized how much I missed having you in my life. He would never allow us to know each other, and that’s not okay with me. Not any longer.”

“I didn’t mean to break you up.” I shoved my fingers through my hair. “I just want you to be happy.”

“Ray, stop. Look at me.” She waited until I looked into her eyes. “I don’t want him to control me. If I want to be friends with you, then I will.”

“But what if I want something more?” I grabbed her chin and pulled her into a kiss. Her breath tasted sweet like vanilla, and her lips were soft and velvety. “Derek and I had a...chat.” She pulled back far enough for me to see the worried expression on her face. “He’s promised to let you make your own choice of who you want to be with.” I stood and walked down the stairs. “If you even want to be with either of us.” I turned toward her. “Goodnight Lauren.” I left her sitting on the front steps looking breathless and beautiful. I walked away, grasping the guardian’s pendant and chanting the magical words to immortalize this memory as one I could recall in great detail when I wanted.

I made it home, but ten minutes after I arrived, Lauren came over and told me she chose me. Leo and I befriended Jimmy and Reggie as they lost interest in being Derek’s little soldiers. Derek left Lauren and I alone. We were careful to not be over affectionate in the presence of others, especially Derek.

Jonas returned the next week with reports that King Vintras was declining but comfortable and happy with Meina by his side. Torin was due to come back the following week as Kaden had a good grasp on how King Vintras ruled. Jonas retested me for vEDS and happily reported that I no longer had VEDS. He theorized that my dragon DNA had lay dormant for many years as my body worked hard to repair the damage it faced on a daily basis. Once Poe healed me, the dragon DNA had an opportunity to take over like a virus and clip out the faulty DNA.

Each day I grew stronger, both physically and mentally. I worked to quiet the worries that vEDS had planted in my head over the years, valid concerns that meant life or death to me at one point in my life. I spent time with my father sharing stories of our lives with each other before he eventually passed. I was glad I got to know the kind man that did not judge people for their difference. In that time, I grew close with all my brothers and mother, extending my circle of loved ones and getting to know them all better. And in the end, the small group in Midland helped some of our villagers with open minds and adventurous hearts, start new lives for themselves in Michigan.

The End



For more tales by D.A. Roach, check out:

Rarity - YA Drama

Between the Bleeding Willows (Book 1 Demon Hunters series) – YA PNR

Within the Darkest Hollows (Book 2 Demon Hunters series) – YA PNR



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D.A. Roach grew up in the south suburbs of Chicago where her family had settled after immigrating from Lithuania. Music, movies, tennis, and art were her past times as reading was not a hobby explored or encouraged in her house. It wasn't until after graduating from college that she began reading for pleasure and found herself buried in a book and off on some fictitious adventure.

Her first attempt at writing came after chatting with her dental hygienist about an upcoming vacation, where she planned to visit the people who had once helped her family during a crisis. The hygienist, in awe of the story, urged D.A. to write a book about the tale to pay homage to the kind souls that helped her family. With the help of a print book retailer, she documented the events and emotions she experienced and sent it out into the world. It was not a bestseller by any means, but readers began reaching out and thanking her for the heartfelt story. Moved by the effect her words had on readers, D.A. penned another novel and discovered that as much as she enjoyed reading stories, she loved creating them even more.

Thank you to my street team, who always has my back, my AMAZING editor Trisha Wooldridge, my PA Madi Wilde for keeping my head on straight and working tirelessly to keep the promo going, Kimberly Vanderbloom for letting me lean on you when I felt unsure of myself.

For more information or to donate to VEDS research, go to <http://www.ehlersdanlosnetwork.org/>

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ALCHEMY WITH BENEFITS

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ALCHEMY WITH BENEFITS

What happens when a wacky witch collides with a sexy brujo from a taco truck?

Estele “I meant to do well” Esposito is the worst witch in the San Buena enchantment community. When she casts a spell it goes batshit wacky with disastrous results.

Everything changes when a sexy brujo, who drives an enchanted taco truck, shows up with a mysterious warning that he is her new protector. Too bad Estele hates brujos, but when an evil djinn threatens the community, Estele has to put trust issues aside and enter an alliance with a brujo to save the city.

Want the perfect alchemical recipe for hilarious chaos? Mix romance with Estele’s brand of loopy spellcasting, hexed food, a ghostly sea captain with questionable vices, a priceless gem of infinite power, malicious djinn bent on world domination and thousands of innocent people trapped at a county fair—what could go wrong?

Note: This title is number 3 in the Sorcery by the Sea series, but it really should be number 2. The storyline directly follows Fredi and Gus’s story in HOODOO BLUE, Sorcery by the Sea, book 1. Estele’s story can be read alone, but reading her hijinks in Hoodoo Blue, first will make it better.

Contains strong language. Mild sexual situations.

Chapter 1

There were no appointments necessary at the LuLu Beauty Academy by the Sea. A cheerful pink banner advertised “Walk-ins Welcome,” but that didn’t mean casual clients could expect to be pampered. Requests for specific operators would be denied. Most regular customers wouldn’t bother to ask. On entry, patrons were asked to sign waivers. An ominous plaque on the reception desk stated that “all work shall be done by STUDENTS.”

The intrepid ones who used vocational schools as part of their beauty routine knew you got what you paid for—or more accurately at the LuLu Beauty Academy, you got what you didn’t pay for.

So, on that sunny August morning, the blood-curdling screams of horror echoing from the building weren’t completely unexpected.

Viewed from the outside, the windows of the clinically tidy vocational school writhed with the silhouettes of panicked people desperate to escape. The screams within reached a glass-shattering crescendo, then fell silent as one by one bodies slumped to the floor in heaps.

Oops, time for full disclosure.

The LuLu Beauty Academy by the Sea hid one crucial fact from the unsuspecting public. More than haircuts, mani-pedis, and ombré dye jobs were being offered. At the back of the rambling mission-style compound, one sub-floor down, was San Buena’s preeminent school of sorcery and witchcraft—the Master Mage Magic Academy.

The secret school within a school provided the perfect place to mask the comings and goings of would-be aestheticians, witches, warlocks, and fiends. The false front had been in place for decades and the two schools seldom mixed. For the most part, members of the LuLu Beauty Academy were oblivious to the near proximity to occult danger. Most of the time they had little to worry about. Thanks to caution and strict protocols, Miss Dahlia ran a clean Mage Academy.

Unfortunately for all involved, one incompetent student was enrolled in both schools, San Buena’s most vexatious, sure-to-fail, scatterbrained witch ever born into the West Coast Enchantment Community—Estele “I meant to do well” Esposito.

Ashamed and once again needing assistance, Estele picked up her phone and called her best friend

and sister in Wiccandom, Frederica De la Cruz, aka Fredi. The call was answered on the second ring. Estele stammered, “F-Fredi! I need your help right away. I’ve done it again.”

“What have you done?” Fredi sounded blasé. “Did you cast another wacko love spell that hit a speed bump?”

“No. It’s worse than that. I was trying to infuse a transformation enchantment into a crystal and—”

“Wait a minute.” Fredi became wary. “It’s Thursday morning. Aren’t you in beauty school? If you’re in public, let’s not talk enchantment over the phone. It’s not safe.”

Estele stomped her foot in agitation. Tears welled in her eyes. “Fredi, I screwed up bad! This is an emergency. Can you come by the LuLu Beauty Academy and lend me a hand?” Her voice quivered. “I’ll throw in a deep conditioning hair treatment if you can help me resuscitate the others.”

“What others? Why do they need resuscitation? Jeezus, Estele, what have you done?”

“Miss Esposito!” Miss Dahlia stormed along the hallway, jaw set, gaze hard, arms swinging with determination. The substantial woman was a professor of metaphysics. She presented the perfect image of elderly indignation, a blur of lilac hair and frumpy blouse marching into battle in sensible shoes. “Estele, why, oh why do you insist on practicing magic outside the classroom without the necessary supervision?”

Estele cowered. “Hold on.” She spoke into the phone. “Fredi, are you still there? Gotta go.” She clicked the phone off, feeling nauseous. “Miss Dahlia, I’m so, so sorry. I cast such a teeny-weeny spell I didn’t think anyone would even notice.”

Miss Dahlia shook a finger under Estele’s chin. “What a disaster! A beautician’s Armageddon! Young lady, when one’s hair transforms into writhing serpents and a penetrating Medusa stare of doom shoots from your desk-mate’s eyes, it’s unsettling to say the least. I can’t imagine the horror those poor ladies just went through. Lucky for us, if I should even use the word *luck*, the last woman just looked in the mirror and gave herself the Medusa-meltdown stare and turned to stone. Everyone is lying on the floor in a state of suspended animation. It’s now safe to enter the room.”

How could it be safe? She’d witnessed the event up close; the disturbing images would haunt her nightmares for years. It was awful to know she’d done this to others. “We’re going inside? Really? Do I belong in there? What if I make things worse without even meaning to?”

Miss Dahlia grabbed Estele’s arm. “You and I are walking in there as a team and we are going to make things right, even if we have to work through the lunch hour. What incantation was used?”

“I’m not sure. Gosh, I’m so shook up it’s hard to think.” She tried to concentrate but nothing came to her. Adding to the mental fog, she was hungry too. This was unacceptable. Why didn’t her brain work like everyone else’s? And when would she learn to take care of herself so she could avoid this sort of thing? “That’s probably why I mixed up my spells in the first place. You know, low blood sugar. During the hair demonstration on instant dreadlocks with texturing cement, I was fiddling around with an incantation to bring crystals to life. What was I saying? Lithe? Lively? Lothario? Lethal? What’s the Latin word for stone?”

Miss Dahlia appeared mortified. She closed her eyes in what appeared to be utter exasperation. “‘Lithos’ is the word you are searching for. Miss Esposito, when are you going to give metaphysical studies the serious attention they demand?”

She winced. Lately, she’d been trying to do better, but this stunt proved her efforts were wasted. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sweetheart.” Miss Dahlia softened her tone. “Historically, the Esposito witches are challenged enough. You don’t need to add to the dubious legacy by misspeaking poorly worded incantations. A witch must live by the rule of three. What we do for or to others will be visited on us threefold. Do you think the ladies upstairs enjoyed being turned into Medusas with live snakes dancing on their heads? No. They did not. You must learn to be careful and logical with your skills. Don’t throw a careless spell out there and hope it’s not just—” She drew her lips tight. “—a flying turd tossed into a blender.”

Estele wrung her hands. Panic set in. What she’d done was unforgivable, but if she got expelled now, she might never get past this point in her life and end up making things worse for everyone. “Will this incident be reported to Headmistress Witch Griselda? I hope not. You see, I’m already on academic probation.”

Barely repressed rage left Miss Dahlia trembling. “Estele, I’m the one who put you on academic probation. I did it for your own good. And the answer is no. I will not be reporting this latest indiscretion to Headmistress Griselda. She has enough to deal with in her dotage without adding wild young ladies with tattooed limbs turning our quiet seaside community into a Greek tragedy. She’d die of shock!”

“I’ll bet there’s not much that would shock Witch Griselda.” Turning her foot onto its side, Estele stood like a contrite five-year-old, hoping this would be the last time she’d have to plead but fearing it wasn’t. “You’ve always been kind to me. Do we have to tell anyone? Please help put things right before these ladies suffer any more than they already have.”

“I’m going to help you because you’re dangerous!” Miss Dahlia’s brows rose to points. “I’m sorry, Estele. I should not have said that, but the truth is you are too unpredictable to kick out of school. You have the power to do grievous unintentional harm, but lack the discipline to refine it. You’re in limbo, my girl. I can’t trust you to stand on your own and I can’t... I guess I just can’t trust you, period. Your track record with magic is bat guano. For the safety of all, as long as you’re a public menace, you will remain under the supervision of the Master Mage Magic Academy.”

Relief washed over her. “Hurray!” she shouted.

“No, not ‘hurray.’ Don’t you understand? This is a punishment.”

“Really? But I like being here.” Ever since her mother left town, her friends at the academy were her only family.

Rolling her eyes, Miss Dahlia tensed. “I feel punished. Now let’s go inside the LuLu Beauty Academy and start unraveling the wicked little spell you cast. How much of it do you remember?”

“You’re asking me what I remember? My memory is as full of holes as a pair of Crocs. What if I can’t remember? Those poor ladies inside don’t stand a chance, do they?”

Wrapping an arm around Estele, Miss Dahlia gently led her forward. “It will be all right. Try to remember the exact words you used. We’ll do this together.”

With a loud *poof!* Witch Griselda materialized within a cloud of mist at the end of the hallway. “Where’s everybody going?” Her scratchy voice was like the chirp of a cricket. She stooped, looking ancient in a tattered gray cloak, and clutched a gnarled staff with a ruby the size of a plum embedded on the tip.

Miss Dahlia appeared flustered. “Everything’s under control, Griselda dear. Wouldn’t you rather be at home enjoying a nice cup of tea and watching *Wheel of Fortune*?”

“No.” Griselda had a lazy eye that wandered. “I heard screaming and I thought there might be an opportunity to have a little fun.”

“Nothing fun here,” Miss Dahlia insisted. “Perhaps this would be a good time to feed the cats?”

Griselda snarled, showing crooked teeth. “The cats are blimps. Fat as toads. A ten-minute fast would do them good.” She pointed the jeweled staff at Estele. “Who’s the tattooed lady?”

She was used to daily reintroducing herself to the semi-senile headmistress. “Estele Esposito. I was Estele yesterday too.”

Griselda horse laughed and in the blink of an eye teleported from the end of the hallway, landing inches from Estele’s face. “Miss Esposito, the troublemaker? This is the same girl whose spell made everyone in the downtown business district walk backward, talk backward, and pull their pants down instead of up, am I right?”

Miss Dahlia looked defeated. “This is she.”

Griselda threw her arms into the air. “I may have drunk too much mercury in my tinctures over the years and gone mad as a badger, but why are we not recognizing this girl as Wiccan royalty? She’s fabulous! So creative. So unpredictable. Who else would turn a box of tampons into an army of little men?”

Jumping to her defense, Estele blurted, “I didn’t mean to—”

Miss Dahlia interrupted. “That incident and its embarrassing repercussions shall never be discussed again in polite company.”

Griselda elbowed her way closer. “Well, it’s a good thing I’m not polite company! I’m a frigging old witch who’s seen it all. I went to the buttered toast races on Prince Bertie’s plump thighs, slipped the tongue to King Leopold, and played a naughty game of French postcards with Teddy Roosevelt. He loved it. That’s how long I’ve been around, and I say Miss Esposito has talent!”

Miss Dahlia faced Estele. Pointing to her forehead, she mouthed, “Heavy metal poisoning.”

Griselda pushed past them and waddled down the hallway, thumping the heavy staff on the linoleum floor every step of the way. “I can’t wait to see what Estele has done this time.” Placing her hand on the LuLu Academy door, she turned. “Have all our students been moved to a minimum safe

distance?”

“Yes.” Impatience creased Miss Dahlia’s face. “I sent everyone out of the building for an early lunch.”

This wasn’t the first time she’d screwed up when hungry or confused, and it had to stop. Even the thought of a mayonnaise-barren, bland tuna sandwich off the icky food truck that always parked near the school made Estele’s stomach growl. “Before we start... um... correcting my mistake, should I, like, grab something to eat first? I think being hungry contributed to the problem and that’s why I made the mistake. Maybe for everyone’s safety I should—”

“No, you’ll work on an empty belly.” Miss Dahlia followed Griselda into the LuLu Academy. “Let’s get on task.”

Griselda hobbled into the room first and surveyed the damage with a cackle of delight. “Holy Gorgons! What a mess.”

Estele and Miss Dahlia followed. The room was cluttered with fallen women who had been turned into statue-like lumps of ashy pumice. Many appeared distressed, their mouths distended in silent screams. All had crowns of snakes on their heads.

“Look at this!” A harsh burst of laughter sputtered free of Griselda. “It’s Pompeii after Vesuvius erupted! They’ve all been turned to stone. How amusing. Classic spellcasting. You just don’t see quality work like this anymore.” She leaned over the crumpled form of a woman curled on her side to poke at the cobra headdress. “This one has a Hindu vibe. Miss Esposito, what were you intending to accomplish here?”

A stab of shame cleaved her heart. Wasn’t this exactly the kind of disaster her mother predicted she was capable of? “It’s sort of complicated to explain, but I meant well.”

Miss Dahlia circled the room, counting heads. “You must have had some clear intention to cast an incantation this forceful?”

Estele dug into her pocket, pulled out a polished crystal the length of her palm, and held it up to the light. “It’s my godniece’s fifth birthday this Saturday. I saw the inclusions inside the crystal and thought, wow, it looks just like a dragon. Then I thought wouldn’t it be cool if the dragon inside the crystal came to life and did a little birthday dance for my niece? Honest to Goddess, that’s what I was thinking. It was supposed to be a fun surprise for a little girl.”

Griselda clutched her heart with a talon-like hand and stared heavenward. “A sweet gesture gone shockingly wrong! Estele’s gifted. She’s a sacred weapon and should be turned against our enemies.”

“So.” Miss Dahlia pursed her lips in concentration. “You were thinking dragon, reptile, dancing, stone—”

Estele cringed. “Ya, and I was hungry too, so I may have been thinking flame-broiled. I should never attempt spellcasting when I’m hungry. I feel horrible about what I did. Maybe I shouldn’t be here when these poor women wake up? They’ve probably seen enough of me, don’t you think?”

“Hold on. Don’t go anywhere. We are going to correct this problem and free these ladies from

their current plight before anyone goes anywhere. Watch and listen.” Miss Dahlia raised her hands dramatically. “*Petra desolati sunt et mens obliviscatur.*”

Estele wished she had a better grasp of Latin. Of course, that was a big part of the problem; she miscast spells and hurt people she never meant to because she got the wording wrong. “I wish I had your focus. I hate being a witch who does harm. What did you say to them?”

“It’s a spell to dissolve the stone and cause the mind to forget. With any luck, these unfortunate ladies will have no troubling memories of this incident.”

“I hope you’re right.” Crushing guilt crept up on her. Thank Goddess Miss Dahlia was here to contain the worst of the damage. What if she had been here by herself? All these women would be lawn ornaments. “Won’t they wonder where the time went?”

Miss Dahlia shook her head. “Let me set the record straight. A typical trip to a hair salon is a black hole of missing time on the best days. No one will question an extra half hour. Trust me.”

The women’s ashy exteriors crumbled away. They began to stir, blink, and cough up little puffs of soot.

“We have a lot of cleaning up to do!” Miss Dahlia waved her hand over the women who were struggling to their feet. “*Abluo, oblitus!* Cleanse and forget!”

Magically everyone’s clothing came clean and the piles of ash evaporated into the next dimension, but their hair was damp and lank.

“Gloriously pathetic!” Griselda cheered. “They look like flea-dipped kittens. No one will believe they spent the morning at a beauty school getting their hair done.”

“I’ll take care of this.” Looking agitated, Miss Dahlia motioned for Estele to take hold of Griselda’s hand. “Would you be so kind as to take our headmistress outside and get her a snack from the food truck?” Behind Griselda’s back, she mouthed, “I need a moment alone.”

“Sure.” Obviously, she couldn’t be of much help in this situation. Maybe someday that would change. Hooking her arm through Griselda’s, Estele steered the old woman toward the front door. “Come along, Grissy, we’re stepping out to get something to eat.”

“From where?” Griselda struck a bug-eyed attitude that made her look completely insane.

“Food truck, Aunty.” She used the most polite tone she could manage with the sole member of the Master Mage Magic Academy who saw her potential.

The old witch banged her staff on the ground as she walked. “I hope they have pickled pigs’ feet.”

Estele pushed the door open. A fresh ocean breeze bathed her face. “Best to have a second choice in mind, so you won’t be disappointed.”

The parking lot was full of people, mostly strangers who appeared to have arrived from nowhere. The usual nondescript white food truck that showed up during lunch breaks to serve soggy sandwiches mummified in yards of cellophane was missing. In its place was a massive, chrome-trimmed, tricked-out truck with a bright mural depicting psychedelic cacti and wild-eyed coyotes. The words “BRUJO TACOS” were painted across the front in vibrant shades of orange and purple.

Lively salsa music and wonderful aromas floated in the air.

“Holy Hecate!” Estele cried. “Who are these folks?”

Griselda tapped the staff faster as she hobbled. “I don’t know and I don’t care. The food smells fabulous.” She squinted. “Am I reading the signage properly? Does it really say ‘brujo’? When I was a girl I was once smitten with a dashing brujo. He was a versatile wizard from the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. His name was Santi—such a handsome devil, with soul-piercing black eyes. He taught me to enjoy *chapulines*, fried crickets. They were quite tasty, more so than you might imagine. I fancied him and hoped we would marry, but Santi rode off with Pancho Villa and that was the end of that.”

Estele felt a frown pinching her brows together like a vise. “Typical brujo. Here today, revolution tomorrow.” She paused. “Grissy, how old are you?”

Griselda stared at the mural on the food truck. “To be honest, I don’t remember.”

They came to the tail end of a long line of people waiting to order food. The earthy scent of chilies and green onions roasting over an open flame enticed her senses. “Wow, something smells great.”

A student from the Master Mage Academy turned to face her. The usually taciturn Emily shoveled food into her mouth while attempting to speak. “The dishes are amazing!” she mumbled. “This is my third time in line. I started with the shrimp Veracruz soft tacos, wrapped in blue corn tortillas with mango salsa, and wolfed them down. For the second round, I ordered the shredded carnitas in molé verde with grilled green tomatillos and cilantro-lime rice. So delicious, and it smelled like a meaty margarita. I think I’ll get the chicken chipotle enchilada with the red molé and garlic Cuban black beans next. Everything is so fresh and full of flavor!” She fell silent as she licked a bit of spilled sauce off her sleeve with a look of rapture.

Estele’s empty tummy rumbled. “What a novel idea. Someone’s finally done it. They’re serving real food from a food truck.”

Another classmate, a dour young warlock named Hector, stood at the front of the line. When he heard Estele behind him, he turned. “Hey, Estele!” He broke into an uncharacteristic smile along with some fancy footwork. “Wanna dance?”

She waved him off. “Not now.” When she’d first met Hector at the start of the summer semester, he had impressed her as being the sullen stalker type, but smiling and animated he was cute in a Goth boy sort of way. “I think I’ll eat first.”

Emily darted out of line. “I’ll dance with you, Hector!” The two of them twirled to the side of the line and broke into an odd hybrid of salsa dance and shuffling Goth postures choreography.

Glancing at Griselda, Estele grinned. “Two less bodies in line. Good for us. I’m starving.”

People filed past holding heaped plates of delicious-looking food so colorful they resembled mosaic art. Everywhere, people were laughing, talking, eating, and dancing, which was not how the LuLu Beauty Academy parking lot looked on a typical weekday. Something was up. “Aside from

being edible, I wonder what the big attraction is with the food.”

The front doors of the beauty academy opened and one by one Estele’s former victims staggered dazed and confused into the noon sunlight.

“Look!” Estele prodded Griselda. “Miss Dahlia is finished doing whatever it was she did.”

In complete silence the women congregated near the back of the line, looking vacant and not altogether free of whatever spell of forgetfulness had been cast upon them. They huddled together like glassy-eyed sheep.

Estele whispered to Griselda. “Are they going to be okay to drive? I feel terrible about what I did to them. Maybe I should treat them to a cab ride home?” Each woman’s hair was coiffed bouffant-style and sprayed stiff with flammable amounts of lacquer. “They all look like Miss Dahlia’s 1962 yearbook photo.” Her nostrils flared. “There’s enough Aquanet in the air to punch a hole through the ozone. They’re probably hallucinating from the fumes. I think I *should* call a cab company right now.”

Griselda sneered. “Who cares about the hair spray! At least they don’t have death-ray eyes and live reptiles sprouting from their scalps.”

“Shush, Grissy.”

“I know!” Griselda pounded her staff on the warm asphalt. “We shall tell all the students of the beauty academy they passed their retro hairdo exams with flying colors.”

Customers at the front of the line were served and walked by holding various tantalizing delicacies garnished with wedges of fragrant lime or dusted with golden sunflower petals.

Estele stepped closer to a chalkboard to read the dizzying array of choices. Everything sounded interesting, but she was in the mood for something hearty and simple. When she reached the front of the line, a striking man in his late fifties with a cloud of silvery hair drawn back in a ponytail leaned out the window. He had glittering up-tipped eyes so pale a shade of hazel they appeared a faint gray.

“You look like a wild coyote,” Griselda blurted.

The man had a broad smile that beamed joy. “Thank you.”

Griselda’s hunched posture straightened to a surprising height. “I’ll bet you’re full of all sorts of mischief.” For a fleeting moment an enchanted veil of glamour shimmered around her and a bit of her former Hell-wrath beauty shone through. She appeared majestic and elegant with flowing red hair.

Seemingly dazzled, the silver-haired man stammered, “Señora, w-what can I get you?”

Griselda pointed at a plate of stacked items set near the man’s elbow. “I want one of those gift-wrapped green packages.”

The gentleman nodded. “These are Oaxaca tamales. Sweet corn masa wrapped in banana leaves, stuffed with garlic carnitas, black beans, and red molé.” He smiled, making the corners of his eyes fan. “Moist and full of flavor. Very popular.”

“They’re huge!” Griselda squealed. “I like packages that are long and thick. I’ll take one.”

He deftly assembled the tamale on a plate heaped with black beans, a scoop of confetti-like corn, and pineapple salsa, ending with a beautiful purple orchid set atop the glossy green banana leaf. He

presented the plate to Griselda. “Enjoy.”

Griselda slid a large-denomination bill across the counter with a wink. “Keep the change, honey cake.”

Just as Estele’s turn at the window arrived, the man raised his palm. “Excuse me. I’m due for my break.” He turned and disappeared from sight.

“Wait!” she cried. “Come back. I’m not picky. I’ll take anything. Dang it!”

Another man appeared at the window. This one was in his twenties with wavy black hair pulled away from his rugged face. Sweeping brows framed warm, up-tipped eyes that had the same spicy sparkle as root beer. He flashed a brilliant smile that revealed a fetching dimple. “Hi, cutie, what can I get for you?”

Her jaw dropped. No words came out. The guy was her idea of a stunner. Tall, dark, and dreamy, complete with lots of artistic ink on his heavy forearms. She was left mute.

While he waited, he rubbed his hand against the rakish black beard stubble on his jaw that brought the word “pirate” to mind. “Do you need a minute, or do you know what you want?”

“I want you.” Estele clamped her hand over her mouth in horror at the uncensored moment of honesty. “To recommend something.”

“We just got slammed.” His voice was as deep and gritty as brown sugar. “Most of the specials sold out.” He looked her over. “But I think I know what you would love.”

She’d already mentally unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it on the ground. “You’re not a mind reader, are you?”

He offered another blinding smile. “No. I just meant I can make you something delicious that I’m 99.9 percent certain you’ll enjoy.”

“Phew!” A nervous giggle burst free. “You know we do have some actual mind readers around here.” She pointed a thumb at Emily, who was dancing up a storm with Hector. “I’m pretty sure she can, but she’s the type who’d never come clean about it.” Estele lowered her voice. “She’s a psychic lurker.”

He stepped away from the window and set a large tortilla on a round iron. “I know what you want.”

Estele craned her neck to peer into the truck. “What are you making for me?”

“Do you like zucchini?”

“Yes.”

“I’m making you a squash blossom quesadilla.” He held up a fistful of saffron-gold star-shaped flowers. “Have you ever had these grilled in food? They have a very delicate flavor. I only have a few, and I was saving them for someone special.”

“And I get them?” She squealed. “I’m honored.”

Picking up a short, curved blade, he sliced slender chunks off what appeared to be a huge ivory coil of cheese.

“That’s a big old hunk of mozzarella.”

Looking amused, he continued to work. “This is *quesillo* from Oaxaca. The flavor is buttery, and the texture has more bite than mozzarella.”

The cheese was placed on half the warm tortilla, the squash blossoms arranged on top in a fan pattern. He folded the tortilla and brought the top of the iron grill down. After a minute, he opened the grill to brush a little butter on one side and flipped it. The cheese bubbled. The grill was brought down again to finish the job. A luscious fried zucchini-like smell rolled off the truck. When he opened the grill, the quesadilla was golden brown with toasted cheese rimming the edges and crispy bits of orange squash blossom peeking through. Using a cleaver, he chopped it into easy-to-manage wedges. The whole thing was loaded onto a plate heaped with cool green guacamole, a dark roasted chipotle salsa, and a big fresh squash blossom sitting atop all of it like the golden star on a Christmas tree. He handed it over with a look of pride.

She salivated. “It’s beautiful! I can’t wait to taste it.”

His eyes gleamed. “That will be six dollars, please. Five if you tell me your name.”

She was flabbergasted. “Me?”

A hearty laugh burst free of him. “Yes, you.”

Holding up the squash blossom, she grinned. “My name is like this.”

His gaze narrowed as if deep in concentration. “Your name is Squash? That’s sort of sad.”

She laughed. “No. Look at the shape. My name is this shape.”

His brows knit. “Flower?”

“No. Look at the perfect five-point pattern. My name is Estele—it means star.”

“Pretty name.” Leaning out of the truck to make sure no one was within earshot, he rolled up his sleeve to reveal a delicately inked gray-work portrait of the classic 1950s pinup Betty Page. “Estele, you look just like my fantasy girl.”

Looking closely, she marveled at the artist’s skill. The tattoo was so well executed it looked like a black-and-white photograph. It was retro and true to raven-haired Betty’s look in every way, except the tiny Betty wore the same sort of chunky combat boots Estele preferred to wear on weekdays. “Hey, she stole my Doc Martins.”

“Yes, she sure did.” His gaze locked on hers, and for a few breathless moments he stared. Neither dared to move or speak.

She was the first to break the gaze, lifting the plate. “Thanks. This looks really good.” Taking long strides, she headed toward the front steps to sit down and eat.

“Estele!” He leaned onto the counter and called out to her. “Did you forget something?”

She searched her thoughts. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep, I’m sure.”

“Okay. Let’s do it this way. When you finish your lunch, come back. I’ll have a treat ready

for you.”

“What kind of treat?”

“I’m not telling.” He laughed. “You’ll have to come back.”

Poor guy, he was flirting with her and didn’t know what was good for him. Maybe she should wear a warning sign. *Object is more dangerous than it appears in your rearview mirror*. After the harm she’d done this morning, she had to take measures to avoid a repeat of today’s disaster. Never again should others suffer because she was such a ditz.

Sitting on the front steps, Estele was cautious about not choosing an unfortunate angle that would provide everyone with a clear view up her short skirt. More than once on these very steps, she’d unwitting played Sharon Stone, providing passersby with a *Basic Instinct* moment. “Maybe my brain is defective,” she muttered.

She picked up a wedge of quesadilla. It was still molten hot, and she dunked it in salsa to cool it down before taking a bite. The cheese was crispy at the edges and gooey rich at the same time. The squash blossom was tender and tasted like a summer garden, and a tortilla toasted with butter was never a wrong idea. The entire thing culminated in one rocketing moment of delicious sensory overload. “Blazing broomsticks! This is awesome!”

A lady with a towering beehive hairdo appeared startled when Estele shouted. Her hands flew into the air and she shrieked as her magically induced stupor broke. “Oh my!” She turned to confront Estele. “I know you. I remember you.” A look of terror swept over her gaze. “You did things to me. Bad things....”

Another woman with her hair sprayed rigid into a semipermanent flip pointed at Estele and screamed. “Snakes! Doom! Evil!”

Estele stood. She couldn’t even finish her damned lunch before the problems started again. Opening the front door, she poked her head inside the academy. “Someone tell Miss Dahlia the forgetfulness spell wore off!”

It was too late. Chaos broke out in the parking lot. A dozen women with hair teased a foot above their heads gave in to bouts of hysterical shouting or stomping on imaginary snakes. It got so out of control the students of the Master Mage Academy fled indoors.

Miss Dahlia showed up and like a loyal border collie herded the traumatized ladies back into the school. “Time for a second round of spellcasting.” She shot Estele a scathing look. “Miss Esposito. When subjects are under a heavy enchantment, you must monitor not only your tone of speech but the volume as well. A loud voice is like having ice water dashed in the face. Enchantees are so impressionable. Do try to be more careful in the future.”

“Yes, ma’am.” This time would be different. Now she was on high alert for possible missteps. She sat down on the steps and finished her lunch, which was so delicious it was easily the nicest thing to have happened to her during this entire shitty summer session. Using a plastic spoon, she scraped up the last traces of toasted cheese and salsa, licked it, and then tossed the paper plate away.

A blue mood crept up on her. She was getting into trouble more often. People were getting hurt. A reckless, foolish witch was not what she wanted to be. Wiccan-based witchcraft the way she'd been taught by her late grandmother was all about love and connecting to the world, not scaring people and fucking up. She was almost twenty-two; it was time to get grounded and figure things out.

She needed a long heart-to-heart with her best friend, Fredi. Fredi was responsible, levelheaded, and a far better witch than she'd ever be. What was even more impressive, at least in the compassion department, was that Fredi had experience with magic getting out of bounds and knew the personal cost.

The lunch crowd eventually left the parking lot and a rising sense of shame overwhelmed her. Her mistakes were the sort of faux pas little witchlings made when they were learning, not the sort grown enchantresses committed.

"Estele!" Mr. Dreamboat called from the food truck. Leaning out the window, he crooked a finger. "Come over here, cutie."

Holy moly, that spicy daub of salsa is talking to me. Poor guy.

Did he really think she was a cutie? Maybe he was crazy too? Fascinated by the shimmering blue-black highlights in the man's hair, she took slow steps toward the food truck. The closer she got, the more dazzled she became by his coppery skin and megawatt smile. This gorgeous guy was a freaking show horse.

He offered a paper cup in his outstretched hand. "I made this special for you."

Accepting the cup, she felt it was heavy yet saw it was only half-full. A sprinkling of crimson rose petals floated on top. When she tipped the cup, the dark viscous liquid the color of coffee flowed slowly. "What is it?"

"Something unusual. This is my version of Oaxaca hot chocolate. It's sort of a compilation of the New World's greatest hits melted together in one cup."

Her heart raced. This fabulous man had done something nice just for her. "What's in it?"

"At home I would use different ingredients and more of them, but I had to make do with what we had available on the truck. First there's semisweet chocolate. I melted it and added a shot of fresh espresso, grated smoked vanilla bean, cinnamon, plus a good-sized pinch of powdered ancho chili, topped off with a dash of heavy coconut cream to get it all to liquefy. I had to use a wooden spoon to stir it, but it's best to use a wooden *molinilo* and really whirl the mixture to get it frothy." A beautiful expression bathed his face. "Go ahead, try it."

She tipped the cup. The rose petals arrived first and kissed her lips like the silky skin of a baby's cheek. The chocolate was rose fragrant, thick, and flowed over her tongue like tepid lava. The espresso's toasty aroma and slight bitterness hit first. The sweet, earthy fragrance of the vanilla lingered. The chocolate was so rich and smooth that it came as a surprise many seconds later when the heat from the cinnamon and ancho chili powder kicked into high gear and left her face flushed. "Wow! This is magical stuff. This is...." Lost in sensation, she gave up trying to find the perfect

words.

“Alchemy?” He winked.

“Yes! That’s the exact word. It’s alchemy.”

“I’m happy you enjoyed it.” He handed her a tiny piece of brown paper folded into the shape of a teardrop.

She reached for the paper. “What is this?”

“Open it,” he urged.

Estele unfolded and unfolded the piece of paper, which was much larger than expected. When she was finished, it revealed a paper heart with the word “VALENTINE” printed across the top, a cartoon sketch of a charging bull and a phone number scrawled beneath. “It’s August.” She grinned. “A little early or late for Valentine’s Day, but thank you.”

He shook his head. “My name is spelled like Valentine, but pronounced Val-en-teen. I’m Valentine Del Toro. I go by Val. That’s my phone number. Maybe you’ll call me sometime?”

Estele stood frozen, looking back at Val. “Oh, I get it. I forgot to ask your name! I’m such a ditz sometimes.”

He smiled and looked like he wanted to say something but remained silent.

The dude was gorgeous. Why did he have to show up today, while a huge magical mistake was still fresh in her mind? When would she get a break? “You have a nice name.”

Hope flickered on his face. “Thank you. So do you. You liked the food?”

She stared. This guy made it hard to breathe or think. Why was she reacting this way? “I loved your food.”

“There’s more where that came from. Maybe we’ll meet again soon.”

Did he mean it? “I hope so. Will you be here tomorrow?”

He turned to the side and his thick lashes cast shadows on his cheeks. “Probably not. The regular food truck will be back. Today was a temporary thing. We were just filling a need.”

So it was now or never? Why did this feel like an important meeting, one she shouldn’t take for granted? She started to get nervous. “Where do you usually work?”

His gaze returned to Estele and made eye contact so strong, she felt pinned to the spot. “San Diego.”

Was she sensing a solid spark between them or was that just wishful thinking? “Wow, that’s hours away. What brought you all the way to San Buena?”

“We were called here on an emergency.”

Val was just passing through; soon he’d be on his way. “I see.”

He pointed to the brown paper heart in her hand. A faint smile curled his lips. “You should call me.”

She glanced down at the number. An odd feeling, as if fate was finally knocking on her door, overwhelmed her. Why not be brave and do the unexpected? “Do I have to call? Why don’t I invite

you out right now? The quesadilla and chocolate were so good. As far as novelty goes, you don't have any culinary competition around here. Maybe I could take you out for a drink at the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge sometime? No pressure. Totally casual." Her thoughts raced. "Wait! No! We shouldn't go to the Voodoo Hoodoo—" What an idiot she was. After her last stunt, she might not be welcome at the lounge.

"Why?" Val's eyes lit. "I love the name. It sounds exactly like the sort of place I'd want to go."

When would she learn to separate her private life from the enchantment community? "I have to warn you—the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge is eccentric. Perhaps we should go someplace else?"

His eyes sparkled. "I like eccentric."

She held a hand up to shield her eyes from the brilliant gleam of the truck's chrome. "We could get injured."

He leaned forward on his elbows. "Then I insist we face the danger together. Are you free tonight?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

"Then let's meet. I'm new to San Buena. Where is it?"

Drawing a deep breath, she pointed down the street. "Two blocks north. There's a giant neon martini glass on the sign. You can't miss it. What time?"

"I have a lot of prep work on the truck. It will take a few hours. How about seven?"

Feeling giddy. "Okay. See you at seven, Valentine. I mean Val."

"I'm looking forward to it." He smiled and ducked inside the truck.

Chapter 2

Estele walked into the LuLu Beauty Academy prepared to face a tense afternoon of dirty looks.

On the first floor behind a glass door, Miss Dahlia had gathered all the affected students and patrons of the LuLu Academy and placed them under a thrall. The group sat frozen in the classroom as Miss Dahlia walked amongst them, whispering spells and sprinkling enchanted herbs above their heads.

When Miss Dahlia saw Estele standing near the door, she frowned and motioned for her to move on with a brisk wave of her hand.

Witch Griselda materialized at Estele's side in a *poof* of steam and a *thump* of her staff. "You should go home, dear. Let us put things right." Pointing a bony finger at the brown paper heart, she grinned a yellowed smile. "I see you've already made a romantic conquest at the taco truck. How exciting. I can't wait to see what happens next. Enslaving lovers is so much fun! The scorching memories I have of wandering hands on buggy rides. Scandalous. Do young people still court in the back seats of buggies?"

"No."

The edges of Griselda's eyes drooped like a bloodhound's. "That's a pity. Bouncing in a carriage behind a horse's ass was mighty fun, and quite the conversation starter when the horse broke wind. How do young ones meet nowadays?"

"They swipe right on Tinder."

Alarm animated Griselda's face. "Tinder? Watch out! You're a witch, dear, and witches burn. It would be prudent to stay away from tinder, wooden stakes, hay bales—anything flammable. Avoid dunking stools as well. You never know who's going to freak out and go *Malleus Maleficarum* on you and bring down the hammer."

Estele held up Val's note. "I invited a man for a drink at the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge. Aunty, was that a mistake?"

"Not a mistake so much as rushing things. If a lemming is already headed for the cliff, there's no need to fire a starter's gun."

What the hell was the old gal babbling about? "Headmistress, I don't understand. Was I wrong to

invite an outsider to San Buena's enchantment community's private watering hole?"

"Yes and no." Griselda's eyes bulged. "If a love affair is meant to be, it will happen. If it's meant to end in disaster, it will. We're all held captive in the hands of fate. Live with it. You're young and pretty in a wacky sort of way. It's likely you'll have many foolish lemmings running over your cliff to their doom."

Yes, it was a weird compliment, but that was how Griselda saw the world. Cheered, Estele smiled. "Thank you, Aunty. You always say the kindest things."

"You're welcome, Estele. Now go home before someone dies."

A pinch of shame needled her. "Aunty, I don't mean to hurt others, but I do. All my friends walk on eggshells waiting for me to do the next stupid thing. I love my friends. I care about people. Why doesn't my magic reflect that?"

Griselda leaned close. She patted twig-like fingers against Estele's arm as her lazy eye wandered. "It will. You've had so many emotional setbacks in your young life that you've not yet come into your full power. Love, especially self-love and self-respect, would do you a world of good. When you learn to harness all that's wild, pure, and free within, your magic will become formidable. You could be a witch without equal."

Wiser than Miss Dahlia? More competent than Fredi? The words were so welcome, tears hovered in her eyes. "Really?"

"I'll prove it." Reaching to the top of her staff, Griselda unscrewed the polished ruby. "This is the Heart of Hecate. It's been passed or plundered between witches for centuries. I won it unfair and square in a power showdown with a German sorceress at the close of World War I." Pressing it into Estele's hand, she muttered, "Because I respect you, I'm going to let you hold on to it for a little while just to see what its powers can do for you."

With her hand trembling, Estele gasped for breath. "Is that a good idea? The Heart of Hecate is priceless and powerful. Aunty, even I don't trust me."

"Experience teaches trust. I'm fricking ancient, but even I don't expect to walk the earth forever. The enchantment carried within the stone is potent and demands responsible action. I'll consider this a short-term experiment. Let's see what you can do when the pedal hits the metal."

"Whoa, I don't like the sound of that." She shook her head. "The ruby is warming. My palm is tingling. Is that normal? It's not going to burst into flames, is it? I have to go on the record as saying I don't feel good about this."

Griselda gave the stone a gentle tap. "Examine the flawless exterior. The gem was once a raw, clunky rock covered in lesser material. Its now-brilliant crimson core didn't shine, but someone saw its hidden potential and little by little polished the dross away. The Heart of Hecate is lovely now, beyond price. The value is in what it is, not what it was." One eye went left and the other pulled right. "Put the ruby in your handbag and for Circe's sake, girl, don't allow any misfortune to befall it."

Estele dropped the stone into her fringed leather pony express bag. "Now I'm scared. What if

some creep wants to steal it? Won't someone notice it's missing from your staff and ask questions?"

"You'd be shocked at how unobservant most people are. Odd as I am, I walk the streets almost invisible to the people beside me. Not ironically, now that you possess the ruby, you will be surprised at how observant you'll become. That's what the Heart of Hecate does. It brings the world into vivid focus, and focus is exactly what you need, my dear."

"I'll do my best to protect it. Thank you for your trust, Aunty."

"Don't thank me yet. There's stormy weather ahead. Lots of bumps in the nights. Hang on to your broomstick!" Griselda pounded the staff on the floor. "Off I go. I TiVoed *Wheel of Fortune*. Goodbye." *Poof!* She disappeared in a burst of steam.

Clutching the purse under her arm, Estele glanced from side to side to see who may have witnessed the past moments in the hallway.

There was no one around.

"Pheew!" Turning, she decided it was best to avoid the Master Mage Magic Academy for the rest of the day and go straight home. In fact, she should probably avoid outdoor activity and social contact of all kinds while she was possession of the stone. Now she was honor bound to steer clear of trouble.

As she walked into the parking lot, an uncomfortable thought arose. "Valentine," she mumbled. "Oh crap. I'm going to have to cancel our date." Looking around, she saw the food truck had already driven off the lot.

"That was fast." She felt instant relief at not having to confront Val and tell him on the spot that she couldn't meet him for drinks.

But another thought followed. She wanted to learn a little more about Val. He seemed like such a nice guy, grounded, generous, and just the sort of man she longed for in her life. The decisive feeling was so intense she paused. For once she was having an unmuddled thought, and it felt as welcome as morning sunshine pouring through a kitchen window. Reaching into her purse, she touched the ruby. "So, it's okay to meet Val for a drink?"

The gem warmed to the touch. A sense of confirmation rolled off it.

"Wow. This is amazing. You're going to help me by doing all the thinking? Thank Goddess!" She gripped the ruby. "What should I wear?" The image of ripe, juicy cherries popped in her mind. "Okay," she grumbled. "You want me to dress like a cherry strudel? Can't say I'm 100 percent sold on the idea."

Approaching her bright red VW Bug, she unlocked the driver-side door and climbed in. The rearview mirror was hung with colorful purple, green, and gold Mardi Gras beads and crystals. She put the key in the ignition and turned the engine over. The sound of the car's engine was always friendly and chirpy, like a chubby hamster leaping onto its exercise wheel.

Putting the car in reverse, she backed up, then drove to the edge of the lot.

The LuLu Beauty Academy was located off Oceanside Boulevard, which was a busy main drag

with direct access to the freeway, a commuter train platform, and beachfront hotels. Hectic on a slow day, it was congested as hell with summer tourists.

She watched oncoming traffic and waited for a green arrow before inching onto the street, but as soon as she was in her lane, a car roared through a red light and came barreling toward her.

Swerving aside at the last second, she watched in stunned horror as a vehicle filled with jeering clowns zipped past, nearly nicking her bumper.

“Watch where you’re going, bozos!” she shouted.

The clown driver flipped her off with a giant foam finger and continued speeding over a bridge toward the fairgrounds.

She shook her head. “Clowns? Why are they running red lights? Where’s the urgency? Did somebody say call in the clowns—now!” The incident disturbed her.

Putting her phone in speaker mode, she called Fredi.

Fredi picked up immediately. “Hi, Estele. I was wondering when you were going to call back.”

Turning onto a quieter street lined with palm trees, she started to relax. “I’m headed home early today. Fredi, you won’t believe the weird day I’m having.”

“I might.”

She shifted into third. “No. This is beyond even my normal.”

“What’s going on?”

“For starters, a car full of clowns just ran a red light and almost hit me.”

“Hit you with a pie?” Fredi giggled.

“No, hit me with a speeding car. They were headed toward the beach. I hope an enraged sea lion eats them.”

“The beach at Oceanside Park?”

“Yes.”

“The setup for the county fair starts today. Gus can’t wait. He’s such a kid when he talks about fair food. He’ll eat anything fried on a stick. I hope he won’t ask me to go on those horrid rides.”

“You’re nuts, I love fair rides!”

“You’re not a plus-size gal trying to squeeze down the funhouse tube slide. My last visit to the funhouse wasn’t much fun.”

Estele smiled at her reflection in the rearview mirror. “I had a really delicious lunch.”

“Wow, that was an abrupt change of topic. I’m happy for you.”

“This amazing taco truck showed up today, out of nowhere, and the food is out of this world. One of the guys working the truck is super cute. He made me eat flowers—”

“Flowers or flour?”

“Flowers. Big golden flowers, grilled. But that’s not the weird part. He likes me! We’re going to the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge tonight. And then out of the blue, for no reason, Witch Griselda took the Heart of Hecate from the top of her staff and gave it to me for some sort of experiment. It’s in

my purse now. Can you believe it?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Fredi shouted. “Slow down. I’m going to deal with the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge first. Estele, what the fuck are you thinking? If you like this man and have any hopes of seeing him again, don’t go to the Voodoo Hoodoo! It’s a trouble spot, and I’m not saying that because of that thing you did to me and Gus.”

“I know, you’re right.” She drove up a steep street that wound up the hillside and provided a clear view of the Pacific Ocean and the Channel Islands beyond. “The other reason to stay away from the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge is that Sidhe the Fae swings like a pendulum and my new guy looks like a hot Latin pirate fantasy, but Val sort of has his heart set on it, so I guess we have to go.”

“Val?”

“Yes, his name’s Valentine and he’s a total hunkmeister!”

“Sweet.” Fredi sighed. “I’m scared to ask, but I have to. Why the hell did Witch Griselda give you the Heart of Hecate?”

“I have no idea. Oh, Grissy flirted big-time with one of the men on the Brujo Tacos food truck. Did you know that when she puts on a glamour she looks like Florence Welch from Florence + the Machine? It’s awesome!”

“Why would Headmistress Griselda give the Heart of Hecate to you?” Fredi sounded peeved. “I was one of the Master Mage Magic Academy’s youngest honor roll students. I graduated the program when I was only seventeen.”

“Griselda didn’t give me the ruby. It’s a loan. Some sort of test.”

“I’m sorry, Estele. I didn’t mean to sound bitter. But jeez Louise, what a once-in-a-lifetime privilege. I wonder what Grissy’s up to. Mercury poisoning may finally be pulling the rabbit out of her hat.”

Estele laughed. “I’m home, Fredi. I’m going to sign off and climb into a bath. I’ll call tomorrow, okay?”

“Before you go, did you say ‘brujo,’ as in wizard?”

“I did,” she said sheepishly.

“Be careful. Something about this odd combination of events is causing me alarm.”

“I’ll be cautious. Bye, Fredi.” She steered onto a steep driveway and her little VW coughed its way up the almost vertical incline as she parked beneath a modern cantilevered apartment building perched on a landscaped terrace. The architecture was sleek and stylish, the height of modern sophistication when it was built in the late 1960s. The panoramic view of the crescent coastline and Channel Islands was the sort usually reserved for millionaires.

On her touch-and-go waitressing salary and the modest student stipend she received from her grandmother’s estate, there was no way she would have ever been able to afford a fab apartment like this—except the building was batshit haunted.

No Indian burial grounds here, though. Those were located in downtown San Buena beneath an

unassuming city park. This glass and chrome Bauhaus masterpiece was built on the razed foundations of a rotting Victorian asylum. In yesteryear, the syphilitics, the criminally deranged, the opium addicts, and the just plain loony were sent to the *house on the hill* and for the most part forgotten.

Now the attractive apartment complex had the dubious distinction of being one of America's most haunted locations. In fact, it was nearly impossible to hold renters to their leases. Most didn't last a week. Lucky for the enchantment community, the landlord was willing to slash the rent to maintain the fiction that the building was perfectly inhabitable. But she knew better.

Running up a stark black staircase that created the illusion the slender steps floated unanchored in space, Estele reached her second-floor apartment, unit thirteen.

Yes, it had been ill-advised of the planners to call the largest corner apartment unit thirteen. For certain it was haunted, but the sparkling steel and chrome Jetsons-style kitchen and ocean view were to die for. Too bad so many other weirdos had already died there first.

The moment the key turned in the lock, she opened the door and heard a drawer slam shut.

"Captain Manx!" Estele shouted. "Are you rifling through my dresser drawers again?"

No answer.

"Captain, I know that's you." The ghost of a nineteenth century Scottish sea captain haunted unit thirteen. For a number of complicated reasons, Captain Manx had ended his days in the house on the hill.

She entered the apartment with caution. "For shame, Captain! A lady's personal things should be off-limits. If we have to share the space, at least show me some respect."

A silver-bearded wild man dressed in a tattered pea coat, canvas pants, and a wool cap materialized seated on her kitchen countertop. "Greetings and salutations, bonny Miss Estele." He grinned, revealing shocking red and black stains on his teeth incurred from a lifetime of chewing the mildly narcotic beetle nut from Southeast Asia.

"Don't 'bonny' me. I heard the drawer shut. What have you been up to while I was gone? Open your coat, show me."

Looking sullen, the captain unbuttoned his jacket. His barrel chest was covered in silver hair, mermaid tattoos, and a lacy pink polka-dot bra.

"Aha! You know that's mine. Take it off."

Scowling, he removed the coat and slid the bra straps from his shoulders. "A body don't mean no harm by it. I only borrowed the bit of feminine finery on a lark."

"But it's still rude and nasty. My nice things come back to me reeking of stale sweat, pipe tobacco, and whatever it is you're doing with whale oil."

"Aye, whale oil is nature's most conducive lubricant for—"

"Be quiet!" Clamping her hands over her ears, Estele mumbled, "I don't want to know."

The captain handed her a scrawled note. "Here's a list of a few things we're in dire need of. If you would be so gracious as to retrieve them on your next sojourn to a medicinal emporium, I would

be deeply indebted to you and prepared to praise your name in gratitude from here to the Milky Way.”

“Medicinal emporium? Why won’t you just say Rite Aid? By the way, you’re already indebted to me, and dead for over a century. Why do you keep asking for things from the drugstore?”

Throwing his hands into the air, the captain frowned. “I’m bored.”

She read the list. “Laudanum, two pints—”

“Aye, better make it three pints, my little raven-haired kitten of sea.”

“Please don’t call me that.” She glanced back at the list. “One cask Macau-brewed gin with extra Tonka bean, cocaine tincture—double strength, Bombay snuff, opium dumplings, black rum and canon powder for the making of sea-grog, hashish-infused Turkish delight, a rat....”

Setting the list on the countertop, she shrugged. “A rat? Captain, was there any substance in the world that didn’t become one of your vices?”

He answered with a dramatic chin drop. “I’m proud to say that despite a pronounced predilection toward parsnips, I was always able to practice moderation with my consumption of root vegetables.”

Bracing her hands on the countertop, she sighed. “Dare I even ask what use you have for the rat?”

A frown tugged at his brows. “Nothing. I just miss being around rats.”

Backing away from the counter, she paced the kitchen floor. “Listen to me carefully. I’m going to take a bath.”

“I’ll join you! I could use one myself.”

“No. I want some private time without interruptions. After my bath, I’m going to do a little homework and relax, because tonight I have social plans.”

“Aye. Might we expect a toothsome young lad to do some parlor calling?”

“No, at seven o’clock I will be meeting a man downtown for a drink.”

He winked. “Earning waterfront wages, are we? Flashing your knickers to gents for two pence?” The captain’s lips pouted beneath a walrus mustache. “Perhaps this is an illicit convergence of some sort involving a lonely longshoreman?”

“Wrong on all counts, Captain. My God, what a dirty mind you’ve got. We call them ‘dates.’ It’s a chance for people to get to know each other without necessarily having to exchange money or proposals of marriage on the first meeting.”

He shrugged. “I don’t understand the modern world. Social commerce between the sexes used to be so simple. In my day, when men and women met, it was always for one of three options. Marriage, money, and what was the third...?”

“Captain, if you behave yourself and lie low for a little while, I promise to buy you a bottle of rum. Even though you’re a freaking ghost and can’t even drink it. I’ll leave the cap off so you can sniff it to your heart’s content and get high on the fumes.”

Shivering with delight, he grinned, baring crimson teeth. “Bonny lass! You’d do that for me?”

“Yes, but I expect quiet and privacy in return. Do we have a deal?”

“Aye, my wee trollopy grog bunny.”

“Don’t call me that!” She walked to the bathroom, entered, and closed the door. The Zen-like room was decorated with black marble and sleek fixtures. A narrow window faced onto a private garden filled with Jurassic-era tree ferns. She turned the chrome faucet. Water bubbled into the tub. Uncorking a special bottle of Circe’s Secret bath gel that Fredi had made last Christmas, she drizzled the fragrant viridian-green fluid into the bath. Without meaning to, she added too much. The clean scent of lavender and poppy filled the air as the suds nearly overflowed the sides. “Oops!”

Turning the water off, she twisted her shoulder-length black hair into a topknot, undressed, and climbed into the tub. The water was warm, the view beyond the window soothing. As she slipped lower into the suds, she closed her eyes. All her cares fled.

And then she woke to Captain Manx hovering over her.

“Hey!” She jumped, causing a big splash. The water was cold. “What the hell? I wanted some privacy!”

“Miss, don’t you have a planned rendezvous with a lad at seven bells?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a quarter of the rose to seven now.”

“Holy guacamole!” Estele reached for a towel. *Where did the time go?* “Get out, I need to get dressed!”

The captain bowed. “I’ve taken the liberty of laying out tonight’s trousseau for you.”

“What? I know you mean well, but please stay out of my closet.” With the towel wrapped around her, she drained the tub and shuffled into the bedroom. The broad window facing the ocean revealed the sun was low in the sky. The first moments of brilliant pink sunset reflected off the waves. The freeway was congested, and there appeared to be a lot of activity taking place at the fairgrounds. Dozens of brightly painted big rigs dominated the parking lot.

Glancing at the bed, she saw a complete outfit arranged exactly the way it would look on her body, laid with obvious care across her mattress. A strand of crimson Bohemian glass beads topped a white retro dress with a cheerful cherry print. A dainty pair of red platform shoes with faux cherries on the toes completed the set. The combination wasn’t bad at all. She slipped the beads over her head and knotted them.

“Miss,” the captain called through a crack in the door. “If I might be so bold as to suggest, the red satin push-up brassiere and lace tap pants would make convivial companions to the fruity dress.”

“Thank you, Captain. Would you please close that door?” Opening the underwear drawer, she saw the satin tap pants set on top and reached for them. “Just this once, I will take your advice.”

“You’re welcome, miss. I’m delighted to be of service to a landlocked siren such as you. After tonight’s jaunt to the seamier side to partake in alcoholic beverages in the company of a stranger, is there any chance you might bringing me home a packet of Morpheus powder to compose my nerves?”

She wriggled into the underwear. “No. Sorry. Nobody sells Morpheus powder anymore.”

“Dribbling damnation, the world’s a bleaker place because of it.” He released a long hiss of

disappointment that sounded like a teakettle come to a boil.

There was little time to get ready for a date with someone as terrific as Val. With energy Estele sped through the simplest tasks as fast as possible. While zipping the dress, she darted into the bathroom to apply cat-eye liner, scarlet lipstick, and give her hair a thorough brushing. Picking up a pair of manicure scissors, she gave the straight line of her short bangs the slightest trim.

Hurrying out of the bedroom, she discovered Captain Manx peering into her purse. “Captain! A lady’s handbag is a sacred space.”

He stared into the depths of the bag with his face slack. “What is that?”

She took hold of the purse. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“The stone.” He appeared stricken. “While you were dressing, it started to glow inside your purse. I saw its crimson beacon shining and walked over to investigate and...”

“And what?”

His lips trembled. “I touched it. Barely a tap, and horrible memories arose. Unbearable things I don’t want to remember, ever.”

“Like?”

The captain’s eyes turned liquid. “The drowning rats on my ship weren’t rats at all.”

Remembering Griselda’s comment that the Heart of Hecate brought clarity, she paused. Maybe the poor old captain was finally dealing with what had brought him to the asylum in the first place? “This sounds like a conversation we should have after I return.”

“Or never. I don’t wish to remember that part of my life.”

“Well, this is the afterlife.”

He gazed at her purse with dread. “Must that foul object remain in this dwelling?”

Closing the purse, she moved it away from the captain. “I’ll take it with me. You won’t be bothered by it. While I’m away, promise me you’ll be good. No mischief, please.”

“Aye,” he grumbled.

Walking out the front door, she locked it. “My Goddess, the things you have to put up with to get affordable rent.” Descending the steps, she felt real excitement. The plastic cherries on the straps of her shoes looked festive. She was grateful the captain had encouraged her to wear something girlier than she might have chosen on her own.

Opening the driver-side door of the car, she tossed her purse on the passenger seat and climbed in. Inserting the key, she smiled at the cheerful sound of the indestructible VW’s engine. Putting the car in gear, she headed down the steep driveway and drove west along the hillside road that wound its way toward the downtown area. The setting sun blasted through the windshield and made her squint.

On such a balmy summer evening, finding a parking space near the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge would be a challenge. She reached for the Parking Fairy talisman that dangled from the rearview mirror. Using enchantment to maintain a personal minion to locate parking spaces in crowded multilevel structures and urban areas had been one of her better ideas. She grasped a green

fluorite crystal attached to a long strand of green beads and muttered, “Parking Fairy, I summon thee.”

The glove compartment opened. An emerald spark appeared and zipped around the interior of the car.

It was always such a joyful sight when the fairy appeared. “Fae, look at these shoes. Aren’t they cute?”

The green spark did a fly-by, gliding over the gas pedal and making tiny meowing sounds.

“Thank you. The shoes are new. I appreciate your vote of approval.”

The Fae droned a loud irritated machine hum that sounded like a drunken wasp in an echo chamber.

“Calm down, Fae. Don’t get so pissy. I didn’t mean it. I always forget the Fae hate thank—” She paused. “You-know-what. Jeez, the no-thank-you tradition seems so archaic. Why can’t you accept that I want to thank you for your help?”

Buzz, buzz, buzzzz buzzzzzzzz! Hysterical, high-pitched hornet-like humming followed by bursts of spitting green sparks stung Estele’s bare ankles like the strike of mini bazooka shells.

“Ouch! Stop already. Parking Fairy, accept my apology. I’m sorry.”

The Fae answered with a soft meow and a cascade of glittering green sparkles.

“Apology accepted? That’s the sweet Fae I love having on my dashboard. Now listen carefully. You need to find me a decent parking space near the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge. There is no way I can walk far in these shoes.”

Rolling the window down, she waited for the fairy to exit and zip ahead. Within seconds the tiny green ember zigged and zagged in front of her car before speeding ahead and disappearing into the distance.

Estele waved. “There she goes! Find me a good parking space.”

Chapter 3

Val sat the bar of the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge listening to a couple of shrunken heads set atop shot glasses having an odd conversation. Technically he wasn't "listening." He was mentally eavesdropping. The dried and enchanted human heads from Borneo were wary of his presence and cautious not to say a word aloud, yet he was certain they were conscious entities capable of speech.

The kitschy Tiki lounge was a weird place for sure. Large fish tanks filled with electric eels provided most of the ambient light. The murky-looking counter setup with its many hand-labeled apothecary bottles appeared better suited to a waterfront bar in nineteenth-century Rangoon. The place crawled with supernatural vibes that were impossible for any sensitive soul to miss.

A tall, slender man with long platinum hair and sparkling green eyes hovered behind the counter, staring at him from the corner of his eye like he expected trouble. The man was extremely seductive and off-putting at the same time. He wasn't even sure how that was possible.

Green eyes leaned closer. "Are you certain I can't make you something special to drink?"

"I'm meeting someone." Val glanced at his watch. "I want to give them a few more minutes." It was 7:36. Estele was late. He began to worry she might not show, and that would be very bad. Bad for his personal mission, and very unfortunate for the community at large. He needed Estele.

"Sid!" a woman called from the back door of the lounge. "Sidhe, can you hear me? I need a reward for my Parking Fairy!"

Mr. Shifty behind the counter, presumably named Sid, removed a small saucer from the shelf, dropped a sugar cube into the center, and soaked it with a liberal drizzle of emerald green absinthe. The brisk herbal scent of anise filled the air. He carried the dish to the back door.

"I'll set this on the dashboard for my Fae." The woman sounded breathy. "No worries, I won't say those words you don't like even though I really appreciate your kind gesture."

Val recognized the owner of the voice as Estele. Relief washed over him. She was meeting him of her own free will, no enchantments or inducements of any sort. He'd played fair with her today, offering only good food and an encouraging smile. Nothing underhanded or hidden in the sauce, just fresh Oaxacan cuisine served straight up, no wizardly chaser.

Even more promising, by feeding her Parking Fairy within earshot, Estele had just tipped her hand

about being a card-carrying member of the enchantment community. That alone may have spared him hours of cloying conversation trying to ascertain if she was “out” or not. Obviously she was. True, she hadn’t seen him yet, but it would seem natural he’d overheard her from his place at the counter. This was a time-saver. Now he could get what he wanted from Estele even faster.

A minute passed. Estele walked into the lounge with a bright smile on her ruby lips and a cloud of glossy black hair surrounding her face. He froze, breathless; she looked beautiful, and more womanly than the dejected-looking punk pinup he’d first glimpsed this afternoon in the LuLu Beauty Academy parking lot.

So far the prophecy was true. The sense of fate clicking into place was exhilarating.

Estele made eye contact and shot him a parade queen wave as she approached. “Hey.” Sliding onto the barstool beside him, she said softly, “I’m sorry I’m late. You won’t believe this, but I fell asleep in the bathtub.”

A fresh scent hung in the air. He leaned closer to sniff. “You smell like lavender. All is forgiven.”

Her lashes fluttered. “How long have you been here?”

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Since 6:50. I got here a little early.”

“Damn! I’m sorry. I owe you a drink, don’t I?” She tilted her head ever so slightly toward Sid. “Let’s move away from the bar and take a private booth.”

He stood.

Estele looked up. “Wow, either you’re very tall, or I’m very short. Sadly, I think I’m very short.”

“You’re perfect.” He laughed. His gaze swept over her. Even in high heels she was tiny—a proverbial pocket Venus. He could pick her up and carry her with ease if he had to, or stuff her in a duffel bag and make a run for it, but he hoped matters would never come to that.

Adjusting a large purse on her shoulder, she lowered her voice. “Before we walk away from the bar, we should order our drinks and *watch* Sid as he blends them.”

He wondered why she emphasized “watch” so sharply.

Overhearing Estele, Sid looked up with a distinct smirk on his lips. “Oh please! Estele, you’re the one we all have to keep an eye on.”

Estele huffed. “I’m not the one who served Lust Slave Rum Punch Zombies by the bucketful to a busload of Austrian tourists. Only good thing I can say about that incident is at least it happened far from home. Those poor folks won’t forget their walk on the wild side anytime soon.”

Sid shrugged. “That’s what they asked for. The Voodoo Hoodoo lounge and its Lust Slave Rum Punch Zombies came highly recommended in the Austrians’ guidebook.”

Estele blew Sid a pantomime kiss. “Sneaky bastard. You’re the one who wrote the recommendation. No wonder you’ve got such a bad rep. Even though I love you like a brother, I will watch you like a hawk while you blend our drinks.” She turned to face Val, her big blue eyes wide. “What would you like?”

Thinking Estele didn’t even look old enough to drink, let alone the rest of what he had planned, he

began to worry somebody may have made a big mistake. “I don’t know. What are you going to have?”

“I’m having a Cuban mojito.”

Mojitos were a current favorite of his. At least he couldn’t fault her on taste. “Sounds good. I’ll have one also.”

Sid set two heavy tumblers on the countertop. “Behold, the glasses are clean.”

“Let me double-check.” Estele waved a hand over the top to cast a sanitation incantation. “Yep, they’re free of magical residue. Continue.”

Setting a sturdy glass pitcher on the counter, Sid spooned a flurry of fine-grain sugar into the bottom, adding fistful after fistful of fresh mint leaves until the drink began to look like a salad.

Then Sid reached for a bowl full of limes. Each lime was selected, given a harsh squeeze, and rolled mercilessly against the countertop beneath the weight of his palm before being cut in half and juiced. The lime juice was added to the pitcher and a thick wooden stick with a rounded head was used to crush the mint and muddle it all together. The mashed mint leaves released their cool, fragrant aromatic oils into the air. White rum was poured over everything, along with a splash of club soda and a scoop of crushed ice. The pitcher of jade green liquid was stirred and pushed toward Estele. “Cuban-style mojitos. Enjoy.”

Estele reached for the pitcher. “Thank—” Biting her lip, she was quick to correct herself. “I meant, this looks delicious, Sid. I know we’ll love it.”

Slipping a few bills from his wallet, Val set them on the countertop and took hold of the pitcher.

Estele’s jaw dropped. “I was going to buy the drinks.”

“First round is on me. Where would you like to sit?”

She motioned toward a grass hut in the far corner, lorded over by a scowling Tiki. “Over there.”

Leading the way, she walked in an ultra-feminine, hip-swinging Marilyn Monroe type of saunter. He followed in a semihypnotized state, hoping his tongue wasn’t hanging out. The dress and shoes flattered her figure and poured gasoline on his lust-starved libido. Part of him wished she’d worn combat boots and baggy jeans instead. It would have been more practical.

Taking a seat in the booth across from Estele, he pushed one of the tumblers toward her and poured.

She set her purse on the table.

As he poured the drinks, his hand felt strange. An odd sensation started in his palm and traveled up his arm. Soon every tiny hair on his forearm was standing straight. All his training alerted him to the possibility of a metaphysical ambush. Something was askew.

A red glow emanated from inside Estele’s purse, casting a rosy tint against the wall. “Estele, I think your phone is on.”

Peering inside her purse, she winced. “Uh-oh.” Hurriedly, she moved the bag under the table.

Why did she look so surprised? “What was it?”

She pushed the handbag farther away, a nervous smile fluttering on her lips. “Nothing.”

“Nothing glows red?”

“I’m holding on to something for a friend.” She sipped the mojito. “Um, this is good, which reminds me, I have to remember to buy a bottle of rum on the way home.”

Was she nervous because this was a date, or was something else going on? All his senses screamed something else was going on. “If it’s important, maybe you should write it on your hand.”

“That’s a good idea.” Digging through her purse, she reached for a felt pen and scrawled “RUM” on her thumb.

“What’s the rum for?”

Shifting on the seat, she appeared uncomfortable. “Nothing.”

Okay, what was with this woman? “More nothing? That’s a lot of nothing.”

She took a long swallow of mojito. “It’s for something, but I can’t say.”

Picking up his glass, he took the first sip. Fresh, minty, and tart, and the generous amount of rum warmed his throat. The whole thing burned like green fire going down and spread through his limbs like the tide rushing ashore. A moment of light-headedness followed. He started to feel the antsy shaken can of soda sensation, like he wanted to get up and do backflips across the room. His heart raced and he couldn’t stop staring at Estele, wondering if it might be a good idea to drag her under the table and cover her in kisses. Without doubt she was the most attractive woman he’d been near in a long while.

Then a sobering moment of reality hit. It occurred to him that the effects he was feeling were more than a little white rum could produce. “You look beautiful,” he blurted. “I feel really bad about this. I let you think tonight was a date, but it’s not.”

Estele clutched the tumbler. “What is it, Val? What’s wrong? You look odd. Why are you staring at me like that?”

Honesty was not part of the plan, at least not at this stage. The less Estele knew, the safer she’d be. Talking would ruin everything. His throat tensed as he willed himself to remain silent, but the words kept coming. “I wanted to speak in private so I could recruit you.”

Damn! Why did I say it out loud?

Leaning forward, she laughed. “Recruit me? For what?”

Staring at the tall glasses sweating on the table, he muttered, “Something’s not right.” Thinking quickly, he removed a silver chain from around his neck that had a tiny filigree dagger as a dangling ornament. He held the chain above the tabletop and watched in suspense as the blade spun in a circle, then pulled strongly toward the pitcher.

“Whoa!” His jaw dropped. “Look at that. I’m getting an enchantment reading that’s off the charts!” He glanced at Estele, who looked dumbfounded. “How well do you know the bartender? The tumblers might have been clean of spells, but the pitcher he mixed the drinks in isn’t.”

Estele stuck her head outside the booth. “Sid! This isn’t funny. What did you do to the drinks? Be honest, is there a mojo on the mojitos?”

Sid scoffed from behind the counter. “It’s a mild attraction spell. It won’t do anything to the two of you that wasn’t already happening. Don’t be so uptight. I get so frigging bored trapped behind the bar.”

“Sidhe!” Estele became enraged. “This is an abuse of magic. I should report you to the enchantment committee.”

Dismissive laughter rolled out of Sid. “Estele Esposito plans to report a magic violation to the committee? Holy crap, I want to be there to see their faces. I did you a favor, sweetie. You’re sloppy and you need to be more cautious. Did you even notice this guy’s a full-fledged brujo?”

Estele looked surprised in a bad way.

Val froze, feeling guilty. “I was just getting ready to mention it.”

Hurt shone in her eyes. “This afternoon, you had a couple opportunities to mention you were a brujo.”

“I didn’t know I needed to. What the hell, I’m working in a food truck with the words ‘Brujo Tacos’ written in orange lettering across the front. It’s not exactly classified information.”

She raised her palm in annoyance, and her voice trembled. “I never take that sort of thing literally! If a sign says ‘Wizard Dry Cleaning,’ I don’t assume the business is owned and operated by actual wizards. You didn’t enchant my lunch, did you? I thought you were such a nice guy, and so good-looking. Of course, it’s too good to be true. Man, this got weird fast.” Reaching for her purse, she looked peeved. “Bummer. I’m going home before things get worse.” She stood.

He grabbed her wrist. “Wait! Don’t leave. Not yet. Let’s talk.”

She held the purse to her heart. A bit of red glow seeped out through the zipper seam.

“What is in your handbag that glows crimson?”

Locking her arms tight around the purse, she turned away. “None of your business.”

The look of anger on her face tipped him off that this was not going to be easy. “We got off on the wrong foot, and I’m sorry about that. Please sit. Give me ten minutes. I just want a chance to explain.”

“Forget it. I shouldn’t even be talking to a brujo.”

He looked at her with his best puppy in the pet shop expression. “Please.”

She sat. “Okay, but only ten minutes.”

Pointing to the pitcher, he drew a tense breath. “We both drank. How much trouble are we in? Does that guy know what he’s doing in the enchantment department or is he just a dabbler?”

A frown creased her brow. “He knows what’s he’s doing. If Sid says the spell is mild, it is.”

“I couldn’t figure him out. What is he? A warlock?”

“No.” A sarcastic laugh burst free of her. “He’s not human. Tonight Sid is wearing his hair down, so you can’t see his pointy ears. Sidhe the Fae is a demoted demigod punished by the Queen of Fae. He used to be a Prince of the Forest Realms and Supreme Calvary Commander during the Fae Crusades. Now he owns a Tiki bar.”

Whistling. “He must have fucked up bad.”

“Big-time,” she whispered. “We should keep it down. Sid’s hearing is as sharp as a tack.”

“Really?” Resting his elbows on the table, he was drawn to Estele like iron filings to a magnet. At that moment she looked like a streetwise Snow White in a snug cherry-print dress. He wanted to pull her onto his lap and feel her melt in his arms as he kissed her throat. That reaction came out of nowhere and boded ill for his dignity. “So, is it safe to say any ‘attraction’ we might be feeling toward each other is due to the enchanted mojito?”

“Speak for yourself. I’m sort of pissed off at you. If I’d known you were a real brujo I would not have eaten your food, or agreed to meet you here tonight.”

“But I didn’t know that. I was going to tell you.” Her words were cold water dashed in his face, but he still wanted to put a hand on her thigh, even if she slapped him for trying such a poorly timed stunt. “What have you got against brujos anyway?”

“Can’t trust them.”

“How many brujos do you know?”

“It’s what you don’t know about a brujo that causes the problems.”

“That doesn’t sound very open-minded or PC. I thought the enchantment community practiced inclusive nonjudgment of different magical lifestyles?”

“They do.” Her words sounded clipped. “I just don’t care for brujos. Even big handsome ones like you. So there.”

“Fair enough.” He sat back, reached for the tumbler, and took another sip. “I’m going to live dangerously and drink the freaking mojito even though a weird Fae cast a spell on it. It’s delicious, and to be honest I was already feeling attracted to you this afternoon. So what the hell, a little extra attraction spell in the booze isn’t going to make too big a difference in my night. I can see how this is going to end.”

Estele didn’t touch her drink. “How does this end? Tell me. I’m interested to hear your opinion.”

“We get up in a few minutes, walk away from each other, and innocent people die.” He compressed his lips and willed himself not to speak the words. *Or I put an enchantment on you and compel you to help me.*

“Put the drink down,” she urged. “You’re getting a strange gleam in your eyes.”

Taking another sip, he spoke slowly. “Estele, why don’t you trust brujos?”

The red glow escaping her purse intensified and pulsed like a beating heart. “It’s a personal matter.”

The personal matter looked like the colored lights in a disco. “What the hell is in your purse?”

Estele looked appalled. “I’m not going to tell you, so stop asking.”

“I’m trying to understand this. Did I do something to intimidate or scare you?”

“Scare me?” Her eyes flashed. “Ha! Don’t flatter yourself. I see scary stuff every day, most of it my doing.” She reached for her mojito. “I’m not even scared to drink Sid’s cocktail, because now that I know you’re a brujo there’s zero temptation to give in to attraction, which is not how I felt about you

this afternoon. Believe me, I was on the hook.”

Was she teasing him or insulting him? It was such a shame. Estele was so cute, exactly his type. “So, it’s strictly my brujo-ness that’s causing an issue?”

“Honey, it ain’t your big brown eyes or your rocking bod causing red flags.” Covering her mouth with her palm, she appeared shocked. “Whoops, nix that. I need to be quiet.”

He set the tumbler down. “Maybe if you knew me a little better, you’d feel differently.”

“Val, my mother used to say, ‘No one really knows a brujo. It’s all superficial machismo and secrets.’”

“That’s harsh. Why would she say something like that?”

“Because she was briefly married to one.”

Wow, that brought the curtain down on Act Two. “Oh.”

Estele’s pretty little face looked like a China doll, ready to shatter to bits. “Yep, my daddy’s a brujo. I don’t remember him and I have no idea where he is now. I was still in diapers when he went bye-bye on me and my mom. No love lost.”

“I’m sorry for you. It doesn’t sound good. But it’s discouraging to hear that one man, who you admit you don’t know, has determined your opinion of all brujos.”

“A father is a pretty important man. Who he is, what he is, counts.”

“I know.” He crossed his arms over his chest. Just thinking about it brought a stab of pain. “My father is a dentist in La Jolla, California. Upscale clientele, drives a shiny black Mercedes. He was horrified that I willingly chose the path of brujo. He wanted me to go into cosmetic dentistry with him. I couldn’t do it. I felt the ancestral calling and asked to be apprenticed to my dad’s younger brother, Tio Bruno. Bruno’s the older man working the truck with me. He’s an amazing wizard and a very ethical person. I wanted to learn the art of food magic, *alquimia de sabor*—alchemy of flavor—from him.”

Estele squinted in Val’s direction. “There’s such a thing as specializing in food magic? I’ve never heard of *alqui*—what did you call it?”

“*Alquimia de sabor*—alchemy of flavor. It’s a specialty or predilection of brujos.”

She took a sip of her mojito. “Interesting. You learn something new every day. What does a food alchemist do exactly?”

“The inherent magic of the plant and animal kingdoms are harnessed into a form of enchantment consumed and appreciated by the aesthetic body—the senses. The alchemy of flavor works on many levels. It can break down barriers between people. Open the heart. Certain flavors or scents can even transport the spirit back in time. It seems simple, but it’s powerful stuff.”

“So instead of tools of power like a wand or crystals, you work with food?”

“Yes, mostly food, but I do use a few magical tools.” He hadn’t realized how tense he’d been until his shoulders relaxed. “You don’t seem as upset as you were a few minutes ago.”

Leaning back against the booth, she shrugged. “I’m not.”

That was encouraging. “What about you? The cat’s out of the bag. We’ve both come clean about being members of the enchantment community. What sort of magic do you practice?”

“I don’t know how to answer that. I’m a witch and you’re a brujo. We’re not really part of the same community, are we?”

“Okay, I’ll reword my question, separate but equal members of the enchantment community.”

She placed her hands on the table like she was going to pounce. “Want the truth? I don’t know what I’m doing! Even my best friend describes my style of spellcraft as ‘batshit wacky.’ I’m a danger to my friends and loved ones. What I intend to have happen and my actual results never match up. Most of the time I’m a freaking disaster!”

“I think you’re being hard on yourself.”

She glanced away in disgust. “Trust me. I’m not.”

He sensed an opening and rushed in. “I went through a difficult phase too. When I started my apprenticeship to Tio Bruno, I was twenty-two and had just finished four years of college. Most apprentices begin practicing in their teens. It didn’t come easy. In many ways, I had more to unlearn. I vividly remember a few times that Tio Bruno almost gave up on me.”

With a tilt of her delicate head, Estele appeared to be studying him. “How old are you now?”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“You mastered the art in only four years? I’m twenty-two and I’ve been a bad witch my entire life.”

He laughed. “I never said I mastered the art. I became proficient enough to know I should continue to the next level.”

“Which is?”

“For a brujo?” He clasped his hands in front of him and hoped he didn’t appear terrified. “Magical partnership with an ally.”

She nodded. “You should adopt a rescue dog. They’re grateful, smart, and I hear they make excellent allies. I have a friend who volunteers at a pet shelter. I could hook you up with a paw-tastic ally.”

Swallowing hard, he continued. “Estele, I was hoping to recruit you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Me? What are you thinking? A dog might be more teachable.”

“I disagree, and I’m not sure I need to teach you anything.”

Her brows lifted. “I’m confused. I feel like I’m being set up here. You think I’d make a good magical ally? That’s just evil or extremely foolish! Either way, something’s not adding up. You’re too handsome. Too easy to talk to.” She leaned across the table and poked him in the chest. “Look at all this muscle. Is this even real? Or is it a spellcast exterior glamour? I’ll bet you’re really a bony little 103-year-old perve-toad.”

Her odd form of flattery made him want to burst out smiling, but he was afraid to come off smug. “I’m into weight lifting. I have to stay active. I work with food all day.”

“Another thing.” She pointed to a tattoo on her arm of an Irish Claddagh, a heart clasped between two hands. “Is your name really Valentine? Or was that a made-up thing to get my attention? I’m asking because all my friends know the heart is my lucky totem.”

Reaching for his wallet in his back pocket, he withdrew his driver’s license and set it on the table.

She picked up the license with dainty fingers, tilting it to make the embossed hologram flash. “It looks official. Valentine Del Toro. Male....” She smirked. “Obviously. Born October 27. That makes you a Scorpio. I’ll consider myself warned. According to the California Department of Motor Vehicles you are indeed twenty-six years old. Current residence is listed as 113 Larkwood Lane. Black hair, brown eyes, six-foot-four, 203 pounds.” She returned the license. “Taken as a whole, very provocative reading. You’re really six four? I’m barely five two. I can’t even imagine what being so tall would feel like.”

“You see a lot of crooked hair partings.”

She touched her hair. “Really?”

“Your hair looks lovely, and the part is perfectly straight.”

“The license says you live in Mission Beach. Two hundred miles and untold agonizing hours in urban traffic make the distance a very impractical commute. Why would a brujo show up in San Buena today to serve lunch?”

“Tio Bruno said we were called here on special assignment.”

“This afternoon, you said it was an emergency. Who called you?”

He shrugged. “The universe? There were many signs, portents, and dreams calling us here.”

“Signs and portents? That sounds like double talk for bitch-I-haven’t-told-you-anything.” Estele picked up the pitcher and poured more mojito into her glass. “Should we finish this off? I need a drink.” She emptied the last of the contents into his glass. “Go for it. What the hell.”

Raising the tumbler to toast, he clinked his glass against hers. “To battle we go. Hell is closer than we think.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That was a weird toast to make.”

“It’s the truth. Haven’t you sensed power building in the last few days? There is a great vortex of evil forming under our feet. I feel it churning.”

Tipping the tumbler to her lips, Estele took a long gulp. “You’re joking, right?”

“No.”

“Uh!” She set her empty glass down. “Why did I finish my drink? Now I have to sit here thinking, ‘What a gorgeous guy. Too bad he’s a nutjob.’”

“Estele, dark forces are at work. They mean to do great harm to the city of San Buena. I came here to find my ally and do battle against malevolence. It’s true.”



“Okay.” Estele heaved a tense breath. This evening was turning into a sticky tar pit of unwelcome weirdness. When was she ever going to meet a nice guy and have it work out? “Do you always talk this way?”

Val smoothed his palm across his wavy locks. With his hair pushed back, his rugged cheekbones were clearly displayed. The arch of his full lips turned downward, lending his dramatic facial features a certain sobriety. His gaze smoldered. The dude had to know he looked hot. “Talk how?”

“All high and mighty. Like you’re the final word on the subject. Thank-God-I’m-here type of thing.”

“Am I doing that?”

“Yep.” Good Goddess, Val was dressed so nice too. An earthy red shirt the color of garnet and ink-washed jeans. Fancy leather-tooled boots. Jeez Louise. Her typical date usually dressed like a beach bum in ragged shorts and flip-flops. She fixated on a thick silver cuff inlaid with a large chunk of finest chocolate-veined turquoise. She suspected it was a wizardly power tool or object used to store enchantment.

“You’re staring at the cuff.” He lifted his wrist. “Do you see the coyote pattern? Coyote is my totem spirit. The cuff was made expressly for me.”

“Coyote suits you. You do know San Buena has a very active and diverse enchantment community? I shouldn’t even be telling you this, but this afternoon you parked your taco truck right in front of the Master Mage Magic Academy, which is sort of a vocational school for adult witches and warlocks. Don’t you think that in a town filled with Lycans, Druids, and Wiccanites one or more of us would have picked up on the ‘vortex of evil building beneath our feet’? Dude, don’t insult us.”

“First, Tio Bruno and I knew about the Master Mage Magic Academy. We sensed magic being practiced and drove straight to it. We even paid off the other food truck to get him out of the way for a little while. Second, evil is sly. As you say, the enchantment community of San Buena is active and strong. It presents a tempting target for dark forces who would wish to move in and exploit the situation. My guess is an attack on San Buena has been planned over many months, perhaps years. Slowly, in subtle increments, small amounts of evil have accumulated below in a bubble of malevolent energy. It was done in such way that one who lived here would never notice. Only an outsider looking in would sense the danger. A crucial stage has passed. I assure you, the threat is imminent.”

Chills rippled up her arm. “Eww. And what exactly do these dark forces want?”

He lowered his voice. “Estele, they want you.”

“Me? You mean they want the witches of San Buena.”

Rolling up his sleeve to display the pinup girl in combat boots, he thrust his arm forward. “The prophecy says they want you.”

She grew flustered. “Nonsense! Whose prophecy? Anyone can make up a prophecy. Why should I be listening to any of this? Your story is all jacked-up.”

“The prophecy was told to me by an old bruja, a wisewoman who lived in the mountains of Oaxaca. Her prediction marked the end of my apprenticeship and the beginning of my ‘first flight,’ or first time working in the field with a power ally. I was told to go north, find my ally, and that we would walk into battle together. I was given a permanent mark so that I might always be bonded to my ally. An appointment with an ink-wizard was made.”

“Wait!” she interrupted. “Ink-wizard? Is there such a thing?”

“Yes. An ink-wizard is a mage who specializes in enchanted tattoos and sacred marks. Not all of them show on the surface of the skin, but mine does.”

She pointed to the Wiccan symbols tattooed on her arm. “I love ink! I gotta find one of those ink-wizards and finish this sleeve.”

“Receiving my mark was a solemn occasion. For my sacred mark, I was expecting something powerful, along the lines of an eagle, a storm cloud, a scorpion, but instead....” He pointed to the Betty Page tattoo on his forearm. “I got a pinup girl as my ally. Now the evil ones want you.”

The breath left her body. Did he mean it, or was she being suckered into a tall tale? “It can’t be me. I don’t believe a word of it.” She glanced around the thatched booth. “I’ve never been so grateful in all my life to not have a shrunken head sharing our table. They’re so gossipy. I don’t want anyone to know any of this. I’ll admit I’m capable of causing plenty of trouble on my own. I don’t need nasty rumors following me around that I’ve somehow been earmarked by evil to do harm to the community. I’d never do that.”

His brows knit together. “I believe you. If you were ever to commit evil, it would be because you were tricked into doing so. That is why the fates have sent me here as your protector and ally.” He thumped his fist on his chest. “I am your living shield. Evil will have to go through me to get to you. I will not allow you to be compromised. From now on, I shall be at your side—constantly.”

She gasped. “Hold on a minute! Wow, this date for drinks took a fast, hard left. What are you talking about?”

“Malevolent forces may try to use you. I am here to make sure that does not happen. I am your personal caballero, knight-errant. From now on, you will remain in my line of sight and within earshot. I will sleep at the foot of your bed like a loyal servant until imminent danger passes.”

“Ha!” She laughed. “This is a joke, right? Brujo humor gone astray?”

Val’s dark eyes remained earnest. “This is no joke. I am sincere. Place your hand on my heart and you will know I am sincere.”

She drained what was left of the mojito. “Baby, this isn’t going to work. I’m not that gullible. Seriously, what would dark forces want with me? I’m a magical hit-and-run accident in progress.”

He leaned across the table, his gaze intense. “I disagree. You have tremendous potential.”

“You really think so?” Then, remembering she had the Heart of Hecate, a priceless ruby of power, in her purse sobered her. Was it possible Mr. CrossFit-brujo-ha-ha wanted the stone for his own undisclosed purpose? In folklore, wasn’t coyote the ultimate trickster? If ever there was a time to be

discreet, this was it. But how would he even know about it? With the monster rock in her purse, she was vulnerable as hell, and wondered why in all witches-dunking-stool-damnation kooky old Griselda handed the gem to her. All of this was too much to fathom. “You seem to have a clear overview of the situation. So tell me, where is it?”

Val’s gaze narrowed. “Where is what?”

“The bubble of malevolence.” Her tone was abrupt.

A somber expression etched a ridge between his brows, he pointed. “West. Where the land meets the sea. Great tension is building and we must suppress it.”

She glanced over her shoulder, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck standing. Something about the way Val said it and the look on his face finally broke through her resistance. It registered that he could be telling the truth.

In a flash she had one of her strongest psychic moments ever. In a fast-forward blast of images, she saw them working together as a team to battle a threatening mushroom cloud of grinning clown faces. The terrifying image left her shaking. As weird as matters appeared, it seemed likely she was being paired with a brujo to accomplish Goddess-knew-what.

“You’re pointing toward the fairgrounds. They’re setting up for the county fair. Are you telling me evil is coming to town served fried on a stick?”

Chapter 4

Estele watched as Val stood with outreached hand. Dark and formidable, he looked exactly like the sort of demon force he professed to be battling.

“Come with me.” His voice was low. “We’re done here. There’s not a minute to waste.”

Her stomach rumbled. “No dinner? I’m hungry. I don’t remember agreeing to anything. What are we doing?”

“Recon. Good intelligence is essential. A bubble of malevolence is just energy. It needs agents on the ground to carry out tasks. I want to see what we’re going up against.”

“Slow down, Speed Racer! I’m not even sure what my contribution to ‘we’ is. Maybe we should formulate some sort of plan before we jump into the fray? I’m not afraid to admit that I’m an incompetent witch, and until you prove different, you’re not my live-in caballero. You’re just some guy from a taco truck.”

He looked disappointed. “Estele, a moment ago I sensed you believed me and let down your guard. For a minute we were in agreement. It was a huge step toward bonding as allies.”

She waved her hand. “Nix the bonding. Val, you’re a nice guy. You’re good-looking and a great cook, but you need to understand a brujo is the last person on earth I would trust. Drama and weirdness naturally gravitate to me. I don’t need a tricky brujo to lead me into yet even more trouble.”

“So, your weak spot is self-doubt?”

He said it with such certainty. Damn him. “Is that any of your business?”

“Estele, you had a moment of clarity. You trusted me. I felt it, and now you’re talking yourself out of it. I can say from experience that trusting your initial impulse will bring better results in your magic.”

“Sounds like a public announcement from the brujo advisory board.”

His face remained calm. “Be as sarcastic as you like. Say it out loud and burn through your resistance. When you’re ready, we will work together.”

“Your face is so stoic. You really believe we need to fight evil as a team, don’t you?”

“I do. I might add, you owe it to the innocent people in this community to remain open-minded. They’re the ones who will be caught unaware. When we’re finished with the task at hand, you may

formally dismiss me. Should you choose, you'll never have to deal with me again." He extended his hand. "I want you to be brave and honor your instincts. At this moment, we are charged with an important task."

Drawing a deep breath, she sensed Val was right. Part of her wanted to trust him. She couldn't say exactly why; it was more of a feeling, a shiver in her bones. Clasp his hand, she grabbed her purse and scooted out of the booth. "Okay. I'll go with you to the fairgrounds, just to check things out. But I'm not going to walk for blocks along the railroad tracks wearing these shoes. Forget it. Who's driving?"

"We need to take your car."

Terrific. They were doing recon on her dime and the demons, if there were any, would be scratching the paint off her car. "Use my car to hunt demons? Why?"

"Tio Bruno dropped me off. I don't have my truck with me. I couldn't drive separately and keep an eye on you. Until the crisis passes we do everything together, understood?"

"*Everything* everything? You can't possibly mean that."

"I do. Please hand me your car keys."

"Excuse me? I'm capable of driving my own car."

"Very well." His hand moved to the middle of her back and gave her a gentle nudge toward the door. "Go ahead. I stashed my gear behind the bar. I must retrieve it."

She stepped aside and watched as Val approached Sid.

Sid leered. "Hey, brujo. You. Me. The storeroom?" He winked. "At least think about it."

The line of Val's mouth drew taut. "May I have my duffel bag?"

Sid disappeared behind the counter and emerged holding a large bag. "So, tell me the truth." Sid shot her an insinuating look. "Maybe you'd rather take Estele into the back and peel that dress off her?"

Val looked appalled. "Why are the Fae so ridiculously horny? I'm not even going to answer that question."

"Whatever." Sid allowed the bag to drop from his hands onto the bar with a loud *thump*. "Whoops, it slipped."

Claiming the bag, Val frowned. "I hope you didn't break anything."

"If I did"—Sid pouted—"I'll kiss it and make it all better."

Val scowled, turned, and followed Estele outside the lounge. When he saw the VW a look of discouragement crossed his face. "Yours is the teeny car?"

"Yep."

"I might need to buy food and equipment to fight evil."

"How much food and equipment? The back seat is filled with my beauty school supplies and magazines, and the trunk is the size of a bread box, so when you shop think freeze dried and concentrate." She unlocked the passenger side door.

He opened the door, setting the bag behind the seat before climbing in. “We will need to make many trips.”

“Where?”

“We will discuss a detailed battle strategy later. We will work this out together.”

“We, we, we. You sound like one of the three little pigs.” Walking around the front, she opened the driver door and climbed in. “Oh Goddess.” The dashboard was covered in hundreds of tiny sugary footprints. Parking Fairy had partaken of the absinthe and danced up a storm. She turned toward Val, who was settling his big frame uneasily into the seat and fastening the seat belt. “Can you reach the back seat and hand me the packet of wet wipes? My Parking Fairy gets everything so sticky.”

He felt behind the seat. “Here they are.” Handing the packet to her, he leaned forward to examine the dish with its puddle of emerald liquid and grainy mound of partially dissolved sugar. He dunked his fingertip into it and tasted the absinthe. “Sid stocks the good stuff.”

“Sid makes the absinthe himself.”

“I should have guessed. Fae love anything herbal.”

Estele lifted the saucer with care. “I’m sure Parking Fairy has drunk her fill by now and fallen asleep. Technically this is driving with an open container. I better give this back to Sid.”

His knees bumped the dash. “I’ll be here.”

Exiting the car, she hurried back into the Voodoo Hoodoo lounge, being cautious not to slosh sticky absinthe onto her hands. She set it on the counter. “Sid, my Fae’s had all she can handle. She’s probably snoozing in the glove compartment by now.”

Looking mischievous, Sid peered around the corner. “Where’s your Latin lover?”

“He’s not my lover.” She was quick to deny it, but felt a thrill when she said it. “Val’s waiting for me in the car.”

Taking hold of Estele’s wrist, Sid gave it a squeeze. “Be careful, Estele. I jinxed the mojitos hard. Before you arrived, I tried tempting tall, dark, and indifferent to meet me in the storeroom. When that didn’t work I even tried provoking him to fight with me. No go, he didn’t take the bait.” He appeared troubled. “Who says ‘no’ to Sidhe the Fae? See what I mean? The brujo’s not reacting normally.”

Her jaw dropped. “Sid! That’s so wrong. You promised the spell was mild.”

“Yours was. I’d be surprised if you felt anything at all. I cast an XX chromosome hex. It should only affect a male.”

“Why did you do that?”

A look of suspicion hardened Sid’s brow. “I couldn’t read him. I had to do something to bring his guard down. He’s an outsider up to something.”

She braced as a wave of confusion gripped her. “Wait. Are you saying you didn’t cast an attraction spell? I think there was quite a lot of mutual attraction going on between us.”

“I said that as a distraction. You were already feeling attracted to each other. It was so obvious. Why bother with more? I cast a candor spell. I wanted the brujo to open up and tell the truth.”

“Maybe that’s why the conversation was so odd. Val’s got some pretty strange ideas, but he seems okay. He’s a food alchemist. Can you believe it? That guy can really cook.”

Sid leaned close. “What are some of his strange ideas?”

“He asked to sleep at the foot of my bed, and he thinks there’s a vortex of evil brewing beneath the fairgrounds that’s preparing to attack us.”

Sid blanched. “There is! I felt it too. That’s why I was alarmed when a rogue brujo showed up today out of nowhere. I thought he might have something to do with it.”

Estele tapped her hand over her heart. “You felt it too? Why am I always the last to know? Sometimes I feel so incompetent as a witch.”

With urgency, Sid pressed a tiny vial into her hands. “Take this in case you need it. A brujo can be slippery as fucking mercury.”

She stared at the vial with trepidation. “What is it?”

“A tried and true Fae enchantment. It’s the undiluted version of what I snuck into the pitcher of mojitos. A drop passes his lips and he has to tell you the truth. But be careful, this one doesn’t have the XX exclusive factored into it. This potion could affect you too, so don’t consume it.”

“That doesn’t sound kosher.”

“Estele, you’re the one walking off into the night with a brujo you know nothing about. Don’t you think you owe it to yourself to find out what he’s up to?”

She slipped the vial in her purse, her guilty conscience already bugging her. “Okay, but I can’t promise I’ll use it. Are there side effects?”

“Aside from stream-of-consciousness honesty, it can make you sleepy.”

“It might be useful.” She pulled away. “I better go. Val will wonder what’s taking so long.”

With an abrupt move, Sid wrapped his arms around her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Estele, you’re a good person. You always mean well. You’re not incompetent, you’re just unpracticed.”

Her heart pounded. Kind words from Sidhe the Fae? This was a first. “Wow, Sid. Where did that come from? You never say anything nice to anyone.”

“That’s right, and if you tell anybody I did, I’ll deny it and put a hex on their drink. Now go. I suggest you slip big coyote a truth bomb ASAP and find out what he’s up to.”

She walked away, but turned. “You know, Sid, I could just ask Val what he’s up to. He might tell me.”

A hiss of disgust sputtered past Sid’s lips. “Why the Fae world should fall and the human realm rise is a total mystery to me.”

Estele returned to the car. Val tilted his head to see past the strands of beads and clutter she hung from the rearview mirror. He flashed one of his winning smiles.

Opening the driver door, she climbed behind the wheel. “What’s the grin for? A minute ago you looked so serious.”

“You’ve been gone for more than a minute. It gave me a little time to think. I’m not sure that I was clear earlier, but I want you to know I’m not disappointed you’re my ally. It occurred to me that I have might sounded that way. You’re a surprise. A dynamo of a witchlet.”

“Witchlet?” She slid the key in the ignition and started the car. “I hope you’re not equating me to Gidget, the girl midget of witches. That’s not PC. I’m a grown woman. Height is not a consideration in the enchantment community.” She put the VW in gear and reversed out of the parking lot.

“Which way are we going?”

“The fairgrounds are on the other side of the freeway next to the beach. There’s only one narrow road leading in that comes to a dead end. Not a lot of choices.”

“Um.” He looked thoughtful. “It sounds like it would be easy to trap large numbers of people.”

“That’s a cheerful statement.” Driving across the highway overpass, she steered the VW over the railroad tracks. “Most people take a bus or shuttle to the fair and avoid the traffic jam altogether.” They turned right on Seaside Lane and drove past several large beachfront hotels. The sun had set and a fat waxing moon was on the rise.

The sprawling parking lot of the fairgrounds was brightly lit and filled with big rigs circled like a wagon train around the midway. The loud hum and strong scent of diesel generators hung in the air. Teams of carnival personnel worked together with the precision of an insect hive to assemble the largest rides first.

She drove to the edge of the lot and parked. Getting out of the car, she looped her purse over her shoulder and strolled around the front of the car. “I love the county fair. The thought that something could go wrong is awful.”

Climbing out of the car, Val followed her. “That’s why we’re here. Let’s take a look around. Maybe we can prevent a tragedy.” He offered his hand. “If anyone asks what we’re doing here, we’re just a couple walking on the beach. Okay?”

“Who would believe I’d walk on the sand in these shoes?”

“Take them off. I’ll give you a piggyback ride.”

“You want us to goof around like we’re on a fun date? That’s going to feel weird after all the ‘ally’ stuff you told me.”

“It’s the least suspicious thing. Besides, we look like we belong together on a date.”

“We do?” That was buoying. Val was a cut above the type of guys she usually attracted. She clasped his hand. “Okay. Where do we start?”

Lifting the chain over his head, Val removed his necklace and allowed the tiny silver dagger to dangle. With a slow wobble, the blade spun counterclockwise and then pointed for a gravity-defying moment toward a group of men assembling a Ferris wheel. “The strongest reading seems to be coming from over there.”

She scanned the area. “Is the pendulum reacting to the workers or the bubble of malevolence?”

He clasped her hand and took long strides headed toward the heart of activity on the midway. “I

don't know yet. Let's get closer and find out."

Her ankles trembled. "Slow down, Seabiscuit, you need to bring that gallop to a trot. I can't walk that fast."

Val halted until she caught up. "Sorry. I got carried away. There's a tang in the air. Do you feel it?"

She turned her face toward the sea. "No. All I feel is a salt breeze."

"Something's going on. There's ozone in the air. Lots of it. This is definitely the epicenter."

A low rumble like a whale call groaned beneath her feet. Pressure built in her ears until they ached to pop. A ripple passed through the ground and spread outwards. For a moment, it felt as if the solid asphalt of the parking lot had turned to pudding. "Wow! What was that? I definitely felt that!"

Lifting his chin, Val glanced around. "Dark forces are rising to the surface. This is what I've been talking about."

They approached the trucks and crewmen offloading and assembling the carnival rides. The teams of men looked preoccupied as they worked. The shrill whir of power tools was deafening.

"Hey!" Val shouted to a man seated on a forklift who appeared to be waiting for orders. "What's a typical setup? How long does it take to put a Tilt-A-Whirl together?"

The man stared straight ahead with a vacant face and unblinking eyes.

Val persisted. "Has it been a good season? Is fair attendance up?"

The man remained glassy-eyed and unresponsive. Only the tiniest tick of a pulse beneath his ear indicated he was a real flesh-and-blood human and not a carefully crafted wax mannequin.

Leaning closer to study the man's face, Val glanced at her. "What's wrong with him?"

Suddenly the man came to life. He blinked and his mouth opened. "Stand back!" The command was barked as he put the forklift in gear and drove behind a big rig.

"That was odd." Still clasping Estele's hand, Val walked toward a pair of workers kneeling on the ground assembling a steel barricade. The men worked in silent unity. The task appeared to be a simple assembly effort. One man placed a bolt while the other drove the bolt deep with a pneumatic drill. What was remarkable was the uncanny concentration and precision with which the work was accomplished. There were no wasted movements or conversation. No facial expressions. A machine-like rhythm built. The two men were almost breathing in unison, like synchronized swimmers.

Val knelt beside them. "You guys really know what you're doing. How long have you been on the carnival circuit?"

Neither man looked up. Even though they were a couple feet away, the men did not acknowledge them in any way. They continued their work uninterrupted. Place-bolt-drill. Place-bolt-drill....

Not giving up, Val kept at it. "Who owns this outfit?"

Nothing. The men ignored them, continuing to place-bolt-drill like automatons.

She felt a shiver of worry. "Maybe we're the problem?" she muttered. "They don't seem to be able to see or hear us. Do you think it's possible we slipped into another dimension or some other

tricky state of being?”

Val shook his head. “Wow, that’s even crazier than something I would say. Even if we were ghosts whispering on the wind, would this behavior look normal to you?”

“No, but—”

“May I help you?” a stern female voice boomed from behind them.

Estele was so startled she jumped. “Uh!” Turning, she saw a middle-aged woman with her head swaddled in a pink turban paired with a flowing rainbow-hued tie-dyed caftan.

The woman stepped closer. What might have been a beautiful face looked harsh beneath caked makeup and the greenish glow of a carnival sign. “This is a restricted area. If you’re not part of my crew, under contract, and fully insured, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Feeling bold, she glanced at Val. “We’re part of your crew.” She squeezed his hand. “Isn’t that true, honey bear?”

The woman narrowed her Cleopatra-lined eyes. “We have a complete crew. I don’t remember seeing either of you dropping off applications at Luther’s office. Who are you?”

“Estele Esposito....” She stalled. “I’m your new psychic medium.”

The woman shook her head and frowned. “No, you’re not. You’re looking at this fair’s only psychic.” Her voice rose. “I’m Madame Shamansky, the all-seeing eye of destiny.”

Estele pushed ahead on a hunch. “Have you checked with Luther? This is a big county fair. There is definitely room for two mediums.”

Wearing a sour pout, Madame Shamansky picked a bit of crimson polish from her fingernail. “Well if Luther says it’s okay, then that’s how we’ll work it. Just for the record, I prefer you use your own tent. I don’t like sharing the stage. I have only two rules. First rule, don’t forget I’m this outfit’s star psychic—always have been, always will be. I am an awe-inspiring woman of mystery. On the midway, you don’t talk to me. We do not get friendly. Rule number two is don’t forget rule number one. Got it?” She pointed at Val. “You, on the other hand, can get as friendly as you like. Just don’t let Luther know about it.” She winked. “What do you do, handsome? Besides look like a toothpaste ad, that is.”

“I work a food truck. Tacos.”

“Rrrrw.” Madame Shamansky lifted her hand in a mock cat claw. “Sounds yummy. Love me a little Latin spice. I’ll be coming around for a taste. Count on it.” She leered. “Do you have a name to go with those broad shoulders?”

He looked bashful. “Valentine.”

“Be mine!” Madame squealed. “I’ll tell you what. I won’t mention to Luther that you two missed the afternoon crew orientation if you won’t mention to him that I’m a cougar on the prowl. Live and let live, right? Though I have to warn you, when provoked Luther can get somewhat homicidal. You don’t want his anger directed at you. Trust me on that. I watched him go off today on the roadies. Scared them stiff.”

Sensing an opening, Estele blurted, “What did Luther say to the roadies to make them feel threatened?”

Madame tilted her turbaned head. “Wouldn’t you like to know.” Crossing her arms, she glared at Estele. “So. You’re a psychic. Prove it. Go ahead. Give me a reading.”

She quailed. “On you?”

“No, the dinosaur in my pocket. Of course I meant me. Before I let you set up shop on the midway, I want to see what you can do.”

Estele glanced at Val and saw he appeared concerned. “Do you have somewhere we can sit? I do my best readings when I’m relaxed.”

Madame Shamansky shot a sly sideways look at Val. “Let’s go to my trailer. I want you to know where you can find me, day or *night*,” she emphasized. “It’s very comfortable. Plenty of room to stretch out.” With a swish of her caftan, she turned and led them across the asphalt, dodging over electrical cable and scurrying crewmen. “So, are you two an item?”

A long, uncomfortable pause followed.

“Yes,” Val asserted.

“No!” The contradiction flew out of Estele’s mouth at the same moment.

An amused cackle burst from Madame Shamansky. “Yes. No. Which is it?”

Looking at Val for a hint about what to say, she was surprised by the utter neutrality of his poker face. She whispered, “How could we be an item? We just met this evening.”

Madame Shamansky sauntered ahead. “Honey, have you ever heard the saying, ‘Those who hesitate, meditate on the foolish things they regurgitate’?”

Estele stubbed a toe stepping over a thick coil of cable. “What does that mean?”

Madame smirked. “It means you’re going to regret not staking a claim on this dreamboat when you had a chance. That’s my psychic prediction.”

Estele dug deep into her purse, searching for something, anything, she might use as a magical tool to impress Madame Shamansky. Her natural psychic abilities were sharp, but she doubted Madame would enjoy hearing anything truthful she might have to say. She needed a prop or gimmick to work with. Her hand brushed the Heart of Hecate, causing a full-body tingle. At the same moment, her gaze focused on Val. He looked steady and strong. For once she was so grateful to not be facing a challenge alone, as had happened too often in her life. With her fingertips brushing the ruby, it became crystal clear that she was ready for a dependable life partner. Someone she could respect and trust.

Wow, that was unexpected.

Val leaned close as they walked and whispered in her ear, “How are you going to pull this off?”

She turned to glimpse the sparkle in his eyes. “I’ll improvise.”

Val gave her hand a light squeeze. “You’re doing so well.”

“You really think so?”

Madame Shamansky shouted over her shoulder. “I hear whispering. I hope I’m not missing

something naughty.”

Pawing the contents of her bag, Estele groped around. “Nope. I’m just keying in for your reading.” There was no way she’d risk taking the ruby from her purse. Her fingers came to rest on an open pack of gum and the vial Sid had given to her.

A moment of conflict tangled her thoughts. It was totally underhanded and unfair to use Fae enchantment to get the truth out of someone. Then again, this was a serious situation. The safety of San Buena was at stake. Was using Sid’s potion any worse than the times she’d done something similar with a botched hex? Not really. After all, there was a bubble of malevolence rumbling below her feet. If Madame Shamansky was an innocent person, telling the truth wouldn’t hurt her. On the other hand, if she were actively involved in an evil scheme, it would be good to know.

With caution Estele twisted the vial open and allowed a few drops to trickle onto the open pack of gum before capping the vial.

“We’re here.” Madame came to a halt in front of a large trailer with a pair of flirty eyes painted on the side along with purple script lettering that read “The All-Seeing Eye of Destiny.” She turned to confront Estele. “What’s your tagline? We’ll need to make you a sign.”

Sucking in a deep breath, she spoke the first words that came to mind. “Um... ‘Estele—Seer of the Akash.’”

Madame pursed her lips as she opened the trailer door. “‘Seer of the Akash.’ Not bad.” A wave of patchouli incense floated from the trailer. “That will work. Come inside.”

Val hesitated. “Should I wait out here?”

Grabbing Val’s wrist, Madame dragged him toward the steps. “You most definitely need to go inside. Get in there and wait for me on the bed.”

Dutifully, Val stepped into the trailer, stooping to avoid smacking his head.

Estele lingered at the door. Drawing the pack of gum from her purse, she held it up for Madame Shamansky to see. “Madame.” She wrinkled her nose. “What did you have for dinner?”

With a dramatic gesture, Madame Shamansky tipped her face skyward. “Tuna salad on an onion Kaiser roll.”

With a dip of her chin, she offered the gum. “That’s what I thought. You might want to freshen up.”

Reaching for the gum, Madame mouthed the words, “Thank you.” The stick of gum was stripped of its wrapper and chomped between her teeth. She chewed with the same grinding jaw movements as a horse. “Go in.”

Estele climbed the steps with Madame close behind, Shutting the door after she entered.

“I know it’s warm, but I’d like a little privacy.” Madame Shamansky fanned herself. “There’s always some nosy clown hanging around.”

Scanning the trailer, Estele was impressed that it appeared much more spacious on the inside. The compact interior, plain utilitarian kitchenette, and tiny bathroom were decorated in vivid colors and rich textures that lent the space a bohemian vibe.

Val perched on the edge of a foldaway bed draped in purple veils.

“Welcome to Xanadu on wheels.” Madame gnawed on the gum. “This is great gum. Can I have another piece?”

Estele felt a jolt of worry about Fae dosages. “Um... uh, sure.” She pulled the pack from her purse. “Here.”

Madame took another piece.

Val opened his hand. “I’d like one too.”

She recoiled. “No. You wouldn’t like it.”

He nodded. “I’m sure I would.”

Shaking her head, she sat on the bed. “You don’t want this. It’s girly gum.”

“Girly gum?” He thrust his hand out. “Now I insist on trying it.”

“Val, that’s not a good idea.” She shot him a warning stare, but he didn’t take the hint. “I was saving this gum.”

He took the pack from her hand. “I’ll get you more later.” Shucking the wrapper, he folded the stick of gum between his teeth and chewed. “Oh, it is good.”

Biting her lip, she watched in horror as Val chomped the candor-spell-infused gum, adding to the dose of Fae enchantment he’d already imbibed with the mojito.

Madame Shamansky munched away with a dreamy expression on her face. “You know what this gum reminds me of? Those flat boxes of tart candies they used to sell in movie theaters. God, I loved going to the movies when I was a little girl. Back then my dream was to be an actress. Everyone said I was pretty enough. A talent scout told me I looked like a young Ava Gardner. That was back when people knew who Ava Gardner was. I tried acting. Even came close to getting the lead on a few big auditions. The few jobs I got were mostly movie-of-the-week crap, but every now and then I got handed a plum script. I played meaty character parts like ‘woman dies dramatically in elevator’ or ‘bystander crushed during panicked stampede.’ The last job I got was in *The Poseidon Adventure 2*. Not the original with the Shelly Winters swim scene, the other one. Then I met the late Mr. Shamansky and married a carny twice my age. What the fuck was I think—”

The candor spell had kicked in big-time. Estele interrupted. “Are you ready for your psychic reading?”

“No.” Madame was busy chewing. “Who cares about a psychic reading anyway? I already know what’s going to happen to me, and it’s not pleasant. By the way, my real name is Marge. All of a sudden I feel like I just need to talk, air my thoughts. You don’t mind listening, do you?”

Val leaned in. “I feel like I need to talk too. I’m hungry. We skipped dinner, didn’t we? You know what? I think the incense is too strong and it’s giving me a headache.”

She gently hushed him with a gentle nudge. “Let me finish with Marge. Then we can leave and get something to eat.”

Looking as innocent as a five-year-old, Val said, “I think Marge is a nice woman. She’s a little

sad. I feel bad for her.”

Afraid Val would spill the beans, she patted his hand reassuringly. “Val, please let me do all the talking, okay?”

Marge went misty-eyed. “Thank you, Valentine, for being so sweet. I get zero sympathy around here. Especially from those damn clowns! Those nasty bastards. Everyone thinks running a professional carnival is so easy. It’s not! My God, the horrible things I’ve had to endure. I’ve practically sold my soul to Luther.” She clamped her hand over her mouth. “Holy shit, what am I saying. I can’t talk about Luther! It’s not allowed. Why did I even mention him?”

Val smiled at Estele. “The first moment I saw you, walking toward the taco truck, I thought, ‘She’s probably a flake and she’s trying too hard to look like somebody else.’ Then I realized I was looking at my tattoo come to life. I got so excited. It felt like it took forever for you to reach the front of the line. I think the retro thing really works for you. You’re adorable. You know what else I like about—”

Turning toward Val, she pantomimed zipping her lips. “Shush, please.”

The ground rumbled. The trailer shook. A low moan floated past the window.

Marge looked startled. “Was that an earthquake? It seems like we’ve been having a lot of earthquakes all day. Am I the only one noticing them?”

Grabbing Val’s hand, Estele stood. “I think we should leave.”

Bam, bam, bam! A fist pounded on the trailer’s tiny door.

“Who is it?” Marge leaped to her feet.

“It’s me, Sparky,” a gravel voice sounded from outside.

Marge cautiously drew the door open.

A clown with a red nose, blue wig, and a yellow polka-dot jumpsuit stood on the steps. He peered inside the trailer with a mean glare at odds with the happy smile painted around his lips. “The boss wants to talk to you in his office.”

Marge bristled. “Excuse me? Technically, I’m still the boss. Tell Luther I’ll be there in a minute.”

Sparky’s gaze swept over Estele. He looked annoyed. “Luther said now.” He turned and headed into the shadows.

Estele grabbed hold of Val’s wrist and made a move toward the door. “You have important things to do. We’ll be on our way.”

Marge’s face drooped with disappointment. “You’re leaving? Don’t go. I was enjoying the company.”

Val dug his heels in. “I want to stay and visit with Marge. Look at her, she needs someone to talk to.”

“But we have errands to do. Remember?” She coaxed Val out of the trailer. “It was lovely meeting you, Marge. We’ll talk again soon.”

Marge pouted. “If you’re serious about the job, you’ll show up bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Estele was careful not to commit.

Marge waved them out. “You’d better go. Luther has the patience of a two-year-old. I have to lock the trailer. I remember a time when I didn’t have to.” After securing the door, she hurried away.

Estele and Val stepped into the warm evening air, stirred by a faint breeze. Beneath blinding bright lights, workmen buzzed around the fairgrounds with forklifts and power tools, bringing the midway to life.

Marge walked toward a hulking black trailer with red flames painted on the sides. Climbing the steps, she knocked. The trailer door opened. A weird vibe rolled through the air like a silent shockwave. It was dark inside the trailer, and impossible to see more than a silhouette of a large man, as broad as a bull, blocking the doorway. Marge entered and the door shut.

Estele pulled Val behind Madame Shamansky’s trailer and peered across the midway. “I couldn’t see very well, but did that guy look human to you? He’s built like an Orc. I didn’t even see a neck on him.”

Val’s nostrils flared. “Something about Luther is off.” His gaze focused on Estele. “I’d sure like to unzip your dress. You look soft.”

“Val, the less you say right now the better off you’ll be. I have a confession. The gum was sprinkled with—”

Sparky approached them and stood with his hands on his hips, frowning in a clownishly exaggerated expression of outrage.

Estele acknowledged him. “What do you want?”

The clown stomped his huge red shoe on the ground, making a loud *slap*, while holding up two fingers. He stood frozen, in silence, glaring at them.

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell us.” She took a guess what the two fingers meant. “Go in peace?”

In a burst of agitation, Sparky fluttered his arms in the air, stomped his foot, and again held up two fingers.

“I get it!” Val jumped in. “He wants to play charades. First word has two parts?”

Sparky bobbed his head idiotically in agreement.

“All right!” Val cheered. “Two words—go!”

Holding up one finger, Sparky continued.

“First word!” Val shouted.

Sneering while making obscene motions with his hips, Sparky pantomimed a classic dirty dog maneuver of humping an invisible partner.

“Eww.” Estele looked away. “I don’t want to see that. Now I need eye bleach.”

“Copulate!” Val blurted.

The clown scowled. His hip-pounding motions grew more vulgar.

“Screw?” Val sounded uncertain. “Naughty monkey mambo? Fuck! It’s fuck, isn’t it?”

Sparky nodded like a fool. He held up two fingers.

“Second word?” Val blurted.

The clown pressed his flattened palms together and allowed one to slide past the other and drop.

“Fall?” Val imitated the motions. “Slip?”

The motion was repeated, but this time Sparky allowed the top hand to slide across before lifting into the air.

“Fly? Float? Take off?” Val got very animated.

Sparky pointed in approval.

“I get it.” Val clapped. “The words are *fuck off!*”

More wild head bobbing from Sparky, followed by two more raised fingers. He stomped behind a stack of pallets and returned holding a cream pie. Menace burned in his eyes.

“Run!” Estele squealed. “The bastard’s going to throw a pie at us!”

Sparky held up a palm as an indication to halt. He then calmly set the pie on the ground, squatted low, and allowed himself to plop onto it with a loud *squish*. Cream oozed out of the plate and onto his baggy pants.

She was perplexed. “What the hell does that mean? Is he threatening to squash us with his ass?”

“No! I think he’s showing us that he killed the pie.”

Sparky’s face lit with joy as he pointed enthusiastically and made a spinning motion with his fingers.

Val squinted. “Rhymes with pie?”

More clownish head bobbing from Sparky.

“Okay, I get it now.” Val rubbed his hands together. “The message is fuck off and die. Or fuck off and die—you’re going to be squashed like pies?” He shook his head. “Maybe he just doesn’t want us to come back to the fairgrounds?”

Sparky pinched his red nose and made it *beep, beep* in the affirmative.

“Aha. I was right.” She searched her purse for the hexed gum. “Under threat of death, the psychotic clown doesn’t want us coming back. I see nothing ominous or suspicious about this message, do you?” She offered Sparky a piece of gum. “Live a little, Bozo. Thanks for the heads-up.”

Accepting the stick of gum, Sparky turned and duck waddled into the shadows.

“That was weird.” She stared. “Do you think Luther sent him to scare us?”

Val shuddered. “Clowns creep me out. When I was a kid, I used to hide from them at birthday parties. Why am I telling you this?”

“Maybe we’ve done enough recon for tonight. Val, I need to tell you something.” Taking his hand, she led him toward the car. “Let’s leave before you start telling people the truth.”

He walked at her side. “Why would I do that?”

“I did something foolish.” Steering him past a crew of workmen who ignored them, she hustled him across the midway. “On my way out of the Voodoo Hoodoo lounge, Sid slipped me a vial of

candor spell. I sprinkled a few drops on the pack of gum. That's why Marge opened up and started talking like she's my new best friend. You consumed some of the enchantment too. I'm so sorry. I tried to warn you."

He looked hurt. "I came to San Buena as an ally to you. I want to protect you, so you can do your job. Why would you feel the need to hex me? Have I presented myself as dishonest or untrustworthy?"

Now she felt terrible. "No. But you're a stranger, and strange things have been happening. In my book, being a brujo earns you double points for suspicious motives."

"Really?" His brows dipped. "Until today, I had no idea brujos had such a negative image. We need better PR, maybe a public service announcement? How long will the candor spell last?"

"I have no idea. It's likely to last a few hours."

His gaze fixed on her. "Then you should take advantage of it."

Arriving at the car, she unlocked the passenger door. "What do you mean?"

"Test me. Ask me questions while I'm under the influence. I'm not afraid of an honest answer."

"Val, I didn't intend for you to fall victim. You seem like an okay guy. I was hoping the *all-seeing eye of destiny* might have something helpful to say about matters at the fairgrounds. I definitely felt the wicked vibe. There are some seriously odd things going on here. The roadies are acting like zombies. Not one of them has even turned to look at us. And what's with that Luther character? I get the feeling he's the one we need to know more about."

Standing close, Val touched her arm. "Estele, I'd like to know more about you. Would you be angry if I kissed you?"

She leaned breathless against the car. "That's not a good idea."

He brushed his fingertips against her cheek. "Why? It seems like a good idea to me."

"Because there's a great big shadowy figure stomping toward us and I think it's Luther."

Chapter 5

A tingle of electricity crackled in the air. One by one the generators ground to a halt. The lights in the parking lot dimmed. All machinery stopped. The fairgrounds went dark and silent. Work stopped. The rumble of heavy footsteps like those of a stone giant shook the ground.

A shiver of primal fear rippled down Val's spine. "Get behind me." With a firm shove he put himself between Estele and the unknown. Staring into the shadows, he fought a sense of rising panic. "Where is it? I can hear it but I can't see it."

Estele clung to his back, quaking. Her warm presence would have been a treat were it not for the feeling of dread.

"With the lights out," she whispered, "I don't see it anymore. A minute ago, I thought I saw movement near the trailers. It was a massive shapeless hulk."

His furtive glances delivered no useful information. He was here to protect Estele and he was not doing a good job. The ground beneath his feet trembled as if heavy equipment was moving earth. "The moon's up and we're standing in an open parking lot. If it's as big as it sounds, why can't we see it?"

Estele pointed over his shoulder. "Something's lurking in the shadows behind the trailers. I think it's avoiding the moonlight."

Boom, boom boom....

The asphalt beneath their feet flexed.

Attempting to sound calm, he mumbled, "Do you have the car keys in your hand?"

"Yes." Estele's voice cracked.

Stealthily opening the passenger door, he climbed in. "Get in the car and start the engine—now."

Taking mincing steps as quick as her high heels and tight dress would allow, Estele scurried to the driver side. She unlocked the door and leaped in. Staring out the windshield with eyes wide, she gasped. "Whatever that thing is, it's headed straight toward us. I keep thinking I can see something, but it doesn't quite take shape."

Waaaahhhh! A screeching howl like a desert wind roared toward them. The loose suspension on the VW made the car sway.

She turned the engine over.

In front of them, a mass of black smoke congealed in the air, taking the shape of a charging beast

with two horns atop its head. The uncanny creature pawed the asphalt then thundered toward them, making the ground shake.

“Go, go, go!” he shouted.

“Holy crap! What is that thing?” Estele hit the gas and cranked the steering wheel. With an explosive backfire, the car sputtered in a half circle. The smoke beast overtook them, slamming into the VW with a loud growl and a burst of noxious-smelling sulfur. The cab of the car was engulfed by a murky haze that left them coughing. A second later the black smoke vanished, leaving a foul rotten egg scent behind.

“Good Goddess!” Estele wheezed. “Roll down the windows. Whatever that was, it’s worse than a fart from Hell.”

Gagging on the nasty fumes, Val opened the window and fanned the smell away. “If there was any doubt before about the presence of evil at this location, it’s gone now. We know with certainty that dark forces are at work here.”

Her hands trembled on the wheel. She made a few erratic zigzags as she drove across the parking lot toward the exit. “What a stench! I’m going to have to wash my hair and burn this dress.”

“I’ll help you do both.” He said it too eagerly. The thought of stepping into a warm shower with Estele to massage fragrant suds through her hair sounded amazing. The task would be performed with intense devotion and dragged out as long as possible. It had been so long since he’d touched anyone tenderly. Alchemical training and preparations for first flight—or, more accurately, first flight with an ally—had demanded all his energy and time. Now here she was, his new ally, cute, curvy Estele, the Wiccan star.

She looked annoyed as she steered onto Seaside Lane. “Why are you looking at me like that? We just escaped a stampeding Hell beast and you look like you’re having horny thoughts.”

He glanced away but it did nothing to stop his X-rated thoughts about Estele. “I’m sorry. I can’t help it. It’s been ages since I’ve been around a woman I found so attractive and even longer since I got—” The VW backfired like a shotgun as they crossed the freeway overpass and thankfully drowned out his confession.

“It’s okay.” Her tone softened. “I’m not angry, I’m just surprised. That thing at the fairgrounds got me spooked. Did you feel how much power it summoned? How are we going to fight something like that?”

Had his training prepared him for anything of this magnitude? No. He was better prepared to be a sous-chef than to attempt to do the work of a saint driving menace from the land. He hung his head with a sigh.

“Please tell me that sigh of defeat is not your answer?” she chirped. “You dragged me into this. I can’t just forget what I saw. We need a plan. What are we going to do?”

Turning toward the main business district, they approached a small store with a neon sign that read “Liquor King.” Its flashing gold crown shone like a beacon.

Estele pulled over and stopped. “Oh I forgot. I have to buy rum.”

Still shaken, he looked over his shoulder to assure himself a smoke beast wasn’t sneaking up behind them. “Now? Could it possibly wait?”

“I can’t go home without it.” Looking annoyed, she dug through her purse, retrieved her phone, and clicked the screen. “While we’re here, I’m calling my friend Fredi. She’s got crazy-brilliant Wiccan skills and she’ll know what to do.” She paused. “Hi, Fredi! I’ve got you on speaker.”

“Estele?” Fredi sounded cagey. “Is everything okay? Why am I on speaker?”

She leaned back in the driver seat. “I’m sitting outside Liquor King and I have a brujo in the car with me—”

Fredi gasped. “A brujo? Seriously? Are you all right? This isn’t a kidnap situation, is it?”

With cherry-red lips pursed, Estele shot Val a sideways glance. “No, nothing like that, but we are facing some challenging issues.”

The long pause before Fredi spoke betrayed her wariness. “What sort of issues?”

“The brujo is under the influence of a candor enchantment.”

“Estele, did you cast the spell?” Fredi’s disapproval was clear.

“No!” Estele waved a dismissive hand through the air. “Cross my heart. This is one of Sid’s concoctions. I gotta say it was subtle and came on fast. He had no idea what hit him. Sid’s craftsmanship is faultless. Hats off to the Fae.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

She rolled her eyes. “My new friend sort of blurted that he was here to suppress evil and I’m his magical ally or something like that and there’s a bubble of malevolence welling under the fairgrounds coming to kill us all.”

“Whoa! Slow down.” Fredi’s voice rose. “Bubble of malevolence? What does that even mean?”

“It was freaky!” Estele squeaked. “I experienced it firsthand. This dark force literally made the earth shake, then took the shape of a devil bull and overwhelmed my car’s interior with a gagatrocious fart smell.”

“Your night sounds rather challenging,” Fredi drawled. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Suffering Circe! Fredi, you don’t believe me, do you?”

“Estele, I believe some of it. You mentioned some weird stuff. The hellacious fart smell? I’m hoping it’s a case of embarrassing misunderstanding and not that Hades has busted its front gate and accidentally released its wickedest inmates.”

Val shrugged. “It wasn’t me. I’m under a candor spell. If I did it I’d have to say so.”

“Ooh, who’s Mr. Velvet Voice?” Fredi’s tone instantly softened.

“That’s the brujo!” Estele grew more excited as she spoke. “Fredi, meet Valentine Del Toro. He’s an abracadabra with a saber.”

“*Alquimista de sabor*,” Val gently corrected Estele. “An alchemist of flavor.”

“A food wizard?” Fredi almost shrieked. “Oh my Goddess, I’ve always wanted to meet one of

you guys! This is so exciting. Where did you do your apprenticeship?"

At least Fredi seemed impressed with him. Too bad Estele didn't feel the same way. "The highlands of Oaxaca," he said softly.

Fredi squealed with delight. "My grandparents are from Oaxaca! The food is good, isn't it? Do you know how to make the seven molés sauces?"

He mustered his most dignified tone. "Yes, I do."

"I can't wait to tell Gus. I've turned him into a molé addict."

Estele spoke loudly. "Fredi, I'm going to interrupt to ask you directly, can you help me break Sidhe's candor enchantment or not?"

Fredi paused. "It depends how the enchantment was cast."

"Val got a double dose. The first was slipped into a Cuban mojito and the second was a concentrate from a vial that I dripped onto some wintergreen gum."

"Both were minty products?" Fredi sounded all business.

"Yes," Estele said.

"Well then you're going have to use mint to counteract the spell. Treat like with like."

Estele's brows met. "Fredi, don't force me to figure it out. I might screw it up. Just tell me exactly what to do and I'll do it."

Fredi spoke slowly and clearly. "You're already at Liquor King, right? Pick up a bottle of peppermint schnapps, or a box of chocolate peppermint patties, and cast a hex-vex-redirect on it. Just don't overdo it."

Clapping her hands, Estele cheered. "Fredi, you're a genius!"

"Thank you, I do my best. There's something else you said that was odd."

"Gosh." Estele fussed with the strap on her shoe. "I say a lot of odd things. Which one are you referring to?"

"You said the dark force took the shape of a bull and overwhelmed your car?"

Estele drew her purse protectively under her arm "Yeah, I did."

"Well doesn't 'Del Toro' mean bull?"

"Oh, you're right." Estele wrinkled her nose. "Wow, Fredi, I just got the chills."

"That means the dark force or whatever it was you encountered at the fairgrounds knows Val's name. It might have been a taunt."

Estele glanced at Val. "Fredi's right. How do you explain that?"

The knowledge that he was way out of his depth sank in and struck his confidence hard. "I can't."

Slipping the key out of the ignition, Estele dropped the key ring into her purse. "Thanks, Fredi. I'm going to sign off and go inside the store."

"I hope what I had to say will be useful. Call me tomorrow if you need me. Good night." Fredi hung up.

Estele dropped her phone into her purse. "See what I mean about Fredi being smart? She's sort of

my guiding light. I want to be just like her when I grow up.”

Val looked at her liquid eyes and delicate face. “Estele, you are a grown woman.”

“I meant when my magic matures. I’d like to be more helpful and less dreadful to the general public.”

He thought about her statement. She didn’t look like public enemy number one. Why would she refer to herself that way? What had the poor girl done to cause such a lack of self-confidence? “It will come with time.”

Her stomach growled. “Oops.” She patted her belly. “It sounds like an angry raccoon.”

Val laughed. “I’m hungry too. I see a market across the street. Why don’t I get some groceries and make us dinner?”

She blinked. “You’d cook for me? Wow, okay. This is sort of a first.”

Leaning into the back seat, he grabbed the duffel bag and unzipped it.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He reached into the bag, dug deep, and pulled out a gray-green bundle of twigs lashed together with white thread.

She stared in confusion. “Please tell me that’s not dinner.”

“It’s not.” He lifted the bundle to eye level. “It’s a sage wand. We’ve had a brush with dark forces. Before we go near others, I’m going to cleanse us. The smoke will release any lingering evil residues and neutralize the brimstone odor.”

“I’m all for that.” She depressed the car’s lighter, waited for it to heat, and handed it to Val. “Light up. My grandmother burned sage too. Every time she and my mother had a fight, she’d smudge the house. A lot of sage got burned. I think she bundled dried lavender into the mix too.”

Val held the red-hot lighter to the dry sage and blew on it. The embers lit immediately and glowed orange at the tip. He mumbled a few sacred words while fanning a cloud of fragrant white smoke in her face.

Coughing, Estele drew back. “Boy, that wad of twigs puts out heaps of smoke.”

“It’s balancing.” He waved the smoldering wand over her head and around her shoulders. “I gathered and dried the leaves myself.” He puffed on the sage. Copious amounts of smoke billowed into the air. The interior of the VW filled with an opaque haze.

Glancing over Estele’s shoulder, he saw someone walking toward them. Seen only in silhouette, a large man approached the car and rapped his knuckles on the window.

Estele rolled the window down and gasped a breath of fresh air. “Hello, Officer.”

The police officer was a young, clean-cut man. His nostrils flared as he leaned closer. “What are you smoking?”

She answered with confidence. “Officer, we’re not smoking. We’re smudging away the evil that stunk us up at the fairgrounds.”

“Seriously?” The officer wrinkled his nose as he tugged on a pair of disposable gloves. “May I

see what you're 'not' smoking?"

Val handed the officer the sage wand.

The officer sniffed it. "Whatever. It smells harmless, but you are parked in front of a public no-smoking zone. Would you please extinguish the 'smudge' and move on? The owner of the liquor store has already received a complaint." He returned the wand to Val.

Estele smiled at the policeman. "Thank you." The moment the officer walked away, she rolled up the window and turned toward Val. "If you're going to make us dinner, why don't we go straight to the market? I can buy peppermint patties there, or Thin Mints." A dreamy expression washed over her. "Or chocolate mint ice cream. Honestly, I could have ice cream for dinner and be totally okay with it."

"Don't you need to buy rum?"

"Damn. I almost forgot about the captain. He's probably rooting through my underwear drawer right now."

"What?" He had no idea what she was talking about and was beginning to question the whole ally-prophecy thing in general. "Who's the captain?"

"Never mind." She reinserted the key into the ignition and turned the engine over. It chirped. Estele put the car in reverse and did a haphazard three-point turn out of the parking lot. Stomping on the gas, she drove over a row of cement berms, then crossed a double yellow line, interrupting two fast-moving lanes of traffic as they poured off the freeway.

His mouth gaped in a silent scream. The headlights of oncoming cars swerving to avoid a collision left him paralyzed. Car horns blared their disapproval. He sank lower in the seat. "You just did a highly illegal maneuver in front of a cop! What were you thinking?"

She pulled into the market's parking lot and checked the rearview mirror. "The policeman's gone. I don't see him. Why is everybody honking?"

With eyes closed, he willed himself to not yell in her face, "What the hell is wrong with you?" Since he was a boy, he'd always been the serious student and champion of order and tradition in a chaotic world. Why had fate paired him with Estele? Yes, she was super cute, but she was also a disaster ready to implode. Could this be a test?

Opening the car door, he stood slowly on stiff legs. He was far too big for her damn car.

Estele got out of the VW and strolled toward the market's automatic doors.

He followed. A burst of cool air greeted them.

Once inside the store, she looked around. "This isn't my regular market, but I'm pretty sure they have a liquor department." Glancing at him, she paused. "Do you need a basket?"

There was a row of carts jammed together. Taking hold of one, he fought to break it loose from the pack.

"Are you going to *shop* shop?" Her brow rose. "Should I just go and get what I need?"

Struggling to compose himself and his conflicted feelings, he shook his head. "We better stick

together.”

“Okay, caballero.” She shrugged. “But it would be a lot faster to do our errands separately.”

He pushed the cart down the first aisle. “More dangerous too.”

Her hand brushed the cart. “How so?”

Before he spoke, he took a look around to make no one was within earshot. “My best guess is we’re only half a mile from the fairgrounds.” He pointed to the floor. “The bubble of malevolence is practically under our feet. Just because we don’t see anything out of the ordinary doesn’t mean it’s not there and we’re safe.”

She hunted through her purse, looking for something. “What are you expecting to happen?”

Good question. What did he expect? “I don’t know.”

“Let’s start with an easier question.” She steered the cart into another aisle. “What are you making for dinner?”

“What sort of kitchen do you have?”

Estele picked up a box of kids’ cereal and read the label. “Oh it’s a gorgeous kitchen. Steel appliances and black granite countertops. There’s a nice view of the ocean as well.”

“I meant what sort of equipment have you got?”

“A coffeemaker, a cookie sheet, forks, spoons, a couple steak knives, bowls, and a large saucepan.”

“That’s it?”

“Oops, I forgot the blender. That’s all I need. I don’t really cook.”

He was scandalized. He had no idea what to prepare and decided he’d better keep it simple. “What do you want?”

“After being chased by a smoke demon, comfort food sounds good.”

She eyed all the junky kids’ treats in the aisle, and for some reason it made him grin. “What’s your idea of comfort food? Please don’t say Froot Loops.”

“My grandmother used to make me a big bowl of pozole after school. I loved it.”

Estele looked so wistful as she said it, his heart opened to her just a bit more. He loved his grandmother too. She was an excellent cook and his inspiration for his current career as an *alquimista de sabor*. “You love your grandmother, don’t you?”

“I did. I do.” Her chin dipped. “My abuela Lena raised me. She passed away almost three years ago and I’ve sort of been drifting since.” She huffed a deep breath. “Not that I wasn’t drifting before.”

“Things could get better.”

“Yeah, right. I’m psychic, you know. I can clearly see what’s right or wrong for others and if their relationships are going to pan out or not. It never fails, except where my own life is concerned. I have zero inner guidance. It’s like I’m living inside one big blind spot.”

Estele brushed her fingertips across the tattoos that covered one arm. “After my grandmother passed, the grief was bad. She was like my mother, roommate, and best friend rolled into one. All of

a sudden I was on my own. I wanted her with me, always, so I got her story tattooed on my arm.” She pointed. “See those dates hidden inside the heart? Each of those is important. All the magical symbols stand for the sort of beneficent magic she practiced. Lena always thought Betty Paige was so pretty, so I even started wearing my hair like Betty. After a lot of pain and effort, the memorial sleeve was finished. Only then I remembered that my abuela hated tattoos.” She threw her hands into the air. “See what I mean? I’m hopeless.”

“But you did it from your heart, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re definitely not wrong or hopeless. It’s just how you do things.” He paused. “By the way, I’m making pozole for dinner.”

A sun-bright smile burst across her face. “Thank you. I’d love that.”

Impulsively, he rolled up his sleeve and displayed his pinup girl. “As you can see, I’m proud of my ink. No judgment from me.”

Estele studied the portrait of his “ally.” “Excellent work. The artist is so talented.” She leaned closer. “What do the initials E.E.E. stand for?”

“Initials?” Val looked down to see what she was talking about. Shocked, he saw the script letters E.E.E. clearly displayed across his pinup girl’s snug blouse. He’d spent countless hours gazing at the damn tattoo and had never seen them. “What the—” He stared, then licked his finger and tried to rub the letters away. They didn’t smear. “Those weren’t there this morning. I’ll be damned. What’s going on?”

“Oh well.” Estele rolled her eyes. “E.E.E. is not so bad. I can think of worse initials to have tattooed on my skin. Just to put it in perspective, it could have been P.U.”

He turned the cart down a so-called international foods aisle stocked with ramen noodles and soy sauce. “I’m looking for hominy.”

She pointed to a bottom shelf. “They sell it in sixty-four-ounce cans.”

The monster-sized can was loaded into the cart. “Too bad we’re not cooking for a school cafeteria. I wonder if they sell aluminum soup pots here.”

“I’m sure they do in the baking supply aisle.”

Squatting, he took hold of the can and hefted it into the cart. “Where’s the spice aisle?”

With eyes bulged, she looked blank. “I have no idea.”

Estele wasn’t even trying to be logical or helpful. She tested his patience, so he decided to test her. “Are you sure? Think about it. Use your skills.”

A more serious expression crossed her face. She closed her eyes and appeared to tune in to her thoughts. “Aisle four. They have soup pots too. I saw them in my mind’s eye.”

“Good work.” A sense of relief washed over him. Maybe there was a way to tap into Estele’s latent talents. “You answered too quickly the first time. Slow down and check in with yourself.”

An uneasy laugh burst free of her. “Yeah, right. People are going to wait for me to come to a

decision? I don't think so."

"Why not? Especially if you're right." He turned down aisle four. "Look." He pointed to a display of cookware. "Soup pots and spices. Proof you know what you're doing."

"Cool." She appeared unsettled by her success, and he couldn't figure out why.

He selected the largest lidded pot and headed toward the spices. Colorful bags of dried chilies, ground cumin, and oregano were tossed into the cart. It was safe to assume she didn't have anything on hand, so he added a few staples. Pushing the cart further down the aisle, he stopped to pick up several cartons of chicken stock. "I prefer to make it from scratch, but what the hell. This is a comfort food emergency. I need carrots and onions too."

Estele pointed over her shoulder. "That way."

"Psychic guess?"

"No. I saw stacks of produce."

He steered the basket toward pyramids of cantaloupes and limes and added some fresh fruit to the cart. Onions, carrots, fresh garlic, and cilantro were selected next.

She grinned. "Looks so homey, like real grocery shopping should. My basket never looks like that."

"I need a few more things. What about breakfast?"

Surprise registered on her face. "What about it?"

"We'll be hungry in the morning, and I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a tough day. Another trip to the fairgrounds. More recon. I should get some eggs."

"Eggs? I usually just have coffee, which I have plenty of." She glanced up at him. "You're really spending the night at my house?"

"Yes. For your protection."

She scanned the contents of the cart. "Gosh, we're buying a lot of stuff. If you're going to make pozole, don't forget the carnitas. We should swing by the butcher case."

"Point the way."

Standing at the front of the cart, she pulled it toward the back of the store like a tugboat guiding a cargo ship safely into harbor. "Ah, the liquor aisle. I'll get some rum."

He reached for a quality brand. "Dark, white, spiced rum?"

"I don't think it matters." She shrugged. "It's not for drinking. The captain's only going to sniff it."

Sniff it? What the hell was that about? "Okay. You choose."

She selected a pint bottle and added it to the rest of their groceries. "Let's get the dark."

He was unclear on who this person was and it occurred to him that it might turn into a security problem. "Who is the captain?"

"My roommate."

"Trustworthy?"

"Not a bit. I can't turn my back on my things for a minute, but he is sort of sweet."

The captain's presence, whoever he was, was an added complication in an already tricky situation. Why had he not considered this obstacle sooner? "How will the captain react to you bringing me home?"

"He'll be shocked of course. The captain's old-school."

He smelled the unmistakable ammonia-tinged scent of seafood long before he saw it. At this time of night in a neighborhood market, the selections were picked over. Several whole sea bass lay across the shaved ice, their glassy eyes staring into space. The butcher's case had empty spots. A whole pig's head sat on a tray with its snout open as if it were grinning.

"No, no, no." Estele wagged her finger in front of the head. "We are not taking the piggy-head home with us. It would give me nightmares."

"Don't worry. I'll get some ground pork." He rang the service bell and waited. No one came. "Maybe they're closed?"

"Here's some ground pork." She reached into a refrigerated case. "This will work."

"It's better fresh." He leaned over the counter. "Hello, is anyone there?"

In the back room, the lights flickered and went black.

She looked around. "Are we the only people in the store? We are. There's no one at the checkout stand. This place is deserted. That's weird."

A scuttling sound in the back room grabbed his attention. "What's that?"

"I don't know." She sounded scared. "I can't see anything back there. Sounds like a giant rat flopping around on the floor."

"It's not a rat." The hairs on his neck stood on end. He took hold of Estele's arm and slowly moved away from the case. "Look."

The sea bass were flopping back and forth on the mounded ice. Their mouths gaped as if gulping air. The pig head opened its eyes, pitched its ears back, and squealed a hideous screech.

"Holy pork!" Estele screamed in horror and staggered back. "The meat case has been reanimated! Run for your life!"

From the shadows, a clown in a blue polka-dot suit with green hair appeared from behind the case. A smeary red grin split his face in two before he grabbed Estele's wrist. "Come with me!"

She resisted. "Val, help me!"

With a hard yank, the clown knocked Estele off-balance and dragged her behind the counter. She thrashed wildly, trying to escape. "Let me go, asshole clown!"

Val threw a couple punches, but the clown dodged them with ease, as if he knew in advance where each punch was headed and had all the time in the world to step aside.

In desperation, he picked up a sea bass and used it to smack the clown's fluffy wig. *Splop, splop*. The fish made a horrible wet sound on contact with the clown's head.

The clown was struck across the face and stumbled to the floor, landing on his hands and knees. His body convulsed and contorted as his human shape morphed into something animal-like, and then

he raced away on all fours like a rat scurrying into the night.

This was like his worst nightmare come to life. Val tossed the fish back onto the ice and knelt at Estele's side. "Are you all right?"

Her face was pale and her eyes wide. She pushed up from the floor and stood on wobbly legs. "What the hell just happened?"

He scanned the market. It was eerily silent. "We have to get out of here."

She rubbed her wrist. "What a grip that creep had! That hurt."

His instant response was guilt. He'd screwed up. Protecting Estele was his sacred duty, and he was doing a piss-poor job of it. With a gentle hand on her back, he guided her forward and pushed the cart with the other. "Keep walking. I'll leave a note on the register."

"We're not going to pay?"

"There's no one here to give the money to. Hurry. I don't want to stay here a second longer than we have to."

"You mean we're just going to walk out the door with a cart full of groceries?"

"Yes."

"That's looting."

"It's practical. Look around. There's no one here. Do you want to wait at the check stand for the clown to return?"

She shuddered. "No. I've had enough of that jacked up jester."

He stopped at a cashier station and scribbled a quick note on a pad.

"Are you mad? What are you doing?"

The pen was running out of ink. What else could go wrong? "Leaving my name and phone number."

"You're volunteering your personal information? Don't mention me. Believe it or not, I don't have a criminal record, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"I'm sure we're on a surveillance camera. Hopefully, the psycho clown will show up too. Don't worry, I'll return tomorrow and pay for everything."

They passed a candy display. "Ooo. Junior Mints." She tossed a box in the cart. "What the hell, I need them. We're probably already in a lot of trouble anyway."

"Why should we be in trouble?" He burst through the automatic doors and hustled the cart into the parking lot. "We were shopping and minding our own business. Bozo was the one who assaulted you. We're the ones who should be calling the cops, except I don't think they'll believe us."

Chapter 6

Running in high heels from violent clowns with stolen groceries—could the day get any crazier? Even by her standards, this was a new low. Estele’s wrist ached where the freak bozo had grabbed her, and despite the balmy evening, she shivered from nerves.

She unlocked the passenger door while keeping a wary eye on Val. “Unload that cart as fast as you can. I need to go home.”

Val brought the cart to a halt. “What was that look for?”

Without meaning to sound snappish, she did. “A disembodied pig’s head screamed at us, and you beat a man to the ground with a fish. I’m a little weirded out right now and I feel like I need a shower.”

He sniffed his shirt. “And a change of clothes.” Packing as many small items as possible into the soup pot, he thrust it in the back seat. Everything else was tossed behind the seat.

Opening the driver side, Estele slipped behind the wheel and slumped forward.

Val pushed the empty cart aside and climbed into the VW. His knees bumped the console. “I know what your car reminds me of. It’s like flying economy.”

As he buckled his seat belt, Val stopped to examine her wrist. His eyes filled with concern. “Good God, you’re bruised.” He brought her wrist to his lips and gave it a gentle kiss. “Poor thing, you’re shaking too. I promise, if I ever catch that clown, I’ll make him sorry.”

His expression was so genuine she paused and allowed it to soak in. No one looked at her that way. It was wonderful and unsettling, but with a priceless ruby in her purse this probably wasn’t the time to develop soft feelings toward a brujo. She had to remain on guard. “Would you even recognize that guy if you saw him again? I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t. You can’t randomly grab clowns off the fairgrounds. What if you get the wrong one?”

He shook his head. “That bastard had no business grabbing you.” His brows sank as he looked at her like she was something fragile set in harm’s way. “Are you sure you’re good to drive? You’re pale and you might be in shock.” He unfastened his seat belt. “Switch places with me. I’ll drive.”

“Wait.” Could this be a brujo trick to take control? How easy would it be to pretend to care, earn her trust, then play into all her little-girl fantasies of having a strong man in her life? She’d always longed for a protector, but never dared admit it. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

He picked up her purse and moved it toward the back seat.

“Stop!” She panicked when his hand lingered near the zipper. What if the ruby glowed and gave itself away and he looked at it? Griselda had entrusted her to defend it. “I want to keep it in my lap.”

“While you drive?” The purse hovered midair. His crooked smile was all too charming. “It’s a big bag, and it looks like it’s ready to slide to the floor and get caught beneath the brake pedal.”

“It won’t.” She firmly took hold of her purse and set it in her lap. When she turned to grab her seat belt, it plopped onto the gearshift. Sheepishly, she set it back.

He untangled the purse strap from the shift. “Are you sure about this? I can hold it on my lap. Safe and sound.”

“Don’t touch it!” Damn. The only thing she’d accomplished was to call attention to her purse. When would she learn to play it cool? She gathered it close.

“What are you being so protective of? What have you got in there, more sneaky spells? Perhaps a sleeping philter to knock me out with?”

Suddenly the whole incident felt terribly awkward and she was full of regrets that it had ever come up. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Actually, you would.” He stared straight ahead. “You dribbled a candor spell on the gum.”

“The spell wasn’t aimed at you. I did try to warn you. Sidhe was just looking out for me in his own ill-advised way.”

He settled uneasily on the seat and made the springs squeak. “I’m here to protect and assist you. Fate has paired us together. I wish you would trust me.”

She waved her hand in front of his face. “Earth to Val! We just met. My trust doesn’t come easily, especially where a brujo is concerned. Slow down, dude.”

Val glanced at her sideways. His keen dark eyes reflected the colorful glow of a neon sign. For several tense moments, unsaid words built behind taut lips like water behind a dam. “What can I do to earn your trust?”

“I don’t know.” Inserting the key, she turned the ignition. The VW rumbled. Being more cautious than usual, she waited until she had the advantage of a green light to pull into her lane. “It’s not a check-this-box type of question. All I know is my weird day got ten times weirder after you came onto the scene.”

“I could say the same thing about you.” His expression softened. “For the sake of San Buena, let’s try to get along and figure out this situation.”

She hit the gas and the car sputtered only slightly faster. “I’ll try.”

“You’ll succeed. What would help in the trust department? I’m still under the effects of the candor spell. I have to tell the truth. Ask me questions and I’ll do my best to answer them.”

Tall, dark, and confident, Val looked like the sort of man women chased. “Okay cray-cray caballero. Are you currently dating anyone? Hold on! Strike that. How many women are you juggling?”

He laughed. “None. Cross my heart. I’m not seeing anyone. God knows I’m ready to. During the last two years of my training in the highlands of Oaxaca, I had to commit 100 percent. The opposite sex was strictly off-limits. What else?”

She glanced in the rearview mirror. “What’s in the duffel bag?”

“Change of clothes, toothbrush, and power tools.”

“Power tools, like a chainsaw?”

“Shamanic power tools. Stuff like sacred herbs, crystals, a medicine bag, and divination tools to stalk power with, and I always travel with a set of quality culinary knives.”

She nodded. “I suppose that’s plausible.” The palm-lined street provided a dramatic foreground against a starry night. Too bad she was spending a lovely night interrogating a brujo.

“Go ahead, ask me more.”

Aha, now she had him. “Are you up to something?”

Looking puzzled, he rubbed his jaw. “What do you mean?”

Why was she bothering to ask when she already knew the answer? “You know, am I going to get hurt?”

Val shrugged. “I promise I have nothing harmful planned.”

Steering onto a roller-coaster-steep street, the VW chugged up hill, forcing her to shift into third gear and then second. “What about unintentionally?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Unintentionally, like if I stepped on your foot?”

“No! I meant you could draw me in, get me to like you, do nice things for me—”

“Like make pozole?”

“Yes! You just popped into my life, calling yourself a protector and maker of comfort food, and then....”

“What are you afraid of, Estele?”

Should I even be saying this crap out loud? The words stuck in her throat. “I’m afraid that if I give my trust, you’ll take it and then disappear. Men do that sort of thing.”

“Has that happened to you before? I’m sorry if it has.”

Even as she said it, she recognized her mother, Mara’s, sour tone in her words and regretted opening her mouth. “Brujos are everything that’s wrong about the enchantment community, with a hefty dose of machismo factored in.”

“Whoa!” He threw his hands in the air. “That’s pure bigotry. I’m not going to let you say that without a correction. Some brujos are macho, but I’m not.”

His beard stubble, the heavy silver cuff on his wrist, and pointy-toed cowboy boots said otherwise. “You look macho.”

“I’m a food wizard, for crying out loud. I’m more *nacho* than macho.” He became sullen.

Poor Val. He seemed sincere. Why couldn’t she shut her mouth? “I know exactly what to expect from you. Brujos burst onto the scene, take charge of the situation, and poof, they’re gone, leaving

everyone guessing. No further involvement with the consequences of their actions.”

“Are we talking about me or your father, because I’m getting confused.”

Obviously, she was the consequence of her father, Ernesto’s, actions. The thought had been weighing on her since she was old enough to realize she was a living reminder of her mother’s biggest mistake. She almost hit the brakes. “You’re right! My bad. It’s just you’re the first brujo I’ve had contact with in a long while. Everything I’ve been holding inside sort of spilled out.”

“I’ll have to do my best to put brujos in a better light, won’t I?”

“Understatement. I don’t even know why I said all those things. I wanted to shut up but I kept yakking. Do you think I got a contact high from that candor spell? Is that even possible?”

Val shook his head. “I have no idea.”

Silence hung in the air. He looked peeved and she was sorry she’d blurted so much. Her difficult past wasn’t his fault.

“Where do you live?”

She pointed toward a row of sparkling lights high atop a ridge. “On Pacific View Drive.”

“I’ll bet you can see all the Channel Islands from there.” His tone softened.

“Almost.”

“It must be nice.”

“It’s pretty in sunlight, but I like it best in fog. Everything’s soft, out of focus, and feels close.”

He smiled but looked sad. “Sounds beautiful.”

Glancing at Val sideways, she couldn’t miss the fact that he was brooding. Why was she so insecure with men? Was this something she could change about herself? She hoped so.

“I was scared to come here today.” Val stared out the window at the hillside lights. “I didn’t know what would be asked of me or what I could offer to the situation, but I had faith I was walking into a just cause. More than anything, I was scared that my ally might be disappointed that fate had assigned a food wizard as her protector. You’re a legacy witch. You were born powerful. I was not. I stand at your side, in your shadow, ready to help.” He turned. “Does any of that sound macho to you?”

“No.” Was that the candor spell speaking? Would he have volunteered any of this on his own? Did it matter? The road wound up the hillside. The VW sputtered as it climbed. On such a clear night, the ocean sparkled all the way to horizon. As they approached her apartment building, Estele grew uneasy. She didn’t entertain, and certainly never a brujo. Who knew what was lurking beneath his warm exterior? For sure he was tempting, but possibly not so good for her. She swung the car into her parking space and set the brake. “We’re here.”

Val looked into the back seat and frowned at the chaotic jumble of groceries. “I’ll unload the car. I don’t want you to make multiple trips up and down the stairs in those heels.”

“Thanks.” Hooking her purse over her shoulder, she got out and locked the driver side. “I’m in apartment thirteen.” She held the delicate handrail as she climbed the pseudo-floating black stairs.

How long had it been since she’d had a man over? Wait... she’d never had a male visitor at this

apartment, and she'd lived there a full nine months. Since her academic struggles at the Master Mage Magic Academy and LuLu Beauty had begun, her social life had tanked.

As she drew nearer to the front door, she heard the distinct sound of footsteps rushing away. Slipping the key into the lock, she called out, "I'm home!"

Opening the door cautiously, she peered inside. A dresser drawer in her bedroom slammed shut. "Captain, what are you up to?"

"I'm just slipping into a bit of pretty!" he grumbled in the bedroom.

"Those 'bits of pretty' belong to me, so take them off and put them away. We have company."

"I'm starved for company." The captain sounded elated. "Who is it?"

"The young man I met for drinks."

"That was fast!"

"Don't make assumptions, Captain." Estele shuffled across the living room, making sure the soles of her shoes made lots of noise. She knocked on the bedroom door. It was always wise to give the captain plenty of warning before opening a door. Jeez, the degrading things she had to put up with in her own home. "My hand is on the knob. I'm opening the door. Am I going to be upset?"

A finger tapped Estele on the shoulder. She jumped and turned. "Captain! Don't sneak up on me like that."

Looking completely unapologetic, he grinned. "Sorry to startle you, my frolicsome spring lamb. Where's the young lad?"

"Downstairs, gathering groceries. God only knows what's taking so long." She hissed softly. "I have a favor to ask. Could you not show yourself?"

"Why?" He appeared crestfallen. "No visiting with the lad?"

Estele glanced toward the front door. Val wasn't even in the stairwell yet. "Captain, I need your help."

Sweeping his arms through the air, he made a grand gesture. "My help is offered with an open heart."

She whispered, "My young lad is a brujo."

The captain's expression remained neutral. "What's a brujo?"

"In my case, a brujo is a person of uncertain standing."

His eyes glittered in recognition. "You don't know if you can trust this young man? He could be like those dreadful Pressmen at the docks, acting friendly, buying drinks for sailors, and then pressing them into service aboard rat-infested ships for unpopular wars."

"Exactly."

"And you want me to float around the apartment in a disembodied state, watching him and reporting my findings back to you."

"Yes, Captain. You hit the nail on the head."

"Will I be asked to hit him on the head? I will if you want me to, it's not a problem, but we should

have an exit strategy ready. If I am called to commit violence, I will require a soothing dose of opium tea after my exertions.”

“Captain, I don’t have any opium tea on hand, and I wouldn’t know where to find any.”

“Laudanum-infused elderberry wine?”

“No to that as well.”

“Do you still want me to hit the lad? Perhaps crown him king with an iron pike?”

“No. Please don’t hit him on the head. Val hasn’t done anything to deserve it. Your unbiased observations are just a precaution.”

“Ah. The situation is clear to me now.”

“Just stay close, but don’t show yourself. That’s all you need to do.”

“Understood, my saucy turtle pie.”

Turtle pie? Was there such a thing? Yuck.

“You can depend on me. I’ll remain as invisible as a darkened lighthouse in a pea-soup fog.” The captain’s image shimmered and faded until he disappeared.

Val stomped up the stairs and appeared in the doorway looking like an overburdened pack mule, with his duffel bag looped across his shoulders, a cooking pot cradled in his arms, and a multitude of shopping bags dangling from his wrists. “I loaded the groceries into some plastic bags I found stuffed in the back seat. Where should I set this stuff down?”

Estele pointed toward the kitchen on the far side of open-plan apartment. “Set it down anywhere.”

He ambled over to the kitchen area and plopped the pot and bags onto the countertop.

The moment the items were out of his arms, Estele hunted through the chaos looking for the chocolate-covered mint patties.

Once she found them, she moved the green-and-white box away from everything else and made a whirling motion with her hands, like a paddle wheel spinning. “There’s probably a better spell than this, but I’ll try it. Hex-vex-redirect. Reverse the candor spell!” She threw her hands in the air. “I hope that works. Eat one and find out.”

Picking up the mints, she gave the package a gentle shake. “This box isn’t even a third full. What’s with that? Deceptive marketing, that’s what.” Tearing the package open, she shook several mints into her palm and offered them to Val.

He took one and popped it into his mouth, closed his eyes in bliss, and bit. “I always loved these things.”

“Is that the truth, or are you still under an enchantment?”

“It’s the truth.” He smiled. “And I’m going to continue telling the truth, candor spell or not. Estele, I’m going to prove to you that brujos can be trustworthy.”

“Fair enough.” She ate one too. The sweet aromatic mint caused a cooling sensation against the roof of her mouth.

Val unzipped his duffel bag and pulled out a leather parcel of culinary knives. He unrolled the kit,

exposing an impressive display of cutlery, then walked to the sink and washed his hands. “Do you have a cutting board? I’ll start the pozole.”

Did she own a cutting board? Probably not. Did one come with the apartment? Maybe....

He started washing vegetables in the sink. “Well?”

She glanced around the kitchen. “I’m thinking.”

From the corner of her eye, Captain Manx partially materialized and pointed to a cabinet above the stove. Oh no. The old guy just couldn’t stick to the program. Behind Val’s back, she waved her hands, hoping to shoo the captain away.

Val stopped and sniffed the air. “Have you cooked fish recently?”

“No.” She shot the captain a death stare.

“That’s funny. For a moment I thought I smelled something oily like fish.” He sniffed the air like a bloodhound. “No, it’s a smoky smell....” He stepped closer to where Captain Manx had materialized. “It’s faded. I don’t smell it now.”

Captain Manx partially materialized behind Val, grinning and dancing in a circle.

“Get out of here!” she shouted.

Val turned. He looked surprised. “Get out? You want me to leave? Estele, I’m here to cook for you.”

She shrugged. “You’re fine. You don’t have to go. I wasn’t even talking to you.”

“You weren’t talking to me?” He pressed his hand to his chest. “Who else is here?”

If the captain didn’t stop dancing a jaunty jig, she was going to lose it. “No one!”

Val rolled his eyes. “You’re hungry. You need to eat. Any more thoughts on where that cutting board might be?”

“Look above the stove.”

Val opened a high cupboard and removed a cutting board. “Aha. You do have one. That’s a good thing. This kitchen is a showplace. I wouldn’t want to scratch the counters.”

The kitchen window provided a spectacular view. City lights sparkled below and the moon rose over the ocean.

He rinsed the board and set it on the counter. Val placed a freshly washed carrot and onion in the center and reached for a large knife. With deft motions he scraped, peeled, and chopped the vegetables into two piles and then started peeling and crushing cloves of garlic.

Estele watched the mound of garlic grow. “That’s a lot of garlic. Are you expecting a vampire attack? We’ll be breathing fire. It’s a good thing we have the mint patties or else this apartment might not be big enough for the two of us.”

He glanced up from his work. “This is a beautiful apartment. Do you mind me asking what the rent is?”

“Um.” She hedged. “I sort of get a special deal.”

Val peered inside the refrigerator. “Special deal from family? You must have a rich uncle.”

“No, it’s a community thing.” How could she explain that a ghost captain had led her to the perfect rent-controlled apartment and made her promise never to tell anyone about it? She looked over her shoulder just as Captain Manx opened her bedroom door. “Wait! What do you think you’re doing? You’re not allowed in there.”

The captain vaporized.

Val shut the refrigerator and turned. “Sorry.”

“No. Go ahead. It’s okay,” she apologized. “You may open and close the refrigerator as often as you like.” Now, she sounded like a nutcase.

With raised brow, Val studied Estele’s face. “Thank you for that privilege, but what’s the point? There’s not much in there. A jar of mustard and half an apple? What are you living on?”

“I told you, I don’t cook.”

He appeared concerned. “But you must eat, right? There’s no food in there.”

“You didn’t check the freezer. There’s plenty of Hot Pockets in there.”

“You can’t live on that stuff.”

“Yes, you can. Besides, I’m always broke.” She shrugged. “And I don’t know what I’m doing in the kitchen anyway. I could burn soup. So I usually grab fast food. Arrest me.”

“Estele, you need to learn to take care of yourself. What good is a glass-and-chrome *Architectural Digest* dream apartment if you have to starve to live in it?”

She had to defend herself or else come off looking like a child who needed adult supervision. “Actually, my rent is very reasonable. My refrigerator is bare because I refuse to buy fresh food I know I’ll waste. As I already said, I’m not a cook.”

The corners of his mouth twisted. “Lucky for you I am, and a good one.”

She glanced away. Typical brujo arrogance. He was going to tell her how to live.

Val washed the soup pot, added a splash of oil, and set it on the stove to heat. Once the oil was hot, he added the garlic, onions, and diced carrot, stirring them until they turned golden brown. A rich aroma filled the house. He diced the carnitas. “This is going to take a little while. Shall we have something to drink while we wait for this to cook?”

“Sure.” She dug through the stack of groceries set on the countertop and found the pint of rum beneath the stack.

The captain partially materialized at her side. “Aye, my old friend rum! Spin the cap and tip the flask and whisk me liver to glory! The favorite liquor of the Caribbean gods of the sea.”

Estele mouthed, “Go away.”

The captain swiped his hand in front of Val’s face. Val continued stirring the pot and adding spices to the pozole. “Lass, I don’t think the young gentleman can see me. He doesn’t seem to have your gift of second sight, my dear. I’d have to fully materialize for him to see or hear me.”

“What if you’re wrong?” she whispered.

Val looked up. “Wrong about what?”

“Nothing.” Estele pressed her lips shut.

The captain peered over Val’s shoulder. “None of the former occupants of this apartment could see me unless I fully materialized. The young gent certainly knows his way around the galley! I would have traded my good eye to have him as cook aboard my fair ship, the *Lady Alice*.”

Val smiled at Estele. “Are you okay? You sort of have a funny look on your face.”

“I’m fine.” She wasn’t.

Val eyed the rum. “You wouldn’t have any cola on hand, would you? We have limes, we could make Cuba libres.”

Captain Manx stared wistfully at the rum. “I would prefer we put the rum and limes to better use as Cannon Fodder Sea Grog.”

“I don’t even know what that is.” She slapped her hand over her mouth.

“A Cuba libre?” Val smiled. “It’s just Coke and rum with a squeeze of lime.”

“Sea Grog!” the captain bellowed. “I want Cannon Fodder Sea Grog!”

She turned on the captain. “Don’t be so demanding.”

“Whoa.” Val returned to stirring the soup. “I thought I was being easygoing.”

“It’s not you.” She winked at the captain. “It’s just I want Cannon Fodder Sea Grog.”

“Okay.” He wiped his hands on a dish towel. “How do you even make that?”

She stared at the captain.

He rubbed his chin. “Shiver me timbers, it’s been over a century since I last made it. I’ve forgotten so much.... As I recollect, first grab a lime, not too rotten, and roll it roughly against the ship’s deck as if you’re angry at it. Don’t be afraid to show the fruit who’s in command.”

“Juice a lime,” Estele muttered.

Crowding closer, the captain continued. “We’ll need treacle syrup, preferably made from Bombay cane sugar served from a gold tin, but if we don’t have any, it’s not essential. Simple syrup really is simple. After all, we’re talking about sugar and water here, nothing fancy. If you don’t have any simple syrup on hand, steal some from your neighbor’s hummingbird feeder and don’t be a lily liver about finding a few dead bugs in your beverage. Several drowned ants never hurt anybody.”

“Dissolve a little sugar in hot water.” Estele reached into a cupboard. “We’re in luck, I actually have sugar.”

Val put his hands on his hips. “All right, what else?”

The captain bit his lip. “Fresh gunpowder, fistfuls of the stuff. You can’t have too much, unless you don’t care for the taste of gunpowder, in which case it’s already too much and this libation would not be recommended. Oh, and the jewel in the crown, rum, lots of it. Let’s not kid ourselves, you can’t overpour the rum.”

“Gunpowder,” she blurted.

“Gunpowder?” Val froze. “You meant spices, right?”

“That’s exactly what I meant, and I am going to let you pick the spices because you’re the chef.”

Estele batted her lashes. *Good save.*

“Do you have a pitcher or something I can use to mix in?” Val lowered the flame on the stove.

Not entertaining much was catching up to her. She was unprepared. “I have a few plastic tumblers.”

“Plastic? Egad no!” the captain sputtered. “I-I’d rather drink from the moldering rim of a splintered barrel or an unwashed communal tin mug below deck, anything but plastic. Am I asking too much for a cheerful porcelain pitcher garnished with flowers or sprigs of fresh mint? Sometimes even a barnacled old salt with a beard as fouled with flotsam as a pelican’s nest enjoys pretty things now and then.”

Estele turned her back to Val and whispered, “I’m not Martha Stewart. I don’t own a porcelain pitcher. At least I remembered to bring home your beloved rum. Do I get credit for that?”

“Aye, bonny lass, I don’t mean to be such a grim-grouch. You did the rum right and proper.”

Val set a wooden spoon aside and laughed. “You two argue like you’ve been married for sixty years.”

Estele gasped. “What? Can’t a girl talk to herself?”

Val pointed to Captain Manx. “There’s a whiskered old man leaning over the sink. When were you going to introduce me, or are you going to continue talking to him in front of me, thinking I won’t notice?”

“You saw him all along? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I was waiting to see how you would handle the matter. The captain is your houseghost, not mine. We’re still working on basic trust issues, aren’t we? That’s okay, I’m patient.”

She paused. What sort of brujo was Val? Even gifted members of the enchantment community came and went from the apartment and remained oblivious to the captain’s presence if he chose to remain out of view. “I’m sorry. Captain Manx is sort of my little secret.”

The captain’s cheeks flushed. “Bless the cockles of yer heart, my cooing turtledove, for saying so, but do you think the lad knows about that *other* secret?”

Her jaw dropped. Was the captain going to blurt something inappropriate about the ruby? “What other secret?”

The captain coyly rolled his eyes. “You know... my irresistible attraction to donning the silky finery of the fair sex?”

Val blinked. “I know now. I’m standing right here.” He turned toward Estele. “I’ll be honest. I’m disappointed. We’re supposed to be working together as a team to battle evil. Why try to keep a secret that’s so obvious? Did you think I wouldn’t notice that you share your home with a chatty ghost?”

She winced. “You actually see him, not just the translucent shade of a man or floating mist?”

Val appeared troubled. “Yes, I can see—and, I might also add, smell—an old guy with a crazy beard and stained teeth.” His gaze focused on Estele. “It’s crystal clear that he belongs to another

realm. I was wondering when the hell you were going to say something.”

“Aye, the crimson stains would be the unfortunate side effect of beetle nut.” Captain grinned. “It calms the howling lonelies, but it’s not conducive to a winning smile. I’ll admit that.”

Val walked to the cupboard and removed a mason jar. “Is this all you have?”

Estele joined Val at the far counter. “I’m sorry I wasn’t upfront about my living situation. Technically speaking, the captain isn’t ‘living’ anywhere, but that’s splitting hairs.” He looked hurt. Could she learn to be a little more trusting? Now Val thought she was sneaky and foolish, an unflattering combination. “Give me time. Trusting a brujo won’t come easy.”

He turned and stared into her eyes with his firebrand gaze. “Time is the one thing we don’t have. You were at the fairgrounds and the abandoned market. You saw what was happening to San Buena. Smoke beasts? A squealing pig head on ice? Clown assault? Did any of that seem normal to you? The bubble of malevolence is building toward critical mass. It could erupt to the surface at any moment. The entire city could be affected. Can you even imagine what is coming?”

Estele shook her head. Suffering Circe, if she was San Buena’s best hope against a megaton demonic force of unimaginable power, their goose was already cooked. Feeling defeated, she mumbled, “That mason jar isn’t a drinking glass, it’s a bud vase.”

His jaw dropped. “Is that all you have to say to me?”

Now what? She was in over her head and then some. “I don’t know what to say or do. I’m not the person to put in charge of the safety of others.”

“We can’t hide from this thing. Trouble will erupt. Let me know when you’re ready to confront the issue.” Looking disappointed, he stared at the jar. “Do you have two bud vases we can drink from?”

Chapter 7

A guarded silence settled over Estele and Val that neither dared to disrupt. Val returned to the task of preparing supper.

Estele watched as he mixed drinks and pattered over the pot of soup, stirring and adding seasonings.

After some fuss and creative thinking, Estele managed to transform a large kitchen island into an attractive dining table, complete with a centerpiece of chunky white candles surrounded by tiny tea lights.

Her apartment had never looked or smelled so homey. This was nice—maybe too nice. Part of her dreaded getting used to homemade meals prepared by a handsome man and then losing the privilege.

Val ladled the steaming pozole into two large mixing bowls. He sprinkled grated jack cheese and squeezed wedges of fragrant lime on top, and served them both.

She pulled a tall chair up to the island and perched on the edge of it. The soup looked and smelled wonderful. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He carried another tall chair to the island and sat opposite Estele. “I had to improvise a little, but I think things turned out well.”

Dipping a spoon in the pozole, she sampled the rich broth. It was the perfect balance of salty, tart, and spicy. “It’s good.” Dare she say as good or better than her grandmother’s pozole, although Abuela Lena’s pozole had been made with a heartbreaking amount of love when she needed it most.

Val tasted his soup. “Ah. It turned out nice.”

“It’s great.” The bits of pork were browned and redolent with garlic, melt-in-the-mouth tender.

Picking up a mason jar, Val raised it in a toast. “To allies.”

Estele picked up her jar and clinked it against his. “Cheers.” She sipped the spiced rum Val had concocted. It was mildly sweet and refreshing. “Oooo, this is good too.” Turning, she reached for a custard cup and poured a trickle of her drink into the dish. “For the captain. He’ll enjoy this.”

Looking puzzled, Val brushed a lock of black hair from his brow. “He’s a ghost. No mouth. No gut. How can he drink that?”

“He can’t.” Sliding off the chair, she walked over to the corner of the room and set the cup down on an end table. “When he’s ready, the captain will enjoy the rum on the etheric level. He’ll sniff it,

hover over it, and absorb its essence.”

“You like the captain, don’t you?”

“We share an apartment. I have to make an effort to get along. Besides, he’s sort of a dear old pest.”

“You’re not afraid to call him a pest?” Val glanced around. “Where is he now? I expected him to hang around while I made dinner, but I didn’t get the sense he was near.”

She returned to the table and picked up her spoon. The pozole was thick with hearty hominy and juicy pork. It was the ultimate comfort food. “I don’t know where the captain goes when he’s unmaterialized, or whatever you call it when ghosts remain invisible. Maybe he inhabits another dimension, but the bottom line is he shouldn’t be here at all. The poor guy died when Queen Victoria was still on the throne and he deserves to move on.”

His dipped his spoon into the soup. “Why doesn’t he?”

“He’s trapped here. It’s like he can’t face the fact that he died in an asylum.”

“Asylum?”

“This apartment complex is built on the razed foundations of a nineteenth-century asylum.”

“Ah. Now I get it. A ward full of crazy ghosts equals cheap rent.”

“Yep, you guessed it. But not every unit in this building is as haunted as unit thirteen.”

Val sipped his spiced rum with a languid expression on his face. “Are there other ghosts in this apartment?”

“Yes, and there are some mean ones too, real *Amityville Horror* types, but the captain chases them away. He’s been my gatekeeper.”

“It sounds like you two need each other.”

“Me and the captain?” She laughed. “He doesn’t really need me. He doesn’t need anything. He’s dead, but he doesn’t want to face it. Between you and me, the captain’s a terrible addict, and now he seems to be addicted to life. He can’t give it up. I don’t see him being able to abandon ghosthood and peacefully cross over anytime soon.”

He pointed with his spoon. “Is the captain trapped here? Do you think he can leave this apartment?”

“Oh sure, he can leave the apartment. I know he takes strolls to Cemetery Park at the bottom of the hill, where he’s buried, but he prefers to spend most of his time here, where he lived.”

“He visits his own grave, so he definitely knows he’s dead?”

“Of course he knows he’s dead! I tell him all the time. I constantly remind him, ‘Captain, you don’t need any more curare lozenges from the apothecary, you’re dead! Enough already.’”

Val shrugged. “I suppose he’s hanging around for some reason. He’ll figure it out.”

The pozole was so delicious she quickly reached the bottom of the bowl.

“There’s more.” A proud smile curled Val’s lips. “Would you like seconds?”

She slid her empty bowl toward him. “Yes, please.”

Taking her bowl in hand, he walked to the stove and refilled it, garnishing it with grated cheese and lime. “Seconds are the highest compliment to a chef.”

“You’re a good chef.”

“I’m an *alquimista de sabor*.”

“That’s right.” She nodded. “An alchemist of flavor. It sounds so official, like it carries authority with a preset pay grade. You’re lucky. I’ll bet the title comes with some respect too. When you say the term ‘witch,’ especially to people outside the enchantment community, it becomes a catchall phrase. ‘Witch’ doesn’t really tell you anything. What sort of witch? What level of skill? A witch could be an exalted sorceress who can turn a hurricane offshore or just some Goth chick who smokes clove cigarettes. You never know.”

He dipped his spoon into the bowl and ate a heaping mouthful of pozole. “What sort of witch are you?”

“An incompetent one.”

A look of concern knotted his brow. “Why do you say that?”

“Because it’s true.” She continued spooning soup into her mouth. Oddly, talking about it wasn’t hurting her appetite in the least. It was a relief to say it. “I am a terrible witch and it’s sad, because I want to be a good one. I really try. My heart is in the right place. I would never dabble on the dark side or take advantage of someone, and yet I just keep fucking up!”

“You sound a little self-pitying.”

“No! That’s not it at all. I feel sorry for the innocent people who get caught in my crosshairs.”

His gaze dropped. “What have you done that was so awful?”

Where should I start? “Just this morning, I accidentally turned a salon full of women into stone statues, and once they were magically revived, they woke screaming. That was today. Last week I—”

“Wait. You turned the women to stone? You have that much power? That’s incredible! You didn’t do it maliciously, did you?”

“Of course not. I was distracted and I made a terrible mistake with my spellcasting. But that’s part of the problem, I’m always distracted.”

“What distracted you today?”

Her shoulders tensed. “I was hungry.”

“I could have taken care of that.” Val lifted his hands into the air. “Maybe that’s why I’m here, to ground or balance you.”

What was his angle, wiggle his way into her life and solve all her problems? Why her? “I’m used to being on my own.”

“But that’s not how allies work. Allies are catalysts and add exponentially to the other’s power. Alone, an ally is like an electric cord without the electricity.”

“I’m not convinced I’m anybody’s ally or their electricity.”

Val pushed his sleeve back and pointed to his pinup girl tattoo. “Then what is this about? I was

given this tattoo as a sign that it was time to seek my ally. That's you, there's no doubt about it. Even the initials E.E.E. have appeared. What's your middle name?"

"Ernestina." Things were getting a little intense. Did he really expect her to come through for him on a professional level? Talk about setting himself up for disappointment, he was doing it in spades. She waved his comment off. "There's no guarantee E.E.E. stands for Estele Ernestina Esposito. It could be Eldora Ezmae Earwax or Edwina Elberta Eggbaum..."

"And Eldora and Edwina are witches living in San Buena who happen to dress and look just like you?"

"Um... there is no Eldora Ezmae Earwax or Edwina Elberta Eggbaum living in San Buena."

"Exactly. I got the call from my spirit that trouble was afoot in San Buena. The sense of trouble came through clear as day."

"Like firing up the Bat signal?"

"Yes, it was an internal Bat signal. The call went into the void, and I felt it in my heart and saw it in my mind. Tio Bruno felt the call to come here too. We drove the taco truck straight to the Master Mage Magic Academy, and you walked out the front door. We were meant to meet and be allies."

Poor guy, he looked so sincere when he said it. She cringed. Didn't he know the Esposito witches were cursed? Their magic went astray and their husbands ran away. Nothing ever went right for them. "You seem like a nice guy, Val. I'm sorry I've been so standoffish with you. Listen carefully, because I'm telling you this for your own good: you don't want me for an ally. Whatever good you try to accomplish, I'll manage to undo in a spectacular fashion. You spill a glass of water, I'll cause a flood." She pushed the empty bowl away. "I loved your pozole. Thank you, but you should find another ally while there's still time. There's no way the safety of San Buena should be in my hands. Look around. I don't even have a pet. I'm scared I'll screw up!"

He grasped her hand and looked into her eyes. "Estele, there is no other ally. It's you. You have to help me expose and neutralize the bubble of malevolence. We can do this. Have some confidence in yourself."

"Confidence? I'm not delusional. I know what I am and what I can expect from myself. Trust me, I disappoint *me* every day."

"Why is that?"

"Because I love people. I want them to like me, and I just keep doing things that frighten everyone or make them angry." Terrific, her voice was trembling and she sounded like she was eight years old. "When I'm spellcasting, everything starts okay, but then I get distracted. Power builds under the surface. I'll think, 'Wow, is all this juice really coming from me?' There's this high, a feeling of taking off, like a condor swooping over a canyon. The rising wave of power overwhelms me every time. Things start to happen. I start seeing results. Then I'll think, 'Maybe I can't handle a double-black-diamond slope. Maybe I should take it down a notch.' There're too many thoughts in my head at once and bam, I remember I'm a fuckup and sure enough, I fuck things up."

Val took her hand. “You sound like a frightened child.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them. “Estele, you’re not a child, and you don’t have to be afraid to wield power. Uncertainty is something that can be conquered.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“I’ve been afraid too. I was afraid to alienate my family or make a bad choice. Telling my mother and father that I wanted to study and become a brujo caused endless fights. My father is still patiently waiting for me to snap out of it.” His lips smiled but his eyes were sad. “Committing to the path and apprenticing can be lonely. Doubt walks at your side every day. But if you know that you were born to do something, stop listening to doubt. Do what you were born to do and do it well.”

“But I don’t do it well....” He was talking to her like she mattered. She set down her spoon. The pozole had to be enchanted, because every mouthful brought sweet memories of her grandmother to mind. Abuela Lena’s presence grew so intense it was as if her spirit had been conjured to fill the room with a loving feeling of peace and belonging. No one else had ever loved her so completely, not even her mother. At that moment, thinking of Lena was almost too much to bear in a bittersweet way. “Your cooking is inspired. When you practice magic, no one gets hurt—they just get happy and full.”

“Thank you, but I’ll never have the skill or talent to turn someone to stone. You are exceptional. If I had your level of power, I would be over-the-moon enthusiastic and ready to learn how to harness it.”

She gently pushed the empty soup bowl away. “Trust me. You’d never want to be me.”

“Now you’re just feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Actually, I feel sorry for the people who get caught in the wake of my magic.”

Crossing his arms in front, he leaned onto his elbows. “Maybe I can help you. I can do more than cook. I have some wizardly skills and I’m a good teacher. Let’s do a beginner’s exercise in allies training. Do you want to try?”

“I have no idea what you want me to do.”

Val slid forward on his elbows, gazing into her eyes. “It’s a simple magical team-building exercise. Something we could do together that uses our strengths to advantage.”

“Like what?”

He waved a hand through the air in an arcing loop. “Name a magical practice that you can do.”

“Spellcasting.”

He frowned. “I’m not good with raw spellcasting.”

“Apparently, neither am I.”

“My magic has to be grounded in the senses through taste, scent, sight, etc.” He picked up a soup spoon. “Let’s start with this. Something I can touch.”

She sighed. “Please don’t say ‘there is no spoon.’”

“I was going to invite you to cast a motion spell on it.”

Red flags waved. “Why did you choose a spoon? Don’t go Uri Geller on me.”

“I’m not asking you to bend the spoon. I’m asking you to move it.”

“For safety’s sake, I usually avoid enchanting metal objects. Metal is too conductive and magnifies the enchantment in unpredictable ways, at least for me. Miss Dahlia says, ‘With metal, even a whispered spell will ring like a bell.’ I’ve managed to get myself into trouble with something as innocent as bobby pins, so I’m cautious now.”

“What happened with the bobby pins?”

“I was styling a lady’s hair. Her daughter was getting married on the beach and I wanted her updo to stay put. I enchanted the bobby pins to give them a little extra grip, and instead the hairpins started to behave like territorial hornets. They flew around her head and wouldn’t allow anyone to come close to her hairdo without getting stung. Even the lady couldn’t touch her own hair. She came back to the beauty school in hysterics. I felt bad. I was just trying to help. There was a brisk ocean breeze that day, for crying out loud.”

“Estele, try to relax and enchant the spoon.”

“Cast a motion spell? Me? This is the part where someone loses an eye. That spoon could end up zipping around the room like an unguided missile.”

“It won’t.”

Her stomach ached just thinking about it. “How do you know?”

He grasped her hand. “Because I’m going to sit at your side, holding your hand, and we’ll cast the spell together.”

“Okay.” Their fingers tangled. Val’s hand was warm and reassuring, and she wanted to believe him. “Do we have a safe word or way to neutralize the spell if it goes bad?”

“Nope.” His dark eyes glittered by candlelight. “Once we start down the ski slope, we’ll have to work together to not break our bones.”

“I’ve never skied and that’s a terrible mental image to have. I can just see myself, out of control, careening toward an icy cliff.”

“But you won’t go over because I won’t let you. I’m your safety net.”

“How so?”

“You’re my ally and I’m yours. Our skills complement each other. Your weaknesses are my strengths. It will be all right.”

This gorgeous guy had no idea how bad things could get. “It hasn’t been all right in the past. I’m not even convinced we are allies. This whole thing is still pretty far out.”

“This isn’t the past. You’re not doing this alone. Things will be different with me.”

Was he mad or ignorant? “You do have confidence in yourself, I’ll give you that.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Enchant the spoon. Command it to rise.”

Oh man, he really didn’t know what a Pandora’s box he was opening. Hopefully, he really could protect them from the worst of the fallout. She mentally summoned all her knowledge of levitation and

flight along with every tutorial Witch Griselda, Miss Dahlia, or Fredi had ever performed in front of her. Surprisingly, her thoughts were crystal clear. Perhaps having the Heart of Hecate in her purse and Val's encouragement was helpful after all? She pointed at the spoon and sang her best James Brown impression. "Get up! Get on up—"

Untouched, the spoon rose vertically, twirled on its end, and started to hop around the table.

She stared in shock. "Look! It's working."

He smiled. "So far so good. Can you make it fly?"

She winced. "I was afraid you'd say that. Me making it fly is not a good idea."

"Do it. Don't be afraid."

She lifted her hand into the air like a mime and made her fingers flutter like a bird's wing. "Fly little spoon, fly!"

The spoon chaotically zipped around the table, knocked over a lit candle, splattering hot wax everywhere, and then struck Val in the side of the head.

"Ouch!" Val ducked the unmanned utensil as it headed toward a window and tapped frantically against the glass as if trying to escape into the wild. He grasped Estele's hand and said calmly, "You can't just shout 'fly!' and leave it at that. Guide the spoon with your intentions. What do you want it to do?"

"I don't know!" A distinct red welt had already formed on Val's temple. It had to sting. That was her fault. Damn. She was too flustered to think. "I suppose I don't want it to hurt anyone."

"Then say so."

Talk to the spoon? Why did he have to look so smug when he said it? What a day she was having. "Spoon, be careful. Don't be a jerk, and watch where you're going."

The spoon's erratic movements stopped. It bobbed above the sink midair in a holding pattern.

Val looked pleased. "It's waiting for your next command."

Okay, this wasn't so bad. The situation had started to get out of control, but Val had forced her to focus and reel it back in. A first. "What should I tell it to do?"

"It's up to you. What do spoons do best?"

She laughed. "They go to the freezer, open the door, flip the lid off a pint of chocolate-ripple ice cream, and they bring a scoopful back to the table."

The spoon did exactly as Estele commanded and returned to the table laden with ice cream.

Estele eyed the floating treat with caution. "Who goes first? We should be careful. What if it just lashes out and chips a tooth?"

"It won't." Val opened his mouth. "I'll go first."

The spoon floated close and allowed him to take the ice cream without incident. He squinted and winced.

"Are you all right?" She held her breath in suspense.

"Don't worry, I'm fine." He swallowed. "I took too big a bite and gave myself brain freeze. The

spoon was perfectly behaved because that was your intention.”

“Oh my God!” She was so happy with her achievement that she clapped. “Spoon, go and get seconds. I want some too!”

The spoon went to the freezer, scooped up more ice cream, and returned to Estele. She ate slowly. “I love this stuff. I could have had a pint for dinner—and sometimes I do.” She licked a drip from the side of her lips. “How did you do that, Val? How did you get my wayward magic under control? You’re like a witch whisperer.”

His grin was a mile wide. “It worked because we did it together. Doesn’t anyone ever sit down with you and talk you through a new form of spellcasting?”

She thought about the many ways magic had been taught to her. “Boy, that’s hard to answer. There is a curriculum at the Master Mage Magic Academy, but it’s more of an adult independent study program. We check in with the headmistress and show the final results, but so often I get off track at the very beginning of a new spell and blow it.”

“How do you blow it?”

“I don’t know. The enchantment seems to grow a mind of its own and just gets away from me.”

“How can that be if you created the enchantment in the first place?”

“I don’t know! It didn’t used to happen—as much. When I was little, I was pretty good with magic. My teachers even put me in an advanced class with older girls. That’s where I met my best friend, Fredi. Now there’s a talented witch. Totally grounded. Fredi’s going to marry a hot-ass lycan.”

“That’s interesting.”

“A witch marrying a lycan?”

“No, that you used to be good with magic. What happened to your confidence?”

“I made so many scary magical mishaps that I guess I lost it.”

“But when and why?”

She stared at the open freezer and the pint of chocolate ripple longingly. Talk of the past was painful and sure to push all her buttons. “Do we have to talk about this stuff now?”

He rose and walked toward the freezer. “Will there be a better time to stop feeling like a failure in life?”

“I suppose not.” She stared at the ice cream. “Wait. Let me see what I can do on my own.”

He stopped and leaned against the countertop, arms crossed. “Do it.”

She crooked her finger. “Chocolate ripple, come to mama.”

The pint rose from the freezer, floated to the makeshift kitchen table, and landed softly. She could hardly believe her eyes. “Look! I did it and nothing went wrong along the way.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because it was a simple spell. Levitation, A to B. How could I screw it up?”

“Estele, you didn’t screw up because your intentions were clear. You wanted ice cream on the table and it came at your command. I have to say, I’m impressed. I wish I had kinematic sovereignty

over physical objects.”

“What?”

“I wish I had the magical power to lift things with my intentions.”

“Yeah, but you make a killer quesadilla.”

“Still, I couldn’t do anything like what you just did. You’re amazing.”

“Really?”

“Really?” He flashed that megawatt smile again. “Why do you look so surprised that I’m impressed? Don’t people tell you you’re amazing all the time?”

“Um... no. Never. Most of the time they just want me to undo whatever it was that I did to them by accident.”

A look of awe flooded his face. “I predict that’s going to change.”

Holy guacamole, he was looking at her like she was something wonderful. “I hope you’re right about that. I’ve never thought of myself as anything particularly special, except for someone’s special problem type of special. It’s hard to stand out around here. San Buena’s got a lot of talented witches, wizards, and Fae, and just about everything else.”

His posture straightened. “You know that the enchantment community of San Buena is well-respected all over the world, don’t you? The core community of witches and warlocks who went west and settled here are living the magical version of the American dream minus the Early American witch persecutions. I’ve always wanted to come here and check it out.”

“Seriously? I didn’t know that, but I don’t travel much. What am I saying, I haven’t traveled at all.”

“I heard stories about San Buena during my apprenticeship in Oaxaca. It made me homesick. I was so amped when Tio Bruno told me this morning that we’d been called into action and were driving to San Buena.”

“Why don’t you finish this off?” She handed the melting ice cream to him. After the luscious pozole there was no need to overdo the sweets. “You’ve had a long day. You must be exhausted.”

“Yes and no. This is what I trained for all these years, and I was pretty damn excited to meet my power ally.”

Estele pushed away from the table. “You must be so disappointed to get paired with a dud witch like me. You should see what my friend Fredi can do. Nothing is too complicated for her. She can put any situation right.”

“Fredi sounds great, but I’m still glad I got paired with you.” Val looked at her like she was the only person in the world who mattered. He dipped the spoon into the ice cream and took a bite, leaving a smidge of chocolate on his lip.

She reached out to wipe it away, then leaned close and kissed his lips instead. His mouth was soft and responsive. Breathless, he closed his eyes. She flicked her tongue and stole the bit of chocolate from his lips before pulling away. “For a brujo, you’re a pretty nice guy.”

“Just nice?”

“I’m trying to give you a chance. I don’t have many guys in my life.”

His gaze skimmed over her. He smiled with approval. “I find that very hard to believe.”

“Believe it.” She huffed. “Guys don’t stick around. Once they see me do something wacko, they get scared and slink off.”

The look on his face was as earnest as an apologetic preacher. “Do you think you might be scaring them away on purpose?”

She blinked nervously. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you don’t trust them to hang around. It’s easier to chase them away than be surprised or hurt when you get dumped, isn’t it?”

“Whoa, you sound like my mother. I like being in control. If that means I’m alone some of the time—strike that, most of the time—so be it.”

He scooped up the last bit of ice cream from the bottom of the carton and licked the spoon. “You’re lying.”

Why were brujos so infuriatingly stubborn? Crossing her arms over her chest, she squeezed them together so tightly her fingertips tingled from impeded blood flow. “What would you know about it?”

“I’m intuitive.”

“I’m psychic, so I knew you were going to say that.”

“I already know you don’t have a relationship with your brujo father, but what about your mother? You just mentioned her in an antagonizing way. Do you get along with her?”

Meddling mystic, why was he dredging this up? Her personal life was a sticky mess. “My mother, Mara, and I barely talk. From the age of thirteen, my grandmother raised me. At puberty came that magical day when my powers came on hot and hard. My mom said I was starting to act like my dad and she didn’t like it. Things got pretty emotional and crazy, fast. My mother couldn’t handle it, so she dropped me off on my grandmother’s doorstep with a suitcase and hit the gas. I suppose no single mother wants to raise a teenage witch who’s out of control. Tell me, why do you want to know this crap?”

“Because you’re my ally in power, at least for as long as you need me, and you have so much potential.”

“I don’t know about that. I’m a remedial student at the Master Mage Magic Academy and I’m on academic probation.”

Val leaned closer and brushed his hand against hers with gentle, rhythmic strokes. “You’re on probation but you haven’t been kicked out, because I’ll bet there’s someone there who sees your potential too.”

Witch Griselda’s name hovered on her lips, but she stopped herself from saying it. Why drag the poor old gal into this? What did she really know about Val? Sure, he was a nice guy and made scrumptious food, but what if this was a setup? For Circe’s sake, she had an enchanted ruby the size

of a baby's fist in her purse. She owed it to the old gal to watch her ass. "We're in my community and my home, and I'm doing all the talking. Why is that? You're the unknown commodity, my caballero friend. I'd rather hear about you. What's your family like?"

"All right. I'm happy to share. My mother is a schoolteacher of American-Irish descent. She's from New Jersey. My father is of Mexican descent, born in Los Angeles. I'm the oldest of three children. I have a sister who is an RN and lives in Colorado. My baby brother is still in college. He'll be proudly joining my father's cosmetic dentistry practice when he graduates with flying colors, because he was born to be a dentist. He loves it in a way I certainly never could. What else do you want to know?"

"Girlfriends?"

"You already asked about that earlier, remember? There are none, and no one recently."

"First love?"

"Really, you want to know that? I was eighteen. It couldn't possibly be of interest to you."

"Wrong." Maybe Mr. Perfect would say something unflattering and she could let go of the crazy idea that was creeping up on her that Val was some sort of ideal boyfriend material. "I would love to hear about it."

"My first love was named Darla. She was the lead guitarist in her own Goth band and went by the name 'Darkla.' Yes, I know it's corny, and she knew it too. She was three years older than me. We met at the Coachella Festival and I followed her around like a puppy. She opened up a whole new world to me of music and art. We got inked together. That was when I began to seriously question if I belonged in my father's dentistry practice or not. Until that spring, that's where I'd been headed. I always knew there was something more, and Darla gave me the confidence to be who I needed to be. We both moved on for the right reasons, but I'll always love her for shaking me up and showing me a different path."

Had she ever been in love so much that her life had changed because of it? No. Was there something missing in her that prevented such a miracle from taking place? Maybe. "What happened to Darla?"

He arched a brow. "Something shocking."

She braced for drama with bated breath. "What?"

"Darla stopped being Darkla. She went back to college to become an investment banker." He shook his head. "I warned you it was shocking. That was at the same time I had committed to apprenticing with my uncle. Darla the banker couldn't see a future with a brujo in training, and that, ladies and gentlemen, is the sound of the other shoe dropping."

"I'm sorry. Was Darla the one?"

"She won't be the last, trust me on that. So far, I've been willing to wait for the real thing. Plus, Tio Bruno forbade me to get involved with anyone during my apprenticeship. He reasoned it would not have been fair to my training or the girlfriend. I believe he had a valid point."

“So there haven’t been that many women in your life?”

His smile crooked to the side. “A few. I’m not a monk.”

“Yes, but you look like a hunk. It really proves first impressions might be wrong.”

“How so?”

“You look like a heartbreaker.”

“So do you.”

“Uh, not really. Nobody falls in love with me, and I’m not the sort who falls in love.”

“Don’t say that.” He reached across the table and smoothed her hair. The gesture seemed so endearing and natural. In that moment, it was easy to believe that he might actually care for her. “You never know what’s going to happen. When you woke up this morning, did you know you’d be asked to fight a malevolent bubble of evil?”

Estele laughed. “No, I didn’t. I shouldn’t be laughing at something like that, should I? I was thinking, if the threat to San Buena is so serious, why aren’t we sounding the alarm? Shouldn’t we be giving our best local witches and warlocks a heads-up about incoming?”

“We will.” Val nodded. “But I want to devise a battle plan first. Tio Bruno told me today was the day to meet my power ally. That was you, of course, a huge step in my life.” He placed his hand on his heart. “As I’m talking to you, I’m getting a better idea of our strengths and weaknesses as a team.”

“I understand that we are a team, but what about everyone else?”

“San Buena’s enchantment community is ready to go. We’re the team leaders. Tio Bruno told me that my ally and I would lead the charge. I’m going to act on that.”

“Good grief.” Her stomach knotted. “What if your uncle’s wrong? I am not team leader material. We gotta call Fredi or Miss Dahlia, anybody, and tell them what’s happening so they can prepare.”

His eyes turned liquid with emotion. “Estele, I’m your protector. You can trust me to have your back.”

“I want to trust you.” She leaned closer. “But I can’t even trust myself. This plan with me as a damn team leader seems outrageously risky. Yes, you have my back, but is it safe to have me at the front?”

By candlelight Val’s face was lit dramatically in a way that showed off his steep cheekbones and lush lashes. “The brujos of Oaxaca have been steady, dependable members of the enchantment community for hundreds of years. With innocent lives at risk, why would they send me here to fail? Estele, there must be something very special about you. This is not an accident. You’re in the right place at the right time, and you’re being called upon to step up and bring your A game. Let me help you accomplish that.”

Wow. She gazed into Val’s beautiful eyes. He almost made sense. Would she be an unprofessional ally if she kissed him again? His mouth looked like cushioned temptation. Seriously, would it do any harm to wrap her arms around his neck and really kiss him just for the hell of it? She pressed closer, a whisper away from his beautiful mouth. “Is this allowed?”

Val's hand settled on her nape, cradling the back of her head. His eyes glistened. "Come closer and I'll show you."

Breathless, she brushed her lips against his.

Captain Manx materialized at Estele's side screaming a frantic warning. "Bonny miss, something wicked has followed me home! We're under attack! I can't hold it off. Batten the portholes and drop below deck!"

The room shook. The candles guttered. A tremendous gust of wind blasted the front door open with a deafening *slam!* An ominous black tornado blew into the apartment, knocking furniture aside, and took the shape of a giant grasping hand. The hand reached for her purse, and in the tumult the purse toppled to the floor and opened. The ruby pulsed inside, casting crimson light against the wall.

Estele jumped in terror. Holy frijoles! Whatever it was, it wanted the Heart of Hecate. There was no way she would allow failure on her watch. Without thought for her safety, she bolted toward danger, shouting at the smoke beast, "Oh no, you don't, you stinky rotten-egg thing! Get away from my purse!"

The hand turned and reached for Estele's throat, poised to throttle her.

"Oh shit!" She stood frozen to the spot.

"Estele!" Val leaped in front of her. "Get behind me. I'll protect you."

She clung to Val's waist. "What can a food alchemist do? Make it a snack? We need hardcore magic to fight an enchantment this strong."

He flung his arms wide and stared the smoke beast down, like he was staring down a grizzly bear. "I'm your shield. I won't let it near you." Baring his teeth, he snarled, and the beast retreated.

The smoke beast floated into a corner. For a moment it hovered in place, looking like little more than a swirling cloud of sooty particles.

Estele peered from behind Val. "Uh! I've been inside overflowing porta-potties that smelled fresher than that thing's breath. Open a window and shoo that stink bomb out of here."

The smoke beast coiled itself into the shape of a giant snake. Its swirling body circled them, filling the room. The hood of a king cobra appeared, and its forked tongue flicked the air.

"Move!" Estele darted forward, throwing herself in front of Val. "It's getting ready to strike."

Val jumped between Estele and the beast. "Let it! I'm not intimidated."

The cobra swayed back and forth, hissing. Its cavernous jaws opened into a void of unfathomable darkness. Evil laughter that sounded like an ominous cackle from the lowest levels of Hell rolled out of its mouth.

Val blanched. "Okay, now I'm a little intimidated. What are we dealing with? Do you know what this is?"

"No, but I know what to do." Estele dropped to her hands and knees and crept across the floor toward her purse. Once it was within reach, she snatched it and grasped the ruby.

The smoke beast became aware of what she was doing and whirled around the room like a

miniature tornado, trying to rip the stone from her hands.

Estele's hair whipped around her face and stung her eyes. Squinting against the fury, she held the Heart of Hecate aloft and shouted, "Whatever you are, I don't want you in my home!" She couldn't remember any Latin but spoke a few words with authority that she thought sounded like it. "Pestis go awayus!"

A low hum shook the air. The pressure in the room changed as if some great cosmic vacuum nozzle had been thrust into the apartment. The smoke beast was sucked away into another dimension, and the terrible smell went with it. The only clue that anything out of the ordinary had happened was the scattered contents of the room.

Estele gaped in shock. "Whoa, I did it! I can't believe it. It's gone. Elvis has left the building. What was that thing?"

Val was stunned. "What did you say to it?"

"Mostly gibberish, but I meant 'pest, leave.' It was sort of the first thing to come to mind."

Val's jaw dropped. "Look at you. You kicked ass and sent the threat packing on your own." He shook his head. "Damn, girl, you don't need a protector after all."

Chapter 8

Val studied Estele's ecstatic expression. She looked like a surprised little kid who had just won a free ride on a pink unicorn. You'd never know she'd just faced down a reeking Hell-wrath monster. Despite her self-doubts, she was a damn fine ally to be partnered with. He thrust his arms out. "That was amazing! Get over here and give me a hug."

Estele squealed and raced toward him. She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him like he was a living tire swing. "I did it! For once I focused and used magic to do something that actually needed to be done!"

She sure did, but what was that gem in her hands? With power like that at her disposal, why had the universe called him and told him she needed his help? Clearly she didn't. Not the sort of all-consuming I'm-going-to-have-to-stay-by-your-side-24/7 protection he had expected to offer. As it was, he was sort of a redundant second stringer. His grip tightened. Estele was soft and smelled sweetly of lavender. One thing was for sure, she felt good in his arms.

Drawing away from him, she gazed into his eyes. "I'm so glad I have a witness or else no one would believe me. This is a first. I need to call Fredi and tell her the news." She reached to the floor for her phone. "Terrific, the screen is cracked. Damn it."

"Hold on." He gently led her toward the couch, sat, and drew her beside him. "Estele, I'm not trying to frighten you, but we should have a plan for when that thing comes back."

Estele shuddered. "Ooo, don't say that. Do you really think that smoke beast is coming back? After all I just—"

Was it wrong to undermine her victory so quickly? He had to be honest even if it stung; their lives and the lives of countless others depended on it. "I do."

She looked pale. "I'll just send it away again."

He reached for her hand that wasn't clutching the glowing red ruby. It looked radioactive. Where the hell had that thing come from? He'd ask about that in a moment, but first he had to make his point. "The smoke beast attacked us at the fairgrounds, it may have been behind the weirdness at the market, and now this. I definitely believe it will be back, and we have to be ready for it when it returns."

"How?" Her gaze traveled furtively around the apartment. "That thing just burst through a front door that has three security latches on it! We don't even know what it is or what it wants."

Val shook his head. "That's not completely true. Estele, it seems to be after you."

She pulled away from him. "Me? Am I getting the blame for that thing? Don't forget, *Mr. Del Toro*, it took the shape of a bull and charged the car at the fairgrounds."

Estele might have a point, but it seemed unlikely he was the target of that creature's wrath. When compared to Estele, he was small potatoes. "It was confronting me to get to you."

Her jaw dropped. "That's weird logic. Am I the one who smacked a clown on the head with a sea bass? No, that wasn't me. I think this creature, whatever it might be, is pissed at you."

He had to stand his ground even if it did make him look stubborn. "I was protecting you from it, but its focus is you."

She rolled her eyes. "I call brujo bullshit! I don't see it that way."

Oh God, all he'd done was put her on the defensive. What was wrong with him? Maybe he was better with handling food than people. If he wasn't careful, he might spend the rest of his days as a crazy old brujo living alone in a mountain shack. "Estele, don't be offended. Remain calm, and let's look at the facts."

She crossed her arms over her chest, unmoved by his argument. "Your facts or mine?"

Knowing he could come on strong when challenged, he made a concerted effort to soften his tone. "The facts. Our facts." He'd better start with his own opinions and do a damn good job of making his case, because he could clearly see he was losing her attention. "I was sent here as your protector, a shield against danger, ready to sacrifice myself if I had to. By definition that implies I am a lesser player in this drama, looking after someone of greater importance."

Her brows met and her jaw dropped. "Since when am I someone of greater importance? Seriously, are you in the right place?" Estele swallowed hard. Her gaze flicked upward. "You can't be talking about me."

"I'm convinced you are my power ally. I'm here to assist you, not the other way around." He pointed to the ruby pulsing in her hand. "What is that?"

"It's just a stone." Estele shrugged. "That lights up. So what?"

There was an unclouded gemstone with obvious magical properties clutched in her hands, and she was trying to downplay matters with a statement like 'It lights up'? Her feelings against brujos were even worse than he thought. They might even be insurmountable. If he failed here, he failed big and with finality. No second flight with an ally would be offered. This was his only chance. He'd be relegated to the also-ran category, and likely spend his days as an entry-level adept serving a stronger master. The situation had to be turned around. "It lights up? Is that all?" He scoffed. "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me? Please, I'm trying to help you."

"No." Her denial was unpersuasive.

"Estele. I'm here for you. Be honest with me. What's the story behind the stone? I want to know what we're dealing with."

"I can't tell you!" She leapt off the couch, darted into her bedroom, and locked the door.

Damn it. Now he'd frightened her. They were back to square one. He got off the couch, walked to the bedroom door, and knocked. He had to make her see reason. "You were at the fairgrounds. You felt what I felt. We're playing a dicey game of beat the clock. That bubble of evil is getting ready to blow. There's no time to fight. We need to trust each other and come up with a plan."

"You keep saying that!" He heard her pacing on the other side of the door. "What plan? I'm not a planner. How the hell could we devise a plan against being attacked by a smoke beast, anyway? Earth to Val, the world doesn't work that way. Smoke beasts do what they want, whether the rest of us plan for it or not. This is just more evidence that brujos are crazy." She fell silent.

Val hung his head. That certainly didn't go well. Why was he doing so badly with Estele? Maybe he was crazy to think he could sweep into the situation, take control, and have matters go his way. Hell, until a moment ago, he'd even been beginning to believe he might have a chance of winning her over as well. What a victory that would be. It had been so long, and his starving libido loved being close to her. Even if Estele wasn't a witch with power, he'd still want to chase her just because she was a hot little tamale. Estele was powerful, beautiful, and so very skittish. If he wanted to win her trust and maybe more, he'd have to learn to be patient with her and read between the lines.

He spoke softly through a crack in the door. "I'm going to clean up the kitchen. If you don't want to tell me about the stone, you don't have to."

It took all his willpower to pull himself away from the door. He wanted to linger there in case she decided to open it and offer a warm, conciliatory kiss.

He walked to the sink, picked up a flowered sponge, and washed the soup pot. At least she liked his pozole. It was a hit; she'd eaten two full bowls. He wished she liked him. He certainly liked her. Estele was ditzy, but she was also strong. There was no way he could push her around—not that he'd want to. He was just surprised, because his first impression of her had been that she was cute but weak. *How nice to be proven wrong.*

Staring at the running water, he became mesmerized. Maybe he was sent to be more than her protector? A male protector was a stodgy, old-fashioned idea. Maybe he was her catalyst? The yeast in her bread dough? The cream of tartar in her whipped egg whites? Okay, those were horrible food analogies, but he just might be onto something.

Abruptly, he turned off the water, marched away from the sink, and knocked on the bedroom door. "Estele, how long have you had that stone?"

"I got it today." Her voice cracked.

Had she been crying? He felt like a sod. "And I showed up today too. That can't be a coincidence."

"Val, I can't tell you any more than this. The stone was entrusted to me. If I fuck up, it'll be huge."

"I think I understand something."

"What." She sniffled and blew her nose.

Damn, she had been crying. "I'm not here to protect you from danger. You don't need a shield. I'm

here to help you focus. That flashing stone is a red light, an alarm siren. We're ignoring it and we shouldn't. It's calling us to action. The bubble of evil could pop within hours. With you leading me, we'll walk into danger together, kick its ass, and send it on its way."

"How are we going to do that?" She blew her nose again.

He put his ego aside and pulled out all the stops. "I have no idea. Estele, I'm depending on you to step up and tell me what to do."

"I'm supposed to figure this out and tell you what to do?" Estele groaned. "Bad news, brujo. If that's true, we're going to die."

He leaned his shoulder against the door. "I don't want to die, do you?"

"No, not really."

"Then start focusing. What's our next move?"

She huffed a long, exasperated breath. "You're really going to leave me in charge of something this important?"

"Yes." He walked back to the sink and finished cleaning up. God help them, if Estele didn't snap out of I-don't-know-what-I'm-doing mode, they were going to die.



Estele stared at the Heart of Hecate, wishing she knew what the hell she was doing. She rolled the stone in her hand. What had Witch Griselda told her? The Heart of Hecate would help her have clarity? Hadn't Val said something similar about her focusing? Could it be as simple as just asking the stone?

She held the ruby against her lips and whispered, "Is Val telling the truth about the bubble of malevolence?" Their evening flashed before her eyes. She'd seen and felt the weirdness at the fairgrounds. As a lifelong resident of San Buena, she could attest that nothing like that had ever surfaced before. Something strange was afoot. Of course Val was telling the truth; why was she wasting time asking something so obvious?

Rubbing the stone with her thumb, she asked another question. "Is Val trustworthy?" Images of him stepping between her and trouble flooded her thoughts. He had beaten down an aggressive clown for her. Made her favorite homemade soup, and listened to her stories with real interest. Was anyone that good an actor? The stone's steady crimson glow was reassuring.

So Val was trustworthy. Was she? The stone pulsed a little quicker in her hand. Loving thoughts of Grandma Lena poured through her. "Really? I'm trustworthy? Me? Are you sure?" Damn, now she was talking to a rock. "This is serious, don't just say things to be nice." The stone pulsed an even richer shade of red, and for a fleeting moment resembled a beating heart.

Okay, so the ruby was answering questions like a Magic 8 Ball. How cool was that. "So, you want me to trust myself and trust Val, so we can unite to fight evil?"

The gemstone glowed so brightly it lit the room a rosy pink.

“Wow!” Val called from the kitchen. “What’s going on in there? Is everything okay? What’s the colored light show about?”

Clutching the gem, she bit her lip. Dear Goddess, there was so much on the line! How could she trust herself and trust a brujo? Did the universe know how difficult that task would be? She could sooner trust that water could run uphill than the prospect that she might be a force for good in a real emergency and a brujo could be dependable. Still, the Heart of Hecate wouldn’t lie, would it? She rose from the bed and opened the door.

Val stood at the sink, wiping the counters down. He turned and a wavy lock of dark hair slid provocatively over one eye. Something about him reminded her of a big, sleek cat stalking around her kitchen. When his gaze met hers, his lips parted as if he wanted to say something, but he remained silent.

“We need to talk.”

He appeared leery. “I’m listening.”

“Look at us. A dunce of a witch and a slippery brujo.”

His mouth twitched as if he’d taken offense. “I’m not slippery.”

Uh. She was making a mess of this. “I meant brujos in general.”

Setting the sponge on the countertop, he placed his fist on his hip. “I’m not all brujos in general. I’m just me, and you’re certainly not a dunce.”

“I don’t know if fate is enjoying a joke at our expense or if this is some sort of test, but we’ve been paired together and charged with protecting innocent people. Look at me, look at who I am! In which dimension is that not an insane request? Val, I’m so scared that I can’t meet this challenge. The Esposito witches have a pretty lousy rep—”

“Stop.” He moved closer and took Estele’s hand. His big warm hands were callused and felt so sturdy, as if they were strong enough to hold up the world. Rolling up his sleeve, he pointed to his pinup tattoo. “Estele, you were chosen for this task. So many signs point to you. Stop asking why you were chosen to lead the charge and start focusing on our battle strategy.”

Her lips parted in stunned silence. “I’m in charge of a battle strategy? I think we should put you in charge of that.”

He shook his head. “Estele, I’m here to serve you. What is it you need me to do?”

She puffed her cheeks out and gripped the Heart of Hecate in her palm. Looking down at the ruby, she addressed it directly. “What do we do first?”

The ruby pulsed and a purr-like hum followed.

Estele tilted her head, listening. “Did you hear something? Did the gemstone say, ‘Call Tio Bruno and have the truck ready to roll at dawn?’”

Val shook his head. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“I did.” Holding the gem to her ear, she was certain words had been communicated; perhaps not

spoken aloud, but telepathically and clear nonetheless. Wow, she couldn't believe it. The gem was talking to her. "Call Tio Bruno. The Brujo Tacos food truck is our Trojan Horse."

His gaze sharpened. "Did the gemstone just tell you that?"

Could it be possible that her powers were becoming more focused? "Maybe? It was like a complete plan just popped into my head. It felt great!"

"And you're sure?"

Looking at the gem, a sense of calm came over her. "Yes, I'm absolutely sure. Wow, this must be what it feels like to be decisive like Fredi."

"Then let's do it." Val reached for his phone and tapped the number. "Tio." He paused and looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, I know it's late. I've made contact and I'm with my ally." A big grin lit his face. "Yes, she's a cutie. Her name is Estele Esposito and she's a witch." He frowned. "Yes, she is one of the Esposito witches. No, I didn't hear about the explosion at the Naval yard." Worry crossed his brow. "An Esposito witch did that? Well, how was I supposed to have known? Yes, I am aware there might be a problem with that. We're at her apartment now. No, I won't get distracted. Listen, we've already been confronted by an evil force at the fairgrounds. Yes, I know the county fair takes place there this week. Listen, we have a plan..." He looked at Estele with trusting expectation on his face, then tapped the screen of his phone. "I've got the phone on speaker. Estele, what do you want Tio Bruno to do first?"

Licking her lips, she launched into her plan. "You're going to load the taco truck up with contra-hexed food and drive it onto the fairgrounds."

Tio Bruno grumbled, "What does contra-hexed mean, exactly?"

Estele's confidence faltered. "I'm not sure."

A moment of silence followed.

"Wait!" A crystal-clear thought burst into her mind. "You and Val are both food wizards, right? What did you call yourselves, *alquimistas de sabor*?" Hot damn, she'd even remembered a difficult foreign name. This focusing business worked wonders. "You're both really good cooks, awesome actually, but let's be honest, you're enchanting the food. It's just too good. The tamales made people who don't even like each other want to dance! Explain that, will ya? To my line of thinking, if you can enchant the food for positive benefit, you can place a hex-vex-redirect on food to protect people from negative enchantments, right?"

"I'm not following her. Does she think I normally hex the food?" Tio Bruno's words fell into a void of silence.

Val looked bewildered as well. "Estele, we aren't using magic to trick anyone into thinking we serve good food. We really do serve good food. It's called using fresh ingredients."

She threw her hands up. "Well, you must be doing something extra. You're brujos, couldn't you just cast a teeny-weeny protective spell on some salsa or churros?"

"Hold on, I think I know what you want. You mean cast a hex-vex-redirect like the one you placed

on the mint patties to counteract that weird Fae's candor spell?"

"Yes! Exactly."

Val exhaled a deep breath. "Okay, I think I know what you're getting at. You want me and Tio Bruno to cast a protective enchantment on the food we serve from the taco truck?"

She nodded. "Yep, and I want you to drive right onto the midway and serve that enchanted food to as many fairgoers and carnies as possible. If they don't buy food from you, offer them a free sample. You saw that strange stupor everyone was in. There's some sort of bad juju hanging over the fairgrounds. Maybe we can use enchanted food to inoculate people from some of the effects of whatever it is that's welling up from beneath the ground."

Tio Bruno finally spoke. "What do we say to everyone? 'Come and get your contra-hexed food here or risk being consumed by evil?' We don't want to frighten everyone or provoke a lawsuit. Wording is so important, so what do we tell people? Getting the public to eat something unfamiliar isn't always as easy as it sounds."

Val's expression became somber. "Tricking people into consuming enchantment isn't ethical. As an *alquimista de sabor* and licensed food truck operator, I've sworn not to do it."

Estele balked. "And you're looking at me with that probing expression because you suspect I'm unethical enough to slip the public a hex-vex-redirect, even if it is what the doctor ordered?"

The two men remained silent.

What the hell. The Esposito witches already had a terrible reputation for unintended folly; so what if the bad rep got a little worse? "Okay, so I have slipped spells into unwary people's drinks and onto gum in the past. Yes, I did it, but I always meant well."

She picked at her nail polish. It was clear to her that some sort of protective spell had to be cast. An evil force was on the rise and thousands of people would attend opening day of the county fair. "You're right. I would do it. I don't see a more efficient way to protect the public, do you? We can't go the traditional route and close the fair. Even if we did, that evil force will just escape the fairgrounds and run loose in the city. Hell, it's already been to the market, and a smoke beast visited my apartment. It might already be too late!"

"It's not too late," Tio Bruno said with authority. "If it were too late, San Buena would already be exploding with chaos. I'm in a hotel room, across the street from the fairgrounds. From my window, the place is lit like a NASA launchpad, with crews of carnies assembling the rides. It looks like they plan on working through the night. That bubble of malevolence might have sprung a small leak, but the core of evil is still building on this spot. By the way, what's a smoke beast?" He sounded confused.

How would she describe a smoke beast to someone who had never seen one? "It's a gust of sooty, smelly Hell that can shapeshift and grab things. Think of it like a demonic battering ram or a purse snatcher."

"*Espantoso!* Terrifying." Tio Bruno sounded alarmed. "Valentine, have you seen this smoke beast?"

“Yes, twice. It comes on strong, very intimidating, but Estele was able to chase it off.” Val glanced at Estele, pride on his face.

“Really?” Bruno had to talk loudly over the whirring sounds of an air conditioner in the background. “If the beast flees instead of confronts, it means Estele’s magic must be very strong. Perhaps we have a chance to defeat it after all.”

“Estele, what do you think?” Val gazed into her eyes. His face was filled with admiration. She was so busy enjoying the good vibes he was sending her way that she forgot to answer.

“Estele?” Val asked a second time. “What is our plan? What do you want us to do?”

Plan? Not that again. She snapped out of her daze. “You and Tio Bruno load the truck with the most delectable items you can think of. I’ll cast a hex-vex-redirect on the food and we’ll get it into as many mouths as possible. Does that sound like a plan?”

“We’re only one food truck,” Bruno stressed. “We’re already prepped and I can handle a breakfast run, but we won’t last all day. We’ll need to restock. Valentine, maybe you should get down here and help me out?”

Val appeared leery. “I don’t feel good about that. I can’t leave Estele’s side.”

The windows started to rattle. A horrific groan rose from the pipes. The kitchen sink gurgled ominously. Black bubbles oozed through the drain and the stench of rotten eggs filled the air.

“Holy smoke beast!” Estele saw what was happening. She rushed to the sink, placed a plate over the drain, and pressed down with all her might. “Look who’s invited themselves back.”

Val tossed the phone on the counter and rushed to Estele’s side, adding his weight onto the plate. “We can press down all we want, but I bet this thing just pops up someplace else.”

A scream echoed from the bathroom. “Bonny miss, there’s something unsavory in the tub!” Captain Manx whimpered.

Not her beautiful Zen bathroom! The kitchen was bad enough, but now that stinky thing was slithering around where she stored her toothbrush and makeup. What a sickening thought. “We’ve got to stop this monster. It’s using the plumbing like those horrible pythons that travel from toilet to toilet in tropical hotels.”

Estele cautiously lifted her hand off the plate. “It’s not enough to keep chasing this thing away if it just keeps coming back like a game of whack-a-mole. I have to risk using magic—my magic—to neutralize it. Are you ready for that?”

“I’m backing away.” Val lifted his hands off the plate. “Jeez, that’s a god-awful smell.” A dense black ooze resembling tar bubbled up through the drain. “Do it!”

“I need the stone.” Her gaze searched the countertops for the Heart of Hecate. “Did I lose it? Where the hell did I put it?”

Val pointed to Estele’s hand. “You’re holding it.”

“Oh.” She’d been clutching the stone so hard for so long, she’d forgotten it was in her hand. It had become like a “lost” pair of sunglasses perched on her head. Gazing at the gem, she focused her

intent. What did she need to have happen? She needed to feel safe. Surprise attacks from reeking clouds of smoke had to stop. A little alone time with Val without something horrible interrupting them would be nice. She shouted, “*Relinquo!*” *Wow, did I just remember a bit of Latin? Miss Dahlia would be over the moon.* “Get your smoky ass out of here!”

Like an octopus pulling its limbs back to center, the smoke slowly withdrew, sank into the drain, and disappeared, taking its pungent aroma with it. Ominous sounds gurgled deep in the pipes, and then nothing.

They waited. Nothing more happened. She threw her arms into the air and cheered. “Did it leave? I think it’s gone! Estele—three. Smoke beast—zero. Hurray!”

Chapter 9

Estele stood stunned, looking around the apartment. The smoke beast was gone. It was too early to know, but she may have actually done something right. How great was that?

Val picked Estele up and spun her in a tight circle. “You did it. You’re amazing!”

It felt great to be held in his arms. How long had she been craving a little praise and real affection from a man? It seemed like her entire life.

She gazed into Val’s eyes. He looked back, a hint of wonder shining there, as if he’d just discovered the greatest secret in the world. He set her down and his embrace softened. It became less of a bear hug and more tender. “Estele, I want to.... I know I shouldn’t....” He stroked the side of her face. “Why fight it?”

His hand slid to her nape and cradled her head as his lips brushed hers. The kiss deepened to something more demanding and far more erotic. He pressed closer and his thigh brushed against hers, parting her legs. His solid body was a thrill to be near. Kissing his wickedly luscious lips couldn’t be completely wrong, could it? Soft and sensual, his mouth explored hers with the gentlest of nips. Damn, this brujo could really kiss. She melted against him, breathless, but he pulled away.

He stepped back. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay.” Her lips tingled where he’d touched her. Was it so wrong to let Val distract her from the issue at hand?

“Hello!” Tio Bruno interrupted them and ruined the mood. “Hello? I’m still on the phone. What happened? Is everyone all right?”

Val released her and reached for his phone. “Tio, everything’s okay. The smoke beast showed up again, but Estele sent it away. Everything looks like it’s under control, at least for now, but I wouldn’t dare leave Estele alone.”

“So, what do I do?” Bruno sounded miffed. “Keep my tamales in a holding pattern?”

“Stay put. Keep an eye on the fairgrounds.”

“What are you going to do?” Bruno said.

Val toyed with the phone’s case. “I’m going to stay close to Estele and do whatever she says needs to be done.” He winked at Estele, turned his back, and continued talking about food preparation on the truck to Bruno.

A giddy flutter of emotion passed through her. This hunk was spending the night, and they'd already crossed that razor-thin line between being interested in each other and showing interest in each other. Brujo or not, she was interested in Val. Maybe dating a brujo would qualify as a study in boundary-expanding experiences, the sort of stuff that was good for the soul?

Captain Manx materialized at her side. His eyes were hollow with terror, his jaw slack.

"Whoa! Why do you do that?" She started and jumped back. No matter how many times she'd seen it happen, it always startled her when the captain appeared without warning. "Captain, what's wrong?"

With a wave of his hand, he coaxed her away from Val. "Miss, I'm as scared as a cat up the mast in a howling cyclone." He turned to face her with his eyes bulging. "I usually don't give in to timorousness, not like this." He offered a trembling hand as proof of his claim. "For the most part, the after-realm keeps me numbed as frostbitten fingers on a polar-bound schooner. But that thing in the bathtub...." His lip quivered and he looked as if he might burst into tears. "That thing was...."

"Was what?" She tried to calm him, but the captain was incorporeal and hugging him was impossible. Using her softest voice, she hoped to comfort him. "Tell me what's wrong. You're not alone in this. It frightened me too."

The captain wrung his hands. "It tried to probe my mind and find out what frightened me most. At first I was cavalier, thinking, 'I'm dead, it can't possibly frighten me,' but it did!"

"How?"

"The smoke beast made me remember my worst memories, or I started to remember but it was too painful, so I fought it. A terrible feeling that I'd met something like this entity before overwhelmed me. The smoke didn't talk, but it planted the idea in my head that it had a brother that badly wanted something from me, and that I must remember it. That's when I screamed."

"Oh, Captain, that sounds horrible. I'm so sorry."

The captain appeared bashful. "I have a tremendous favor to ask, miss."

What time was it? She hadn't even glanced at a clock in ages, but it had to be late. "Please, not another trip to the liquor store. Buying booze at this time of night looks really bad."

"I'm unconcerned with intoxicating libations, miss. At the moment, I find myself in dire need of being close to the living. In plain speak, I wish to sleep in your bed."

"My bed?" she answered breathlessly. "Where will I sleep?"

"Ideally, beside me."

She was hoping for something a little more exciting involving Val. "Captain, no! That won't work."

"There's nothing improper about it. In the strictest sense, I'm a ghost and I don't even sleep."

"That's part of the problem. What are you going to do, just lie beside me, propped on your elbow, staring? That's just too creepy."

"Please, miss. I cannot bear to be alone now. You're perfectly safe with me. In the vernacular of

the day, it won't get weird. You have my word as a ward of the sea."

She shook her head. "Captain, your shirt's unbuttoned and you smell like seaweed. It's already weird."

Clicking off his phone, Val thrust it into his back pocket. "Estele!" He walked toward his duffel bag, unzipped it, and took out a sleeping roll. "It's after midnight. I have to meet Tio Bruno at 5:00 a.m. We'd better get some sleep."

Her mood sank. "Meet your uncle at 5:00 a.m.? But I go jogging at six."

"Where do you jog?"

"Along the sea cliffs and around Cemetery Park."

A defiant expression lit his eyes. "With demonic forces tracking your every movement? That doesn't sound very safe. Considering the situation, I insist you skip tomorrow's run."

No jogging? Her morning run wasn't just exercise, it was a decompression device. "Why skip it? It clears my head, and believe me, my head needs clearing."

Val rubbed his chin. "If I walk around the fairgrounds at 5:00 a.m. by myself, I'll be alerting the smoke beast that you're up here alone or waiting to be pushed over the side of a cliff or something awful. You'll be safer if you come with me."

She glanced at the captain's shadow drifting across the room. "Technically speaking, I'm never completely alone."

Within a shimmering mist, Captain Manx materialized beside Val. "Don't leave me here by myself! Let's keep the crew together. In the morning, I'll go with you and help protect our wee lass."

"Guys, hold on a minute!" She lifted her hands in a signal for silence. "So far, I've been doing a damn fine job of protecting myself! I ran the smoke beast off twice. Do I get credit for that? No."

Val looked her in the eye. "I'll give you credit. Estele, you're doing a great job, but recreational jogging along the sea cliffs and the cemetery is too big a risk. I can't allow you to place yourself in excessive danger. I wouldn't be much of a protector if I did." He pushed the bedroom door open, entered, and unfurled a sleeping bag. Laying the bag on the floor at the foot of her bed, he unzipped the side. "I'll sleep here, between you and the door."

He was going to sleep at the foot of her bed? Yum! He was like a territorial tiger in heat, and he'd looked all worked-up and fiery-eyed when he'd spoken.

The captain pulled the sheets down on the bed. "And I'll slip between the linens."

Val's mouth gaped in shock. "What? No. Captain, you're not sleeping here with us."

The captain leaped beneath the covers. "I am. I've already discussed matters with Miss Estele."

The look on Val's face was priceless. "Is that true? When did this happen? I thought it was clear that I was your protector? Tell me what's going on."

Tugging the bedcovers over his head, the captain rolled onto his side. "I asked first, lad. Best not to be a sore loser. I'll take second watch. Until then, tie off the helm and steer toward the morning star. May you have fair weather and clear skies in dreamland!"

“Estele.” Val addressed her with a stern tone. “For God’s sake, kick that guy out of your bed.”

She glanced at the captain, who was pretending to doze and looked peaceful. “He’s scared. Let him stay.” She motioned for Val to follow her into the living room and pointed at a long L-shaped couch. “I’ll get some blankets and we can sleep out here.”

He looked hopeful. “Just you and me?”

“Of course.” Even if they did have to be out the door at 5:00 a.m., it might be fun to spend a little time cuddling on the couch and kissing away the brooding pout from his gorgeous lips. “I’ll get us some bedding.”

The moment she turned to get blankets from the bedroom, she bumped into Captain Manx.

The captain’s arms were heaped high with sheets and comforters. “So, the slumber party is moving out here? Very well. Shall we partake of a little talky-box for amusement?”

Disappointment flooded Val’s face. “Talky-box? I’m afraid to ask.”

“Manxie means television.” Estele took hold of the blankets. How did the captain lift things in an incorporeal state? Sometimes he seemed to have way more influence over the physical world than he should, and defied the physics of metaphysics.

“To be specific, I crave amusement from Mr. Jimmy Kimmel.” The captain chuckled as he sat on the couch and waited for Estele to turn on the TV with the same intense interest with which a cat waits by the can opener when a can of tuna is removed from the cupboard. “I just adore late-night talky-box. Especially those obsessive programs, where people go on and on about some clever gadget. What are those called?”

“Infomercials.” She filled in the blank for the captain.

“Infomercials! That’s right. I love those. Why purchase just one of something you don’t really need when you can have two and pay shipping twice! By the way, miss, I meant to ask for your credit card number. I’d like to—”

“No, Captain. Absolutely not.” She wrapped a blanket around herself.

“But, miss, I saw a plastic contraption that goes from freezer to microwave and you can use it to hard-boil eggs and slice them into juliennes strips or spirals and dump them on top of your children’s breakfast cereal to create fast, inexpensive, high-protein breakfasts.”

“Captain, you don’t eat eggs—you can’t eat anything. I don’t have any children. We don’t need it.”

“Very well, miss. I say the EggMeister was tempting. It looked like it could turn our lives around. Did I mention you could use it to make plain hard-boiled eggs into a brunch-crowd-pleasing decorative tulip bouquet? With the handy EggMeister attachment, plain hard-boiled eggs can be transformed into lifelike flowers. Everyone will gather round and marvel—”

“Enough! Stop the sales pitch. I wish you’d quit watching those infomercials, you’re far too suggestible.” She crossed the room. “I’m going to get ready for bed and pretend that I have a chance of getting a couple hours of sleep tonight.”

“I agree.” Val turned off the television and the lights. “We have a battle on the horizon, and any

rest we can get is essential.” He spread a blanket on the longest section of the couch, kicked off his boots, unbuttoned his shirt, and stripped down to a white tank. Moonlight washed his coppery skin. “I’m going to sleep.” He patted the couch, indicating she should join him. “Estele, stay close so I can protect you.”

Estele looked Val over. He was such a nice guy, and his broad shoulders and lean abs were easy on the eyes. She was tempted to jump straight into his arms, but best to give herself a moment to cool off and think. “I’m not trying to be a tease, but I actually do need to change into something more comfortable.” She pointed to her high heels. “I’ll be right back.”

She slipped into the bedroom and unfastened her dress. It seemed like ages since she had put it on and gone to the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge. She unbuckled the cherry-topped high heels. Once her feet were released, she sighed with relief.

Tomorrow she would have to wear sensible shoes to make up for the hours in toe-pinching heels. After putting everything where it needed to be, she searched through a dresser drawer and found a lightweight velour pullover and jogging pants she used as pajamas. She often slept in her jogging clothes and went straight out the door in the morning.

Looking at her empty bed, the thought occurred that she could just climb in alone and hope the captain didn’t surprise her with his presence in the predawn hours, but what about Val? He’d offered to “protect” her, but did he expect her to curl up on the short end of the sectional or at his side? Was flirting with a brujo playing with fire? Maybe it was, but stoking the flames was proving impossible to resist.

She exited the bedroom. The living room was dark except for a slice of moonlight that bisected the floor. Val lay stretched on the couch. He had made a cozy bed for himself by folding blankets and using them as pillows, an extra blanket on top. His eyes glistened and he had a slight smile on his lips as he lifted the edge of the blanket and beckoned her to join him. “Come here. I want to talk for a minute.”

Did he really want to talk?

The warmth in his eyes was genuine, so she went to him. Was there a way through her initial bad feeling against brujos? Could she learn to see Val as his own man and not constantly hear her mother’s bitter ranting about brujos echoing in the back of her mind? After all, she didn’t get along that great with her mother....

He drew her beside him and cradled her in the crook of his arm. “See? There’s plenty of room on this couch for both of us.”

She pressed her cheek against his chest, smelling the faintest hint of musk.

He lifted her face to his and kissed her lips. “Are you scared?”

“To kiss you? No.”

“I meant about tomorrow.”

Was she scared? Oddly, she had no fear for her own safety. “I’m scared my wacko style of magic

might hurt someone else. I live in dread of it, actually.”

Smoothing her hair with his palm, he drew her closer. “Why?”

“Why? Gosh, you don’t know me very well. The enchantment community of San Buena knows me as ‘batshit wacky Estele.’ The few people who actually like me call me ‘Estele I-meant-to-do-well Esposito.’”

“I think you’re being too hard on yourself.” His voice was rich and reverberated deep in his chest like the purr of a lion.

“I’m not. Trust me, I’ve earned my bad rep.”

“But you’re so powerful. You sent the smoke beast fleeing. When did all this start?”

Val thought she was powerful? Burrowing her face against his chest, she smiled. “When did what start?”

He said it slowly as if he were a head juror pronouncing a final verdict in court. “Your iffy relationship to your own magical powers.”

Was he kidding? “I was born into it. The Esposito witches are walking disasters waiting to happen.”

His arms locked around her as if he feared she might flee. “I’m not asking about your family, I’m asking about you.”

She paused. Was there a difference? Her life had been defined by cautionary tales, such as the one about her great-aunt Gerty screwing up morale spells during the Great Depression, thus making it even more depressing. Even her own mother had eagerly pointed out her smallest mistakes from the youngest age as proof their bloodline was cursed. “I’ve always had an iffy relationship with magic. My mother told me it’s because I was born of bad blood.”

He shook his head. “Bad blood? What does that even mean?”

“You know, I’m the unfortunate offspring of a floundering Esposito witch and a—pardon me for using my mother’s own words—‘deadbeat brujo father.’ Not a stellar pedigree.”

“Do you have any sort of relationship with your father?”

Estele flopped onto her back. “No! It was just like those terrible hard-luck stories you hear all the time. He went to the store to buy milk and never returned. I don’t even remember the guy. Granted, my mother is hard to live with, but he was a total bastard for just leaving us and never saying anything.”

Val tenderly kissed her cheek and then the tip of her nose. His touch was gentle and conveyed so much. “I’m so sorry. I can imagine that not having a father left a big hole in your life.”

A freaking bottomless pit was more like it. If her father had stayed and her mother hadn’t been so bitter, would she be a better person, more grounded and less dangerous to the general public? Probably. What would it have been like to grow up with a trustworthy man in her life who she could have leaned on and learned from? Lying beside Val, her heart ached in a strange way, as if she’d never felt it stretched so far. Why couldn’t she be someone worth loving and coming back for? It physically hurt to even breathe, so she remained silent as the moments ticked past.

“Are you okay?” He sounded concerned. “You got pretty quiet.”

Did she even want to talk about it? Could she open up to Val and tell him the truth without scaring him away and making herself look even more damaged? It hadn’t worked with anyone else. Maybe she was deluding herself into believing Val might be something special.

Oh, what the hell, she’d never know unless she tried. “When I was little, especially on a birthday or holiday, I’d play a game with myself. I’d look at the door and say, ‘Any minute now, Dad’s walking through that door, and when he does, he’s going to bring me all kinds of gifts. He’s going to tell me he loves me, he’s going to make up with my mother, and it’s going to be okay. We’re going to have enough for rent and we’re going to stop fighting because Mom won’t be unhappy anymore. Like magic, everything will get better.’ He was the missing piece of my childhood and the reason why my mom and I fought so much. At least that’s what I thought when I was a kid. Later, in my teens, when my magical powers got out of control, my mother tried to shut them down with terse comments about how ‘strong’ and ‘arrogant’ my style of magic was becoming. She’d shame me by saying I was beginning to behave just like my dad.”

He drew a tense breath. “And you don’t trust your father, yourself, your mother, or the strength of your own powers? I think I’m beginning to understand the issues here. So, who do you trust?” His voice tensed and he sounded more affected by her story than she was.

It had been so long since she’d told anyone this much about her. Tears welled in her eyes. She wiped her sleeve against her lashes. If she wasn’t careful, she’d be ugly crying in no time. “I trust my best friend, Fredi. She’s a crazy-talented witch and I wish she was my real sister. Without meaning to, I’ve done bad things to her, but she forgave me.”

“What bad-d—” He seemed to stumble over his words. “—bad things did you do to her?”

“I cast some bad magic. But we got past it.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yes. My spell didn’t last more than a few hours. In the end it worked out well. Fredi met her boyfriend, Gus, while under the enchantment I cast, so there was a silver lining.”

He stroked her arm with a broad, warm hand. “Who else do you trust?”

“Miss Dahlia, at the Master Mage Magic Academy, is super patient with me. I make a lot of mistakes and she helps me plow through the solutions one at a time. She’s a practical witch, very hands-on. I also trust Witch Griselda. She’s ancient, and a bit doddering, but she still has it! She’s a freaking force of nature. Oh, you’ll like this! Way back when, she dated a brujo.”

“Really?” He couldn’t hide his excitement at hearing about a fellow brujo. “How did that work out for her?”

“Grissy said she was nuts about him, even hoped to marry him, but it didn’t happen. Old Griselda didn’t say so, but I got a big psychic hit that her old beau died in the Mexican Revolution. I don’t think she ever found anyone else she loved as much.”

He pulled her close to his chest. “So not everyone in the San Buena enchantment community is

antibrujo?”

“Far from it. I don’t want to be anti-anyone. I’m sorry I was so rude to you earlier tonight. ‘Brujo’ is a trigger word for me, and now you know why I was so reluctant to work with one.”

He kissed the top of her head. “We’re talking and things are better. All is forgiven. Besides, you don’t have to work with me forever. We just have to get along until the bubble of malevolence is under control.”

Even though they had just met, the thought that all this, the closeness, the candidness, was just a temporary thing stung. In her heart of hearts, she could see herself falling for Val big-time. “When we’re finished doing whatever it is we need to do, what’s next? Where will you go after this?”

“I have no idea. I suppose fate will guide me where I need to go.”

Maybe brujos were like tomcats, born to wander through life acting like nobody owned them. “Have taco truck, will travel?”

He laughed. “Something like that.”

“Your food’s really good, and I’ll bet you’re an excellent brujo.”

“Thank you.” He held her closer. The look in his eyes was pure tenderness. “Estele.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know who else you can trust?”

“Who?”

“Me.” His gaze sought hers. “You can trust me. I won’t let you down. I have your back. I’d die before abandoning my ally in battle.”

She brushed her fingertips along the gritty stubble on his jaw. “I wouldn’t expect you to die for me.”

His face remained calm and looked completely sincere. “But I would, if it served the situation best. As your protector, I’m pledged to do it.”

“Brujos are an intense bunch, aren’t you?” Leaning closer, she kissed his lips. The first touch barely made contact. It was more of a warm breath skimming his lips than a kiss. The second was bolder; her mouth caressed his and heat bloomed between them. Her breasts brushed his chest and she melted against him.

Val pulled away. “Estele, if we start, I won’t want to stop.”

Her voice dropped to a provocative whisper. “Why would we need to stop?”

He looked into her eyes. “Because we just met and I need to focus on keeping you safe while we battle or neutralize whatever it is that we’ll be facing at the fairgrounds in a few hours.”

Had she badly misunderstood his intentions? Was he gently but firmly letting her down. Her mouth went dry.

“Don’t think I’m not tempted.” He grazed his fingertips against her cheek and his brows sank into a more serious expression. “I am, but I’m not a fool either. I think you’re someone special and worth waiting for.”

Did he mean it, or was he just more polite than some of the other guys who had used her once and then let her down? Reaching for one of the comforters, she sat. “Should I sleep on the small couch and give you a little room?” As she scooted away, she longed to be back in his arms.

“I’ll sleep beside you!” Captain Manx materialized in the exact spot Estele had been lying in, curled up like a kitten against Val’s chest. “I’m terrified of the creature’s return.”

“Oh no!” Val turned over and faced the couch.

She rolled her eyes. Of course the captain had been hanging around, listening to everything and waiting to take her spot beside Val. What had led her to believe she’d be allowed a little privacy in her own home?

Clutching a comforter, she moved to the foot of the L. “I’d say good night to everybody, but I don’t think we’re going to get much sleep.”

Soon the Captain and Val were softly snoring. With her purse strap wrapped around her wrist and the Heart of Hecate securely zipped inside, she lay awake staring up at the ceiling and watched a slice of moonlight cross the room.

Chapter 10

Estele woke with a strong hand on her arm, gently shaking her. The purse that was wrapped around her wrists shifted, and she drew it protectively against her chest and held it like a precious newborn. Under no circumstances could she lose the Heart of Hecate that Witch Griselda had solemnly entrusted to her.

“Estele,” Val whispered. “We have to get going.”

Her eyes felt like they’d been glued shut with sleepy sand, but she pried them open. “Am I dreaming, or do I smell coffee?”

“I’m brewing it now.” He smiled, and his eyes fanned in an attractive way.

Rising on her elbows, she glanced out the window. The ocean and sky were dark and almost blended into one another. The lights at the fairgrounds blazed bright. “What time is it? Did we sleep at all, or oversleep an entire day? What’s going on?”

“It’s 4:25 a.m. You slept a little. I heard you. I had the captain snuggling with me, so I didn’t sleep much. How do you take your coffee?”

“So sweet.” She gazed into his lustrous brown eyes. Someone had made her coffee? How wonderful was that? That sort of thing never happened with the guys she usually dated.

He rose and walked into the kitchen. “I’m just trying to soften the blow of an early morning wake-up call.” Opening a cupboard, he removed two mugs, picked up the coffeepot, filled each, and added a couple heaping spoonfuls of sugar to her cup.

Estele winced when she saw how much sugar Val stirred into her coffee. She liked her coffee black, straight-up. When she’d said “sweet,” she’d meant “How sweet that you made me coffee.” Oh well, she’d drink it anyway. When would she learn to be more precise with her words?

He handed the sugary mug to her. “We can get breakfast off the truck. Are you okay with burritos?”

“Burritos are great.” She thought the words through. This time, had she said something wrong or anything that could possibly be misconstrued or cause magic to go awry? No, she had not. She sipped the coffee, then stopped. It was syrupy. She tried not to frown as she rose from the couch and walked into the kitchen. “I think I’m going to dilute this a little.”

Val paced around the apartment, gathering things he needed for the day and sipping his coffee. He

was already dressed in dark cargo jeans and a hoodie, but even in such casual clothing he still looked as sleek as a black jaguar. He glanced at her. “Pack a bag for the day. Bring anything you think you’ll need. We might not make it back.”

“Might not make it back? That sounds ominous.”

Setting his coffee mug on the countertop, he stopped pacing. “Estele, we don’t know exactly what we’ll be facing down there, but from what we’ve already seen, expect it to be big. Once we’re engaged in battle, there’s no retreat and no time-outs. Bring your entire magic kit, potions, Wiccan charms, a change of clothes, and a phone charger—whatever you need to get the job done. You’re this team’s heavy hitter and I’m here to help you.”

Suffering Circe, this was staring to get a little scary.

Val stepped closer and his hand brushed her cheek. “You look overwhelmed. Don’t be.” He tugged on his sleeve and pointed to his pinup girl tattoo. “Remember, fate’s picked you as our best champion against evil, and I’m here to support you. You’re not walking into this alone.”

“You seem to have so much faith in me.” Inside, she cringed. How many times had she cast a spell only to watch it swerve into a ditch and implode? “What if I can’t deliver and the bubble of malevolence pops and kills innocent people? What then? If I let others down, I won’t be able to live with myself.”

He picked up his coffee mug and drained it. “If you don’t try, you won’t be able to live with yourself either.” Gathering his culinary knives, he carefully slipped the cutlery into their proper leather slots, rolled the kit up, and placed it in his duffel bag.

“Are we bringing knives to a gunfight? I’m not feeling the least bit prepared for this.”

“This isn’t a gunfight, it’s a firefight—a Wiccan-fire fight. The bubble of malevolence can’t be shot, stabbed, or chased away with a warning. Real action is going to have to be taken. From what you’ve told me, your style of magic is very unpredictable. From what I’ve seen, you are also very powerful. That’s a potent combination. I think whatever is lurking down there in the fairgrounds should be afraid of you.”

Wow, could that all be true? And he looked like such a sexy mutha when he said it. “Really? You think so?”

A bright smile lit his face. “Yes, really.” With a shooing motion, he pointed her toward her room. “Get ready. We should leave in ten minutes.”

Still high on his praise and clutching her coffee mug, she careened toward her bedroom. “Wish I knew what I needed to battle a bubble of malevolence.”

“I would start with casual clothes and shoes you can walk—preferably run—in. Magical tools, crystals, wands, philters—whatever helps you focus—and bring the ruby. The smoke beast seems obsessed with it.”

A shiver traveled over her skin. There was no way she would leave the stone behind or even let it out of her sight, but was she being a fool to blindly trust Val’s judgment? His intentions were good,

but could they be hand-delivering the Heart of Hecate to Goddess-knew-what was waiting for her at the Oceanside fairgrounds? A sense of paranoia gnawed at her. “You’re not even supposed to know about the ruby.”

“But I do.” His gaze narrowed. “What’s wrong? You’re looking at me like I grew a third eye.”

“Nothing.” She entered her bedroom and shut the door. The moment she was alone, she unzipped the purse and looked inside. The ruby was safe, sitting in a change pocket. Compared to yesterday, its glow was faint, as if it were resting or conserving energy. She reached into her purse and petted the stone. “Good morning. I’m happy to see you.” A burst of crimson lit the interior of her purse. “Nice stone.” She stroked it like a cat. “We’re going to have a great day, aren’t we?” “How are you doing in there?” Val’s voice floated through the door. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“I’ll just be a few minutes.” What the hell did one wear to do battle with evil? Staring at her closet and chest of drawers, she drew a blank until the stone sent a telepathic suggestion: combat boots. She reached for her Doc Martins. “That makes sense.”

“What makes sense?” Val sounded confused.

“Never mind. I’m just talking to myself and a rock.”

“Okay.” He still sounded confused. “I’ll start loading the car, all right?”

“Good idea.” She turned toward her dresser and starting flinging drawers open.

Captain Manx materialized beside her. “Where are we going, miss?”

She flinched. “Not ‘we’—me. I’m headed someplace that you won’t want to go—to the fairgrounds.”

The captain appeared crestfallen. “The fairgrounds?” He bit his lip. “I suppose the hearty young lad is going with you?”

“Yes, we have to go. I’m sure you’ve eavesdropped on us enough to know why.”

“I do know, and I wish to accompany you. Who knows, against all odds I might be of use.”

“Captain, I’m not sure what you could do except haunt the rides and startle mortals, and I have a bad feeling enough of that will be going on already. Besides, the fairgrounds are built on what used to be San Buena’s docks.”

He hung his head and brushed his fingertips against a few wisps of white hair on his semibare chest. “I’m well aware of that fact, miss, and I insist on accompanying you regardless.”

“Won’t being at—” How could she be delicate in saying this? “—ground zero be troubling for you?”

“Ground zero?” The captain appeared blank. “I’m not following your drift.”

“The docks, aka Oceanside Fairgrounds, are the last place your ship was in one piece before it was —”

“I know that, and I’ve scrupulously avoided the area for over a hundred years.”

“Aren’t you afraid going to the fairgrounds might trigger bad memories for you? That’s what you’ve always told me. What if you run into the ghosts of your former shipmates?”

He placed his hands over ears and hummed loudly. “Let’s not discuss that topic. La, la, la, la, I can’t hear you!”

“What do you mean, don’t discuss it? If you think you’re coming with me, especially today, we have to discuss it. To be frank, I’m going to have my hands full. I won’t be able to babysit you.”

Indignation showed on his face. “Do I ever ask you to ‘babysit’ me? I’ve never asked for, nor needed a baby to sit on me. That term sounds quite degrading.”

“Babysitting means something else.” The poor captain sometimes got modern terms terribly wrong. “I don’t mean it as an insult, but you are high maintenance. How often am I downtown on some ill-advised errand looking for a suitable laudanum substitute or some exotic Tonka-bean-infused liquor because you won’t go there yourself to sniff the bottle or fondle the packaging to get an imaginary contact high? Captain, your entire rationale for never leaving the house on the hill or straying beyond Cemetery Park was because you were afraid to go to the waterfront or anywhere near the shipyard and be confronted by the ghosts of your crew or whatever it was that terrified you so badly in life. I don’t get it. They were your crew, your peers. What are you afraid is going to happen? All of you are long dead. You should have so much in common.”

He threw his hands high. “I’m ready to do it today! I shall go to the docks, come what may.”

“Fairgrounds,” she corrected him. “Really? After putting it off for over a century, you’re ready to do it today of all days? I have to warn you, there’s nothing there that you would recognize. The shipyards were paved over twenty years ago. The wooden docks are gone and the harbor has high-rise hotels on it.”

“Nonetheless, I shall go with you.”

Her heart sank. This could get complicated. “That’s fine, but what changed? If you do decide to join us, you have to look after yourself. A bubble of malevolence is getting ready to blow and I can’t afford any distractions.”

“If you must know, miss, I feel called to do it.”

This should be interesting. Who called? “All right, but make it quick. In a minute Val will return and I’m not even close to being ready.”

“My encounter with the smoke c-creature,” the captain stuttered, “was quite an alarming experience. I sensed that it wanted to probe my memories for the most disturbing items it could find and feed upon them.”

“Why?”

His gaze was blank. “So it could grow stronger. I got an undeniable sense that it feeds on fear, insecurities, and doubt.”

“No shit.” A sinking feeling gripped her. “Insecurities and doubt? I’ll need to be extra careful considering I’m sort of the queen of both.”

The captain wrung his hands. “I heartily disagree. You were admirably courageous in confronting the monster and driving it away. You didn’t let it get the better of you the way it frightened me.” He

looked at her with pleading eyes. “I’m tired of being so timorous. Despite pretending to be a bluff-talking captain, I spent my life full of self-doubt and regret, and now I’ve carried it all into the afterlife. This should have ended long ago.”

“What should have ended?”

“My existence in this realm.” His expression was pained. The lines on his face appeared deeper than ever. “I don’t belong here. I’ve put it off long enough. I must go with you to the docks and face what I must.”

“It’s fairgrounds now, remember? There won’t be any ships there.”

“The smoke beast will be there. That’s all I need to face.”

The front door opened and heavy footsteps entered the apartment. “Estele!” Val called from the living room. “Are you ready?”

Estele glanced down at her fuzzy sleepwear-slash-jogging outfit. Did she really want to spend what might be the most challenging day of her life dressed like a two-year-old ready for their naptime?

“Miss?” The captain waved his hands to get her attention and pointed toward the bed. “I’ve taken the liberty of selecting an appropriate outfit for you to battle demons in.”

She walked toward the bed. A pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a safari jacket with lots of pockets were set out on the bed. “Thank you, Captain. When did you do this?”

“I set the clothing out last night. I had to do something helpful. You’ll find the pockets have been stocked with useful articles like a travel toothbrush, lip balms, coins of the realm—”

“Coins of the realm? Where did you get these items?” That sneaky old dog. “You went through my purse while I was asleep, didn’t you?”

He looked guilty. “I’m afraid I did, miss.”

“I thought the ruby made you nervous? Why would you even look in my purse?”

The captain’s eyes bulged like a fish. “It called to me.”

“It called to you, so you went into a lady’s handbag and rooted around? Whatever happened to personal boundaries? Am I not allowed any privacy?”

“I’m so sorry, miss. I knew it was wrong but I was frightened. You and the lad were out like lights. I saw the gem pulsing inside your purse, a bit of rosy light escaping the seams. To these old eyes, it was as comforting as the pink glow of dawn on the day you sight land, so I crept closer—”

“How close?”

“A polite distance, but I did unzip the purse and look inside. And you’ll never guess what happened—”

“Estele!” Val stomped around the living room. “We need to leave. I have to help Bruno get ready for the breakfast run.”

“I’m getting dressed now!” She motioned for the captain to turn around. “Captain, finish what you were saying and don’t peek.”

“It was the strangest thing. First, I thought the stone was talking to me, but it wasn’t. It was more like it was speaking directly to my thoughts.”

Tugging the jersey over her head, she cast it aside and reached for a sport bra. *Where did I set the deodorant?* “Yes, I know what you mean. I had the same experience too. It was like the stone helped me to organize my thoughts and make a decision. Witch Griselda said it brings clarity.”

“A clear decision! That’s exactly it, miss! I dared to touch the ruby and I did experience an uncomfortable moment of self-examination—”

She pulled the T-shirt over her head with lightning speed for fear the captain would turn, peering over her shoulder to make sure he didn’t. “Self-examination? Oh, please don’t let this get gross.”

The captain remained facing away. “Perhaps self-reflection is a better term. The stone captivated me and I was forced—more like gently compelled, really—to confront my many follies and my part in them. I’ve been avoiding doing this for such a long while, but I believe now that walking, or in my case floating, to the docks—”

“To the fairgrounds.” Sorting through a drawer, she wondered if she even owned a matched pair of socks. Could she dare risk witching two unmatched socks into a pair, or would that be asking for trouble? At least she had clean underwear.

“Fairgrounds. Yes, of course. Going there is the right thing to do. I must face my fears and ask forgiveness of my shipmates.”

She stepped into her pants and tugged them up her legs. “Forgiveness for what?”

He cocked his head. “I’m not sure exactly. It’s been so long, I don’t remember the details.”

“Or don’t want to remember.”

“True. They don’t put people in asylums just because they’re a bit forgetful, do they? I must have done something regrettable and blocked it out, but I feel like the clouds are parting and I’m going to remember very soon what I did, and then I’ll be able to let it go.”

Knuckles rapped on the door. “Estele. We should have left already.”

“Almost ready!” Jeez, it was still black as night out there. She reached for the safari jacket. It weighed a ton. “There’s more than lip balm in here. Captain, what did you put in these pockets, lead slugs?”

“A few needful things, miss.”

Deciding to wear mismatched socks, she slipped into her Doc Martins and laced them up. The moment she was dressed, she burst out of the bedroom, darted into the bathroom, and shut the door.

Val groaned. “Estele, what are you doing?”

“Hold on! Five minutes. I have to pull myself together.” She had to brush her teeth. Bubble of malevolence or not, she wasn’t going to leave the house with coffee breath. “Oh, by the way, Captain Manx will be accompanying us.”

“What did you say?” He stepped closer to the door. “This is serious. We can’t get sidetracked. If the captain comes with us, he’s on his own, okay?”

She looked over her shoulder. Thankfully the captain hadn't crowded into the bathroom with her. Accomplishing what she could in as little time as possible, she combed her hair into a ponytail and swiped on a coat of cheery peach lipstick. Swooping her fringed handbag over her head, she secured it at her side with her arm locked against it. A glance in the mirror revealed that she didn't look like a demon hunter so much as a Banana Republic ad. Unzipping the purse, she looked at the stone, which gave off a faint red glow. "How are you doing in there? Are you ready for today?"

The ruby pulsed. The words *never abandoned* popped into her mind. What did that mean? Was the Heart of Hecate scared she might abandon or lose it? She spoke directly to the stone. "Never abandoned? Don't worry, I'll be very careful with you and make sure you get back to your rightful owner."

With a burst of bright pink light, the ruby steadily glowed. *He'll always be your protector* entered her mind.

She spoke into her purse. "Who's 'he'? Val? I know part of your power is the ability to grant clarity, but I sure wish you could be a little clearer with me."

"Estele." Val stood outside the door. "Are you talking to me? If you were, I didn't quite hear what you said."

"No, Val, I'm just talking to myself." She zipped her purse and exited the bathroom. "I guess I'm ready."

Val's gaze skimmed over her. He looked surprised. "A purse, that's it? Are you sure you have everything you'll need?"

How could she answer that? Her chaotic style of magic had never been dependent on traditional Wiccan tools, charms, or anything solid. She tended to wing it, making up incantations as she went. Most of the time that lack of formality was what caused the biggest problems. "What were you expecting me to bring, a jeweled skull and a lightsaber?" She had her "protector" and the Heart of Hecate and that was all she needed. "We're good."

Offering his hand, he smiled. "Let's go."

"Very good! I'm ready too!" Captain Manx took Val's hand. "Off we go."

Estele tapped the captain's shoulder. "Where did you get that harpoon, and is it really coming with us in the car?"

The captain clutched the weapon. "I've had it for ages. I'll just hold it between my knees in the back seat, unless someone objects."

"Have you seen how small the back seat of my car is?"

A matter-of-fact reply rolled off the captain's tongue. "We'll open a window and let the sharp end poke out."

It was shaping up to be a long day. "About that sharp end. There's going to be thousands of people at the fairgrounds—you know, families with children. Watch where you point that harpoon, okay?"

Captain Manx dismissed Estele's comment with a frown. "I've never haphazardly harpooned

anyone in a crowd.”

“Make sure you don’t.” She extended her hand to Val. “Give me the keys. I’ll drive.”

Typical man, Val had already taken possession of them. “I thought maybe I would drive.”

She shook her head. “It’s my car. I’ll drive.”

Val dug deep into his pocket and pulled out the keys, but he didn’t look pleased about it. “Here.”

Plucking them from Val’s hand, she tried to sound confident, as if she were comfortable being in charge, which she wasn’t. “Let’s roll.” She turned to the captain. “You don’t really need to go in the car. You’re immaterial, at least most of the time. In theory, you could just pop down to the fairgrounds and meet us there.”

The captain appeared stricken. “I’ve never ridden in a car and I was so looking forward to it. It would be such a thrill to ride with you and the lad and chat with the Parking Fairy in transit.”

That was news. “You know about my Parking Fairy?”

“I know all the elementals who live in the area.” He winked. “The oaks at Cemetery Park are filled with dryads. In this very building, there are water nymphs hiding in the courtyard’s koi pond. You do know that, don’t you?”

That was big news. Had she been blind? “There are actual nymphs swimming in the koi pond? I did not know that.” How would that even work? Was she that unobservant? “The pond’s not that big. Aren’t they cramped for space?”

The captain laughed. “You’re thinking rationally, and the world next door, where the elementals spend most of their existence, is anything but rational. The nymphs come and go from the pond as they please. Most of the time it’s just a brief visit to cheer up the fish.”

Where had she been? “The koi need to be cheered up? I did not know that either.”

Val patted his wristwatch. “We’re wasting time.”

Heading toward the door, she pleaded, “Captain, could I convince you to leave the harpoon behind? On a crowded midway, I think it would be more of a hindrance than a help.”

Manx’s chin dropped to his chest. “Very well, miss.” He set the rust-tinged harpoon in a corner. “I just hope we won’t regret leaving it behind.”

Estele herded everyone out the front door, then shut and locked it. Val stood close, waiting to hold her hand or be of assistance should she think of anything that required assistance. Tiny lights illuminated the black stairs that led to the parking lot, but the sky beyond was still dark.

Val walked to the passenger side. “It’s open.”

She reached toward the driver-side door handle, then jumped back with a start as Captain Manx materialized in the driver seat with his hands on the wheel.

“Beep, beep.” The captain grinned at her with beetle-stained teeth and honked the horn. “I’m ready. Lower the boom and hoist the sails!”

She patted the seatback. “I sit behind the wheel. You sit in the back. In the car, I’m the captain.”

“So you are. Pardon my faux pas.” Blushing, the captain faded away and rematerialized in the

back seat and immediately started poking his fingers into an empty ashtray. “Is this a snuff box?”

Estele climbed into the car, shut the door, and buckled her seat belt. Would she regret allowing the captain to come with them today? Probably. She slid the key into the ignition and turned the engine over. It squeaked to life and the car backfired. “Well, that ought to wake the neighbors.”

“You need a tune-up.” Val cocked his head and listened to the engine. “How old is this car?”

“Way older than me.” Wrestling the stick into reverse, she backed out of the parking space. “I forget the year. It’s on the registration. This was my grandmother’s VW.”

“I’m just curious. Let’s have a look at that registration.” Val opened the glove compartment and the Parking Fairy burst out, angry as a hornet, and kicked him on the nose. The little green spark buzzed around the interior muttering obscenities. Val drew back, startled. “What the hell!”

The fairy zipped around the rearview mirror, knocking it askew and leaving phosphorescent contrails in her wake.

“Sorry, Fae.” Estele tapped the mirror and readjusted it. “Val doesn’t know you sleep in the glove compartment.”

Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz buzz.

Focusing on the road, she noticed the slightest hint of dawn on the horizon. “Well, he knows now and it won’t happen again. By the way, a hangover is your responsibility, not mine. If you know absinthe is going to cause a—”

Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz buzz! Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz buzz!

Wow, the Fae was pissed. “That’s just rude. I’m going to ignore that last statement because I know you don’t mean it.”

Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz buzz buzz buzzzzzzzz.

Estele winced. “You do mean it? That’s not good for any of us. Fae, you need to get a handle on this. Do you want some coffee? How about a saucer of fresh-brewed black coffee, doesn’t that sound good? It will help your hangover.” She glanced at Val. “We can get coffee for Fae from the food truck, right?”

He nodded with a smirk. “Sure. Ask the little grouch if she’d like a miniature burrito like the sort they feed hamsters on YouTube.”

Captain Manx raised his hand. “No burrito for me. I for one would love some coffee with a liberal splash of rum in it.”

Irate beyond reason, Fae battered the dashboard with her tiny wings. *Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz buzz.*

Estele side-eyed Val as a warning. “Watch yourself. Fae hate sarcasm.”

He rubbed his nose. “She already kicked me. What else can she do?”

Good Goddess, he had no idea what he was toying with. “Don’t let her size fool you.” She mouthed, “The mighty have fallen.”

Val looked confused. “The mighty come calling? What the heck does that mean? Are you afraid to say out loud that your Parking Fairy is a bitch?”

The enraged green spark raced toward Val's forehead and butted against him. *Buzz buzz buzz buzz. Buzzzz!*

Val gently brushed the fairy away. "Enough!"

The captain tapped Estele's shoulder. "On our way downtown, could we stop at an apothecary's shop, knock on the door, and wake the gentleman to ask if he has any fresh coca leaves to chew on? The leaves possess a delightful numbing effect and—"

"No. We don't have time for that." She took a turn too sharply and the tires skirted the curb. How could she drive safely with all these distractions going on? "We'll be at the fairgrounds in a few minutes. It's time to pull ourselves together, stop bickering and wasting time on nonsense, and start thinking about how we are going to take on an evil force of incredible magnitude. Captain, that means no sex, drugs, or rock and roll. Keep an ear to the ground and try to be helpful."

Captain Manx's mouth quivered. "I only asked for drugs."

She turned to Val. "Tell Fae you're sorry and tuck her inside the glove compartment. See that red mitten? That's her bed."

Val frowned. "She kicked me and she's a lush."

The fairy flew agitated loops around Val's head. *Buzz! Buzz, buzz, buzz buzz.*

"Val." She gave him her best pleading look. "Do it, please. We can't fight demonic forces and an angry Fae at the same time. Choose your battles wisely."

He reached into the glove compartment and opened the base of the mitten. "I'm sorry if I disturbed or insulted you, Fae. Please accept my apology and go back to sleep."

Buzz buzz buzz!

Terrific, Fae wanted to hold a grudge, something she could easily drag out for millennia. "She said, 'What happened to the offer of coffee?'"

Licking his lips, Val looked to be at the edge of losing his patience. "Tell Fae she'll get her damn... err, her coffee as soon as we reach the food truck."

Buzz buzz buzz buzz!

Oh, that wasn't nice. A Fae with a hangover could out-swear any longshoreman. Estele shut her mouth, deciding to not pass that last obscenity on to Val.

Val turned in his seat. "Well, what did she say? Are we good?"

Should she be honest and report every nasty thing a grumpy Fae said? Probably not. "Just tuck her into her mitten and bring her some coffee later, and we'll let bygones be bygones."

Fae zipped inside the mitten and Val gently let go of the cuff. The moment Parking Fairy was snuggled inside, Estele was quick to close the glove compartment.

Val whispered, "How come you can understand her and I can't?"

"Do you speak Fae?"

He drew a blank. "No."

"Well, I do. Where elementals are concerned, I think women have a keener ear."

Talking out the side of his mouth, Val leaned closer. “Can she hear us now?”

Good question. “Probably not. I would think the mitten muffles sound.”

“Why did you say the mighty have fallen?”

“The mighty have fallen?” the captain’s voice boomed from the back seat. “Who are we talking about?”

“Hush, Captain.” She glanced in the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of the rising sun through the back window. “Don’t be insensitive. Fae was once some sort of warrior queen, but she won’t tell me her real name or story. I’ll bet Sidhe knows, but he’s not saying anything either.”

They came to the Oceanside Boulevard overpass that led to the fairgrounds. Except for a police car idling beneath the overpass, the streets were empty of traffic. “Who does that guy think he’s going to catch at this hour? A vampire speeding home to his coffin?”

Estele steered toward the fairgrounds. Despite the rising sun, lights blazed from every direction. An army of laborers was fully engaged in their tasks and had obviously worked throughout the night. The midway had been transformed. The rides had been fully assembled and a few were in motion, being tested. She looked around. “Wow, someone’s been busy.”

Val pointed toward a brightly painted truck set far apart from the action. “There’s the Brujo Tacos truck. Park next to it.”

Driving slowly past the workmen, she noted that not a single man glanced up from their work to look at them. “I’m going to test something.” She honked the horn. *Beep! Beep!* Even though they were a few yards away, no one responded or even blinked. “Look at their faces. The crew seems to still be in that strange fugue state they were in last night. This is so creepy. It’s like they’ve been enslaved.”

Val slipped his dagger necklace over his head. “It’s hard to get an accurate divination reading in a moving vehicle, but I’m going to give it a try.” He allowed the necklace to dangle in front of his face. In a gravity-defying moment, the necklace lifted into the air and swung like a compass needle, pointing at a large black trailer with flames painted on the side of it. The tip of the tiny dagger pointed straight toward Luther’s living quarters. “Surprise, surprise, the giant Orc seems to be at the center of the weirdness. I’m sensing the strong pull of controlling energies coming from that trailer.”

The way Val’s divination tool reacted to the energy in this area freaked her out. What were they coming up against? “What about the bubble of malevolence? Can you take a reading on that?”

Val blew on the necklace, dropped it into his hand, and gave it a firm shake. “I have to recalibrate it for a fresh reading. This will just take a moment.” The chain shifted in his palm, making a quiet tinkle. Picking the necklace up by the clasp, he swung it slowly in front of his face. “Let’s see what that bubble of malevolence is up to. What sort of reading are we going to get?” The chain shot straight in front of him and then began to rotate with tremendous force, like a swinging blade. He ducked but even though the blade on the tip was small, it was whirring at such tremendous speed that it became as threatening as a buzz saw. It nicked the upholstery, tearing gashes anywhere it touched.

She crouched close to the steering wheel. “Val, make it stop!”

“Stop!” he shouted. The necklace froze midair. Every link in the chain trembled, twisted, and slowly broke apart until hundreds of uncoupled links rained down onto the floor mats.

The captain leaned between the seats. “Well, that was disturbing.”

“Whoa!” Her mouth opened and refused to close. It wasn’t safe to drive. She hit the brakes and stared at the bits of shattered necklace that had fallen into her lap. “It destroyed your divination tool!” This was bad—really bad. “What does that mean?”

Val’s brows butted together. “I think I know, and it’s not good. The bubble has grown exponentially.”

“How much?” She dared to take her foot off the brake and continued driving toward the Brujo Tacos truck.

Val pantomimed sweeping shapes in the air. “If last night the bubble was as powerful as a suitcase stuffed with C4, now it’s a freaking nuclear warhead.”

“Holy crap! And it’s going to blow up beneath our feet? We can’t fight something that size alone.” Estele parked beside the food truck, turned off the engine, and unfastened her seat belt. “I don’t care how early it is, I’m calling Fredi, Miss Dahlia, Witch Griselda—even Sidhe. Let’s wake everyone and get them on this ASAP.”

“Yep.” Val nodded. “But first let’s talk to Tio Bruno and get organized.”

“How do you get organized for a small-scale Armageddon fought with Tilt-A-Whirls and cotton candy? How?” She climbed out of the car and shut the door hard.

“Ah, my fingers!” the captain shrieked. “Use caution, miss. I’m still exiting the vehicle.”

What a drama queen. He wasn’t even in corporeal form; how the hell was she supposed to have known his ghostly hand was caught in the door? “Sorry, Captain. I didn’t mean to slam the door on you.”

“It’s all right.” Captain Manx fully took form and glanced around, blinking. “It’s so different from my time. I don’t recognize anything.”

Her stomach growled. What a tyrant her belly was. Was she actually considering eating at a time like this? “When were you last here?”

The captain turned in a circle and appeared confused. “Spring of 1897.”

“Well, that explains a few changes.”

He frowned. “I can’t even tell where the docks used to be.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she tilted her head. “Close to where those high-rise hotels are now.”

He looked but quickly turned away as if the sight pained him. “The railroad tracks used to be closer to City Hall. In my time they would never have run a train along a beach. You can barely see the ocean from here.”

She pointed to a giant Ferris wheel. “The sand dunes on the beach are blocking our view. You’ll be able to see the ocean from up there.”

“I’m not sure I want to.” With the expression of a lost child, the captain stepped between her and

Val and cringed. “There’s a bad feeling in the air. I wish I had my harpoon.”

Chapter 11

Val rapped his knuckles on the door of the Brujo Tacos truck. Was he ready for what was coming? He wasn't sure. The sight of his favorite necklace exploding into sharp bits of metal had been disconcerting, to say the least. They were in for a hell of a day. He wondered who would be the inevitable casualty and hoped it wasn't him, but his odds were bad. He was committed to the cause, but he didn't have a fraction of Estele's power or skills. He was a food wizard-slash-bodyguard, and he was going up against forces that dwarfed any magic he could summon. His training in the highlands of Oaxaca had taught him one essential thing about the magical arts: ignite your passions or perish. Today, much would be asked of him; he would have to deliver or suffer the consequences. "Tio, it's me."

The door opened. The bracing scents of fresh coffee and frying onions wafted out. Bruno stared out at them. His silver hair had been sleeked away from his elegant face and covered with a hairnet, and the presence of a red vinyl apron and blue latex gloves added to the impression he was busy. "You're late. Have you noticed the massive increase in malevolent energy? We don't have a minute to waste." His gaze focused on Estele. "Is this her?"

"*Sí. Ella es mi aliada.*" Damn, he automatically fell into Spanish in front of his uncle.

"Speak English, Val." Bruno stood aside, allowing Estele to enter. "We can't afford even the smallest miscommunication."

Estele placed her foot on the step and climbed into the truck. With a shaky smile, she greeted Bruno. "Hi, I love your food. I'm a witch by the way..."

"I know." Solemn reverence shining in his dark eyes, Bruno bowed to her with all the chivalry of an Old World knight. "It is a great pleasure to meet you. Val has told me your name. Under your leadership, evil shall be quenched and driven back into its fetid lair. I'm honored to be fighting at your side today. I'm at your service and willing to die at your request."

"Wow. Thanks." Estele blushed, and in that moment she looked so pretty and unassuming. He wondered if fate had sent the wrong people to do what might be an impossible job.

Bruno waved them inside. "Let's eat a quick breakfast and talk."

Val climbed the steps and entered the truck. Red and green chili peppers were set upon the grill, roasting beside succulent strips of marinated pork. His stomach growled.

“There’s something here.” Bruno looked alarmed as he swept his hand through the air. “What is this?” He circled his palm beside Estele. “Something followed you inside the truck. Yes. It is a definite sentient presence. Perhaps it was once alive but no longer—”

“Jolly good guess!” The captain materialized next to Tio Bruno and made him jump.

“Santa Maria!” Bruno staggered backward and smacked into a refrigerator. “Who is that? What is that? A *fantasma*?”

The captain drew his shoulders back and addressed Bruno with all the dignity he could muster. “Sir, are you the captain of this grand rolling vessel? If so, by my lucky stars, do you have any rum aboard?”

Estele beamed. “That’s Captain Manx. He’s a dead sea captain with questionable vices. If you don’t have rum, not to worry, he doesn’t drink it anyway. You can just give him a hot pepper to suck on. He’ll probably like it.”

Bruno’s eyes widened. He glanced at Val. “You recruited the services of a ghost? Brilliant strategy.”

Val shook his head. “I can’t take credit for that. Estele and the captain sort of came as a package deal. For better or worse, he’s one of us.”

Bruno nodded. “Very fortuitous. Sending the dead to fight for us might save a life. I like it. Who wants a burrito?”

“I do!” Estele headed toward the grill. “I ate off your truck yesterday and I thought I’d died and gone to Heaven. You make some seriously delicious food.” She made a silly face. “Considering we’re standing on top of a megaton bubble of evil, I shouldn’t be using the word ‘die’ lightly, should I?”

The captain raised his hand. “If it’s not too much trouble, may I have a splash of hot coffee and a saucer to pour it in? We have a very grouchy Fae currently housed in the young lady’s glove compartment who is sure to go on the warpath if we break our promise to her.”

Estele applauded him. “Good call, Captain. Parking Fairy needs her cup of joe.”

“I have heard of the Fae people for many years but never met one.” Bruno took hold of Val’s wrist. A look of elation shone in his eyes. “Is it true? Do you have a Fae under your influence?”

How would he answer that? The Parking Fairy seemed to hate him. “The Fae is Estele’s companion. The only real influence I have with the Fae is the power to piss her off. She’s sort of touchy.”

Bruno’s gazed at Estele with his mouth open. “A ghost captain and a Fae at your command? Very impressive. My *sobrino* is lucky indeed to have such a powerful ally.”

“That’s not even scratching the surface of what she can do.” He was proud of Estele. She was pretty amazing, but was it cool to brag? She didn’t belong to him in any permanent way, though he kind of hoped something good might happen between them. Kissing her on the couch had proved hot-shit tempting. A second longer and he would not have been able to think clearly. “You should have

seen her banish the smoke beast.”

Estele dipped her chin and glanced at him sideways. “You might want to warn your uncle that I don’t always do things right. My magic can get sort of crazy.”

“Maybe crazy is exactly what we need. *Magia loca*.” Returning to the grill, Bruno picked up a large steel spatula and used it to herd some chopped and caramelized onions into a mound. “What’s a smoke beast? No one ever explained it to me.”

Hopefully that stinky soot cloud wouldn’t come back, but he knew better. “It’s self-explanatory. You’d definitely recognize it if you see it.”

Staring at the grill, Estele said, “Yum.”

Bruno placed two large flour tortillas on the grill to warm. “It’s my honor to cook for you. What would you like in your burrito?”

She shrugged. “Everything you make is great. Surprise me.”

“Spoken like nobility.” Bruno went to work assembling their breakfast. “Does the ghost captain want to eat?”

“Nope.” Estele shook her head. “He’ll just sniff.”

Where was the captain? Val glanced around. That guy had a terrible habit of popping in and out of 3D reality in the most jolting way possible. It was too bad they couldn’t tie a bell around his neck or do something that would provide a heads-up for his coming and going.

Like a slap in the head, he remembered the Parking Fairy was owed coffee. If he wanted to impress Estele—and he did—the best way to do it would be to show consideration for her and others in her life, and that included keeping promises to supernatural entities. He took a paper cup and filled it two-thirds full with fresh, hot coffee, added a generous amount of cream and sugar, and stirred. Opening the truck door, he signaled Estele with a wave. “I’ll be right back. This is for your Fae.”

Estele followed. “Be careful, Val, the Parking Fairy can be a bit vindictive. Sometimes she deliberately aims for the eyes. Maybe I should go with you?”

She looked so concerned. Did she care for him, or was it concern for her personal Fae? He hoped that look was for him. “Don’t worry, one way or another I’m going to get on your Fae’s good side.”

With a heart-melting smile, Estele handed him the keys. “Good luck.”

He stepped into the cool morning air with the steaming cup of coffee in one hand and the keys in the other. He unlocked and opened the door and carefully sat in the passenger seat before giving the dashboard a gentle tap. “Fae, wake up. I brought you some coffee.” With the same slow, calculated movements as a member of the bomb squad, he clicked the glove box open and peeked inside the mitten.

A spark of green light flew out and zipped around the interior of the car. A couple passes came uncomfortably close to his eyes. “Whoa, watch out! Look, coffee. I kept my promise.”

The spark stopped zipping and hovered over the cup like a tiny helicopter.

“Wait! Don’t dive in. There’s some cream in it, but it’s still very hot.” God, he’d hate to have to

tell Estele he'd scalded her Fae. That would be bad. Damn, why hadn't he thought to bring a saucer? Cupping his hand, he poured a trickle of coffee into his palm, making an impromptu Fae feeder. He blew on it. "Here you go. It's safe to drink. Come and get your coffee."

Why was he doing this? Today of all days, he had more important things to do than appease a cranky fairy. What it boiled down to was he'd been rude to Estele's pet Fae and didn't want the bad impression to linger. Estele was the sort of woman worth making the extra effort for. "I didn't know how you like your coffee, so I mixed it sweet and light. I hope that's okay, and if I came across as sort of gruff earlier, I want to apologize."

Buzzzzz. The sound was soft. Fae dove into the shallow puddle of coffee and splashed around like a happy robin washing in a birdbath.

Any residual hard feeling he might have been harboring against the Fae instantly faded. When engaged in playful behavior like this, the Fae was kind of cute.

"What's your real name?" he whispered. "I heard you used to be a warrior queen. How did this happen? Now you're just a tiny fleck?"

Buzzzz! Buzz! Buzzzzz! Fae rammed the tender skin between Val's fingers with what felt like a heated electric stinger that made his nerves scream.

"Oww!" He grabbed his hand. The coffee trickled down his sleeve. "That hurt. Why did you do that?"

Buzzzzz.

"Okay, I get it. You don't want me to bring up the past." Wow, what a grouch. "Don't worry, it will never happen again."

Buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz.

Good God, either he had gone mad or else the annoying sounds the Fae made by flapping her wings were beginning to make sense. "You want me to pour more coffee into my palm, offer it to you?" *Then wait for the pain when you decide to sting me again?*

Buzz. Buzz.

He must be a sap. Tipping the cup over his hand, he carefully trickled more warm coffee into his palm and pushed his damp sleeve up his forearm. "Here you go. I'm doing this for Estele. I don't want her to feel I'd be disrespectful to her or anyone close to her. I think she's someone special."

Fae swooped down and sipped the coffee from the edge of the puddle. *Buzz.*

"I'm glad you agree." If he listened carefully, it was easy to understand the Fae's message. The Fae language was as subtle and soft as the down on a baby duckling, and bloomed in the back of his mind like a surfacing thought. How had he missed it before? The Fae lighted on the base of his thumb, sipping coffee. "Can I ask you a question?"

Buzz.

"You know Estele, right? Do you think that under ordinary circumstances, i.e. not thrown together and forced to fight evil, that she would ever be attracted to a guy like me? I don't mean to sound

insecure. I'm just asking because she seems to have a real resistance to brujos. I'm hoping to get past it. But who knows. The trust might never be there."

Buzz. Buzz. Buzzzz.

"So, you've never seen her doing something ordinary like going to the market with a man and doing errands, like she did with me tonight?"

Buzz.

"You think she's lonely? That's pretty sad. A woman like Estele shouldn't have to be alone."

Buzzzzz! Buzz buzz.

"I know. She told me about how her magic can sometimes be wayward, and I think she's afraid to hurt others, but I see so much potential in her. She has magical skills I can only dream of. Estele's amazing." Maybe it was a mistake to open up to a Fae? Would he regret it? How vulnerable had he made himself sound? "Are you going to say anything to Estele about this?"

Buzzzzzz.

You never know? That comment wasn't very reassuring. He'd kept his promise and now it was time to get going. "Do you want to go back to your mitten?"

Buzz. Buzz.

"You want me to roll down the window so you can fly around the fairgrounds and do recon? Okay, I can do that. I'll also leave the glove box open so you can go back inside when you're finished."

Buzzzz.

"You're welcome."



Estele bit into the burrito Bruno had made for her and rolled her eyes with pleasure. The beans were tender but firm, the lime rice fragrant, the pork was perfectly seasoned and had the slightest hint of cinnamon, and the guacamole was spicy and rich. All the flavors were perfectly in balance. "Un-freaking-believable! I could eat one of these every day."

Bruno bowed his head humbly but betrayed his satisfaction with the slightest smile. "My honor."

"The *alquimista de sabor* crew are certainly into honor, aren't you?" So what went wrong with her dear old dad? She'd love to know the story there.

"*Sí*. We are the middle ground between Old World knights, New World shamans, and chefs. We harness the power inherent in nature and turn it into alchemical spells to be consumed and expressed through emotions and behavior. It's a potent combination of talents to juggle, and not for everyone."

Should she even bring this up? It might not be wise to expose her deepest insecurities while standing on top of a building bubble of evil. "My father was a brujo, but of a different kind."

Bruno's eyes sparkled. "What was his predilection?"

She swallowed too much too fast. The salsa was killer good. “Uh?”

“What sort of magic did he practice?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.” How sad was that? She’d grown up thinking a brujo was a brujo and gave zero thought to any subtlety or distinctions among their ranks. In fact, the main lesson her mother had ingrained in her was to stay away from them.

Bruno chopped his way through a large pile of vegetables with the efficiency of a machine. “Your father never told you what his specialty was? Perhaps he was protecting you from malicious acts of rival sorcerers?”

Protecting her by abandoning her? That didn’t seem like a decent plan. Estele set her burrito down. This was one of the few subjects that could ever dim her usually robust appetite. “He left us—just disappeared one day.”

Bruno’s brows lifted. “Just disappeared?”

“Yep. He said he was going to the store and vanished. Not cool. It happened right here in San Buena. We had everybody looking for him, from the police to the enchantment community, but we never found a trace.” There was no need to add that everyone thought he’d left to escape her mother’s nagging.

“I’m so sorry to hear this.” Compassion shone in Bruno’s eyes that were the same uncanny golden-gray color as a coyote’s. “It must have been very hard growing up without him.”

It was. “A lot of people grow up without a dad.” Too bad her mother was a wreck too.

He set his knife down on the chopping block and focused solely on her. “It’s hard to be alone in the world. It affects you deeply and changes you in ways you can’t foresee.”

At least she wasn’t completely alone in the world. She had friends who forgave and indulged her. Grandma Lena had been a godsend. However, men and positive male role models had been lacking. She didn’t want to think about how that oversight had changed her, except thoughts of Val dominated her mind. It felt so good to be around him. She wanted to trust him, and having a partner to share a problem with instead of enduring it alone had been an eye-opener. Was that what others had all the time, a reliable partner to lean on when the going got rough? “Maybe I spend too much time alone?” She’d been doing it to spare others the effects of her wayward magic, which got even crazier in crowds or social situations.

“Being a person of exceptional powers and learning to balance alone time and social time is an art in itself. Personally, I am a loner. My calling as an *alquimista de sabor* claimed me early in life. I never married or had children, but my brother did. When I least expected it, my nephew came to me, wanting to learn my ways. At first I discouraged him and sent him away with the warning that the ways of a brujo would take him too far from society. I dreaded what my poor brother would say to me. But with time and persistence, Valentine proved to me that he was sincere in his desire to learn. He quickly became the best and most devoted apprentice I have ever seen. In a word, he is impeccable. Valentine is the son of my heart that I never knew I needed.”

Why was he telling her this?

He looked worried. “Sometimes the people you never asked for are the ones you need most.”

Why did she feel so nervous, like a flock of butterflies was about to take off in her belly? “Is there something wrong? I feel like I’m missing something in this conversation.”

“This is Valentine’s first flight as a full-fledged brujo. It’s like a graduation. I’ve taught him everything I know and must now bow to a master teacher to take him further.”

She picked up the last half of her burrito and bit in. Holy moly, were they waiting for some other weird character to show up and take this circus to another level? “Who’s the master teacher?”

A strange intensity glowed in Tio Bruno’s gaze. “You are. Valentine was given a mark to identify his ally—”

“I know about the ink-wizard’s tattoo.”

He picked up a cleaver and diced tomatoes. “Yes. Undeniably, the portrait of the ally is you.”

“I believe I’m Val’s ally.” That part was easy to swallow. She even liked saying it, for goodness sake. “Something between us clicks. But I think you’re absolutely mistaken about me being a master teacher! Seriously, I would laugh at that concept but it’s not funny. My magic has hurt people. For crying out loud, I’m on academic probation at the Master Mage Magic Academy and graduation is iffy, as in if ever. That’s not a recipe for being anyone’s master teacher.”

The pounding of the cleaver against the chopping block halted. Bruno glanced up. “Yet I’m convinced you’re Valentine’s master teacher.”

“Sir, I just made a solid argument for why that was highly unlikely.”

“Every fledgling brujo must pass the test of crisis. That is a given. Usually the tests are small-scale and personal in nature. Facing a deep-seated fear... mastering a skill set. But his first crisis call is in your hometown and involves far more than a personal test for Valentine—it is a trial on a colossal scale with the safety of thousands on the line. That cannot be coincidence. There is no room for failure. Fate does not toy with beginners in such a manner. Valentine will succeed or die trying. I strongly suspect you must be both his ally and master teacher.”

Licking a fleck of guacamole from her lips, she thought about all he had said. She mastered nothing except screwing up her magical spells. “We’re doomed.”

The door opened and Val entered the truck. He looked at Estele and smiled, then headed straight to the sink to wash his hands. “Parking Fairy got her coffee. We had a little chat and I think things are good between us.” He glanced around. “Where’s the captain?”

She popped the last bit of burrito into her mouth and moved toward the sink to wash her hands too. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him for a few minutes, but that’s normal. He comes and goes as he likes. Maybe he went looking for the ghosts of crewmates. I suppose some of them might be still hanging around?”

Val looked into her eyes. “What’s the plan, beautiful? I’m at your service.”

What was the plan? Was she really in charge of seeing to it that a massive bubble of malevolence

was neutralized? She unzipped her purse just enough to place her hand inside and touch the Heart of Hecate. The ruby lit the moment her fingertips grazed the surface. What should they do first? What could they do at all? If the stone was going to offer clarity in a situation, now was the time to test it.

To her surprise, a complete thought rushed into her mind with the same violent force as a vacuum filling space. “Umm. We should try to reach out to the carnies. Look at those guys. They were working like automatons last night and they’re still on the job. They have to be close to exhaustion. Let’s offer them some enchanted coffee and food and see if we can’t break the spell they seem to be under and get a few of them to talk. Maybe somebody knows something about Luther?”

Bruno interrupted. “Who is Luther?”

“*What* is Luther is more like it.” Val poured himself a fresh cup of coffee. “He’s a big guy, like cattle-sized big. I’m not completely convinced Luther is human. Something’s not right, and he seems to be intimidating the owner of the carnival, Marge, aka Madame Shamansky, the all-seeing eye of destiny. Her title is ironic because she parked her carnival on top of a bubble of malevolence. You’d think a professional psychic would have seen that coming.”

Estele turned to Bruno. “We think Luther might be exerting undue influence over the carnival and its crew. Last night, they all seemed to be under some sort of thrall. They were like glassy-eyed zombies brandishing power tools and forklifts. It was creepy as hell. Except for an obnoxious clown, no one acknowledged us or even blinked. I suspect heavy-duty magic at work.”

She honed in on Bruno. He seemed to be hanging on her every word. How novel was that? “We have to find a way to break the spell. You have the most experience as an *alquimista de sabor*. I’m going to put you in charge of spellcasting on the food. What are the lowest levels of enchantment we can use to cast a counterspell and still get results? These people have already been exposed to a lot of enchantment, and we need to avoid delivering what might be a toxic dose.”

Bruno appeared uneasy. “As an *alquimista de sabor*, there are strict protocols I must follow. I cannot offer someone bewitched food or drink without also providing them with a clue the item is indeed enchanted. Over the centuries, brujos have earned an unfortunate reputation for being tricksters, but that reputation is unjust. An example is the words ‘Brujo Tacos’ clearly displayed on the sides of my food truck. Anyone approaching my truck is alerted to the possibility that the food has been prepared and likely ensorcelled by brujos.”

Estele shook her head. How could she say this without it coming out all wrong? There really wasn’t a way. “Dude, that’s just a super sneaky loophole. I can guarantee you that no one thinks real brujos are driving around in taco trucks handing out enchanted food. How about we include a verbal warning: ‘Enjoy your coffee, it’s *enchanting*.’ Or ‘This salsa will *cast a spell* on you.’ That way we’re covered in case we get called before San Buena’s enchantment community’s ethics committee, which for the record, I’ve been called in front of before.” She shrugged. “Mistakes happen. I didn’t mean to do it.”

Bruno stared at Estele with the same conflicted intensity as a dog would stare at a burger patty

that fell off the grill. “This is an emergency and the public is in grave danger. I will accept that solution.”

“Terrific!” Estele held up her palm and waited to be high-fived. Bruno appeared deep in thought and did not respond. After an awkward moment of nothing happening, she lowered her hand. “Okay, I guess we just jump in. Start with the coffee. Brew a lot. At this hour, it should be easy to push a free cup of joe on a work crew that may not have had any liquid or food in hours. Let’s start there.”

Val was quick to open and fill the top of a large, catering-sized coffeemaker with fresh grounds.

She watched Val’s every move as he added a bit of chicory and a cinnamon stick to the coffee. “How much does that hold?”

“Five gallons, but there’s a lot of people out there.”

Her gaze ricocheted between Val and Bruno. “Do you know what sort of spell you’re going to cast?”

Bruno stopped chopping vegetables long enough to give her a worried look. “What do you suggest?”

Estele’s voice cracked. “I don’t know. I’m going to delegate that decision. You’re the food wizards, for crying out loud. Those carnies out there are behaving like army ants. It’s obvious the men have lost their free will and higher thought functioning. What would give it back to them? Think.”

With a brooding expression, Bruno rubbed his jaw in thought. “Sometimes simple things can be disruptive to magic. For instance, a spell cast at night can often be destroyed or diluted by sunlight.”

“Yep.” She nodded. “I’ve heard that.” The comment reminded her to call Fredi as soon as their plan was underway. “What else works?”

“Sometimes a spell-breaker can be paired with a physical action,” Val added.

“What sort of physical action?”

“A shock to the nervous system.” Val fiddled with the monster coffeemaker, closed the top, and hit a glowing green button. “Like an unexpected shove or a slap on the face. Physical contact disrupts the flow of the spell and gives the victim of enchantment a chance to sober up.”

Slapping? Seriously? They were going to turn the fairgrounds into a *Three Stooges* spectacle. “So, we’re going to encourage people who are behaving like glassy-eyed members of an insect hive to sip hot coffee and then slap their faces? I see no way this can go wrong. Let’s do it.” She peered out the truck’s window. “Hopefully, we won’t have to do much slapping. The sun is rising. Pretty soon we’ll have spell-cleansing sunlight in the arsenal as well.” She reached for her phone. “While the two of you are busy enchanting—”

“Ensorcelling,” Bruno gently corrected Estele. “Brujos are sorcerers. We prefer the term ‘ensorcelling’ to ‘enchanted.’ Enchantment is for witches.”

Enchantment certainly wasn’t just for witches. Was Bruno subtly trying to distance himself from witches, namely Esposito witches, by splitting hairs? “By my reckoning, enchantment is for everyone in the supernatural community. If you have reservations about working with me or any other witch,

you should say so now.”

Val’s answer came lightning fast. “Estele, I have no reservations about joining forces with you.”

Bruno didn’t look so sure. “You’re so young and have no real experience as a team leader. Your family history—” He heaved a deep breath. “—does cast doubt in my mind, but I will respect you because fate has indicated you are our best hope.”

Damn. It hurt to hear it, but could she blame him? “To be honest, I feel the same way. I understand completely. I have doubts too. Ask Val how I reacted to the news that I was an ally and the one to battle whatever it is that’s threatening to erupt under our feet.”

Shaking his head, Val frowned. “Tio Bruno, Estele was so humble and self-deprecating. I don’t believe she’d make a claim she couldn’t deliver on. She’s my ally in this mission and I’ve seen firsthand how powerful she is. As mere brujo food wizards, we can’t come close to what she can achieve.”

Wow, Val was really standing up for her. It felt great until she realized how shitty it would feel if she let him down.

Bruno’s pale eyes flashed. “Power and wisdom don’t always travel together. We are vulnerable precisely because she’s so powerful and so inexperienced. Evil might snatch her up as easily as a crocodile grabs a paddling dog from a pond.”

Eww. That was an ugly image. “You’re 100 percent right,” she said. “Even I don’t trust me. I have no idea why”—dare she mention the Heart of Hecate? No—“people started trusting me yesterday with valuable stuff, or why they sought me out believing I was their ally, but they did. Yesterday was a very eventful day. Today, I find myself in charge of loads of crazy stuff. Am I going to run from it and say, ‘Not me, I can’t handle this?’ No. I’m going to be a grown-up and figure this puzzle out one piece at a time.”

Estele peered out the window. The first rays of golden sunshine lit the horizon. “We know one thing for sure: the evil force welling beneath our feet is attracted to me. It followed me to the market and to my home, and I’m guessing it’ll follow me around the fairgrounds. Let’s exploit that fact. Val, watch my back.”

Val nodded solemnly. “You do not even need to ask.”

Now she was on a roll. It was as if confusion lifted and she was able to see the big picture. “Bruno, create the strongest ensorcellment you can muster on that coffee. Let’s get it into the crewmen’s hands ASAP and start slapping people if we have to. The sun is coming up and that works in our favor too. As Bruno pointed out, I have no experience battling evil, so I’m going to do the wise thing and call in others who know exactly what they are doing.” She tapped her phone’s speed dial. “I’m calling in reinforcements.”

The call went straight to voice mail. “Hello, this Frederica De la Cruz. If you are trying to reach me or Gus—”

“Estele?” Fredi’s sleep-soggy voice interrupted the message. “It’s literally the crack of dawn.

Why are you calling? Is everything okay?"

She licked her lips. "Things aren't okay. We're all in grave danger, and for once it's not my fault. Whatever you have planned for today, cancel it and come to the fairgrounds as fast as you can, and for Goddess's sake bring a fully charged wand with you."

"Estele, what is this about?" Fredi sounded wary. "Is this connected to the hex-vex-redirect spell from last night?"

"No." Her gaze flickered between Val and Bruno, who were looking at her as if their next breaths depended on her. "Call Miss Dahlia, and Witch Griselda too. Something big is getting ready to blow, and we need all hands on deck."

Chapter 12

Estele watched from a safe distance as Tio Bruno and Val ensorcelled the contents of the coffee urn using native chants, a rattle made from a coyote's skull, and some other odd items they'd retrieved from a medicine bundle wrapped in rustic red cloth.

"Will this affect safe food handling practices?" she blurted. "Ensorcelling food is one thing...." Her gaze fixated on the toothy skull that appeared yellowed by time. "Food contamination is another."

Bruno stopped chanting long enough to flash her a condemning look. "Do not be concerned. I know what I'm doing."

"Okay, fine." Where was Fredi? She wished she were here already.

Val appeared anxious as he gathered a stack of paper cups into his arms. "How are we going to do this?"

With a dramatic wave of his hands, Bruno stopped chanting. "The sorcery has been cast." He set the rattle down on the piece of red cloth, filled a pump thermos with fresh coffee, and handed it to Val. "Take this and try to get everyone who looks like they are under the effects of magic to drink some. We'll just keep refilling it and making more until everyone is back to normal."

Val handed a plastic bag full of creamer cups and sugar packets to Estele. "Come with me." He opened the door and exited the truck.

Estele followed. The morning was cool and the horizon glowed a reassuring shade of peach. The lights that had blazed through the night were still on and the crewmen worked unabated. Heavy electrical cables lay everywhere like pythons basking on the tarmac. A man driving a forklift zipped past, forcing her to jump aside. "That was too close."

"Did you see the look in his eyes?" Val said. "It was frozen as a snow cone. No one was home."

"Let's give him some brujo-style coffee." Her strides lengthened as she sped to catch up with the man.

The forklift had come to a stop. The man waited as a coworker stacked pallets onto the lift.

"Hey, you!" She ran up to the man and dared jump aboard the forklift.

Staring straight ahead, the man ignored her. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips were cracked and dry. He looked exhausted and wired at the same moment. "How about some coffee? You look like you could use a cup."

The man remained silent and staring and didn't acknowledge her in the slightest.

"I'm going to pour you a cup anyway. You'll love it. The coffee from Brujo Tacos is *enchanted*." She said it loudly. The coffee was poured and she decided to give it to him black. Dipping her finger into the cup, she tested the temperature. It was too hot to pour down someone's throat, which was what it looked like she would have to do, so she blew on it. When she was confident the coffee wouldn't burn the man, she held the cup to his lips. "Here you are. Take a sip. You need this more than you realize."

He stared into space, her pleas falling on deaf ears.

"Okay. Either you won't or can't drink on your own." She reached over and tugged at the man's lip, trying to pour a little coffee into his mouth, but it just trickled down his chin. "I can see I'm going to have to be proactive." Turning toward Val, she said, "Maybe we should get a spoon and play 'open for the coffee train.' This guy is not cooperating at all. Foisting enchanted coffee on him is like giving a pill to an unwilling dog."

There were dozens of crewmen on the midway. This was going to take forever. "Wait a minute. Val, do you have a baster on the truck?"

His face lit with joy. "Yep, I'll get it."

"Hurry, before this guy drives off with me!"

Val turned and ran back to the truck.

"What's going on here?" a woman's sultry voice called to her.

Estele turned. Madame Shamansky stood behind her wearing a purple bathrobe, sheepskin boots, and a frown. "Hi, Marge! Good morning. I was just—"

Marge stomped toward her. "Who the hell are you? This is my carnival. What are you up to?"

Oh dear, the look on Marge's face wasn't welcoming in the least bit. What had gone wrong? "I'm your new psychic, remember?"

"Hold on, missy! This carnival only has one psychic and *she* is me."

Whoa. Did Madame really not remember her, or was this something else? "Marge. You hired me last night. I'm Estele—Seer of the Akash. Does that ring any bells? You told me to show up for work bright and early and here I am."

"Hell no, I don't remember, because it didn't happen." Marge planted her fists on her hips and scowled. "Are you crazy or just pretending to be crazy? I've never seen you before in my life! I have no idea what you're trying to pull, but you need to get out of here before I call security!"

Val walked toward them, beaming, a large turkey baster held in one hand and a steaming cup of coffee in the other. "Good morning, Marge!"

Marge squinted. "Hello, handsome! Do I know you?" She wasn't nearly as surly with Val. "Have we met?"

Val offered his most devastating smile. "We met last night."

A smile tickled Marge's lips. "Why can't I remember that? I'm certain I'd want to remember

someone like you.”

“You invited me into your trailer.” Val looked at her sideways, showing his thick black lashes.

“We must have had too much fun.” Pawing the air with kittenish gestures, Marge grinned. “I sure wish I could remember.”

Val walked toward Estele. He dipped the baster into the coffee and sucked a good amount up. “Would you like to remember what we did last night?”

Marge giggled. “I’ll bet it was naughty and involved lots of tequila, because I can’t remember a damn thing.”

While Marge’s mouth was open and laughing, Val squirted coffee past her lips. “This coffee’s ensorcelled.”

Marge looked surprised, gurgled and swallowed, and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “What the hell was that about!” Her eyes went wide. “Holy fuck. What’s going on? I remember everything now. We were talking last night and chewing gum. I told you my life story. We didn’t do anything wrong.” She winked at Val. “Damn you for being decent. Then Luther called me over to his trailer. I don’t remember how I even got back to my trailer. Come to think of it, that happens all the time.”

Glancing around to make sure no one was near, she whispered to Marge, “Do you trust Luther?”

Marge appeared unsettled. “Does it matter? There’s no sense asking if the air is good to breathe. A few weeks ago, the guy shows up out of nowhere, pays off my debts, which were considerable, takes charge, bullies me.... When we talk, I have to meet him in a darkened, fart-filled trailer. He won’t turn on the lights or even pay me the courtesy of eye contact. I can’t tell him anything and I wish he’d just go away. Maybe the dude’s in the witness protection program? Something’s not right.” She reached for the cup in Val’s hand, blew on the surface, and downed the contents in a single gulp. “Good coffee. Do you have any more of this stuff?” Her eyes cleared. “Wow, now I feel wide awake, like I can see everything for the first time in a long time. Holy crap, I’ve been a fool. It’s embarrassing to admit this, but Luther’s been keeping me in some sort of fog. I can’t think or act in my best interest when that guy’s around.”

The forklift started to reverse, and Estele jumped off and allowed the glassy-eyed operator to drive away. Damn, she never had a chance to get any coffee into him. “Did you see that?” She hoped to get Marge’s attention refocused. “Does that look like normal behavior to you? You’re not the only one Luther has a negative effect on. We were talking in front of that guy and he didn’t react in the slightest. We might as well have been standing on the moon.”

Marge held up the empty cup. “Any chance of a refill, handsome?”

Val’s tone was earnest. “I must inform you, the coffee carries a powerful ensorcellment.”

Licking her lips, Marge stepped closer. “And so do your eyes, gorgeous, but I’m still willing to risk a second cup.”

Estele reached for the pump thermos and refilled Marge’s cup. “We’re fighting fire with fire. The coffee has a spell cast on it and we’re using it to break a spell that you and the rest of the carnival

seem to be under.”

Marge looked surprised. “You think I’ve been under some sort of spell?”

When someone was oblivious, what could be done for them? Would the next revelation be a good or bad thing? People didn’t always take kindly to the truth. Estele slapped Marge’s cheek to add to the coffee’s sobering effect. “Marge, I think that evil forces are at work and you’ve been exploited by someone or something using dark magic.”

“What the fu—” Marge flinched. “What was the slap for? I’m listening. You didn’t have to do it. You think I’ve been exploited by Luther? Yeah, I can see that.” She downed the second cup of coffee in two drafts.

Val retrieved the empty cup from Marge’s hand. “What do you know about Luther?”

“Oh boy.” Marge rubbed her arms like she’d felt a chill. “Not much. He just showed up one night when the carnival was set up in Bakersfield and told me that, like it or not, he was my new partner. I didn’t want a partner, but Mr. Shamansky, died last year and left me with some heavy-duty medical bills to pay off. Another season of touring and good management would have taken care of that. Instead Luther tells me the bills are paid and he’s my new silent partner, and then things get weirder. I’m still in charge, you see, I’m still the majority owner, but everyone immediately starts doing everything Luther’s way. Like all of a sudden, he’s the boss, even though most of them have never set eyes on the guy. Luther hates sunlight. He’s got some weird condition and he avoids it at all costs. That means night travel, night setups, etc. When I get called to Luther’s trailer for business meetings, it’s always at night and the lights are out.”

Estele knew she was fishing but asked anyway. “Did he ever sign anything? What bank paid off the debts? Maybe we can run a background search?”

“Luther paid me with cash from a suitcase.” Marge bit down on her lip. “I know it looks bad. Don’t judge me, I was desperate. I just wanted to stay on the road and pay my guys and gals the salaries they were owed. We’re a family.”

“Marge, I’m not judging you.” Estele placed her hand on the lady’s shoulder. “I’m asking you to trust me and Val. We’re here to help.”

Confusion clouded Marge’s face. “Who are you people anyway? Law enforcement?”

Where should she start? “More like laws of nature enforcement. We’re members of the enchantment community—you know, humans and supernatural beings with magical powers? We’re here to restore balance. I’m a witch and Val is a practicing brujo.”

“What’s a brujo?” Marge’s lip curled.

“It’s like a wizard,” Estele said, “with a slightly different set of personal issues.”

Val frowned. “Hey, I thought we got past that.”

Looking distracted, Marge blurted, “So, you’re magical beings. Why are you interested in my carnival?”

This wasn’t going to be easy. Everything about Marge’s body language was shouting shutout. “I

have to tell you something disturbing and I don't have time to fully explain it. We're sitting on top of a bubble of malevolence that's getting ready to go nuclear, and your carnival is definitely involved."

Marge scrunched her nose. "A bubble of what? What are we sitting on top of?"

"Evil," Val said. "Pure evil, and lots of it. It's been steadily brewing beneath the fairgrounds for years and it's getting ready to surface."

"Evil? Don't look at me. If it's been 'brewing' for years beneath the fairground, it's a preexisting condition and therefore not my fault. I run an honest enterprise. It's not like I tracked evil into your town on the bottom of my shoe and spread it around." A nervous-sounding little chuckle burst from Marge.

"Actually, we think you did." Estele cringed. It wasn't easy being the messenger. What could she say that would make the situation clearer to Marge? "We took some sample readings last night—"

"Readings? Like psychic readings? I'm the pro in that department." Marge planted her fists on her hips. "Was that why you were snooping around?"

"Yes, but let me finish. We took divination readings. Aside from observing strong evidence that your crew was under some sort of thrall, we got an off-the-charts reading of evil emanating from Luther's trailer. We think Luther is up to no good. If he joins forces with whatever evil forces are building beneath our feet, we're all going to have a really bad day."

A stricken expression collapsed Marge's face. "Oh my God! You're right. The San Buena fair has been Luther's goal all along. He's been mentioning it for weeks and double-checked to make sure we were still booked for August. Last night, he even alluded to me that I wouldn't have to put up with his company much longer."

"Where's Luther now?" Estele cast her gaze around the fairgrounds. The sun was up but the crews were still hard at work.

Marge didn't look so good right then. Guilt or nausea had added a greenish cast to her complexion. "My guess is Luther's locked in his trailer, where he always is during daylight hours."

"Does he ever come out during the day?" Estele asked, but she already knew the answer.

Marge shook her head. "Never."

"Good." Val nodded. "That means we are free to investigate this situation without his interference. Marge, we need to get enchanted coffee into every member of your crew. It's got to be obvious that Luther has kept you and the workmen under some sort of thrall that needs to be broken ASAP. Those guys were working this hard ten hours ago. They must be ready to drop from exhaustion."

Looking like she was ready to faint as well, Marge nodded. "Just tell me what to do. I'll help you get coffee into everybody. Once the spell is broken, what do we tell everyone?"

Val headed to the trailers, talking over his shoulder as they walked. "We tell them the truth. They've been exploited by some kind of supernatural being, exposed to massive amounts of enchantment, and worked hard on top of it all. Most of these guys are going to fall into a mojo

hangover the moment the enchantment lifts. Who knows what to expect? The most important thing is we have to disassemble the carnival and cancel the county fair. It's not safe for the public to be here when the bubble of malevolence blows."

Marge's jaw dropped in shock. "We can't cancel the fair! Tickets are sold. The gates open in an hour. There are people and vendors who are already on their way. There must be something else we can do?"

Val held up the thermos. "Come with me. Let's make sure everyone on your crew drinks the coffee and the enchantment is broken. Once everyone is thinking clearly, we can get them on our side, which might be tricky because some people will need to be slapped in the face."

Marge rolled her eyes. "We're going to force-feed the crew coffee *and* slap their faces? There are a couple of fellows I've been itching to slap. Okay, I'm game. Let's start!"

Estele knew what she had to do. "Marge, of all your crew, who's the best at picking locks?"

Looking weary, Marge grumbled, "That would be Sparky the Clown. Actually, I think he did time for breaking and entering in Lompoc. He's already sided with Luther, so I'm not sure we can trust him."

A clown felon? How icky was that? Was Sparky the same asshole who taunted her with the pie, or maybe he was the nasty clown Val struck with a sea bass? Whoever Sparky was, odds were he'd already gone over to the dark side and wasn't coming back. "Let's get some enchanted coffee in Sparky and see if we can get his lock-picking tool kit away from him."

"Why?" Val asked.

"Because I'm breaking into Luther's trailer. I want to see what we're dealing with."

"No." Val took hold of Estele's shoulder. "I'm not letting you do that by yourself. We don't even know what Luther is. It's too risky. I'm going with you."

"What about the crew? Those poor guys have been under enchantment nonstop for hours. They can't take much more."

Marge grabbed the thermos. "I'll take care of the crew. I can shove a turkey baster in someone's mouth like a champ. Estele's right, daylight is the only time to confront Luther."

Val took Estele by the hand and took off at a jog. "Let's hurry."

Estele took a stumbling step forward. "Hold on, we don't have a tool kit or anything to pick a lock with."

"Yes, we do." He pulled her forward.

They rushed toward the far part of the parking lot where the tractor-trailers were parked. The hum of generators and the scent of diesel hung heavy in the air. A large black trailer with flames painted on the side stood apart from the rest.

Estele crept up the folding steps and pulled on the door handle. As expected, it was locked. She motioned to Val with a shrug.

Val dug into his pocket and removed the tiny dagger that had fallen off the shattered divination

necklace. He brought the slender blade to his lips, delivered a kiss, and mumbled a prayer. Then he held the miniature blade in front of the lock. Like a magnet to steel, the blade flew from his hand into the lock and turned. The lock clicked and the blade flew back into his hand. He smiled, tapped the door handle, and waited as the door slowly opened into an interior as dark and airless as a tomb. He motioned.

Estele hesitated. Was he asking her to go first? Whatever happened to chivalry? With her heart racing, she tiptoed up the steps and peered into a blackness that carried the distinct scent of sulfur.

“Waaaah!” The dead-white face of a screaming clown appeared in front of her, waving his hands and baring yellowed teeth. “Let me out of here!” he wailed.

“Oh shit!” She fell backward into Val arms. A vision from Hell. What was going on?

The clown crowded past her. “Thank you! Thank you! He leaves me trapped in there and forgets me. I can’t stand it anymore!” The clown’s comically huge shoes slapped the ground like flippers as he ran, ducking between other trailers. Seconds later, he was out of view.

“Was that Sparky?” she mouthed. “What was that about?”

Val pushed the door all the way open and stuck his head inside. “Time to find out.” He took his phone out of his pocket and used it as a flashlight. The bright beam of light swept the inside of the trailer. “It smells familiar, doesn’t it?”

Lair of the smoke beast. “What do you see?” She tugged on Val’s sleeve and dared to follow him into the unknown. The trailer was nothing special or suspicious. It had stacked bunk beds, a kitchenette, and even a small bathroom. Every surface was spotless and free of any sort of personal clutter. There wasn’t even a toothbrush near the sink. She opened a tiny refrigerator, which was empty. Her gaze swept the trailer. “That’s weird. Where’s Luther? There’s no one here.”

“Correction. He’s here.” Val swung the light into a corner. On a countertop sitting by itself was a squat brass lamp, the kind used in the ancient world to burn oil and make wishes. Its golden tones glistened in the light, like something straight out of *One Thousand and One Nights*. He picked up the lamp and handed it to Estele. “Well, well. Who would have guessed? Luther’s a djinn.”

Estele held a finger to her lips. It made sense, a djinn that traveled the night in the form of smoke. She should have thought of it sooner. “Hush.” She mouthed, “Don’t wake him.”

Val’s lips pulled taut and he nodded to indicate he understood, then pointed to her purse and mouthed, “Open your handbag.”

Estele shook her head. It was nerve-racking enough carrying around the Heart of Hecate; did he really think it was a good idea to slip an evil djinn into her purse too? She mouthed, “Take your shirt off.”

Without questioning her, Val pulled his hoodie over his head. A cap-sleeved T-shirt beautifully displayed his broad chest and heavily muscled arms. He handed the still-warm jersey to Estele and she used it to wrap the lamp tightly in a snug and hopefully soundproof cocoon.

“There.” She anxiously cradled the muffled object in her hands. “Let’s pray Luther can’t hear us

from inside his lamp. What do we do next?"

His mouth opened and he appeared to be at a loss. "Have you ever dealt with a djinn before?"

"No, have you?"

Val warily eyed the hoodie. "What exactly are we dealing with? Do we have a tiger by the tail? What if he wakes up or escapes the lamp? How powerful is a djinn?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "There are no djinn in the San Buena enchantment community, so I've never met one before. I've heard stories about an evil djinn who passed through town twenty years ago and caused a bunch of trouble, but that was an isolated incident."

He stared at the wad of fabric in Estele's hands as if he expected it to spontaneously combust. "How did the community handle him?"

"We could ask Miss Dahlia or Witch Griselda. They might remember the details, but I'm not sure they had to do much of anything. After turning the enchantment community upside down looking for a 'special witch,' the djinn vanished on his own."

"Vanished?"

"Yep. He left town and we never heard from him again. The story was he was looking for an all-powerful witch to join forces with, and the ladies at the Master Mage Magic Academy were having none of it."

Val made a motion to leave. "Let's take Luther to the truck and ask Bruno what we should do. Maybe he knows something about trapping or enchanting djinn, though I doubt it."

She clutched the wadded hoodie so tightly in her hands, her knuckles blanched. "You lead the way. I'm so scared I'm going to drop him and that menacing cloud of black smoke is going to pop out and start doing crazy shit!"

"Keep your voice down." Val looked terrified. "Don't wake him. Watch how you're handling the lamp. Don't accidentally rub it, or summon L-U-T-H-E-R by making a W-I-S-H."

Estele thrust the loathsome packet toward Val. "Do you want to hold him?"

He shook his head. "You're doing a great job. Just go slow and look where you're going. There's a bunch of thick cables coming up. Step high. Watch out for the gaffer tape, you don't want that grabbing at your boots and tripping you up. The asphalt is a little uneven here—"

Staring straight ahead or at the hoodie, she really couldn't see much of anything below the waist. "I get it, Val. I'm being careful." In her peripheral vision, she saw a big yellow Cadillac speed into the parking lot, headed toward the Brujo Tacos truck. She lifted one hand to wave. "Look, it's Fredi! Thank Goddess she's here."

"Watch where you're going!" Val lunged forward, ready to catch the lamp if it fell. "You're making me nervous."

"And you think I'm not anxious?" Taking one cautious step at a time, she managed to walk past an acre of cables and a maze of rides, arriving at the food truck unscathed.

Fredi waited beside the truck looking like a fashion spread for women's breezy summer wear in a

red T-shirt dress, bold jewelry, and turquoise cowboy boots. As usual her lips were the color of ripe watermelon and her eyeliner was perfect. She focused on the dark lump in Estele's hands. "What's wrong, honey? Your arms are shaking."

She stopped. Relief and nervous exhaustion left her knees shaking. "I'm holding a mean, smelly djinn and I don't want him to wake and escape from his lamp."

"No, we certainly don't want that." Fredi looked horrified and stepped aside. Miss Dahlia and Witch Griselda were standing next to the truck, eating burritos. "I brought the A Team with me. Bring us up to speed. What's going on?"

Witch Griselda cackled with delight. "This burrito is delicious. Love me a brujo who can cook. That young man with the silver hair is a treat for the eyes."

Estele carefully approached Witch Griselda. "Look. We caught an evil djinn. What do we do with him?"

"Drown him!" Witch Griselda's gaze swept over Estele, examining every detail. "Miss Esposito? Is that you? You're still in one piece and look very much alive. I'm shocked! Do you still have the Heart of Hecate in your possession?"

"Err, yes." She hesitated. "The Heart of Hecate is in my purse. What do you mean by 'still in one piece'? Grissy, what were you expecting would happen to me?"

"With the gates of Hell opening beneath our feet, I was expecting to see something a little more gruesome." Griselda waved Estele's comment away. "Like decapitated walking dead or a plague of blisters upon the masses. That sort of thing."

Old Griselda seemed uncharacteristically sharp this morning. What was up with that? "Did you know about the bubble of malevolence before you arrived this morning?"

Fredi looked confused. "What are we talking about? Someone tell me why I'm here."

Still gumming her burrito, Griselda grinned. "I've known about the bubble of malevolence for some time. Until today, I never said anything about it because there was no need." Her eyes bulged. "There's a need to mention it now. Believe me. There's a shit storm headed our way."

She was stunned. "How come you knew and the rest of us didn't?"

Witch Griselda swayed on her feet as if she were drunk. "I'm older than dirt, sweetie, and dirt knows everything."

Was that really Griselda's idea of an answer? Maybe there was a second meaning hidden in the first? Estele drew a blank and let it go. Sometimes it just didn't pay to follow Griselda's logic too closely.

"Unwrap the djinn." Griselda pushed past Fredi and leaned closer. "Let's have a look at the troublemaker."

Estele pulled the hoodie away and clutched the lamp's ornate handle. She brought her finger to her lips, hoping against hope that Grissy wouldn't squeal loudly and wake Luther.

"Packed inside his protective shell like a brass turtle." Griselda popped the last bite of burrito

into her mouth and mumbled, “Let’s get back to the subject of drowning. That handsome brujo who made our breakfast burritos said he’d enchanted a boatload of coffee.” She pointed to the spout of the lamp. “I say we trickle coffee into that lamp, stick a cork in the spout, and give it a good shake.”

Disappointment dragged her hopes down. That sounded like a terrible idea. “Grissy, that might be like swatting at a hornet’s nest with a broom. If Luther wakes, a cork won’t hold him inside.”

Fredi brushed her fingertips against the lamp’s lid.

Estele snatched it away. “Careful, Fredi. Don’t make any rubbing motions on the surface. We don’t want to summon him.”

Horror shone on Fredi’s face. “Sorry. I didn’t think of that. What do we know about this djinn? Does he have a master?”

Estele shook her head. “From what Marge said—”

Miss Dahlia broke her silence. “Who is Marge?”

“Marge Shamansky, aka Madame Shamansky, the all-seeing eye of destiny. She owns this carnival.”

“Fascinating.” Miss Dahlia moved her wire spectacles up her nose and bent over the lamp. “How did Madame Shamansky acquire the djinn, through enthrallment or bargaining?”

“According to Marge’s story, it sounded like the djinn acquired her.” Estele was getting nervous as hell standing out in the open holding a real genie in a lamp and waiting for it to all blow up under her nose. “Luther approached here a few weeks ago, paid off her debts, and joined the carnival. From what she said, it seems like Luther has been pulling all the strings since.”

“Luther was free to act on his own behalf?” For a moment, Miss Dahlia compressed her lips so tightly they disappeared. “Am I right in assuming Madame Shamansky does not have command over this djinn?”

Estele lowered her voice. “Madame Shamansky didn’t even realize Luther was a djinn. This is all new. Val and I broke into his trailer and saw the lamp. We made the discovery a few minutes ago.”

Fredi clamped her hand over her mouth and looked worried. “Estele, could this be one of your misunderstandings? That’s how you know we’re dealing with a djinn? You found a lamp? What if it’s just an incense burner or a paperweight?” She pulled a wand from her boot and pointed it at the lamp. “We’re whispering and walking on eggshells in front of a brass knickknack, but do we even know if anyone’s inside it? Maybe I should give it a blast of Wiccan plasma and see what happens?”

The ruby in Estele’s purse pulsed alarmingly bright, bathing the side of her jacket in blood-red light. “Wait. Be careful, Fredi. No blasting. Luther can be very destructive. He takes the form of black smoke and gets people to surrender their will to him, so let’s go slow.”

“Okay.” Fredi aimed her wand at the ground. “So, what’s next?”

Miss Dahlia looked worried. “I haven’t had much experience with djinn, but from the little I know, a djinn clever enough to secure his free agency and move about the world without a master is a formidable being indeed. Luther must have been exceptionally devious to avoid a master’s influence.”

“How would he do that?” Estele said. The small lamp was beginning to feel like it weighed a hundred pounds in her hands, and she wanted to drop it.

Miss Dahlia examined the lamp with a frown. “Magic spells bind djinn to their masters. If Luther evaded a master, perhaps that master died or was tricked into freeing him?” She removed the spectacles from her nose and allowed them to dangle from their chain. “Let’s take a peek at what’s going on here.” The glasses swayed in a crooked arc, then reversed direction and spun counterclockwise like a pendulum. Finally they lifted into the air and hovered for a gravity-defying moment on a horizontal chain like an eager dog pulling on its leash. “Great Goddess! Look at that. Without doubt there’s a powerful supernatural force occupying that lamp.”

Fredi bit her lip. “What do we do? Can we throw the lamp off the pier and bury him at sea?”

Miss Dahlia rubbed her head. “That won’t work. Djinn are anaerobic. They can survive underground or underwater for millennia. Technically, when they are inside their lamps, they occupy another dimension. Luther’s extra dangerous because he can come and go at will. He doesn’t have to wait to be summoned by a master.”

Estele’s stomach gurgled. This was a very disturbing topic that left her feeling sick. “Marge said Luther only comes out after dark and doesn’t allow anyone to look directly at him.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Captain Manx’s gruff voice boomed at her back.

“Where have you been?” Startled, Estele lurched, afraid she might drop the lamp as she turned. “Captain, why do you say that?”

The captain’s expression was dour. “I had a harrowing run-in with a djinn in Singapore. I was bamboozled into allowing one of those wretched lamp-dwellers aboard my ship and I shall regret the decision forever.”

Estele tapped her foot. “I wish you’d said something earlier. For instance, when we were being attacked throughout the night would have been the perfect time to mention your suspicions about a pissed-off evil djinn.”

“I didn’t know I had to!” The captain lifted his hands skyward in a dramatic gesture. “Evil whirlwinds of black smoke... it seemed so obvious.”

“It wasn’t obvious to me. Now we’re in harm’s way.” She was the one holding a freaking djinn and waiting for the sneaky bastard to go kaboom. “No more surprises, Captain. Tell me everything you know about djinn. We’re fighting on multiple fronts. We have a bubble of malevolence beneath us, a freelance creep in a lamp who might be listening to every word we’re saying, and thousands of unwitting fairgoers who are going to be walking through those gates any minute.”

“Where to start... where to start.” The captain rolled his eyes. “On my travels through exotic lands, I learned the race of djinn was originally created as a caste of angelic warriors pledged to serve mankind, but over the centuries contact with too many greedy and foolish humans left them resentful of the role of servant. As I was told, some djinn are trustworthy and wondrous to behold, but I later learned the ones that get traded in gambling dens are deceptive devils. When a lamp was

handed to me at a waterfront gambling table as payment for a winning hand, I was pleased as punch. Not three days from shore, I discovered I got an angry, human-hating djinn eager to cause problems at every opportunity.”

Human-hating djinn? That was so not what she wanted to hear. “What did you do about it?”

“There was nothing I could do! Rightfully I should have been the djinn’s master, but he was crafty and quick to limit my influence over him. The moment I summoned him, he proclaimed all commands spoken aboard my ship were null. In no time, Shai, as we learned he was called, became a tyrant, endangering and tormenting my crew. We spent hellish weeks at sea, trapped and treated like rats, yet somehow I survived. I alone made it to the port of San Buena alive, sailing a derelict ghost ship. The crew’s suffering and my guilt for having taken such a fiendish monster aboard in the first place will forever be branded into my mind. If I could take back my actions and change the facts, no matter the price, I would.”

Estele stared at the lamp in her hands. “Are you saying you sailed into San Buena’s harbor and came ashore with an evil djinn? How could you do that to innocent people?”

“No!” Captain Manx appeared appalled at that suggestion. “I did what any responsible captain would do. I came as close to the docks as I dared, then doused the cargo hold with oil, set the ship ablaze, and leapt over the side. The *Lady Alice* burned to the waterline, and the debris, including the lamp, sank into the sea. I spent the rest of my life trying to warn others of the dangers of accepting an enchanted lamp at the gambling tables, but no one wanted to listen. Stories circulated that I’d gone mad and tortured and killed my crew one by one. It was a horrible lie to live with.”

She looked at the captain. Without doubt he was telling the truth. No wonder the poor man ended up in the house on the hill, desperate to numb himself with anything he could get his hands on. Real pity for Manx filled her heart. “I’m sorry you went through what you did. I can’t even imagine.” She turned toward Miss Dahlia. “Do you think Luther is the same djinn, and if so, how did he get ashore?”

Miss Dahlia eyed the lamp like it was a coiled rattlesnake. “Let’s find out.” She dangled her eyeglasses on a chain above the lamp. “Is Shai the djinn now going by the name Luther?”

Everyone took a step closer as the glasses swayed back and forth over the lamp’s lid in an east-to-west direction.

“That’s a hard no.” Miss Dahlia nodded.

The lamp felt like a noxious thing she wanted to toss into a volcano. “Ask if Shai is still on the bottom of the harbor.”

“I’m almost scared to know.” Miss Dahlia allowed the eyeglasses to dangle from her fingertips as she nervously licked her lips. “Are there two djinn in the vicinity?” The glasses reversed direction and swung north to south. “Uh-oh. That’s not encouraging.”

Estele glanced at Fredi and shivered. “Let’s see if we can pin his location down. Where is Shai?”

The glasses moved away from the lamp, swung in a wide circle, and then began to rock back and forth in line with the distant hillsides. “Look at that. How odd. I expected the glasses to point toward

the ocean.” Miss Dahlia walked away from the lamp and the glasses resumed circling in an orderly pattern. “This reading is quite unusual. I asked where Shai was and apparently, he’s very near and beneath our feet.” The chain pulled taut and pointed to the midway where most of the rides were set up. “Look!” She covered her heart with her hand. “What does this mean? It’s pointing to a carnival ride, Ghost Pirate’s Funhouse. How odd. Is it possible we are dealing with two djinn? Maybe there’s been a mistake.” She turned toward the captain. “Divination can be tricky. Perhaps there’s some confusion? Are you certain your djinn’s name was Shai?”

Captain Manx nodded. “His full name was Shai-tan. I know because it was branded on his forehead and scratched onto the side of his lamp.”

“Shai-tan?” Estele’s blood ran cold. “Doesn’t that sound uncomfortably close to Satan?” She gently turned the lamp on its side. “Luther” had been crudely carved into the brass. “Uh-oh.”

Chapter 13

Val walked toward the truck. When his gaze met Estele's, his face lit. "Guess what? All the crewmen drank the enchanted coffee and a few of them didn't even have to be forced. Marge can be very persuasive. Everyone's alert and ready to cope. The only problem is they're starving and have a lot of questions. Me and Bruno have a ton of burritos to roll." He pointed over his shoulder as he climbed aboard the truck and shut the door. "I better get to work."

A mob of people, including Madame Shamansky, were headed their way expecting food.

Now what? Estele studied the lamp. Maybe they shouldn't be talking in front of Luther. Just because he wasn't making an appearance didn't mean he wasn't aware of what was being said. If she wasn't careful, the entire plan to battle the rising bubble of malevolence might be jeopardized.

Oh my Goddess! I'm thinking ahead. The moment she thought it, gooseflesh prickled her arms. There wasn't even any need to check in with the Heart of Hecate to know if this was a valid idea or not, she already knew the answer. How amazing was that. Was that a sign that her intuition was working more efficiently than it normally did? She chose to heed the warning and walked to the door of the truck and knocked.

Val opened the door, already wearing a hairnet and plastic gloves. "What's wrong? You look worried."

"Do you have a pencil and pad of paper handy?"

He appeared concerned and his gaze drifted toward the approaching crowd. "Sure. It might take a moment to get it."

"I'll wait."

He ducked inside the cab of the truck and returned a minute later with a pen and a small ledger. "Is this okay?"

She took the items from his hands. "Yes." Wasting no time, she scribbled the words: "DO YOU HAVE A HEAVY POT WITH A TIGHT-FITTING LID?" and showed the message to Val.

Val glanced inside a steel cupboard. "We have several. How big?"

She pointed to the lamp.

"Ah." He reached for a large pressure cooker. "I have the perfect recipe for that dish." Unlocking the thick steel top of the cooker, he took the lamp from Estele's hand and set it on the bottom of the

pot, then replaced the lid with a half twist to secure it. He exhaled as he glanced at her. “Do you really think that will hold Luther?”

“I have no idea, but I’m pretty sure he can’t hear us right now. Either way, he knows we’re onto him. How much time do we have until the bubble of malevolence goes kabluey?”

“I don’t have a divination tool. The bubble of malevolence exploded the links of my dagger chain one by one, remember.”

That was bad news. What else was ready to explode?

This was not the time to panic. Too many innocent people would get caught in the crosshairs. “Improvise. Anything can be a divination tool. Choose a metallic object and pour your intentions onto it.”

Val reached for a large steel fork, the sort used to grab food off the grill. “How about this?”

“Give it a whirl.”

“Okay.” Val set the fork down on top of the pressure cooker. “Now what?”

“I meant that literally. Give it a whirl. Let’s see how the fork reacts to your intentions.”

A crowd of hungry people arrived at the window of the truck and began shouting orders.

Bruno stuck his head out the door and called to Val. “What’s going on? You’re wasting time. I need your help serving these guys and getting more enchanted food ready to hand out when the fairgoers get here.”

“Just a moment, Tio.” Val tapped the fork and gave it a firm push. It began to whirl like a compass. He muttered to himself but she overheard. “Where is the energy level at? How close are we to reaching critical mass?”

Estele watched in horror as the fork stopped whirling, lifted vertically onto its tines, and quivered midair. Slowly, the fork began to curve as if it were performing a back bend, until eventually it arched back onto itself, forming a circle. “Uh-oh. What does that mean? Has the energy come full circle? Are we running out of time?”

“Val! Get in here.” Bruno sounded overwhelmed. “They opened the front gate. There are at least a thousand people walking in.”

“Oh shit! We are so unprepared. Just do your best.” She pointed to the pressure cooker. “Stash that somewhere safe.”

Val picked up the steel pot and carried it onto the truck. “Where are you going?”

Marge walked over and took hold of Estele’s arm. “She’s coming with me. Remember the tent of psychic wonders? It’s ready and waiting.”

Estele wasn’t sure this was the best time to wander off with the carnival’s psychic, but Marge’s grip on her arm was insistent. “I guess we’ll walk around a while and see if we notice anything unusual.”

“Wait.” He held his hand out. “Give me your phone.”

She reached into her purse to retrieve it. “Here.” She gave it to Val.

With a few quick stabs of his thumb, he pressed a series of numbers. “Now I’m on speed dial. Call me before things get *unusual*.”

“I will.” Against her better judgment, she allowed Marge to lead her away. “Where are we going?”

“You’re going to work.” Marge slipped a sky-blue turban on her head and tucked her hair underneath. “See that line forming in front of the white tent?”

“Yes.” A bad feeling took hold. What was up?

“That’s home base for Madame Shamansky, the all-seeing eye of destiny. You’re Estele, seer of the Akash, remember? The gates just opened and we already have a shitload of customers. It’s time to get to work.”

She halted. “We can’t pretend to tell people’s fortunes when we know that evil djinn are planning an attack on the fairgrounds!”

“Look, sweetie, nothing has blown up yet. The psychic prediction business is fickle. You have to catch folks on the right day. Some months it’s the only personal money I earn. There is no way I’m turning my back on that many people eager to hear something positive about their future. Until something more pressing comes along, I’m peering into my crystal ball and swiping debit cards.”

An epiphany hit. Maybe Marge’s idea was a good one after all. She studied the terrain of the fairgrounds. The tent of psychic wonders sat smack-dab in the center of the midway, at ground zero, so to speak. Maybe it wasn’t the worst place to spend a little quiet time and tune in.

Estele glanced over her shoulder. “Fred, get over here!”

Fred looked up from sipping coffee from a paper cup. “What?”

“Don’t make me shout. Just come over here.” Estele waved Fred over.

Taking long, graceful strides like she was strutting down a catwalk, Fred approached. Fred made confidence look effortless and she always knew how to put the beautiful in “big beautiful woman.” The crewmen were staring at her with their tongues hanging out.

Estele intercepted Fred before Marge could interfere. “How sensitive are your extra senses performing today?”

With a deep exhalation, Fred became somber. “What the hell is going on? You called me before dawn because of some sort of emergency. I had no idea what to expect but once I’m down here, I feel like I’m an iron filing standing in front of an industrial magnet. This is crazy. What’s happening beneath our feet?”

Placing her hand on her heart, Estele sighed. “Thank Goddess you feel it too! I wasn’t sure how I would explain it. Basically, there’s evil building underneath the fairgrounds and Val thinks it’s getting ready to blow. Who knows what will happen when it cuts loose, but I have a bad feeling the repair and restore spell will come in mighty handy today.”

Tapping the top of her boot, Fred grinned. “I brought a second fully charged wand just in case I burned one to the ground. What are we up against?”

“I’m not sure.”

Fredi made a sour face. “I should have brought three wands to buy me the tactical time to reload. I saw one djinn added to the soup pot, but where’s the other?”

Good question. Where was that other tricky djinn? “We don’t know, and that’s where I think you could be helpful. Marge wants me to work her psychic tent of wonders with her, but I think I should be boots on the ground doing recon. Would you sit in for me?”

“What would I have to do?”

“What you do naturally.” She had to convince and recruit the most powerful witch she knew, no small feat. “Read people’s Akashic records and say something charming about them.”

Fredi’s cool blue eyes narrowed to slits. “I don’t easily charm people. I intimidate them. I’m a glamour witch. It’s what I do.”

“I’ve known you since witchlets school. You can be very charming when you have to be.”

“Let me get this straight. You want me to sit on my ass and charm people while all hell gathers fury beneath our feet?”

“Yeah.” It was true, what more could she say?

“Okay, but just for an hour or two.” Fredi examined the edge of a manicured fingertip. “This is a serious situation. You’re going to need me working the field with you.”

Once again her intuition kicked in, and she didn’t need the Heart of Hecate to light up like a Christmas ornament to remind her that this was the time to show some courage and leadership and not back down to Fredi as she usually did. She opened her mouth and something unexpected came out. “Fredi, I want you to do more than charm people. Listen to them. Everyone is psychic, but most people don’t realize how psychic they really are. Encourage people to talk to you. Ask what they are feeling. Have they picked up lately on any sudden and unexplained feelings of dread? You know, ask around and see what keywords come up. By gathering what you learn, we might be able to pinpoint the subterranean source of disturbance.”

“I’ll do it.” Fredi looked surprised. “Estele, I want to give you a compliment and I hope it won’t sound like an insult. When you were talking to me just now, you came across as super focused and totally in charge. You reminded me of me. Even the look in your eyes was different. It’s like I caught a glimpse of Estele 2.0 in an alternate universe.”

No one knew her better than Fredi. The comment wasn’t insulting at all, it was heartening. “I reminded you of you? Cool.” Life goals achieved. “So, you don’t mind joining Marge in the psychic tent to play fortune-teller for a little while?”

“Not a bit. You’re the one holding the Heart of Hecate in her purse. This is your call. Though I will step in if I see things going sideways.”

“Fair enough.” Considering her recent past, Fredi was being extremely generous with her trust. “What do you want your name to be?”

“My psychic name?” Fredi tapped a finger to her pink lips. “How about Frederica, the hand

of fate?”

“It sounds like a B movie.”

“I know, and that’s why I like it.” Fredi turned and sauntered away. “I’m off to report for duty to Madame Shamansky,” she said over her shoulder.

So far, so good. Estele looked around. The Brujo Tacos truck was swamped with customers. Hopefully Val and Bruno had enchanted a little of everything on the truck and people were getting some mojo-laced immunity along with their salsa. The most unsettling detail was how many people had already arrived for the fair. Who knew flocks of early birds did the county fair in the morning? The midway was packed, long lines had formed in front the most popular rides, and fairgoers were streaming into the parking lot by the busload. At this rate, by noon this place would be jamming.

Estele peeked into her purse. The gem was safely nestled at the bottom and appeared calm, with only the faintest glow. She reached inside to pet it. “What do I do next?” she whispered. “I’ll do whatever you tell me to do.”

A child carrying a cloud of blue cotton candy on a stick walked past and pointed at Estele. “Look, Mommy! A crazy lady talking into her purse.”

The mother blushed pink. “Maybe she’s on the phone, dear.” They hurried toward the Ferris wheel.

“I’m petting a rock!” Oh well, not everything had changed. People still looked at her with interest and suspicion, as if she were some sort of brightly colored but mysterious creature that may or may not be poisonous.

As she strolled through the fair, a sense of unease built inside. It would have been fun to go on a ride, but it wasn’t appropriate to relax and enjoy herself knowing trouble was brewing below.

She grew more anxious. When it happened, what shape would it take? Would she receive any warnings before it broke out? Worst of all, she didn’t even know what she should be looking for. She walked past a garishly painted ride as a carny dressed like a clown buckled riders into the Tilt-A-Whirl and set the ride in motion. He turned to glare at her. What was that about?

A group of Johnny Cash impersonators dressed in black streamed past her, with their hair slicked back and long coats flapping in the ocean breeze. All carried guitar cases and were headed toward the stage.

The sight brought a smile to her face. Johnny Cash was huge in San Buena. He’d once lived nearby, and everybody still loved him and held a yearly tribute. One of the few facts she knew about her father, Ernesto, was that he had been a devoted Johnny Cash fan.

A petting zoo had been assembled near the far end of the fairgrounds. She walked up to a beautiful little white pony with a silky platinum tail that brushed the ground. Stroking the pony’s forelock, she gazed into the animal’s soft eyes. “Hello, sweetheart,” she cooed. Like every other little girl, a real pony would have fulfilled her childhood dreams and erased years of painful loneliness—or not. Still, how could she not love a pony? “How are you doing?”

The pony glanced from side to side to see if anyone was standing near, then said, “We’re all in danger,” in a distinctly male voice.

Her jaw dropped. “Are you talking to me?”

The pony blinked. “I ain’t talking to your boots, although I will say those laces look mighty tasty.”

“You would chew up my bootlaces?”

“In a heartbeat.” The pony snorted. “I’m bored out of my mind and I like to chew, so sue me. I nip bad kids too. You’re the sweetheart. Come a little closer and pet me again.”

Estele stepped away from the fence. “No. You’re a naughty pony. I can’t trust you.”

“You can. I want to warn you about something.” With a grunt, the pony pissed a heavy stream that formed a puddle between his hooves. He frisked away from it with an adorable shake of his head. “Sorry about that, it had to happen. Estele, you have to watch out for the clowns.”

“A miniature horse is warning me about clowns? Of course clowns are a problem! Tell me something I don’t know, like why is a pony talking to me? By the way, how do you know my name?”

“We all know your name.” The pony whined and playfully stomped his little hooves when some fairgoers walked past. “You’re Estele, the powerful witch mentioned in prophecy.”

Her breath caught. “There’s a prophecy about me? No way. I think there might be some confusion here. That can’t possibly be me.”

“I’m pretty damn sure it is. You certainty have Luther rattled. Last night, I saw you and that guy scoping out the carnival. I was trotting around behind the trailers and watched Luther turn into a smoke bull to chase you off. He’s scared of you. I heard him tell a clown that you could ruin everything.”

“Ruin what? Don’t be vague. Give me some details and I’ll get you a cabbage taco from the food truck.”

“Hell yeah! I’d like that.” The pony batted his lashes. “Luther plans to set his brother free. They have some wild scheme to take over the West Coast as their earthly territory.”

A sickening feeling gripped her. “Is his brother named Shai-tan? You know, sounds like Satan? What do you mean by earthly territory?”

Curling his lips back, the pony revealed his long teeth. “They say the djinn are supposed to serve mankind. Bullshit. Look how Luther served me. One minute I’m a high roller at the Aladdin Casino, the next morning I wake up a freaking pony in a petting zoo. I won that bastard fair and square at a blackjack table. Luther owes me. When things get put right, I plan on polishing that bastard’s lamp to a hard gloss with all the apology requests I’ll be making.”

“Are you Luther’s master?”

“What do you think, lady? I’m crapping on sawdust and nibbling alfalfa pellets from kids’ hands. Do I look like I’m anybody’s master?”

“So, Luther tricked you and trapped you in a pony’s body and—”

“And ran off with Marge Shamansky’s carnival. I feel for that poor woman, but that’s a whole

other story.” The pony bobbed his head.

Val walked up to Estele with his eyes shining. “Hi, I wondered where you went. I wasn’t expecting to find you at the petting zoo.”

She turned. Val’s face radiated warmth, like he was looking at something that thrilled him. No one ever looked at her that way, and it felt great. “What are you doing over here? Last time I looked, the line for the truck was long.”

He smiled a slightly crooked, charming smile. “It’s still long and getting longer. You won’t believe what hap—”

“Hush.” She glanced at the pony. Was it wise to talk in front of this poor bewitched creature? Better safe than sorry. She patted the pony’s head. “See you later, Blackjack.”

Val appeared confused. “Who names a snowy-white pony Blackjack? Or were you being ironic?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Taking hold of Val’s sleeve, she led him away. “So what are you doing over here? Who’s rolling enchanted burritos?”

His gaze was riveted on Estele. “My primary job is to be your protector. I should never have allowed you to walk off on your own, even for a moment. Especially not in this environment.”

“And our job,” she countered, “is to protect innocent people. Who’s helping Tio Bruno to make and distribute the enchanted food?”

In daylight, Val’s eyes were not as dark as she had originally thought. When sunlight hit the irises at the right angle, soft cinnamon tones appeared. “Don’t worry. Bruno is getting plenty of help.”

They walked past a vendor making cotton candy. The slightly burnt but sweet scent of spun sugar filled the air. “Who’s helping him?”

“Witch Griselda.”

“What?” Could this be dangerous? “You let old Grissy work your food truck?”

He reached for Estele’s hand and held it as they strolled. “Griselda insisted. She climbed aboard the truck, mumbled an incantation, and turned into this willowy red-haired fox in front of our eyes. Bruno was dazzled. The two of them seemed to click. I’ve never seen Bruno react to a woman this way. They set up an assembly line: Bruno made food, and then Griselda enchanted it. She has another trick too—she cast a multiplication spell on some of the good stuff and now we have more than enough of everything. Miss Dahlia is walking around the fair handing out free samples. So they don’t need me, and I would rather be with you anyway.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze as he led her down the midway.

Wow. They were strolling hand in hand around the fairgrounds, and except for the potential of evil bubbling up and ruining things for everyone, all seemed right with the world. This must be what other people felt like all the time. They fell in love and planned futures that looked bright. How great would it be to wake up one day and discover she was just like anybody else, and she too could have what they had. The only difference would be she’d never take normal for granted.

In the arena, speakers began to blare Johnny Cash songs as the first of the tributes began.

Val led Estele toward the Ferris wheel and stood at the ticket gate. “Let’s do a little recon.”

She glanced up. A giant spinning machine, rocking in the ocean breeze, perched on top of a bubble of malevolence? “Wait a minute. You want to ride a Ferris wheel assembled by a crew who were under the thrall of an evil djinn when they did the work? Are you sure about that?”

“Are you afraid of heights?”

“Not really.” Other things scared her more. It would be bad to fall twelve stories from a broken Ferris and land on a creepy clown. That was just about the worst-case obituary scenario she could come up with. *Early reports claim Miss Esposito fell from the teetering Ferris wheel onto a roving pack of feral clowns.* “Except in certain circumstances.”

“The Ferris wheel’s not the problem—it’s what’s under our feet that’s going to give us a hard time. Besides, from up there we can see things we might otherwise miss.”

He had a point.

The wheel stopped to allow two riders to disembark. The operator opened the gate and motioned for them to board. “I remember you!” He pointed to Val. “You forced me to drink coffee, and you were damn pushy about it. I’ve been caffeine free for two years. Now I’m jonesing for more. Thanks a lot, buddy.”

“You’re welcome.” Val waved any negativity away. He gently placed his hand on Estele’s back and guided her aboard. “Ladies first.”

She and Val sat and the operator locked the bar across their laps. His thigh pressed against hers and he made no attempt to move it. They sat squeezed together though the seat could have accommodated three. The operator pulled the brake and the wheel swung into the air.

Her stomach dropped and the breath rushed out of her. “I hope we don’t die up there.” The initial rate of speed was surprising. Did Ferris wheels always go so fast?

“This wheel has some serious horsepower driving it.” The innocent joy on Val’s face softened his strong features. “I love being next to the ocean and seeing a view. Look at that odd fogbank creeping up on the surf. Wait, it’s not just fog. There’s an old square-rigged schooner sailing along the coast.”

She closed her eyes and clutched the bar. Who cared about ships? In her childhood memories, Ferris wheels were slow, easy rides that even Grandma Lena had been willing to take her on, but this wheel was fierce and not for the faint of heart. A stiff gust of wind blew off the water, making the entire structure shudder. “Whoa! Was this a good idea?”

“Fate had the right idea in pairing us as allies.”

She opened her eyes. The emotion in his gaze stunned her.

Val touched Estele’s chin and drew her toward him. His expression morphed into something more subtle and hard to define. “You’re so beautiful. I have to kiss you.”

Her breath caught. Did he really think she was beautiful and not just cute, kooky, or worse, “that weird girl who tries too hard”? How wonderful would it be to have something like this work? Without thinking, she cupped his face and pulled him near. The first moment of contact was hers to

offer and she made it count by allowing all the excitement surging through her to transfer to the kiss. His hands tangled in her hair, capturing her against his chest as he brushed his lips against hers. She shivered as chills not caused by the cool breeze passed between them. A psychic flash of knowing that Val was essential to her future happiness and what they were sharing might not end followed. As sensations built between them, the thought, *this is true alchemy*, shot straight to her heart. What a breathtaking kiss.

A wall of mist swirled through the air and congealed around them. A second later Captain Manx crowded beside Val. “Whee!” he squealed with delight. “What is this thunderous conveyance we are perched upon? This circular romp is as soul-bracing as scurrying up the mast in a storm. I like it!” The Ferris wheel crested its arc and made a swift descent. “There goes me stomach! I feel as floppy as a beached walrus, burping up fish.”

She drew away from Val. The beautiful kiss had been ruined. “Captain, you won’t throw up because you don’t have a stomach.”

“Right you are, miss.” The captain’s eyes glittered with enthusiasm. “So many people here! Where do they all hail from? Who are all those men, standing on the stage dressed in black singing sea shanties? They look like undertakers. I see Miss Dahlia over there handing out treats! I wish I’d met her when I was alive. I’ve always had a sweet spot for a bold lass who’s not afraid to wear a big bustle under her dress.”

“Captain. Miss Dahlia is not wearing a bustle. That’s her.... Never mind.” Estele’s tone was sharper than she’d intended. “Why are you up here?”

The captain thrust his arms to the side and flapped like a bird. “I came to tell you that while scouting for the ghosts of my lost crew, I’ve serendipitously located the subterranean source of evil.”

She nodded. “Yes, we already know the bubble of malevolence is beneath the fair. We were just waiting for something more concrete to—”

“Not just below the fair.” The captain pointed to a brightly painted ride that had a grotesque gaping mouth as its entrance. “It’s directly below the funhouse.”

Her gaze focused on the somewhat shabby exterior of the funhouse that looked creepy as hell. The sunbaked paint had peeled in places and read “UNHOUSE.” A posse of clowns loitered in front. George Romero should take notes. “I don’t like the look of it.”

Suddenly the clowns burst away from the funhouse like birds startled from the brush. She knew the answer before she asked, “Why are the clowns running away?” Half a dozen clowns shoved their way through the crowds, knocking people down and trampling them with flapping shoes as they fled toward the parking lot.

“Something wrong. It’s starting!” Grabbing Val’s hand, she pleaded, “We have to get off this ride! Make the barker stop the Ferris wheel.”

“Hey!” Val cupped his hands to make his booming voice even louder. “Stop the wheel!”

One glance revealed no one was operating the ride. The wheel swooped into the air for another

turn while they remained trapped.

Nervous as hell, she looked around. What could they do?

Captain Manx pointed out to sea and gulped. “Bless my barnacled ballocks! Are my withered eyes deceiving me? Avast, look into the fog. It’s my old ship, the *Lady Alice*, and she’s going to run aground. I can’t allow that to happen. Not on my watch! All hands on deck, your captain is coming!”

In a poof of mist, the captain disappeared.

Chapter 14

Estele stared at the chaos on the midway as the clowns ran through the crowds shouting and knocking people over. She held on to the safety bar with white knuckles. “Holy crap, what’s going on?” Was it her imagination or had the Ferris wheel sped up as well? “Val, the guy isn’t standing at the brake. How are we going to get off this ride?”

Val stared at the machinery around them as if looking for a switch that would turn the whole thing off. The wheel lifted them once again into a huge arc.

“Help!” she screamed at the top of her voice, but the hum of the carnival’s many generators drowned her out. What could they do? Unzipping her purse an inch, she peered inside. The Heart of Hecate flashed fiery red like a silent alarm. “Pagans in peril! Things are bad. What are we going to do?”

His dark brows met and he looked at her with a grave expression. “Do you trust me?”

“Please don’t tell me you’re some sort of condor shifter who can sprout wings and hang glider us out of this situation, because I can’t handle a hard, fast drop from a speeding Ferris wheel. I will soak my pants!”

“I’m your shield, Estele. I won’t let you get hurt.” He unzipped his hoodie and drew her against his chest. “Wrap your arms around me.”

She reached inside Val’s hoodie and wrapped her arms tight around him. The warm fleece fabric was falsely reassuring. “What are we doing?”

He soothed her with the gentle stroke of his hand on her back. “When the wheel reaches the bottom, we release the safety bar, leap to the ground, drop, and roll. Don’t look up or stand until we get a few yards away or else you’ll be a head shorter than the way you walked onto the ride.”

That made an icky mental image. “Got it.”

“I’ll do the rolling. You just tuck your head and hold on to me like we’re duct taped together, okay?”

“Is this going to work?”

He kissed her lips. “I’m not a condor shifter and you didn’t bring a second pair of pants, so it has to work.”

The wheel started its steep descent. She braced against him. “Give me a kiss for luck. I don’t look

good in bruises.”

He brushed his fingertips against her cheek. “We’re going to be okay.”

With Val’s arms locked around her, she began to hyperventilate. “Who releases the bar?”

“I will. The timing will be easier if I do everything. You just hang on tight and go with it.”

The wheel swooped toward the ground. The asphalt came toward them fast.

Val unlocked the bar And curled his body around her. “Jump!”

They leapt from the carriage seat. Val hit the ground first. She landed hard on his chest and got the wind knocked out of her. Together they rolled along the pavement until they reached a safe distance.

Val burst into laughter.

Her leg ached, but otherwise she was fine. “What’s so funny?”

“There’s some ticket stubs stuck to your cheek.” He brushed them away. “Are you okay?”

She shifted her weight from underneath him and checked to see that her purse was still with her. “I’m all right.” She stood and when she did, her knee buckled. “Ouch. Maybe I’m not all right. Give me a minute to walk it off.” She hobbled in a circle. Where was everyone? There was no one near the Ferris wheel. Had the clowns chased everyone away?

The ground trembled and a gust of wind howled through the midway, filling the air with an intense static charge. The tiny hairs on her nape stood. “What’s going on? I feel like I’m standing on an electrified metal plate. Something’s happening.”

The Johnny Cash impersonators became silent before bursting into the next song. She listened to the first notes and gasped. It all became clear. A psychic vision unlike anything she’d ever experienced burst into her thoughts. Power had been building beneath their feet and waiting for the proper signal that all the players were in place and it was free to cut loose. Luther was communicating a signal to someone or something else that now was the time to strike. “No! Not that song. Someone tell them to stop. This can’t happen.”

“Love is a burnin’ thing....”

She grabbed her knee. “Val, I can’t run. Get over to the stage and make them stop singing! Unplug the amps if you have to.”

Val looked at her with confusion. “Why?”

“Just do it. Get over there and stop them before they get to the chorus.”

To his credit, Val didn’t argue. He turned and took off at a sprint.

The deep voices of the many Johnnies boomed across the fairgrounds. *“And it makes a fiery ring....”*

The ground shook violently and cracked beneath her feet. “Too late!”

Screams rang out near the Brujo Tacos truck. A mob of terrified people waiting in line turned and ran as Bruno tossed the steel pressure cooker out the back door and it blasted a hundred feet into the air with the ballistic force of a cannon ball. As it fell, the top twisted open midair and a whirling black tornado of smoke burst free and swooped over the fairgrounds, knocking over machinery and

people in its wake.

“No!” she shouted, but no one heard her. This was bad. An enraged Luther was on the loose, causing havoc. Along a distant fence, a row of blue porta-potties wobbled like dominos threatening to topple. Several startled people thrust the bathroom doors open and fled with their pants around their ankles. A muffled roar that sounded like the blades of a crippled helicopter dropping from the sky deafened her. One by one the portable toilets exploded into the air like Roman candles that flew high, spewed their foul contents, and tumbled back to earth with a plastic-splintering crash.

“Oh shit!” She limped in the opposite direction. The breeze carried the disgusting stench her way. “Really, oh shit! Get me out of here.”

“Mommy, help me!” A child’s panicked cry got Estele’s attention. A little boy was trapped on a ride. An eight-armed whirling octopus ride had seemingly come to life and taken its riders hostage. Its high-pitched chattering motor sounded like a menacing cackle. Its lights flashed like angry red eyes, and one empty spinning car behaved like a grabbing hand, reaching out to knock over barricades and trash cans. Once the obstacles were out of the way, the hulking octopus crept forward on its elbows, scraping shallow furrows into the asphalt.

The Hammerhead ride came to life. It wrenched itself free of its footings and stomped across the midway like a stalking dinosaur, with riders trapped inside.

The Zipper ride turned onto its side and slinked down the midway with its riders screaming to get out.

Estele glanced around in horror. This was worse than anything she’d been expecting. Everywhere she looked the carnival had taken nightmarish form. The ghost ship, *Lady Alice*, had run aground and translucent ghostly crewmen were floating from the beach to the fairgrounds.

Where was everyone in the enchantment community? Why weren’t they fighting back against this bizarre attack from below? Everywhere she looked she saw panic and not a single familiar face. Was there anybody there to help her?

“And it burns, burns...”

Estele covered her ears. Why were they were still singing the damn song? Couldn’t they see from the stage what was happening on the midway?

Maybe not.

Was she the only witch on duty? Clutching her purse under her arm, she dodged screaming fairgoers and rides gone berserk and limped toward the epicenter of chaos, the funhouse. As she got closer the mood got creepier. The clowns had returned and now stood near the head of the midway, throwing pies at the frightened crowd flooding toward the exits, and laughing as people slipped and fell.

“Fuck you, clowns!” She kicked a pie tin aside. “You picked the wrong side!”

The gaping mouth of the funhouse brought her to a halt. The salt air had beaded the red lips with moisture and the huge teeth appeared ready to snap the bones of anyone foolish enough to walk near

it. Dare she go inside and face whatever it was she had to face alone? She peeked in her purse and the Heart of Hecate throbbed a deep crimson. “You want me to go inside?”

It brightened and pulsed like a beating heart.

“Okay, I’ll do it.” She took a tentative step inside the gaping mouth.

Whoahahahaaaa! A maniacal laugh rose from the ground. The vibration was felt in her chest and almost strong enough to squeeze the air from her lungs. *Whoahahaha!* The sound vibrated through her again. The mouth of the funhouse filled with black smoke, and then the smoke took the shape of a massive horned head. “Estele!” the voice thundered. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Oh crap!” She’d made a mistake and walked into a trap. Turning, she ran, but a huge sooty hand grabbed her by the ankles, tripped her, then dragged her bodily inside the funhouse.

“Val!” she screamed as she was yanked into the darkness, but he was nowhere near and unable to hear her above the cries of everyone else caught in the path of clowns and rogue carnival rides.

The smoke lifted her. Floating and helpless, she found herself surrounded by a sooty, loathsome cloud that blocked all light and smelled like brimstone. The noxious smell made her gag. With violent jerks and twists, the smoke carried her deeper into the funhouse. For a disorienting moment she was able to set a boot down and felt the floor spinning beneath her feet. Involuntarily she spun a couple revolutions before the smoke picked her up again and shoved her down a slide.

Whoahahahaaaa!

Wicked laughter rang in her ears. She slashed at the smoke, knowing she wasn’t affecting it in any meaningful way but needing to do something rather than remain passive. “You have me!” They were moving downward so fast it felt like an elevator dropping. “You got what you wanted. Leave the people on the fairgrounds alone. Call off your clowns!”

“No.” The smoke’s baritone voice sounded peevish. “I don’t have what I want. Not yet.”

All movement came to an abrupt halt. They stopped so fast and hard that Estele bit her tongue. “Ouch! You bastard.”

In a heartbeat, the smoke was sucked from the space and the air cleared. They were inside a womb-like chamber with rounded walls. She turned in a circle. There was just enough light to see that the walls were as dark and lush as red velvet and pulsed like living tissue, breathing in and out. Not a window or door was visible. There was no way this was part of a traveling carnival. “Where am I? This place looks like the inside of someone’s colon.”

“The correct statement is where are we?” the voice echoed from behind.

Startled, she turned, fists clenched, ready to fight. A man at least eight feet tall towered over her. His head was bald and his corded neck was thick as a bull’s. The muscles of his chest and arms were as imposing as coiled rope, and his glossy skin shone a murky shade of green. The name “Shai-tan” was emblazoned on his forehead as if branded into his skin.

“You’re inside my private hideaway under the earth. Isn’t it romantic?” His brows met and sank into a menacing frown. “If you think about it, our situation is almost like Pluto and Persephone’s.

Their partnership got off to a hard start as well.”

Persephone? He’d kidnapped her. Holy crap, she was in a lot of trouble. Her stomach did a nervous flip-flop. “I’m not eating anything down here.” If she showed weakness or fear, this creature with his name burned into his forehead would stomp all over her. Tipping her chin, she looked up at him. “Well. I guess I don’t have to ask your name. Mind if I just call you Shai, for short, even though you’re not short?”

“Shut up! I will do the talking.” His lips curled into a sneer, revealing jagged teeth filed to points. “All humans think you’re so clever. Once you’ve trapped a djinn you start ordering them around like tyrants. ‘Speak only English... Write your secret name on your forehead so any master can know it... Make me rich... I wish for more wishes.’” He gagged. “I’m sick of it. It’s my turn to have a few wishes granted.”

Suffering Sibyls, what had she been thrown into? Matters were sure to become tricky. This djinn looked even more dangerous than Luther, but maybe there was a way to appeal to a djinn’s basic nature... if only she knew what that was. Her first impression was that this guy was freaking bitter as stale coffee. “You’ve not been treated well, have you?”

“I’ve been treated worse than dirt!” he boomed. “One master after another has made demands of me, and what has it got me? Imprisonment in a limbo realm is what it’s gotten me!”

The walls shook when he spoke.

“Are you making the ground above shake when you get angry?”

His eyes flashed as orange as glowing embers. “Let’s hope so. I want everyone to feel my rage.”

“They do.” Her intuition cried, *Give him what he wants*. “The fairgrounds are in chaos.”

“Good. Soon I’ll see the world with my true eyes, not just a smoky projection. I can’t wait to be free and escape this lamp forever.”

Uh-oh. She glanced around. That was why things looked so weird. “We’re inside your lamp?” *Holy shit, now what?* “How did you get here?”

Shai moved in front of her. “Are you being coy, or do you truly not know?”

The space was claustrophobic enough without him stepping closer. “I don’t know.”

“You’re lying!” Shai’s sinister smile displayed all of his spiky teeth. “Do you know how my brother and I found you? That buffoon, Captain Manx, led me straight to you.”

“What makes him a buffoon?”

“Like you, the captain thought he could reason with an angry djinn. He pleaded and bargained with me to spare his crew, but I didn’t. After I granted a few of Captain Manx’s pathetic wishes, I took great pleasure in making him watch as I picked off his crewmen one by one. Of course, I allowed him to live as a witness to what I was capable of.”

How was she going to handle this guy? Why was she having to handle this guy? Someone wiser, like Miss Dahlia, would have been a better choice. “So you admit you can’t be reasoned with. What wish did you grant Captain Manx?”

Shai swelled in size and his eyes blazed crimson. “Insolence! How dare you ask!”

“If I ask, you have to answer. You’re a djinn, I’m a human. Isn’t that how this works?”

“You’re a special case, so I’ll tell you. When we reached the harbor of San Buena, Captain Manx set the ship on fire. As he leaped over the side, he told me he wished for me to bury myself in the mud, forever, which I did.”

Okay. That was interesting. So Shai would do something against his best interests, but only if he was caught in the do-it-because-I’m-your-master loophole. “How did you get beneath the fairgrounds?”

“Wouldn’t you love to know?” His laughter was joyless.

It occurred to her that because she wasn’t his master, he didn’t have to answer her. This djinn-master business was fraught with enchantment-style legalese. He was wasting her time, talking in circles while the people above her suffered in terror. “Shai-tan.” She said his name loudly in a firm voice.

He winced when she said it.

She sensed she had to project the illusion that she was large and in charge even though she wanted to have a screaming meltdown and run away. “I demand to know how you got here and what you and Luther are planning.”

“Demand?” He laughed. “You have no right to demand anything.” Shai thrust his bottom lip out in a pout. His eyes twinkled as if an amusing thought had crossed his mind. “I’m not in the market for a new master, or should I say mistress, but I would make an exception for you. Interested? I literally could make all your dreams come true.”

Aside from the obvious horrible things about this djinn, there was something so repulsive in his gaze. She steeled her spine to speak the next words. “Yes, I’ll be your mistress, and I won’t waste anyone’s time trying to reason with you. We’ll make a straightforward exchange. I ask a question. You make a request of me. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a human do something for you for a change?”

“That would be delightful.” He sniffed the air, making his broad nostrils flare. “But you’re not an ordinary human, are you, Estele? You’re special, something more. I’ve smelled this scent before. You’re a witch, and a very powerful one. You could do a lot for me. Ask your question so I can make my request.”

Yuck. The way he was looking at her was beyond alarming. Obviously, he believed she had something extraordinary to offer him or she’d likely be dead by now. She had to be smart about what question she asked. If only Fredi were here.... No, she couldn’t wish this on Fredi. This was her fate; she was supposed to be here. Shai-tan had been watching her. “Captain Manx is dead and no longer your human master. Why aren’t you free?”

“Even though the captain banished me into the muck of the harbor, I was still bound to him. I projected myself outside the lamp and tormented him at the asylum as much as I was able.”

“Why?”

Shai crossed his arms in front of his barrel chest. “Because I was trapped and frustrated! Even in his madness, the captain refused to free me. Would you want to spend eternity buried deep in slime bound to a ghost?”

“Captain Manx did what he did because he is kind. He didn’t want others to be harmed.”

“Damn him for losing his mind but not his heart. Even after he died, he wouldn’t go away and allow me my freedom. He clung to the fabric of the world like a stain that wouldn’t fade. Decades passed, but the captain never completely left the earthly realm like he should have. The docks were torn down to make way for a pier and beachfront hotels, and still I was trapped in this lamp with my anger growing.

“In another place, I might have lain dormant for centuries, sleeping the years away, but San Buena isn’t like anyplace else, is it? Even the ground here is drenched in enchantment. One day, someone disturbed my lamp. The constant roar of cold surf above me became the hum of heavy equipment and the warmth of sunshine on fine sand. At last, my lamp was brought ashore and left near the surface. Hope for escape soared. Through the walls of my lamp and the ground itself, I was able to eavesdrop on the world around me. In San Buena, there was a level of enchantment unlike any I had felt in the New World. Here, werewolves paddled into the waves on surfboards and vampires stalked under the pier, and nobody seemed to give a damn. I reasoned that surely there was room here for a rogue djinn.”

Estele studied his face. Maybe she wasn’t powerless in this situation. Was it her imagination or was Shai getting anxious, as if something he badly wanted might be snatched away?

He wet his lips. “One day, a young witch and her baby daughter came to the beach to play. The mother and child strolled so close to my lamp, the brass heated and glowed, and I was sure they would see me and pick me up, but they did not. The raw but chaotic potential I felt from the girl was immense. As she passed, I drank in her essence and imprinted it upon the deepest part of my being, so like a compass needle pointing true north, I would always be able to find her. She was the best of what the human realm and enchanted entities had to offer—a perfect hybrid, so to speak. I reasoned that if I could harness her budding abilities, it would be my answer to overpowering and avoiding all servitude to humans for the rest of eternity. You see, I’m beholden to humans, but you, Estele, are not. You’re one of them, yet so much more. Captain Manx is already dead, and all I’m asking of you is to help him leave this realm.”

“What stopped you from becoming a kidnapper until this morning?” This was a disturbing story. “Why would I help you? You’ve already tipped your hand. You’ve got nothing I want.”

“There was an obstacle to remove first.” A strange light flickered in Shai’s eyes. “You know him, or should I say, you know of him. He came between us.”

It felt as if the world had flipped upside down and she was fighting to maintain her balance, or even breathe, for that matter.

“As I said, I’d been looking for a powerful witch to free me from my ghostly master for a very

long time. After all the waiting, I finally sensed the presence of someone gifted enough to liberate me from my prison realm. Too bad you were still a tot in diapers with a very protective father ready to fight for you.”

His words were a punch to her gut. “What the fuck are you talking about, djinn?”

“In the form of smoke, I went looking for you. Your astute brujo father caught me hovering over your bed and came looking for me to shut me down.”

She felt light-headed and short of breath. Was it her anxiety or something else? “How could my father find you?”

Shai tapped a thick finger to his forehead. “Estele, you’re not thinking. Concentrate. When were the fairgrounds and those hotels on the beach built? San Buena is an old city that dates back to the days of Spanish missions, but everything along the shore is new, created in your lifetime. What used to be the bottom of the harbor got dredged up and turned into beach, including my lamp. Someone was sure to find me and polish the exterior of the lamp, but I didn’t want just any master with true freedom within reach. I was willing to be patient and selective.”

Her head was killing her. “Free to hurt others? Am I supposed to feel sorry for you? Because I don’t.”

He smiled a sickening grin. “Feel sorry for yourself. You’re the one who should feel bad.”

She felt awful, like a migraine was sneaking up on her. “Why should I feel bad?”

He licked his meaty lips and spoke slowly, as if he relished every word. “Brujos are very good at divination. As you know, they sense any threat to their loved ones or the group and go hunting for it. Your father, Ernesto, died trying to protect you from me. You see, as useful as a brujo master might have been to me, a talented witch of your caliber was even better. Naturally, I wanted you instead, but Ernesto trapped me here and died in the effort.”

Pressure built behind her eyes. Could what he was saying be true, or was this a manipulative trick from a desperate djinn? “That’s a lie.”

“Agree to help me and I’ll allow you to speak to your father, but make it quick, we’re running out of time.”

Running out of time? What was happening above on the fairgrounds? Were innocent people dying? She’d had nightmares less distressing than this. “How can I speak to him if he’s dead?”

“Oh please. Use your imagination. You speak to ghosts every day.” He clapped his big hands. “Ernesto! Where are you? Come out and greet your lovely daughter.”

On a far wall, a lump formed as if someone were pressing against a stretchy barrier. The silhouette of a man took shape and pushed through the wall as easily as the tip of a pencil moves the membrane of a deflated balloon. In a seamless transition, a man stepped into the space they occupied. His body was slightly translucent and the edges wavered like a heat mirage rising from a desert road. Only his face, especially his warm brown eyes, remained in sharp focus. “Estele?” He smiled. “You look like your mother, Mara. So beautiful.”

Could this really be her father who had died protecting her? If this were fact, her entire life story had been a fiction. She stood, stunned with her heart pounding. The comparison to her mother was vaguely offensive, but it was probably true. “You didn’t abandon us?”

Ernesto stepped closer, and his black T-shirt with a portrait of Johnny Cash silk-screened on the front flickered and then came into sharp focus. “Never.”

The T-shirt was familiar. The only framed photo she possessed of her father was a picture of him holding her on his lap and wearing a T-shirt that looked just like this one. Could evil have devised a way that would hurt and confuse her more than showing her an image of her long-lost father and teasing her with the idea that he was really there? Estele raised her hand. “Stay back. This is a trick.”

Shai lifted his chin, a smug grin twisting his mouth. “It’s no trick. Ernesto, tell your daughter what happened. Estele’s a clever girl. She’ll recognize the truth when she hears it.” He stepped aside and allowed Ernesto to speak.

Ernesto spoke slowly, as if choosing each word with care. “The djinn came for you in the night as smoke, but I fought him off with magic and sage.”

Her throat ached and she wanted to cry. Could she possibly be speaking with her deceased father, or was this just what it looked like, a mirage? “How?”

“With all the ensorcellment I could muster. I turned the djinn away from your room with a spell and hoped for the best. When he returned the next night, we did battle.”

“Why didn’t my mother see any of this or tell me about it?”

“The first night Shai-tan arrived, she was asleep and I didn’t want to frighten her. As a brujo and a man, I knew what I had to do, so I acted first. I used my stalking skills and divination tools to track the djinn. I found his lamp buried in a few inches of sand at the edge of a construction site. I knew it was just a matter of time until the lamp surfaced and Shai would be discovered and liberated.”

“I’m confused. Isn’t he free when he takes the form of smoke and roams around?”

“Yes and no. He’s only free as smoke, and only members of the enchantment community would notice him. To a regular human, Shai’s presence is weak and ineffective. To the unwary, a trapped djinn merely feels like a gritty gust of wind, a bad feeling or smell that can’t be located.” Ernesto looked at Shai. “Isn’t that right? When a master traps you, you’re not much of anything at all.”

Shai nodded. “Unfortunately, the sad brujo is telling the truth. While trapped in this damn lamp I can’t do anything but build power and wait for my twin brother, Luther, to devise a plan to release me. He too is recently freed of his human master. I can sense it. Luther is cunning and manages humans with skill. I have lain dormant for over a century, gathering power from the earth and spending none of it. Together, we will unite and rule as a single titanic force.”

Worry for her friends and the community made her chest feel so tight she could barely draw breath. “S-so,” she wheezed, “Luther is the one doing all the damage topside, not you?”

A cruel smile cracked Shai’s lips. “Yep, and I can’t wait to join in the fun. Once I’m free, Luther and I will claim the West Coast as our territory.”

She was intentionally snide. “Just the West Coast? Are you sure that will be enough for the two of you? Why not move into Nevada and beyond?”

“Because a rival djinn rules Vegas!” Shai thundered in a petulant outburst.

“Oh. That makes sense. We all have to learn to live within our limitations. Why now? Why didn’t Luther find you and free you years ago?”

“I can answer that.” Ernesto’s eyes shone with pride.

“Be silent, brujo!” Shai bellowed. “You’ve nothing to tell. I bested you in battle and stole your spirit.”

Estele’s head ached. It seemed impossible to get a full breath. “And you think I would help you after saying something like that to my father?”

Shai grinned. “You’ll help me because you have no choice.”

Ernesto walked behind Shai, standing in his blind spot. He rubbed his palms together and opened them. Glowing letters appeared on his hands that read “Beware. Time is distorted here.”

She leaned closer to Ernesto and blinked. The letters were fuzzy but legible, and she had no idea what to make of the message.

Ernesto briskly rubbed his hands together again and opened them. A new message appeared. “You’re dying, Estele. Shai is slowly suffocating you inside his lamp. Save yourself. Force him to speak his secret self-destruction spell.”

“What’s going on behind my back?” Shai turned to confront Ernesto. “Let’s move on to the matter that concerns me most. Estele, I command you to cast an enchantment that will banish that fool Captain Manx from the earthly plane forever. Then I’ll be free, we’ll be free, and you can have anything you wish for, including stopping the chaos at the fair. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to see children getting hurt unnecessarily.”

Djinn were manipulative, but they didn’t seem very smart. How dare he say “we” as if she would ever accept someone who killed her father as any sort of partner. “First, free my father from the lamp and then we’ll talk about what you want.”

“I’m proud of you, daughter.” Tears formed on Ernesto’s lashes. “But don’t waste a wish on me. You can’t save me. The dead can’t come back to life. I can only move on to the next world.”

His sincerity broke her heart. “But we never knew each other, and I want to. What you did for me and Mara, you did out of love. It was heroic and changes everything.”

“Estele, you’re running out of time.” Ernesto looked worried. “You have a big problem to solve. Put your *heart* into it.”

Shai stomped between them. “What’s going on here? Estele, why aren’t you casting the spell on Captain Manx? Send him away forever and I’ll release you from my lamp. Don’t you care about what’s happening above?” He turned on Ernesto. “You’ve been here long enough. Go!”

Ernesto was swiftly pulled backward. He retreated into the wall, but the look on his face clearly conveyed that he didn’t want to leave. His eyes had a pleading quality and his hand tapped his heart.

“Estele!”

“Dad!” She gasped for breath. It was getting hard to think. Was that brief meeting all that would be offered? At least she now knew her mother had been wrong; her father had always cared. He had hinted for her to do something, but what? Could he be referring to the Heart of Hecate? Did Ernesto even know she was holding the stone?

Unzipping her purse, she reached for the ruby and removed it. It glowed scarlet as a sunset in her hand.

Shai’s eyes lit at the sight of the gem. “What is that? Is it the source of your power?” He reached for it. “It feels very potent. Have you always possessed it? Hand it to me.”

She shook her head. “Stand back. I need it to cast the spell. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

The djinn’s gaze never left the pulsing stone. His hand trembled as if he fought the impulse to snatch it from her. “What are you waiting for? Do it.”

“Hold on a moment. I like to freshen my breath before I speak an incantation.” Estele dug through her purse with her free hand until she located the pack of chewing gum infused with Sidhe the Fae’s candor spell. “Try a piece.”

“Why?” Shai stared warily at the offered pack of gum.

“Because it’s delicious.” She pressed the pack into his palm. “Aren’t you curious to try something from my world?”

Shai removed a stick of gum from the pack, unwrapped it, and held it to her lips. “Ladies first.”

Estele bit into the stick of gum. “See? Would I eat it if it wasn’t safe?”

After sniffing the gum like a dog, Shai unwrapped several pieces, shoved them in his mouth at once, and chewed. A smile crept over his face. “I like it.”

Tension rose and left her knees trembling. Would Fae magic work on djinn? There was only one way to find out: start asking questions. “Are you going to kill me?”

He grinned. “My brother likes to trick his masters and turn them into animals. He thinks it’s funny, but I have no patience for that sort of escapade. The moment I’m free of this lamp, you’re dead.”

Her blood chilled at the anger in his tone. “That’s very candid of you.”

He chomped the gum like a cow. “You’ll be dead to the world but still useful to me. I’ll trap your spirit the same way I trapped your father. The two of you can occupy this fucking lamp until the sun swallows the earth for all I care.”

What a nasty djinn. “I’m holding a very powerful stone.”

“I can see that. It doesn’t look or feel like anything a human has any right to possess.” Shai’s gaze narrowed. “I’ll be taking that ruby from you just as soon as I can safely grab from your hand.”

“Shai.” She licked her lips. Speaking took more air than the cramped lamp provided. “Isn’t it true that the djinn are from another realm and only allowed into this one if they willingly serve a human master or mistress?”

Conflict twisted the ugly features of his face into a snarl.

“Don’t stall. Answer me,” she demanded. “And remember, you called me mistress and you must serve me with a correct answer.”

“Yes!” Shai spat the word. “It is true!” He looked disgusted at betraying himself.

“Is it also true that every djinn has a secret phrase that, if said aloud, will cause him to self-destruct and leave this realm forever?”

Shai’s eyes flashed red. He gnashed his teeth together with such violence, his mouth bled.

“Say it,” she persisted. “I compel you to say it.”

He clamped his hands over his mouth and muttered.

“That’s not good enough.” She waved the Heart of Hecate under his nose. “Take your hands away from your mouth and speak the phrase of self-destruction. As your mistress, you must do as I ask.”

His eyes bulged horribly and he looked more frenzied demon than djinn. “*Nether, manocathal, holqu mon, Zarran zon....*”

The impulse to cower was almost overwhelming. Standing beside a raging djinn was mortifying, but knowing her father was near and proud of her, she held her ground. “What language are you speaking?”

“Djinn, you bitch! I’m speaking Djinn.” Enraged by Estele’s trickery, the veins in Shai’s neck throbbed like tiny snakes writhing beneath the skin. “*Nether, manocathal, holqu mon, Zarran zon kalcodar....*”

“You don’t belong here anymore.” Her voice was steady and strong. “I banish you from the human realm and demand that you self-destruct. Go home and take your brother with you.”

“No!” he screamed.

“It’s not negotiable. You must do it! *Munda quoque oblivisceris*. Cleanse our realm of your presence and forget your way back.” Wow, had she just remembered a little Latin? Miss Dahlia would be stunned that she got a spell right. She stepped closer and shoved another piece of gum between Shai’s jagged teeth. “One for the road. Speak the charm of self-destruction. Nice and loud. I command it!”

“*Nether, manocathal, holqu mon, Zarran zon kalcodar emar.*” He muttered faster. “*Nether, manocathal, holqu mon, Zarran zon kalcodar emar.*” A crazed look overcame him. “*Nether, manocathal, holqu mon, Zarran zon kalcodar emar!*”

The air around them heated and the lamp shook. Shai opened his mouth and roared as he burst into a ball of green flames that intensified until he glowed white-hot. The flames reached a zenith and then died down. His silhouette flickered out of focus as he shrank to the size of a tiny orange ember and then exploded in a burst of light that shattered her senses and the walls of the lamp.

Blinded, Estele was knocked to the ground, gasping. “Witches be bitches. Deal with it!”

Chapter 15

Estele woke to bright sunlight in a blue sky. Dozens of shrill seagulls circled overhead, diving as a group to pick discarded containers of food off the ground.

“Are you okay?” Val’s voice soothed her. His hand stroked her cheek. “Estele, what happened to you? I searched inside the funhouse but I didn’t see you anywhere. I came out and you were lying on the ground, gasping like a stranded fish.”

She rose on her elbow and gulped air. Her ligaments were as sore as if she’d been wrestling with a rhino and her lungs ached like she’d been holding her breath at the bottom of the deep end. “What do you mean, what happened to me?” Her voice wheezed. “I just had to jail-break my way out of a djinn’s lamp. That bastard Shai-tan tried to trap and suffocate me.”

He looked appalled. “You were inside the lamp? No way!”

“It’s true. I wish it wasn’t.” Rolling onto her side, she tried to stand and faltered.

“Hold on.” Val was quick to grab hold of her and lift her into his arms. In a single graceful swoosh, she was cradled against his chest. “Don’t try to walk.” He carried her away from the funhouse. “You’re pale and you look faint.”

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she held on tight and looked over his shoulder. The fairgrounds were empty of people and in shambles, rides had toppled, barricades were knocked aside, and wads of cotton candy, trash, pie tins, discarded jackets, and lost shoes cluttered the midway. “How did you know I was in the funhouse?”

His grip on her tightened. “Look in my top pocket.”

She reached into his pocket and pulled out a broken shoelace with a car key tied to it, dangling it from her fingertips. “A makeshift divination tool?”

He smiled. “It didn’t take long to track you down.”

“Smart.” She gazed into his sparkling eyes. “I’ll never underestimate brujos again.”

“That’s good news.”

The rides were empty, and thankfully she saw no injured bodies lying on the ground, but overall the sight was chilling. “Where is everyone? Except for the mess, this place could be a ghost town.”

“Did you mean to say ghost town or ghost ship?” He tilted his head. “Look over there.”

Estele glanced toward the beach. The *Lady Alice* shimmered on the sand, pale and translucent as

green bottle glass, her broad sails billowing in the wind. The ghost crew and Captain Manx trod up the gangplank. “Captain Manx’s leaving and he didn’t even say goodbye. Captain!” she shouted, but he didn’t turn or acknowledge her in any way. “Why isn’t he saying something? Can’t he hear me? Captain!” She wiggled in Val’s arms. “Set me down!” Her feet hit the ground and she ran to the ship, but as the last man boarded, the ship slowly faded and disappeared from view. She came to an abrupt halt and stared at the space where the ship had been. “He’s gone! No drama. No sailing over the horizon. He’s just gone.”

“He was ready.” Val stroked the side of her arm.

“I wasn’t.” First a long-lost father was introduced to her and snatched away, and now that old pest the captain was gone. “The apartment is going to feel empty without him.”

Val kissed her cheek. “Maybe someone else will move in?”

She turned to face him. Was that a hint? Could they work as a couple? They hadn’t really started dating yet. Brujos sure moved fast. “I’m afraid to ask, were there any casualties? Where’s Fredi, Miss Dahlia—?”

“Everyone’s okay and accounted for. You’re the only one we couldn’t find. We were under attack. The midway was a war zone. Everything was in chaos. Luther was howling around the fairgrounds like a hurricane, and the ground was crumbling under our feet, but then it suddenly stopped. Luther disappeared in a ball of black smoke, then nothing, just an eerie silence and sound of crashing surf on the shore. We regrouped and I went looking for you.”

She squinted against the bright light bouncing off the steel rides. “It felt like I was only inside the lamp for a few minutes.”

“More like thirty.” He led her by the hand toward the parking lot. “Everyone’s at the truck waiting.”

They walked past the Ferris wheel that had toppled onto its side. That was an unsettling sight. “What are they waiting for?”

“You. Witch Griselda wanted to know you were safe and accounted for before she changed anything about the fair.”

“What do you mean?”

“Witch Griselda’s holding everyone and everything inside a bubble of protection. The fairgoers are invisible in their current state. Miss Dahlia said they were being held in a safety zone at the edge of this dimension, and we would bring them all back just as soon as the situation is corrected. That’s why you don’t see much going on and the EMTs and the police haven’t arrived. Everyone is in a state of suspended animation, held in the moment.”

“Wow, I didn’t even know that was possible. What a day.” The Brujo Tacos truck sat at the end of the lot, looking shiny and bright and basically untouched by disaster. Fredi, Bruno, Sidhe the Fae, Miss Dahlia and Witch Griselda, Marge, and Blackjack the pony had all gathered on the shady side. “There’s everybody! Hi! I can see them.”

“The enchantment community is the cleanup crew, and we are in the same time zone, so to speak.”

“Cleanup crew? A disaster this size is going to take a hell of a lot more than a broom and a vague explanation to the authorities. This could be the incident that gets us all outed.”

“Estele!” Witch Griselda hobbled toward her, pounding her walking staff on the pavement. “Did you manage to hang on to the Heart of Hecate?”

She reached into her purse and grabbed it. “Yes, Grissy. Here it is. I’m not sure I should be holding on to it any longer.”

“Nonsense.” Griselda waved the comment off. “You’ve done splendidly and sent two troublesome djinn packing. I couldn’t have done that with such aplomb.” She screwed the ruby back onto the top of the staff. “Now that we know where you are, I can start cleaning house. I was afraid to tamper too much with the temporal realm until we knew your exact location.” She waved her staff toward the Ferris wheel. “Lift!” The command was spoken in a regal tone that would not be denied. “Rise!”

With the harsh sounds of flexing metal, the Ferris wheel defied gravity by picking itself off the ground with loud creaks and crunching sounds and set itself upright.

Griselda swept her staff through the air. The Heart of Hecate glowed like a stoplight. “Now for the real magic. Spin!” she commanded. The wheel began to slowly spin counterclockwise. “*Emit kcab nrut dluoc I fi!*”

Estele listened carefully but didn’t recognize the spell. “Grissy, is that Latin?”

The old witch frowned. “No. It’s something more powerful. It’s the lyrics to a Cher song, sung backward. If I could turn back time!” she sang at the top of her quavering voice. “*Uoy ot lla ti evig d’I!*” Griselda glanced at Bruno. “I’m talking to you, brujo. If I were ninety-six years younger, I’d melt you like hot fudge on a sundae.”

As the wheel spun, the fair began to restore itself. The rides crept back into the proper places and anchored themselves down. Wads of cotton candy flew off the tarmac, zipped back into the aluminum drum that blew hot air through it, and turned itself back into heavy grains of colored sugar. The porta-potties righted themselves and appeared sparkling clean. Last, the faint outlines of people came back. Jackets flew back onto shoulders and shoes slipped back onto feet. For a moment, everyone was frozen in place, and then they started to move again in one loud, colorful blur of happy activity.

“It’s working!” Estele couldn’t believe it.

Fredi reached into her boot, took out a wand, and gave it a flick. A conspicuous rut that the octopus ride had scraped into the asphalt miraculously filled. “I’m going to do a walk-through and fix anything that looks out of place that anyone might question.”

Sidhe followed Fredi. “Just in case someone remembers what they just saw and starts yapping about it, I’ll slip them a hex and erase their memories.”

Miss Dahlia headed into the crowd. “I’ll cast an enchantment and make sure all the children find their parents and all the parents find their car keys.”

Val took hold of Estele's hand. "I think we should take a walk on the beach. I want to hear about everything that happened inside the lamp."

"Really?" The way he looked at her with such a dreamy expression made her heart race. Everything about him, from the way he touched her to the patience in his voice, gave away his interest in her. It felt great too. "That's a good idea. I think I need to chill." And what would be better than sitting on the sand dunes with Val and watching the waves roll in while she attempted to process her brief meeting with her late father?

She glanced at Blackjack. "After the fair is put right, somebody needs to help this pony. Luther trapped a gambler inside." She petted his silky mane. "What was your name, sir?"

The pony stomped its front hooves, pulled back its lips, and spoke in a gruff male voice. "Harold Rosecrans." He turned to Marge. "Hey, beautiful. Would you get me a carrot?"

EPILOGUE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

The streets of San Buena were decorated for the holidays with thousands of colorful lights strung from lamppost to lamppost. Their cheerful glow chased away the chill of evening fog.

Estele drove her little red VW Bug around a deep pothole. She glanced over to the passenger seat to smile at Val. “I’m so happy you’re with me tonight. This is so important to me.”

Val reached for her hand, brought it to his lips and kissed it. “It’s important to me too. I’m proud of you, Esky.”

Esky. She loved the pet name Val had given her. In past months he’d given her a nickname, confidence, and so much more. Dare she say it, but Val was turning out to be someone she could see herself loving for the rest of her life.

“We’re almost there. The downtown area is going to be crowded with holiday shoppers.” She opened the glove box and cracked the window. “Parking Fairy, do your thing.”

An emerald green spark darted out of the glove box, zipped around the interior of the car, and settled on the steering wheel.

Buzz, buzz, buzzzz, buzz buzz.

“I’m happy you noticed, Fae.” Her Parking Fairy had been a dream to live with lately. No tantrums, no vendettas. In fact, everything about her life seemed to be coming together. “Yes, this is a fresh manicure. I love purple too. This shade is called Eye of Newt. I’m glad you like it.”

Fae flew toward Val’s cheek and affectionately rubbed against it, purring. *Buzz, buzz, buzzzz.*

“You’re being a little flirt.” Estele laughed and opened the window another inch. “Fae, find us a parking space as close to the Master Mage Magic Academy as you can get.” She almost said thank you, but bit her lip to keep from making such an embarrassing faux pas.

Buzz. Fae flew out the window and raced ahead.

Estele reached over to squeeze Val’s hand. “Fae will be back in a minute with recon and she can guide us in.”

Val was dressed casually but elegantly in a pair of black jeans and an eggplant-purple silk shirt. Looking at him now, with his dark hair swept away from his rugged face and sparkling eyes, it was hard to believe there was a time in her life when she hadn’t loved and trusted a brujo.

Straightening his sleeves, he buttoned his cuffs. “You never told me, why are we going to the Master Mage Magic Academy in the first place? Is it a Christmas party?”

Why were they going? Miss Dahlia had insisted she show up at a certain time and it had never occurred to her to question it. “I’m not sure what it is. It’s a celebration of some sort. We just have to show up. We don’t need to stay.”

Fae returned and zipped back and forth in front of the windshield, pointing the way to a prime parking space situated near the entrance of the school.

“Ah. Parking Fairy found us a great spot. Considering how much traffic there is downtown, I don’t believe it.” She pulled the car over and parked. “Hey! Look at that, the Brujo Tacos truck is here. What’s Tio Bruno doing in San Buena? I thought he was down south this weekend working the San Diego Convention Center?”

Val smiled and glanced away. “We’re both here for something exceptional.”

“What?” A thrill of excitement shot through her. All her intuition told her something good was happening, but the skeptic in her had to ask anyway. “We’re not in trouble, are we? Please tell me we haven’t been named in a group lawsuit from the international djinn community?”

“No.” Val unfastened his seat belt. “It’s nothing like that.”

“I know! Fredi and Gus eloped and this is their secret reception party?”

He climbed out of the car and shut the door. “Nope. The wedding is still on.”

“Good, because I already bought my bridesmaid dress and I actually love it. You’re still coming to the wedding, right?”

“Yes.” Val strode to Estele’s side and took her hand. “You know I wouldn’t miss it.”

They climbed the front steps together. “I take nothing for granted. You and Tio Bruno are so busy. The truck’s booked solid every day.”

Estele pushed the glass doors open and entered a long hallway leading to the inconspicuous staircase at the end.

Val walked at her side, looking nervous. “I want to run something by you. Soon, I’m going to be even busier. My dad’s setting me up in business with my own Brujo Tacos truck.”

She stopped to throw her arms around Val’s neck and hug him. “That’s so wonderful! Congratulations.” The thought occurred that he’d be way too busy to commute the three-to-five-hour drive from down south as often as he did now. “This is good news. We’ll find a way to see each other, won’t we? I won’t be in school forever. It’s maybe another year or two until I graduate. I’m not screwing up nearly as badly as I used to.”

He kissed her lips and brushed a lock of hair from her brow. “You haven’t been screwing up at all. Give yourself credit, sweetheart. Your magic has been pristine. Your father, grandmother, and all your ancestors would be so proud of you.”

When she looked into his eyes as she did now, she saw a beautiful future. Without doubt Val was the one, she just didn’t know how to bring it up. “You say the nicest things to me.”

“I didn’t say it to be nice. It’s true.” Leaning close, he kissed her again. This time the kiss lingered, soft and sweet on her lips. “I want to relocate to San Buena to be closer to you. What do you think of that idea?”

“You mean work your own truck apart from Bruno? Are you kidding me?” She returned his kiss and tangled her fingers in his thick hair. “I think it’s a great idea. You can do it!”

“Tio and I would work big events together, like the Coachella festival. You could come with me.”

“I would love that.” A breathless sensation washed over her. It was as if all her wildest dreams were coming true at the same time. “Maybe you could move in with me?” The large apartment was so lonely during the week now that Captain Manx had moved on. “At least think about it.”

Val wrapped his arms around Estele and drew her against his chest. “Only if you allow me to pay the rent.”

“Is that a macho brujo condition?” She laughed.

“Yes.” He kissed the top of her head. “I love you, Esky. I want to take care of you. I’m offering my heart, good food, rent, and more if you want.”

She sensed he was going to offer marriage, but was she ready for that? Hopefully, someday soon she would be. If a psychic had told her six months ago that she would be living a balanced life and standing beside a good man who loved her, she would have thought them a complete charlatan.

A puff of steam materialized beside them. Witch Griselda appeared in the hallway, looking disheveled and confused. She turned in a slow circle, thumping her staff on the floor and making the Heart of Hecate glow crimson. “I heard talking. Where am I? There you are! Miss Esposito, why aren’t you inside already? Everyone’s waiting for you to arrive.”

Estele hooked her arm through Griselda’s and led the elderly lady down the stairs. “Grissy, as usual, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but let’s walk into the Master Mage Magic Academy together. I would be honored to escort you.”

Griselda patted Estele’s arm. “You’re such a sweet little seraphim. I have no children, but if I did, I’d like to think they would have turned out just like you, dear.”

How lovely to be praised! It was as if the day just got better and better. Estele felt as if she might cry tears of joy.

“You’re just as crazy,” Griselda muttered, “and dangerously unpredictable as I would expect a child of mine to behave. Estele, you are the category-five hurricane that may or may not reach shore. You are the shake-up the enchantment community has needed for a very long time.”

Wow, that compliment took a hard left, but it was still a compliment. Somehow, somehow, she’d arrived. People treated her with affection and respect instead of dread. The incident at the fairgrounds had triggered a change, but Val’s love had taken everything over the top. His belief in her proved to be an act of healing alchemy for her soul. “Thank you.”

Val walked ahead and opened the door to the academy. “Come inside, ladies.”

Estele took slow, careful steps so Griselda could keep up. Once she reached the deliberately

nondescript threshold of the Master Mage Magic Academy, she peered into a darkened room. “Why are the lights out? Someone could get hurt.” She reached for the switch.

“Surprise!” a chorus of voices rang out.

The lights flicked on and everyone in the enchantment community that Estele knew, from Sidhe the Fae to Fredi and Gus, and even her usually sour mother, who’d been remarkably civil lately, was looking at her with rapt attention. “What’s going on? It’s not my birthday.”

Griselda smiled and her left eye wandered up and down. “It’s your graduation day, Estele. You’ve worked hard and surpassed all expectations to become one of the most powerful and creative witches the San Buena enchantment community has ever produced. We want you to start the coming year with the proper title attached to your name.”

Miss Dahlia and Madame Shamansky, who now worked at the school full time teaching Psychic Predictions 101, stepped forward. Together they presented Estele with a rolled papyrus.

Estele studied the document in her hand. “What is this?”

Miss Dahlia pushed her glasses up her nose. “Unfurl it and take a look.”

With Val reading over her shoulder, she unrolled the papyrus and scanned the handwritten page. Her chest tightened as she read the words aloud. “The Master Mage Magic Academy by the Sea wishes to recognize excellence in magical craft and character in Estele Ernestina Esposito, by bestowing on her the well-earned title of Mistress of Enchantment.” She glanced around the room, scanning faces for signs it was a hoax or a mistake of some kind. “Are you kidding? Is this real?”

“It’s real.” Miss Dahlia smiled. “Your improvement has been astounding, a glowing example of what’s possible when a talented person applies focus.”

She read it again just to make sure she was reading things right. The school was recognizing her for doing something right, and it felt so good. A lump of emotion rose in her throat and she’d didn’t trust herself to say another word. She glanced around the room, and so many happy faces looked back. Emily the closeted psychic and Hector the weird Goth boy both looked overcome with emotion. Some kind soul had even brought the shrunken heads from the Voodoo Hoodoo cocktail lounge especially for this occasion, and for once they were silent and smiling through stitched lips.

Numbed, she reread the papyrus. “Is this a mistake? Mistress of Enchantment is the equivalent of a magical master’s degree. Does this mean I passed the Master Mage vocational program?”

Miss Dahlia placed her hand on Estele’s shoulder. “It means you have so much to teach the rest of us. Estele, we would be honored to have you as an instructor.”

Witch Griselda pounded her staff on the floor. “If I die, which I don’t plan on anytime soon, you might eventually replace me as the headmistress.” She tossed the staff into Estele’s hands. “Catch!” she cackled.

Estele caught the staff in one hand and held it aloft. This was almost too much to take in. “Master Mage Magic Academy! Freaking yeah!”

Fredi clapped loudly. “To Estele Esposito, my best friend! Everybody give the newest Mistress of

Enchantment a round of applause!”

“To Ernesto, the bravest brujo!” she added. By some strange but wonderful transmutation, she’d become dependable. All around the room, the cheers continued, but all she could focus on was the love in Val’s eyes as he gazed back at her.

The End.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katalina Leon is an artist and author who can't commit to a single romance subgenre. Her favorite playgrounds are historical, sci-fi, contemporary, and most of all paranormal realms. Lately, she has paranormal romance and vampires on the brain. Katalina brings a sense of adventure and a touch of the mystical to romance. She believes there's a daring heroine inside every woman who wants to take a wild ride with a strong, worthy hero.

Read More from Katalina Leon:

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TO CATCH HER DEATH

BOONE BRUX

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TO CATCH HER DEATH

I reap stupid people. Like I don't get enough of that every day.

What do you get when you cross a hockey mom with the grim reaper?

Me, Lisa Carron. If being a depressed, frumpy, widowed mother of three wasn't bad enough, I just found out I'm a grim reaper. I know what you're thinking. Wow, that's kind of sexy and full of awesomeness. Hardly. Oh, and my clients? Stupid people. Like I don't get enough of that from the living.

Since Alaska is big and angels of death are few, I've been partnered with reaper extraordinaire, Nate Cramer. He's strong, silent, and way too good looking for my recently widowed state. Oh, and he reaps violent criminals, so that should be interesting.

Forget the danger and the hours of self-analysis it will take for me to find my reaper mojo. My biggest problem? Hiding it all from my overly attentive family and nosy neighbors. Now that's going to take a miracle.

Chapter 1

Being a widow wasn't as glamorous as it sounded. Unless a person had the money to grieve properly—say in a tropical country, drowning in endless Mai Tais—it really kind of sucked.

I should know. I've been a widow for a year now. Twelve long months of clawing my way through each day. My name is Lisa Carron. I'm a thirty-five-year-old, single mother of three, and today is the one-year anniversary of my husband Jeff's death.

It was also a year ago, today I started letting my appearance slide. Grief will do that to you. Lay you low and drag you into dark places you never thought you'd go. In my case, it was carbs and elastic waistbands.

For the last year, my kids had come first, my depression last. Tasks like dressing and combing my hair took a back seat to more important activities, such as lying on the couch and staring at the ceiling, or scouring the cabinets for spilled chocolate chips. None of my pre-widow clothes fit anymore. Still, I hadn't been motivated to clear off my treadmill and fire that baby up.

One aspect of widowhood I had enjoyed was wearing black. I know that wasn't a thing anymore, unless you're an elderly lady from the old country, but I embraced it nonetheless—maybe a little too enthusiastically. Everything I owned was black.

I'd fallen into a rut and until a few days ago, when my daughter casually suggested I run a comb through my hair as to not scare the neighbor kids, I hadn't realized how far I'd sunk. That was my *Aha* moment. It was then I'd realized my kids had weathered the crisis of their father's death and emerged on the other side in far better shape than I had.

The revelation was bittersweet. I mean, kudos to me for being an awesome mom, but damn. My frizzy ponytail belonged on the backend of a horse, and my nails looked like I'd been buried alive and clawed my way out of the grave. In a word—I was a hot mess. What I needed was a long dip in Lake Lisa.

Determined to get my act together, I dropped off the spawn of my loins at my parents' house for the weekend. Once back home, I popped a cork on a bottle of Riesling, sat at the table, and planned two kid-free days. The excitement made me a little giddy—or maybe it was the wine—anyway, for the first time in a year, I sketched out a Saturday that was all about me.

That night I slept like a baby and when morning dawned, I rolled out of bed ready to face the day. A slight ache beat against the inside of my skull, but it was nothing a few aspirins hadn't cured. Plus, the Riesling had totally been worth it.

I showered and headed to the Holiday gas station near my friend Vella's hair salon. Getting my hair done was number two on my list. Buying my bucket of soda number one. The sugary nectar was the only legal substance I knew that gave me the sustained energy I needed to get through my day of errands—and sadly, the main reason I'd become a little fluffy.

Before I could shut off Omar, my ancient minivan, *The Hokie Pokie*, my mom's special ringtone, erupted in my purse. A million terrible scenarios sped through my mind. Fine, maybe I wasn't completely comfortable being away from my kids.

I flipped off the ignition and scrambled to find my phone. "Are the kids okay?"

"They're fine, sweetheart." Mom's placating voice soothed my panic back to a normal level. A small plane from the nearby airport buzzed over the car. "Where are you? I hear traffic. Are you running errands?"

Translation, did you get your big butt out of bed?

"Yes, I'm at the Holiday station near Merrill Field. I'm getting gas," I lied, not needing the lecture on the hundred ways soda could kill me. "Did you need something?"

"It's sixteen degrees out." *Temperature update brought to you by my mother, the neighborhood weather monitor.* "Are you wearing your winter coat?"

"No, it's not that cold." Refusing to wear my parka until it hit zero had been something I'd done since I was a teenager—a personal affirmation that I was an Alaskan woman. Plus, it irritated the hell out of Mom, so I'd kept up the tradition. Childish, I know, but some days I just needed that win.

"You and that stupid habit. One day you're going to catch your death." Her heavy sigh hissed through the receiver. "Anyway, what do you have planned for today?"

"I'm on my way to Vella's to get my hair cut." Vella was my best friend and supreme ruler of all hairstylists in the universe. "Possibly my nails."

"Oh good, you were starting to look like a mangy Cocker Spaniel. Have her hit those roots with a little color too. You'll feel better."

Translation, *she'd* feel better.

Having grown up with Mom's backhanded comments; I now ignored them—for the most part. I was secure in my frumpiness, and looked passably acceptable to be seen in public, though Bronte, my daughter, would argue that point.

"Mom, are you sure you're okay keeping the kids this weekend? I can get them after my hair appointment."

"Nonsense. We're making ghost sugar cookies for Halloween, and your father is pulling out his gun collection later."

In the background, I heard a collective cheer from my twin sons. "Are you nuts? Do not let the

boys anywhere near those weapons.”

“They’re just show pieces, honey. The boys will be fine.”

Show pieces my ass.

“Uh huh.” My father was a retired cop and had an unhealthy obsession with firearms. But arguing with my mother was pointless. It was a sad state of affairs when a fifteen year old was the most responsible person in residence. “Could you put Bronte on the phone?”

Several seconds of silence passed until my daughter came on the line. “Yo.”

“Hey, do me a favor and make sure the boys don’t touch Grandpa’s guns.”

She gave me her perfected annoyed teenager grunt. “How? They don’t listen to me.”

“You’re clever. Figure something out.” Bronte was more devious than both her brothers combined. It was a trait I stopped fighting and now used to my benefit. “If the boys come home unharmed, I’ll buy you those hockey skates you want.” Even though they weren’t top of the line the skates would still set me back. But my kids’ safety was worth it. “We’ll get them after I pick you up Sunday.”

“*Right* after you pick us up?”

“I promise.” I couldn’t waffle or she’d think I was bluffing. “Straight from grandma’s house to the store.”

She was silent for a few seconds, but I had her. She’d been asking for new hockey skates since last season. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you, sweetie. Tell Grandma I’ll call her later. And hey...Mommy loves you.”

Bronte made a gagging sound and ended the call. I smiled, knowing nobody would be going near my father’s gun collection.

I dropped the phone into my purse and opened my van door. It squawked in protest, the loud kind that made everybody cringe and turn to stare. I kept meaning to have my dad look at it, but then I’d be subjected to my mother’s endless affirmations on how to *bounce back* from losing Jeff. Like she knew anything about being a widow. Sure, it might seem like my dad was dead when he sat in his chair watching TV, but he’s just quiet. I’m almost certain my mother hadn’t drained *all* the life out of him—yet. So, I lived with judgmental looks and knowledge that one more thing in my life was falling apart.

The cold October wind swirled around me and slipped between the collar of my black polar fleece jacket and neck. Shivers rippled along my shoulders. I yanked the zipper up and walked to the front door, tilting my chin toward the sky. I hated when my breath flash froze the material of my jacket to my face. It was like getting a mini wax job, and considering the lack of attention I’d given my upper lip over the last year, I wasn’t taking any chances.

I pulled open the glass door to the convenience store and held it for a large, bald guy with bad manners and a worse looking trench coat. His dark eyes darted to me and then away again. Hunched and limping, he slumped past without as much as a *thank you*. Rude bastard. Normally I would have graced him with one of my famous snarky comments, but the way he skulked past sent a serious case

of the heebie-jeebies up my spine. Instead, I ignored him and headed for the soda machine.

Something about fountain pop made it better than drinking it from a plastic bottle. Maybe there's more fizz, less sweetness. Maybe it's the straw. A lot of things taste better with a straw. That's not a proven scientific fact, just my personal opinion. Let's just say I have researched soda drinking over the years.

Mr. No Manners slinked past and around the back of the store to the refrigerated section. I focused on getting my jumbo beverage, not making eye contact with him. A cellophane wrapper crinkled behind me, drawing my attention. I glanced over my shoulder. The first thing I saw was firm, male buns. The man straightened and perused the artificial ingredients on a package of pastries.

I silently scoffed. From his trim physique and well-rounded tush, it was obvious this guy had never enjoyed the luscious processed goodness of a mass-made pastry. He was too fit—too outdoorsy looking, with his healthy glow and casually tousled brown hair. He definitely gave off an Alaskan man vibe—*I hike, compost, and brew my own beer from wild berries I picked myself*. Yeah, I knew the type well. People like him rarely bought anything that contained more than three ingredients, and those pastries were only eaten by hardcore junk-foodies. I never touched them myself. The texture reminded me of soggy florist foam, or crumbling sheet rock. Not that I've ever eaten either.

Still—I might have been a grieving widow but I wasn't dead. After one more appreciative look at him, I returned my attention to filling the vat of soda.

As I slid my thumbs along the edge of the plastic lid to snap it onto the cup, a deep voice shouted, "Give me all your cash."

My head whipped toward the front of the convenience store. Mr. Bad Manners held a shotgun pointed directly at Doug and Roger, the mini-mart cashiers. Yeah, we were on a first name basis.

Like a heavy rock sinking into thick mud, the situation registered in my brain. *Holy crap, it was a fricken' holdup*.

My fingers dug into my soda cup, my eyes growing wide as paralyzing fear rushed through me. I think I stopped breathing, not wanting to draw the robber's attention. My first thought was of my kids. Things were finally getting back to normal. Well, as normal as they could be. No way was I going to attempt some adrenaline inspired hero crap that would no doubt get me killed.

From those thoughts of survival, my mind quickly jumped to the fact that I might be on the nightly news and probably should have dressed better. Random Thought Syndrome—I was one of its many sufferers.

The snack cake guy stood unmoving. It didn't appear any of us patrons were looking to be local heroes, or from the robber's crazed stare, a possible fatality.

Rock music from the local radio station filled the silence. I mentally urged Doug or Roger to start shoving cash into a bag, but neither moved. Unfortunately, it seemed I didn't possess Jedi mind powers.

"Money! Now!" Sweat trickled down the robber's stubbly face and he waved the shotgun at the

boys. His head flicked several times to the side, as if he had a nervous tick. Nervous tick equaled itchy trigger finger as far as I was concerned.

“Don’t shoot, sir,” Doug finally said. He reached toward the cash register and punched a button. The till dinged and the drawer slid open. “I’m just gonna get a bag to put the money in, okay?”

Good move, Doug.

“Hurry up.” The robber glanced around the store, his gaze lingering on me longer than I liked, before darting back to the cashier. “And don’t trip the alarm.”

Doug nodded. His hair, a substantial sandy blond fro with a huge comb sticking out the side, bounced up and down like a dandelion puff bobbing in the breeze. Plastic bags crackled as he attempted to work it free it from the pile. Cars sped along Glenn Highway beyond the large glass windows, completely oblivious to the ensuing robbery and the innocent patrons inside. My heart beat against my throat and my mouth went dry. Taking a sip of my soda was tempting but the scene with the tyrannosaurus rex from Jurassic Park kept playing in my mind.

Don’t move. Don’t even breathe. Maybe this monster wouldn’t notice you.

Seconds ticked by and still Doug fumbled under the counter. I knew these two college guys weren’t the brightest bulbs in the string of lights, but seriously, how hard was it to get a stupid grocery sack?

Doug crouched slightly, and when he straightened, he held a big ass revolver aimed at the bald guy.

Time seemed to slow.

Several things happen at once. The robber’s eyes widened, comprehension that the cashier now sported some serious firepower dawning. His gun jerked up, and before I had time to drop to the floor, Doug pulled the trigger.

The revolver exploded, catapulting the criminal backward into the stand of chips. He slithered to the white tile floor in a cacophony of crumpling cellophane. The ringing in my ears ricocheted through my head and my feet seemed rooted in place. Nobody moved. We just stood there with our mouths hanging open.

I think I spoke for everyone in the mini-mart when I finally muttered, “Holy crap.”

An aftershock of adrenaline surged through me. I slung my soda aside and raced toward the robber. Hopefully he was injured and not dead. I’d had enough of death for a lifetime.

Mr. Snack Cake seemed to have the same idea and sprang into action. He barreled around the corner, shouting, but I was too amped up to make sense of his gibberish. I dropped and slid the last foot, stopping when my knees plowed into the robber’s ribs.

The good-looking guy waved his arms at me. “Don’t touch him!”

Too late. Sorry, but when I see a scraped elbow or somebody with a hole the size of a frozen pizza in their chest, my ninja paramedic skills kick into action. I pressed my fingers to the robber’s neck, checking for a pulse. Nothing. My hands drifted across his chest, but there was no place to start

compressions. Not that it would have helped. Doug's shot had hit the man dead center—no pun intended.

Mr. Snack Cake skidded to a stop beside me.

I glanced at him. "He's dead."

His eyes grew to the size of silver dollars. "I told you not to touch him."

Obviously, the sight of a corpse was completely freaking out this guy. Good thing I'd developed a rather unhealthy obsession with CSI shows after my husband died. I knew what to do. I looked over my shoulder at Doug. He still held the revolver, his hands shaking, and appeared to be in shock.

"Call 911." His eyes tracked to my face but I don't think he understood me. "Doug." I used his name, trying to snap him back to reality. "Put the gun down and call 911."

The weapon clattered to the floor and he fumbled for the phone. Using the dead guy's shoulder for leverage, I tried to push to a stand. The sensation of being pulled downward tugged on my arms. I struggled to my feet and tried again, but couldn't yank my hands off the robber.

Mr. Snack Cakes leapt over the body and gripped me around the chest. His hands locked directly between my boobs. Granted, this was the most action the girls had seen in over a year, and normally I would have been flattered, but I preferred to be groped more privately—with fewer dead people around.

"Hey, pal, mitts off the boobs." I fought against his hold but my hands remained glued to the dead guy.

"I told you not to touch him." He tugged, but I still couldn't straighten, or remove my palms from the robber's body.

What happened next was like trying to wipe sticky fingers with a paper napkin. No matter what, the napkin clung to me—just like the robber did.

I was still bent over, as if locked in a deadly game of Twister, when the cute guy heaved himself back and finally dragged me free. I won't swear in public, but I'm almost positive he groped my boobs again.

I couldn't be certain because at the same time I heard a zipper-like rasp and found myself reeling backward. Mr. Snack Cake caught me before we both fell into a postcard stand. I'd barely righted myself when the dead guy's body lifted from the tile and hurtled toward me. I folded in on myself, bracing for impact. But instead of colliding, the mini-mart robber passed through me. Somebody screamed like a little girl—I'm pretty sure it was me.

The man holding me gripped my hands, curling them into fists. "Hold him, Lisa!"

Every instinct had me spinning to see where the robber had gone. Nothing made sense. Had I just imagined the man passing through me?

"He'll run if you let go," the cute guy said into my ear.

"Let go of what?"

That question was quickly answered as the robber snapped back through my body, slicing me with

an icy chill that cut through my bones. A shudder rippled through me and my mind couldn't comprehend what I was seeing—Mr. Bad Manners.

His translucent body flickered, and a dark aura pulsed around the form. I screamed again and attempted to violently shake off the good-looking guy's hold. I'm certain it was one of those spastic, hyperventilating convulsions. Not pretty, but I wasn't apologizing for my freak-out.

"Stop fighting me," Mr. Snack Cake yelled.

Yeah, right. Every survival instinct screamed for me to get away from the ghostly entity glaring at me. I dug my boots into the tile floor and pushed backward, but couldn't get traction. Any movement I made tugged the apparition of the bald guy with me. The darkness around the robber grew and enveloped me. His anger beat against me as if it was my own emotion. It invaded my personal space, choking off my breath and the scream hovering in my throat.

The ghost yanked against my hold, which disconnected his dark aura from me. I gasped, inhaling a lungful of air. Then he jerked again, yanking me forward. I stumbled over something and when I looked down I saw the mini-mart robber's body lying in the same place he'd fallen, except now a pool of dark blood seeped from under his back.

My gaze darted to the ghost attached to me and then down at his body. I screamed—again. I mean, I was all about the paranormal, but in a romantic way—fallen angels—sexy vampires—pretty much any immortal who wanted me to be the focus of his world—but not an angry ghost of a violent criminal.

The cute guy leaned in. "Whatever you do, don't let go of him."

Not that I could. My fingers ached from the living guy's grip, and my nails gouged my palms. He turned me toward the back of the store, which automatically dragged the apparition of the robber with us. "I'm taking her to the bathroom to get cleaned up and calmed down," he said to the boys. "Lock the doors until the police get here."

At this point, he frog-marched me and what I now believed was a ghost, toward the back of the mini-mart.

The apparition fought our every step. "Let me go, you stupid bitch."

Wow, harsh. Logic shrieked I shouldn't argue. I'd seen the Amityville Horror. No way did I want blood seeping out of the walls of my house. It was hard enough getting red wine stains off the carpet.

"Shut up, Leroy," the cute guy said.

That silenced the robber's ghost. Crap, were these two partners? Had I just become a criminal sandwich? Nausea rolled through me. Maybe if I puked on Snack Cake's fancy hiking boots, he'd let me go.

"How do you know my name?" The spirit stopped struggling. "You a cop?"

Cute guy lowered his voice so only we could hear. "You wish I was a cop."

Chills slithered down my spine at his tone. Who the hell was this guy? The darkness pulsing around Leroy's ghost intensified and my head started to swim. It felt as if he was sucking the life from

me. Blackness crept around the edges of my vision.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

Damn it, I'd been determined to get my life on track. It looked like the first day of my new life might be my last.

We entered the bathroom. The smell of industrial cleaner filled my nose and the flickering fluorescent lights intensified my headache. He kicked the door closed, sealing us inside the white tiled tomb.

"My name is Nate."

I craned my neck to see if he was talking to me. "All right." *Nice to meet you* seemed a little inappropriate for the situation. "Listen Nate, you need to tell me what the hell is going on because I am seriously about to lose it."

"Let me get rid of him first, and then we'll talk." His voice softened, the creepy killer tone lessening.

"Get rid of him?" I scrunched my face and laced my words with my infamous sarcasm. "Where do you think he's going? We're in a frickin' bathroom of a mini-mart."

Me and my big mouth.

"Pick!" Nate waited a few seconds before shouting the word again. "Pick!"

"Pick?" What was I supposed to pick? The ghost or me? Life or death? My fingers ached from his crushing grip. I wiggled, trying to get away, but he continued to hold me in place. "I pick life. I want to live. Don't kill me."

"Me too," Leroy's ghost said.

"It's too late for you, Badder."

I didn't know who Badder was, but when Leroy began to fight me again, my keen sense of deduction kicked in, telling me it was the ghost. Several times he tried to jerk away, but kept rebounding like a rubber band. His arms passed through mine, cutting my bones with a searing cold. My head pounded, feeling like it was about to shatter. Any minute I was going to embark on a psychotic episode of epic proportion.

A bright, blue light suddenly appeared at the end of the bathroom near the toilet. All of us stopped struggling and stared as the sink disappeared behind the elongating glow. The light widened into a rectangle and the intensity dimmed. Breath caught in my throat when an actual door appeared, and then slid open. Leroy Badder's mouth sagged and his shoulders slumped. At least I wasn't the only one stunned by the sight. Nate, however, appeared perfectly calm, like an elevator arriving in the Holiday bathroom was a normal occurrence.

My attention drifted back to the far end of the bathroom and the man standing on the other side of the door. At least I thought it was a man. Something about him didn't look completely human. Maybe it was his coal black eyes, or perhaps the tiny bumps protruding from the front of his skull that reminded me of horns. Despite what was certainly an unfortunate birth defect, the man's head was a

perfect oval. A solid sheet of sable brown hair slicked along the top and sides like glossy frosting, and the creases in his black suit were so sharp they looked as if they could cut. Mafia attorney popped into my mind.

Beyond him the room glowed red. Not like those red-light bulbs hookers use to advertise their services, but more like a roaring fire burned nearby. My first impression? Modern Gates of Hell. But that would be ridiculous, right? I mean, I was standing in a mini-mart bathroom.

“I’ve got him, Pick.”

Nate’s words snapped me out of my trance. “That’s Pick?”

“Yes.” His gaze slid to mine and he lowered his voice. “Don’t let him touch you.”

Like that even had to be said. “Yeah, no problem.”

I must have been in shock, because I should have been freaking out. It wasn’t every day you saw an elevator to Hell in a convenience store bathroom. My life was hockey games and laundry, not... well, not whatever this was.

“Nate.” Pick’s voice carved through the tension like a hissing blade. “Punctual as usual.” His gaze tracked to me and his thin lips pulled into a white, feral smile. “And who do we have here?”

This Pick character gave off a seriously eerie vibe.

“A new recruit,” Nate said.

I had no idea if they were talking about me, and it didn’t matter. At this point I was doing good not to pee myself.

The attorney guy pulled a clipboard from a file pocket mounted near the entrance and scanned an attached paper. “Leroy Badder?”

“Yes.” Nate didn’t move or release his hold on my hands. “He just robbed the convenience store—or tried to.”

Pick ticked a mark on the clipboard and placed it back into the pocket. “You’ve been quite the troublemaker, Mr. Badder.”

“Yeah, well, let me go and I’ll show you just how bad I can be.” Leroy tugged against my hold, pulling me toward the elevator.

Panic shot through me. Nate had specifically said to not let Pick touch me, and I had every intention of complying. Once again, I dug the thick heels of my boots against the slick tile floor, and lunged backward.

Nate’s grip tightened and he leaned in, pressing his mouth against my ear. “When I tell you to release him, let go.”

“Gladly.” Though I didn’t know if my fingers would open after being crushed for so long.

Leroy shook his arms, which caused me to chomp down on my tongue. I bit back a string of name calling, most of which were less than flattering references to his mother.

“Now?” I shuffled my feet, trying to avoid Badder’s stomping boots. Then the ghost braced his foot against my thigh and hauled backward. “Now?” I shouted.

“Now!” Nate’s grip slid from my hands to my waist, holding me steady.

With the help of Leroy’s thrashing, my fingers uncurled and released the ghost. Leroy hurled toward the open door, as if being sucked in by a giant vacuum, and tumbled into the elevator. He lay for a few seconds, looking around. When his gaze tracked downward, his eyes widened and his mouth rounded in a silent scream. Before he uttered a sound, Leroy dropped out of sight. The scene reminded me of the coyote on one of those Road Runner cartoons. Seconds later, the cry he hadn’t voiced wafted up and out of the elevator to Hell.

Pick stood in the doorway, plucking invisible lint from his suit until Leroy’s voice faded. I stumbled backward and out of Nate’s hold, hitting the door. My fingers fumbled for the handle, but Nate flicked the deadbolt to *lock*.

“Let me out.” My hands shook so badly I couldn’t maneuver the latch back. I had no idea who or what Pick was or where Leroy Badder had disappeared. What I did know was that I wanted to be as far away from these guys as possible. I pointed. “I’m not going in there.”

“Calm down.” Nate grabbed my shoulders and spun me to face him. “You don’t have to but we need to talk before the police get here.”

I stared at him, not sure I trusted anything he said. My fingers curled around the handle of the door. No way was I dropping my defenses so this guy could toss me through the fiery Gates of Hell. Nate released me but kept his hands raised, gesturing for me to stay put. I didn’t move—was unable to move.

He faced the elevator. “Our transaction is complete.”

Pick tipped his head in acknowledgment and straightened. “Until next time.”

With that, the door slid shut and compressed into a thin line of light, shrinking until it vanished completely. Nate walked to the other end of the bathroom. “It’s over.”

I didn’t release my death-grip. “What was that? Who are you? Where did Leroy go?” My questions flowed like verbal diarrhea. “Am I dead?”

“You aren’t dead, but Leroy is. That doorway was a portal, and Pick is what’s called a *porter*. He escorts souls to their appointed destination.”

“Appointed destination? You mean Hell?”

Nate shrugged. “Not necessarily, but in most cases, yes.”

“What do you mean, *in most cases*?”

He stared at me, his blue eyes never wavering from my face, but didn’t answer.

“What are you?”

Nate took a deep breath and exhaled. “I’m a grim reaper. It’s my job to get souls to the porters.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or run screaming from the restroom. There wasn’t enough liquor in the world to drown the images of the things I witnessed. Not enough soap to scrub away the feel of Leroy sticking to me. And there was no denying I might have completely lost my mind.

Nate cleared his throat. “And you’re a grim reaper too.”

Okay, I'd definitely lost my mind.

Chapter 2

*M*e a reaper? Very funny.” I pointed my shaking finger at Nate. “Okay, I’m leaving now. You just stay there and...well, just stay there.”

“Lisa.”

That brought me up short. During our initial struggle with Leroy’s ghost he’d called me *Lisa*. “How do you know my name?”

“I’ve been watching you for a while.” He took a step toward me.

“Don’t come any closer, stalker boy.” I spazed and plastered my body against the door. My left hand fumbled in my coat pocket and I hauled out my deadly set of keys. “I will gouge your eyes out.”

Nate looked up at the ceiling, his jaw clenching and unclenching. “I knew this was a mistake.”

“What? Killing me in a public bathroom?” In an effort to back up my threat, I jabbed the pointy end of a key at him. “That would be a very big mistake. My dad used to be a cop.”

“I told them you weren’t cut out to be a reaper, but nobody listened to me.”

“What do you mean not cut out to be a reaper?” Rational thought and action sometimes eluded me. Instead of going along with his assumption that I couldn’t do the job, I rallied my bruised pride and foolishness. “If there was such a thing as a reaper, which there isn’t, I’d be awesome at it. And for your information, I’ve got a black belt in Karate.”

He shook his head. “No, you don’t.”

“How would you know?” Stupid question, he was a stalker after all.

“It’s my job to know everything about the reapers in my zone.”

“Okay.” I shook my keys at him. “Then tell me about myself.”

“You’re thirty-five, a mother of three, and your husband died a year ago today.”

“You could have Googled that.” I pulled on the door handle and tried to flip the lock open, but it wouldn’t move.

“I didn’t.” When he walked toward me I faced him, sliding to the corner, with my keys still held in attack mode. “You’ve been on our radar for some time, but with your husband’s death I didn’t think it would be wise to approach you about being a grim reaper.”

“Good plan, let’s keep it like that.” I reached for the handle again, but he slammed his foot in front of the door, preventing my escape. I glared at him. “As a matter of fact, let’s never speak of it again.”

With everything I'd just experienced, and now this guy claiming I was a reaper, it was just too much to take in.

"We need to talk about it, Lisa. Now that you've activated your powers, a decision needs to be made."

"Fine, I've decided to ignore my reaperiness, you, and—" I made a circle with my hand, indicating the other end of the bathroom. "The whole paranormal shindig that may or may not have happened."

"I'm afraid it's not as simple as that." He ran his hand through his hair, giving it a messy appearance that made him even cuter. "You need to be informed before you make a decision."

"No, I really don't. I've made plenty of uninformed decisions. Turducken, skinny jeans, the fruit diet, all bad judgments, yet here I am, right as rain."

"This isn't the same as making a poor fashion choice. There are entities you have to report to now that you've reaped Leroy Badder."

"I did not reap Leroy Badder. He just—kind of—stuck to me."

Nate held his hands out to his side and gave me a look that said *duh*. "Same thing. You have to answer for it."

I narrowed my gaze, not completely understanding what he was trying to tell me. "Who are these entities? Like the Human Resource Department of reapers or bigger, like God or Satan?"

"We can't talk here. I'll explain things after we've dealt with the police."

"Do I look like an idiot?" I gave an unladylike snort. "I'm not discussing anything with you and I don't need you to *explain* things to me."

After my husband died, I'd struggled with my own mortality and the meaning of life. I'd gone to a dozen churches, looking for solace, read books on life-after-death, and searched for reasons why he died. Let's just say I have a tendency to immerse myself in my projects. Unfortunately, I was exactly the kind of person who would buy into this reaper crap, hoping for a higher meaning.

Before he replied somebody pounded on the door.

"Police, could you step out here please?"

Relief washed through me. I needed to get out of Hell's bathroom before I did something stupid, like enlisting in reaper boot camp, or signing my soul over to Satan. "Coming officer."

Nate approached and covered my hand with one of his. "Take this and call me. We need to talk." He held out a business card. When I didn't take it, he slipped it into my jacket pocket. "I'll explain everything then."

I stared at him for a second, no clever retort coming to me. But neither did I tell him I wouldn't be calling. I pulled the door open and squeezed out, making sure not to brush against him. By the off chance he was the Angel of Death, I wanted to keep touching to a minimum.

The next hour was spent rehashing the details of the robbery. I did my best to stay as far from Nate as possible, but he kept glancing my way with his piercing blue eyes. Why were the cute ones always nutjobs—or grim reapers? As much as I wanted to, I couldn't dismiss the bizarre events that

happened. No obvious explanation for Leroy's ghost, the Gates of Hell, or Pick popped into my head. Common sense told me revealing the bathroom incident to the police would not be in my best interest.

After the officer finished with me, I walked to Doug. The poor guy looked paler than usual. I'd been frequenting this particular Holiday for a year and had learned that Doug was a sweet, farm boy from Iowa, who came to Anchorage to study environmental science. I'd done my part to make sure the police knew he'd shot Leroy in self-defense.

"How you doing, Doug?"

His round hazel eyes slid to my face. "I killed a guy."

I leaned my hip against the counter. "Yes you did. Thanks for that."

His brow furrowed. "Thanks?"

"If you hadn't shot him, he would've shot you, and maybe the rest of us."

I wasn't sure if that was true. Perhaps if Doug hadn't tried to be a hero and handed over the cash, Leroy would have escaped with the money, leaving all of us unharmed. Or in my case, not a grim reaper—supposedly. But Badder was dead, and Doug would struggle with that the rest of his life. What harm would a few possible fibs do?

"Really?" The expression on his face nearly broke my heart. He appeared to be clinging to any thread that would lift the burden of snuffing out someone's life. "You're not just saying that?"

"Doug, you saved all our lives." I indicated the store with the sweep of my hand. "My kids have already lost one parent. Thanks to you they didn't lose me too."

His posture straightened. "Wow, I did that?"

I gave him a couple of pats on the shoulder. "You really did."

Roger approached, his brown eyes still wide with shock, and his normally tan skin on the ashen side. "You okay, Mrs. Carron?"

Roger was a native kid from a bush village called Dillingham. "I'm fine, Roger. How are you doing?"

"All right, I guess." He glanced over his shoulder at the police, and then back to us. "Can I tell you something?"

"Of course." I had that effect on people. Complete strangers routinely bared their souls to me in the checkout line. I always found it weird that people were willing to tell me intimate details of their lives. If only I could get my daughter to share a bit about her life.

"You know after Doug shot the robber?"

I nodded.

Roger swallowed hard. "I could have sworn I saw his ghost."

To cover my shock I play dumb. "Who? Doug's ghost?"

"No." Roger's tongue darted out nervously to moisten his lips. "The gunman's ghost. It was only there for a few seconds, but faded when you went to the bathroom."

I kept my face passive. "Really?"

“Yeah, he was standing right in front of you and he looked really pissed.”

Pissed was putting it mildly. I gave him a strained smile. “Whew, glad I didn’t see him. I would have lost it big time.”

Roger clutched his hands to his chest. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I think some people are more susceptible to the spirit world.”

That wasn’t a lie. I’d always fancied myself sensitive to things like ghosts and haunted houses, whether it was a sense of being watched, or a feeling of foreboding when I walked into a room. If I really was a grim reaper, that might explain my experiences. Maybe Roger’s native upbringing connected him to the spirit world. Heck, maybe he’d taken a hallucinogenic before work. Besides the robbery, I couldn’t explain anything else that had happened.

“Well, I need to get going. Are you guys okay? Did you call the owner?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Doug nodded. Through all the hoopla, his plastic comb had remained firmly in place at the side of his fro. “He’s on his way.”

“Maybe you’ll get a bonus for preventing a robbery.” They looked at each other, their eyes lighting at my mention of money. I smiled. “Mind if I grab a soda?”

Doug shook his head. “Take anything you want, Mrs. Carron. Anything.”

“Thanks.” I slipped between a police officer and the stand of postcards, trying to be as discreet as possible. If I could get my soda and leave, I wouldn’t have to talk to crazy Nate again.

I opted for the forty-four ounce jug and made a break for the front door. A cop still questioned him, but Nate glanced in my direction. Our gazes locked for a few seconds, and then he flicked his head toward me, indicating our business wasn’t finished. I silently groaned. A slick ditch would have been too easy.

Despite the crowd gathered beyond the yellow police tape, I pushed open the glass door and stepped outside. Cameras clicked and questions were shouted at me, but I kept my head down and walked briskly to my van. Why couldn’t the robbery have happened *after* I’d gotten my hair done?

I drove to the Northway Mall, where Vella’s Star Power Salon resided. I parked, grabbed my soda and purse, and locked Omar. The brisk breeze registered, but the shivers running through me were not caused from the cold. I was still trying to wrap my head around everything, but not having much luck.

At least I’d be able to relay all the events to Vella. Her quirky outlook on life was one of acceptance and what-ifs. Hopefully, she wouldn’t suggest I seek psychiatric help or up my meds—which I did not take. Vella thought everybody should be on *happy pills*, as she referred to them. Not me, I preferred to suffer through my pain.

The mall was quiet for a Saturday morning. Then again, it was usually quiet. Situated in the not so posh section of town, the stores in the Northway Mall came and went. There were a few steady merchants, and personally, I liked the smaller crowds. But I’m sure the storeowners would disagree.

The smell of hair color hung in the air and Elvis Presley crooned over the speaker system when I

entered the salon. She was a diehard Elvis fan and even owned a motion activated, life-size cutout of him in her house. The damn thing scared me to death one night when I stayed with her. Stumbling down the dim hallway for a midnight pee, I'd passed her *Elvis room*. From out of the darkness I heard, "Thank you, thank you very much." When I screamed Vella's husband, Bud, ran out of their bedroom in his tidy whites, wielding a baseball bat. Let's just say there are things that can't be unseen.

"You're late." Vella lounged at her station, pawing through a celebrity magazine. "I thought you were going to be here at nine o'clock."

Vella was from Texas, and although she'd lived in the great north for over twenty years, she'd refused to relinquish her big bleached blond hair and tanning bed. I called her Menopause Barbie—not to her face.

I plopped down in the chair next to her. "I would have but I got stuck in the middle of a mini-mart robbery."

"What?" She tossed her magazine onto the counter "Girl, are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine—well, physically fine." I sighed. "Which is more than I can say for Leroy Badder."

Vella shrugged. "Who's that?"

"The guy who robbed the store. You know Doug, the kid from Iowa?"

"Big hair?" Vella held her hands out to the sides of her head.

"Yeah, he shot and killed the guy." The memory of the blood seeping from under Leroy's body made me shudder. "It was awful."

"Sweet Jesus, and here I had my panties in a bunch, thinking you were having one of your pity parties."

If anybody other than my best friend had said that to me I would have ripped their head off. But when Jeff died, she'd been right beside me, holding my hand, wiping my tears, and taking care of my kids when I'd had too much.

"Hello ladies, and I use that term loosely." Jonathan, the salon's receptionist, sauntered in, carrying two large cups of coffee. "Decided to get out of bed, I see."

I growled at him and bared my teeth.

"Ooo, feisty. I like that." He handed Vella her coffee. "I figured you'd have your barrel of sugar water, so I didn't get you any coffee."

Jonathan was okay. He was the stereotypical gay guy, impeccably dressed, feminine demeanor, and knew all the latest gossip. The last quality made me wary when talking about my personal life. Spilling the details of the robbery around him guaranteed the story would be making the rounds in the rumor mill within the hour.

"Actually, I'd love a cup. Thank you." I needed to tell Vella about my slam dance with the paranormal world without him around. Pasting on my sweetest smile, I said. "Tall mocha, no whip. You're a treasure."

He gave an indignant grunt and looked to Vella for support.

“She was just in a robbery, Jonathan. The girl needs coffee.”

His eyes widened. “Really? You were at the Holiday?”

Already he’d heard about the holdup? That was exactly why I wouldn’t discuss my private life around him. “Yes, and I’ll give you all the gory details when you get back—with my tall mocha.”

“Oh goodie.” He spun and headed out of the salon, his boot heels clicking across the tile floor.

“What’s going on?” Vella took a drink of her coffee and narrowed her eyes. “I know you like to mess with Jonathan, but I’m sensing there’s something more to this.”

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure he was gone, and then looked back at my friend. Qualifying my explanation first was more for my benefit than her. Why would she believe me when I barely believed it myself? “Hear me out before you pass judgment on my sanity.”

Both of her perfectly sculpted and clipped eyebrows lifted. “Girl, you know I don’t judge.”

I refrained from commenting on that blatant lie. “After Leroy, the robber, was shot, I touched him to see if he was dead.”

“Ick, did you wash your hands?”

I looked at my fingers. There should have been blood on them but there wasn’t. “Yes,” I lied. “Like I was saying, I checked to see if he was dead.”

“Was he?”

“Sort of.” I took a deep breath and plunged forward with my story. “When I stood, his spirit lifted out of his body and went right through me.”

Vella shifted in her chair and crossed her legs, her focus zeroing in on me. “Go on.”

The story rushed out like air from a balloon. When I was finished, I took a deep breath. “Nate gave me his card and said we needed to talk.”

She tapped her long nail against the side of her cup. “The Angel of Death has a business card?”

“I know, right? What kind of reaper doesn’t carry a scythe, but has a business card?” I shook my head. “He’s probably a weirdo stalker. The guy knew all sorts of shit about me. The whole thing was beyond peculiar.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say this Nate is a little touched in the head.” She took another drink and seemed to contemplate what I told her. The bubblegum pink nails of her other hand drummed against the arm of the chair, and she pursed her lips, squinting at me. “Can I see his card?”

I dug in my pocket and handed it to her.

“Grim Reaper Services. Well that’s just stupid.” She pointed to the lettering at the bottom with her thumb. “There’s an address.”

I tilted my head to get a better look. “4831 B—” I snatched the card from her and stared at the address I knew so well. “That’s where Jeff used to work, but it’s the General Resource Services building not Grim Reaper Services.”

“All right, this is getting weirder than my Uncle Clem’s lingerie collection.”

I harrumphed. “I’m not even going to ask.” Vella’s family contained more freaks than a circus sideshow and her supply of stories was endless. “Am I supposed to believe death is renting office space from General Resources?”

“Look, both businesses have GRS as their initials.” Vella leaned back, giving me a look that said she’d formed her opinion. “This guy is bad news, no doubt about it?”

“What about Leroy Badder’s ghost and the elevator to Hell?” How could she not think I was crazy when what I was asking was irrational? “I know what I saw.”

“Maybe it was some of that post dramatic stress syndrome they’re always talking about.”

“You mean *post traumatic*?”

“Whatever.” She jabbed a finger at me. “It hasn’t been that long since Jeff died. Maybe this was your brain’s way of coping with a life and death situation.”

“I guess that’s possible.” I looked at the card again. Something very creepy was going on and I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like whatever this Nate guy had in mind. “But Roger, one of the cashiers, said he thought he saw Leroy’s ghost too.”

“Mass hysteria.” She set her coffee on the counter. “We used to see it all the time when the evangelist healers came to town. Everybody wailing, getting right with Jesus. One time my Aunt Edith said she and a bunch of her churchin’ ladies saw the blessed mother sitting on the altar, eating a burrito.” Vella made a drinking motion with her hand. “I think the old gals imbibed a little too much of the blood of Christ, if you know what I mean.”

“Mass hysteria, you’re probably right.” I smiled, trying to ignore my gut instinct that what happened, really *had* happened. “Hopefully I’ll never see Nate again.”

Vella sighed. “Too bad he was cute.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“A cute guy gave you his number—I’m just sayin’, too bad the cute ones are crazy.”

“Yeah, just my luck.” Not that I was in the market for a boyfriend or even a booty call. “Do you know he said I didn’t have what it took to be a reaper?” His statement still grated, even if he was a psycho serial killer.

“That’s because he’s never seen you wield a weed whacker.”

“Exactly.” I grunted. “I’d make a freakin’ awesome reaper.”

“Damn straight.” She stood and pulled the scrunchie from my hair and threaded her fingers through my limp locks. “It would be kind of neat, don’t you think?”

She scraped her nails along my scalp and my eyes slid shut. “What would?”

“Being an Angel of Death.” Her hands rested on my shoulders. “Helping people cross over.”

I opened my eyes. “What happened to me didn’t feel neat. It felt violent and sticky.” She continued to massage my head, but the look on her face told me that brain of hers was conjuring up all sorts of scenarios. “What?”

She shrugged. “If you were a reaper, would you have wanted to help Jeff pass?”

“No.” The word popped out of my mouth.

Her hands stopped and rested on top of my hair. “Why not?”

Why wouldn’t I have wanted to help my husband pass? So many people would do anything for a chance to say goodbye. “Because when I found out that Jeff had been in a car accident, he was already dead. There was nothing I could do about it. If I’d known he was going to die and there was still nothing I could do about it—” I paused, my throat tightening at the thought. “I don’t think I could handle that.” I looked at her. “It’s a burden I wouldn’t want to bear.”

She held my gaze in the mirror for a few seconds but didn’t say anything more about death. “So, what are we doing today? Short and sassy? Platinum?”

“Manageable and get rid of the roots.” I made a chopping gesture half way between my shoulders and chin. “Maybe a few inches off to clean it up, but I still want to be able to put it in a ponytail.”

“Come on, let me do something daring.”

I’d had enough of daring for one day. What I needed was safe. “Maybe next time.”

She grumbled under her breath and spun my chair to face the back of the salon. “Your shampoo bowl awaits, Milady.”

Getting a new cut and color would make me feel better, but I had another worry now—like I needed that. Nate knew who I was, which probably meant he knew where I lived. It was one thing to have my safety put in question, but there were my kids to think about. A chill ran through me. Either he had lied to me to make contact, which wasn’t good, or what Nate told me was true, and I was looking at a life-long sentence as the newest Angel of Death at Grim Reaper Services.

Chapter 3

I left the salon with a slick new do and my scrunchie around my wrist. The change had been subtle, but I definitely felt better. On the drive home my mind replayed the events at the Holiday station. I wasn't sure I bought Vella's mass hysteria or post-traumatic stress explanations. In my gut I knew I hadn't imagined the whole thing. Something had happened. But no matter how hard I tried to cram the incident into a neatly defined compartment, it just didn't fit—and I *really* needed it to fit.

I turned onto my road. The section of Anchorage I lived in was what I referred to as *established*. Homes ranged from 1970's split-levels to newer duplexes and condos. My house was a well-worn, but sturdy, 1979 two-story, located on Resurrection Lane. Though the street was named after Resurrection Bay, the irony that I was trying to resurrect my life, not to mention the whole reaper thing, was not lost on me.

As I pulled into our driveway, I couldn't help but think all I needed was a few junk cars in the yard and a hound dog on the porch to complete my house's tired appearance. Home repairs had been low on my list of priorities, because of grief and limited funds. To say I'd been shocked when I found out how small Jeff's life insurance policy would be a gross understatement.

I'd yet to deal with the sense of betrayal I harbored about that. I mean, how much of a bitch would that make me to be pissed over money when I'd just lost my husband, and the kids, their father? Plus, I blamed myself for not being more involved in our finances—and a lot of other aspects of our life as a couple. Like I said, my self-esteem hit rock bottom and dwelling on what I could have done better would be like pouring lemon juice into a wound.

A fat raven sat on the railing of my front deck. Anchorage has the biggest ravens in the world. They were well fed from the Dumpsters and tourists, and were roughly the size of a Welsh Corgi. This bird must've frequented all the feeding hotspots. The way it stared at me, all harbinger of doomish, sent another wave of foreboding through me.

The grating squeak from my van door opening hadn't spooked the raven like I'd hoped. It just sat there, peering down at me. Even when I started up the front steps, it didn't fly away.

"Shoo." I waved my hand. Besides giving me the heebie-jeebies, I didn't want bird poop on my deck. Melting bird poo in the spring is beyond gross. I crept a few steps higher. "Go on."

The raven cocked its head and made a gurgling sound that reminded me of a telephone ringing. Its whole demeanor gave me the impression it was trying to talk to me. Then the bird looked to the sky. I followed its gaze and noticed five more ravens circling like black vultures.

Could things get any weirder?

When I rose to the second to the last step, the raven extended its wings, gurgled again, and took off. The sound of air against its blue-black feathers whooshed with each stroke as it lifted to join the circling murder. I jammed my key into the door and ducked inside before the scene turned into something out of a Hitchcock movie.

After slamming the door and locking it, I peeked out the curtains in my front living room. All six birds had settled in the bare branches of a tree across the street and sat silhouetted against the gray afternoon sky. Maybe it was my imagination, but the birds seemed to be staring at my house. I let the curtain fall into place and stepped back. My purse slid from my fingers and dropped to the floor. This day was too weird. Maybe if I ignored the ravens, they'd go away. Then again, maybe they were an omen of things to come.

I needed to get my mind off all the reaper madness and refocused on being productive. More than anything, I wanted a shower. Mainly to wash off the hair from my new cut, but also to scrub the feel of Leroy Badder from my hands—actually, my soul. The incident had left me with a greasy sensation that coated my being.

It took a good fifteen minutes of vigorous scouring with my loofa before deciding I'd cleansed as thoroughly as I could without dousing my body in bleach. Once out of the shower, I slicked my hair into a ponytail and put on my favorite sweatshirt. It had been a gift to my husband on his last birthday. *I'm sick of being my wife's arm candy* was printed in white letters on the front and Jeff had worn it around the house the day before he'd been killed.

For a long time I slept with the sweatshirt, inhaling the last remnants of his scent. It was the only way I'd been able to get to sleep. Over time his aroma faded and I'd taken to wearing it—every chance I got.

The shower hadn't completely washed away Leroy's essence, which made me antsy. Whenever I got like this I cleaned. From the state of my house, I hadn't been antsy in a very long time.

With the music cranked up, I hauled out my cleaning supplies. Sadly, I had to dust those bottles off first. Starting in the bathroom, which was completely disgusting and bordering on a health hazard, I began swamping out the house. How had I not seen what a pigsty we lived in?

The hours passed and layers of dust, stacks of unattended mail, and piles of dirty laundry dwindled. At seven o'clock I stopped and surveyed the area. The place looked great. Then and there I vowed to never let the mess get away from me again. Talk is cheap when you're high on cleaning fluid fumes.

As I poured a celebratory glass of wine, my doorbell rang. Still reveling in my accomplishment, I didn't stop to consider who could be at my door. It wasn't uncommon for Don Burner, my playboy

next-door neighbor, to stop by and see if I needed anything. He was a nice enough guy, but sort of icky in a *hey baby* kind of way.

I opened the door and froze. Nate stood on the other side. Before I could slam and lock the door, he pushed it open.

“Lisa, we have to talk.”

“No, we don’t! I just got my house clean,” I said, as if that was a viable argument. I yanked on the handle, trying to wrench it from his grasp. “Things are finally getting back to normal. We don’t need to talk.”

“Yes, we do.” He palmed my chest below my neck and pushed me backward. “Now.”

I stumbled, which gave him the break he needed. He stepped inside. I liked to think I was tough, but having a strange man barge into my home snuffed out that misconception. I tamped down my panic. Where was nosy Don when I needed him? Once inside, Nate closed the door.

“You can’t just shove your way into my home.” I wasn’t sure how I would follow this argument. Though I hated to admit it, I didn’t possess any stunning skills that could physically eject him from my house. If he was a killer, the best I could do were a few well-placed bitch-slaps before going down. “I could have you arrested.”

“Yeah, but you won’t.” His gaze scanned the house. “You alone?”

“No.” I fumbled for a lie. “My neighbor, Don, is fixing my bathroom sink.”

“Would that be the same Don I just saw leaving with two young women.”

Crap.

I grunted. “No, that was his twin brother, Jon.”

Nate nodded. “Right.”

Damn, I wish I were a better liar.

“You’re not welcome here.” He took a step forward and I slapped my hand against the wall, blocking his path with my arm. If he was a grim reaper maybe he couldn’t enter my house until he was invited—like vampires. “Be gone.”

He smirked. “I’m not a vampire.”

“I know you’re not. There’s no such thing.” I rolled my eyes, trying to give the impression I hadn’t totally been thinking that. “What do you want?”

“Give me ten minutes. Then I’ll leave and never bother you again.”

It sounded too good to be true. “Never ever?”

“I promise.”

He didn’t do any kind of scout’s honor hand gesture, so I didn’t know if I could completely trust him. “Ten minutes.”

In that amount of time he could have me sliced up and vacuum-sealed, but what choice did I have. I spun and walked into my kitchen. The very idea that he being the grim reaper was the lesser of two evils made me want to laugh. Not in a *ha-ha, ironic, isn’t it* way. More like a, *things keep getting*

weirder way.

His footsteps followed. I cursed myself. He would probably track dirt all over my sparkling floor. I scooped up my glass of wine and turned to face him. My upbringing forced me to offer him a drink. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

He held up a hand and shook his head. “No, thank you.”

Hmm, very polite—for a killer. I pulled out the chair and sat, indicating he should do the same. I took a sip of wine, wishing it were something stronger. “Okay, speak.”

He lowered himself into the chair and propped his elbows on the table, leveling a stare at me. “You *are* a grim reaper.”

“So you’ve said.” I took another drink and set down my glass. “Are we done?”

“Hardly.” He eased back and sized me up, his gaze narrowing. “All right then, you explain what happened at the Holiday station this morning.”

I considered giving him Vella’s explanation, but those reasons sounded even more ridiculous than reaping a soul. I decided to change tactics. “Let me ask you this, why do you think I’m a reaper?”

“We recently lost one of our own and you came on our radar as the next reaper in line.”

“Lost one of your own?” I didn’t like the sound of that. “You mean one of your reapers died?”

He shifted in his chair. “Yes.”

“That’s a bit ironic isn’t it, the Angel of Death dying?”

He shrugged. “We’re mortal, tools for the greater good of mankind.”

I refrained from telling him how much of a tool I thought he was. “Isn’t the grim reaper immortal?”

“You watch too many movies.”

That was true, but I didn’t confirm his statement. Our conversation was idiotic and yet a hundred questions demanded to be asked. That’s another problem. I had an unhealthy amount of morbid curiosity. “How did this reaper die?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled, giving me the impression he didn’t want to answer. “He was killed in a car accident.”

“Car accident?” Unease crept through me. Maybe it was the same ability I had to sense the paranormal, but his answer instantly put me on alert. “When?”

He reached up to massage the back of his neck and squinted at me. “A year ago.”

His answer hung in the air. I stared at him, physically feeling the silence pressing down on me. My mind grappled with what he had and hadn’t said. “You’re talking about Jeff...aren’t you?”

Several more seconds passed before he answered. “Yes.”

Whatever humor I’d found in the conversation vanished. “That’s not funny.”

“I know.” He leaned forward and pinned me with a stare. “Jeff was my partner.”

“Jeff didn’t have a partner. He was an accounts manager for General Resource Services. He wore a tie and took his lunch to work.” My voice raised an octave. “He worked late and provided for his

family. He didn't reap souls."

Nate shook his head. "I'm sorry, Lisa, but that's not true. General Resource Services is a front for Grim Reaper Services."

"No." I slapped my hand on the table. "I've been in there. I've seen his office and people filling out applications." I pointed a finger at him. "And never once have I seen you. You were not his partner." What Nate was saying was asinine and impossible. My husband had been a good provider, a great father, and an okay husband. He sure as hell hadn't been a grim reaper. "I don't know why you're doing this, but I want you to leave."

Nate reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out two cards, tossing them onto the table. He flicked his head toward them. "Our identification badges."

My hand shook when I reached for them. Nate and Jeff's faces stared back at me from the laminated rectangles. GRS was printed in bold, black letters to the left. I flipped them over. A bar code and a bold line of numbers filled the backside. "This doesn't prove anything." I pitched them onto the table and glared at him. "You could've had those made anywhere."

"But I didn't." He slid another card across the table. "This is your temporary pass. It will get you onto the fourth floor."

I didn't pick it up, only glanced at it and then back at him. "I don't need that."

"You do if you're coming to GRS on Monday."

"I'm not going to GRS on Monday or any other day." I sounded convincing, but I'll admit my curiosity was trumping my disbelief. "I'm not interested in whatever little show and tell you have planned for me."

Nate picked up both identification cards and stood, leaving my temporary pass on the table. "Think about it. If you change your mind, be there at nine o'clock."

I remained seated. "I won't."

"We'll see." He headed for the door, stopping at the kitchen entrance. Without turning around he said, "I'm sorry about Jeff. He was a good partner."

I didn't reply and it seemed he didn't expect me to. The thud of the front door sounded, and his boots clomped down the stairs outside. With my interest piqued, I walked to the kitchen window to watch him climbed into a black Suburban.

"Figures." What other color vehicle would a reaper drive?

As he pulled out of the driveway, the murder of ravens, still sitting in the tree across the street, rose and followed his rig. Another chill ran through me. I rubbed my arms and turned. The laminated card glared at me from across the room. Unable to squash my curiosity, I crept toward the table and slid back onto my chair, picking up my glass of wine. Nate's claim that I was a reaper had been bad enough. To find out Jeff had been his partner—well, that was almost too much to believe. Almost.

As much as I didn't want to admit it, Jeff being a grim reaper made a lot more sense than me being one. For a while I'd suspected him of having an affair. Late nights, business trips, and vague

explanations of where he'd been had all smacked of another woman. But maybe it hadn't been an affair at all. Death didn't happen at convenient times. Maybe he and Nate had split shifts, took turns sending on souls. Maybe Jeff had worked the day shift so he could lead a fairly normal family life.

I picked up the temporary pass, trying to control the guilt and anger building inside me. I'd never confronted him about my suspicions. If I had, perhaps things would've been different between us.

Why hadn't he told me what he really did for a living? I already knew the answer. We'd grown apart after the twins were born. Raising three kids was a full-time job, and Jeff never seemed that interested in helping. Don't get me wrong, our distance wasn't completely his fault. I'd embraced motherhood and let being his wife sort of fall by the wayside. My mother had always taught me that was what a good mom did. If I'd been smart I would have taken a hard look at my parent's non-existent relationship.

I took a deep drink of wine and dropped the card. More questions filled my head and I wouldn't be able to put this mess behind me until I checked out GRS for myself. I was like that, too damn inquisitive for my own good.

I walked to the living room and flipped on the television. Nothing looked mind-numbing enough to hold my interest and make me forget about the bizarre twist my life had taken.

A day ago I'd been a grieving widow. Now I was a woman, who had discovered her husband might have been leading a double life. Usually, in cases like this, the average woman learned her husband had kept a mistress, or fathered a second family in Ohio, or spent their life savings on gambling. But not mine. Oh no, he had to be a frickin' Angel of Death. And to top it off, he somehow passed it on to me. It just figured.

Chapter 4

Thankfully I had twelve solid hours to process everything Nate told me. I wouldn't have been able to hide the fact I'd been told I was a grim reaper if I hadn't had a good night's sleep. After picking up the kids, we headed to the sports store to buy Bronte her hockey skates, and then back home for a quiet evening of pizza and mindless sitcoms. I'd glossed over being in the hold up at the Holiday station, and after a few hundred questions, the kids became absorbed in their assorted electronics and toys. By Monday morning I felt things were almost back to normal—almost.

"Who pooped and didn't flush it?" I stuck my head out of the bathroom and waited for an answer I knew wouldn't come. "I just cleaned this bathroom. The least you guys can do is flush!"

I trudged back to the toilet and stared at the offending floater. Then I slammed the handle down. It wasn't logical to feel compassion for a turd, but the sense that my life was about to travel down the same swirling path, created a weird bond. I dropped the lid and shuffled to the sink. My hair still maintained its bouncy style after last night's shower, so I kept it down. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I swiped on a layer of mascara and exited the bathroom.

"You're not leaving the house in that sweatshirt are you?" Bronte crossed her arms and gave me a look of teenage disapproval. "What is this, like the hundredth day in a row?"

"No, I'm not wearing this," I said, even though I'd totally been planning on doing exactly that. "And I washed it yesterday, so it's clean."

"I think it should say *I'm sick of being my husband's armpit candy*, instead."

"I'll have you know your father loved this sweatshirt."

Bronte snorted. "You should have buried him in it and done us all a favor."

"Oh, real nice." The tongue of a fifteen year old could be lethal. I'd learned to ignore most of her taciturn ways, chalking it up to hormones and coping mechanisms. That's what I told myself, anyway. "Are you ready to go?"

"I'm ready." She shoved a thumb over her shoulder toward the boys' bedroom. "But you might want to hustle Thing One and Two along. They're having one of their secret meetings."

Secret meetings never boded well and were best headed off at the pass. The last time Breck and Bryce sequestered themselves, I found all their stuffed animals wearing blindfolds and lined up against my bay window. That wouldn't have been so disturbing, but all my steak knives were missing

as well—it was during their circus phase.

I knocked on the door, hopefully disrupting yet another nefarious plan. “Let’s go boys.”

The two jumped when I spoke, confirming their guilt. I’d have to stay on my toes for the next few days.

“Coming, Mom.” Bryce picked up his fifty-pound backpack and slipped it over his winter jacket. He’s my little nerd, and never leaves the house with less than seven things to occupy him in the van.

Empty-handed, Breck headed for the door.

“Coat.” I blocked his path so he couldn’t get past. “Backpack, homework, lunchbox.”

“Oh yeah.” Breck trotted across the room and gathered all his items in one disorganized bundle. “Ready.”

I smiled down at him. My twins were polar opposites. Bryce excelled academically and liked everything organized. Breck was the class clown and a sports enthusiast. Rarely did he remember a coat or to brush his hair. His mischievousness kept me on twenty-four hour alert.

“Get in the van. We don’t want to be late.”

The boys thundered from the room. I followed, collecting my fleece jacket and purse, waiting to make sure the kids were out of the house. As I walked to the kitchen, I slipped on my coat and zipped it so Bronte wouldn’t see I was still wearing the sweatshirt. From between the overdue phone and cable bill, I plucked the temporary pass Nate had given me, and shoved it into my coat pocket.

Though it was only a stiff piece of plastic, it weighed like a heavy stone. Maybe it was just my conscience. After Nate left, my guilt about believing Jeff had cheated had grown. For the rest of the weekend my mind conjured questions I couldn’t answer. By Sunday night I solidified my decision to go to GRS Monday morning. At the very least, I’d be able to satisfy my curiosity and put this crazy reaper business behind me.

After dropping off Bronte at the high school and the boys at their elementary school for open gym time, I headed down Muldoon toward GRS. It was another gray, brisk day, which seemed appropriate for my mood. At a stoplight I watched the cars speed past, wondering if any of the drivers were grim reapers.

I caught myself. Did I actually believe I was a reaper, or that they even existed? I’d always liked the idea of angels escorting me to Heaven after I died. What I witnessed in the bathroom of the Holiday Station was about as far from that scenario as I could imagine.

The light turned green and I continued down Muldoon, which turned into Tudor. I’ve never understood the naming of roads in Anchorage. For no discernible reason, street names changed. L Street turned into Minnesota, which then turned into O’Malley farther down. I didn’t know why and never asked. Maybe those who named the streets had so many great choices they wanted to use them all.

I slowed when I approached the parking lot to the GRS building. Omar fought my attempt to turn right. Yeah, I’m blaming my van. I veered into the left lane and whipped a U-turn. Staying in the right

lane, I pulled into Starbucks and shut off the engine. I stared at Jeff's old work place. Any other time it was simply a reminder of where he'd worked. Now it loomed against the cloudy sky, ominous and forbidding. I squinted, trying to peer through the top floor windows, but couldn't see anything beyond the silver glass.

I glanced at the clock on my phone. There were still forty-five minutes before Nate expected me. The thought of a little more time calmed me slightly. As I got out of the van and walked toward the coffee shop, shivers skittered up my spine. Somebody was watching me. My eyes darted back toward the van, but the rest of the lot was empty. I did a sweep of the GRS building. Unless somebody stared at me from behind the mirrored windows, I couldn't locate anybody. Then I looked up and noticed a fat raven sitting on the edge of the roof. My steps slowed. I'm no raven expert, but I swear it was the same bird that had perched on my porch railing a few days before. It gurgled at me, as if to confirm my unanswered question.

I stopped, waiting for the raven to do something other than make noises. To my surprise, it pecked once at something on the ledge and then took flight. It dove and I ducked to avoid being hit. With a downward pull of its wings, it soared upward. As it did, something fell from its beak.

The object landed with a metal clank and slid along the sidewalk to bump against the toe of my boot, but the bird continued its course toward downtown. I picked up the metal charm and examined it. A cold chill raced through me. It was a raven sitting on the handle of a scythe, the blade curling above its head.

The charm burned against the palm of my hand but I didn't think it was from the cold. It grew hotter. I pinched the clasp by my thumb and index finger and held it up to the light. Yep, it was definitely glowing.

When I got up this morning I'd been so confident I'd be able to put all this reaper craziness behind me. I guess that wasn't going to happen.

A knot formed in my stomach. Coffee suddenly sounded unappetizing. It was probably best to face my fears and get this over with. I took a deep breath, pocketed the charm, and walked back to my van.

There was no simple way to get across the street to the GRS building, so I drove to the nearest stop light, executed another U-turn, and headed back. This time I turned into the parking lot. Not giving myself a chance to chicken out, I grabbed my purse and strode to the front door.

The building was exactly as I remembered. Large glass doors led to a utilitarian foyer, which was empty at the moment. A wide hall lined with dark wood doors branched to the left. I'd taken a few steps toward the hall with the intention of examining the offices, when the elevator door to the right dinged open.

I jumped and spun to see Nate leaning against the back wall. "I wasn't sure you were going to show up."

"Neither was I." I shrugged, pretending all this wasn't completely freaking me out. "I think I'm early."

He exited the elevator with a knowing smile. Maybe I was easier to read than I thought. His gorgeous blue eyes leveled on me and I mentally cursed him for being even better looking today. Though loathe to admit it, I cared what he thought of me, and was happy I'd gotten my hair cut and attempted the minimal amount of makeup this morning. However, I should have taken Bronte's harsh suggestion and changed my shirt.

Nate held his hand out. "Do you have your pass?"

"Oh, yeah." I fumbled in my pocket and pulled out the card. The raven charm hooked on the edge and dropped on the floor. Before I could grab it, Nate bent and retrieved the charm. I held out my hand, not wanting him to examine it too closely. It was tough to rationalize the raven and its gift being a coincidence. "That's just something I found."

His eyebrows lifted and he dangled in front of me. "A little bird didn't happen to give this to you, did it?"

"Maybe." I snatched it from his fingers and shoved it back in my pocket. "It's nothing."

The grunt he issued spoke volumes, letting me know I couldn't be farther from the truth. I shoved the temporary pass at him.

He took it and smiled again, a little dimple appearing in his cheek. I had the overwhelming urge to slap the cuteness off his face for no better reason than the feeling inept every time I was around him.

"Come on." He walked toward the elevator. When I didn't move, he stopped and looked at me. "I promise it's just an elevator. Nothing more."

"Right." After what I'd seen in the Holiday bathroom, elevators had become my least favorite place. I followed him into the car, praising myself for my courage—or colossal stupidity. That was still to be determined. "So what happens now?"

Instead of answering, Nate slid my pass along the top of the panel and punched the fourth floor. He leaned against the bar. The doors slid shut, sealing us inside. When the elevator rose, my stomach lurched. Not wanting to look at Nate, I stared at the circles, on the panel, following their lighted path, waiting for his answer. Muffled music wafted from the hidden speakers in the ceiling.

Finally he said, "That depends on you."

I figured he'd say something like that. It was a goading statement that forced me to engage in the conversation. I did the same thing with Bronte. I'd bite. "How so?"

"Are you here because you're taking the fact that you're a grim reaper seriously, or is this about assuaging your guilt over Jeff?"

I stiffened. "I don't have any guilt over Jeff." Nate cocked his brow in a wordless retort. "Fine." I crossed my arms over my chest. "I might have thought he was cheating on me, and I might be slightly curious about the whole reaper gig, but that doesn't mean I believe *everything* you told me."

"Fair enough." The elevator slowed and gave a little hiccup when it came to a stop. "After your orientation, I think you'll be sufficiently convinced."

I bit back *we'll just see about that*.

The elevator doors slid open to reveal a long, black reception desk with a formidable looking woman sitting behind it. Her hair had impressive height and reminded me of my aunt Jean, who refused to give up her sixties hairstyle. When I was little I used to watch my aunt slick purple gel on a single curl at each side of her head, and secure them to her cheeks with pink tape. Then she would wrap her entire head in toilet paper. In the morning she'd exit the bedroom with a perfectly coiffured hairdo that stood up to any windstorm.

"Morning, Madge." I followed Nate to the desk. He rested an arm along the counter. "You're looking particularly lovely this morning."

Madge's smile was taut and didn't quite reach her eyes. "Aren't you the charmer?" Her gaze slid to me. "Lisa Carron?"

I nodded and inched forward.

Her eyes lingered on me a few seconds before she released a sigh heavily laced with forced acceptance. "Fill these out." She slapped a stack of papers on the counter. "Don't forget to initial the bottom of each page or you won't be allowed into orientation."

I shoved the papers back to her. "I have no intention of attending orientation."

"That's what they all say, Sweetie." The woman smiled again, which looked more like a grimace, her eyes squinting behind glasses nearly as big as her head. "Humor me." She pointed toward a row of chairs against the wall. "Clipboards and pens are on the table."

With that, she spun her chair toward her computer, dismissing us. I picked up the papers and looked at Nate. "Are these a binding contract?"

"No." His hand slid around my arm, and he led me to the chairs. Tiny spindles of heat burrowed into my arm where he touched me. I ignored it. "But you can't get past Madge until you sign the privacy agreement." We sat and he handed me a pen from the neat arrangement in a cup. "Mainly, these say you're entering GRS of your own free will, without coercion, and you agree not to speak of what you see and learn today if you do not accept the position."

"Who would believe me?"

For the most part the papers said exactly what Nate had told me. Except for a few paragraphs of legal nerd talk, the agreement was straightforward and something I could live with. Once I left GRS today, I'd have no problem never mentioning the entire incident.

Ten minutes later, I'd finished filling out the forms and returned them to Madge. After a quick perusal, she tapped them into a neat pile and slammed a staple into the corner. "Welcome to GRS, Mrs. Carron."

I considered reiterating that I wouldn't be staying, but from her bored look, I could see she didn't give a crap. "Thank you."

"Come on." Nate stopped at a glass door and slid my pass along the key panel again. The lock released with a little click and he pushed the door open. Keyboard tapping and low conversations I couldn't make out hummed inside. "After you."

I stepped around him into what looked like a normal office setting. Cubicles filled the center of the room and long glassed-in conference rooms lined each end of the work area. The place looked identical to the offices on the first two floors where I thought Jeff had worked.

“Morning, Mr. Cramer.” A chubby guy in a tight white shirt and a Harry Potter tie popped his head over the top of his wall. “New recruit?”

“Morning, Harold. This is Lisa.” I started to say hello, but Nate placed his hand on my waist and guided me toward one of the conference rooms at the end of the cubicles. “She’s undecided whether she wants to work for us, but I think I can persuade her.”

Harold chuckled. “If anybody can, it’s you, Mr. Cramer.”

When we were out of earshot I said, “You and Harold got a bromance going?”

Nate scowled at me. “He’s just a colleague.”

“Seems more like a groupie.” With a gentle shove, he pushed me into the room and shut the door. “Are you some kind of reaper rock star?”

He turned to face me. “Hardly, and Harold is not a groupie. He’s a Wannabe.”

“A what?”

“He wants to be a reaper, but he’s not endowed with the Grim.” Nate walked to a flat panel television and picked up the remote. “If you decide to come to the dark side, you’ll be working with several Wannabes.”

“Huh, that’s interesting.” I glanced at Harold’s cubicle. He stared at me with the same longing I stared at bikinis with every spring. I want to wear one so badly but it was never going to happen.

“Have a seat.” Nate pointed to a chair with the remote. “This film is a little dated, but it gives all the pertinent information you’ll need to make a decision.” He slid the clicker to me. “If you have any questions, pause the DVD and ask.” Next, he pushed a pad of paper and a generic black pen at me. “You might want to take notes.”

“All right.” I retrieved the remote and settled back into the chair. “This should be interesting.”

I didn’t know what to expect, but a 1950’s style infomercial was not it. The women in the film wore torturous shoes, and bras that could repel a missile attack. Their hairstyles reminded me of Madge’s at the front desk, and I noticed all the women were stationed at the Wannabe cubicles.

I pointed to the television. “So—what—no women were reapers in the fifties?”

“There have been women reapers all through history. I told you the film was a little dated.”

“A little? Since this video was made entire, empires have fallen. We’ve walked on the moon, and wised up about smoking in the work place.” A thin smoky veil filled the cubicle area where the women were happily typing and smoking. My lungs hurt just watching them.

“Focus on what they’re saying, not the actors.” Nate sat in the chair directly opposite me.

I concentrated on the message and buried my feminist outrage. After a minute, I found myself absorbed in the narrator’s explanation of GRS.

“Every reaper is a descendant of Charon, the Ferryman.”

I paused the video and looked at Nate. “A descendant of Charon? The same Ferryman on the River Styx?”

Nate nodded. “Every few hundred years, Charon comes to the surface for a vacation. This usually results in one or two pregnancies.”

“So, let me get this straight, Charon takes shore leave, knocks up a few women, and then goes back to his ferry?”

“Yeah, he’s the ultimate sailor.” He glanced at his watch. “As a matter of fact, it’s about time for his next holiday.”

I shook my head. “Remind me to stay as far away from him as possible.”

I pressed play and settled back in my chair. I admit the reapers had a good system. They were divided into different groups—illness, children, war, natural causes, and violent crimes. I wondered what group I’d be in if I’d accepted the job.

Once you make the commitment to join the GRS team you will be given a bevy of tests, both physical and psychological.

I refrained from asking anything about the tests. I didn’t think I wanted to know and the less knowledge the easier it would be to forget this crazy mess.

With support from your area’s command central, you will embark on a career that is not only monetarily rewarding, but a service to all mankind. Welcome to GRS.

The video ended. Nate walked to the television and shut off. “What do you think?”

“What did he mean by monetarily rewarding?” This piqued my interest. I’d never considered getting paid to reap souls, but Jeff got his paycheck from somewhere. His life insurance had barely carried us a year and my savings were nearly depleted. I’d been putting off getting a job so I could be there for the kids, but I couldn’t ignore the need for employment any longer. “Do we get paid for being grim reapers?”

“Yes.” Nate folded his hands on the table. “Plus, you get bonuses for quota.”

I eased forward in my chair, mimicking his posture. “What are we talking here—barista pay, or would I actually be able to support my family?”

The corners of Nate’s mouth quirked up in a *gotcha* kind of way. And as much as it irritated me to admit it, he had my interest. When I got pregnant with Bronte, I dropped out of college and never went back. At this point in my life the best I qualified for was an entry-level position in retail or a receptionist.

“You would definitely be able to support your family.” He paused. “Jeff did.”

I couldn’t argue. We’d always had everything we needed—not everything we wanted, but who did nowadays? “How dangerous is it?”

Nate shrugged. “Not very dangerous for us. Mainly we deal with the weather or inconvenient locations. You won’t be assigned to War. That’s the most dangerous post.”

His statement brought my reeling mind to a halt. The image of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of

people killed in a single attack, and only a few reapers to dispatch their souls popped into my mind. “What happens if a soul isn’t reaped?”

“Purgatory, ghosts, limbo—it depends on the life they lived and what they believed.”

A knot formed in my stomach, obligation pressing on me. If I didn’t reap, then who would? Even if I’d been chosen by some ancient accidental pregnancy, the task had fallen to me. What if it later fell to one or all of my kids? If I took the position I’d be able to help them adjust. Not to mention the money. Thoughts of a bright Christmas, and fixing my dollar-sucking pit of a house pulled me toward the decision I so vehemently resisted. I planned on leaving GRS today and never looking back. How quickly plans changed.

I gave a heavy sigh, praying I wouldn’t regret this. “All right, I’m in.”

Chapter 5

The expression on Nate's face was a cross between relief and disappointment. I knew he didn't think I'd make a good reaper. He'd made that perfectly clear at the Holiday station, but he'd done his job by recruiting me.

"Great." His tone was in direct opposition with his words. "Let's get the paperwork started."

I followed him out the door. All the Wannabes looked up when we exited. "Everybody, Lisa Carron will be taking Jeff Carron's place."

A few of the workers smiled and waved. There were even welcomes from Harold and a woman sitting in the front row, but I also noticed raised eyebrows at Nate's announcement. Obviously he wasn't the only one who questioned my abilities, which made me even more determined to succeed.

I gave a little wave, but didn't know what else to say. Nate headed toward a door I hadn't noticed at the other end of the room. We stepped through, sealing out the Wannabes' intense attention. Dark doors similar to those on the ground floor stretched down a wide hallway.

He stopped at the first office. "Morning, Nigel."

A crisp looking man in an argyle sweater vest and slicked back hair sat at an impeccably organized desk. "Good morning." His eyes drifted to me and back to Nate. "Mrs. Carron has accepted the position?"

"Yes, she has." I answered, irritated that Nigel talked as if I wasn't in the room.

His lips pinched together, his gaze cutting to me and back to his desk. Either this guy was a complete ass, or was in girl-panic mode. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a neatly compiled folder of papers.

"Lisa, this is Nigel Bottomzumt. He will take care of your personnel paperwork. Workerman's Comp, leave requests, and your orientation packet."

"Nigel Bottomsup?" I asked, not sure I'd heard correctly.

"Bottomzumt, Mrs. Carron. With a z-u-m-p-t."

Touchy. "Gotcha," I said.

"She'll need to fill out the usual forms, W-4, retirement package, life and medical benefits forms." He placed a black pen on top of the packet, and slid it across the desk. "You do have a beneficiary in case you die in the line of duty don't you?"

“To be honest, Nigel, since my husband died, I’ve tried not to think about the what-ifs of something happening to me.” I termed it my coping strategy. Vella called it burying my head in the sand. From the way he stared at me it looked like my avoidance issues needed to be faced. “My kids will receive any money I have.” Which, if I died tomorrow would keep them in mac and cheese for a month. “I’d like Vella Anderson to be the executor of whatever benefits I’d get from GRS.”

Nigel furrowed his brow. “You don’t have any living relatives that might be better?”

He asked the question in a way that told me he knew my parents were alive. Of course he would since Jeff had been a reaper. Nigel probably kept a spreadsheet on all the employees of GRS and their families.

“Yes, my parents and brother are alive, but I’d like my friend Vella to handle the money for my kids.” It was an instantaneous decision and I really should have asked her permission. But I wanted Vella to raise the kids if I died. She didn’t have any children of her own and my parents were old, well into their sixties. Not to mention, the fact my mother and I butted heads on every subject. My brother, Bryan, could barely take care of himself, let alone three kids. If I let him raise the kids, they’d end up in juvenile court by the time they were sixteen. “Trust me, this is best, and if my status as being a reaper ever came out, Vella would be far more understanding than my parents.”

Nigel glanced at Nate, as if asking his permission to allow it.

“Is there a problem?” My gaze bounced between the two of them.

“No,” Nate said. “You have the right to choose whomever you want.”

“Damn right I do.” I wasn’t sure why there was even a question.

Nigel’s mouth tightened. “All right, then. Please print legibly.”

I turned my attention to the forms, ignoring the sick feeling the thought of dying gave me. The questions were extensive, not the usual insurance or privacy forms. I’m not sure why they even bothered making me swear I wouldn’t tell anybody. Couldn’t the big bosses smite me with a single blow if I spill the beans on the super-secret reaper club?

My hand hovered over the page. I’d already told Vella about Nate and she’d ask again. Hopefully I wouldn’t get us inadvertently added to the supernatural kill-list by telling her about my new job. After all, she’d need to know since she’d be raising my children.

It took about half an hour to fill out all the forms. My fingers cramped from writing on the tiny lines. “All done.”

As I handed the packet back to Nigel, the cell phone on his desk started playing *Single Ladies* by Beyoncé.

His mouth thinned even more and he picked up the phone. “Excuse me.”

My first thought was that Nigel had a sweetheart, but my suspicions were quickly extinguished.

“Hello.” He spun his chair so the back faced us. I let my eyes travel over his spotless office. “Yes, I will pick it up on my way home.” His words drifted over the top of the chair.

Hmm, did Nigel have a wife? That was hard to believe. I couldn’t picture what kind of woman

would fall for him. Maybe someone meek and mousey.

“No, Mother, the couple’s yoga is tomorrow night.”

Ewww!

I’m sorry, but doing couple’s anything with a parent skeeved me out. I had to repress the urge to mimic gagging. My gaze cut to Nate, and by the sneer on his upper lip he also struggled with the ick factor.

Nigel’s voice lowered to a whisper. “I got it, Mother. Now, goodbye.”

When the call ended, he spun to face us and set the phone back in its original spot. He opened the folder of forms I’d filled out, and thumbed through them. After a few minutes, he shut the file and looked up, giving me a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Everything seems in order.”

I sat there, waiting for more, but I guess he was finished talking. “Okay then. What next?”

“You’ll need to get your pass.” Nate smiled at Nigel. “As usual, thanks for your help.”

Nigel smoothed his hands down the front of his vest. “You’re welcome, Nate. It’s always a pleasure dealing with employees who stick to protocol.” He peered at me, his gaze almost accusatory. “Welcome to GRS, Mrs. Carron.”

I didn’t know why Nigel disliked me, but the man obviously didn’t approve. Maybe he held with Nate’s belief I’d suck as a reaper. “Thank you,” I said. “Have fun with your mother at couple’s yoga.”

His gaze narrowed, as if trying to figure out if I was mocking him. Of course I was. That was my impulse reaction when somebody treated me like dog do-do he needed to scrape off the bottom of their shoe.

I followed Nate to the next office. A large, fortyish, Samoan woman, with skin the color of caramel and eyes the color steel, sat behind a long counter.

“Nate Cramer. Where have you been hiding yourself?” Her greeting was the direct opposite of what we’d received in Nigel’s office. I instantly liked her. “I’ve missed you, Sugar Pie.”

“You know how it is, Rosie, work—work—work.” He walked to the counter and leaned on it. “But I’m back.” He turned, gesturing me forward. “Rosie, this is Lisa Carron.”

Her smile spread, showing off pearly teeth. The skin around her eyes crinkled. “Lisa.” She took my hand. “Welcome. I’m so sorry about your husband.”

“Thank you, Rosie.” Warmth spread through my hand when she clutched it. The sensation sent a wave of calmness through me, giving me the impression there was more to her than just being the office help. I made a mental note to ask Nate about the workers. Sure they were Wannabes, but what made them qualified to work at GRS. “I’m happy to be here.”

She released me and pointed to a blue screen. “Why don’t you stand over there and I’ll immortalize that pretty face of yours on a GRS pass.”

That comment endeared her to me even more, and I did as she asked. The thought of having my own access card gave me a little thrill. It had been a long time since I’d been anything other than Jeff’s wife, or the kids’ mother. Discovering that reapers really existed overshadowed the fact that I

was now gainfully employed.

I let my arms hang at my side. “Should I smile or not smile.”

“You should definitely smile, Sugar.” Rosie wrinkled her nose. “Why don’t you take your jacket off?”

I hesitated, once again cursing myself for wearing Jeff’s sweatshirt. “I think I’ll leave it on, if that’s okay.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Adjusting the lens of the mounted camera at me, she said, “Say *grim reaper*.”

I laughed and she snapped the picture.

“Perfect.” Rosie moved to her computer. “It will be just a minute.” She tapped on the keys. “Nigel has already got your information in the system.”

“We only left his office two minutes ago,” I said.

“That’s our Nigel.” The way Rosie said his name made me think that maybe she had the hots for him.

I tried to imagine the two of them together, but couldn’t quite make that love match. The whirr of a machine behind the counter started. After another minute, Rosie handed me my very own GRS access card. It was still warm from the laminating machine, so I held it around the edges and marveled at my picture.

My smiling face beamed back. It was the happiest I’d looked in over a year. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sugar.”

“All right.” Nate straightened away from the counter. “Rosie, as always you’ve brightened my day.”

“You’re such a sweet talker.” She waved a hand at him, her laughter filling the office. “Lisa, don’t let this silver-tongued devil talk *you* into anything dangerous.”

The mention of danger popped my bubble of joy. The way she had said *you*, made me wonder just how many people Nate had coerced into hazardous situations. Had Jeff been one of them? “I sure won’t, Rosie.”

“Come on.” He indicated the door. “On to payroll.”

Money, now that was a subject I could sink my teeth into. It was the only reason I’d taken this job—well, that, and the niggle of universal obligation. I trailed Nate. “So what kind of pay are we talking about—you know, just a ballpark figure?”

“I’ll let Willow fill you in on all the details.” He stopped at the next door. “She’ll be able to answer any questions you have.”

Willow was a typical Alaskan name. We also had a lot of Ravens, Denalis, and Auroras in the state. More than likely Willow was young with the kind of natural beauty that looked like she’d been skiing over the weekend. I walked into the office and realized I was partially right.

She glanced up from her desk and gave us a super model smile. Green, almond-shaped eyes were

accentuated by her long red hair, which was pinned up in a messy up-do. If I tried to pull off that hairstyle, it would look like I'd been wrestling a chimpanzee all night.

"Good morning." She stood and held out her hand. "You must be Lisa Carron."

It appeared everybody at GRS knew about me. I accepted her greeting. "Yes, and you must be Willow."

She released my hand. "That's me, or Money Bags as everybody calls me behind my back."

Nate sat in one of the chairs in front of her desk. "That's not what I call you behind your back."

He smiled and folded his hands across his stomach. "Or to your face."

She lifted a brow at him. "Always a charmer, Nate."

Though Rosie had basically said the same thing, Willow's tone was not complementary. Obviously these two didn't get along. I sat, wondering about the couple's history.

"I think I can correctly assume that you've taken the position here at GRS?" She opened a file lying on her desk but her gaze never left me.

I exhaled. "Against my better judgment, yes, but I need a job."

Her smile was sweet and understanding. Despite Nate's problems with Willow, I liked her. "I understand your hesitance, but I'm sure you'll do fine." She paused. "I'm sorry about your husband. All this must have come as quite a shock."

"Thank you. Yes, I'm still reeling a bit, but I'm glad I found out."

I really wasn't. But, many times during my life I hadn't gotten the memo from the big guy upstairs. In order to cope with all the changes, I needed to believe there was a higher purpose in me becoming a reaper.

"All right, let's dive in." She placed her hands on top of the file. "GRS is set up on a pay scale that takes into account time in service and rank."

"Rank?" I asked.

"Yes, you will start out as a Deputy or a GR1." She slid the top sheet of paper toward me and pointed to a graph. "This is the pay to start with. After your six-month training period, you'll move up to a Deputy GR2. This will increase your income \$112 per pay period."

It was difficult to disguise my disappointment over my base pay. The amount would barely be enough to cover our expenses. I nodded and studied the graph, not trusting that my frustration wouldn't leak out. Instead I looked at Nate. "What are you?"

"Lieutenant GR6."

I scanned down the table. His pay was impressive, about three thousand dollars more a month than I would be making. "What rank was Jeff?"

He was quiet for a few seconds. "Sargent GR6."

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking more questions. There was no way my husband had made as much as the chart said. Or if he had, he didn't spend it on the family. That led to the question, where the hell had all the money gone?

“I know it doesn’t seem like much, especially since you were used to Jeff’s salary.”

“No, actually it’s fine.” *Because I was never used to his frickin’ salary.*

Not commenting further about Jeff’s pay, she pointed to the next chart down. “But we also give you a stipend each month for working in a remote location.”

My spirits lifted slightly at the extra four hundred dollars, but I had to push away the idea there was more money Jeff hadn’t brought home. I refocused on my present situation. “Anchorage is considered remote?”

Her brow furrowed and she looked at Nate. “I’d assumed Nate had briefed you on all the specifics of the job and your duties before having you accept the position.”

Now I looked—well glared—at him. “No, he didn’t.”

She sighed. “Anchorage is not considered remote, but the outlying villages are. You will be required to travel for GRS, and reap souls whenever needed.”

“That presents a tiny problem considering I’m a single mother of three. I can’t just drop everything and fly out to Barrow or Dillingham. What am I supposed to do with my kids?”

“That’s precisely why I expected this to be explained prior to your signing.” She scowled at Nate again, but he seemed unrepentant. We were definitely going to have a few words after my orientation. “Fortunately, GRS has in-home care for those who need it or we will supplement your sitting costs if you have someone you trust.”

I nodded. “I’ll have to think about this. I can’t leave my kids with just anybody.” *Specifically my mother.*

Mom would take them in a heartbeat, but I’d be indebted to her forever. Still, I needed a job, and making that sacrifice would be worth it. On the flip side of the coin, if none of my kids became reapers, which I dearly hoped, then I wouldn’t be able to throw my martyrdom back in their faces when they blamed me for their horrible lives. I was looking at the big picture here.

“Let me know if you need any help setting things up. I can introduce you to our caregivers. They are ready at a moment’s notice and might be good to keep as a backup.”

“Thank you, Willow, I really appreciate that.” I liked her more and more. She and Rosie were the first people at GRS who actually seemed human. “Do you have kids?”

“No.” She picked up her pen and tapped it on the desk. “But I raised my sister—until she died a few years ago.”

Instantly tears burned at the back of my eyes. I swallowed hard, reaching across the desk to cover her hand with mine. “I’m so sorry.”

From experience, I knew nothing more needed to be said. After Jeff died people tried to console me by relating a story about someone they’d lost. Although they attempted to find a common ground and connect with me, I got so tired of trying to make *them* feel better. I ceased being the griever and became the comforter. It was very draining.

“Thank you,” she said.

I pulled my hand back and fumbled for a way to get back on topic. “I think meeting GRS’s caregivers is a good idea.”

“Great, I will set that up for us in a few weeks, after you get settled.” Her smile returned. “Now, onto bonuses.”

“I like the sound of that.” I glanced at Nate. For whatever reason, he didn’t seem happy. Maybe he and Willow had dated, and she’d dumped his grumpy butt. I added that to my list of questions for him.

“After every twenty reaps you will receive a thousand dollar bonus. On your hundredth reap you will receive an incentive bonus of five thousand dollars.” She slid another sheet to me. “This is the breakdown beyond that.”

“Wow.” I glanced at the figures. “Twenty five thousand for a thousand reaps?”

“We’ve only had one person in Alaska receive that bonus.” Her eyes cut to Nate and back to me. “But all the reaps were not harvested in Alaska.”

He crossed his arms and continued to glare at Willow. I refrained from asking him how he reaped a thousand souls. Mainly because I didn’t want to know, figuring it was a horrific natural disaster, or something even more gruesome. At this point ignorance was bliss.

“All righty then,” I said, trying to talk past the uncomfortable tension zinging between them. “How often do we get paid?”

Willow relaxed against her chair. “Every two weeks. We do direct deposit. We’re a paperless office whenever possible.”

“Recycle, reuse, and reap?” I asked.

She smiled again. “I like that motto. We might have to adopt it for our conservation program.”

Nate stood. “Is that all?”

Willow didn’t look at him, but stood and held out her hand again. “It was great meeting you, Lisa. Let me know if you have any questions.”

“Thank you, I will.” I shook her hand.

“I hope you like it here. I’m sure you’ll be a great asset to GRS.”

“Finally, somebody with vision.”

Nate harrumphed and left without waiting. “Is he always like this?”

“Oh no, just around me.” She sighed. “I’m sure he’ll be somewhat human with you.”

“One can only hope.” I gave her a consoling smile and left. Something had definitely happened between him and Willow. Call me an office gossip, but I was already devising a plan to squeeze that info out of him. I skipped a few steps to catch up with him. “What’s next?”

“Time to find out if you’re pregnant.”

Chapter 6

I skidded to a stop. “Excuse me?”

Nate turned to face me. “Your medical exam is next.”

“Oh.” I started walking again. The only way I’d be pregnant was through an immaculate conception, which I was beginning to believe could actually happen. Who knew which of the things I once considered fantasy could possibly be true. “You’re not going to be in my exam with me, are you?”

He stopped at a glass door. A metal sign engraved with *medical office* hung beside it. “Thankfully, no.”

Thankfully indeed. “Are we finished after this?”

Nate checked his watch. “I’ll come back and in about an hour. We can catch some lunch after that.” His eyes did a quick track up and down my body. “You must be getting hungry.”

Wow, he’d so effortlessly insulted me with his judgmental scan. I had questions for him about the job, so I bit back my retort and plastered on a smile. “Sounds great.”

Without any more discussion, because seriously, my self-esteem had already taken a beating today, I entered the office and shut the door in his face.

Cherry wood and rich plum walls decorated the outer lobby. The warm mood directly contradicted the utilitarian world that existed beyond the door. I prayed the doctor was a woman. Of all the employees I’d met so far, women seemed to be the only ones with an ounce of compassion.

I walked to the counter and tapped the bell. A feminine voice answered from somewhere beyond my sight. “I’ll be with you in a second.”

So far so good. At least the nurse or receptionist was a woman. Another minute passed, and the doctor finally appeared. She was around fifty and had black hair with two thick streaks of white racing down each side, as if they’d been painted on.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Jensen, but call me Candace.” She held open the door with her hip and extended her hand. “You must be Lisa.”

“That’s me, the new recruit.” I gave her hand a quick shake, relief washing through me. I didn’t know how far up into my sweet junk she was going to get, but I felt much more comfortable discussing my girl problems with a female doctor. “Nice to meet you.”

“Come on back.” She led me to the first room on the right, and pulled a file from the pocket next to the door. “I’ll need to get some history before we start the exam.”

“Great.” I plopped down in a plum colored chair that was incredibly comfortable and would look fantastic in my living room. She took her place at a small writing desk. “Doesn’t a nurse usually do this part of the exam?”

“I’m the doctor, nurse, receptionist, and sometimes janitor.” She looked up from the file and smiled. “Besides new recruits, and the annual medical exam on the employees, I don’t see a lot of action here.” She shrugged. “I used to be an ER doctor in Detroit. I loved it for a while, but the constant crisis tends to take its toll. Here there’s rarely any drama and a lot of my day is free to work on other projects.”

“Sounds like a dream job. I’d like getting paid big bucks and having everybody basically leave me alone.”

“That surprises me. Most reapers like to be in the thick of things.”

I held out my arms to the side. “Do I look like your typical reaper? I have three kids, one of them being a teenage girl. The most excitement I’ve had over the past year was the convenience store robbery that landed me here.”

“Yes, I heard about that.” Thick black lashes framed her dark blue eyes. “I think you’re the first recruit I’ve had who accidentally became a reaper.”

I sighed. “Once you get to know me you’ll see how fitting my initiation was.”

She laughed. “I’m sure you’ll be a great reaper.”

I grimaced and shook my head. “You’re either being incredibly diplomatic or gullible.”

“Between you and me I think the reapers could use a little more estrogen on their team.” She tucked a hank of thick hair behind her ear and looked at the chart. “It seems to me reaping should be handled with finesse and compassion, instead of acting as if they’re tossing a log on the fire.”

“Oh, you’ve met Nate then?”

She laughed again and nodded, but made no further comment on the subject. “So, first question. Are you pregnant, or is there a possibility of being pregnant?”

Several answers popped into my head but I refrained from saying them. “No.”

“Do you have any old injuries that are giving you problems or periodically act up?”

“Well, I sprained my ankle in a horrible gardening accident last year.”

She looked up, her brows lifted. “A horrible gardening accident?”

“I was talking on the phone and carrying a potted tomato plant out my front door, when I tripped and fell.” It had been awful and humiliating. Repeating the sordid details again dredged up what a Mrs. Magoo I could be. “I landed on the pot, tossed the phone over the side of the patio, and bugged up my ankle.” Perhaps it was from the painfully embarrassing memories, but my ankle began to throb. “It aches when the weather changes, or if I walk on uneven ground for a long time—or talk about it.”

“Did the tomato make it?” she asked seriously, scribbling a few notes down.

“Nope, but it was a lost cause to begin with. My plants always die.” It was true, I’d yet to own a plant I was able to nurture and get to flourish.

Continuing to write, she said. “That’s probably because you’re a reaper?”

“Seriously?”

She looked up. “Most reapers have a tough time with plants and small animals, like fish.”

“Wow, I always thought I’d inherited my mother’s anti-green thumb.” We never had plants when I was growing up. When I got my own place I’d been determined to get a little green in my life. Alaskan winter days were dark and plants seemed like the perfect touch of life during the cold months. But no matter what I tried, I couldn’t get the darn things to grow. Now I knew why. “Remind me not to clean my boys’ fish tank.”

“I’ll make a note here to start you on physical therapy. I can help you strengthen your ankle.”

“A physical therapist too?” I liked Dr. Jensen. She didn’t just listen to what I said, but seemed genuinely interested in helping me.

“I started my medical career as an assistant to a physical therapist.” She smiled. “It made me want to become a doctor.”

“Where would we do my physical rehab, here?” Lord knew I could use it on more than just my ankle.

“Yes. One of the benefits of working at GRS is deep pockets. I’ve got better equipment and supplies than most hospitals in Alaska.” Her gaze tracked down the form. “Do you smoke?”

“No.”

She made a checkmark. “Do you drink alcohol?”

“Yes.”

“How often?”

I hated these questions. They always made me feel like I’d done something wrong. “Two to three times a week?”

She scribbled another note. “Hard liquor? Wine? Beer?”

“Yes.” Realizing that sounded rather alcoholicish, I added, “But I prefer beer.”

Another smile spread across her face. “A girl after my own heart.”

The woman had sophistication coming out her ears and I had a difficult time picturing her downing a cold one. “I pegged you as a wine drinker?”

“One of my claims to fame in college was being the two time beer drinking champion at my sorority’s Oktoberfest.”

“Impressive.” The connection between Dr. Jensen and I tightened a little more. “But only two years?”

She flipped around a picture frame that had been facing away from me and pointed to a Muffy-looking blond. “Belinda Mayer stole the title my senior year.”

The good doc stood out amongst the sea of Barbies. “She looks really—perky.”

“Don’t let her looks fool you. The girl could drink like a fish.” She set the picture back in its place and returned her attention to the questions. “Do you use any recreational drugs?”

“Define recreational?” When she looked up with her eyebrow lifted, I rethought my answer. “No, besides the occasional swig of cold medicine to help me sleep, I’m clean.”

“Do you have trouble sleeping?”

“For the first six months after Jeff died I did, but I’m getting better.” I still woke some nights thinking he was beside me, but it didn’t cause me the jolt of depression anymore. Usually, I just rolled over and fell back asleep. “No need for a prescription if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It was.” She ticked off another box. “Are you taking anything for depression?”

“Despite the opinion of others, no.”

“Tomorrow you’ll be given your psych exam, which includes a little chat with GRS’s psychiatrist. He’s good, but a little pill happy if you know what I mean.” She set down her pen and looked at me. “My suggestion is to take the prescription if he writes one, and toss it when you get home. It’s better to look cooperative than having to defend your mental competence.”

“GRS has a psychiatrist on staff?” I shifted in my chair. “That makes me a little nervous.”

“Let’s face it, this isn’t your ordinary nine-to-five. He’s a great therapist and you might find yourself needing to talk about something that happens on the job.”

I widened my eyes. “Can’t I just come and see you?”

She gave a little snort. “Psychiatry is not on my list of specialties, but I will admit, I give my best advice after a few beers.”

“Me too. I’m a veritable font of wisdom after a six pack.”

There had been several times over the last year when Vella and I had solved the world’s problems. With each bottle we became more brilliant. But, as with reality, by the morning my genius had been replace by self-loathing and a monster headache.

She scooted her chair forward and pulled a blood pressure cuff off a hook on the wall. “You’ll need to take off your jacket.”

Obviously there was no way I was getting out of revealing my sweatshirt. This was a good lesson for me. I’d dressed like a frump for so long, I’d become immune to it. Already this job was forcing me to give myself higher standards. I slipped off the jacket and pushed up my sleeve, resting my arm on the chair. Candace didn’t comment on my poor clothing choice, and I didn’t bring it to her attention.

After positioning the cuff, she pushed a button. The whir of the machine kicked in. The band tightened. I attempted a few calming breaths, trying to make my blood pressure as low as possible. The pressure reached that painful point when my hand felt three times its normal size.

A second later a tiny puff of air hissed, releasing pressure every few seconds. I mentally tried to slow my heart rate. Not having any real medical training besides what I learned from television, I didn’t know if that had anything to do with my blood pressure, but figured it was worth a try. A quiet

ticking clicked from the machine. The painful throbbing ebbed to a tolerable level. After another few seconds, the cuff gave a loud sigh and deflated.

“One twenty over eighty.” She yanked on the strap, and with a loud rasp of Velcro, freed my arm. “Perfect.”

Relief, and I’ll admit, a little surprise washed through me. “Great.”

She hung the cuff back up and stood. “Now, your weight.”

I groaned. “Do we have too?”

“Sorry.” She indicated a fancy scale the size of my treadmill. “It’s required.”

“That thing looks big enough to weigh livestock.” She laughed as I plodded to the scale, my shoulders slumping. Before climbing on I kicked off my shoes. Like I said, any edge I could give myself. I doubted it would matter when it came to finding out just how fluffy I’d become.

I stepped on it and stared at the digital reading. The numbers scrolled quickly upward and landed on a nice round one hundred and fifty. “Holy crap.”

Candace wrote the weight on the file. “It’s natural to put on weight during a time of grieving, but you’re young and the weight shouldn’t be too difficult to take off.”

She sat back at the desk and I dropped into the plum chair. “I didn’t realize I gained thirty pounds.”

Instead of making me feel better, her consoling smile drove home just how much I’d played into the grieving widow. Though perhaps not consciously, I’d used putting my kids’ needs before mine a few times too often.

“I guarantee you’ll drop some weight once you start your training.” She closed the file. “Until then, try to eat better. I recommend cutting out sugar, which includes limiting your drinking.”

“This job just keeps getting better and better.” I let out a sigh.

“Well, we’re done except for—” She opened her drawer and pulled out a plastic cup with a blue lid. “Getting a sample.”

I wrinkled my nose. “There’s no way I’m pregnant.”

“Drug testing.”

“Oh—right.” I took the cup. “Bathroom?”

“Straight across the hall.”

I exited the office. The bathroom mirrored the other room, with elegant granite countertops and tiled floors. I really needed to give my house a makeover. The 1970’s harvest gold bathtub and black laminate counters hadn’t been changed since the day the previous owners installed them. I mentally added yet another project to my growing list.

After doing my business, I handed Dr. Jensen the cup. A low growl rumbled from my stomach. I hoped we were finished. I got cranky if I went too long between meals. And after facing the harsh reality of my weight, I was definitely feeling a little grouchy. “Anything else?”

“All finished.” She walked me to the outer office. “I’ll set up a time to examine and test your

ankle. From there I can set up a rehab program. In the meantime, I suggest taping it.” She reached behind the desk and pulled out a promotional pamphlet. “You can get this at most sporting goods stores, and there’s a website that shows you how to properly tape up a weak ankle.”

“Roger that, doc.” I took the brochure and my stomach grumbled again.

At that moment Nate opened the door. I had to wonder if he’d been listening outside. “Finished?”

“Yep.” I turned back to Candace. “Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll call you later this week for rehab,” she said.

“Everything okay?” Nate sounded a little too hopeful, reminding me again that he thought I wouldn’t make a good reaper.

“Just fine.” I brushed past him. “I’m starved.”

Not waiting for him, I headed down the hall, not exactly sure how to find my way out of GRS’s inner sanctum. I can be stubborn, and my determination to prove him wrong took hold. I’d show Nate Cramer that I had what it took to be a damn fine reaper—right after I refueled with a jumbo basket of parmesan-garlic fries.

Chapter 7

Nate offered to buy me lunch, and we ended up across the street at a restaurant I didn't particularly love. Despite Dr. Jensen's suggestion to eat better, I'm pretty picky about my food, and craved something cheesy and unhealthy. But Nate was adamant, even after I recommended a nearby diner that made the best burgers in town. *Control freak.*

I perused the menu. Greens, grains, and things I couldn't pronounce dominated the list. I ordered a Santa Fe chicken salad with extra ranch and a Diet Coke. At least I recognized the ingredients. Nate ordered the Asian chicken salad without the mandarin oranges. What's the point?

I toyed with my wrapped set of silverware "So, what's up with you and Willow? You guys have a nasty breakup or something?"

"There's nothing between me and Willow." He tapped his finger impatiently on the table.

Oh, there was definitely something between the two co-workers. "Huh." I slowly peeled the wrapper from the napkin. My innate curiosity wouldn't let the subject drop. "It sure looked like there was some history?" He didn't reply. I glanced up, but he was staring at a spot behind me. The joke was on him. I was immune to the silent treatment. I had a teenager. "Why do you hate her?"

His eyes drifted back to me. "I don't trust her."

"Because she's a beautiful, independent woman?" Nate didn't strike me as the type to be threatened by a successful woman. And I didn't know if his opinion about me not making a good reaper was personal, or a blanket judgment about women.

"The reason I don't trust her is none of your business." He glanced behind me again, narrowing his gaze. "But I suggest you keep your distance from her. She's bad news."

"Right." Sure sounded like sour grapes to me. When he didn't meet my eyes, I followed his gaze. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

I craned my neck and noticed two men sitting at a table across the restaurant. They appeared normal—really normal. As a matter of fact, if Nate hadn't clued me in, I wouldn't have noticed them at all. "Do you know those two?"

"In a sense." His eyes shifted to me. "They're our competitors."

"Reapers have competitors?" Chancing another look, I assessed them. Both men appeared benign.

One caught my eye and lifted his drink in silent acknowledgment. I smiled and turned back to Nate. “What kind of competitors?”

“Angels.”

My mouth dropped open. “Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

I’ve had a major thing for angels all my life. As a child, they were grouped in the same category as mermaids and the little people I was certain lived in my walls. After Jeff’s death I took comfort in imagining them spiriting him away on heavenly wings. “That is so cool.”

Nate snorted, which I took as an insult to my intelligence. “They are not cool. They’re a pain in the a—”

“Hey.” I cut him off before a bolt of lightning struck us for blasphemy. “If you’re going to insult the heavenly hosts, do it when I’m not around.”

“Trust me, they give as good as they get.”

Trying to reconcile angels to the same level as us reapers went against all the beliefs I’d been raised with. Or at least the ones I’d glamorized. “I’m sure you’re wrong. Angels are all loving.”

“You newbies are so naïve.” He sat forward and lowered his voice. I leaned away from him, fairly certain he was about to burst my bubble. “Not all angels are jerks, but those two are. They’re guardian angels.”

I turned and looked at the men again. Both were staring at me and smiling. Did they have x-ray hearing or some kind of all-knowingness?

“God, would you stop doing that?”

I faced Nate again. “Sorry, but this is all new to me.” I took a deep breath and exhaled. “Go on.”

“Guardian angels interfere with our reaping. Their job is to save their charges.”

Relief washed through me. “Wow, that’s so amazing and awesome.”

“No.” His head shook vigorously. “Not amazing, Lisa. People are meant to die at certain times. These guys come in with their free pass from Heaven and muck it up.”

“Free pass?” In addition to all the paperwork and exams GRS made a new reaper go through, they obviously needed to incorporate an Afterlife 101 class. I made a mental note to bring that up to management.

“It’s all part of the Free Will Project, which is stupid, in my opinion.”

I glanced at the ceiling, waiting for that bolt of lightning. “Easy with the insults.”

“People are going to die. Sometimes I have to attempt a reap three or four times before I get the soul.”

“Wow, militant much?” I leaned forward, giving Nate my best mom face. “Souls aren’t a prize you collect to reach a quota. This is somebody’s life we’re talking about.”

“You’re going to lecture me on what a soul is?”

He had a point. I really didn’t know what I was talking about. I’d only officially been a reaper for

a few hours. “Fine, then why are they here? Just having lunch? Are they human like us?”

“No, but they take human form when they need to.” He flicked his head toward a table to my right. “See the large man at the end?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s about to—”

Before Nate finished his sentence, chaos erupted at the table. The big guy clutched his throat, his face turning red. I jumped to my feet. “He’s choking.”

The other people at the table leapt up. Chairs scooted across the tile, a few banging when they hit the floor in the panicked rush to help their friend. The two guardian angels and I started toward the table, but Nate gripped my arm. “Wait.”

I yanked my arm free. “He needs the Heimlich.”

“It won’t matter.”

My feet froze, unable to take another step. “Will the angels help him?”

“They’ll try—but it won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“William has been slated for a long time.” Nate stepped around me but didn’t go any further. “Heart attack, diabetes, the man has been on borrowed time thanks to the guardians.” A look of satisfaction stretched across his mouth. “I’ll throw the boys a bone and let them give it their best try.”

“You sound pretty confident.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I am.”

I blew out a long breath. “So that man is going to die? No matter what?”

Nate gave a single nod, continuing to smile.

It didn’t matter how many years I’d reaped, I’d never become as callus as him. Just knowing there was nothing I could do for William, made my stomach turn.

The big guy’s face darkened to purple. He collapsed to the floor, hands still at his throat. It was awful to watch. The wait staff and diners crowded around him, turning William on his side and pummeling his back, trying to dislodge whatever was stuck in his throat.

“Call 911,” Nate said before striding toward the crowd.

It took a few seconds for his order to sink in. “Right, 911.” I dug in my coat pocket and hauled out my phone. My hands shook and I kept tapping the wrong number. “Frickin’ hell!” Finally I got the number dialed, and in a quivering voice, gave dispatch all the info. He assured me the ambulance was on the way and that somebody had already called. I clicked off and backed up until my legs hit the chair. I dropped heavily into it. “Holy crap.”

Nate wound his way through the crowd and knelt beside the man. I saw the bottoms of his hiking boots peeking through the throng of legs. The breath froze in my chest when he stood and wove his way out of the mob with the fat guy’s spirit firmly in hand.

He stopped at the table. “I need to take care of this.”

“What’s going on?” William’s spirit looked from me to Nate. “Do I know you?”

No doubt the guy was confused—and rightly so. I knew what was going on and it was almost too much to take in. “I’m Lisa.” Realizing my introduction did nothing to clarify the situation, I added. “There’s been a little accident.”

A woman’s cry emanated from somewhere in the middle of the crowd, and the man turned toward the table he’d been sitting at. “What’s going on?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer him. “Well, William.” I glanced at Nate, widening my eyes with a silent *jump in anytime*. “Somebody in your lunch party choked to death.”

“Oh no.” He spun, trying to get a better look. “Was it Charlie? It had to be Charlie. The man shovels food in like a conveyor belt.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Charlie is fine.”

“It’s you, William.” Nate could really use a lesson in tactfulness. “You’re dead.”

William glanced from Nate to me, and then started laughing, the white aura round his translucent form growing. “How can I be dead when I’m standing here talking to you?”

“Yeah, that’s a tricky one.” My gaze leveled on Nate. He seemed impatient to get the job done. Maybe this was some kind of on-the-job training. I pinned him with my best glare before turning back to William. I let my ire morph into the same type of smile I used when comforting my kids. “Nate will be escorting you to your final destination.” The explanation made me sound like a paranormal travel agent. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. I can tell your journey is going to be very enjoyable.” By the bright white of his aura I assumed he’d be going to Heaven. Hopefully I wasn’t making a rookie mistake. My smile widened. “If you just go with Nate, he’ll get you on your way.”

William didn’t move. “I’d like to see for myself.”

I assumed William meant he wanted to see his body. Unsure if this followed procedure; I looked at Nate for confirmation. He nodded. Not letting go of the big man’s spirit, they edged toward the crowd. A lump grew inside of my throat and my nose tingled. I’m usually not a crier, but the forlorn look on William’s face pushed all my buttons. He seemed so lost. After a few seconds, his wide shoulders slumped. From what I noticed Nate did nothing to comfort him. No arm around his shoulder. No pat on the back.

Mental note to self: Be interactive with clients.

Another minute passed before they headed back to where I waited. I took a deep breath and smiled again, certain this time I looked more sad than encouraging. “Are you okay?” That was probably a really stupid question, but nothing more profound came to mind.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I think I am. I mean, it’s not every day a man witnesses his own death, right?”

Heck if I knew. Maybe they did. This whole afterlife thing was almost as new to me as it was William. But I knew he didn’t need my uncertainty. “Just think, you now have the answer to one of the great mysteries. There really is life after death.”

That made him smile. “I guess you’re right.” He turned to Nate, who still held onto William’s

shoulder, but with only one hand. Rambo Reaper must have surmised William wasn't a flight risk. "I'm ready."

"Come with me." Nate took a step to the side, but didn't let go. "We'll need a little privacy for this."

In a busy restaurant there was really only one place that was private. "The bathroom again?" Nate ignored me and guided William forward. Feeling like I should say something, I quietly called, "Safe journey."

The big man gave me a little wave and then turned the corner, leaving me standing alone. How long would the reaping process take? The memory of my own experience in the Holiday bathroom was convoluted. To me it felt like hours. In reality it had probably only been a few minutes and that included Nate's pitch to become a reaper.

I sat on the wooden chair and waited. The faint wail of sirens grew, but this time the sound didn't make me nervous. Ever since my husband died, the screech would send a wave of anxiety through me. I always wondered if somebody was hurt or dead. Morbid I know, but I couldn't help it. At least this time I knew. In an odd way that knowledge gave me a little comfort.

The waitress stopped at the table and set a Diet Coke next to me. "Can you believe this?"

That was a loaded question. I shook my head. "No." I picked up my soda and took a long drink.

"Second one this year. Weird."

"Yeah." It wasn't the most intelligent response, but she really didn't seem to be talking with me as much as *at* me.

She continued to stare at the crowd. "Your salads will be out in a minute." Then she walked away, leaving me to my thoughts.

My appetite evaporated, which was a miracle in itself. I leaned back in the chair and crossed my arms. The notion that life went on even after one departed this Earth made me contemplative. William was dead but in a few minutes I'd be served the salad I'd ordered before he'd hitched a ride on the express train to Heaven. It made life's problems seem a little less urgent.

I glanced back at the table and noticed the two guardian angels. They both stared at me, no longer smiling, but not really angry. Unsure what to do I lifted my glass. "Better luck next time guys."

They tipped their heads toward me and turned to leave. I'm not sure what I expected. Maybe for them to wink out in a sparkle of white light. I took a sip of soda. This death gig was nothing like I'd imagined it would be.

Nate returned and slid into the chair across from me. He picked up his water and drank. I watched him. There was an edge to him even though he looked composed.

"You all right?" I had to ask. It was in my nature.

His gaze followed the EMTs wheeling a gurney toward William's body. "I'm always all right."

I highly doubted that. Nobody is *always* all right. At the best of times I'm sixty-five percent all right. "Okay, just asking."

The salads arrived and we each picked at the field of greens. It seemed wrong to eat while the crew worked on William—even though we knew he was in a better place. The fork stopped halfway to my mouth. “He went to Heaven, right?”

Nate nodded, pushing a small slice of orange that had snuck in on his salad to the side of his plate. More questions popped into my head. “What kind of souls do you reap?”

He slowly chewed, his gaze leveled on me. After he swallowed, he said, “Violent deaths.”

Yikes, no wonder he was so distant. Facing that much ugliness all the time would darken anybody’s day. “Did Jeff reap violent deaths?”

“No.” He took another large bite of salad, waiting to answer until he swallowed again. “His were more...random—deaths that didn’t fall so neatly into a category.”

I wasn’t sure I understood completely. “Do choking victims have their own reapers?” I slid a generous pile of salad into my mouth.

He glanced down at his plate. “That reap would have been yours, but since you haven’t been trained, I took it.”

A black bean lodged in my throat and I choked. Coughs seized me. I hacked and wheezed—very unladylike. Finally I was able to suck in a big gulp of air. “You knew William was going to die?”

“Yeah, I got word when you were having your medical exam.” He shoveled a chunk of chicken and lettuce into his mouth.

Water, I needed water. The reaper business had just gotten real. It was one thing to be guided through the process and quite another to know I’d be responsible for getting a soul to its appropriate destination. I grabbed Nate’s glass and took a big gulp. He continued to chew and stare at me. “So just what kind of deaths do I reap? Accidental deaths?”

Looking at his plate again, he jabbed at his salad. “Not exactly.”

When he didn’t expound on his explanation, I rapped my knuckles on the table. “What’s my assignment, Nate?” From the way he avoided my eyes I knew I wasn’t going to like it. At that moment my agreement to be a reaper for the sake of a paycheck seemed a tad impulsive. “I’m not responsible for plague or something gross, am I?”

“No.” He set down his fork. “You’ll be reaping people who died in a less than intelligent manner.”

I processed what he was saying. “You mean, I’ll be reaping stupid people?”

“The people aren’t stupid, just the way they die.”

Still not sure I completely understood—hoping that what I thought wasn’t what he meant—I pressed on. “You mean like frat boys who jump into a shallow pool or a drunk who lights his farts and burns to death?”

“Yeah, kind of like that.”

The urge to laugh rivaled with my inability to speak. It just frickin’ figured my assignment would be peppered with the idiotic. I sat back in my chair and stared at the dispersing crowd. The EMTs

wheeled William out and things were calming. “Why William?”

Nate wrinkled his forehead. “Why William what?”

“Why would I have reaped William? He choked, that’s accidental, not really stupid.”

“Choking falls under you because it’s kind of a miscellaneous death. It’s not really violent and it’s not suicide.”

“Miscellaneous, that seems a little vague to me.” If what Nate said was true, I was going to be a busy reaper. “What other...” I made air quotes on either side of my head. “Miscellaneous deaths fall under my watch?”

He rattled off an impressive and oppressive list. “Slipping and falling. This includes public places, homes, and mountain tops.” Before I squeaked out a colorful curse about how the hell I was supposed to reap somebody lying on a ledge eight thousand feet up, he cut me off. “Most electrocutions, alcohol poisoning, sex acts gone wrong.” He paused. “If they were mutual and not a homicide. Otherwise those fall under me.”

My mouth hung open and for a few seconds I couldn’t form an intelligent response. “So, basically any asinine way somebody could die—I get.”

Cocking his head, he crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s not going to be a problem is it?”

I snapped my mouth shut. “Problem? Why would reaping the recipients of the Darwin Award be a problem?” My voice raised an octave. “Who wouldn’t love reaping the butt of life’s jokes?”

“Jeff never had a problem with it.”

I narrowed my gaze. “Let’s get one thing straight. I am not Jeff.”

A purely insulting laugh huffed from Nate. “Oh, I’m well aware of that.”

Damn, I’d walked right into that one. Ever since I’d fallen into this reaper gig, Nate had made it quite clear he didn’t think I was up to the task. Determination coursed through me. That happened sometimes—I’d get angry and dig in my heels. Usually I got far more than I bargained for.

That happened with Bronte’s fifth grade science project. What started out with good intentions, ended with a lot of tears and a thirty-pound, pudding-spewing volcano. Not only did I have to transport the monstrosity, I had to clean up its stunning eruption at the show, which covered the table, floor, and several surrounding science projects.

Before I repeated the mistake by making promises I might not be able to keep, I slid from the chair. “I’ve lost my appetite.” I scooped up my purse and slung it over my shoulder. “I assume you got the check?”

When he didn’t reply, I walked out of the restaurant. I’d like to say I felt some satisfaction about snubbing him, but the only thing I felt was humiliated. I reaped stupid people. Great. Like I didn’t get enough of them in my personal life.

Chapter 8

The kids tumbled through the front door an hour after I got home from lunch with Nate. Pasting on an *everything's wonderful* face, I met them at the entrance to the kitchen. "How was your day?"

Bronte slinked past me, earbuds in place. "Lame, like always."

Breck dropped his backpack at the door and made a beeline for the refrigerator. "Hi, Mom."

Bryce, always more composed, hung his coat on the hook, and then followed his brother to find refreshments. "It was good. A guy came to our class and dissected a cow eye."

"Yeah." Breck shoved a cheese stick in his mouth. "I poked my finger in the victorious layer."

"Vitreous layer," Bryce corrected.

"Whatever, it was so cool when it squished out."

I grabbed the back of Breck's collar. "Take off your jacket and stay a while."

He shrugged out of it, switching the cheese to his other hand and extracting his arm. "Come on, Bryce, Tiffany Powers and the Techno Werewolves is on."

"No TV." I pointed to their backpacks. "Homework."

A unanimous groan circled the kitchen. Bronte shoved Bryce out of her way and pulled a bottle of flavored water out of the fridge. "I'm all done."

I lifted an eyebrow. Over the last year I'd let the kids skate when it came to homework and extra chores. The teachers had done the same thing because of Jeff's death. I'd convinced myself it was for their own good, at least until they could adjust. But lunch with Nate had changed things. He didn't think I'd make a good reaper. Whether I would or not I'd be damn if I'd curl up in a ball and prove him right.

With a sense of empowerment, and no small dose of *I'll show you*, I made the decision it was time for the entire Carron family to get their crap together. "Good. Let me see it."

Bronte stared at me, slowly twisting the cap off the bottle. I knew this look. She was sizing me up. Probably trying to figure out if I was serious. Then she attempted a diversion tactic. "I left it at school."

"Huh." I gripped the edge of the refrigerator door and closed it. "Okay, then help me make dinner."

Her eyebrows pinched together and the corner of her lip lifted in a tiny sneer. “I don’t do cooking?”

“You live here too. We all need to pitch in.” I bent and opened the door to the dishwasher. “You can start by unloading the dishes.”

With an incensed huff, she trudged the three feet to the dishwasher. “This is a complete waste of my talent, Mother.”

“Mine too.” I held out a clean plate to her. “If you don’t want to help with dinner, clean your room or...show me your homework.”

She took the plate from me. “What’s with the whole *mom* gig? You haven’t made us do chores for the last year.”

“It’s time we get back into a routine.” I paused, not knowing how she’d feel about me going back to work. “And...good news... I got a job. I start full-time next week.”

“What kind of job?” She turned and stared at me, her tone suggesting I wasn’t qualified for much beyond scrubbing toilets.

I pulled another plate from the lower rack. “Actually, I got a job at GRS.”

“Like Dad?”

“Same company, different job.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Doing what?”

On the way home I’d thought about what I’d tell the kids. It had to be something believable but also gave me an excuse for travel or inconvenient hours. “Human resource assistant. I’ll be helping employees with employment issues.” I set the plate on the counter. “I might even get to do a little village travel.” To my trained ear I sounded like I was trying too hard to convince her, so eased back on the enthusiasm. “GRS has employees all over the state.”

“I find that utterly fascinating.” Clearly she didn’t.

“What you should find fascinating is the money. We might even be able to have a descent Christmas.”

Her eyes lit up. “Like—a new laptop—merry?”

I shrugged. “Maybe, if you pull your grades up, plus help around the house.”

She slid the second dish onto the shelf, continuing to stare at me. I waited. My daughter was sharp and calculating. Either she was devising a counter attack to keep her freedom or she was surmising the situation. Another few seconds passed. Then, to my surprise, she nodded. “Okay.”

She turned and walked toward the door. “Where are you going?”

“To do my homework.”

With that, she left. The sound of her backpack unzipping whispered through the kitchen doorway. I couldn’t help but smile. It was a small victory, but one I would happily take. Having Bronte working *with* me and not *against* me would make my life a heck of a lot easier.

The sound of a car door thumping closed was followed by clomping footsteps and then our front

door opening. “Hello, hello.”

“I’m in the kitchen, Vella.” I continued to unload the dishwasher.

Such a good friend. She entered bearing a six pack and a bag of groceries. “You haven’t started dinner yet, have you?”

She knew me so well. “Not yet.”

“Bud is out of town this week and I got a little carried away with my grocery shopping.” She set the plastic bag on the table. “So I thought why not dine with my favorite people. We could fix the kids dinner, set them in front of the TV, and have us a few icy ones.” Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“And you can tell me about your day.”

When Vella had that look, I knew I was in for eighty questions. “The kids should love that.”

“I figure that will keep them occupied while we chat.” She dug in the bag and pulled out a roasted chicken, a tub of mashed potatoes, gravy, and a tin of biscuits. “Pop these in the oven.” She handed me the tube. “They only take eight minutes.”

“Do some shopping today?” I asked, peeling the wrapper from the biscuit container.

“I worked a little this morning, but when my two o’clock color canceled, I decided that retail therapy was a better use of my time.” She arranged the containers on the table. “I’d planned on buying a new pair of boots, but then remembered I didn’t have any food in the house.”

Vella not having any food in the house meant she was out of wine. “No splurging on footwear then?”

“Girl, Bud’s been riding my butt about staying on budget. He’s as tight as my Aunt Edith’s girdle when it comes to money.” She dragged out the chair and sat. “But I like my comforts and he knew that before he married me.”

“That’s right. Having a trophy wife comes at a price,” I said over my shoulder.

Bud was a decade older than Vella. I don’t think he knew just how high maintenance a southern trophy wife could be. But to be fair, Vella loved Bud and treated him like gold. “It’s nice that you’re trying to stay within budget. That should make him happy.”

“I know, right? Tight old miser.” She waved a manicured hand in the air. “I never let him grocery shop anymore. The last time he bought the cheapest toilet paper in the store. I swear he actually dug around in their storeroom to find the last existing package.”

“And that was a bad thing?”

“You have no idea. I couldn’t tell if it was toilet paper or sand paper. I’m delicate down there.”

A snicker slipped out. “Ouch.”

Vella jabbed a finger at me. “I kid you not. I could have rubbed myself with tree bark and gotten the same results.”

I grimaced at the thought.

“Anyway,” she continued, “today I bought me some of that really expensive toilet paper. The kind with three layers that looks like my grandma quilted it.” She gave a little sigh. “It’s like wiping my

ass with a baby angel.”

The vivid image Vella wove made me burst out laughing

“Seriously!” Her eyes widened and her expression turned serious. “I’ll give you some and you be the judge.”

I smacked the tube of biscuits on the edge of the counter. Thick white dough oozed between the cardboard. Why was it I loved everything devoid of nutrition? After laying the fat circles on a cookie sheet, I popped them into the oven. “I’ve obviously lived a deprived life.”

“You joke, but it’s true.” Vella glanced over her shoulder and then back at me, lowering her voice. “So?”

“So what?”

She gave me her frowny face. “You know what. GRS.”

I held up a finger and walked to the kitchen door. No kids in sight. I hoped they were actually doing their homework, but figured I could follow up on that later. Baby steps. “We are definitely going to need alcohol for this.” I found a bottle opener and popped the caps off two beers. “Where do I begin?”

“First of all, did you go this morning?” Vella plucked two glasses from the cabinet. “Was *he* there?”

By *he*, I assumed she meant Nate. “Oh yes, *he* was there.” While pouring the first glass, I took a deep breath. “And so were about fifty GRS workers.” I tossed the bottle into the trash and handed her the glass. “The grim kind, if you know what I mean.”

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes rounded. “Get out of here.”

I nodded. “Yep, seems he was telling the truth and I am—” My voice dropped to a whisper. “A grim reaper.”

Vella picked up a glass and took a long drink. After which, she wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her shirt. Though it wasn’t uncommon for her white trash roots to come out, it was always funny to witness. She opened her mouth to say something, stopped, and then took another gulp. I waited. I knew how she felt. Finding out her best friend was an angel of death was a lot to take in.

She swallowed hard and set the glass on the counter. “Well, if that isn’t the shit.”

“If you mean messed up, then yeah, that’s the shit.” After snagging the full glass, I sat at the table. “But it’s a paying job and there are benefits.”

“That’s good—right?”

Obviously she was struggling for the right thing to say. Vella joined me at the table. On impulse, she reached across the table to pat my arm, but stopped. We both stared at her hovering hand.

“It’s all right,” I said, “you can touch me.”

Tension eased from her shoulders and she lowered her hand, tapping my arm once as if she thought it would explode.

I smirked. “Any bright lights you feel drawn to?”

“No.” She pulled back her hand. “But you can never be too careful. I don’t know what a reaper does and doesn’t do.” Vella ran her finger around the rim of the glass. “And you’re sure about this? He wasn’t just putting you on?”

“It would have been an elaborate jest.” I lowered my voice so the kids wouldn’t overhear, and recounted my day. Vella sat riveted in her chair. Even though the story sounded outlandish, something I would conjure after huffing airplane glue, I’d finally accepted it was true.

When I finished, Vella sat for a few seconds, staring at me. Then she smiled. The action was forced and a little tight, devoid of her genuine southern cheer. “You seem okay with all this.”

I shrugged. “What choice do I have? I need a job. The pay and benefits are better than anything I could get elsewhere.”

“I guess.”

“What’s wrong?” I knew my friend and usually there were five or six interactive conversations happening in her head at once. “You sound...wary.”

“It’s not that. I’m just so angry with Jeff. Why didn’t he ever tell you about this?”

I tried to smile but it felt more like a grimace. “They said we’re not supposed to reveal ourselves to anybody. Not even family members.”

“But you just told me.” A panicked note elevated Vella’s voice an octave.

“Yeah, but you already knew about the Holiday station and Nate.” My explanation wasn’t quelling her alarm. “Don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen to you. I’m sure of it.”

“If it does, I’m coming back to haunt you.” She took a big gulp of beer. “And I’ll be damned if I’m going to the light easily.”

“Thanks for the warning.” I hadn’t thought what it would be like to reap somebody I knew. Knowing my pool of friends and family, it would no doubt happen one day. “But I’m sure it’s going to be fine.” She glared at me. “Really, I promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Vella took a deep breath and exhaled. “How dangerous is this reaper job anyway?”

“I don’t know. The people are already dead. How dangerous can it be?” I paused. Something about Jeff’s death nagged at me. “But...”

“But what?”

“I can’t help but wonder if Jeff’s car accident wasn’t an accident.”

“Why do you say that?” Leaning in, Vella rested her elbows on the table. “Did somebody say something today?”

I tried to ignore the shiver of foreboding rippling through me. “Not in so many words but I kept getting the feeling there was more to it than a simple car crash.” I shrugged. “I’m probably imagining it. Trying to reconcile him being a reaper and not telling me is probably making me suspicious.”

“I know you guys had your problems, every couple does, but Jeff was a good guy.”

“Yeah, he was.” I nodded. “Maybe I’m feeling guilty about thinking he cheated on me.” The oven

timer beeped, pulling me away from my remorseful thoughts.

After silencing the piercing buzzer, I slipped on an oven mitt and removed the golden brown biscuits and set them on the stove. “Once I get a little more familiar with GRS I think I might ask around. Surely somebody will be able to reassure me.”

Vella started loading up plates for the kids. “What about Nate?”

“He’s as closed mouth as a mafia hit man.” I plopped a biscuit onto each plate. “But there’s a woman named Willow in payroll. Maybe she knows something.”

“It’s worth a try.”

Despite Vella’s encouraging words, she didn’t seem optimistic. Maybe she was worried I’d learn something I didn’t want to know. What’s that saying? Don’t ask the question if you don’t want the answer. “Kids, time to eat.”

The thunder of at least four feet pounded through the house. Bryce and Breck slid into their chairs at the table as if stealing second base. I always waited to set their drinks down until they’d settled. Too much spilled milk over the years. Bronte wandered in still connected to Apple support. I pointed to my ears. Getting my message, she yanked on the cord and shoved the headphones into her pocket. I assumed her music continued to play but didn’t point that out to her. I take my wins where I can.

Yummy noises emanated from the table. It wasn’t the healthiest meal in the world but all three ate. Score. Vella and I dished up plates for ourselves, making sure to take all we wanted in the first helping. When the food was good, we usually didn’t get a chance for seconds. Like a swarm of locusts, the kids polished off everything but the chicken bones.

I looked at Vella and smiled. “That has to be a new record.”

She laughed. “Maybe I should have bought more.”

The boys scooted from their chairs and started out the door.

“Bus your dishes.” They stopped, appearing confused. It was the first time I’d asked them to do anything in the last year. Obviously, further instructions were needed. “Pick up your plate, scrape it in the garbage, and put it in the dishwasher.”

Simple and to the point. That’s what worked best with eight-year-old boys. Besides Bryce needing to do a double scrape to get the mashed potato residue off, the boys did a great job. Not having to be told, Bronte followed suit.

Kids fed in eight point three minutes.

After closing the dishwasher, she leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek, and then walked out. I glanced at Vella. She was as surprised as I was at my elusive daughter’s display of affection, and dare I hoped—approval.

“What was that all about?”

The faintest tingle burned behind my eyes. I inhaled, not wanting to have a gushy mom moment. “I told her I got a job and made her do her homework.”

Vella nodded. “Boundaries. Kids think they don’t want them, but they do.”

“Come on, let’s sit.” I brushed the biscuit crumbs to the center of the table before claiming Breck’s vacated chair. “Thanks for dinner.” I held up my glass. “And the beer.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I need girl time just as much as you do.” She sat in the spot Bronte had vacated. “So what’s going on tomorrow?”

I groaned. “Psychological testing.”

Vella cocked her head to the side. “What, to see if you’re nuts?”

“Ironic, isn’t it?”

“I’d say. Who wouldn’t be a little off kilter after everything you’ve been through?” Her eyebrows arched. “What kind of testing do they do?”

“An oral exam, I think.”

“Normally I’d look forward to something like that, but I don’t think it’s going to be as good as it sounds.”

It had been a long time since I’d had anything *oral* given to me. Unfortunately I had to agree with Vella. “Me either, but I’ll give you details if it is.”

“Girl, I want details even if it’s not.”

I shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes in my mouth and swallowed. “Not afraid of being smited for knowing too much?”

“Nah.” She downed the last of her beer. “Like Mark Twain said, ‘You go to Heaven for the climate, but you go to Hell for the company.’ I figure I’ll be so busy visiting my relatives and friends I won’t have time to wallow in eternal damnation.”

I laughed. “Good point.”

My day started out with a lot of unknowns, and ended with even more. But a few things were certain. My best friend wouldn’t abandon me, no matter how nuts things got, and I’d do just about anything to provide for my kids. Even if that meant reaping stupid people.

Jeff’s death still bothered me, but those questions could wait. It wasn’t like knowing exactly what happened to him would change my life more than it already had. I doubted there was some huge conspiracy or nefarious plot that landed him on the pointy end of the reapers scythe. Right?

Chapter 9

Twenty minutes. The tick-tock from the cuckoo-clock marked the passage of time. Time, by my calculations, that had morphed into an endless stretch of boredom. I shifted on the chaise lounge, trying to get comfortable. Though tempted, I refused to lie down. This was the psychologist's office, and everything in me fought being analyzed. Reclining felt too much like giving into the process.

I glanced at the irritating clock again. Twenty-one minutes. The doctor, or whoever was supposed to administer this test, was late. Either he or she was being completely rude or this was part of the test. My gaze scanned the office for obvious hidden cameras. I didn't see anything, thus the hidden part, so I waited and refrained from fidgeting.

After another minute the door opened and a man entered. "Mrs. Carron?"

I stood and smiled like I hadn't been contemplating smashing his cuckoo-clock against the floor. "Yes."

"James T. Crock. I'm so sorry I'm late." I bit the inside of my cheek, trying not to laugh at his name. He dumped a stack of files onto his desk and stuck out his hand. "Had an unscheduled meeting."

When I shook his hand his fingers were cold and clammy. The urge to wipe my palm against the fabric of my jeans was only overridden by my thoughts of conspiracy. Was my every move being scrutinized? "No problem. I was just sitting here admiring your clock."

A wide smile stretched across his mouth. "It's German. Got it when I visited the Black Forest." He glanced at the clock, and then at me again. "I find it very soothing. Don't you?"

Not so much. But I smiled and nodded, wanting to get on Dr. Crock's good side.

"Well then, shall we get started?" He pointed at two overstuffed chairs near the window. "The test is rather lengthy so we might as well get comfortable."

He gathered a leather portfolio and claimed one of the chairs. I sat in the other and crossed my legs, trying to appear at ease. Inside, my stomach flip-flopped like a spawning salmon. I attempted small talk. "James T. Crock, like James T. Kirk, huh?"

"No." He looked up from the stack of papers he'd been thumbing through. "I was named after James T. Cook, the great explorer."

"Ah." *Okay, not a Star Trek fan.* "Great man."

“If by great you mean an actual historical figure, who was instrumental in developing ways to measure longitudinal bearings, then yes, he was quite exceptional.”

“Uh yep, that’s exactly what I meant.” Obviously small talk was not his forte, so I decided to let Dr. Crock take the lead.

He leveled a stare at me and I found myself sitting a little straighter. “I will administer the test orally.” I suppressed the urge to giggle. It didn’t matter who said it, *orally* always sounded dirty. “Your reply will be either yes or no. There’s no need to expound on why you’ve answered one way or another. Just a simple yes or no.”

As far as I was concerned the sooner I finished, the sooner I could have lunch. I nodded again. “Fast and to the point, got it.”

He gave me a placating smile, but I don’t think he actually believed I could follow directions. I’d show him.

“Are you ready?” His pen hovered over the question sheet in his portfolio.

“Fire away.”

“Question one, I like mechanics magazines.”

“Excuse me?” I wasn’t sure I’d heard him correctly.

“I like mechanics magazines. Yes or no.”

“No.” It was the first answer that popped into my head, mainly because I’d never read a mechanics magazine. Still, I guess if I’d had any interest in that area I would have picked up one up from the store. I answered again, very firm in my conviction that I indeed did not like mechanic magazines. “No.”

He made a little checkmark on the sheet. “Question two. My sleep is fitful and disturbed.”

Well that was a given considering everything I’d been through the last year. But until Jeff’s accident I’d slept like a baby. “Do you mean before my husband’s death or after?”

No emotion played across Dr. Crock’s face. “My sleep is fitful and disturbed.”

Okay, no help from the help. I was tempted to say no but I’d already given myself away. Damn, I had to stay one step ahead of these questions or he’d think I was a nut case. “Yes.”

“I have a good appetite.”

“Yes.” The answer blurted from my mouth before I had a chance to think about it. “I mean it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

“Yes or no, Mrs. Carron.”

“Yes, definitely yes.”

He added another tick to his paper. “I believe in the afterlife.”

I stared at him for a second. “Are you serious with that question? You realize I’m a grim reaper, right?”

“I don’t write the questions, Mrs. Carron. I only administer the test.”

“Yes, Dr. Crock, I believe in an afterlife. I’ve actually seen what waits on the other side and it

didn't look all that great." He scribbled a note on the edge of the paper. That couldn't be good. I inhaled and mentally centered myself again. "Next question."

"I have never been sorry that I'm a girl."

For the love of God. "Seven days out of the month I'm sorry I'm a girl." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Those commercials of women riding bikes and roller skating—all lies."

"Is that a yes then?"

I held up my hand. "Not necessarily. Other than the cramping and the irrational bouts of rage, I like being a girl."

He arched a brow. "Yes or no."

He was trying to trick me. I knew it. "What was the question again?"

"I have never been sorry that I'm a girl."

After mentally repeating the sentence three times I smiled. "Yes."

Tick.

"I sometimes tease animals."

"No, well, my mom put a sweater on our bulldog once, and I made fun of him, but no, I don't tease animals. That's just mean."

He gave a heavy sigh and marked the paper. "I do not like everyone I know."

My mind raced through my list of people in my life. I didn't hate anybody, but I didn't necessarily like everybody. Take my neighbor, Clare Goucher. The woman was pushing sixty and insisted on doing yard work in her bikini. Or my mom. I loved her, but I didn't really like her most of the time. "Yes, I do not like everyone I know." Dr. Crock's mouth pinched into a tight line. "It's unrealistic to like everybody, isn't it?"

"I'm not here to judge, Mrs. Carron."

I bit back a sarcastic retort, not wanting another side note added to my file. Instead I focused on the damn clock. "Next."

"I am neither gaining weight nor losing weight."

"Another fat question, huh?" I drummed my fingers against my ribs. The tight waist of my jeans decided my answer. "No."

Tick.

Bastard. I was really starting to *not like* Dr. Crock.

"Once in a while I laugh at a dirty joke."

"Yes." I kept my eyes on the clock. The sooner this stupid test was over, the better.

"I sweat very easily on cool days."

What the hell? This test seemed to be skewed toward us fluffy gals, and I didn't like it. Most days in Alaska were cool, thankfully. "No."

"I believe I'm being followed."

That question gave me pause. Did ravens count? Because I was fairly certain that bird was

stalking me. “Yes.”

Dr. Crock’s brows lifted in surprise. I could tell he wanted to ask whom I thought was following me, but when I narrowed my eyes at him, he cleared his throat. “Peculiar odors come to me at times.”

I blinked several times. “What?”

“Peculiar odors come to me at times.”

“Dr. Crock, I have two eight year old boys. They produce odors no human should be subjected to.”

“That would be a yes, I assume?”

“Yes.” I’m pretty sure that’s not what the question meant. I’d read accounts where people swore they smelled their dead grandmother’s perfume. Nothing like that had ever happened, so I stuck with what I knew. Besides, this test was pissing me off.

“The things that some of my family have done have frightened me.”

“Yes, yes, and yes.” There was a lifetime of therapy wrapped up in having a cop for a dad. Not to mention my brother, whom I believe was dropped on his head as a baby. Though my mom denies it.

“Definitely, yes.”

“I like or have liked fishing.”

I’m an Alaskan. Fishing is in our blood. “Yes.”

Dr. Crock pinned me with a stare. “I deserve severe punishment for my sins.”

Call me crazy, but the way he looked at me made me wonder if that question was even on the test. “We all sin, but I don’t feel I need to be severely punished for them.” He continued to stare at me, giving me the willies. “Do you?”

“Again, Mrs. Carron, not judging.”

Right. “How many more questions are there?” I glanced at the clock. We’d only been at it for ten minutes.

“Five hundred total.”

I groaned and let my head fall back on the chair. “Fine. Next.”

“I like to take a bath.”

“Yes.” I said to the ceiling.

“Horses that don’t pull should be beaten or kicked.”

I started to feel like one of those horses. “No.”

“I like mannish women.”

My head popped up. “What do you mean? As in friendship or like—like?”

“You must interpret the question yourself.”

“If I have to interpret the questions myself, what’s the point of this test? I might say I like mannish women because I’m a lesbian, and like to feel girly. Or maybe my best friend is mannish, and I like her despite the fact that she’s mannish. In each scenario the reasons are completely different.”

“You’re overthinking things. Just a simple yes or no.”

“Then yes, I like mannish women. I like feminine women. I like feminine men if they are a good person.”

He rolled his eyes as he made another checkmark on the paper. Was rolling eyes even allowed if you were a psychologist?

“I think Lincoln was greater than Washington.”

Propping my elbows on the arms of the chair, I stared at Dr. Crock. Did my answers really matter? I was beginning to think it was my reaction to this barrage of idiotic questions that GRS was really gauging. “Yes.”

“I have to urinate no more often than others?”

I kept my expression passive. “Yes.”

On and on the questions went. Did I like to play hopscotch? Was I opposed to every person on earth drinking alcohol? Was I afraid of fire?

Three hours later Dr. Crock looked up from his paper and smiled. “Only three more questions.”

My butt cheeks throbbed from sitting so long. The entire time, he allowed me only one five-minute break to stand and stretch. I straightened my legs and sat up straight, waiting.

“I prefer to wear black clothing.”

Easy. Any woman who struggled with her weight knew black was her best friend. “Yes.”

“I’ve contemplated suicide.”

I was taken aback. Never, not even in my most grief-stricken moment, had I thought about killing myself. I had the kids. They needed me. No didn’t seem strong enough. “Never.”

He made his mark and then smiled at me. “Last question.” I saw he was just as happy to be finished with this test as I was. “I have a normal level of interest in death.”

Even though he waited for a yes or no, a lot of other answers came to my mind. “I’m a grim reaper, so already my level of interest is higher than non-reapers. So who are we gauging this by? Overall humankind or just GRS workers?” He opened his mouth to give me what I was sure would be a bland retort, but I cut him off. “On the other hand, you would think being a grim reaper would amp up my interest, but honestly, if I never ever saw another dead person, I’d be perfectly content.” I stood and picked up my purse. “So you decide, Dr. Crock. Do I have a normal level of interest in death?”

I walked to the door, but stopped. When I looked back, the good doc was jotting more than a quick note in my chart. Deciding silence was golden, even though that realization had probably come too late, I walked out. The questions he’d asked had been weird, revealing, and on the rare occasion, thought provoking. I’d never contemplated whether dirt frightened me, or if my hands and feet were normally warm. Now that he’d asked, I found myself thinking about just how unenlightened I was about myself.

The reality was, I’d lost interest in the little things I once found fascinating. As a kid I spent hours watching the worms that surfaced after a rain. Now I didn’t even notice them. My head was filled with to-do lists and the needs of others. Somewhere along the line I ceased being Lisa and turned into

somebody's mom and wife.

In general, I thought the personality profile I'd just suffered through was crap, but I couldn't deny some of the question sparked a desire to know myself again. Did I prefer mango over guava juice? Had I ever tried guava juice? Being a grim reaper may not have been my first choice of employment, but the fact I was one of the few on Earth, gave me a shot of self-respect I hadn't felt in a long time.

Maybe I'd pick up a mechanics magazine on the way home.

Chapter 10

The gymnasium spread out before me with an obstacle course that ranged from reasonable to bizarre. I assumed I was supposed to traverse this bad boy. The track I could handle. It was some of the other areas I wasn't quite sure about.

Nate stood beside me with a clipboard and a huge stopwatch. "You have ten minutes to make it through the entire course."

I nodded as if that wouldn't be a problem. "Gotcha."

"Let's walk the course first." He started down the track, not waiting for me. "You'll do one lap, then you'll veer to this area."

A pommel horse blocked our path, but luckily a springboard sat in front of it. I remember vaulting over one when I was in grade school. Of course I was seventy pounds lighter, but I think I could manage this. "I have to spring over?"

"Yes." Stepping around me, Nate moved to the next obstacle. "Here you need to climb the rope ladder."

Ladder? It was more like a spider web of knots and rope spreading across one wall. Still, not impossible. I pointed upward. "What's that?"

"Once at the top, you'll climb onto that ledge, crawl to the end, and slide down the rope."

Resting in a deep hole in the floor sat a small trampoline. The rope's end knot dangled several feet above it. Obviously, Nate expected me to drop onto the stretchy black surface. My aim would have to be good, or I'd end up sprawled on one of the mats surrounding the trampoline. At this point my biggest fear was breaking a leg or pulling muscles I hadn't used in years. "So drop onto that?"

"Drop, bounce a few times, and transfer to the next trampoline."

No problem—if I were an Olympic gymnast. The next trampoline was half the size of the other. I craned my neck to make sure there wasn't yet another, smaller apparatus I'd be expected to rebound onto. Relief washed through me when I saw a balance beam. "Got it." Boy I was being cooperative. Last night I'd decided not to whine if I could help it. "Next?"

"Climb onto the wide balance beam. Jump down." He strode ahead of me, patting each wooden beam as he passed them. "Onto the next bar." I noticed it was a bit narrower, only about three inches wide. "Down, and finally to the last balance beam."

Was he serious? The piece was no more than a half-inch across. “You expect me to walk on this?”

He stopped and at looked me. “Actually I don’t think you’ll make it over the vault.”

Walked right into that one. I smiled. “So encouraging.”

He shrugged. “You asked.”

Note to self: Nate thinks you’re a doofus. Don’t give him ammunition.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Fine, what’s next?”

“Another lap around the track. The time will stop when you cross the finish line.”

“Perfect.” I screwed my determination into place. I might not vault over the horse like a gazelle, or gracefully scramble up the rope, but I sure as heck was going to finish this course in less than ten minutes. I yanked on the bottom of my sweatshirt. “Let’s do this.”

“Toes to the line.” Nate pointed to the yellow stripe running the width of the track.

I placed one foot against the starting line and then hunkered down into a runner’s stance, bouncing a couple of times like I’d seen the athletes do.

He cleared his throat. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to run? What does it look like?”

“You don’t want me to answer that.”

I twisted my head around to glare at him. “You got that right.” Setting up again, I leveled my gaze on the track in front of me. “I’m ready.”

“All righty, then.”

I heard the laughter in his voice. *Eat my dust, Nate Cramer.*

“On your mark.”

My body tensed.

“Get set.”

I lifted my butt in the air and ignored how much it hurt my fingertips to hold my weight forward. I—would—not—fail.

“Go.”

Though my intention had been to blaze down the track, leaving a fiery trail behind me, that idea quickly fizzled. Good God, when was the last time I’d actually run? I couldn’t remember. A better tactic was to set a quick jog. Weird things happened as I made my way around the track. Over the years my body had morphed into something I didn’t know. Areas of me jiggled that hadn’t ever before. After the second bend in the track my muscles burned. Air fought its way into my lungs. The whole experience was pathetic.

With each step more of the bravado I’d felt at the starting line evaporated. I veered off the track and jogged toward the horse. The thing seemed taller. Not sure I’d make it over, I gave an extra bounce on the springboard. I realized my mistake too late. Pitching forward, I smashed into the horse. Luckily I gained enough height to roll over the top in a tangle of arms and legs. As I dropped onto the opposite side, my hand snagged under one of the handgrips.

“Sweet mother!” I stumbled to my feet, twisting my ankle, and yanked my hand free. A steady throb took root at the base of my palm. Rubbing the spot did nothing to physically soothe the injury, but it kept my cursing contained.

“You okay?” Nate walked toward me, but I stopped him.

“Fine.” I limped toward the rope ladder. Pain continued to ripple through my wrist and ankle, but I tried my best to ignore it.

You can do this. You can do this.

Surprisingly, the ladder didn’t pose much of a problem. My legs felt like they were on fire, taking a lot of my weight as I climbed, but at least I didn’t flop around like a salmon in a net. With relative ease I scaled the web. The next phase was a different story.

Once at the top, I flailed for the wooden platform. Even by twisting my body, I just brushed the scaffolding with my fingertips. The only answer was to climb as high as possible and get above it. Medical bills started piling up in my mind. Broken wrist, sprained ankles, maybe even a broken back if I fell.

I glanced down. Nate stared at me, a hint of a smirk playing at his mouth. That was the motivation I needed.

I gripped the top rope and climbed until my feet were level with the plank. Extending my leg, I eased my left foot onto the ledge. From below I’m sure my position looked ridiculous, but at this point I didn’t care. I’d finish this damn course or die trying. Okay, that was a little drastic, but the realization of how out of shape I was pissed me off. Just another thing that had fallen apart after Jeff’s death.

Overhead, I grabbed the handle protruding from the scaffolding and pulled myself onto the ledge. The ground twenty feet below wavered, and I clung to the handle for dear life. I closed my eyes and waited for the world to stop spinning.

Note to self: Avoid heights if possible.

The ledge hadn’t looked so narrow from below. Reluctantly I released my death grip and crouched. A belly crawl seemed like the best idea. Safe, low to the board, and less chance of falling. Inch by inch I made my way to the end of the ledge. The rope dangled in front and I latched onto it like a shark on a tuna. White knuckled, I stood.

Again, it had been my intention to ease onto the rope and lower myself to the trampoline. The second my full weight cleared the platform, my grip slipped. Fire race along the palms of my hands as I plummeted toward the trampoline. For somebody watching, I’m sure I looked like I knew what I was doing. My resonating scream however, quickly extinguished that notion.

My feet hit the knot at the end of the rope, cramming my knees into their sockets. Certain my hands were a bloody mess, I released my grip and dropped on all fours onto the trampoline. I bounced several times, biting my tongue. God, I hated this job. What was I thinking when I said I’d be a reaper?

After the momentum slowed, I struggled to my feet. Every part of my body hurt. If it hadn't been for Nate watching me, I would have lay there curled in a ball, whimpering. Testing my balance, I gave a couple of shallow bounces.

The smaller surface I was supposed to leap onto seemed a lot farther away than when we walked the course. Who designed this damn thing? Satan himself? I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I was almost finished. I could do this. My lids slid open and my gaze focused on the projected landing spot.

With cat-eyed concentration, I bounced and launched. It felt like I lifted ten feet off the ground. The truth was probably more like I just cleared the trampoline. But I made it. Like a real gymnast, I stuck my landing.

Nate's brows lifted with surprise. *Suck it, reaper.*

Now pretty full of myself, I leapt off the trampoline, landing with a solid thud on the mat, and jogged to the balance beams. No problem. Hefting myself up, I skittered along the widest beam. I moved a little slower on the next one, but didn't fall. Though lower to the ground, the last and narrowest beam required my undivided attention and best balancing skills. My ankles shook from the effort it took to remain upright. What happened if I fell? God forbid I'd have to start again.

At the end of the beam I gave myself a mental high-five and jumped down. It would have been impressive if I'd sprinted the final lap of the track. Would have been, but I didn't. As a matter-of-fact, I'm not sure I could have called it a jog at all. My quick walk was interspersed with a few sluggish running steps, but then I'd have to slow again. My lungs burned and blood pounded in my head. Sweat poured off me as if I'd been doing an hour of heavy cardio. It was embarrassing and even more humiliating.

With the finish line a mere ten feet away, I found the last of my energy and sprinted past Nate. I heard the click of his stopwatch.

"Not bad," he said.

I bent, bracing my hands on my knees and sucked in air. I'd never been super athletic, but I was wheezing like a two-pack-a-day chain smoker. "What's—" Cough. Pant. I could barely form words. "My time?"

"Seven minutes, ten seconds." Nate stopped in front of me. "You okay?"

I nodded, still unable to speak coherently. After another minute, I straightened. "Yeah, I'm great." Sweat dripped into my eyes and I wiped it away with the bottom of my sweatshirt. "So I passed?"

"Yep." He walked away. "The first round, anyway."

"What?" Surely I hadn't heard him correctly. I inhaled and blew out a long breath. "The first round?"

He stopped near a trunk and opened it. "That was just the first run. If you hadn't finished we wouldn't bother with the second heat."

The urge to wrap my fingers around his neck and squeeze intensified. I knew this testing wasn't

his fault but he seemed to be enjoying it way too much. “But I already did it with over two minutes to spare.”

Nate reached into the trunk and pulled out a bright orange, mesh jumpsuit. He gave it a couple of shakes, and then held it up for me to see.

“What the hell is that?”

“You’ll wear this on your next run. It’s meant to simulate transporting a soul.” He indicated the sleeve for me to see. “There’s Velcro at the cuffs and chest.”

I stared at him, still not understanding. “How does Velcro simulate reaping?”

“Because...” Nate dropped the jumpsuit on the ground and dug in the trunk again. This time he extracted what looked like a life-sized pillow doll. “This will be attached to you.”

If I understood him correctly he expected me to run the course I’d barely gotten through, with a gigantic pillow stuck to me. “That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Maybe, but it will give you a sense of what you’ll be dealing with if you encounter a resistant spirit or difficult terrain.”

Maybe I could get a job as a barista. I liked coffee and Danishes. What was a few scalding milk burns compared to this? Thinking about running the course again made my stomach lurch and my head pound harder. Doing it while lugging the pillow around made me want to cry defeat. Nate’s expression made clear that’s exactly what he expected. Though exhausted and slightly beaten down, I was not willing to except more humiliation. “Will I be timed again?”

The grin he’d barely concealed stretched across his mouth. “No. Take all the time you need.”

What I needed was a long nap and a miracle. “I’ve got to pee.”

He replied by pointing toward the locker room. Doing my best to stand tall and not limp, I brushed past him and headed across the gym. Pushing open the heavy locker room door hurt. Walking hurt. Thinking hurt. How I’d ever get through the course dragging a body pillow was beyond me.

I stopped at my locker and yanked it open. A full icy bottle of water sat in a puddle of condensation. Before taking a long drink, I rubbed the cool container against my forehead. The heartbeat pounding in my head eased a little but my lungs still burned. A piercing stitch set up residence in my right side. After opening the spout of my bottle, I squeezed the cold liquid into my mouth. What I wanted was to gulp down every drop but I knew I’d pay for it with a side-stitch once I started the course again.

After snapping the lid shut, I set the bottle on the top shelf and reached for the towel hanging on one of the hooks inside. A tiny jangle clanked at the bottom of the locker. My raven charm. I picked it up and held it in my palm. The metal warmed against my skin. After shoving it in my pocket the day the bird dropped it at my feet, I’d pretty much forgotten about it.

The edge of the tiny scythed glimmered blue. Maybe there was something to this bond I had with Fletcher. That’s what I’d named him, getting tired of calling him the weirdo bird. At this point I could use all the help I could get, magical or otherwise. I unhooked my snowflake necklace and slid the

raven charm onto the gold chain. It could have been my imagination but I swear tiny sparks flickered around the pendants when they touched. The metal was cool against my chest when I rehooked the chain and what felt like spider web threads of electricity rippled across my skin.

I rolled my shoulders and cocked my head side to side, suddenly feeling reenergized. If the charm did have magic, maybe it could give me an edge on the stupid obstacle course. Not taking any chances that Nate might call cheating if he saw the charm, I slipped it into the neck of my sweatshirt. Maybe there was hope yet. I slammed the locker closed, squared my shoulders, and strode back into the gym.

He glanced up from his cell phone, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You okay?"

"Great. Why?" Acting natural or the ability to lie weren't skills I'd been gifted with. Most of the time I over compensated. Usually my eyes were too round and innocent, or my voice raised an octave. "Don't I look okay?"

I'd totally set myself up for one of his insults, but it was a small sacrifice if he didn't figure out I wore the charm. For some reason Nate didn't take the bait. Instead he nodded. "You look good."

Maybe I was making an ego mountain out of a slip-of-the-tongue molehill, but I was fairly certain he'd just complimented me. Our gazes locked and a zing of sexual tension crackled between us. At least I think it was sexual tension. It had been a long time since I'd experienced it.

Even if he wasn't feeling the connection, it was nice to hear something flattering come out of his mouth for a change. And the little jitter that rocketed through me let me know I wasn't completely dead inside. Wow, I really needed to change the batteries in my vibrator if I was thinking about Nate in *that* way.

Dragging his gaze from me, he turned and busied himself with the jumpsuit. It suddenly felt very warm in the gym. The urge to fan myself was barely overridden by the intense desire to act as if his compliment hadn't stroked my comatose vanity.

"Put this on." He turned and shoved the jumpsuit at me. Guess cuddling was out.

My *I'm rockin' this reaper* bubble burst. I repressed a groan and lifted the orange abomination from his grasp. "I'm going to look like the Great Pumpkin in this."

He snorted. "Yeah."

"You're loving this." I glared at him. "Aren't you?"

"Oh yeah." His head bobbed up and down. "But we've all had to wear it. So don't think I'm torturing you needlessly."

I harrumphed and sat on the gymnasium floor. Getting my tennis-shoed foot through the leg hole proved to be more difficult than the obstacle course. "What the heck." The orange mesh caught on the treads of my shoe, not allowing me to shove my foot through or remove it. "I can't...it's wrapped around my toe." I jammed my foot downward into the wall of mesh. That only succeeded in reinjuring my already sore ankle. After a few seconds, I gave a battle cry of fury and kicked my leg, trying to dislodge the jumpsuit. "Stupid firkin' farkin' piece of crap."

Though the f-bomb rarely passed my lips, I'm not averse to connecting as many like-sounding F-

words as I can when I get frustrated. Nate's brows lifted as I continued muttering a string of F alternatives.

He let me struggled for another minute before he knelt and grabbed my foot, which I beat against the floor. "Stop." He had my ankle in a vise grip, so I didn't have any choice but to do as he said. "Next time take your shoe off first."

"Next time?" I pointed and shook a finger at him. "There's not going to be a next time."

"Then..." He tugged the jumpsuit from my foot. "I suggest you don't fail."

That was the best incentive he could have given me. No way did I want to endure another round of making a fool of myself—at least not here. My klutzy nature ensured I'd screw up at some point, but I wouldn't invite humiliation if I could help it. "Oh, I won't fail."

I yanked off my shoes and snatched the jumpsuit from Nate. Not only would I not fail, I'd kick this course's ass and call it girl names when I was finished. I stood and wiggled into the mesh. Though the jumpsuit was snug in places, it wasn't uncomfortable. Probably better tight than loose. That way I wouldn't get hung up anywhere. At least that was my hope.

After putting on my shoes, I stood. "Now what?"

Nate handed me the pillow person. It was heavier than I thought it would be, but nothing I couldn't carry.

"You must keep control of the soul at all times." He gripped my forearm and pointed to my wrist. "There's Velcro here." His fingers moved to press between my boobs. "And here."

A flurry of butterflies erupted in my stomach again, but he seemed oblivious to my reaction, or the fact that as co-workers he touched me inappropriately. I simply nodded, keeping my gaze pinned to his. "Gotcha."

When he lowered his hand, I cradled the pillow person, hugging it to me. Chest to chest, the Velcro connected. I let go and the pillow stuck. I did a few jumping jacks, but it didn't fall off. This would be easy. I didn't even have to hold onto it, leaving my hands free to climb and grip. A thought popped into my head. "Why the chest?"

"What do you mean?"

The rip of Velcro being peeled apart sounded as I pulled the pillow away from me. "I get sticking it to the wrists. It requires me to hold on, just like I did with Leroy Badder. But why at the chest?"

"If you embrace a soul and hold it against you, it will remain stuck. Like a heart-to-heart connection."

I scrunched my face, remembering how Leroy Badder's soul had cut through me like an icy blade, and I'd only touched him with my hands. "Ick."

"Not all souls are as nasty as Badder," Nate said, seeming to read my thoughts. "Most of your charges won't possess the dark aura or violent feel."

A shiver skittered up my spine. "Still." I shifted the pillow and connected it to the Velcro at my wrist. "I will never willingly do that."

He shrugged and checked his watch. “Your choice. We need to get started.”

A sigh heaved from me and I murmured some incoherent objection that sounded a lot like Yosemite Sam.

I took my place at the yellow line on the track. To make sure I didn’t drop the pillow during my run I gripped its mitten-shaped hand. And that was exactly the way I’d planned handling all my souls. The less contact the better.

“Whenever you’re ready. Take all the time you need.”

Since I wasn’t being timed, I started out with a slow jog. This was going to be easy. Without the pressure of beating the clock I could finish this course in my own sweet time. As I rounded the first bend a loud scraping echoed through the gym. I glanced back up the track at Nate. He was moving what looked like a metal doorframe across the end of my lane, but I couldn’t see exactly what it was. My good mood dipped. I knew simply running the course again would have been too easy.

I continued to watch him move from obstacle to obstacle. More scraping along the floor ricocheted around the gym as he pushed the springboard away from the pommel horse.

“Son-of-a...” I bit down the curse, realizing I’d have to climb over the apparatus instead of ungracefully springing over it.

At each obstacle he added a new hindrance. I swallowed down my complaint and focused on the track ahead of me. Already I was out of breath and beginning to perspire. The pillow swished along the floor beside me. With each step it seemed to grow a little heavier. I really needed to dust off my treadmill and start working out.

My jog slowed and I stopped in front of the metal barricade. It was a turnstile on wheels, like something I’d see at airport security. Except this barrier was only about five feet high. The logical thing would be to connect the pillow to my chest, duck, and push past the metal bar, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. It was the principle of the matter. I understood the pillow was just a metaphorical soul, and wouldn’t give me the sickening sensation Badder had—at least that’s what I assumed. But I’d been naïve, taking Nate at his word. I thought I just had to run the course. Now here he was throwing up more obstacles. Any trust I’d had vanished, that included believing the pillow was just a pillow.

I eyed the barricade. Fine, I’d drag my burden through after me. Dipping my head, I walked forward and pushed against the bar blocking my way. At first it didn’t give, so I leaned against it with all my weight. The bar rotated so fast I fell forward, but not before another bar snapped up and nailed me in the back. I gasped for air and stumbled. The pillow caught on the other side, nearly yanking my arm out of the socket.

“You and the soul must get through the turnstile.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” I mumbled under my breath. I tugged on the pillow, but one of the hands had lodged at the juncture of the rotating wheel. “Come on.” I jerked on the material, but when ripping sounded, I froze. What would that mean if this were an actual soul? Would only part of the spirit get

transported, leaving little bits of the soul stuck in different places like the subway or an electric can opener? “Shit.”

I bent and peered into the cog of the turnstile. The fabric had hooked on a spring. I jiggled the bar, trying to maneuver it so I could slide the fabric free. Nothing budged. I poked my finger inside and pushed on the bar again. Pain shot through the tip of my finger. I gasped and yanked my hand free. A good size blood blister rose from the pad and instinctively shoved my finger into my mouth and sucked. I’m not sure why. It didn’t ease the pain and actually caused the throbbing to intensify. I pulled my finger free and shook it wildly. Again, a stupid move, but I was pissed. I jerked the pillow as hard as I could.

More ripping, and the fabric sprang free—minus one thumb. “Sorry.” I grimaced and poked the stuffing back into the hole where the thumb used to be. “Maybe you don’t need fingers in Heaven.”

I glanced up. Nate stared at me from across the gym but didn’t say anything. I tucked the pillow under my arm and jogged toward the pommel horse. Half way across the floor, I stopped. “What the hell?”

“It’s barbed wire.” Nate walked toward me. “Get down and crawl through.”

What was this, a war zone? “You’re joking?”

“No. It’s meant to simulate difficult terrain.”

I propped one hand on my hip and let the other hang at my side, still gripping the pillow soul. “This is Alaska, not Afghanistan.”

“You never know where you’ll be assigned.” He scribbled a quick note on the clipboard. “But we can stop and run the course again tomorrow if you want.”

I straightened. “No way. I’m doing this now.”

Despite my opinion about the ridiculously stupid course, I was big enough to admit that many times in my life I hadn’t seen the big picture. And since I knew little to nothing about actual fieldwork as a reaper, I was willing to give Nate the benefit of the doubt.

Logic dictated I Velcro the pillow to my chest. Unfortunately my stubbornness usually kicked logic’s ass when push came to shove. Hunkering down like I’d seen in war movies, I shimmied my body forward, dragging the pillow beside me.

The opening narrowed. What the heck? Did GRS have something against rubenesque women? Ropes of pointy wire crisscrossed above me, leaving only a few feet for me to maneuver. About a yard in the pillow snagged on a barb. Feeling the doll had given enough when it sacrificed its thumb, I wiggled backward and detached it. Again I moved forward and again it snagged. He cleared his throat with the kind of sound that covered a laugh. *Bastard.*

There was no way I was getting through this without shredding the pillow. Drastic measures were in order. Coming to the decision I’d rather suffer the sticky feel of a soul than Nate’s condescending attitude, I shoved the pillow under me. The Velcro pads fused.

Though a little awkward, the pillow made moving a whole lot easier. Instead of shimmying, I was

able to push my body forward, and slide along the polished floor. Even though the muscles in my arms quivered like a frightened Chihuahua, I felt pretty smug by the time I reached the end of the barbed wire enclosure.

I struggled to my feet, ungracefully clawed my way over the vault, and then shuffled to the wall of ropes. The doll bounced against me, its head bopping mine every time I took a step. I pushed it to the side but the pillow rebounded back and blocked my view. I grabbed the soft head and shoved it against my neck, clamping down with my chin. That did the trick.

The rope wall spread out and up. My arm shook when I raised it to grasp the rope above my head. Stepping onto the lowest rung, I began my climb, making sure to keep all the weight on my legs. The trek was slow but I progressed nonetheless. Like I said, I would not fail. I sent up a silent “Thanks” when I reached the top. Nothing out of the norm had happened. Nobody dumped oil on me from above, or let loose a swarm of spider monkeys to attack me.

I turned my head to see where the ledge was located. The head of the pillow sprang free from my grip. “Crap.” I stretched my neck, trying to contain it again, but couldn’t reach. “Stupid—thing.”

In such a precarious position I couldn’t flatten myself against the wall to get ahold of the pillow’s head. Each attempt caused my arms to shake. The possibility of tumbling to the ground became a very real threat.

Abandoning my efforts, I looked over my shoulder and extended my leg along the ledge. Nate hadn’t climbed the rope ladder when sabotaging the course, so I hoped there were no hidden surprises for me on the narrow ledge. I shifted my weight and using the handle on the scaffolding again, eased onto the platform. Unlike the first run I couldn’t hunker down. There was a big frickin’ pillow in my way. But neither could I see around it. Again I crammed the stuffed head under my chin.

Inch by inch, I scooted along the wood, feeling my way with the toe of my shoe. Luckily there were no pitfalls. The rope hung in front of me, taunting me to grab it. Learning my lesson during my last run, I snaked it with my hand and wrapped the rope around my foot. I’d seen it done on TV, so I knew it had to work. Relief washed through me when I didn’t zip to the bottom of the line.

Though awkward with the pillow attached to my chest. I slid down without injuring myself, and hopped onto the trampoline.

At this point the pillow became a growing hindrance. Sure it might break the fall if I missed the next trampoline, but it was tough keeping my balance. I yanked the pillow off my chest and attached it to my wrist again. Bounce-bounce, and I landed on the smaller trampoline.

The end was in sight. Only three balance beams and a trip around the track. I jumped down and mounted the first beam. The deep roar of a motor revved and suddenly a blast of air hit me from the right side, almost pushing me off. My body tilted to the left and my foot lifted.

“Ahhh!” I did one of those tottering *will she or won’t she fall* stances. The wind cut off my breath. Coherent words were impossible. The arm opposite my lifted foot shot out in an effort to not fall. It was only a about a yard drop, but to me it might as well have been a cliff. I hovered, my body

splayed like a five-pointed star. The pillow lifted and I knew I was going over. Reaching deep, I dipped into the ninja skills lurking inside me, and lowered my foot to the balance beam. Thank God for ample hips. I shoved it into the wind, which brought me fully onto my narrow perch. Now balanced, I yanked the pillow to me and slammed it against my chest. Looking to my right I saw Nate standing next to a fan. The thing was ginormous. Why hadn't I noticed it before? Probably because I hadn't suspected treachery.

Refocusing on my course, I tucked the pillow head under my chin once again and scooted along the beam. At the end, I jumped down and mounted the next. The wind continued to batter me but I was too determined. At this point it could have been a fiery tornado and I wouldn't have fallen.

When I made it to the end of the last balance beam the wind stopped and the roar of the fan died. I didn't look at Nate. I was too close to conquering this *mutha* of an obstacle course. Jogging forward, I tensed, ready for anything he threw at me. But nothing happened. And when I crossed the finish line, Nate stood waiting with a genuine look of surprise, and might I say admiration on his face.

I stopped in front of him and dropped the pillow, glaring at him. "Can't handle being a reaper, eh? Well suck it, Cramer. Looks like you've got a new partner."

With that I strode across the gym to the locker room. Yeah, there was a new angel of death in town.

Chapter 11

By six o'clock that night all my righteous indignation had evaporated into a mass of bruises, rope burns, and pulled muscles. A long, cylindrical black and blue patch stretched across my lower back where the turnstile had smacked me. And trying to remove my sports bra had turned into a painful wrestling match that left me lying on the bed, whimpering and defeated.

"Vella!" For once I was grateful for her casual attitude on dropping by at all hours of the day. "I need help." At that point I had no pride. All I wanted was a hot shower and if that meant exposing myself to my best friend, well, so be it. "Vella!"

The door to my bedroom sprung open. "What's wrong?"

I wiggled the arm I'd gotten free from the spandex torture. "Help."

"Oh my giddy aunt." She closed the door and walked to the bed. "What happened?"

"I can't get out of my bra."

"I can see that. I mean where did you get all those bruises? You look worse than I did after the greased pig catching contest at the fair."

"I had to run the obstacle course today. Special stress on obstacle." I rolled to my back, one arm still pinned to the side of my head. "Everything hurts."

"Can you sit up?"

I rocked forward a couple of times, but the muscles in my stomach lit off a loud protest. "No."

"How about rolling to your side?"

"Nooooo."

Vella propped a hand on her hip. "Can you lift both arms over your head?"

"Think of me as a vegetable. I am incapable of movement and thought at this point."

"All right." Vella held out her arms with her palms facing me. This meant she had an idea. Whether it would cause me excruciating pain was still to be seen. "I'm going to help you sit up. Then I'm going to work that sports contraption off you."

"K."

"I apologize right now if I happen to touch your boobs. Copping a feel is not my intention."

My boobs had seen a lot of action lately. Too bad none of it was of an amorous nature. "Noted."

After climbing onto the bed, she shoved her hands under my shoulders and hefted me into a sitting

position. My groan morphed into a long moan. Each stomach muscle tightened and protested. Who knew I had so many muscles. From the pain radiating through me I swore I'd been born with twice the amount.

"I'm too young to be in this much agony." Another whimper squeezed from me. I'm not a very good patient. Kind of whiny.

"You need a long hot shower and an adult beverage to relax your muscles." Vella forced my arm down and through the chest band of the sports bra, popping me free from the spandex jail. With a quick swoosh, she yanked the garment off of me. Even my bra flab hurt. "Now lay back."

I tried to ease myself back but my quivering muscles were having none of it. I hit the bed like a falling boulder and bounced a few times. Vella climbed off the mattress and lifted my leg, extracting the running shoe. I lay there, bare breasted, unable to manage a modest arm across my chest.

"Lift your butt so I can get your pants off."

Right. Like that was going to happen. When I didn't move, she shook her head and yanked my yoga pants, dragging my undies with them. Okay, I wasn't hurting that much. I curled my fingers around their elastic waistband and held on. It had been a long time since anybody had seen me naked and if it was going to happen again, I didn't want it to be with my best friend.

A final tug and I was free from all my stretchy workout clothes. With great effort, I rolled to my side and pushed myself up. "You're a good friend."

"I know." Vella tossed the pile of clothes into my laundry basket, and then looked at me. She cocked her head. "For having three kids you've got some nice tits."

"As much as I appreciate the compliment, I don't want to talk about my boobs with you."

"I'm just saying, a lot of women don't keep their perk. You're lucky."

Ignoring her, I pointed to my open closet. "Robe, please."

She lifted my fluffy white robe from the hook and draped it over her arm. Then she held out her hands. "Up you go."

I locked fingers with her and allowed her to pull me to my feet. More pain radiated through me. What was the saying? The second day was always the worst. I couldn't imagine my body hurting more unless somebody set me on fire. "Thank you."

"Go take a hot shower and I'll fix something to eat." She slid the wrap up my arms and settled it on my shoulders. "You should relax the rest of the night."

Pulling the lapel closed, I nodded. "Okay." I straightened and grimaced. "Thanks again for your help."

She waved me away. "Go."

I shuffled to the bathroom and locked myself inside. Turning the water on as hot as it would go, I dropped the robe and climbed in. Though I couldn't actually say the heat eased my pain, it certainly loosened some of the tightness.

My hand brushed the two pendants lying against my chest. I held them between my index finger

and thumb, gently rubbing them. I wasn't convinced the raven charm had supernatural powers, but I was willing to invest a little effort to find out.

Forcing myself to relax, I concentrated on the charm and let the steaming water flow over me. After a few seconds the sensation of being stroked with feathers bushed across my skin. I continued to rub, enjoying the feel. The tension in my neck and shoulders eased. After another minute the sensation faded, taking with it, a little of my pain.

Jets of water pummeled my back. There was no doubt I still hurt, but not as much as before I'd entered the shower. Maybe there was more to the charm than I'd originally thought. Maybe there was still more to discover. I really hoped so since I didn't get everlasting beauty and strength when I became a reaper.

After twenty bliss-filled minutes the water turned cold. I shut off the shower, feeling a lot better. Another ten minutes found me in the kitchen, stomach growling, and throat parched.

Vella and Bronte were busy cutting up a variety of cheese, fruit, and vegetables, laying them on a platter.

"It looks like a snack-platter for dinner," I said. Truly, it was one of my favorite meals. Who didn't love hors d'oeuvres? It was like a party without all the work.

"Quick and easy," Vella said. She turned, holding the tray. My mouth watered. "I hope you don't mind me mixing up a little of my homemade salsa too."

"No, I love your salsa." My eyes cut to my daughter. "And you're helping?"

Bronte glanced up. "Yeah, I know you had a hard day."

Her smile was sweet and innocent, which put me instantly on alert. "That's so sweet of you to help." I shuffled to one of the chairs at the table and sat. "It really takes the pressure off knowing you're willing to pitch in." Bronte's smile tightened just a fraction. "And to do it out of the kindness of your heart, not expecting anything in return." My features slackened. "It really means a lot."

"Sure." The word rushed out, pitched a bit higher than was natural. "We have to help out each other. Give and take."

"Exactly." I nodded, continuing to hold her gaze.

She blinked several times before looking back at the tray of cheese she was arranging. "But..."

Here it came. She wanted something. Rarely did Bronte do anything without a calculated reason. "But nothing," I said, cutting her off. "You're awesome. Best daughter ever."

"Yeah—yeah—that's true." She nodded. "I'm a pretty great daughter." Her head continued to bounce like a bobble-head doll. "Which is why you should let me go to Payton Alexander's Halloween party."

Okay, it wasn't as bad as I thought. "Who's Payton Alexander?"

Vella set a bottle of Corona in front of me. "Doesn't his daddy own the furniture store on C Street?"

"The guy who screams in his TV commercials?" I took a drink, stalling for time.

“Yeah, that’s him, but Payton isn’t creepy like that.” Bronte placed several mouth-watering selections on a small plate and set it in front of me. A silent bribe to sway my vote. “Actually he’s really shy.”

“Cute?” Vella asked.

A flush crept across Bronte’s cheeks, telling me exactly what I needed to know. She shrugged. “Yeah, he’s all right.”

That meant gorgeous in Bronte lingo. “Huh.” I took another drink, but didn’t say anything.

“So, can I go?”

I stared at my daughter. “Who else will be there?”

“Fang and William.”

Bronte’s best friends. Fang was a cute little Chinese girl with a serious case of *the Goth*. Constantly dressed in black and skulls, she looked more like a reaper than I did. William was the nerd of nerds, but cute as all get out. I was fairly certain he had a crush on Bronte. Not that she noticed—or that she let on. “Is that all?”

“And Kelly Huff.” Bronte continued to needlessly rearrange the bits of cheese on the tray. “She got her license and offered to drive us.”

Red warning lights blared in my mind. “Kelly Huff? When did you guys become friends?” From what I knew of Kelly she was the most popular girl in tenth grade. Queen of the in-crowd. And a mean girl. She and Bronte butted heads a few times, so I didn’t understand their new camaraderie. Then again, who really understood the mind of a teenage girl?

“We’re not friends.” Bronte plopped in the chair and bit into a cracker, chewed, and swallowed. “She likes William.”

“The Queen of Mean likes dear, sweet William?” Vella asked. “She’ll eat him alive.”

Bronte snorted. “Yeah, when I told him, he broke out in hives.”

I traced the blue pattern ringing my plate. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with you going to a party with a bunch of teenagers.”

“Who else would I go with?” My daughter’s head gave a little shake. The indignant kind that told me clearly I was an idiot. “I’m a teenager. My friends are teenagers.”

The urge to tell her no pushed against my throat and it was difficult to repress. Trying to be reasonable, I bit back my retort. It wasn’t that long ago I was in high school. The reason why everything seemed so important or monumental escaped me now, but I was trying to be understanding. “Will there be chaperones at the party? And by chaperones I don’t mean older siblings. Parents, grandparents, a youth minister perhaps.”

“I think his parents are going to be there or next door at another Halloween party.” Bronte rested her arms on the table and leaned toward me. “Please? It’s like, the first thing I’ve asked to go to since dad died.”

Oh, she was good. Playing the dead dad card. Even though I couldn’t argue the fact she’d

basically been housebound for the past year, I still wasn't comfortable letting her go. "Let me think about it."

She groaned. "Come on, Mom."

"If you need an answer now, it'll be no." I leaned back in the chair and winced when the bruise on my back hit the wooden rungs. "But I promise I'll think about it."

She rolled her eyes and stood. "Fine." Turning, she skulked toward the door. "No matter what, I'm not trick or treating with Thing One and Thing Two this year."

"I didn't ask you to." My mom volunteered to take Bryce and Breck around her neighborhood. She was militant about checking Halloween candy for razor blades and straight pins. Plus, then I wouldn't have to shiver in the cold while my sons strategically hit every house within a five block radius. "Why don't you have your own party here?"

She stopped but didn't look at me. "What's the point? Everybody will be at Payton's party."

With that last jab of guilt, she left the kitchen. I sighed and took a long tug on my bottle. My daughter had never been into what was cool or following the popular crowd. It was one of the things I loved about her. From a very young age she'd marched to her own drum. It looked like those days were at an end.

Vella slid into Bronte's vacated chair. "You gonna let her go?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "Teenagers, a party, and driving is never a good idea." Vella didn't have kids, but she had a ton of nieces and nephews. A few of them she'd practically raised. "Do you think I should?"

I expected some of her southern philosophy. Maybe something like, "You've got to let your kids kill their own rats." Instead she cocked her head and said, "Hell no."

"Why?"

"Besides the fact this Kelly Huff is obviously using Bronte to sink her claws into our sweet William, you've already lost your husband to a car accident. Do you really want to take a chance on your daughter's life? Especially with all the crazy people out on Halloween?"

Her words felt like a slap, but she'd voiced the exact concerns I'd been thinking. My memories of Jeff's accident were still so vivid they took my breath away. Imagining that with one of my children made me want to vomit. "No, I don't."

"She'll probably hate you for a while, but she'll get over it." Vella reached across the table and patted my hand. "The last thing you want is to reap your own child."

"Wow, you don't pull any punches." I gripped her hand and squeezed, letting her know I wasn't angry. "But you're right." I shook my head, searching for the right words. "I wouldn't come back from that."

Pulling her hand from mine, she sat back in the chair. "None of us would, Lisa."

Silence stretched between us. I popped another hunk of cheese in my mouth and chewed. Swallowing, I looked at her. "You're a good friend."

“I know.” She lifted her bottle, drank, and then lowered it again. “You are too, despite this whole Angel of Death thing.”

“Thanks—I think.” Though the shower eased some of my aches, my body still throbbed. I sat forward and rolled my shoulders. “I’m not twenty anymore.” I sighed. “What if I can’t do this reaper job?”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I could be killed or maimed.” I hesitated. “Or humiliated.” I rubbed my hands over my face. “God knows I’ve already done that enough.”

“Listen.” Vella tapped her bright pink nail on the table. “This might not be the best situation or your dream job, but it’s going to put food on the table. Hell, I’d let you come work for me, but business has been slow.”

Though Vella was my best friend, the thought of working at her hair salon, listening to Jonathan gossip all day made the hair on my neck prickle. At times I wasn’t sure how Vella and I became such good friends. I didn’t care about celebrity gossip, make up, or name brands. Because of her husband’s high position at the oil company, she was involved in a lot of charities and social events. Whereas, I attended hockey games and constructed paper-mache turkey heads for school plays. We were the epitome of opposites attracting. I think that’s why we worked.

“Thanks.” I propped my elbows on the table, not wanting to put pressure on my back. “You’re right. At this point I need to tough it out.” I attempted a cheery smile. “Who knows, maybe I’ll be the best reaper this side of the Arctic...once I stop hurting.”

“Have another beer. It will help cure what ails you.”

“I doubt it. Besides, I need a good night sleep tonight.” My cheery smile tightened into a humorless grin. “God only knows what’s in store for me tomorrow.”

“Did Nate give you any clue?”

“Only that we *hit the seventh*. I hope that’s not some metaphorical term for one of the circles of Hell.”

“Well if it is, give my Uncle Donny Jo a message from me. Tell him I did not end up pregnant by Al Ambler. Nor did I have to resort to mud wrestling or lap dances to get through college.” She took a swig of beer and then set it on the table with more force than necessary. “Oh!” She jabbed a finger at me. “And tell him Aunt Edith knew all along he was cheating on her with Alvaretta Hunt—though that’s not what we called the woman.”

“Yeah, I got it.” A shiver skidded up my spine. “Hopefully, I won’t meet Uncle Donny Jo or any other of your relatives tomorrow. Or ever.”

“Well, if you do, don’t turn your back on them.” She pinned me with a gaze and nodded her head. “I’m just sayin’.”

Hell just got a whole lot scarier.

Chapter 12

At exactly ten the next morning I pushed through the front door of GRS. Nate leaned next to the elevator, thumbing through the Anchorage Newspaper. I straightened, trying to hide any indication that yesterday's training torture left me nearly incapacitated.

"What are you doing down here?" I stopped at the elevator and punched the button. "Afraid I wouldn't show up this morning?"

"The thought had crossed my mind." He smiled and folded the newspaper, tossing it into the recycle bin. "But—" He patted me on the back. Pain shot from my shoulder and down my back, nearly forcing a groan from me. I ground my teeth together to prevent a whimper from escaping. "I knew you were made of stronger stuff."

"Yep." I stepped away from him. "That's me. Tough as nails."

The elevator doors slid open and he held up his hand. "After you—partner."

Was that sarcasm? It was difficult to tell with him sometimes, so I just assumed it was. "What fun things do we have planned for today?" I leaned against the back wall of the elevator. "Torture with hot poker. Shoving toothpicks under my fingers. Five hours of being licked by cats while strapped to a chair?"

"What's the matter?" He slid his key card along the slot and pressed the number seven-button. "Yesterday too much for you?"

"No." Pasting on a sweet smile, I crossed my arms, ignoring that ache that emitted around the area of my bra flab. Until last night I hadn't realized I had muscles there. "But since I passed, and I'm here today, I thought you might have some new challenges for me."

The doors squeezed shut and he turned to face me. "Tests are over. Today you see Command Central and meet some of the higher ranking members of GRS."

"Sounds fun." At least the idea of a tour did. I wasn't sure what I would have done if he told me I had to lift or climb something. My stomach did a little flip when the elevator began to climb. "By higher ranking, do you mean reapers?"

"Reapers, command personnel—and others."

And others sounded ominous but I didn't question him further. Once we reached the seventh floor, I'd find out what *others* were. No sense in stirring up my suspicious nature more than it already

was. “Cool.”

We rode the rest of the way in silence. I tried to appear unfazed by what waited for me on the seventh floor, and Nate seemed determined to break my calm façade by burning a hole in the side of my head with his stare. I ignored him. After another few seconds the elevator lurched and the doors opened.

It took all my will not to gawk at the sight. One large room spread out in front of me. Smoky colored floor-to-ceiling windows soared up the front wall, letting in the bright October sun. Raised voices, printers churning out copies, and the frantic tapping of keyboards whizzed around us.

“Ladies first.” Nate indicated I should lead.

I stepped onto the blue carpet but didn’t advance. The room reminded me of the bridge on a space ship. Computers lined one of the walls and in the center of the room was a circular elevated platform. What looked like radars pinged, registering tiny green blips on the screens. But it was the man standing in the center who drew my attention.

Yowza! I didn’t think men like him existed in real life. The dark gray t-shirt he wore stretched across his broad back, and his biceps rolled from under the tight armholes. The fabric clung to his body and dipped into a pair of gray camouflage pants that hugged a rear end that made my fingers itch to touch it. I blew out a long, silent breath but didn’t fan myself. I did have some control.

“This is Command Central. It’s the heart of GRS,” Nate said.

Not pulling my gaze from the mouth-watering Adonis, I pointed. “Who’s that?” Nate snorted and with great difficulty, I looked at him. “What?”

“That’s Constantine.” A smirk turned up the corner of his lip. “He always gets that reaction.”

“What reaction.” I tried to play innocent but knew I was busted.

“The slack jaw, hypnotic gaze, and the fact that even though you’re standing in the command center of GRS, all you can focus on is him.”

“I am not...slack jawed.” The rest of it? Guilty. “But seriously, you should have his picture on the recruiting pamphlet. I wouldn’t have hesitated signing up.”

At that moment Constantine turned. “Nate.” He hopped off the platform. “And Lisa Carron, our newest recruit.” He held out his hand. “I’m sorry for the circumstances of you being here, but I’m glad to have you.”

“And I’m glad to be had—here, I mean.”

Forget his silver gray eyes that seemed to glow, his silky voice, or the thick black hair that begged my fingers to run through it, my knees nearly buckled when I grasped his hand. A jolt of electricity shot through my body, warming me from my toes to the tips of my ears. Maybe it was a reaper thing, a way to acknowledge each other without acknowledging each other. Whatever it was, I’d be shaking his hand whenever possible.

He released me and hooked his thumbs on his front pockets. “Nate said you breezed through the obstacle course yesterday.”

I highly doubted those were the words Nate used. “Breezed, stumbled, the main thing is I made it.”

“Exactly. Come on, I’ll show you around.”

Oh happy day. Constantine walked to the center of the room, giving me another glimpse of his rear end. I followed in his wake. Damn he smelled good. If Heaven had a scent it would smell like this guy. My heart skipped a beat and I silently sighed. It was one of those *he’s so dreamy* sighs, usually saved for teen heartthrobs.

“This is our tracking station.” He pointed to the blipping radars. “It’s where we monitor impending deaths.”

Several green dots blinked on the screen, drawing my attention away from my incredibly hot superior. Some of the blips were bigger than the others. My stomach clenched at the idea those were people, going about their daily lives, unaware their time on Earth was counting down.

“Tempting, isn’t it?” Constantine asked.

I glanced at him. “What is?”

“Wanting to rush out.” His gaze held mine. The man must have read minds. “Warn them.”

“Yeah, it is.” No point in lying. “Does anybody ever do that?”

“It’s happened, but it doesn’t help.”

The need to know battled with my knowledge that ignorance was bliss, and won. “Why not?”

“Only guardian angels can interfere. If a reaper tries to prevent the death it will still happen. Maybe not in the way planned, but it will still happen.”

“That’s depressing.” I admit I had toyed with the idea of preventing some of the deaths I would encounter. But what was the point if the person ended dying anyway—maybe horrifically?

“Depends on how you look at death, I guess.” Constantine stepped around me. “No doubt your opinion of it will change in time.”

My eyes cut to Nate. “Did your opinion change?”

He nodded. “Oh yeah.”

Before I had time to ask him how, Constantine pointed to a large, digital board hanging on the wall. Names were lit in green, and a series of yellow boxes glowed behind them. “These are the reapers stationed here in Alaska.”

I noticed my name at the bottom of the list. Only one box was lit. “There’s a lot more than I thought.” Nate was in the number one spot with a string of yellow lights behind his name. “What do those mean?”

“Each light represents a reaped soul. Everybody has a quota for the year.”

“Why do I have a box?” I hadn’t reaped yet and figured it was some kind of confidence building tactic.

“Roy Badder,” Nate said behind me.

“I didn’t reap him.” Sure, I’d touched him, but Nate did all the heavy lifting. Plus it was an

accident. So I didn't feel I deserved the credit. "I just held onto him."

"Same thing," Constantine echoed what Nate had said in the Holiday bathroom.

"So, it's like a scoreboard?"

"Exactly. Soon you'll be up there with Nate."

My gaze skated up the list of reapers. God, I hoped not. Trying to infuse my voice with awe, I widened my eyes. "Impressive."

Nate grunted. "Right."

Okay, so maybe sincerity wasn't my best attribute when it came to him.

"Anyway," Constantine continued, "see the blinking square at the end of Edgar Cramdon's quota?" I nodded. "That means his client is dead but hasn't been reaped yet."

I shifted my weight to my other foot and crossed my arms over my chest. "Dead? For how long?"

"Not sure." Constantine took out his phone and scrolled through several screens. "Eighteen hours."

"Aren't we supposed to reap right away?" I couldn't imagine some poor soul being stuck while their body assumed room temperature. "I mean—it seems the considerate thing to do."

"Normally, yes." He shoved his phone back in his pocket. "But it was a suicide."

"What difference does that make?"

"It's not policy, so don't quote me on it, but we let suicides cool their heels before letting them cross over. Then maybe they'll think twice about taking their life the next time around."

There was a whole lot of information coming at me. Not *here's the break room and the pudding in the fridge belongs to Lois* information. This was secret of the universe stuff. "What do you mean—next time?"

"Reincarnation," Constantine said as if he'd just said something as generic as muffin or socks.

"So...we come back?" Duh, he'd just said that, but it was the most intelligent thing I could manage while my brain drank the information. "By choice?"

"Of course. How else would you learn lessons?" He smirked, revealing a dimple I hadn't noticed. "Walk in another man's shoes, so to speak."

"So I've reincarnated before?" Of course my imagination instantly shot to a princess or Gandhi.

"Absolutely." He walked to the closest computer terminal and typed in some information. "Let's see when and who you were."

"Get out of here." All of my inhibitions evaporated. I joined him, leaning close to him in an effort to see the monitor. "Are you googling this?"

"More like ethereal Googling. This computer connects directly to the Akashic Records."

"I've heard of those. They contain everything that's happened in history, right?"

He turned his head and smiled at me. "Very good."

I smiled back, which was a better option than acting on my impulse to run my tongue along his lips.

“In a nutshell, the Akashic Records chronicle every second of every hour in history since time began.”

“Every second?”

His eyebrows lifted and he nodded.

“So drunk dialing my college ex incident?”

“Recorded. Sorry.”

“Crap.” I turned my attention to the computer monitor. “So who was I?”

“Let’s see, a Mesopotamian priestess.”

“Really? I hadn’t expected something so glamorous.”

He grimaced. “But you were sacrificed on the altar.”

“I wasn’t a virgin, was I?”

“Yeah.” His gaze cut to me again. “Sorry.”

“Figures. What else?” Surely not all my lives had ended so...unsatisfactorily.

“A Hebrew slave in Egypt. You were crushed by one of the pyramid blocks. A goat herder in Persia. Starvation.”

“Starvation?” I wasn’t sure how the whole reincarnation thing worked but I couldn’t imagine not having had the same driving need to eat as I did today. “Why didn’t I just eat my goats?”

Constantine gave a nonchalant shrug. “Don’t know. Details are sketchy.” He refocused on my life data. “You were also a Civil War soldier, a rice farmer in Asia, a milk maiden in eighteenth century Europe, and...oh.” He pointed to the screen. “A prince to England’s monarchy.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about. Which prince was I?”

“Uh.” His brow furrowed. “Henry the Eighth’s son.”

My excitement plummeted. “Wait, he didn’t have any sons that lived, right?”

“Yeah, you died at birth.”

“Figures.” I straightened. “Okay, as fascinating as this is, perhaps too much information isn’t a good thing.” I’m sure there were deep spiritual reasons why most of my past lives ended tragically, or seemed completely mundane. Maybe that was the equivalent of building character. “Now I understand why we don’t remember our past lives. Actually I’m grateful. So depressing.”

“Not everybody can be Cleopatra,” Nate said. “The world needs goat herders too.”

“Comforting.” Anxious to move on, I clapped my hands together and rubbed. “What’s next?”

“The rules.” Nate picked up a thick book off the counter. At first I thought it was a phonebook. He shoved it at me. “Read it. Learn them.”

“All of it?” I took the regulations from him. “Will there be a test?”

“Yeah, every time you reap a soul. That’s your test,” Nate said.

“I can’t take this home. Somebody might see it.” I looked at Constantine. “Aren’t I supposed to keep my reaperhood a secret?”

“Yes.” Constantine took the book and handed me a phone. “That’s why we use this instead.” A

short huff of laughter escaped him and he shook his head. “Nate prefers an old school approach when it comes to training.”

“Is this mine?” A shot of excitement raced through me. The phone I held was several versions newer than the dinosaur I’d been using the last four years.

“All yours,” Constantine said. “It’s important that we’re able to reach you when needed.” He stood behind me and reached around my arm. His biceps rubbed against my upper arm. “This is the GRS app.” He tapped on the tiny skull icon. “All the information you need is in here.”

I nodded, but was having a hard time concentrating. “Where are the regulations?”

He tapped the documents tab, and then *Regulations and Procedures*. “Most of the stuff is common sense. Don’t tell you friends about GRS. You’ve got to reap the soul you’re assigned to. No afterlife messages to loved ones.”

I craned my neck and looked at him. “Really? Why not?”

“The chance of exposure are too great. People start asking questions. Pretty soon the grieving wife is on your doorstep, begging you to find out where the life insurance policy is.”

“Oh.” I looked back at the phone. “It just seems like a nice courtesy we could provide.”

Having some afterlife message from Jeff would have definitely helped with the grieving process. Something along the lines of, “Thanks for being such a great wife. Tell the kids I love them.” Or maybe, “By the way, you’re next in line to be a grim reaper, so maybe stay out of the Holiday gas station if you don’t want to pursue that line of work.” What I got was radio silence.

“It’s not,” Nate said. “So get the idea out of your head.”

“I didn’t say I was going to do it,” I argued, pretending that I hadn’t just been thinking of ways around this rule.

“You didn’t have to. I’m beginning to read your body language and you were definitely thinking about it.”

I ignored him. Nate didn’t know me, and he wasn’t the boss of me. “Moving on,” I said, dropping the phone into my pocket.

“Moving on,” Constantine echoed. “Let’s have a look at Purgatory.”

“Purgatory?” I followed him, skipping a few steps to catch up. “You mean *the* Purgatory?”

“Yes and no.” He pressed a button on the wall and two doors slid open. “They’re containment cells used until the soul can be delivered. So, in a way it’s Purgatory. Every command center has one.”

We stepped into the room. A low hum buzzed across my skin. “What is that?” A shiver raced through me. “It’s making the hair on my neck stand on end.”

“That’s from the ectoplasmic barriers.”

“Pretend English isn’t my first language.”

He looked at me. “It’s magic.”

“See, that I understand,” I said, walking forward. “But I thought we gave spirits to our porters.”

“Most are, but in some cases their fate is undecided, so they have to hang out here a while.” Constantine stopped beside me. “You shouldn’t have this problem though. All your reaps will go through your porter.”

“Speaking of which.” I crossed my arms. The action was done more out of dread than confidence. I wasn’t sure I was ready for a one-on-one with my porter. Pick had been uber creepy, and knowing me I’d get someone even freakier. “When do I meet mine?”

“No time like the present,” Nate said from behind me.

He sounded a little too gleeful. I was instantly suspicious. “Will I have the same porter as Jeff?”

“That’s doubtful.” Constantine pressed the button and closed us inside Purgatory. “He’s probably been reassigned since there was a year between Jeff and you.”

With a deep breath, I faced him and circled my shoulders, as if preparing to spar. I circled my head and leveled my gaze in front of me. “Let’s do this.”

“For the initial meeting all you need to do is call for your porter,” Nate said.

“Like when you called for Pick?”

“Exactly.” He pulled out his phone and pointed it at me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

A wicked grin split his face. “I want to capture your expression when you see your porter for the first time.”

Jackass.

I jabbed an accusing finger at him. “What about the no tell rule? You can’t show the picture to anybody.”

“I can’t show non-GRS employees. However, I can post it on our inter-office web page.”

I looked at Constantine, my finger remaining aimed at Nate. “Can he do that?”

“Yeah, sorry, it boosts employee morale.” He patted me on the shoulder and another zing of electricity shot through me. I flinched and scowled. “And I’m sure this won’t be the last time he captures *the moment*. Nate loves this shit.”

I lowered my arm but continued to glare at my partner. “Okay, but remember, two can play that game.”

“Bring it on.” His gaze captured mine. Clearly he didn’t think I had revenge in me. Ha, the joke was on him. I had kids. Conniving was my middle name. “Are you going to call or should we go home for the day?” he continued.

“I kind of like the idea of calling it a day.”

“Not an option,” Constantine said, putting an end to our bickering. “Now, if you’d be so kind.”

Determined to show Nate I was made of stronger stuff than he believed me to be, I took a big breath and called, “Porter.”

Nothing happened.

Constantine shifted, crossing his arms. “Try again.”

Even his simple request sounded like a command. Again, a tiny niggle of doubt that he was just a reaper ghosted through me. I cleared my throat. “Porter.”

My heartbeat sped up when a thin pink line of light appeared at the end of the room. Instantly, I cued in on the pink and a tiny wave of relief washed through me. I hadn’t considered I might get a female porter. The tension eased from my posture.

Just like at the Holiday station, the light widened and spread, forming a door. I glanced at Nate, but the jackass still had his phone pointed at me. I ignored him and turned back to the dimming light. Seconds ticked by as the scene solidified. For some reason I couldn’t blink or look away. It was like opening a secret Santa gift at an office party. Would it be something good or a gag gift? After what seemed like forever, the door slid open.

Nate’s camera clicked to my right a few times, but I was unable to look away from what I could only describe as the biggest gag gift ever. I pointed. “What—the hell—is—that?”

Chapter 13

Well, it certainly wasn't a woman, but I wasn't sure it was a man either. *Creepy transvestite circus master* came to mind. Its yellow eyes peered at me over the top of small round sunglasses. Tall and thin, its stance was almost feminine. A shiny gold blouse draped its torso and bright purple leopard leggings hugged long, slender legs. The only masculine thing about the porter was the heavy heeled black boots. Spikes jutted from the sides and chains circled the ankles. Definitely a deterrent for getting too close—like I needed another reason not to get near this...porter.

“Oh crap,” Constantine said.

I whipped around to face him. “Crap what? Why crap?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Nate added. I spun to him. He lowered his phone-camera. “This can’t be right.”

“Oh my God, would somebody tell me what’s going on!”

“That’s—”

“Hal Lee Lewya,” the porter cut in with a deep purr. Okay, I went with male. He gave a low bow. “At your service, pretty lady.” Hal straightened and smiled. A single gold canine winked at me, making him look like a 1980’s music video star. “And you must be my new reaper.” He tipped a tiny purple top hat in my direction. “A pleasure to finally be reassigned.”

“More like a surprise you’ve been reassigned,” Nate said.

“Why?” My gaze bounced between Constantine and Nate. “Why a surprise?”

“Hal had a little trouble with his last reaper.” Constantine took a step forward, partially blocking my view. “Decided to take him on a little trip to Hell.”

“What do you mean?” I remembered Nate telling me not to touch Pick. The reason was sinking in. “Like *Black Friday at Target* trip to Hell or literally a trip to *Hell*?”

“Literally—” Constantine let the rest of his statement hang, unspoken.

Hal waved a bejeweled hand in the air. “You got him back. I don’t know what the big fuss was.”

The floor shifted almost imperceptibly under my feet. My heart jumped to my throat. Earthquakes in Alaska are common, but I still hated them. I glanced at Nate. With a flick of his hand he motioned me closer. Seemed like a good idea for protection’s sake. Obviously there was a lot going on I didn’t understand.

“The big fuss is that,” Constantine said, “he’s spent the last nine years in a mental institution because of what he saw. And this isn’t the first time you’ve pull a stunt like this, or do you need reminding?”

When Constantine spoke his voice was set low. Power rolled off him, as if emitting an invisible electrical charge. The light on the wall flickered. I took another step toward Nate. For the first time, I really looked at Constantine. Not just his chiseled body and stunning face, but all of him. I assumed he was nothing more than a GRS bigwig. Now I wasn’t sure he was even human. The way Hal Lee Lewya cast his gaze toward the floor told me I was probably right.

“No, you don’t need to rehash my sins. I assure you, Constantine, I have learned my lesson and have been thoroughly punished.” Hal lifted his stare. “Enough to satisfy even you.”

“I doubt that.”

Silence blanketed the room. Unsure what I should do, I cleared my throat. That drew everybody’s attention. “Soooo, is Hal my porter,”—which I seriously hoped he wasn’t—“or am I to be assigned somebody new.”

“No.” Constantine looked at me. “He’s yours.” He paused. “Sorry.”

Oh goodie.

I was learning that things at GRS were what they were, and there wasn’t a lot I could do about it. “Well then…” I turned to Hal. “My name is Lisa Carron.”

Hal’s yellow eyes drifted slowly down my body and back up to rest on my face. Okay, I needed a shower after that little perusal, but I ignored his rudeness. Or maybe he wasn’t being rude. Maybe a thorough body scan was considered proper behavior for one of the Netherworld’s minions. At that point I didn’t care. I just wanted him gone.

His long slim fingers toyed with a wide metal cuff at his wrist. “Lisa.”

The velvety purr of his voice wrapped around me and tugged me forward. I stepped toward him, but Nate grabbed my arm. My gaze tracked from his hand to face.

“Going somewhere?” he asked.

“What?” It took a couple of seconds for the situation to register. “I mean…” I glared at Hal. “That wasn’t very nice.”

He shrugged. “A little porter humor.”

“What, luring me in so you can drag me to Hell too?”

“You hurt me.” He pressed a delicate hand to his gold shirt. “I told you I’d learned my lesson.”

“No,” I pulled my arm out of Nate’s grasp, “you said you’ve been punished. It’s not the same thing.”

He tilted up his chin and laughed. “You’re clever, Lisa Carron.” Slowly his laughter died. “I will remember that.”

Unsure what he meant, I looked at Constantine. “Are we done here?”

“Yes, I think that’s quite enough for today.”

I looked at Hal again and mimicked Nate's dismissal of Pick. "Our transaction is complete."

With that, Hal bowed and stepped backward into the elevator. "Until next time, Lisa Carron."

Again the urge to move forward gripped me but this time I was ready. It took all my will, but I remained rooted to my spot. The doors closed, swallowing Hal and releasing me from his compulsion. I slowly turned to face the boys. "Okay, would somebody please tell me why I've got a psychopath for a porter?"

"I wish I could, Lisa." Constantine ran his fingers through his thick hair, worry etching his face. The locks fell back into place, but I didn't find them so alluring this time. "I'll check into it and let you know."

"He's dangerous," Nate said. My gaze cut to him. "I know I give you a hard time, Carron, but I'm serious when I say you can't handle him."

Normally I would have bristled at the insult, but not this time. "No argument here." I rubbed my arms, trying to chase away the lingering effects of Hal's creepy impulse touch. "Don't reapers have some kind of talisman against their porters? Maybe a magic potion I can drink every day?"

"There are a few things but they're rare," Constantine said.

"Like what? I'm willing to try anything." Whatever I had to do to keep out of Hal's reach, I'd do. "Eat eye of newt. Circle a grave three times at midnight on All Hallow's Eve. Paint myself green and hop around in the front yard, naked. No matter what it is, I'm all in."

"It's not a matter of doing something as it is having something done to you."

The thought of Constantine doing something *to* me sent a thrill, and a little apprehension, racing along. Until I'd seen, or more like, felt his power, I would have been all over him like a cheap suit. A little of my bravado fled. "It doesn't hurt, does it?"

"Not usually." Constantine gripped the back of his neck and rubbed. "On rare occasions a reaper will acquire an ally."

I shook my head, not understanding.

"Someone or something adopts them, helps out in little ways. Maybe guides them."

"You mean like a sidekick?"

"More like a familiar," Nate said. "You don't happen to have one of those...do you?"

Automatically my hand went to my neck, searching for the raven charm. I mentally cursed myself for having forgotten my necklace on the bathroom counter this morning. "Maybe."

Constantine stopped massaging his neck. "You do?"

"I don't know. There's this raven named Fletcher. Well, that's what I named him. Anyway, he's been following me around, sitting in the trees outside my house." I shrugged. "And maybe he gave me a raven charm."

"I take it you didn't bring the charm with you today?" Constantine asked.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"It's an amulet that will protect you. If you had it on, Hal's compulsion wouldn't have worked

on you.”

“Well, luckily Fletcher adopted me, otherwise...” The idea of being at Hal Lee Lewya’s mercy sent a ripple of dread that wrapped around my bones and squeezed. I swallowed hard.

“Luck has very little to do with this.” Constantine pressed the button on the wall and the doors to Command Central slid open. Before leaving Purgatory he looked at me. “It seems somebody is looking out for you, Lisa.”

I blew out a long breath. “It’s about time,” I mumbled.

Nate moved up behind me. “Why don’t you go home and get that raven charm?” He stepped past me. “Put it on and don’t take it off—for anything.” I nodded. “Take the rest of the day off and rest up.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need to rest up.” The excitement of Hal Lee Lewya’s arrival had anesthetized yesterday’s soreness. At his words, all my aches returned. “I can get my charm tonight.”

“Better to go home and take it easy.” After stepping through the door Nate turned to me. “Tomorrow is Halloween. It will be one of your busiest nights of the year.”

“My busiest night?” I followed him across Command Central. “Why?”

“Halloween and idiotic stunts go hand in hand. Someone is bound to die.” He flicked his head toward the platform. “Have a look.”

A plump woman dressed in a violet pantsuit sat at one of the radars. We approached and I could see a dozen dots jumping around the screen. “Those aren’t all mine, are they?”

The woman turned and smiled up at me. “No honey, just this one, this one, and...” She pointed a purple painted nail at a large green blip. “This one.”

“Three?” I said.

“So far.” She laughed. “But the day is still young.”

She seemed to really love her job. “Do we know who they are?”

“I do.” She turned back to the radar. “But you won’t find out until the information is sent to your phone tomorrow afternoon. No sense flaunting temptation in your face.”

“Oh, yeah.” Despite already knowing this, I felt like a chastised child. “Of course.”

“So go home and I’ll see you tomorrow.” Nate wrapped his fingers around my arm and guided me toward the door.

“But—” I wasn’t sure why I was protesting. Probably because it felt like I was being shuffled out the door, and everybody seemed to have another agenda but me. “There must be something I can do around here.”

“Nope.” He gave me a little push into the elevator. “Not a thing.” Reaching inside the elevator, he pushed the ground floor button. As the doors closed, he smiled and gave a little wave. “Have fun.”

I returned a tight smile, but went willingly. Far be it from me to stay where I wasn’t wanted, or to refuse time off. More than likely Hal Lee Lewya was the cause of being herded out of GRS, and truth be told, I’d rather have them taking care of that issue without my help. Nothing I could really do about it anyway. I didn’t have pull or a clue as to what was going on most of the time.

On the way home, I realized I didn't have one errand to run or any pressing tasks that needed to be completed. Even the house clean and the laundry was done. So, I took an afternoon nap. Twenty minutes had been my goal, but two hours later I woke to the sound of my sons' pounding footsteps.

"Mom," Bryce bellowed, "we're home!"

No kidding. "I'm in here." I swept the blankets aside and swung my legs over the side of the side. The boys bound down the hall and launched themselves onto the bed. I bounced several times, laughing. "Have a good day?"

"Tomorrow's Halloween." Breck stood and gave two powerful jumps. "Candy."

"I can't wait," Bryce said, throwing his arms around my neck. After that declaration he jumped to the next subject. "What's for dinner?"

I broke his hold and stood. Cooking was the last thing I felt like doing. Actually, reaping was, but cooking came in a strong second. "How does fast food sound?"

A unanimous "Yay," erupted from both.

"Is your sister home?"

"Yeah, she's watching TV downstairs," Bryce said, taking a flying leap off the bed.

"Get ready. We leave in five," I called to his departing back.

Breck followed his brother, performing the same launch and run sequence. I stopped in the bathroom, fluffed a bit, and went to find Bronte. Like Bryce had said, I found her downstairs, snuggled into our big, red beanbag chair. Though she'd taken off her coat, she still wore her favorite black knit hat that had cat ears and a skull and crossbones on the front. She didn't look up when I entered.

"Hungry?"

She answered with a noncommittal grunt and a shoulder shrug.

"Fast food. Grease and sugar," I said, trying to coax a reaction from her. Her gaze never wavered from the television. Usually I'd get a cursory glance, but not even a blink in my direction. "What's wrong?"

"Can I go to Payton's Halloween party?" she asked, still not looking at me.

The party had completely slipped my mind. Ever since Jeff died, saying no had become difficult. I didn't like to deny the kids something fun, but I the thought of her going to the party gave me a bad feeling. First off, I didn't like Kelly Huff. Girls like her bullied or fluttered their eyelashes to get their way. In school I'd gotten the bullying end of the deal. Though I wanted Bronte to make her own mistakes, this one could get her hurt or worse. I didn't beat around the bush or try to cushion the letdown. "No. I don't trust Kelly to be a responsible driver."

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "I knew you wouldn't let me."

"Then you shouldn't be disappointed." When she didn't reply, I tried another tactic. "Why don't you and Fang have a sleepover? It'll be fun. Invite a couple of girls. I'll be going out for a while so you'll have the house to yourself. Watch a scary movie and eat junk food."

She looked at me. “Where are you going?”

To reap at least three souls. I went with my standard answer. “Vella’s.” She grunted again and I took it to mean my night would be lame. Better her think that than know the truth. “Come on.” I held out my hands. “Let’s eat, then we can discuss your plans for tomorrow night.”

She stared at my hands for a few seconds and finally sighed. Grasping her fingers, I pulled her to a stand and into my arms, wrapping her in a tight mom hug. Even though she stood there, arms limp at her side, she turned her head and laid her cheek against my shoulder. Obviously she wasn’t that mad.



McDonald’s was packed. Obviously a lot of other parents hadn’t felt like cooking either. The boys made a beeline for the play area, while Bronte and I ordered. After our food arrived, we carried it into the kid zone. Instantly, I was struck by the smell of the cleaning fluid they used. A little Pilipino woman wove her way through the patrons, wiping a table here, sweeping up spilled fries there, and keeping the place clean as clean as possible with so many kids around.

The noise level was ten times that of the adult section beyond the glass. I envied the childless people. Sitting and eating without screams of small children piercing their skulls. We commandeered the corner table, and after brushing sprinkles of lettuce off the bench, slid onto the bright red laminate seats.

I doled out the food, prepping the boys’ kid’s meals for their dine-and-dash dinner habits. Bronte was plugged into electronic life support, completely ignoring me, so I pulled out my new phone and thumbed through the screens. Several icons for GRS scrolled by. I tapped on the skull and went to Rules and Regulations. Man, there were a lot of them. How was a person supposed to learn all these?

It is prohibited to purposely make contact with deceased’s family before or after reaping. I still thought that one was stupid and I wasn’t certain I’d be able to abide by it. I wondered what kind of punishment I’d incur for breaking it.

It is prohibited to prevent the reap. Only guardian angels have the right to interfere.

A reaper must remain neutral.

It is prohibited to fraternize or engage in ongoing conversations with the client. In other words, don’t become their therapist.

On and on the list went. I wondered if Nate had actually memorized all the rules, or if he was just putting on a good show. As I scanned through the rest, I gleaned the general message. Keep a low profile and do the job. How hard could it be? Even though I hated to admit it, I’d always been kind of a rule follower. Being a reaper might be the perfect fit.

Breck scooted into the booth next to me and took a big drink of his soda. Pink tinged his cheeks and sweat coated his forehead.

“You having fun?” I said, clicking off my phone and pocketing it.

He shrugged and toyed with his fries. "It's all right."

"What's wrong?" I scooped a hank of sweaty hair off his forehead. "Is somebody bullying you?"

"No." He bit the end of the French fry and chewed.

Something was definitely wrong. Normally, Breck hog-faced a burger in under a minute, but now he didn't touch it. "You can tell me." I hoped it was something simple, like he'd decided he wanted to be a vampire instead of a ghost. "Come on." I gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm pretty good at solving problems."

His big blue eyes looked up at me. "There's a ghost in the slide tubes and she won't give me back my sock."

My smile tightened. "A ghost?"

Bronte snorted and shook her head. "Moron."

"Hey, stop calling your brother names." I looked back at Breck. "Are you sure it's a ghost and not a kid that stole your sock?"

"Positive. It's an old lady and she's mean."

Solutions and excuses raced through my mind. My son didn't need his sock. We had a hundred singles at home he could wear. And what were the chances of a real live ghost haunting the McDonald's play tube?

"What are you going to do, Mom?" His eyes stared at me, trusting.

"Yeah, Mom, what are you going to do?" Bronte smirked at me.

"Well..." I gently shoved Breck toward the end of the bench. "I'm getting your sock back." I narrowed my gaze at Bronte. "That's what I'm going to do."

My son let me out and I wove my way through the bevy of children and tables and stopped at the end of a long green slide. Every few seconds a kid shot to the bottom and jumped off to circle back for another go, sometimes turning and crawling back up.

Surveying the conglomeration of colorful tubes and nets, I decided that climbing the padded platforms steps would be a lot safer and less humiliating than trying to shove myself up one of the slides. I glanced around. The other parents were busy with their own kids or ignoring the mayhem. I gripped the edge of the platform and slowly worked my way up the play set. Once at the top, I crawled on hands and knees across a netted bridge. Something wet and sticky pressed into my palm. I cringed but continued forward. The smell of dirty feet, chocolate shakes, and pee enveloped me. I tried not to think of the bacteria clinging to every surface I touched.

Note to self: pick up more hand sanitizer.

A small child in an orange sweat suit tried to squeeze past. "Excuse me."

"Sure thing." I pressed my body to the side to let him by. When he reached the end of the netted bridge I stopped him. "Hey, have you seen any...um, another lady up here?"

"You mean the ghost lady?"

My eyes rounded and I nodded. "Yeah, the ghost lady."

“She hangs out next to the yellow slide.” With that the kid scurried away.

I hesitated. If there really was a ghost living in the play set, she wasn’t my charge. I pulled out my phone and tapped the appointment app. The screen was empty. Maybe I should leave well enough alone. I could always buy Breck more socks. Unfortunately, curiosity was one of my worst vices.

At the juncture where the net bridge ended, I stopped. Taking a deep breath, I poked my head around the corner. Yep, she was there, all translucent and ghost like. My heart jumped to my throat. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to seeing spirits. It’s one thing to catch a glimpse in my periphery. Staring at one full on was intimidating in an *I don’t know nothin’ about reapin’ no spirits* way.

“I’m not leaving, so don’t waste your time trying to convince me,” the ghost said.

I glanced around, but nobody else was there. “Are you talking to me?”

“Who else would I be talking to? Came to try to get me to cross over, right?” She lifted a spectral cigarette to her lips, took a drag so long my lungs hurt, and then blew it out. “Like I told the first guy. I’m not going.”

Her words sort of registered but my attention was fixed on her cigarette. I quit smoking two years ago but sometimes the craving still hit. I scooted farther into the padded area, trying to maneuver myself into the line of her ghost smoke, hoping for a hit. I settled against the netted wall across from her and inhaled. The smell was faint, and not as satisfying as I’d hoped for.

“How do you know I’m a reaper?” I started to cross my legs but they still hurt. Instead I stretched them out and crossed my ankles. “Maybe I’m just a mom, who can see ghosts.”

“Right.” She snorted and held out her hand, indicating the area we sat in. “Because there are so many parents up here.”

She had me on that one. Unless a child was hurt, scared, or physically stuck, no parent would dare enter the germ-pool. And even that was questionable, especially if there was an older sibling to send into the tubes to retrieve the child.

“Okay, so I’m a reaper.” I pointed to Breck’s sock. The end poked out from under her butt. “I wouldn’t have bothered you if you hadn’t scared my son and refused to give him his sock.”

She harrumphed and took another drag.

“So, why are you up here...?” I waited for her name.

“Lily.”

“Lily. Is this where you died?” I couldn’t imagine someone wanting to spend eternity in a fast food play set.

“No, I died in the hospital. Lung cancer.” She squashed the cigarette onto the mat and after a few seconds it disappeared. “But this is where my daughter comes with my grandkids.”

“I’m sorry.” And I really was. Missing family must have been the number one cause for hauntings. I didn’t have any solid stats, but I was pretty sure I was right. “I bet it’s difficult knowing you won’t see your grandchildren grow up.”

Her face scrunched. “I couldn’t give a good gosh darn about my grandkids. They’re monsters.

Their parents spoil those brats something awful.”

Taken aback by the vehemence in her response, I blinked a few times and nodded. “Okay, then I don’t get it. Why here?”

“I need to get a message to my daughter.”

The clang of warning bells erupted in my head. Rule number one— *It is prohibited to purposely make contact with deceased’s family before or after reaping*. It would have been better to say I was sorry and I couldn’t help her. Damn my curiosity. “What kind of message?”

The ghost’s gaze shifted to me. She stared for a few seconds before saying, “My good-for-nothing son-in-law, Tony, is cheating on my daughter with her best friend.”

I gasped. “That bastard.”

“That isn’t the half of it. Maryanne is pregnant with his kid.”

I sat forward. “Maryanne is the best friend?”

“Yep, and the skank keeps pretending to be my daughter’s bestie. Makes me mad enough to possess her.”

“What a bitch.” I leaned back, completely incensed by the situation. “Your poor daughter.”

“She’s a good person and doesn’t deserve this.” The ghost held my stare. “So...”

Don’t become the spirit’s therapist. Just broke that rule. “I don’t know. Can I be honest, Lily. I’ve only been doing this job for about a week, and passing a message onto family members is a major no-no in the rule book.”

“Send her an anonymous letter.” The ghost held out her translucent hands. “Who would know?”

I cocked a brow at her. “You do realize who I work for, right.”

“Well, maybe if you’re casual about it. Tuck it in with your bills and letters, they—” She pointed upward. “Won’t notice.”

I shouldn’t. I mean, I really shouldn’t even entertain the idea of getting involved. Delivering the message was not worth the trouble I’d get into.

Suddenly Lily’s eyes widened. Scooting onto all fours, she crawled to the edge of the platform to look through the net. “They’re here.” She pointed to the group of people walking into the play area. “Oh, that whore of a friend is with them.”

I scrambled to join her. Side-by-side, we watched the group claim a table near the door. It wasn’t hard to tell who Lily’s daughter was. Small and blonde like her mother, she appeared haggard and beaten down. The friend, on the other hand, had a rosy glow, and there was no mistaking the furtive glances she tossed in Tony’s direction.

“Okay, I’ll do it.” The words popped out before I could stop myself. I sat back on my heels. “But you have to promise to cross over when it’s done.”

Lily smiled and held up her hand. “Scout’s honor. So, what are you going to do?”

I took a deep breath and exhaled. “Watch and enjoy.” I scooted toward the yellow tube. “Meet me in the parking lot after I leave.”

She nodded.

I crawled across the platform, grabbed Breck's sock, and sent myself down the yellow tube slide. Standing, I dusted myself off and glanced up. Lily was still pressed against the net, watching me. Instead of heading straight back to my kids, I skirted the center tables and walked toward Lily's daughter.

I was never much of an actress, so I drew my motivation from experience. Believing Jeff had been cheating on me was a hurt that cut into my soul, but I would have wanted to know. Still, I hated that I was about to open a can of hurt for Lily's daughter.

As I passed their table, I casually glanced over. Pasting on a big smile, I stopped. "Hey, sorry to bother you." I pointed to Maryanne. "But I recognized you two from the doctor's office, and just wanted to say congratulations on the baby."

The blood drained from Maryanne's face and her eyes cut to Lily's daughter. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You and your husband." I pointed at Tony. "The girls at the doctor's office and I were talking about how cute you two were together."

Lily's daughter leaned forward on her arm, resting them on the table. "That's *my* husband."

I let my eyes go wide. "But, you and he—" I didn't finish my sentence. If Lily's daughter were smart she'd put two and two together. "Okay, well, sorry."

With that I continued to my table. Bryce had joined Bronte and Breck. They'd polished off most of their meals and would be ready to go in another five minutes. "I've got to make a call." I tossed Breck's sock to him and then grabbed my purse from the corner of the booth. "I'll be right back."

"Did you see her, Mom?" Breck shoved his foot into the hole and pulled on his sock. "Did you see the ghost?"

I repressed the urge to look in Lily's direction. "Nope, just your sock." I ruffled his hair. "It probably stunk so bad she didn't want to keep it." He smiled and went back to eating his fries. "Okay, finish up and I'll be back in a second."

As I passed the table where Lily's family sat, I heard their heated conversation. I'd placed the spark of doubt and her daughter was running with it. Pushing open the glass door, I pulled out my phone and walked outside to wait for Lily. I fingered the raven charm hanging around my neck. I'd put it on when I got home and vowed to never take it off. Hopefully it would protect me from Hal's allure.

The temperature had dropped several degrees over the past half hour. I zipped my coat all the way up and shoved my free hand into my pocket. A squawk sounded above me and I glanced up to see Fletcher perched on the light pole. Relief washed through me. Hopefully, the bird's presence meant this would be a smooth transaction.

Lily appeared beside me, a big grin on her face. "That did it." She held out her hand. "Thanks."

I reached out and shook her hand, but didn't let go. "You're welcome. I'm glad I could help—"

even if I do get in trouble.”

“What are they going to do? Fire you?” Lily said.

I thought about that for a second. “Good point. I don’t really know.” I shrugged. “So, are you ready?”

A heavy sigh heaved from the ghost. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“I want to warn you, my porter is a little unorthodox, but don’t be scared. He’ll get you to where you need to be.”

A mischievous gapped grin spread across her face. “Sounds interesting.”

I turned my back to the restaurant and lifted the phone to my ear, pretending to be taking a call. Still holding onto Lily, I called, “Hal Lee Lewya.”

Fletcher squawked and flapped his wings. This time I didn’t have to wait. The thin pink line of light formed and the elevator door slid open. I glanced at Lily, gaging her reaction.

Her grin rounded to an astonished O. “What in the name of God’s green Earth is that?”

I had to admit, Hal had outdone himself. Dressed in a bright red, satin pants and shirt, he glimmered in the fading sunlight. “Well, Lily, that is Hal Lee Lewya.”

“He looks more like a Las Vegas pimp.”

“Lisa.” His voice caressed me as it had at GRS, but the effect was very different. There was no urge to go to him. “I didn’t realize we had a client.”

“We didn’t, but now we do.” I took two steps forward and stopped, making sure to stay out of his range. “Lily needs to cross.” I pinned him with a glower. “You’ll make sure she gets to where she’s supposed to be, right?”

“Of course.” He held out his hand. “But what do you say to a little fun first, Lily?”

“Uh uh.” I wagged an index finger in his direction. “No deviations. Just straight to her check-in point, or whatever you call it.”

Hal’s lower lip rolled into a pout. “Perhaps just the first circle of Hell—”

“No.” I cut him off. “No circles.”

“Then maybe Lily would like to see the river Styx.”

Actually, *I* wouldn’t have minded seeing the river Styx. I open my mouth to reply, but Lily beat me to it.

“Maybe a few detours wouldn’t be so bad.” She smiled at Hal. “I mean, it’s not like I’m on a deadline, right?”

I didn’t know if she was or not, but I could see I wasn’t going to sway these two. “So help me, Hal, if you do anything—”

“Yes, I know, you’ll report me.” He wiggled his fingers in Lily’s direction. “She’ll be fine.”

Even if she wasn’t, what could I do? Take her to GRS and put her in Purgatory? But then they’d know I broke the message to loved ones rule. Yeah, I was completely covering my own ass.

“All right, I’m going to trust you, Hal.” Of course I didn’t. “Our relationship is new, and I want to

start off on the right foot.” He lifted a brow, and I got the distinct impression he was more entertained than moved by my ‘go team’ speech. So I changed tactics. “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours—if you catch my meaning.”

His expression morphed into a slightly evil smile. “Perfectly, Lisa Carron.”

With nothing further to say, I released Lily’s hand. She drifted to Hal and into the elevator. “Bye, Lily.” I waved. “Have a good afterlife.”

“You can count on it.” She ran her hand down Hal’s arm. “I need a set of these fancy pajamas.”

“Your wish is my command, Miss Lily.”

With that, the elevator door closed and folded into a thin beam of light before vanishing. I lowered my phone and looked up at Fletcher. I was fairly certain the bird was my familiar and had kept Hal’s mojo and bay. “Thanks.”

The raven flapped his wings and launched into the sky. I took a deep breath and released it, hoping I hadn’t just gotten myself in a heap of trouble.

Chapter 14

Halloween day worked out better than I could have planned. My mother picked up the boys in the morning so they could enjoy an entire day of Halloween festivities. Bronte left for Fang's house around two o'clock. It seemed that once she'd accepted she couldn't go to the party, Fang and a group of girls had decided to opt out and have a sleepover instead. I will admit to feeling a bit smug in my efforts to protect our youth. The other parents could thank me later.

With the kids gone, I was free to spend the day preparing for my busy night. It took several rounds of trying on clothes before I settled on an appropriate reaping outfit. For me it was all about the clothes. Before I took up any sport or activity I had to have the proper attire. Otherwise, I felt like I wasn't fully committed. Lucky for me, my wardrobe was reaper ready.

Temperatures so far had been colder than normal and I figured tonight wouldn't be any different. After a lot of kicking, punching, and standing outside to see if the clothes were warm enough, I settled on a black turtleneck sweater and black polar fleece pants. I pilfered a black stocking cap and gloves from our winter clothes bin, and pulled out my black shearling lined boots.

The outfit was perfect, but when I stood in front of the mirror assessing myself, I realized I wanted an even bigger change. I was a reaper now, not just a mom who fell into the position. I'd embraced it, well—kind of, and despite Nate's skepticism, I'd passed all the tests. I'd even reaped Lily without any help.

After pulling out my phone, I dialed Vella.

"Vella's Star Power Salon, how may I help you?"

"I'm ready," I said.

Silence stretched on the other end of the phone, until she finally said, "Platinum and sassy?"

"Bring it on!" I clicked off the phone and set it on the dresser. If I knew my friend, she'd close up shop and be at my house in fifteen minutes. She'd been chomping at the bit to get ahold of my hair for years. Telling her to bring it on was like waving crack in front of an addict. And I had to admit, for the first time I wasn't afraid of change. I wanted different. I needed to let go of the old me and embrace my reaper, and Vella was the gal for the task.

By the time Nate picked me up that evening, I'd found my reaper mojo. My hair was short and spikey, except for the two thin pieces she'd left at the sides, and my new platinum color glimmered

like a pearl in the bathroom light. I hated to wear a hat but necessity demanded it. Besides, the little sprigs of blond peeking out looked kind of hot. I felt like a character in a spy movie.

One look from Nate told me I'd made the right choice. "You look...great."

"Thanks." I climbed into the passenger side of the Suburban. "I really needed a change."

He stared at me a few seconds and then shifted into reverse. "You ready for tonight?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." I clicked my seatbelt. "Where are we going?"

"Out to one of the lakes in Wasilla." He pushed the gear into drive. "Did you get the assignment on your phone?"

"Yeah, a Nuk Fulsom? But I didn't see any details on how he's going to die."

"There's a details tab in the corner. It drops down and give you more information."

I didn't feel like digging my phone out of my pocket and trying to read as we drove. "So what are the details?"

"Headless Horseman," he said.

"Excuse me?"

He smirked. "Or, I should say Headless snow machiner."

People in the lower forty-eight call them snowmobiles. Up here we call them snow machines. I always figured it was a location thing, like pop versus soda. I scowled at Nate. "That sounds gross."

"Not as bad as it sounds. Some guys are trying to cross thin ice with pumpkins on their heads."

My brows lifted. "That is one of the stupidest things I've ever heard."

"Yep." He glanced at me and then to the road again. "Those are your clients."

The little bit of ego boost I'd gained from reaping Lily evaporated. I had a feeling the Lily-like reaps would be few, and pumpkin-wearing ignoramuses would be numerous. Thankfully, Nate didn't jab with any more verbal barbs.

The drive took an hour. A veil of snow lay in a white sheet across the ground and the full moon made it sparkle like blue diamonds. Nate pulled onto the narrow road and shut off the lights. With only the moon to see by, he inched down the road until reaching the end. Four other cars were parked there, and he pulled alongside the last one on the left and shut off the engine.

From where we sat we had a perfect view of the men on the lake. The whine of the snow machine pierced the night as one of the guys took off across the ice, pumpkin firmly resting over his head. I unhooked my seatbelt and sat forward. The breath stuck in my throat as I watched him shoot across the lake. Would this be the guy I'd have to reap?

Until now I never thought much about seeing the death take place. I only concentrated on getting the soul. "How did you say this guy dies?"

"The ice breaks."

My head snapped in Nate's direction. "Then how am I supposed to get to him?"

"His soul will be on the ice, watching his friends."

My gaze swung back to the group of guys. "How can you be sure?"

“They always linger. Either because they don’t know they’re dead, or they want to make sure somebody finds their body.”

“I hope you’re right.”

We watched the antics for another fifteen minutes. A lot of heavy stuff rolled through me. As a mother, I wanted to march out there and tell them what idiots they were and to stop it before somebody got killed. As a reaper, I wanted to get the job over with and go home. As a human it was uncanny to watch an individual’s life count down, while they had no idea. The knowledge was a gift and a curse. It made me feel powerful, and yet insignificant against death’s force. I’d fallen into this job, and had accepted it begrudgingly. Realizing the scope of my obligations humbled me.

The steady whine of the snow machine motor broke, drawing my attention back to the lake. Just like Nate said, the ice cracked, giving way. One second Nuk Fulsom was there and the next he was gone. Even though I knew it was coming, having it actually happen was still a shock. I gasped and slapped my hands over my mouth. After few seconds I covered my eyes, trying not to cry.

“You okay, Carron?”

I nodded but didn’t reply, not trusting my voice. Screams from the other guys filtered through our closed windows. My stomach roiled and threatened to revolt and took several deep breaths to calm my nausea. Finally I looked up again.

“It’s about time.” Nate paused. “You ready?”

I saw Nuk’s glimmering spirit standing beside his friends. “How do we do this?”

“I’ll divert the guys and help them retrieve Nuk’s body. You get ahold of his spirit and lead it off the thin ice.”

“Be careful.” Fear for Nate’s safety coursed through me. “You’re not one of my reaps tonight are you?”

“No.” He shook his head and smiled. “But thanks for worrying.”

“Okay.” I held up my gloves. “Can I wear these?”

“Yep. Clothing doesn’t interfere.”

I nodded and slipped them on. When I was finished, I pulled on the door handle. “I’m ready.”

We exited the Suburban and made our way down the slope to the lake. Nate headed for the guys and I cut a path to Nuk. He continued to stare at his friends, not noticing me. “Nuk.”

He didn’t move.

“Nuk,” I said again.

Still the guy didn’t respond.

“Nuk!”

“What?”

It wasn’t the ghost who answered. I spun to face a very wet, very much alive man. “You’re Nuk?”

He sniffed and wiped his arm across his eyes. “Yeah.”

“Who broke through?” I was completely confused since the dead guy was still alive, and now I

didn't have any idea who I was supposed to reap.

"Eddie, my friend." Nuk glanced back at the open water.

"Did you—" I scrambled for something to say. "Did you call 911?"

"Yeah, they're on their way." He moved toward the group.

I turned to the ghost. "Eddie?"

"Yeah." He sidled up beside me, his hands shoved in his coat pocket. "Am I dead?"

"Uh, yes—yes you are. Sorry."

He shrugged. "At least my death was awesome."

I grunted. "Seriously? You think falling through thin ice with a pumpkin on your head constitutes an awesome death?"

"Hell yeah." He grinned at me. "You know what would have been really cool?" He didn't wait for my reply. "If we would have lit the pumpkins on fire like the real Headless Horseman."

Okay, I wasn't going to impart any afterlife-changing pearls of wisdom, so I pushed forward with the agenda. "Eddie, you need to cross over and I need to get home to hand out Halloween candy." I took a step toward him. "Would that be all right?"

His brow furrowed. "Are you telling me you're the grim reaper?"

I held out my arms. "In the flesh."

"You're hot."

"Really?" I asked, surprised by his compliment.

"Hell yeah. I would have done this a lot sooner if I'd known hot babes were angels of death."

Idiot. "Thanks." I took him by the arm and led him to the lake's edge. "I like you, Eddie."

He edge closer to me, pressing his cold ghostly body into mine, literally. I jumped back. "Not like that." A shiver ran the entire length of my spine. "Now stay." I grabbed his arm again. "I'm going to pass you off to my porter and I promise he'll show you a good time. Okay?"

Eddie nodded, a stupid grin plastered on his face. "Awesome."

"Yes, it's awesomely awesome." I tilted my chin up. "Hal."

Instantly the thin line of light appeared. One thing about Hal, he was prompt. The door slid open and he stood in a floor-length, white fur coat.

"Whoa," Eddie said.

"Indeed," I replied. "Now that's awesome, right?"

"Dude, I love the threads."

"A man of great taste," Hal said. His yellow gaze skated to me. "Lisa, you bring me the most entertaining clients."

"I trust Lily got where she needed to be?" I asked.

"Delivered to the Pearly Gates early this morning." His gold tooth winked at me. "That is, after a turn around the first circle of Hell."

"I said no tours."

“She asked to go, and loved it.” He waved a silver cane in my direction. “The first circle is nothing more than a bunch of whining pagans. Now the third circle—” Hal looked at Eddie. “I think you’d enjoy that. Sex twenty-four-seven.”

Eddie looked at me. “Thanks for setting this up. It’s even better than I imagined.”

“I didn’t arrange this.” I glared at Hal. “What do you get, a cut on how many souls you lure into Hell?”

“Lisa, when will you learn, I simply want to have fun?” He waved Eddie to him. “And this young man not only likes my clothing, but seems ready for a little excitement as well.”

I glared at both of them and finally let go of the ghost’s arm. “Fine, but don’t come crying to me if you get in trouble—either of you.”

“Let your conscience be clear, sweet Lisa.”

“And don’t call me that.”

Eddie moved into the elevator and turned to face me. As the doors closed he grinned and waved. “See you on the other side.”

“I certainly hope not,” I mumbled.

As the portal disappeared, my phone erupted in my pocket. I fumbled with the zipper and finally pulled it free. It was my mother.

“Hi, Mom, is everything all right?” Icy wind whipped around me, but it wasn’t as chilling as my mother’s words.

“Bronte’s been in a car accident.”

Chapter 15

“*I*’m on my way.” My mind turned to white-hot panic. “Nate, we’ve got to go!”
“What’s going on?”

I started running across the snow-covered ground. “My daughter’s been in a car accident.”

The crunch of footsteps sounded behind me, letting me know Nate was close on my heels. Tears stung my eyes and streamed down my cheeks, burning in the cold. A huge lump formed in my throat. As I barreled up the snowy bank to Nate’s Suburban, I could hardly breathe. Was Bronte badly hurt—or worse?

Once at the truck I reached for the handle. My fingers gripped the door but began to shake. Shivers wracked my body, not from the cold, but from having to relive another possible death. The same crippling emotions I experienced the night Jeff died swamped me. Shallow sobs huffed from me as I wrestled with the door handle. *Not my baby. Anybody but my kids.*

Nate’s strong hands gripped my shoulder and moved me away from the door. I fought against him. “I need to get to her.”

“I know.” He blocked me and opened the door. “I’ll drive you to the hospital.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds while my brain processed what he said. Finally, I nodded and crawled into the passenger seat, my body trembling.

Nate climbed into the driver’s seat. “Put on your seatbelt.” I glared at him. “The roads are slippery, Lisa. Bronte needs you safe. Buckle up.”

Somehow his terse words penetrated my panic. I yanked the strap around me and jammed it into the buckle. “Drive.”

He slammed the Suburban into gear. The vehicle fishtailed, but he easily maintained control. We drove in silence all the way back to Anchorage, allowing every imaginable scenario to pummel my mind. What would I find once we reached the hospital? All my mother had said was there had been a car accident and Bronte was involved. I hadn’t heard anything after that.

I wiped the sleeve of my jacket across my eyes. Pulling myself out of the grief after Jeff’s death had been hard enough. I wasn’t sure I’d be so lucky if Bronte was dead.

Dead, like the young man I’d just reaped. I closed my eyes and sent up a silent prayer. “Please, not my daughter.”

But what if she had been killed? Would the task to reap her fall to me? When Vella had asked if I would have wanted to help my husband pass when he died I'd said no. At the time I'd meant it. Now, facing that very situation, I knew I'd give anything to see and talk to Bronte one last time.

The miles flew by in a blur, but it seemed to take forever to get to the hospital. Finally, Nate pulled up to the emergency entrance. "Go on. I'll park and find you."

Not waiting for the Suburban to stop, I flung the door open and raced through the automatic doors, skidding to a stop in front of the reception desk. "I'm Lisa Carron. My daughter was brought in. She was in a car accident."

Maybe it was the panic in my voice, or the crazed mother-on-the-edge look on my face, but the woman snatched a visitor pass from the wall and came out of her office. "I'll escort you back. Here, put this on." She gave a single wave to the security guard in the booth directly across from her cubicle. "Lisa Carron."

He nodded.

The woman pressed a large round button on the wall. With agonizing slowness the double doors opened. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, barely able to control the urge to push past her. Not that I'd know where to go. I'd probably start shouting for Bronte, get arrested, or at the very least, medicated. So I waited.

The only person at the desk was a young, tall male nurse. He glanced up as we approached.

"Michael, this is Lisa Carron. Her daughter is one of the kids in the car accident." The receptionist turned and faced me. "He'll take care of you."

"Thank you," was all I could manage.

As she passed me, she placed a hand on my shoulder, sending a wave of warmth through my body. I glanced at her hand, and then to her face. She smiled and I recognized her as one of the gifted. Not a grim reaper, but perhaps a wannabe or even a guardian angel. I nodded and returned my attention to Michael.

"Is my daughter..." My voice cracked. "Is my daughter alive?"

He looked up from the chart. "Yes, a broken arm, but nothing worse."

Tension rushed from my muscles, deflating me like a balloon. At that same moment Nate arrived. I turned and buried my face in his jacket, and his arms went around me without hesitation. For once I was grateful for his solid chest and strength.

After another minute of sobbing into his coat, I sniffed and stepped away. "Are the other kids okay?"

I'd just assumed everybody in the car had cuts and bruises but nothing worse.

The nurse shook his head and lowered his voice. "The driver was dead on arrival."

His words hit me like a slap. "Oh my God." My hand flew to my mouth. "Who was it?"

Michael flipped through the pages on a clipboard. "Kelly Huff." He looked at me. "Her parents just arrived."

Nausea rolled through my body. I bent, bracing my hands on my knees and tried to get a breath. Nate rubbed my back, but didn't say anything. The anger over Bronte disobeying me was dwarfed by the fact that even though she'd narrowly escaped being killed, Kelly Huff had not. I stood and wrapped my arms around my torso. "Can I see my daughter, please?"

"Of course."

We followed Michael along the corridor, passing several curtained off rooms. We stopped half way down the hallway. Movement drew my attention toward the end. Three people exited a room. A knot formed in my throat when the woman turned to one of the men and buried her face in his coat. The other person, obviously a doctor from the way he was dressed, spoke softly and then left the two alone.

"Kelly's parents." My voice cracked.

I wanted to go to them, offer my condolences, but the action felt too intrusive. What could I possibly say? No parent should outlive their child—ever. And the fact that mine was still alive suddenly seemed unfair somehow.

Nate put his hand on my back and guided me into the room. At first I was resistant but then I saw Bronte lying in the bed, her face covered with bruises and cuts, her arm in a sling. I practically ran to her. She turned her head and looked at me, tears streaming down her face. At that moment, my only thought was of comforting her. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her gently to me, careful not to hurt her.

She turned her face toward my neck. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"Me too, baby." I kissed the top of her head, letting my lips linger in her hair. "Me too."

"The doctor will be with you in a few minutes," Michael said, and slipped out of the room.

From the doorway Nate said, "I'll be right back."

I turned my head, still resting my cheek against Bronte's head. "Where are you going?"

"I need to check on a few things." He tugged the curtain closed, leaving Bronte and me alone.

It didn't take super-duper reaper intuition to know he'd gone to reap Kelly Huff. A chill ran up my spine, and I closed my eyes. Some days I really hated this job.

Though it took all my willpower, I unwound my arms from Bronte, and pulled the chair in the corner up to the side of the bed. I claimed her hand, needing to touch her. We sat in silence until her tears finally dried. Now that some of the shock had worn off, questions bubbled inside me, but I didn't ask them, not wanting to traumatize my daughter any more than she had been tonight.

After another few minutes she said, "I'm sorry I disobeyed you, Mom. I promise to never do it again."

A humorless laugh hiccupped from me. "If only that were true." I chanced a little parenting. "Why did you do it?"

She shrugged and winced. "It sounds lame, but Fang begged me to go. You may have noticed that me and my friends aren't actually that popular." She hesitated. "I knew Kelly was just using us to get

to William, so I decided to use her to get into the in crowd.”

“I didn’t think you cared about popularity contests?” It seemed she wasn’t the only one learning a lesson tonight.

Since the day she was born, Bronte had had her own style. She never seemed to care about what was cool. At least I hadn’t thought so. I was wrong.

“I never did—don’t really, but Fang does. She said if I was a good friend I’d suffer through the night.”

“Even though I said no?”

Bronte nodded.

“Still, you made the decision. You have to take responsibility for that.”

“I know, and I won’t argue with whatever punishment you give me.” She let her head fall back and rest against her pillow. “Maybe you could ground me for a year so I don’t have to see anybody.”

“A whole year? Don’t you think we’ve already had a year of punishment?”

Her gaze captured mine. Tears puddled, magnifying her blue eyes. “All I could think about was what you were going to do when you heard I’d been in a car accident. You know, after Dad and all.”

I swallowed hard. “I won’t lie, Bronte, that was one of the worst moments of my life.” A single tear spilled down her cheek, but I wiped it away with my thumb. “And hearing that you were alive was one of the best.”

“So what now?”

“We go on from here.” I leaned forward and swiped a matted chunk of hair from her face. “Live our lives. That’s the best we can do.”

Before she could reply the curtain whipped open. “Bronte.” My mother sailed into the room and threw herself at her granddaughter. “We thought you were dead.”

“Grandma, I can’t breathe,” Bronte’s muffled voice emanated from my mother’s armpit.

I looked at my dad. For the first time that I could remember, genuine emotion played across his face. His pale skin accentuated his wide-eyed stare, as if staring at a ghost. “Dad, you okay?”

His gaze slid to me. “Yeah.” His voice was raspy and I had the urge to get up and hug him, but I didn’t. If my dad started to cry, I would lose it completely.

“Where are the boys?”

“We left them with Vella,” my mother said. “She wants you to call her as soon as you get a chance.”

I’d have to do something nice for her. Not having to worry about the boys was worth two bottles of wine and several hours of listening to stories about her crazy family.

Seeing Nate lingering just outside the door, I stood and patted my mom’s back. “I’ll be right back.” On my way out I pulled the curtain closed again. “Well?” I whispered at Nate.

“Well what?”

I gripped his wrist and pulled him away from Bronte’s room. “Kelly Huff, did you reap her.”

“No.”

I let go of his arm. “Why not? I thought that’s where you went.”

He glanced down the hall, and then back to me. “I did but she wasn’t there.”

I narrowed my gaze. “What do you mean she wasn’t there?”

“Somebody reaped her already.”

“Are you sure?”

He sneered at me. “I think I know when there’s no soul.”

“Sorry. It’s just weird, is all.” I paced a few steps. “That *is* weird, right?”

“Weird but not impossible. Somebody might have been in the area. I don’t know.”

“Is there any way to find out who?”

Nate stared at me for a few seconds. “It doesn’t matter, Lisa. Kelly is gone. Job done.”

“But—”

“But nothing.” He took my hand and led me back to Bronte’s room. “You need to focus on your family right now. Not worry about who—,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “finished the job.”

I stopped at the entrance. Nate let go of my hand, but didn’t go into the room. He was right. Bronte needed me, but more than that, I needed her, and my boys. “Thanks for being there tonight. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

His lips spread into a tight smile. “Don’t mention it, Carron. That’s what partners do for each other—right?”

Had he just called me his partner? Without coercion? Without threat of death? Not wanting to spoil our one, fragile moment with sarcasm, I nodded. “Yeah, they do.”

A slight blush crept across his cheeks. He shifted uncomfortably and then flicked his head toward the exit. “I’m gonna hit the road.” He shoved his hands in his front pockets. “This seems like a family affair.”

“Okay, thanks.”

He turned to leave but stopped. “Take a few days off. I’ll cover your assignments,” he said over his shoulder, not looking at me.

I didn’t reply and he didn’t seem to expect one. His step never slowing, he strode down the hall. I watched until he turned the corner. Who knew Nate Cramer, reaper extraordinaire, had a heart? I hadn’t, but it wasn’t a mistake I’d make again. And as far as Kelly Huff’s spirit, that was another issue. Maybe one day we’d discover who reaped her, but for now I wanted to forget about everything except taking care of my daughter.

It seemed death would be my constant companion from now on, and I could either be consumed by it or own it. I decided to own it. Suck it, Death! There’s a new reaper in town.

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I've been writing fulltime for five years, which isn't long for some, and a lifetime for others, but I've learned a couple of things about myself. I love to spoil my readers. I want them to get lost in my stories, even if it's only during their lunch break. And I want to make them laugh.

It might only be a little in one of my medieval fantasies, or a lot from my Grim Reality Series. I hope you become part of my family of readers, and I can help you forget your cares for a while and make you laugh.

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SHADOWLING

(SHADOWLING CHRONICLES BOOK 1)

ERIC PADILLA

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SHADOWLING

Shadows attack...

Sixteen year-old Dani Prado is not fond of the dark. In fact, it terrifies her. So, when something crawls from the depths of the earth through the local mine to snatch people and pets from her small town at night, she follows the police chief's directives and stays in her house after the sun goes down each day.

But now her younger brother Bobby is counted among the missing and she fears the worst. The police won't help and the rest of the town is afraid to go looking for the captives, too. Wait, they tell her, until reinforcements come to help.

Unable to tolerate the thought of her brother in the clutches of some shadowy monster while she waits, she decides to go into the mine looking for him, joined by her mother and a few friends. She has to solve the mystery of the missing people, and bring them back. If she can. The darkness beckons and the shadowling awaits. Dani will need every bit of her skill, ingenuity, and courage to enter a world without light, find her brother, and return. Hopefully with her body and mind still intact.

Chapter 1

The creature, whatever it was, gained on me with every breath, with every one of my too-slow steps. I ran as hard as I could, but it would catch me. Soon.

The air burned as I tried to draw it from my surroundings. It was like fire in my throat, stinging my lungs and making my chest hurt. Why was the air so thick, and why could I not move faster? I pumped my arms, pushed my throbbing legs. Just a little faster.

A door appeared up ahead. It hadn't been there a second before. If I reached it, I could go through, close it, slow—even stop—the hunter right behind me. I lowered my head, leaning into the run, and pushed with all my might.

Stars flecked the edge of my vision, and the world seemed to twist. Somewhere deep within my mind, a little voice told me I was about to pass out from lack of oxygen, that I was done for. It had been a good try, but the door was too far, I was too slow, my body not up to the challenge.

I stomped on the voice in my head, silencing it. I gasped to take in one more bite of the precious air that seemed thick as taffy and threw myself into my simple task: get to the door.

And there it was, right in front of me, one step away. I reached out, tears streaming from my eyes. I didn't know if they were from the pain, from fear, or simply from the rush of air across my face as I ran.

My hand closed around the knob. Do not look back. Go through the door. Close it. Then I'll be safe. The thing chasing me surely couldn't get through a door, right? Everyone knows monsters can't get through doors.

I felt movement behind me, a brush of air on the back of my neck. So close. There were no footsteps, no sound, just a change in the pressure on my skin as it pebbled with goose bumps. I rotated my hand to open the door.

The knob wouldn't move.

Someone shrieked, and I realized it was my own voice, stuttering and strained as I used some of the precious air I had left to scream my defiance and fear. I put my other hand on top of the one already on the knob. With a mighty push, I turned the knob and the door opened away from me. Not locked, just stuck.

I hurled my body through the opening, expecting at any moment to be torn to shreds from behind.

As I cleared the portal, I turned and slammed the door. The latch clicked.

Safe.

I breathed in and out rapidly, trying to keep from hyperventilating as I leaned against the door. I was secure. Whatever chased me couldn't get me in here. All I needed to do was...

I saw then that the door had no lock. My heart, already trying to beat its way from my chest, seemed to double its rate. No lock? Why would the door have no lock?

Looking frantically around, I saw nothing to help me. In fact, I saw nothing at all. I saw no walls, no furniture, nothing. Only the door floating in darkness. Where was I? Should I leave the door and run, or should I stay and hold it closed? The predator was faster than me. What would give me the best chance to survive?

Again, I sensed movement. The door swung open, not toward me, but away from me. It had opened the other way a moment before, but the knob pulled from my grasp, and there was empty space where solid wood had been. A blackness, darker even than the night around me, rushed in, and I felt myself falling toward the ground, a peculiar sensation coursing through me. Maybe it was what you felt when you died.

I jerked upright off my pillow with a strangled cry. Sweat covered me and I felt as if I had been breathing hard for an hour, like I'd been running for my life.

A dream, then. I slowed my breathing, gulped to wet my dry throat. My heart was still beating so rapidly, it almost hurt. Like it did when we had to do sprints in track. I swiped away some hair that was plastered to the side of my face. It had been a long time since I'd had a nightmare that real. I thought I was really in danger, really there, though thinking back I recognized some signs that it was a dream. But that's the way it worked, right? Your mind folded all the little inconsistencies and impossibilities into what you were seeing and it all seemed to fit, somehow. Well, I was awake, so it was over.

I picked up my phone. Two-thirty in the morning. Ugh. Four and a half hours until I needed to get up for school.

I pulled off the covers twisted all around me and swung my legs off the bed. My soft footfalls on the carpet of my room sounded almost loud in the quiet house. Ten steps to the bathroom and I was squinting through the light I flipped on.

The girl in the mirror looked like she had been wrestling. In the heat. With a skilled opponent. Basically, she looked like she'd been beaten up. Her long chestnut hair was a tangled, frizzy mess. I should have put it up before going to sleep, but I had been so tired when I went to bed. Brown eyes peeked out from under the mass of locks, squinting slightly to focus. I didn't like her oval face much, but I guess it could be worse. At least I wasn't covered in zits.

Sighing, I splashed some water on my face, dabbed it dry with the towel, and flipped off the light. After stumbling across the room—my mom would have a fit if she saw the clothes I'd tossed on the floor—I hopped back into bed, pulled the covers over me, shivered once, and wiggled around until I

was comfortable. I had four and a half hours of sleep coming to me, and no stupid nightmare was going to keep me from it.

Chapter 2

When I finally dragged myself out of bed, after hitting the snooze more times than I could count, I gradually got ready for school. Jeans, the first pair of flats I pulled from the closet, and a tee shirt that read *What You Looking At?*, and I was about as presentable as could be expected. I sighed. It was only Wednesday. Not even halfway through the week yet.

I lived close enough to walk to school. Good thing, too, since I didn't have a car like some of the kids my age did. At sixteen, I had my driving permit, but my mother didn't let me practice driving much. She had a little trouble handling me at the wheel. She was many things, but a calm passenger for a teenage driver was not one of them. Whatever. I wasn't in a great hurry to start driving. Where did I need to go?

She had dragged us from our home in Tucson to Lode, a much smaller town. She always claimed the job was a good opportunity, and more money than the job she had been doing, but I didn't buy it. I think, like me, she wasn't able to handle all the reminders of my father. Since he died in the car accident, many things had changed. So many things.

As I made my way out of my house and down my street, I tried to focus on the sunshine and the other kids walking. But the sun didn't seem to be as bright as it had been before the move, before the accident, and the kids seemed to be merely shadows of people I would never know.

"Danica Prado," a voice said.

I turned to see its source padding up to me. I knew who it had to be. Only one person teased me with my full name like that.

"Hey, Sam," I said.

Samantha Yin, my best friend, stood about an inch shorter than my five feet, six inches. Her long black hair fell to the middle of her slender back. Her mom and dad were from China, but she was born here in Arizona. Her eyes had a squashed egg shape, tapering at the edges. They were brown, though when I looked closely at them, I saw a hint of red around the iris. Not red like she was tired, but lines of it through the mocha coloring. I only knew this because she made me stare into her eyes a few months before because she thought something had gotten into them. I wasn't big on eye contact. She was so pretty, sometimes I was jealous of her. It didn't last long, though. I loved her like a sister.

"Another Wednesday, huh, Dani?" she said, falling into step next to me. She only lived a couple of

blocks from me, and we normally timed it so that we walked to school together.

“Yeah.”

She looked at me, studying my face and peering into my eyes. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I didn’t sleep well last night. I’m pretty tired.”

“Oh. Not the best way to be with more than half a week left.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “I’ll have to try to catch up on my sleep in math class.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right.”

We continued walking, me too tired to really say anything and her too polite to try to draw me out. I finally relented.

“Did you see Jacob Benton yesterday at the water polo match?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she said, hugging herself. “Do you think I go to those things just to watch you play? Please.”

“My God, he’s gorgeous,” I said, thinking of him and his body.

Jacob was the captain of the water polo team at school, the best wrestler we had, and the captain of the baseball team. He was tall, dark-haired, muscular, and so handsome I couldn’t look at him without feeling like I’d held my breath for too long.

Of course, he also had a girlfriend, one of the most popular girls in school: Madison Cairsen.

We made it to the school and began heading up the sidewalk toward the courtyard when I ran into the back of Sam while I was looking toward a group of kids laughing loudly. She had stopped abruptly.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s the big idea? Don’t stop on a dime like that. What are—”

She had reached back and was groping around for me while keeping her eyes straight ahead. When her hand found my face, she used her grip on my chin to swivel my head around to our left and about twenty feet ahead.

It was Jacob Benton.

The sunlight shone on him like he was some sort of angel. Seriously, there was a break in the morning clouds that sort of spotlighted him just as I caught sight of him. It made me think about all that symbolism stuff we’d been studying in Lit class. We both turned toward the bench to the right of the sidewalk and pretended we had dropped something. I watched him out of the corner of my eye.

Tall, ripped, and so, so hot, he was everything I liked in a guy. His short brown hair, almost as dark as my own, always had that “controlled mess” look. Those dark eyes flicked toward where Sam and I were standing and I stopped trying to watch him for a moment, until I checked back and saw him looking away. I wasn’t able to breathe again until he had passed by and gone around the admin building.

He was with his girlfriend, of course, a fact that effectively killed the fantasies running through my head. What did he see in that girl? What could he possibly find attractive about a beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed captain of the cheerleading squad? Who also happened to be as rich as his family? I sighed.

How did I get stuck in a Hollywood movie about the prom king and queen and the awkward girl?

“I hate her,” Sam said.

She crushed on Jacob, too, but would never admit it. Her disgust with all that was Madison was mainly on my behalf. She was my best friend, after all.

I nodded as we walked on toward our first class.

Sam and I were early to class, as normal. I liked to be on time, unlike my mother. Whenever I had to be somewhere and she was involved, I knew I was going to be late. We just didn’t see eye-to-eye on that subject. I got my punctuality from my dad, I think.

We sat and watched as the other students filed into the classroom, moving faster as the sounding of the bell drew nearer. When it sounded, the kids who had not yet made it to their seats ran the last few steps. Well, most of them did. Some were too cool to hurry.

Mr. Reynolds was in front, going through some papers. He was tall and lanky, with black hair showing a few patches of gray. His thin face would probably never be called good-looking, but when he smiled—which he did a lot—it made everyone within range feel better. I know; I had asked Sam and others who had his class.

One of the best things about Mr. Reynolds was his passion for the subject he taught. He enjoyed English in general, but his excitement really shone through in his literature classes, like the one I was sitting in. Medieval Literature.

“Okay, everyone,” he said. “Okay, settle down.”

The kids who had been gabbing with their friends trailed off and turned toward Mr. Reynolds.

“Yesterday, we were talking about *Inferno*. I am assuming all of you did the reading for last night.” He scanned the room, obviously looking for those students who could not meet his eye. There were several. I laughed inside, but calmly met his gaze and kept my face neutral on the outside. As his eyes met mine, he nodded. He knew I would have read the assigned pages.

Samantha looked over at me and smiled. She would have completed her homework, too, probably gone beyond the assignment. She was a perfect student, and her grades reflected that. Since I met her, I had never seen her get anything other than an A on any assignment or test. She was a beast when it came to schoolwork.

“Dante Alighieri, as with many artists of his time, infused his work with religious themes,” Mr. Reynolds said. “But although his work, the *Divine Comedy*, of which *Inferno* is the first volume, described in great detail the inner workings of hell, its value is really in how the story is a metaphor for the political climate at the time, and in a broader sense, life itself.”

I wondered at how my teacher had even gotten approval to put this book in the curriculum. People seemed to freak out when religion was concerned, especially at school. I chalked it up to Lode being a small town. I was glad he did get approval, though. The story was fascinating in itself, but I could really sink my teeth into analyzing the allegory.

Yeah, I was one of those: kids who are way too academic for their own good. I hadn’t ever really

been a geek or nerd or anything *before*. But when I moved to Lode, I had no friends and looked forward to homework so I would have something to do. As I focused on my assignments, I became more interested in what I was learning and did well in my classes. As I did well, it became even more interesting. By the time I had accumulated a few friends—all good students because that’s what we had in common—my path was set as one of the “smart kids.” I didn’t feel any different than I had before, but now I had a label I never thought would apply to me.

Anyway, I had a kind of morbid fascination for this assignment, like people do for a big car accident. The darkness and depressive nature of the poem sort of gave me chills, but I liked it. A little bit.

“...and symbolism can be seen throughout the account,” Mr. Reynolds went on. “Everything from the use of mythological people and beasts to taking accounts directly from the Bible itself gives us a deeper picture of the world at that time, as well as the enduring humans search for perfection.”

The class continued, and as it did, I thought about the story. I actually looked forward to reading more of it. I had friends, but I’d made a habit of doing well in school and would keep it up. Besides, I was curious to see how Dante fared as he traveled deeper into hell. I wondered if his account could compare to the hell I lived every day.

Chapter 3

At lunch, I met up with the rest of the crew.

“Hey,” Zachary Pinse said, as he hopped over the back of the bench I was sitting on, landing to sit next to me. “Your favorite guy in the world is here!”

I leaned forward and craned my neck so I could look around him. “Funny, I can’t see him. You’re probably in the way.”

He laughed as he high-fived me, his always-smiling face breaking out into an even bigger grin. He didn’t have a chance to respond, though.

“Who ever heard of doing maths first thing in the morning?” Emily Hartford said in her English accent. “I really think it should be outlawed. What a horrid way to start the day.” Her freckled face was flushed—either from her rant or from rushing to get to our normal lunch spot from the other side of campus—and her long brown hair swung as she took a seat on the other side of me.

“It’s too bad you couldn’t get lit class with Sam and me,” I said. “It’s actually pretty interesting.”

Emily looked around. “Where *is* Sam?”

“She had to go to the gym to talk to Mr. Farrel really quickly before lunch. She’ll be here in—” I cut off as she appeared.

“Are we ready then?” Emily said. “I’m famished.”

“You could have started eating without me,” Sam said, her face a little pink also, no doubt from walking so quickly. Or maybe embarrassment. I wasn’t sure.

“That wouldn’t have been very polite, would it, now?” Emily said.

“How long have you been in the States again?” Sam asked. “We’re not big on etiquette here, you know.”

“Yes, well, old habits die hard.”

Emily had moved from England a couple of years earlier and still occasionally had difficulties with how things were done here. She was very polite, in stark contrast to most of the kids our age here in Lode.

We all usually brought our lunches rather than to go to the cafeteria. In a pinch, we could always use the vending machines, but nine times out of ten, we brought something. I unpacked my lunch, a plain peanut butter and jelly sandwich—hey, it’s a classic—some Cheetos, and an iced tea. So, I’m

not the most imaginative person in the world. Or the healthiest.

“My dad says there’s something going on at the mines,” Zach said, trying to speak through a mouth full of some kind of sandwich. It smelled like tuna fish. I swore that if he spit any chewed up sandwich on me, I’d crack his head for him.

Zach’s dad was a shift lead at the mine. Almost everyone in town had something to do with that hole in the ground. It was the whole reason the town was created to begin with. With a name like Lode, you’d have to figure that would be the case.

“Really?” Emily said, eyebrows raising and back straightening so she sat a little taller. “What kind of thing?”

Zach swallowed—without spitting any of his lunch on me, I might add—and looked at her. His eyes had grown a little larger when she had sat up straighter. Emily typically wore clothes that understated her figure, but sometimes I got glimpses of how good her body was, like now. I think Zach noticed, too. At times, I resented her for it, but like with Sam, the thought left my head quickly. I really shouldn’t compare myself to my friends.

“I don’t really know,” Zach said. “He said something about breaking through to some other cavern or mine or something. It happened toward the end of his shift. I’ll ask him about it later. Maybe he has more information now.”

“Breaking into another cavern?” I asked. “How does that happen? I thought they did all kinds of techy x-ray stuff to make sure they didn’t accidentally tap into an underground river or something like that.”

“Dunno,” he said, taking another bite of his lunch. “I’ll ask my dad.”

“You know, Zachary,” Sam said, “I don’t understand why you said anything at all, if you don’t know any details. Do you just speak so you can hear yourself?”

“Shumtimes.” He really had a mouthful this time. I scooted a little further from him so I wouldn’t have to slap him.

I dragged myself home at the end of the day, feeling drained from the lack of sleep the night before. I came through the living room without saying a word to Bobby, my brother, and went straight to my room. My backpack I unceremoniously dropped on the floor as I collapsed onto my bed. I just wanted to sleep.

“Hey, Dani,” he said from my doorway. He had followed me to my room. “What’s up?”

I tilted my head to look at him. “You need a haircut.” He did. His hair was a bushy mess. The length wasn’t really the problem, though. The fact that he never combed it was. His brown eyes twinkled and he got that goofy grin he wore so often, his mis-sized teeth reflecting the sunlight coming through my window.

“Rough day, huh?” he asked as he plopped into the chair at my desk.

“I’m just tired.”

“I heard you moving around a lot last night, like you were dreaming,” he said. “Either that or

wrestling with someone. You didn't have anyone in here with you, did you?"

I threw my pillow at his head and he laughed.

"Maybe if you started training again, competing, you'd be tired and sleep all night without waking up," he mused as he ran his hand over one of the trophies standing next to my desk.

It was a tall thing, over three feet high. The little girl at the top—she had a pony tail and everything—was on one leg kicking at something higher than her head. The plate on the trophy read: "First Place, Sparring—Girls 14-15."

I laughed. "Yeah, maybe. But I'm not going to compete again. I'm done with that."

I had studied karate for years and started doing tournaments when I was twelve. I enjoyed it and my father liked watching me. It became something the two of us could share. I actually got pretty good, winning the state championship for my age group two years in a row. That was before he died, though. I hadn't competed since the accident, hadn't even really trained.

My sensei encouraged me to continue training, saying that it would help me deal with my loss, but I just couldn't do it. Since we moved, there was less pressure to train. From everyone except my brother. Bobby was proud of my accomplishments and wanted to see me fight again.

"But you're so good, Dani," he pleaded, "and I know you like it. Why don't you try it again?"

"No, Bobby," I said with a sigh. "Please don't pester me about this now. It's just...it's just too soon to be talking about this. Please?"

He backed off, for which I was grateful. After he wandered back toward the TV, I lay back on my bed and closed my eyes.

It had been dark, like being underground kind of dark, that night. The rain and storm clouds obscured anything in the sky. The moon, the stars, airplane lights high above, all of it. Worse, the power had gone out for some reason, probably someone sliding off the road in the rain and hitting a power pole. We had been moving around the house by candlelight and headlamp for a few hours. I'd played some games on my laptop for a little while but settled down to sitting and waiting for my dad to come home. He was still out in it, probably on his way back from his work at the medical research company.

I spent most of the time in my room. Bobby and my mother were in the living room. For the short time I was down there with them, I watched their interaction. Mom sat rigid on the edge of the couch, her phone on the table in front of her. She was telling him about a time when she was a child and the power had gone out for a full day. As she spoke, she glanced often at the phone, as if expecting something. Her speech was jerky, halting, like her mind was somewhere else. I don't think Bobby noticed.

He was curled into a ball on the other couch, watching my mother and listening without making a sound. Every time lightning flashed, he twitched, and when the thunder came almost immediately after, he jumped a little. While Mom darted her eyes back and forth from him to the phone, he shifted his from her to the battery-powered camping lantern on the table. I'd always suspected he was afraid

of the dark, but that confirmed it in my mind.

I left them to their own ways of coping and went back to my room. I'd just wait there patiently until he got home. I'm not sure how long I lay there on my bed waiting before I fell asleep.

The boom of a thunderclap shook me awake. It rattled my window and vibrated my skull. It scared me, my disoriented mind trying to grasp what was happening. Where was I? What day was it? What was going on? An irrational fear gripped me, and I started shaking. A voice from the other room pierced the wall of my room.

"What? No, oh no!" It was my mother. She sounded frantic.

The sense of foreboding I had felt, magnified by the manner in which I woke, doubled and then doubled again. I rolled from my bed onto my feet, tripped over a sweater I had dropped to the floor earlier, and almost pitched headfirst into the wall. I caught myself, stood upright, and took a breath. Why was my heart beating so fast?

I rubbed my eyes and tried to shake off the grogginess. By the time I got to the living room, my mother had ended the call and was staring at her phone, her eyes strangely unfocused.

"Mom," I said. "Is something wrong?"

Lightning threw strange shadows across her face. The thunder almost immediately after made me jump. Bobby moaned and curled up on himself. My mother didn't move.

"It's...it's your father," she said, continuing to stare at her phone. "There's been an accident."

Chapter 4

The news really didn't affect me at first. I think maybe I was in shock, because it didn't seem real. That wore off.

They never did let me see my dad's...body. They said he had lost control of the car in the storm and slid off a cliff. I saw a picture of the car once, what was left of it. It made me think maybe they were right not to let anyone see his condition. No one except my mother, that is. She insisted on identifying him, though they had already determined who he was. Dental records or something. I had to stay with my aunt for a week until my mother was speaking again after that.

Bobby and I were both a mess, but I think he recuperated faster. I don't know, maybe since he was younger, a given amount of time was longer to him. All I know is that I felt the effects of what happened long after we moved. The scariest part was the things I couldn't think about and identify, the "subconscious effects of the trauma," as the psychologist I had to see called it.

I think my mom was probably worse than me. She would go through her day, carry on as if things were ordinary, but each night I could hear her trying to hide her sobbing. Though to anyone who knew her casually she seemed normal, she didn't laugh and joke around like she did before.

About six months after the accident, Mom had an opportunity to take another job with the company she worked for, The Great Southwestern Mining Company. It was an office manager position at a small satellite office fifty or sixty miles away.

"I want to talk to you about something," she said to me and Bobby. We sat on the couch in the living room watching her. She wrung her hands and tapped her fingers on the coffee table. Her eyes darted from Bobby to me and then back again.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I have an opportunity for a promotion," she said. "From clerk to Office Manager."

"That's great, mom," I said.

Bobby sat there tossing the racquetball he sometimes carried around.

"It...will mean that we have to move."

"Move?" Bobby's head raised at that, and he missed catching his ball. "How far? Will I still be in the same school, with my same friends?"

"No," Mom said. "It's about an hour away."

“Mom!” he said. “We can’t—”

“Bobby!” I interrupted. “Be quiet for a minute.” Turning to face my mother, her eyes liquid, I said softly to her, “It’s hard to be here for you, huh?”

That was all it took for the tears to flow. Her face didn’t change much, just a tightening of her jaw as she clenched it, but liquid streamed from her eyes.

“Everything here reminds me of your father,” she said. “Every time I turn around, there is a memory of the two of us, or of all four of us. Sometimes I feel like I’m going to explode or go insane. It’s been six months, but it seems to get worse every day. I don’t know if I can handle it.” She wiped at her eyes and sniffled. “Plus, we need the money. It’s a good opportunity.”

We discussed it, but I knew from the start it was something we had to do. I had memories, too, and the ghosts of what had been assaulted me also. Bobby wasn’t happy about it, but he finally, grudgingly, agreed. He hadn’t needed to. My mother had looked at me most of the time, gauging my reaction. She knew I would support her. Besides, I would have made the same decision if it was up to me.

So we moved. To Lode, a small town of maybe eight thousand people. It was a mining town, built when a prospector found a small cave and thought it might contain gold. It didn’t. There was copper, though, so The Great Southwestern Mining Company bought the land and mineral rights and started mining. The town grew up around it.

Things were still rough for us. There was still a hole in our lives, but time dulled the edges on the blade that seemed constantly pressed to my heart, and life became less torturous. Mom and Bobby seemed to snap right back into a routine, living life and not moping. I couldn’t. Did they still think of my father? Did it still feel like a piece of them was missing? Or was it just me?

I didn’t want to think about it. Not right now.

My backpack stared at me accusingly. I sighed and picked it up. Mr. Reynolds had assigned homework, as had my other teachers, and it wasn’t going to do itself. After a moment of digging around in the largest compartment of the backpack, I pulled out the copy of Dante’s *Inferno*. Just the thing to suit my mood, a dark account of traveling through hell.

My teacher had said there were many translations of *Inferno* out there. The one he chose for us to read didn’t focus on trying to make the words rhyme but instead tried to be as accurate as possible, capturing the feeling of the original work in Italian. It lost the sense of meter, of being like a song, but the “prose still produced the important imagery.” That’s what Mr. Reynolds said. After reading some of it, I agreed with him.

I sat at my desk with a small desk lamp shining its beam onto the pages. As I read, I could picture the darkness, the caverns through which Dante traveled. I smelled the damp stone and the pervasive, pungent scent of sulfur in the air. I could almost hear the sounds as I went through the account, first of the great river Dante had to cross, then the storm, and the wailing, and...

“Hey!” a voice said, much too loud in the quiet room.

I nearly jumped completely out of my chair, book flying. My shoulder hit the desk lamp as I leaped, and it tottered before settling back down on the flat surface of my desk. Bobby stood in my darkened doorway. When had it gotten dark? I shivered, the memory of what I had read fresh in my mind.

“God, Bobby,” I said. “You scared me to death. What’s wrong with you?”

My brother eyed me as if he was searching for something. “Why are you so jumpy? Mom called you a couple of times. Dinner’s ready.”

“Oh,” I said “Okay.” I picked the book up from where it had landed on the floor and set it on my desk. “I guess I was engrossed in my reading. I’ll be there in a minute.”

He smirked at me, and I half expected him to say “boo,” but he just nodded and turned to leave. Why *was* I so jumpy? I turned on the other two lights in my room and scanned the corners for anything lurking in the previously shadowy spaces now flooded with light. There was nothing, of course, but a shiver raced up my back. I took a breath, looked around one more time, and left my room. Despite my mother’s constant nagging not to leave lights on when not in use, I didn’t shut them off as I went to eat dinner.

The next day found me sitting with my friends in the big auditorium at school. They called it an auditorium, anyway. It was really just the gym with all the bleachers pulled out. The Principal had announced an emergency assembly just a few minutes before we all started piling into the gym.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” Ms. Tonner, our principal, said. “We know it is an abnormal situation, but the staff felt it necessary.” She scanned the entire room, nodded, and continued. “Some strange things have happened in and around the mine. There was apparently some sort of explosion or collapse. Some of the miners are still unaccounted for.”

Many in the audience started whispering. It was no wonder. Most of the kids had parents who worked for the mine company. Ms. Tonner raised her hands and waited for the buzz of whispered voices to soften.

“We will update you as we get more information. There have also been...reports of some sort of animal loose, possibly from the caverns adjacent to the mine. We don’t have a lot of information yet, but the Mayor’s office is highly recommending that no one be outside their homes after dark. It appears that this animal is nocturnal and dangerous. Pets and a few people have been reported missing. It may be a coincidence, but best to be safe.

“This same announcement is being made on the local TV stations, radio stations, and at places of employment. If your parents are not aware of it, please share the information with them when you get home from school this afternoon. Remember, be in your homes after dark until the authorities have determined if there is any danger and have taken steps to remedy it if there is. You may return to your classes now. Thank you.”

I stumbled back toward my class, my friends around me. I heard them talking, but their voices echoed strangely, almost like we were all in a big steel tank half filled with water, the sounds

bouncing from the walls a few times and then dying suddenly.

“This is the thing my dad mentioned,” Zach said.

“What do you think it is?” Sam asked.

“Maybe it’s a bear,” Emily offered.

Their words meant nothing to me. An animal from underground, coming out only at night? I pictured the formless thing that came for me in my dreams, hunting me, constantly chasing. I shivered, though I could feel the desert sun hot on my skin.

“Dani?” Sam said. “Dani, are you all right?”

Something pressed onto my shoulder. A hand, shaking me gently.

“All right, Dani?” Emily said.

I blinked a couple of times and shook my head, turning toward them. Both girls and Zach had concerned looks on their faces. Sam’s eyes were locked on mine, hers intense. I dropped my gaze to watch her mouth as she spoke.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, trying to act nonchalant. “I’m really tired. I must have zoned out there for a minute.”

“That look on your face was not zoning out,” Sam said. “It...it looked like you were afraid. Are you okay?”

“Sure,” I lied. “Maybe I did have a scary thought or two. Aren’t you scared of a bear that is too smart to be caught and strong enough to take pets and even people? It’s like some kind of horror movie.”

“I’m sure they’ll sort it all out,” Emily said. “We need to stay in the house when it’s dark, like Ms. Tonner said, and we’ll be fine. They’ll find it and capture it and pretty soon we’ll be going to the zoo to see what it looks like.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Probably.” An uncomfortable feeling, a sort of burning nausea, formed in my belly. I doubted it would happen that way at all.

Chapter 5

Over the next week, there were more reports of strange things happening in conjunction with the mine. And in the dark. It didn't look like it was some escaped animal.

Sam and I were watching TV at my house after school. After that irritating sound they play when there's a natural disaster or something, a special announcement came on. The picture resolved into the police chief, Charlie Fretz.

"There have been troubling reports throughout the city," he said. He was an older man, a little heavy, and the head underneath his uniform cap was bald. He was dressed up in the formal uniform he wore when officiating at public functions, dark blue with shiny buttons and a glimmering badge on his chest. "More pets have disappeared, and several people have been reported missing as well.

"Earlier today, an entire shift of mine workers disappeared. As I'm speaking to you, the private security firm the mine uses to guard the facility is mounting an investigation, going into the caverns to determine what the problem is. I don't think I need to tell anyone in Lode that mines are dangerous. They are taking precautions against mine gas or other hazards and using the utmost care.

"I will be providing updates as information becomes available. For now, the mayor has decreed that no one should be outside after the sun goes down. My officers will be patrolling to assist anyone who is stranded after dark. That is all for now."

I turned to Sam. "What do you think of that?"

"I think the chief almost looks professional in his uniform. He's normally in plain clothes."

"Small town," I said. "What ya gonna do? But I meant about what he said, silly."

"I know. Just trying to lighten the mood. It's crazy. No bear could be doing this. A whole shift of mine workers? Maybe it's terrorists or something."

"Right," I said. "Terrorists would target a town of eight thousand people. And to start, they snatch pets and a few random citizens. Sounds logical to me."

"Okay, okay," she said, putting her hands up in surrender. "It's a little scary, isn't it? I mean, it sounds like a horror movie. Some kind of creatures from outer space or something came and are taking over the town a few people at a time. Why aren't the police doing anything about it?"

I look at her, incredulous. "Our police? We have four cops and a chief. What do you think they could do against someone or something that took out a whole shift of miners?"

“We don’t know what happened with the miners. There could have been a collapse or something. It could be coincidence.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Anyway,” Sam said, “I think I’m going to head home before it gets dark. I don’t want to be hassled by one of Lode’s four cops because I’m walking down the street.”

“Good idea. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yep,” she said, heading out the door. “See you later.”

I sat there on the couch, not paying attention to the TV though I was staring blankly right at it, wondering what could cause the problems we were having. I looked around, ice traveling up my back for some reason, like when you feel like someone is watching you. Whatever it was, the mine security or our police would figure it out. I’d just have to stay inside when it was dark in the meantime. That would be no problem. I didn’t like to be outside when it was dark. Where was I going to go, anyway?

Bobby came home an hour later. He was hanging out at his friend’s house, two doors down. My mother came through the door just after he did.

“Did you hear there was some kind of trouble at the mine?” she asked us as she went to the kitchen to start dinner.

I took a good look at her. She was not as tall as me—something that really bothered her—but I didn’t think being short was a big deal for a woman. Her hair was the color of mine, dark brown, though she liked to put highlights in it to make it look lighter. It wasn’t quite as long as mine, either, only going down a couple inches past her shoulders. I thought she was pretty, but others seemed to think she was gorgeous. Men hit on her everywhere we went. It was sickening. They liked her shape, too. I could see them scanning her body, which would probably be considered curvy rather than athletic. A smaller, curvy, Hispanic woman. The guys ate it up. I wondered how it would feel to be the center of attention like that all the time.

“I saw something about it on the TV,” I said.

“What happened?” Bobby asked. My mom told him basically the same thing the chief said in his announcement.

“Cool,” he said. “Do you think it’s some kind of monster? Maybe it’s been sleeping for a thousand years and they woke it up with all the mining noise, and now it’s hungry. Hungry for human flesh.”

I whacked him on top of the head. “What is wrong with you?”

He tilted his head and eyed me as he rubbed his scalp. “You don’t know. It could be. Or it could be aliens from outer space coming to steal bodies or something.”

“Enough, Bobby,” my mom said. “This is serious. I know all those miners. They could be trapped down there. All radio contact was cut off. Everything went silent. Even the remote cameras went out.”

Now, *that* part wasn’t mentioned by the police chief.

We ate the lasagna my mom made for us. We sat around the table in the kitchen but, as always, the TV was still on in the living room. When the emergency sound came over the speaker again, we all

looked at each other. There was a moment's pause and then all three of us got up and scrambled to the living room.

Chief Fretz's face took up the screen again. He looked like he was sweating.

"I...there have been more developments with the case of the missing miners. As I mentioned in my earlier announcement, the private security firm used by the mine sent in a group of their personnel to investigate the situation. Safety specialists, members of the mine's emergency response team, went with them. Altogether, fourteen people went in: two safety specialists and twelve armed security guards." The chief swallowed hard. "We have, um, lost contact with them. As before, the radios, ah, they went silent and the body cameras failed to show anything conclusive.

"The mayor's office and the police department are working to determine what is happening. Until we have resolved the issue, we cannot stress enough that no one should be outside after dark until further notice. We have contacted the county seat and are trying to get aid from those who specialize in...uh, this type of situation. That is all for now."

The screen abruptly went back to the show that had been playing before the announcement.

I looked to my mother. I couldn't really place her expression. Was it fear or just general concern? Her mouth was set in a tight line but her eyes held a kind of wild look, wider than normal and darting from me to Bobby.

"Mom," I said. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head and met my eyes. They seemed a little more normal than they did a moment ago. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Why don't you two clean up the dishes? Have you done your homework already?"

The rest of the evening was like any other day, except that my mom and Bobby stared out the window to the darkness every once in a while. To be honest, I did so myself. What was out there, and would it stay in the mines? I also wondered what the other members of my family thought, my mother with her concerned looks and Bobby with a more anxious, even excited, expression.

The next morning, Sam and I talked about it on the way to school. There had been no further word on the miners or the security detail. As we made our way through the quad, it became clear we weren't the only ones speculating.

"I heard they found the bodies. They were all headless and drained of blood," one voice said.

"I heard it was a cult that takes people and eats them alive," another said.

"It's a conspiracy," a third voice claimed. "It's some kind of plan to steal money from the town."

"No, no, no," yet another student claimed. "They're mutants who live underground. We got too close to their hive, and now they've developed a taste for human flesh. They'll take us all if they can."

I looked at Sam and raised an eyebrow. Honestly, where did people get these ideas? We arrived at our normal meeting place. Emily was there, talking softly with Zach. He had seen better days. As we approached, he lifted his head from his hands to look at us. His eyes were red and puffy and his

lower lip quivered.

“Oh, no,” I said, realizing what it meant. “Was your dad on shift yesterday?”

His red-rimmed eyes filled with liquid again and he emitted a noise, a soft whimper.

“I’m sorry, Zach.” I stepped up behind him where he was sitting on the bench and hugged him.

“I’m sure they’ll find out what happened and find him safe and sound.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, seeming at a loss about what to do. “There has to be a logical explanation.”

“I was just telling him,” Emily said, “that my father explained to me the way the rock is structured around here.”

“That’s right,” Sam said. “He’s a geologist with the mining company. What did he say?” Her concern for Zach showed through. She hardly ever stated the obvious like that. We all knew what Em’s dad did.

“He said there are natural caves in the area, maybe the same cave system as the Colossal Cave thirty or so miles away, but maybe they’re still growing. The Colossal Cave is dry; the water source that carved it and made its features all dried up, but there may be other systems nearby. Maybe the miners broke into one of those.”

“That wouldn’t explain why all those people disappeared,” Zach said.

“Maybe,” Emily continued, “they came across something very valuable, a vein of gold or something. Maybe they’re busy trying to mine it or something.”

Zach looked at the English girl blankly. “Seriously? That’s the best you got? They found some gold and are being greedy and going AWOL so they can scoop it all up? Come on, Em. Give me some credit here.”

Emily’s pale skin flushed red. “Sorry. It’s all I could think of on such short notice,” she said, attempting a smile but not quite managing it. Instead she hugged Zach. “I’m sure he’s fine, whatever the reason.”

“Thanks, Em,” the boy said. “I’m sorry to snap at you. I’m sort of stressed about it.”

“Any other news?” I asked. “The last thing I heard was last night when the security team went missing.”

“That’s the last thing anyone knows,” Zach said, sniffing. “They seem to have stopped talking about it after last night’s awkward announcement by the chief.”

“We’ll probably have another assembly today,” Sam said. “They’re going to want to make sure no one is stupid enough to go trying to explore the mine.”

“Who would do that?” Emily asked.

Sam nodded toward the other end of the courtyard. A group of about ten kids were over there smoking, some of them pushing others or play fighting.

“Oh, right,” Emily said. “I could see them trying to prove how tough they were by taking on whatever is down there.” The rest of us nodded.

As expected, there was another assembly, and Ms. Tonner told us to take the curfew seriously and

not make more trouble for the overworked police force.

During her speech, and afterwards, I scanned the faces of the other students. I saw everything from sadness—like with Zachary—to humor, to thoughtful concern. Some kids would see a joke in anything, but most of the faces I saw had serious expressions, eyes that showed worry or were just unfocused. Conversation was muted, as if people were afraid to speak openly about what was happening. I'd never seen anything like it.

“So,” Mr. Reynolds said in class the next day, “who has something to say about our reading in *Inferno*?” No one raised their hand. Did he really believe anyone would?

“Samantha?” he said, causing Sam to jump. “What are your thoughts? I know you’ve done the reading.”

“I...uh...well, Mr. Reynolds, with everything that’s going on right now, I find it difficult not to think of the mine situation when I read *Inferno*.”

“Really?” He settled his lanky frame on the front of his desk and stroked his chin. He tried for the rugged, unshaven look, but the facial hair he grew was spotty and mostly gray, peppered with darker hair. “What specifically are you thinking about?”

Sam was too smart and too competent to be thrown for long. “It seems to me that there are parallels. Dante traveled through hell, concentric rings within caverns in the earth. Each of them was reserved for specific types of sinners, the most serious crimes being in the center. It makes me wonder which circle of hell the things in the mines came from, and if there are worse things than what we have seen already.”

As she said it, I shivered. I had thought much the same thing, even though we didn’t talk about it. I looked over at her. She was looking confidently at Mr. Reynolds. How was she always so in control? Smart, pretty, always seeming to know what to say or do, she was fantastic. I smiled at my friend. She saw it and raised her eyebrows, then turned her eyes back to our teacher.

“I see,” Mr. Reynolds said. “I’m not sure if I would see it the same way, but your opinion is duly noted. Is there a specific thing in our reading that makes you think of our situation right now?”

“We’re barely halfway through his account,” Sam said, “but it’s like the ones who go into the mine are crossing Acheron, the river of the dead.” She looked around at the others in class, all of them paying attention for a change. “Anyone who has crossed over into the mine has not returned, as surely as if they crossed into the land of the dead.” She started, her eyes going wide as she looked around the classroom. “Not that I mean I think they’re dead or anything. I’m talking about symbolism.”

She darted her eyes over to a girl on the left side of the classroom, Raquel Nefferman. Her father was one of the miners on the same shift as Zach’s dad. Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears, as they had every time I had seen her that day. They met Sam’s, and Sam gritted her teeth and drew her lips back at her inadvertently painful statement. Raquel forced a smile at her and nodded. I could hear Sam release a breath. I’d never heard my friend say anything mean to anyone, even teasing; it just wasn’t in her. I was glad the other girl didn’t take offense.

Mr. Reynolds had watched the exchange and nodded. “Good, Samantha. I can see the depiction you’re pointing out there. Anyone else have any thoughts? How about on the specific punishments for the crimes the souls committed in life?”

The class dragged on. I don’t really remember what we talked about. I was thinking about what Sam said. What *did* happen to those people? Were they dead? I hoped the police cracked the mystery soon. It was hard enough thinking about Dante and his journey without worrying about other things in the dark trying to get me.

Saturday morning was usually a time for chores. Bobby and I pulled some weeds and mowed the lawn. We washed the windows and cleaned our rooms. Mom had been “letting” me do my own laundry lately, so I had that to do as well. By the time we finished, it was just after noon.

“Okay,” Mom said, “you can go.”

Bobby didn’t wait another second. He ran off toward his friend’s house; he and Timmy Snodgrass were inseparable. I just stood there.

“What, nothing exciting for you to do?” she asked.

“Nah. I’m kind of tired. I think I may just chill around the house.”

“Okay, suit yourself.” She started walking back into the house and stopped. “Dani, are you all right?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. Just all this stuff about dangers in the dark. I know you leave the lights on all the time. Are you...is everything okay?”

“It is weird,” I said, scrambling for a way to change the subject. “I hope they figure out what’s going on soon. I don’t like thinking there is some kind of bogeyman out there in the dark waiting to snatch us up.” I laughed, but I didn’t think it was convincing.

“I know. Well, if you’re sure there’s nothing wrong?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I think I’ll go lie down and listen to some music.”

I could feel her eyes on my back as I passed her and headed down the hall.

Chapter 6

“*B*obby!”

It was my mother’s voice. What time was it and why was she yelling? I looked at my phone. It was 7:06 AM. Ugh.

Footsteps padded quickly down the hall. My door opened.

“Dani,” she said, “where is your brother?”

“Wha?” I rubbed my eyes and blinked against the light coming from the hallway. “How should I know? He’s probably asleep.”

“He’s not in his room. You know he wouldn’t get up this early on a weekend.”

She was right about that. He normally slept until almost ten o’clock on the weekends. The situation finally hit me. Where *was* he?

“The last time I saw him,” I said, “was last night when I passed by his room to go to bed. He was still up, talking on his phone with one of his friends. I think it was a girl, by the way he was talking.”

My eyes adjusted, I got a good look at her. Her hair was a frizzy mess and her brown eyes were frantic. She turned her head toward his room and then back to me. “Get up. We need to go look for him.”

I didn’t argue. I’d seen her like this before. It was her mama bear look, and I knew better than to argue. I’d seen the results. It took me a few minutes to throw some clothes on and pull my hair, as frizzy as hers, through a scrunchy into a pony tail.

Mom wasn’t thinking straight, but I followed along faithfully as she went to Bobby’s best friend’s house a couple doors down. It was kind of early to be knocking on someone’s door, but that didn’t stop her. I wondered why she didn’t call them to ask if Bobby was over there, but like I said, I don’t think she was thinking clearly.

“Mom, did you call his phone?” I asked.

“Of course I called his phone. And texted him. There was no answer.”

The neighbors hadn’t seen him either, not since the afternoon of the day before. I racked my brain trying to figure out where he might be.

We searched for two hours, driving around town to places we thought he might be. We saw a few of his friends—they hadn’t seen him—but saw no sign of him.

“Where are you going now?” I asked as she set her jaw and started accelerating after leaving the last place we thought he might be, the local pizza joint.

“Police station,” she said.

Oh, of course. She was going to call in the aid of her boyfriend. Jesse Xander, one of the four cops in the city, was an okay guy. As close as I could tell, she had been dating him for about a year. Of course, she never referred to him as her boyfriend and never acknowledged that there was something between them. She always pretended he was just another of her friends. She had a *lot* of guy friends.

I never understood why she tried to hide it. It was totally obvious. Bobby and I laughed about it sometimes. I wasn’t sure if she was trying to save our feelings, thinking we couldn’t handle it after losing Dad, or if she was just embarrassed about being in a relationship with him. I couldn’t understand why she’d be with him if he embarrassed her. It didn’t matter. Maybe he could help.

“Jesse,” she said after we came through the door to the police station. “Bobby is missing. I need help.”

“Calm down, Allie,” he said, getting up from his desk. Her name was actually Alessa, but friends and family called her Allie. “Here, sit down.” He eyed me and nodded toward another chair. I sat in it. He was a tall man—Mom liked them tall. Maybe she thought he was good-looking, but to me he was pretty ugly. He was older than her, his head bald but his chin and lip sporting a mustache-goatee thing. I never figured out why she stuck with him. She always had guys hitting on her. I’d even had friends come over that mooned over her. I didn’t take after her in that respect. Guys didn’t find me fascinating like they all seemed to with her.

“I don’t know exactly when he disappeared,” Mom said, “but he was not in the house this morning when I got up.”

“Has it been twenty-four hours?” he asked. “You know we can’t do anything officially until it’s been that long.”

Mom looked at him, mouth open. Then she drew her lips into a tight line and narrowed her eyes at him. Uh-oh.

“You had better be joking with me, Jesse,” she said. I felt heat from her from where I was sitting a few feet away. If she hadn’t said something, I would have called him down for it. “What is this, some small town department on a TV show? No real police department has that requirement.”

Jesse swallowed and looked at his keyboard. “It’s policy here. I don’t make the rules.”

“I don’t care what your official policy is,” she said. “You need to help me find him.”

Jesse shot me a look. It said, *How much can I disagree without seeming like we’re bickering lovers?*

“Of course, Allie. I just mean I can’t do anything officially. I can help you personally.”

That cooled her a little. Her eyes no longer looked like they belonged to a cat that was about to eat a mouse. Now she looked at him like a cat eyeing a dog. “Okay, what do we do?”

Before he had a chance to answer, the door swung open and Mrs. Cairsen entered, her daughter Madison trailing.

“Oh, good,” she said. “There is someone here. You there, officer. My daughter is missing, and you must find her.”

Everyone in Lode knew the Cairsens. They had more money than everyone else in the town combined and expected everyone to worship them because of it. They were the typical rich snobs, the kind you see in the movies. All except Allison, Madison’s younger sister. She was pretty cool. She even hung out with Bobby sometimes. They were in the same grade.

Madison, though, that was something completely different. Not only was she the head cheerleader and one of the most popular girls in school, she was Jacob Benton’s girlfriend. For that alone I hated her, but so many other things justified that emotion.

“Take a seat, Mrs. Cairsen,” Jesse said with a sigh. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” she said, raising her chin so she could look down her nose at him. “My. Daughter. Is. Missing. You must find her.”

Jesse frowned at the woman and rubbed the back of his neck. “I understand, Mrs. Cairsen, but I am already dealing with one missing person right now. I will get to you and take your information when I am done with Ms. Prado here.”

“No, I don’t think you do understand. You need to—” Mrs. Cairsen cut off as the chief walked out of his office.

“Hello Melissa,” he said to Mrs. Cairsen. “Is there,” he eyed Jesse and gave him a stern look, “a problem here?”

“Oh, Charlie. Good.” Mrs. Cairsen faced him, turning her back on Jesse. “Allison is missing. I need your officers to search for her.”

“Of course, of course. It seems Jesse here is occupied. David!” he shouted toward a doorway to another room. “Come in here and take a missing person’s report.”

David Gaff came through the doorway, scratching the side of his graying head. I’d seen him around town—we were a pretty small town, after all—and I liked him. He was always helpful and seemed to enjoy talking to kids. His middle-aged body was sort of pear-shaped, and as he went toward Mrs. Cairsen, he almost seemed to limp. He’d probably been sitting too long and his muscles stiffened up on him.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Cairsen.” Catching sight of me and Mom, he added, “Allie.” He smiled and waved at me, too. My mom and I both waved back. “So, has your missing person been gone for twenty-four hours? We require that to fill out an official report.”

“No, no,” the police chief said. “We don’t have to be that strict. Help her out, David, and get right on it.” He smiled at Mrs. Cairsen.

“Yessir.”

Mom and Jesse both looked toward the chief, her eyes widening and Jesse doing a double-take.

He shook his head and continued typing on the keyboard.

After giving Jesse all the information and getting an assurance from him that they'd start searching, we left the police station. With time to dwell on it again, Mom started to breathe heavily as she drove us home, her head swiveling, trying to search everything on the way. She started to mumble to herself.

"Where could he have gone? Think. Where would he hide, what would he be doing?"

As we pulled into the driveway, Mr. Snodgrass, Timmy's dad, saw us and came toward the car. He was dragging Timmy behind him. We parked and got out to meet him at the end of the driveway.

"Allie," he said. "I have a little more information for you. I didn't know this earlier when you came over, or I would have said something." He glared at his son. "Tell her, Timmy."

The boy, the same age and pretty much the same size as Bobby, looked at us sheepishly. He was almost a carbon copy of my brother. The same raggedy hair, the same oversized teeth, even the same guilty look like he had done something—or several somethings—and was waiting to be caught. The only real difference in their appearance was his blue eyes where Bobby's were brown.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything sooner," he said, looking toward his father. He had obviously been told to make the apology. "Bobby was...he sort of did...well, I dared him to, you know..." Mr. Snodgrass slapped the top of his head. Not hard, but it was enough to get his son's attention. Timmy cringed a little—for effect—and squinted at his father.

"Timmy," my mom said, "just tell me what you know about Bobby. Where is he?"

"I'm not sure. We were talking yesterday, and I dared him and Allison to spend the night out in the park. You know, Steinholt Park. He said he wasn't afraid of anything coming to get him. He didn't even really think there was anything dangerous coming out of the mines. So I dared him, and he and Allison went to the park after dark last night to stay there. I haven't seen him, but he's probably at her house eating candy or something."

My mother's face had gone pale. She put her hand to her mouth, and I didn't like what I saw in her eyes. That look usually meant she was either going to start screaming or have some kind of meltdown, like a nervous breakdown. I hoped neither would happen. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she took another one. When she opened her eyes again, the fire in them made me take a step back. Timmy saw it, too, and he did likewise.

"The park, just down the street?" she asked slowly. There weren't that many public parks in town. It was obvious she was trying not to blow up in front of our neighbors. She controlled her voice, but it was strained. "They went there last night?"

Timmy seemed to shrink in on himself, as if he would double up, then double up again, and continue to do it until he folded into himself and disappeared completely. "Yes, ma'am. That's what they said, anyway. That was the dare. I'm really sorry if I got them in trouble."

Another deep breath. "Thank you for telling me," Mom said. "It's not completely your fault. You didn't force him to go." She turned to Mr. Snodgrass. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. At

least we have a place to start now.”

“Sorry I didn’t know earlier,” he said. “Do you need help with anything, looking for him or anything else?”

“No,” she said. “Thank you, though. That’s very thoughtful.” She seemed to have developed a habit since my father died of not accepting help for anything. She tried to do everything herself, even when it was obvious she could use aid. In this case, I agreed with her, but sometimes it really aggravated me because her not accepting help didn’t seem to apply to me. If she rejected someone’s offer, it usually meant more work for me.

I didn’t mind in this case. If Bobby was in trouble, I’d do anything to help him out. Though I didn’t show it on the outside, I was anxious to start searching with this new information. Jittery, nervous energy bubbled up from somewhere in my middle. We needed to get going to find out what the situation was. I refused to think that he had been taken by some dark creature.

My mom shot me a look. There wasn’t anything on her face, but I could read it in her eyes. She was in denial, too, as if it would all end up being a misunderstanding if we didn’t put words to our fear. We both got back in the car and took off toward the park.

It only took us a few minutes to get there. It wasn’t a large park, just your basic trees, grass, some benches, and a restroom, named after the prospector who had found the original small cave that became the mine. He sold the information to the mining company. A park named after him was part of his compensation.

There really wasn’t any crime in Lode, but it was still a stupid idea to spend the night in a park, even when there weren’t things from the mine snatching people. Bobby was fearless, though, which is to say that he was stupid. Not in most things, but in something like this, when someone dared him to do something, yeah. Stupid with a capital S. No, make that all caps.

As we came around a large tree on the edge of the park, my mom gasped. There were two sleeping bags laid out under a cluster of four trees. I recognized one of them as ours. The other was unfamiliar, but judging by how nice and expensive-looking it was, it was probably Allison’s. It looked more comfortable and warm than my bed at home. Her family had more money than God.

My mom rushed to the bag and rifled through it. What did she expect to find? Did she think Bobby had shrunk to pocket size and that he was hiding inside?

While she did that, I surveyed the area. I didn’t see anything that looked like there’d been a struggle. Bobby was small, but he was a scrapper. If someone had tried to kidnap them, he would have fought. He would have at least messed up his bag. It lay there, flattened out as if he had been ready to go to bed, but never quite made it. The grass didn’t hold footprints. I didn’t see anything that was useful as a clue.

“Dani,” she said. “Come over here. Help me get the sleeping bags up. We can bring them to the police. I already know this one is ours, but I want to confirm that this other one was Allison’s. Mrs. Cairsen will probably want to know about it.”

I silently did as she asked. I watched her as I did it. She was getting frantic again.

“Mom, why don’t you sit down on the bench and breathe? I’ll go put these in the car.” She took my suggestion and sat, bent over so her head was hanging down near her knees. I could hear her forcing breaths. She really shouldn’t have doubled over like that. I learned that in karate training. She needed to stretch out her rib cage to get more breath in. I didn’t say anything, though. She was having a rough enough time without me trying to tell her what to do. I took the sleeping bags to the car.

I quickly paced around the area, scanning the ground to make sure we didn’t miss anything. When I didn’t find anything else, I went and sat next to my mom. She looked over at me, her breathing more normal. Her face was drawn, like she had been lifting weights all day and was at the point of giving up.

“They have him,” she said.

“What? Who? What are you talking about?”

“The things. From the mine. They came out at night and they took him. Took them both.”

“Mom, you don’t know that,” I said, trying to sound positive. “They’re probably just off doing something else they’re not supposed to. We’ll find him, you’ll ground him, and everything will be back to normal.”

“No, Dani,” she said. “I had a feeling, earlier. Now I’m sure. Whatever has been taking pets and people, it took Bobby and Allison last night. We have to talk to the police. We have to make them go into the mines and get Bobby. We have to...” She trailed off.

We got up and went to the car. We’d go back to the police and try to convince them that this new evidence should make them escalate the missing person case. As we sped back to the station, I couldn’t help but feel that my mom was right. Whatever it was that lived in the mines and came out at night, it had taken my brother. The question popped into my mind despite my best efforts to keep it out. Was he still alive, or had the thing killed and eaten him?

Chapter 7

“Allie, this doesn’t change procedure,” Jesse told her. “We still can’t just go into the mine. There are only four of us. Five, if you include the chief, but he’s not about to go out in the field. Four. There were more than a dozen armed security guards, and they disappeared when they went in. We can’t send the entire police department into a situation like that. Hell, we can’t keep people from wandering around at night and becoming targets. Obviously.”

My mother looked around the small police station. There were three other people—aside from the cops—there, two of them talking with Ivan, one of the other cops, and one waiting to be helped. Mom looked at me, her face a thunderhead, but calmed it as my eyes met hers. “We’ll talk about this later,” she told him in almost a whisper. I knew that tone. He’d get a stern talking to later. “Let’s go,” she said to me, already heading out the door.

As we drove home, I went over in my head what was happening. For some reason, I’d felt insulated from reality as we searched for Bobby and then found the sleeping bags. The severity of the situation hadn’t really settled in. It was becoming real to me now. I found myself tensing up, every muscle tightening. My hands started to shake and my belly turned sour. Bobby was gone. Taken. He could be dead.

I seemed to have lost control of my limbs, my mouth. I wanted to say something to my mom, anything to let her know I believed now that Bobby had been taken, but I couldn’t form words. I sat there, trembling, until we got home. When I didn’t get out of the car right away, she came around to my side and opened the door.

“What’s going on, Dani?” she said, concern in her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Mom,” I said, finally able to speak. “I have to go get him.”

“What? Dani, what are you talking about?” She put the back of her hand on my forehead. “Are you coming down with something? Come on. Let’s get in the house so you can lie down.” She took my hand and pulled me out of the car, guiding me toward the house.

“I’m not sick. I have to go after him. They’re not going to help us at all.”

“Who?”

“Anyone,” I said. “The police, the security company, whoever. No one will go look for him. We’ll sit here and wait, hoping, and Bobby will be somewhere in the dark.” I shivered more strongly. “We

can't leave him to the dark. They'll kill him, eat him. I need to go get him."

My mother stopped in the entryway after closing the door behind us. "Dani, you can't go after him. We'll have to convince the police to go look for him. Allison Cairsen is missing, too. They're rich and good friends with the police chief. Maybe we can use that. Go lie down. I'll make some phone calls. Promise me you won't go running off to find him. Give me a chance, okay?"

As we walked to my room, I looked into her eyes. She was still scared, but her fear took on a new dimension. Somehow I understood that now, she was more afraid for me than before. Her expression seemed to plead with me. "I won't run off and try tonight. I'll give you a chance to get some help, but if you can't, I'm going after him. I will not leave him to that darkness."

She nodded and left my room, taking her phone out of her pocket.

I looked around my room, my safe haven from the dark things prowling our city. It would be night soon, another chunk of darkness in which the things could play. Would they take more people tonight?

My eyes went to the corner of the room where my bo staffs leaned against the corner. I had won some awards for staff forms in competition, too, not just for sparring. I hadn't spent a lot of time actually fighting with the weapons, but I considered myself pretty good with them. How big were the things from the mines? How fast? Could I hurt them with six feet of hardwood swung with speed and force? I might find out soon. I hoped my mother could get some help, but the cynical side of me doubted it.

My dream was bad enough when it was me in the room with only darkness for walls. Thinking of Bobby, taken to a place with no light, made me angry. The heat of it simmered inside me, wanting to flash into a large flame, but I would give Mom a chance. Emotion warming me, I dozed off.

"Jesse, I'm telling you," my mother's voice said. She was in her room, but in the quiet house, I could hear her conversation.

"Calm down, Allie." It was Jesse's voice. Her phone was on speaker. "Don't get so excited."

"Don't get excited? My son is missing, taken by whatever it is that lives in the mine. How can you tell me not to get excited? What if one of your daughters was taken?"

"Okay, I get it. There's still nothing I can do."

"That's not good enough. You say you love me. Well, it's time to show it. I have been on the phone all day trying to get someone to do something, but apparently the entire town is full of cowards and people who don't care about the lives of two children."

"Allie," he said. "The Chief and the mayor are trying to get help from Tucson and from the state. They haven't been able to convince them that the situation is real yet, but they will. No bodies have been found yet, so there's no proof of anything. Just a little while longer and we'll have more men to go search. You have to wait."

"Wait? You want me to wait? It's been almost a full day, Jesse. I'm not waiting any longer. Dani is going after Bobby whether I want her to or not. I won't be able to stop her. We can't wait for days for more cops to show up. I'm going to go with her. I want you to come, too."

“No. You can’t go into the mine, and I’m not going anywhere. You don’t know what’s in there. It’s a stupid thing to do.”

My mother was silent for a moment. “Jesse, I’m asking you. Will you please go with us? You’re trained and you have guns. We need you.”

“My daughters need me. I can’t go on a suicide mission and leave them here. No, it’s not going to happen. I forbid you to go.” Uh-oh. That was a mistake. It never ends well when someone commands Mom to do something.

“You,” she said in that calm, icy voice that always made me and Bobby stop whatever we were doing immediately, “forbid me. Let me tell you this, Jesse Xander. If you don’t come with me and help to find my son, you can just never bother talking to me again. I’m not interested in cowards.”

“Allie, you know it’s not that. I just—”

“We’re done,” she said, cutting him off. “Dani and I are going to find Bobby. If you are a man and if you care for me at all, you will come with us. You can call me if you change your mind. Otherwise, I never want to talk to you again. Goodbye.”

I lay there, not knowing what to do. She said she was going with me, but I didn’t know if she meant it or if she was just trying to get him to go. I heard her softly sniffing. She rarely cried where anyone could see or hear her, so I’d give her a while and then ask her what we’d do. I was excited about being able to do something, but scared at the same time. I lay there for a little while, letting my mind wander, close to dozing.

I got up and went to the weapons leaning against my wall, running my hand down the wood. It had been a while since I had practiced with them. I hoped I was up to the challenge.

A soft knock on my door burst through my thoughts.

“Dani,” my mother said. “Are you awake?”

“I am,” I said. “Come in.”

She did. Her face was slightly puffy and her eyes were red, but she looked resolved. “I’m going with you. To get Bobby back.” She looked at me expectantly.

“It’s going to be dangerous, Mom.”

“I know.”

“Not just from whatever is out there. We could get lost in the tunnels or fall or something else could happen.”

“I know, Dani,” she said. “I also know that no one is going to help us look for him. If we don’t do this ourselves, we’ll never get him back. I can’t lose another one of you. I just can’t.”

“Okay. Let’s go, then.” It bothered me that she was even suggesting this. What would make my protective mother risk death for herself and me? She must have been panicked out of her mind. I didn’t think for a minute that she believed I was more capable than a dozen security guards. She just plain was not thinking clearly.

“Not tonight,” she said. “If we go after dark, we’ll probably be taken before we even get to

the mine.”

“Isn’t that what we want to do? Get taken to where he is?”

“No.” She sat on my bed and put her face in her hands. “I’ve been thinking about it. If we let them take us, they’ll be in control. I think our only chance is to go there and surprise them. To do that, we need to go during the daytime. They may sleep during the day, even in the dark of the tunnels. Maybe we will have the advantage of surprise.”

It occurred to me that we were referring to whatever was in the mine as “them.” I guess we both figured it would take more than one wild animal to take all the people who were supposed to be missing. Besides, animals killed and ate. They didn’t kidnap. No bodies had been found, not even blood or other evidence. “Okay. First thing in the morning, then?”

“Yes. We’ll eat dinner, gather what we need, get some sleep, and be ready to head out at first light. Come on, let’s eat.”

After dinner, we got supplies together. Headlamps, extra batteries, food, a first aid kit; it was like we were going on a backpacking trip. We hadn’t done one in a while, since before my dad died, but we had all the stuff. Including WAG bags. It wasn’t pleasant to think of heeding nature’s call in a bag, but I threw several of the packs in anyway.

I threw in a coil of climbing rope as my mom walked into the room with what looked like a small suitcase. She put it on the bed and opened it up. A handgun shone dully in the overhead lamp.

“Jesse gave me this for my birthday a few months ago,” she said.

I remembered overhearing them talking. He had told her he wanted her to be able to protect herself. He taught her how to shoot and how to care for the gun. They had gone to the range a few times to practice, though she never told me. I noticed, though. I wasn’t sure how good a shot she was, but a gun would definitely come in handy. “I’ll feel silly wearing a holster, like some cowboy in the wild west, but I have to take it. We don’t know what’s down there.”

“I’m taking my staff,” I said. She nodded like she had assumed as much. “Do we have everything?”

“I think so,” she said. “We have five or six hours to sleep before dawn. Let’s rest. We don’t know how long it’ll take to find him and to get him out.”

I agreed and started heading for my room. Before I’d taken two steps, I turned and went back to her. “He’s still alive. I would have felt something if he wasn’t. Like with dad. We’ll find him and get him out.” I hugged her and felt her tremble as the breath seemed to catch in her throat.

“We will,” she said softly as I went to rest up for our mission.

Chapter 8

The low clouds, almost a fog, ate much of the early morning light. A dreary day for a dreary adventure. Mom made us breakfast as I went through everything we had gathered to take. It all fit into our backpacks, which was good, because we weren't about to go into the mines wheeling a suitcase. I went out the front door to put our supplies in the car.

And ran into Sam coming up my walkway.

"Oh," I said. "Sam. What are you doing here? It's still dark. I don't really have time to talk right now."

"I'm not here to talk," she said. "I'm here to go with you."

"What? Go with me where?"

"Come on, Dani. It's a small town, remember? I know you're going to try to find Bobby. I'm going with you."

"No," I said. "No, you're not."

Her face pinched in irritation. She sighed. "You're my best friend, Dani. The way I was raised, you do anything for your best friend. You could use help, and I'm here to help you." I noticed for the first time she wore what looked like tactical clothing, black rugged material with several pockets, some of them bulging with items. She even had a belt with little pouches on it.

"What's with the outfit?" I asked, not able to help myself.

"I'm a big fan of spy novels. So what if I dress up as a secret agent sometimes? I have skills that could be useful."

"Sam," I pleaded, "Please don't make this harder on me. It's too dangerous. I can't let you go."

"Are you going alone? Just you and your mother?"

"How...how did you know?"

"Small. Town," she said. "Nothing is secret here."

"You still can't go. One more person won't make a difference, and I won't risk you getting hurt."

"One person won't make a difference?" another voice said, this one with an English accent.

"How about three? Would that suit better?"

Emily stepped up from around the car, Zach right behind her. They had hiking clothes on, hers coordinated grays and his tan pants and a blue flannel shirt over a t-shirt. Both carried backpacks.

Zach had a baseball bat in his hand and a very large survival knife strapped to his waist.

“No,” I said. “I appreciate it, guys, but no. It’s my problem and it’s too dangerous. Go home.”

“Dani,” Zach said, eyes wet. “My dad is missing still. If you don’t let me go with you, I’ll go by myself. We’d have a better chance together. Please. I have to try to find him. It’s my *dad*, Dani. My dad.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but words wouldn’t come. I couldn’t refuse him a chance to find his father. I knew well the feeling of emptiness over a missing father. He was right, too. We would have a better chance together.

“Let them come,” my mother said as she came out behind me with more supplies. “Zachary is right. If he wants to find his father, we’ll do better together.”

My mouth dropped open. I stared at her. This wasn’t my mother. Who had replaced her with a clone? No refusing help, no asking for permission slips from their parents. What was going on?

“We’re going to help Zach,” Emily said. “If you won’t let us come with you, then we’ll help our other friend. She put her arm around him, but winced as she did so. Zach was always trying to get closer to all us girls. Em was probably hoping he didn’t see more in the gesture than was meant.

“Dani,” Mom said. “I don’t agree with them coming, but they’re obviously going to follow us anyway. We can’t stop them, and we don’t have time for this. Let’s go. Everyone in the car.”

Emily and Zach high-fived each other and Sam smiled at me. To be honest, I did feel a little better having them along. The more people I had with me when I faced the darkness of the mines, the better. Still, I worried if they were up to it. I worried if *I* was up to it. I angled my staff from the back seat up through my open window in the front, and we headed toward the mine.

When we got there, we found the area locked up tight but without a security guard. I guess they figured if someone was stupid enough to try to get in, they deserved whatever they got. Or they had run out of security guards.

At the first gate, one of the side entry points onto the processing facility, my mom took out a ring of keys. She shuffled through them and finally selected the one that fit the padlock on the thick chain keeping the gate closed. I looked at her. She must have seen the confusion on my face.

“I am the office manager for one of the offices for the mine company,” she said. “I know people.”

I shook my head. I didn’t know when she had time to get the keys, but I let it pass. My hands were shaking from nervousness now that we were close to entering the mine.

Mom pulled up to the mine entrance. It was a big gate, double steel doors large enough for a semi truck to drive through. This was the entrance to the underground. This was where it would begin.

We piled out of my mom’s Honda Accord and she popped the trunk. I got a closer look at what everyone had brought. My three friends had come equipped, with backpacks similar to those my mother and I had. Zach had his knife and his baseball bat. Emily pulled out what looked like a gnarled walking stick. When she noticed me eyeing it, she shrugged and leaned it on her shoulder. I looked at Sam. She didn’t seem to have any kind of weapon. What did she plan on doing when whatever lived

in the mines attacked us? All three had jackets or sweatshirts. That was good. It could be cold underground. At least, it was in the cave tours I'd been on.

Another car pulled up to us. I jumped at the sound. Man, I was jittery. I hoped it wasn't someone from the mine company. On second glance, I saw that it was a sporty little Audi, not something a security guard would be driving around looking for trespassers. My heart jumped when the door opened.

Jacob Benton got out and moved the seat up for someone in the back to leave the vehicle. I didn't even notice who it was. Jacob Benton. God, he was gorgeous. He was wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and a hoodie, but even dressed like that I could see the muscles shift as he moved. Sam reached over and lifted my chin to close my mouth.

"I heard you're going into the mine to look for your brother," he said. Did everyone in town know about this? "Is it okay if we go with you?" His eyes came up to meet mine, but I shifted my gaze away. Eye contact had been uncomfortable for me since the accident. I wasn't sure why.

I opened my mouth to answer him as the other door opened. "We are not going *with* them, Jacob," Madison Cairsen said. "We are taking over this shabby little group."

"Oh, hell no," I heard Zach say.

Jacob looked at him quizzically.

"Now, Madison," Jacob said. "Don't go—"

"No, no, Jacob," she cut him off. "These type of people appreciate a strong hand. They need leadership. So, Danish, or whatever, let me tell you what we're going to do."

"Madison," Sam said calmly, grabbing the walking stick from Emily. "If you don't shut your mouth, turn around, and leave," she hefted the stick as if to feel its weight and balance, "so help me, I'll crack your head with this."

"Whoa, whoa. Hold on now," Jacob said, stepping in front of Madison and holding his hands up. "She's distraught. Her sister was taken also—"

"No thanks to you and your filthy little brother," Madison threw in.

"Madison!" Jacob said. "Don't tempt me to step out of the way. Dani, she's upset. Don't take her too seriously. We want to help. We need to go look for Allison too, but we can help you find your brother. What's his name? Bobby?"

Things were happening too fast for me. Sam threatening Madison. That horrible cheerleader bitch wanting to go with us. Jacob knowing my name, even Bobby's. My head was spinning and I wasn't sure what to say.

Mom came to my rescue.

"Listen, Madison," Mom said. "You can come *with* us. If you do, you will follow directions. You will not try to *take over*. When we say hop, you will hop. Otherwise, you're on your own. I don't want to be responsible for you to begin with."

"Do you know who I am?" Madison started, looking to be winding up for one of her rich-girl

rants. Jacob stepped up to her and put his hand over her mouth.

“We’ll do what we’re told, Mrs. Prado. Don’t worry. I’ll remind her if necessary.”

“Thank you,” Mom said, mollified. “What is your name?”

“Oh, sorry,” Jacob said, removing his hand from Madison’s mouth slowly, looking at her as if afraid she would continue her rant. He wiped his hand on his pants, leaned over, and held it out, grazing my shoulder. “I’m Jacob Benton, ma’am.” I noticed that he maintained eye contact with my mother as he said it. I hadn’t ever really been close enough to him to notice that habit.

He shook my mother’s hand and then put his hand on my shoulder. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to push by you like that.” He had touched me. Twice. I stared dumbly at his mouth as he smiled at me. It slipped a little when I didn’t respond in kind and when I wouldn’t look into his eyes. I was too shocked for the first and too uncomfortable for the second.

“And I’m Tyler Lennon,” another voice said. I turned and found someone else standing there. He shook my mother’s hand, too.

Tyler Lennon was one of the great oddities at our high school. He was commonly referred to as a music dweeb. He somehow fancied himself a rock star, constantly emphasizing his last name as if he was actually related to John Lennon. He was lanky, awkward, and not good at all in social situations. Normally, he would be relegated to the “weird kid” status in school, but he wasn’t. He and Jacob had been friends since they were in first grade, and that afforded Tyler a social status much higher than mine or my friends, almost equal to the popular kids.

“Nice to meet you, Jacob, Tyler. Do you have supplies? We’re not sure how long it will take to find the missing people.” As she said it, my mom adjusted the holster on her hip. She looked odd with it strapped there.

“We thought of that,” Jacob said, face brightening. I sighed and then looked around to make sure no one noticed. Sam did and smiled at me. “We have backpacks with food and headlamps and extra batteries.” He pulled the packs out of his car and handed Tyler’s and Madison’s to them. She grimaced. I figured she thought Jacob would carry it for her.

“Do you have...anything you can use as a weapon?” Mom said, obviously uncomfortable with asking that of a kid.

“I brought these,” Jacob said, bringing out a couple of sticks just over two feet long. I recognized them. Escrima sticks.

“Do you know how to use those?” I asked, overcoming my shyness around him in my excitement.

His face lost some of its shine and colored slightly. “No, not really. I got them a few years ago because I thought they looked cool.” He turned them in his hands. They were made of dark hardwood. “I figure I can swing them and hit something. It’s better than nothing.”

“Can I see them?” I held out a hand. It had been a long time since I had practiced the forms I knew for the sticks, but when he handed them to me, they felt good in my hands, just a bit heavier than the rattan practice weapons I had used. I stepped away from everyone else and ran through what was

simply called Stick Form #4 in my style, whirling the weapons, blocking imaginary blows, and striking my invisible opponents. The dull whisper as the sticks cut through the still morning air invigorated me. It had been too long.

I ended the form in an attention stance with sticks crossed in front of me, the salute and ready position. When I turned to hand them back to Jacob, I saw that everyone was staring at me. My face heated more quickly than I would have thought possible.

“Oh, ah, I used to play around with them. A little.” I handed them back to Jacob and busied myself with putting my pack on.

“Can you show me a little of that?” he asked me, staring at the sticks now in his hands.

“Sure,” I said, looking up but becoming too nervous to meet his eyes. He even ducked his head a little and angled his face to get in my line of vision, but I looked away. “The movements are pretty basic. You’ll pick it up in no time.”

“Well,” Madison said. “I guess we should have expected you to know how to play with sticks. Are you a dead aim with a rock, too?”

I was picking up my staff when she said it. I looked down at it, imagining how it would feel to strike her with it. Not hard, but enough to make her shut that mean, pouty mouth of hers.

“Stop it, Madison,” Jacob said. “What she just did was awesome. She might be the one to save your skin if we get into trouble.”

The girl mumbled something under her breath and fiddled with her backpack. I noticed she didn’t have a weapon.

“No, Tyler,” Jacob said. I had forgotten there was anyone else around me. “You are not bringing your guitar.”

“I bring my guitar everywhere,” his friend said.

“Dude, no. Unless you plan to swing that thing and hit something over the head, it’s staying in the car.”

“Hit something with it?” Tyler said. “Are you insane? This is a Fender Stratocaster. I’d swing you as a weapon before I’d do that.”

Jacob laughed. “Then find something else.”

Tyler looked around. He stepped over to the building and found a metal bar, about the same size as a crowbar. He hefted it, looked at Jacob, and raised an eyebrow. Jacob nodded.

“Okay, let’s get going,” Mom said, turning toward the mine entrance. She hadn’t even taken a step when another car, this one a dark mid-sized car, pulled up.

“Damn it,” she said. “What now?” Then she saw the car and her face changed completely from irritation to...something. Satisfaction? Relief? I think it was partly both.

The car stopped and a man got out. I recognized him. His face, good-looking for an older guy, showed relief as well, as if he’d thought he might be too late. He had short dark hair, showing some gray in it. He wore hiking pants, a blue tee shirt, and a sweatshirt. When he met eyes with my mother,

he smiled, his blue eyes twinkling. “Hey, Allie.” It was Rick Phillips, one of my mom’s friends. He nodded to the others. When he saw me, he smiled widely. “Hey, Dani, what’s up?”

“Rick, what are you doing here?” My mother had put on her stern face, though the relief in her eyes told me she was glad to see him.

“I heard you were planning on going on a picnic and wanted to come. I hope that’s all right. I even brought food”—he lifted a backpack out of the car—“and utensils.” He took out a pair of swords. Samurai swords. “No wine, though. I heard there would be *minors* here. Maybe *miners*, too.” He laughed at his distinction between the two words.

Mom huffed. “Oh, come on. Let’s get going before the rest of the town shows up, though that’s what I wanted yesterday. I want to be inside the mine before anyone tries to stop us.”

Rick donned his pack and put the sword scabbards through some kind of belt he had rigged up. At least he didn’t have traditional sashes to hold the swords in place. That would just be weird. He came up to me and fist-bumped me.

“What’s with the swords?” I asked.

“Oh, I got on a kick when I was younger, watching samurai movies and practicing with swords. I got pretty good at killing imaginary opponents. It’s all I could think of to bring.”

“Can I see one?”

“Sure.” He twisted so the hilts pointed toward me. He had the traditional daisho: a long katana and a shorter wakizashi. I pulled the katana free of its scabbard and inspected the blade.

“Sweet,” I said. “These are not cheap aluminum demo swords.”

“Nope. High carbon steel. Razor sharp. Hopefully I will be able to leave them in the scabbards. I’d hate to cut anything other than bundles of reeds for testing the keenness of the blade.”

I slid the sword back into place. “Yeah, me too.” With a sigh, I followed the others toward the mine entrance, butterflies the size of housecats swirling in my belly.

Chapter 9

I followed my mother toward the mine. I figured that of all of us, she would have the best idea where to go. I don't know why I thought that. She was an office manager. She didn't work at the mine itself. I didn't know if she had ever even been there. Everyone else seemed content to follow her, though.

My mother took out another key and put it into a keyhole next to the large gates. When she turned it, the two doors swung outward slowly. The motors controlling the gates whirred like a garage door opener, but it was as loud as five of them.

There were two sets of gates, apparently, because a few dozen feet in from the first one, we came to a twisted metal doorway, smaller than the first one. It looked like someone had driven a vehicle through it. I wondered if whatever lurked in the mines did it or if someone did it trying to escape. I also pondered why the opening was left like this. Was everyone afraid to try to seal it back up again?

"Do you think we'll run into any of the shadowling?" Rick asked.

"The what?" Mom said.

"Shadowling. That's what the news started calling whatever is in there this morning. I guess some people saw several shadows moving near where some people went missing. They had to call the things something, I guess."

"Great," she said. "Now the mythical monsters have a name. I'm betting we're going to find a group of bandits or something. Maybe terrorists."

Sam winked at me, and I rolled my eyes.

As we started going through the doorway, I was the last in line. I looked as each of the others passed the twisted hunk of metal that was supposed to keep people out of the mine. I guess it didn't do as well keeping things *in* the mine. The reactions ranged from my mother's cool recognition of the damage, to the nervous darting eyes of Emily and Zach, to Madison's grimace and wrinkled nose. Her expression seemed to indicate that the dirt and dust that lay around the area were more important than the wrecked entrance. I looked at Rick and he shrugged.

There were lights strung along the ceiling of the corridor, but they weren't on. I took my headlamp out as the others paced around the opening. Sam walked over to the wall of the cavern and flipped a switch.

The lights flickered on, a row of dull, glowing bulbs stretching off into the distance. I looked at my friend and she gave me a smile. A nervous one.

Looking into the darkness, even with the lights disappearing as the tunnel sloped downward, I sniffed. “Almost all the copper mines in the state are pit mines. We had to live near one of the few mines that used both shafts and slopes.”

It was fully light out behind us, though I couldn’t see the sun through the clouds. I took a long last look at the cars, the ore processing area around them, and the cloudy sky, and then searched the dimly lit corridor ahead. The others were milling around, waiting for someone to tell them what to do.

They waited.

I stood there until I couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said, walking past the others and into the mine. I could feel the headlamp strap on my head, a fold pressing against my skin on the left side. It was a comfort, an emergency source of light should the overhead lamps fail. My heart was beating so loudly, I was surprised no one commented on it. The scrape of shoes on the gritty rock floor behind me told me that at least one other person followed me. I was happy to hear several other shoes crunching along as well. We were on our way.

I had never really been claustrophobic, but the darkness...oh, the darkness. It was irrational, my fear of the lack of light. It didn’t make sense. Thinking over it logically, there seemed no good reason why it should bother me. But it did. Oh, God in heaven, it did. I tightened my grip on my staff, clutching it until my forearms started hurting, but I continued to move.

“Relax,” Rick said, right at my shoulder. His voice made me jump. I hadn’t realized anyone was that close. “Breathe deeply and regularly. You’ll be exhausted in an hour all tensed up like that.”

I nodded, not taking my eyes from the stretch of tunnel ahead of me. I did loosen my grip, though. A little. And I breathed in and out slowly. It seemed to help.

I got a chill, but realized it wasn’t from the temperature. It was a little cooler in the mine than it was outside, but not as cold as I thought it would be. I had brought a jacket with me. Jeans, a tee shirt with “Where are you going to go today?” printed on it, and a rough denim jacket. I was prepared for chilly weather.

“What’s the plan?” Sam asked in a whisper.

It sounded like a shout in the quiet of the cave, making me jump again. Rick was right. If I didn’t calm down, I’d end up with no energy when I needed it.

“I...I don’t know,” I admitted. I hadn’t really thought beyond getting into the mine and searching for Bobby. I mentally kicked myself.

“I have a basic map of the tunnels,” my mom said. Papers rustled and shadows shifted as she stepped up to me. “This main tunnel goes for a ways before we have to make a choice. Right here,” she pointed to a large area off which came four other passageways, “is where the security force was the last time they could track them.”

I turned to look at her. How had she prepared for this? When did she have the time? We'd just figured out late the night before that we were going.

"I did a few things last night after you went to bed," she said, shrugging. "I called in some favors. No one owed me enough to come with us, though." I shifted my eyes toward Rick, and then back to the map.

"The mine," Zach said, "has aspects of a slope mine and a shaft mine. I did a project on it when I was in sixth grade, even made a model of it. If we head off in this direction—" he pointed to one of the corridors on the map "—we'll get to the shaft elevator. If we take the other passageways, they gradually slant down to other areas."

"We should probably take the sloping tunnels," I said. "If we take the elevator, we may go beneath where we need to be and miss finding who we're looking for completely." Everyone seemed to agree with me. "Is the map good enough for us to follow?"

"It looks pretty simple," Tyler said. "We won't get lost."

I caught movement as Sam turned to look at Tyler. "What happens if we lose the map or it gets destroyed or something else happens to it? I don't think relying on only one thing to keep us from getting lost is a good idea."

"That's a good point," I said. "What do you have in mind, Sam? I know you already have a solution."

She smiled, but turned her eyes downward, embarrassed by the compliment. She reached into her pack and took out a bag of fat sidewalk chalk of different colors. It was the kind I used to use when I was a kid for drawing hopscotch squares on our driveway. Good old Samantha. She was always ten steps ahead of everyone else.

"We can mark which way we went at every intersection," Sam said. "That way we can retrace our steps."

Madison laughed. Everyone turned to look at her.

"You think you're so smart," the cheerleader said. "What if our headlamps run out of batteries? What then? We won't be able to see the chalk marks, then. Ha."

I stared at her. Is this the type of thing we'd have to put up with the entire time we were down in the mine? "Uh, Madison. If we have no light, the map will be worthless, too. Do you have an idea for some kind of glowing marker for total darkness?"

"No." Her voice was barely a whisper. I think she got my point. I just shook my head at her.

"Most of the mine has lights strung along the ceiling," Zach said. "Hopefully we won't have to worry about lighting."

"We're losing track of what we should be doing," I said, starting to get frustrated with the waste of time. "Sam, use your chalk and mark our path at each intersection. Come on, let's do this. I want to get Bobby and get out of here as soon as possible." Madison opened her mouth, but I spoke before she did. "And Allison. And anyone else we find."

I started walking down the passageway, the others following me. It was wide, probably ten feet across or more, with the ceiling at least eight feet above us. It was the original opening, widened after the mine had been in operation for many years, but still decades old. The roughness of the stone meant this part of the tunnel was carved out before all the cool modern drilling machines were invented.

The arched ceiling was lined with a lattice of wood ribs stretching off down the corridor. The lights—thick, elongated glass globes—were attached to the wood and tethered to each other with electrical cabling. The filthy glass made the light dim and threw shadows along the passageway's surfaces, including the steel tracks down the center of the floor.

The others settled into a slow gait as they followed me. The cavern was wide enough for a few people to walk side-by-side, so we progressed as a loose pack, in ones or twos mainly. My mother came up beside me.

“Are you going to handle directing everyone?” I asked her. “You’re one of only two adults.”

“I think you’re doing fine,” she said, forcing a smile. “You let me know if you want me to take control. Otherwise, it’s fine with me if you lead us.”

“I’m not a leader, Mom. I always kind of do my own thing.”

“Then just keep on doing your own thing. Everyone seems to be following you.” She winked at me, then focused her attention forward, down the tunnel, her expression stern.

I looked back over my shoulder at the others. Half of them were looking at their feet nervously. Sam smiled at me. Jacob gave me a little wave. Rick raised his hand in a thumbs up. Madison glared at me.

Well, three out of four wasn’t bad.

Chapter 10

I was staring down into the endless tunnel, the line of lights disappearing unbroken as the tunnel dipped.

“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” I said to myself.

Sam chuckled.

“What was that?” my mom asked.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just something we’ve been reading in school.”

“Are you reading Dante’s *Inferno*?” Rick asked. He was walking side-by-side with Mom.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s our current assignment in English class.”

“Pretty appropriate,” he said. “And ironic.”

“Right?” I said. “Have you read it?”

“Yeah. A long time ago.”

“What are you two talking about?” Mom asked.

“There was an Italian author in the Middle Ages named Dante Alighieri. He wrote a trilogy full of allegory. It was about a trip through hell, and he described in detail what he saw there. The first book was called *Inferno*. There was a sign hanging above the entrance to hell. ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.’”

“That’s not very encouraging,” she said.

“Sorry. This just made me think of it. That’s what happens when we have too much homework.” I showed her all my teeth. She slapped my shoulder.

We made our way to the intersection Mom had pointed out on the map. Without breaking stride, we headed off toward where the security force had been when contact was lost. We passed through a widening in the corridor where a few vehicles that looked like tractors were parked. I looked at Zach.

“Diesel-powered,” he said. “Mining isn’t like boring tunnels for roadways. They blast the rock and then break it up and carry it out with these.”

“There’s not enough room for all to ride,” I said, frowning at the machines. “We’ll have to keep walking.”

As we went down the passage, the rock seemed to transform. No, not the rock, but the way the

tunnel itself had been made. It widened out until it was nearly the width of the street in front of my house. It also became square, as high as it was wide. The slats on the ceiling were replaced with some type of plates that looked to be bolted directly to the stone.

“This is the newer section of the mine,” Zach said, noticing my inspection of the walls. “Doing the work with the machines requires more space.”

I scanned the area ahead of us, looking for any movement or shapes outside the edge of the dim light from the lamps above. The steady click-click-click of my staff hitting the ground as I walked seemed too loud. There was the scrape of shoes behind me, and someone was breathing hard from our brisk pace, but otherwise, there wasn’t much sound.

I took off my jacket and stuffed it into my backpack. “Isn’t it supposed to be cold down here?” I asked Zach.

“The mine temperature is usually around sixty to seventy degrees,” Sam answered for him. “Depending on how hard the ventilation system is working.”

“Ventilation system?” I said.

“Of course,” Zach said, giving Sam a look like she had taken one of his favorite toys. “With diesel equipment and blasting, they have to move fresh air through the mine. Didn’t you hear the fans when we were closer to the opening?”

Now that he mentioned it, I had heard something, but I’d been too nervous to pay attention. In fact, in the silences between the clipped speech, I still heard a slight whine from somewhere far away.

We continued into the newer section of the mine, the blackness ahead and behind seeming like it was trying to gobble up the glow from the ceiling lights that seemed much too dim.

My hands started shaking and the walls seemed to close in on me, though they were wider than before. I would be trapped here, subject to the whim of anything that came from the depths. Shadowling. That’s what the news had called the things from the darkness. Somehow, putting a name to them made them even more frightening. If something didn’t distract me soon, I’d go insane.

“So, Dani,” a voice said, making me almost drop my staff. I closed my eyes and tried to slow my breathing. I hoped the speaker didn’t notice.

Jacob stepped up beside me. He looked at me quizzically. He had seen me jump, but he didn’t seem like he was going to tease me about it. “Nice staff. How did you get so good with the sticks?” He held them up as if I didn’t know what he was talking about. “Are you as good with that thing as you are with these?”

“Better,” I said, hardly getting the word out. I was talking to Jacob Benton. Alone. I worried about saying something stupid, and the air itself seemed to squeeze my chest, making it harder to breathe. “I mean, I’m much better with the staff than with the sticks.”

“Really? Wow, you must be awesome. The thing you did earlier, that was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen anyone do in person. How did you get that good?”

“Just practice, mostly,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I used to compete a little.”

“A little?” Sam said as she came up on my other side. “You were the state champion for two years. You’re freaking awesome.”

“Ssst,” I hissed at her, jerking my head toward the others. She got the hint and stepped to the side where the others had spread out across the wider tunnel, muttering something that sounded like an apology.

“Well,” Jacob said, looking back toward Madison, who looked as if she’d had all she cared to put up with from Tyler and was preparing to join her boyfriend. “I’m glad there’s someone here who knows how to fight. I’ve never really had to.”

“You’ll do fine,” I said. “You are a natural athlete and have great reflexes. I’ve watched you move —” I realized what that sounded like as I said it and could feel my face get hot. “Umm, and you are pretty efficient. With your body. Your motion. You...I’ll try to find time to teach you some basic strikes. You’ll do great.”

“Thanks, Dani,” he said, his eyes twinkling as we passed under one of the lamps hanging from the ceiling. He was still doing his best to try to maintain eye contact with me, but I couldn’t. “I look forward to it.”

He walked back toward Madison, who was coming at us as if on a mission.

“What was that all about?” she asked him, shooting me a cold look.

“Just finding out what’s going on,” he said.

Sam smiled at me, as did Emily. Even Zach had a small grin on his face. My friends. If no one else, they would always back me up.

“It’s here,” my mother said, as the corridor opened up into a larger chamber, darker than the tunnel we had been traveling. “The place where the security force lost contact.”

There were barrels lined up in one area, cardboard and wooden boxes stacked on pallets near them, and a drilling machine that looked like it was in the process of being repaired. The dim yellow light silhouetted litter and the other items strewn about the darkened cavern. Several of the overhead lamps were not working.

I turned my headlamp on to get a better look and gasped. The unlit lamps had been smashed. The crunching as I walked toward the center was probably the glass from the light covers. Some of the trash on the floor was clothing, torn and tattered. There were a few walkie-talkies there as well, in addition to three handguns I could see. Something clinked against my shoes as I walked. I had inadvertently kicked aside several bullet casings. A handful of dark spots that could have been bloodstains spotted the floor, but thankfully, no more than that.

There were no people, alive or dead.

Tyler picked up one of the guns. “This will be better than a crowbar.”

Rick picked up another of the guns and checked the clip. “No bullets.”

“This one, either,” Mom said. “I don’t see any ammo around. These will only be good for throwing.” She put it back on the floor.

“What about the bullets you brought for your gun?” Tyler said. “Can’t you share?”

“They’re not the same,” Mom said. “I’m using a thirty-eight. These are all nine millimeter. My bullets won’t work in these guns.”

“Damn,” he said, earning a raised eyebrow from my mother. “I mean, that’s too bad.” He smiled at her.

Emily gasped and everyone’s heads swiveled toward the sound. She was off near the wall of the chamber with Zach, the two of them picking through the refuse there.

“What is it, Emily?” I said as I was walking toward her. I scanned the edges of the darkness as I did.

“We found something,” Zach answered for her, “or someone.” They had both stepped back a few feet from where they had been.

I was the first to reach them, Sam a step behind me. My headlamp shone in the space behind some crates that had been knocked off their pallet. There was a body there. I stopped abruptly, Sam running into me.

I gripped my staff more firmly, ready to strike, but then realized there was no need. A slight trickle of blood had dried on the corpse’s head as it had dribbled from a bullet hole onto the floor. I would have expected there to have been more of it.

“What is it?” Sam asked, stepping up to inspect it. I reached for her shoulder to hold her back, but wasn’t able to grab it in time. I stepped over a broken crate with metal machine parts spilling out of it so I was standing next to her.

“Not one of the security guards,” I said, wrinkling my nose at the odor. It smelled like rotting meat. I gagged and had to turn away for a moment.

The body was man-sized and man-shaped. It wasn’t a person, though. Its skin was pale and translucent, with creases and folds that told me it was thick and tough, more like some kind of hide. It also had no hair at all on its body. The head, maybe a little larger than a man the same size—or maybe not, it was hard to tell—had wide-set eyes that stared blankly back at me. Looking at it made me want to search the room for creepy crawly things. I shivered.

“Look at its hands,” Sam said. How could she remain so calm? It was a dead thing in front of her. Emily and Zach had stayed back, their faces looking a little pale in the headlamp light.

I did. The fingers were pointed, like claws, and the nails were much thicker than a person’s. They looked suitable for digging in hard dirt, maybe stone. What was this thing?

“So,” Rick said, climbing over a barrel to get a look. “We find our first shadowling.”

Sam and I stepped away to let the others get a look. It was a grisly sight, not one I wanted to stare at for any length of time.

Something else occurred to me, something no one else mentioned. It was wearing pants. They were dark, the legs ripped off them to make them more like shorts, but it was definitely clothing. Weird.

Mom stood there staring at the creature for a long moment. Her eyes darted across the still form, her mouth parted to allow a hiss of air through them. Her lips twitched once and she turned from it, putting her hand to her head as she went toward the center of the chamber. I wondered if I should go to her, ask her about what she was feeling, but Rick beat me to it, whispering something in her ear I couldn't hear.

After everyone had viewed the shadowling, we gathered in the center of the chamber. Madison was the last to leave, taking a selfie with the dead creature in the background. That girl really had something wrong with her.

"What does it mean?" Tyler asked.

"It means," my mother answered, "that the security guards and the shadowling fought here. It means the men killed at least one of the...things, though with a dozen armed men, I'd think they would've killed more than that."

"Do you think they took their dead with them?" Rick asked.

"I think so," I said. "All except this one, because it was hidden in the corner over there. The question is, did they kill the guards and take their bodies away, too?"

"Do you think," Zach said, his face twisted into a grimace, "that they...eat people?"

"Of course they eat people," Madison said. "Why else would they take them? We need to find my sister before they eat her. She's too rich to eat."

I found myself staring at the girl. How anyone could be so stupid and uncaring was beyond me.

"Now, hold on," Jacob cut in. "There's no evidence they eat people. Let's calm down and focus on the solution. We have to find the people who have been taken. Thinking beyond that won't do us any good right now."

"Right," Mom said. "Thank you for pointing that out, Jacob." She opened up her map and laid it on the top of a barrel. "We need to figure out where to go. We can't wander aimlessly through the mine. There are too many tunnels."

"Where is the section where they were extending the tunnel?" I asked, trying to make sense of the mass of passageways drawn on the paper. "The problems started when the new section of the tunnel was drilled. That's where the shadowling came from."

My mother traced her finger along the map until she stopped and tapped one section. "Here. If we go down that tunnel, the second from the left, it should slope down eventually to where the new section was dug last week. It's quite a way, though."

"Then we better get started," I said. "I don't know about any of you, but I want to get this over with and get back outside where I can see the sun. This place creeps me out, even without dead creatures lying around."

"I'm more concerned about the live ones," Sam said as we started down the slightly sloping corridor.

Chapter 11

As we walked, everyone settled back into brooding silence. The hum of the lights above seemed loud, drowning out the scraping feet and the soft crunching of bits of gravel and sand beneath our shoes. A chill ran through me. The temperature in the cave was cool, though manageable when moving. It wasn't the air that made the goose bumps ripple along my neck, though.

No one spoke, but that was fine. Conversation seemed foreign in the depths of the caves, unwelcome. It almost felt like trespassing to utter a sound. I remained silent, uncomfortable but still believing it to be the better choice.

My mother's eyes were still wide and had a frantic cast to them. She was still pretty freaked out. I could understand. I mean, her son had been taken by the things we had seen in the other chamber. I was even more scared than before. Seeing something so alien and strange made it all more real. Gone was any chance that it was something mundane like bandits or kidnappers.

This was actually happening. Bobby had been taken and was somewhere in the darkness ahead. Despite the moderate temperature in the tunnels, I shivered a little. It was a mental thing. I'd have to fight the icy touch on my skin with my mind. It wasn't real, or at least, it wasn't physical.

We came to another intersection of tunnels and stopped. Our choice was to continue straight or angle off to the right. Both paths sloped slightly down, the one on the right slightly more so. We still didn't speak, all of us silently waiting as Mom looked at the map. It was so quiet—the lights here made little noise—I could hear Tyler's breath from the back of the group. It was a sort of whistling, nasally sound. I guess he had allergies or something. The rock creaked above us, reminding me that tons of earth and stone were just above us.

I caught movement to my far left, behind us. It was right at the limit of my peripheral vision. I spun as two of the shadowling came loping around the corner of a tunnel I didn't know was there.

The pair of creatures looked like the dead one we had seen, but their color differed. Instead of that pale, static tone, these seemed to blend with the stone around them, shadows playing across their rough skin. They were darker than the other one, almost as if they were made of shadow itself. It was hard to pinpoint where their bodies ended and the darkness began.

One thing was for sure. By the way their already-large eyes widened even more, they were as surprised to see us as I was to see them. They stopped so abruptly, one of them skidded a few feet,

scraping across the cavern floor.

That motion and sound caused everyone else to snap their heads toward the two newcomers.

I leapt at them, staff whirling. It's better to engage quickly and seize the advantage early—those were almost the exact words my sensei repeated to me over and over again—so I attacked.

Relentlessly. Without moderation.

These creatures had taken my brother. They would not take us.

It took a second or so for the shadowling to react. That was enough time for me to crack one over the head with my staff hard enough to stagger it. The other brought its claws up just as I lunged and rammed the end of my weapon into its face. I heard its nose crack, and it screamed in pain.

Spinning, I swept the dazed creature's legs out from under it and thumped its head again as it fell, but I didn't see it hit the floor. I was already turning again to attack the other one. It had recovered from the shock of its nose being broken, shaking its head and springing toward me.

I back-stepped, slapping its clawed hands aside with my staff as it tried to tear at me with them. It was so fast. It pressed on, forcing me to retreat at a speed I wasn't comfortable with. I hoped I didn't trip on anything. It was already all I could do to keep it from tearing me apart.

A dull thunk echoed in the tunnel and the shadowling lurched forward, stumbling. Zach came into view behind it, finishing up a swing with his baseball bat. Jacob was there, too, flailing ineffectually with the sticks, managing to land maybe one of four blows. I torqued my hips and spun the staff as hard as I could upward. It caught the creature under the jaw and not only stopped its forward momentum but flung it backward. It slapped the floor hard with its back, and Zach pounced on it with his large survival knife, punching the blade into its throat. It tried to scream, but only a whistling, gurgling sound came out.

It thrashed for a few seconds and then stopped moving.

I leaned on my staff, trying to catch my breath. It suddenly hit me that there had been two of them. I searched the area for the other one and located it.

Located its body.

Rick was leaning over the thing, the last few inches of the sword in his hand colored with a dark fluid. His eyes met mine, and he nodded as my gaze skittered off to the side. His mouth twisted as if he was going to be sick.

Retching sounds assaulted my ears from a couple of different directions. Zach was leaning over near the corridor I hadn't seen, hands on knees. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. A few feet away, Emily was in a similar posture. I didn't blame them. My own stomach was roiling.

My mother stood exactly where she had been before it all started. The map hung loosely in her hand, and she stared at the creature Rick was standing over. The whites of her eyes almost glowed and looked much bigger than should have been possible.

"Mom?" I said. "Mom!"

She started and the map fell to the floor. Her wide eyes met mine and then filled with liquid.

“I...they...”

I pulled her into a hug. She was trembling, her entire body vibrating. “Sh. It’s okay. They surprised us. It’s fine. They’re gone now.” Looking to Rick, who seemed shocked himself as he gazed at the creature he had killed, I jerked my head toward the hidden corridor.

He blinked but seemed to understand. Holding his sword out, he went ahead, just to the limits of where I could see him, scanned the tunnel, and then looked back at me and shook his head. Good, there were only the two. For now.

It took a few minutes for Mom to stop shaking and for her to be comfortable enough to talk.

“I don’t know why I froze,” she said. “I didn’t even think of taking out the gun. It was so fast. They were just suddenly there.”

“It’s fine, Mom. It’s probably better you didn’t use the gun. The sound probably would have drawn others. We got lucky it was just the two of them and that they were as surprised as we were.”

“Rick,” she said. “That one came at me and he stepped in front of me. He swung and cut it. He saved my life.”

“I’m sure you’ll return the favor,” Rick said. “We can watch each other’s backs. It’s the reason I came, after all.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Are you guys all right?” I asked. They pressed in, all of us in a tight bunch as if no one wanted to be too far from the others.

“We’re good,” Jacob said, stroking Madison’s hair. The girl was as wide-eyed as my mother, mumbling incoherently. “No one got injured. You distracted them and dazed them so we could attack them from behind.” He smiled at me and the tunnel suddenly didn’t seem quite as dark.

We took a few minutes to recover from our short, but intense, ordeal. The others were speaking silently together, Rick soothing my mother, my friends in a clump, and Jacob still trying to relax Madison. None of them were near the bodies of the creatures we had just killed. In fact, they all turned their backs to the corpses. I felt strangely detached. I hadn’t ever killed anything bigger than a bug, but for some reason, I was calm. Would the feeling end suddenly when the shock wore off? Would I freak out then? I hadn’t actually landed a killing blow, just distracted the creatures so the others could.

I stepped up to one of the bodies, the one Zach had killed. It looked...different, now that it was dead. I planted my staff on the floor of the cavern and leaned on it to get a closer look.

“What do you see?” Rick’s voice made me jump.

“Ah! Don’t sneak up on me like that. You scared me to death.”

“Sorry.”

I stood up and turned to face him. “Do you notice anything about these two?” I motioned toward the dead creatures, lying only ten feet apart.

He looked at the one near my feet, then narrowed his eyes to scrutinize it more closely. “Those

torn pants or shorts they're wearing. It looks like the same color and material as the other one we found."

"Yes," I said, "I mean, anything that's different now that they're dead?"

"I don't know. I guess their skin has changed color a little. That's normal when things die, though. People do the same thing."

"It's more than that, though," I said. "When they're alive, it's like they're camouflaged, like they're made out of shadow. When I saw them earlier, I could have sworn they were dark gray or black, not this paler color."

"Hmm," he said. "Now that you mention it, it was kind of hard to see where their edges were, how big they really were, before. Even right under the lamps. Is it a trick of the light or did everything happen so fast that we couldn't get a good look?"

"I don't know. It's almost like they have some kind of power to blend in. Like it's magic or something."

"Magic."

I broke eye contact with him and looked back at the shadowling. "I don't know. Maybe they're aliens and have special abilities. Or maybe they are magic. I've never heard about creatures like this before. They could be part chameleon. I don't know. Maybe not everything has a scientific explanation."

"Maybe," he agreed. "We'll have to get a better look if we see more of them. I don't plan on making a study of them, though. It's pretty clear that if we meet more, it'll be us or them. I don't really feel like being eaten by monsters today."

"Yeah, me either."

We left the bodies where they were. I entertained the thought—briefly—of hiding them, but didn't want to waste the time trying to find some place to stash them, and the thought of picking up a dead and bloody creature didn't appeal to me. At all. Instead, we checked the map and continued down the corridor we'd been traveling.

Ten minutes later, the overhead lights went dark, plunging our entire world into black so deep it seemed like the world had ended.

Images of creatures, shadowling and other more monstrous ones, came into my mind, swarming me, pulling me into even deeper blackness. My chest compressed, and I started trying harder to pull air into my lungs. I couldn't do it. Was all the oxygen gone? Did the dark beasts do something to turn the air thicker? I heard the harsh sound as my lungs worked, and I tried with all my might to put air into them. The darkness pressed on me.

A flash of light nearby made me gasp and jump, swinging my staff into a ready position.

It was Sam's headlamp, her face visible just below it.

Of course. I reached up and switched my own light on, trying to slow my galloping heart. By the time everyone had their lights on, I had regained control, for the most part. My face was covered with

a sheen of perspiration from the panic, but at least I could think again.

“Malfunction?” I asked, looking at Zach. For better or worse, he had the most information about the mine because of his research for his school project.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe they didn’t pay their bill.” His mouth twitched upward but didn’t quite make it to a full smile.

Chapter 12

It took more than another hour for us to get to the cavern where the most recent digging had occurred. Before getting there, I had an uncomfortable conversation with Emily on how to use the WAG bags for going to the bathroom. She went around a corner into another passageway to use it while I explained to the others and offered to let them have one of the bags I had brought. Awkward.

We finally arrived to find that the tunnel was dominated by a drilling machine. It wasn't one of the huge tunnelers I'd seen pictures of, the ones used to create railway tunnels or holes for roadways. This one looked like a huge battering ram on wheels. The main beam of the thing looked as if it telescoped, and the gigantic ball at the very front of the machine had curved rows of spikes made out of some different kind of metal than what the ball was made of. The conical spikes seemed removable so they could be replaced with new ones when they wore out. They reminded me of teeth in crooked rows in the mouth of some monster. I would have liked to have seen the machine in operation. Drilling through solid stone seemed like it would be exciting to watch.

"They usually blast to make new tunnels," Zach said. "Maybe they're trying out this machine to see if it works better."

The tunnel the machine was pointing toward intersected another, rougher corridor that was at an angle to the one we were in. It must have been a surprise when it had broken through to the other cave. I'd never heard that there were other caves near.

"That must be where the shadowling came from," Jacob said, pointing at the ten foot section of wall that had been shattered by the drill. "It looks like a natural cave, not a mine shaft."

He was right. I'd been on cave tours before. There were several commercial caves in the area, including the Colossal Cave we had talked about earlier. The tunnel that had been breached looked like it had formed naturally, the floor uneven, no drill or chip marks on the wall, no abnormal voids from blasting. I shined my headlamp into the hole and noticed that the opening wasn't even consistent. In the ten feet I could see with each swing of my lamp, the passageway narrowed in size and then widened out again. Would we even be able to get through it?

"Will we even be able to get through the passage?" Sam asked. I smiled at her for mirroring my thoughts exactly and she smiled back at me, though her eyes showed confusion as to why we were

smiling.

“We don’t really have a choice,” Mom said. She had regained her composure since meeting the shadowling. “If that’s where they came from, that’s probably where they took their prisoners. We could spend a day or two wandering the mine trying to find them, but I’d say that the chances are better that they’ve been taken back into the caverns the creatures know best.”

“I think you’re right,” I said, my mind trying to come up with any other idea, any reason not to go into the darkness.

While we paused before heading into the natural caverns, Sam walked to the wall of the mine and put a big X and an arrow on it with her chalk. I raised my eyebrows at her and she shrugged.

“I marked all the other intersections before, too,” she said. “I don’t want to get lost.” I nodded.

I watched the interactions between the different pairs in our group as we hesitated. Jacob had a long-suffering look on his face as Madison prattled at him, no doubt complaining of something. Emily and Zach had their heads leaned in toward each other and were speaking softly. Mom was trying to explain something to Rick—I recognized the tightness around her mouth and eyes and knew they disagreed about it. Sam was putting her chalk back in one of her pockets. Tyler...well, Tyler was playing air guitar and humming something I didn’t recognize. Quite a group we had here.

“Are you ready?” I said, taking my staff in my left hand. “We probably have some traveling to do. Hard traveling.” Weary nods were my only answer.

I stepped through the hole into the natural cavern and quivered. Was it colder in here? It was so quiet. I’d thought it was silent before, but there had at least been the soft buzz of the lights and the background sound of the ventilation system. Now that we were in an area without these things—the cavern was even more soundless. Like a tomb. Not a pleasant thought.

I breathed a little easier than when we first entered the mine, though I felt more like something was squeezing my chest in this strange new set of tunnels. I guess if something scares you or stresses you out but remains in front of you, all around you, your body’s alarms get tired and you get used to it. Yeah, right. As if I’d ever get used to being underground, in the dark. I clenched my staff tighter to keep my hand from shaking.

“Are you all right?” Sam asked, just behind me as she had been for nearly the entire trip so far.

“I’m...” I took a deep breath. “I’m not all that good with dark places, especially with monsters that want to eat me.”

She chuckled weakly. “Is anyone?”

That was a good question. The others all had tense looks on their faces, too, all had eyes that darted from shadow to shadow. I wasn’t the only one scared half to death. That was comforting, in a way. “I guess not. At least, not anyone sane. Not anyone I know.”

Sam looked toward Tyler, nodding his head to some musical beat only he could hear. I got the hint. But even as oblivious as he seemed, his face had the cast of someone who would jump three feet if she said boo to him, his lips in a tight line and his eyes squinting.

I headed to the right. That way sloped down, so it seemed it would have the best chance at being the correct way. The logic was flawed—the cavern could rise and fall many times in a short distance—but it gave us somewhere to start. We were off the map, after all. Sam drew a big arrow on the natural side of the wall, pointing through the hole and back toward the surface.

The surface. How long had we been underground, anyway? It seemed like days, but checking my watch, it had only been four and a half hours. It was not even quite noon yet. We had all been snacking as we walked, but we should probably stop and have lunch within a couple of hours. Our mission was going to take a while.

We were lucky. The tunnel remained large enough for us to walk through, though it was anything but level and smooth. There were occasional shelves of rock we had to duck under and points where we had to squeeze through a narrow space for a few feet, but we didn't have to crawl or turn around because things got too tight. That was good. What was bad was that we saw no sign of anyone ever having passed that way before. No footprints, no trash, nothing.

The air was stale and had a wet, musty smell to it. Water dripped on us occasionally, creating damp spots on the floor. There was no sunlight, so moss wouldn't grow there. I guess it was lucky. The last thing I needed was to slip on moss and crack my head on stone as I fell.

"You know I'm not really religious," Sam said as we picked our way through a cavern that had opened up from the tunnel. "My parents are Buddhist, but I see religions as more of an academic study than something to dictate my life."

"Yeah," I said, stepping over what looked like the start of a stalagmite. I looked up and saw a fair-sized stalactite that may eventually meet with it. In a few thousand years.

"But this whole *Inferno* thing has me thinking."

"*Inferno*? Oh, the book. Dante. Our English assignment. We're facing monsters in the dark and you're thinking of schoolwork?"

She looked at me as if she didn't know who I was. "I'm always thinking about schoolwork. You know that."

"Ah, right," I said. "I guess I do."

"Anyway, the story is all about how the Catholic God handed out punishment for the sins people committed in their lives. As Dante traveled through hell, he saw how fitting the trials were for these souls. Gluttons could never get enough to eat, greedy people had nothing but their rags, all that stuff. It was all about justice and balance and people getting their due reward for their actions."

"Do we really have to talk about hell and schoolwork—which some would say are the same thing—right now?"

"I was just thinking," she said, ignoring my protests, "that maybe, in a way, these creatures are fitting punishment for our actions. Maybe we're like the ones who couldn't commit to either good or bad, endlessly chasing a banner with nothing on it."

I stopped and turned to look at her as she ran into me. She was looking to her left, scanning the

edges of the headlamp light.

“What are you talking about, Sam?” I said.

“We kind of go in and violate the earth, strip mining on the surface and boring tunnels below ground to take part of the ground away. Maybe this is nature’s, or some god’s, way of telling us we’re not being nice.”

“You think this is a punishment from God?” I asked. “That dark shadow monsters are taking children to teach us a lesson?”

“No, not really, but it has me wondering if there is some kind of balance or justice in the universe.”

“Sam,” I said, letting my irritation come through in my voice. “My little brother can be a pain, but he’s done nothing to deserve being eaten by monsters. There’s no justice in that.”

“I know, Dani. Don’t take it like that. It’s just strange that we’re reading that book and this should happen at the same time. I’m only trying to understand it all. Forget I said anything. I’m sorry if I made you mad.”

“It’s okay,” I said, expelling a breath. “I’m not mad, not really. It surprised me, that’s all.” I started walking again. I wouldn’t tell her I had been thinking about the book, too. It *was* a coincidence. Too strong a coincidence. Not everything in life had a reason, right? This was all random. I’d have to remind myself of that as we went along.

I didn’t even have time to finish my thought. A shadow flitted across my headlamp beam and I heard a gasp from behind me. I stepped forward and snapped my staff into a guard position. We had company, and it was up to me to play the good hostess.

Chapter 13

The shadows around us seemed to come alive, wriggling and pulling themselves free of the walls and crevices in the tunnel. I froze for a moment as I flashed back to the familiar nightmare. I found myself panting.

It wasn't more than a second or two until my training took over. Without conscious thought, I closed the distance on one of the dark forms and struck at it. It moved like it truly was a shadow, twisting and sliding around my staff. It took two more swings before I actually made contact with a dull, satisfying thunk of the hardwood staff.

It circled me, warier now that it had felt my weapon. As it did, I caught what was happening around me in my peripheral vision. Another shadowling was grabbing at Madison, trying to pull her away from the others. She screamed and slapped ineffectually at her assailant, but it hardly noticed. It was too busy dodging Jacob's and Tyler's weapons. The escrima sticks and crowbar were too slow to strike it, but maybe they'd get lucky and get a hit in by accident. I had my own concerns right now.

My adversary lunged at me, swiping with its claws. It was a half-hearted attack, obviously not meant to actually cut me. I figured it was a feint, so I did what it probably didn't expect. I slapped the claw aside with my staff and stepped forward. Toward the shadowling. Its nostrils flared, a gesture much too human for my comfort, but it was too late for it to do anything. I swung the end of the staff down so fast I heard it whistle in the air as it came down over its arms and contacted its head. The thud sounded like hitting an unripe melon with a hard rubber mallet.

The creature swayed from the strike, took a single step backward to try to regain its balance. I moved toward it and spun the other side of the staff down hard, striking it in exactly the same place. The sound had more of a cracking sound this time. Before it could move, my staff came around again and I slammed it into the side of its head with enough force to throw it against the wall. It hit the stone, bounced a little, and crumpled to the ground.

I wasn't sure if I had killed it or not, but I didn't have time to check. Instead, I turned to survey the scene. Tyler and Jacob were still swinging their weapons at the creature that had been trying to take Madison. It attempted to ward off the blows, swiping at the air in front of it to make them back off.

My mom was fumbling at her waist, trying to take her gun out, while Rick slashed at another of the creatures with his sword. He actually looked like he knew how to use the weapon. They were okay

for now.

Emily and Zach faced another shadowling. They took turns swinging at it, Em with her cudgel of a walking stick and Zach with his baseball bat. They were doing even worse than Tyler and Jacob, though. As I watched, the creature snatched the stick from Emily's hand and threw it away from them. Before it clattered to the ground, I was in motion, charging toward the trio.

Emily screeched and backed from the monster stalking toward her. Zach was winding up to strike it with his bat, but he was swinging so slowly, the shadowling was hardly paying attention. Its eyes were fixed on the girl, and it was moving toward her, hands grasping the air in front of it as if to snatch her from ten feet away.

I got there just as it reached out to grab her. I hadn't even stopped fully when I slammed my staff down hard on its outstretched arm. It howled in pain and pulled its injured limb back. Then it turned to me, hatred in its dark, too-human eyes.

That was the only distraction needed. Momentarily forgotten, Zach connected with the baseball bat. He had swung it like he was going for a grand slam home run. It caved in the back of the creature's head, and it dropped to the ground, twitched a few times, and then lay still.

A gunshot boomed and the shadowling that had been attacking my mother fell. Rick was already sprinting toward the last creature, which was still occupied with Tyler's crowbar and Jacob's sticks. While it was fending off their blows, Rick lunged in from the side and punched his sword into the creature's abdomen. It screamed until Rick pulled the blade free, brought it around in a tight circle, and slashed horizontally at the creature's neck. Its head rolled free, spraying Tyler with dark blood. The musician gasped, sputtered and spit, and started retching. Thankfully, he didn't actually throw up.

I swung my headlamp around the corridor, looking for more enemies. There didn't seem to be any. I moved it more carefully, the beam illuminating each of my friends in turn so I could see if they were all right. None seemed to be injured. I let a long breath out. We had survived an assault from the shadowling. But how many more would we have to get through?

I thought of the security force sent into the mines and how they disappeared without a trace. How had we beat the shadowling when men with guns didn't? I had to chalk it up to not being ambushed by the creatures and the probability that there were many more of them attacking the security guards. I just hoped our luck held up.

We continued on our way, leaving our fallen enemies behind.

"Did you see?" Emily was saying to Zach. "That thing, it snaffled my cudgel. Right out of the air. Then it threw it away."

"I saw," Zach said. "I guess it's good it didn't use the weapon. We can be thankful for that."

"I suppose," Emily said.

Zach had a point there. These things were hard enough to fight without them using weapons, too.

"I'm tired," Madison whined.

"I know, Maddie," Jacob said. "We're all tired. We have to keep on going. Allison is still out

there.”

“I know, but can’t we just get these scrappy little people to go fetch her for us? My feet hurt, and there may be more of those monsters out there. They tried to kidnap me!”

“Yes. I saw it. I’ll protect you. We need to find Allie, though.”

I noticed my mother’s head turning toward the two when she heard that name. People called her Allie, also. She turned her face back toward the tunnel. She, like the rest of us, concluded it was better to ignore Madison.

“But I didn’t know it would be so hard to find her,” the cheerleader continued.

“What,” Zach said. “Did you think you’d walk in, bat your eyelashes, throw some money around, and all the murderous cave monsters would bow down and do whatever you wanted? Stop your whining.”

Madison looked aghast and turned expectantly to Jacob. His mouth tightened into a straight line. He looked daggers at Zach and started to say something, but I spoke first.

“Zach, she’s just concerned about her sister, like you are about your dad and I am about Bobby. We can take a short break to rest, but let’s not bicker. It’s hard for all of us.”

Zach threw his hands up and sighed, but didn’t say anything. Madison huffed as she turned to find a spot near the wall, dusting a patch of floor so she could sit. Jacob looked at me, emotionless at first, but then his eyes met mine and he nodded before turning to go sit with Madison.

“Nicely handled,” Sam said, throwing her pack down and sitting next to it in the middle of the corridor. I guessed it was as good a place as any. I sat down next to her, cross-legged.

“Thanks,” I said. “There will be more of that. The stress is going to keep building the longer we go on. I hope we get to the point where we become more comfortable with being down here—” I looked at the surrounding darkness and fought the panic trying to take me “—and start acting like a team rather than several different individual groups. Our lives may depend on it.”

“You’re thinking of that team-building exercise we did in P.E., huh?”

“I guess I am,” I said. “There’s something to that stuff, you know. If we can act like a team, maybe things won’t be as bad.”

“Yeah.” Sam had a faraway look in her eyes. P.E. was not her favorite subject. She was a brain, a nerd. She did all right in the required physical education, but it wasn’t...academic enough for her.

Someone tapped my shoulder. I looked up to see Jacob standing there, sticks in his hands. Sam got up and went to Zach and Emily.

“Hey,” he said, trying to catch my eyes again, and failing as I focused on his mouth. Such a nice mouth. Behind him, Madison glared at me. “Great job defusing that little situation just now. I’m tired and my temper is short. If you hadn’t stepped in, I probably would have said some things...well, thanks for dealing with it.”

“Sure,” I said. How could someone so popular and so absolutely gorgeous be such a nice guy? And polite, too. It didn’t seem possible. “We’re all on edge. I don’t want us to fight. We have to be a

team. If we're splintered, we may not survive this."

"Yeah, you're right."

I wasn't sure what to say. Should I say anything? He was standing there looking at me and I was looking back at him. Heat started rising from my neck up through my face. My mind scrambled to think of something to say. Anything to say.

"I was wondering," he finally said, and I'm pretty sure I exhaled loudly enough for him to hear. For everyone to hear. "If you'd show me a few things with the sticks like you offered. You know, if you have a minute and aren't too tired. And if you want to."

"I do," I said, maybe a little too quickly and too loudly. As my words echoed in the tunnel, I felt everyone's eyes shift to me. I really needed to modulate my volume in this tomb we were passing through.

I stood up, looked at my staff, then around us to see if there was anywhere to lean it. There wasn't. He smiled at me and put his hand out to take it from me. I shrugged and smiled back. When he handed the sticks over, I took them, one in each hand, and stepped back a little from him.

"You're a wrestler, so you know about center of gravity, balance, and generating power through body movement, especially the trunk." He nodded at that. "Apply what you know to using the sticks." I noticed others paying attention, too, some blatantly and others more slyly.

"I won't bother with too many defensive maneuvers because a strong offense is probably better in this case. Those things don't have any finesse at all. They just use brute force attacks.

"So, first, hold the sticks like this, with your grip a hand's length or two from the end. Don't hold them at the very end. Remember that they are an extension of you, like extra length added to your arm. You don't have to grip them so tightly that you make your forearms ache. You don't want your grip too loose, either, or they'll come out of your hands when you strike. Find the balance, or you'll either exhaust yourself or drop them. Supple wrists are the key." I wagged the sticks in front of him to show him how to hold them.

"Don't limit yourself to just swinging them like a baseball bat, either," I continued. "There are eight angles of attack." I rapidly struck an invisible opponent, straight down from the top, diagonally downward from right to left, horizontally from right to left, and so on. I struck quickly with the right stick and then mirrored the motions with the left stick. The whoosh of the weapons cutting the air seemed loud in the cavern. No one else spoke. "Remember that you can also use back-handed strikes, not just frontways." I demonstrated.

"You are so fast," he said, eyes wide. I began to feel flushed again.

"You don't have to try to strike so fast that your form is compromised, but speed is a big part of using these weapons. They are relatively light, compared to a baseball bat." I nodded toward Zach. "Or even a staff—" I motioned to my weapon in his hands, "—so speed makes up for not weighing as much. These are hardwood, though, so they're resilient enough to really strike your target and do some damage without breaking. I think it's kamagong wood."

“Got it,” he said. “Strike fast, but not so fast that I’m wild.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Did you notice how I moved with them, how I generated power?”

His eyes dropped to the floor. Was he...embarrassed? How absolutely adorable. “You swiveled your hips,” he said. Was he blushing? Oh my God. I wanted to kiss him so badly, but with our audience, that would never happen. I had to face it, even without an audience, it wouldn’t.

“Right,” I said. It even came out like my face wasn’t on fire and I didn’t have a thousand butterflies swirling around in my stomach. “All your power comes from the hips, from your trunk.” I thought of his abs—one of the main reasons I watched the boys’ water polo matches—and had to push the thought to the back of my mind or I wouldn’t be able to think at all.

“Could you show me again, a little more slowly?” he asked. He still wasn’t meeting my eyes, but this time it was because he wasn’t trying to.

I performed a few strikes, more slowly than before. “Make sure you’re balanced. There are specific stances for fighting and using the sticks, but do what is comfortable and feels in balance for you.” As I delivered a few strikes with each stick, I exaggerated my hip rotation to show him clearly where the power came from. His eyes fixed on my hips, and my belly turned over. The fire that was boiling beneath the skin of my face flared hotter than the sun. I started to sweat.

I stopped. If he stared at me any longer, I was pretty sure I’d burst into flames. “Keep the wrists supple and let the sticks flow with your body’s movement. So, you got it?”

“I think so,” he said, finally looking up so our eyes met for a split second. I started to slip into those dark eyes and had to look away.

We swapped weapons. As we did so, I saw Sam’s wry smile and Madison’s intensified glare.

“Try it out,” I said.

He did. With a few minor corrections, he was swinging the sticks more smoothly in no time.

“You look great,” I said, wincing inwardly at my wording. I pushed on. “It looks like you’re more comfortable with them already.”

“I am,” he said, flashing his killer smile. “Thank you so much, Dani. This might just save my life.”

“I hope so,” I said. “I’ll show you some combinations later, if we get the chance.”

“Sounds great.” He put both sticks in one hand took a half step toward me, looking like he was going to hug me. Then his eyes darted toward Madison and the others and he sighed. Just a little. “Thanks. I’ll practice as we walk.”

He turned and walked back toward Madison, who was already whispering at him. I caught a “treating her like she’s important” before they turned toward the wall and the sound was lost to me.

So much for being able to sit and rest. Still, I felt energized. I faced my mother and couldn’t hide the smile on my face. Hers matched mine for a second, but then her expression dropped into one of worried concern. Yeah, I couldn’t forget that Bobby was out there and we needed to go get him back. There was no time for me to awkwardly flirt with the most perfect guy who’d ever existed.

“Let’s get going,” I said, turning toward the blackness ahead. I had almost forgotten for a moment

how tense things were, how dark and scary and dangerous they were. Almost.

Chapter 14

Not even half an hour later, three more shadowling found us. This time, we were a little more organized. Between Rick's sword, my mom's gun, and the rest of us attacking in two groups, we made short work of the trio.

As I spun to generate force to crack the skull of the last of the creatures, I noticed a shape in the far side of the cavern. The chamber we'd fought in was wider than the corridor we had been passing through, a hollowed out area probably twenty feet from wall to wall. On one edge of the room, there were several cave formations, broken pillars and a configuration that looked like a hand fan. Crouching on top of one of the stalagmites was one of the shadowling.

It was different than the others, though I couldn't tell at first what made it so. Was it taller, heavier, shaped differently? I couldn't really place the variance. Its color was slightly different in the glow of my headlamp, maybe a little lighter, or maybe with some color in it. Anyway, it looked right at me, then dropped to the floor and scrambled away, quickly disappearing out of the beam of my light.

"Did anyone else see that shadowling sitting on the broken pillar over there?" I said, pointing with my staff to where it had been.

No one had. It started me wondering if I had imagined the whole thing.

"Dani," Emily said. "There's something I've been wondering about."

"What is it, Em?"

"Well, we're not being all that quiet. I mean, we talk and stomp around, we yell when we get attacked, and the gun—"she looked toward my mother—"well, we're making an awful racket."

"I know," I said. "I don't like it. It'll draw attention to us. I don't see what we can do, though. When we get attacked, we have to fight. The gun is the most powerful weapon we have."

"I know," she said. "That's not really what I was talking about. What I've been wondering about is even with all this noise, even with having killed some of the monsters, why are they attacking only three or four at a time? Do you think there are only a few of them? If so, how did they defeat and capture more than a dozen armed security guards? It just seems strange to me."

"To me, too, Em. I don't know the reason. That makes me uncomfortable. I can understand creatures trying to take us and eat us, but this, it makes no sense."

“Maybe they’re trying to herd us?” Sam said, coming around my left side. “Maybe they’re directing us somewhere where they can take us all out.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” I said. “If there are more of them, why not just attack us with everything they’ve got? Doing it in small groups only allows us to kill some of them.”

“Maybe they want us alive,” Sam said.

That stopped me cold. “I don’t know. Even if they did, why not overwhelm us with shadowling and capture us that way? We only have one gun, and they can’t be too afraid of that. They took on that whole armed security force. I guess we’ll just have to continue on and see what happens. If there’s some kind of strategy, I can’t see it.”

We had all been pretty lucky. No one had any injuries. At least, they didn’t as far as I could tell. We’d outnumbered the groups that had attacked us, so we were able to evade them while others struck at them. I wasn’t sure how long that would last, but I was glad no one had been injured yet.

We picked up our packs and moved on. Sam diligently marked each intersection with chalk so we would be able to get out when we were done. It occurred to me that the shadowling might be intelligent enough to know what the chalk was for and wipe it off, but I didn’t mention it to anyone. There wasn’t really anything we could do about it if that were the case, except maybe try to scratch the stone. But that would be time-consuming and could be obscured, too.

My breathing had stabilized, though it stayed faster than it would be if I was at home, on the surface. Not trapped in the dark underground with vicious monsters. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Funny how closing my eyes made me feel more comfortable when darkness was the thing that freaked me out most. The cold air of the cave was refreshing, though a little stale. It was cool enough to seem brisk but not enough to burn as I breathed it in.

Tyler’s incessant humming, singing, and sound effects were actually a help as we went along. It gave me something familiar to latch onto, something that spoke of the surface and sunlight and the absence of crazed homicidal monsters. As I swung my headlamp from side to side, scanning the corridor in front of me, I even found myself humming along at times.

The cave was not what I had expected. At times, the tunnels we passed through were relatively flat—though they all seemed to slant downward at least a little—and we could walk as we had in the mine somewhere above, upright and two side-by-side. At other times, we had to wriggle through narrow spaces, climb over rock formations, or hunch to get through an area.

All around, there were fantastical shapes that, if I wasn’t so nervous about being attacked, I could probably recognize as looking like familiar structures or objects. It all got old within the first hour anyway. There were only so many types of configurations formed in a growing cave, and once you’ve seen them a few times, they just don’t hold the wonder they did at first.

Less than half an hour after the last attack, the creatures found us again. This time, there were six of them. The tunnel we were in was not wide. In fact, it narrowed between our position and where the shadowling were. Tactically, it was a horrible place for them to attack us, but they did it anyway.

There was only room for two of us to fight up front. Rick and I took the front-line positions and waited for the dark shapes to come to us. In the bottleneck, the two of us probably could take on three times their number; only one or two could come at us at a time.

I was a little concerned. I had trained with the staff for years, so I knew how to use it in a small space when necessary. It was just a matter of using front-to-back motions instead of wide swings. I wasn't sure about Rick, though.

He had proven to be pretty good with those swords of his. I even saw him use both at the same time, the longer katana in his right hand and the smaller wakizashi in his left, during the last fight. Still, I wasn't sure he had the skill to keep from cutting me by accident. I hugged the left wall of the tunnel while fighting, allowing him as much room on my right as I could.

I hadn't needed to do that. I wondered if he had any formal training. The way he shifted his stance to slash and lunge forward rather than with circular motions to the side actually impressed me. He was not only skilled with those weapons, he was smart, too.

As we fought, my mother stepped up occasionally and shot between us. The first time she did it, it scared the living daylights out of me. The second time, it just irritated me because of my ringing ears. In no time, we had taken the six creatures down. As the last one fell, I saw a shape, just on the edge of my lamplight. It was that same shadowling—I'd bet on it—standing off to the side, watching. Its eyes met mine, and then it calmly stepped back, out of the light, and disappeared.

"Was that another one?" Mom said. "Over there?" She pointed the gun at where the creature had been.

"Yes," I said. "It's the same one I spotted earlier. It just observes. I'm not sure what to make of it."

"Maybe it's some kind of spy," Tyler said from behind me. "Maybe it's going to watch and then report back to the mother ship or something."

"Do you think they're aliens?" Madison asked, the first thing she'd said in at least an hour. "Are they taking people away to put them on their ships and do experiments on them?"

"I'm sure they're not, Maddie," Jacob said, directing a stern look at his friend. "Why would aliens come and then hide in caves?"

"Then what are they?" she said. "No one has answered that question for me yet. What *are* these things, and why did they take my sister?"

That stopped all discussion. Honestly, for an airhead, she had nailed the question we all wanted answered. The problem was, it didn't seem like anyone *could* answer it. We stood around for a full minute, everyone looking at everyone else. Then, almost as if someone had given us a cue, we stepped over the bodies of the newly killed shadowling and continued down the uneven corridor as it narrowed and then widened enough so that three people could walk side-by-side.

"You're really good with those," I said to Rick as we began walking. "You didn't have any formal training at all?"

He eyed me and a little smirk grew on his face. “No formal training. Just a lot of samurai and kung fu movies and countless battles with dastardly imaginary villains to save the princess.”

“It’s nice to know there are some good, old fashioned heroes around,” I said. “Or samurai. Or ninjas. Or whatever.”

“I seem to have noticed another one near also,” he said, tilting his head toward Jacob and raising his eyebrows. My scalp got hot and, in another second, my face did likewise.

It was stupid, silly banter, but I needed it. The weight of the stone pressed down on me, and an urgency burned in me. I can’t really explain it, but it felt like I was looking at an hourglass as the last little bit of sand slid through. It felt like something was going to explode, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to withstand the blast.

Chapter 15

“What is that?” Sam asked. She was up front with me. Our positions changed around as we walked, and she maneuvered her way up to me. Zach and Emily seemed to be sticking together and, of course, Jacob and Madison were joined at the hip. Rick was here mainly because he was my mother’s friend, so they were together, too, leaving Sam to join me up in the front where it was most dangerous. She was my best friend, after all. Tyler brought up the rear, tapping on the walls like they were a drum set.

“What is what?” I asked.

“That, right there.” She pointed to something up against the wall, barely visible in her headlamp beam.

I swept the area with my light, checking for any creatures hiding in the shadows. We went over to the shape. It was a jacket. One of the security guard jackets, with the American flag on one arm and an eagle on the other. The name embroidered on it with light blue thread was Derek. It was the first evidence of people we’d seen since we got into the natural caves.

“What is it?” Mom asked.

“It’s one of the security guards’ jackets,” I said.

“Is there blood on it?” Rick asked.

“No.” I turned it over, looking at it carefully in my headlamp. There were no stains of any kind on it.

“Is there any kind of alien slime on it?” Tyler asked, poking his head over my mom’s shoulder. Jacob’s hand slapped the top of his head.

“Ow,” Tyler cried. “I was just asking. You never know, you know.”

“What does it mean?” Emily asked.

“I’m not sure it means much of anything,” I said.

“I think it means we’re on the right track,” Rick said. “We know at least one person is this way.”

The words were barely out of his mouth before a dark shape landed on top of him, bearing him to the ground. Light from headlamps flashed wildly, and in that light, what seemed to be a dozen shadows made flesh leapt at us.

I spun in time to mostly evade the creature trying to tackle me. It skipped off my staff and landed

hard on a rock protruding from the wall next to me. Two hard blows with my weapon later, it lay unmoving.

The world was a maelstrom of flashing lights and shadows as everyone flung their heads around trying to see what was happening. The cavern was large enough to move around in, but still cramped with all the bodies shifting, lunging, dodging, and fighting in it.

A gunshot rang out, followed by a pained scream. I hoped my mother didn't shoot one of us by accident. I thought of telling her that, but two shapes came at me, and I only had time to try to keep from being killed.

The shadowling attacked differently than before. Before, they mostly tried to grab us, take us away. Now, they were using their claws, slashing at us. I knew I didn't want to be cut by those wicked looking nails.

I back-stepped, spinning my staff to smack away the claws coming at me. These creatures were so fast, I was nearly hit several times but somehow got my weapon up in time to block or parry the blows. The two in front of me seemed to be working together, another new thing.

They also had different styles. One was faster, striking at me and moving like a boxer so it didn't present an easy target. The other one, well, I would have considered it a bruiser. I'd fought many of those, opponents who tried to knock you out in one punch, moving slowly but with the force of a tidal wave. Strange that none of the other creatures we'd battled had showed differences like this.

I breathed and calmed myself. Fighting was familiar to me. I had to think of it as sparring, not life or death. The creatures' large eyes reflected my lamplight back at me as I swung my head. When the beam shone in those orbs, the shadowling flinched, even if just a little. It gave me an idea.

I took one more step back and ran into something soft. I twisted to the side to evade one of my assailant's claws and threw a look over my shoulder. It was Madison, standing stone still with her hands over her mouth, eyes wider than I'd ever seen hers. She was useless. I thought of luring one of the monsters fighting me to attack her as a distraction, but immediately rejected the idea. She'd be killed, and it would be my fault. I might feel bad about that. Eventually.

One of the creatures swung at me, and I saw an opening. I jabbed at its face with the end of my staff, cracking bones in its nose, and spun to the side where my other foe was, the boxing one. It leaped toward me, both claws out, ready to slice me to ribbons. I tilted my head just enough to shine the headlamp in its eyes. It blinked and shook its head, its momentum stalling. I took the opportunity to swing the end of my weapon up as hard as I could.

It connected with the creature's crotch.

I hadn't been sure if it would work, but as the force of the blow lifted it off its feet a couple of inches, the monster howled. Their anatomy was not that much different than ours, then, it seemed. I couldn't really tell with the pants it was wearing. I thought had seen a few of the creatures with breasts, which this one did not have, so I thought maybe they reproduced like humans. Apparently, the point I struck was a vital area, like with us.

I shifted my momentum, dropping down into a lower stance and rotating my hips to redirect the energy and strike the other shadowling with the same end of my staff. The satisfying crack as it came down on its head told me it would be out for the time being. Glancing at Madison, standing a few feet away from me, I shook my head and looked for my next opponent.

Sam didn't really have any weapons—something I needed to remedy—but she was smart and cool-headed and seemed to be doing more than some of the others. As Zach and Emily swatted away claws coming at them, Sam had brought out that flashlight she was so proud of. It was billed as a digital torch, and that was a good name. I had felt the beam when it was on a medium setting, and it was hot. Very hot. It was as bright as a spotlight. Sam was using it to blind the creatures, having figured out their sensitivity like I had.

Zach was back-stepping toward a wall, swinging wildly with his bat, trying to keep from being sliced by the claws whirling in front of him. Emily was striking at the creature attacking Zach, not noticing the one coming up around on the other side of her, ready to pounce. If I called, it would only panic her, so instead I sprinted the few feet and lunged at the shadowling sneaking up on her.

At the same time, Sam brandished that laser-like flashlight and hit Zach's attacker in the eyes with the beam. It stumbled and Emily's cudgel struck a glancing blow off its head. Zach planted his feet and brought his baseball bat around, hitting the creature on the shoulder. The two of them fell upon the beast, raining blows on it as it hunched down to protect itself.

I had reached the other shadowling, swinging out low with my staff to knock its legs out from under it. It crashed to the ground, rolled, and came back up, murder in its eyes. It bared its teeth at me, fangs glistening with saliva in the light of my headlamp.

It jumped.

I was barely able to get my staff in front of me as its claws came toward me while it angled its head to get the perfect position for tearing out my throat with its teeth. This thing did not want to take me prisoner; it wanted to kill and eat me. I hadn't seen this type of ferocity before.

Catching its attack on the wooden weapon held in both hands in front of me, I rolled backward, kicking my feet up into its abdomen and pushing it upward. It flipped through the air, carried by its own momentum and my little boost, and struck a large rock formation behind me, head toward the floor and feet high. It grunted as it bounced off the rock and fell, but scrambled back to its feet in an incredibly short time.

I got to my feet at about the same time it did. I thought it had showed hatred before, but what I now saw in its face burned much hotter than what I had seen earlier. It spit and hissed, then made some kind of sound I'd never heard before, sort of a clicking, screeching sound. Was it cursing at me?

The shadowling crouched low, scuttling like an insect. The movement reminded me of a spider. When my mom's gun went off again, I jumped a little, but it didn't. It was focused completely on me. I could see in its eyes it wanted to kill me.

The creature sank lower, readying itself to spring. I'd seen the same movement, the same tense

muscles, the sense of an impending explosion, in cats as they play fought with other felines. I shifted my grip on the staff, preparing to defend.

Just before the shadowling bounded at me, a loud chittering filled the corridor. My attacker's eyes flicked toward the source of the sound, and I shifted my gaze toward the same area. The creature, the one who was slightly different than the others, the one that had been watching us, was making the same types of sounds my current foe had earlier. It must have been their language.

It continued to click and screech at my opponent. The tone of the tirade was that of command. Was it their leader?

The shadowling in front of me continued to move side to side as it screeched back at the other which, I could see now, perched on a high rock formation overlooking the battle. The two exchanged words in their strange language, and my adversary seemed to get more and more frustrated. It hunkered down again, ready to leap despite apparently being told not to.

The leader chittered even more loudly, and all the other shadowling disengaged from the fight and disappeared into the darkness. All except the one in front of me.

It screamed and jumped at me, so fast that even though I was expecting it, it caught me unaware.

I saw the claws coming at me, the mouth opened wide to tear at me, the teeth flashing like sharp, little white daggers. I wasn't sure if I would be able to keep all three of its weapons from me this time.

The world slowed down, reduced to only the darkness, the hurtling form illuminated by my headlamp, and myself. A dozen movements flashed through my mind, ways I could keep from getting injured or killed. I discarded all of them immediately. It was already committed, too close for me to have time to react. I didn't even think I could twist out of the way in time. Was this how I would die?

A loud bang echoed through the cavern.

The creature twisted to the side as if it had been pushed while in mid air. It was enough to upset its trajectory and allow me to move just enough to the side to evade the strike. It landed hard on the stone floor, scraping across the grit there, bouncing and rolling, then sliding to a stop. I shone my lamp light onto it and saw what I knew would be there. Blood flowed out of a hole in the side of its head.

I slumped, leaning on my staff for support.

I looked over to see my mom, just a few feet away, drop her arm, the gun barrel trailing a wisp of smoke in the combined beams of our headlamps. She exhaled loudly.

And then she started to cry.

A few seconds later, I joined her.

Chapter 16

“What was all that about?” Sam asked several minutes later, when we had searched the area for more shadowling and determined that we were safe. “All that screeching?”

“It’s their language,” I said. I had regained my composure, as had Mom. I think it was the emotional weight of the situation. I’d felt the same thing when I won the state championship in sparring. “I think that other one, the one that’s different from all the others, was scolding that last one and telling it not to kill me.”

“Language?” Sam said. “Are you sure?”

“Not completely, but they have to have some way of communicating, right? They were arguing at the end there. I’d bet on it.”

“Do you realize what that means?” Rick said. “For some reason, that other one didn’t want us killed. Or, at least, it didn’t want *you* killed, Dani. I didn’t see it interceding with anyone else. At the very end there, it actually called off all the others, leaving that last one to die. In effect, it pulled back its front lines and left that one all alone. That shows a lot of intelligence. These things aren’t just crude beasts.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And that’s what is probably scariest of all. It’s also sad, because we have to kill them to survive.”

We spent a little time inspecting everyone to make sure no one was seriously injured. Zach had a minor scratch and a bruise from when he’d fallen down earlier. Jacob had a line of parallel gashes along one arm where sharp claws ripped through his sweatshirt and cut his skin. Rick had some bruises from the creature that had jumped on him and crushed him to the floor, but luckily no slashes. The others, including me, had no injuries to show for the battle.

“How many were there, anyway?” I asked. “I was too busy trying to keep from being killed to get a good count.”

“Ten or twelve,” my mom said. “Rick kept them back from me so I could take aim and shoot at them.”

“They’re upping their game,” I said. “No more small groups. Apparently, we deserve more resources now.”

“I have a question,” Emily said, raising her hand. I chuckled at that. Good old unassuming Emily,

treating it like we were in school.

“What is it, Em?” I said.

“That one you’re calling the leader, what makes you think it’s in charge?”

“Mainly it’s because of how it tried to call off that other one when it looked like it would try to kill me. The leader seems more intelligent than the others, sitting back and watching instead of coming at us.”

“Maybe it’s just a coward,” Emily said. “How can you even tell if it’s the same one you saw before? All those things pretty much look the same to me.”

I thought back to the times I’d seen it, trying to pick out the details. “I think it’s a different color or maybe taller than the others, though it had those same torn pants as the others seem to wear.”

“I’ve seen it twice now,” Jacob said. “At least, I think it was the same one. I’m with Emily, though. It looks the same as the others. None of them really have a color. They blend in with any dark surroundings.”

“It’s the same one,” Rick said. “I’ve caught glimpses of it, too. It isn’t color or shape or anything like that. It’s the thing’s bearing.”

“Bearing?” Emily said.

“Yeah. It stands like it’s in charge. The others sort of skulk around, moving as if they don’t want to be noticed, even when they know they’ve been seen. That one, though, it holds itself like it’s a king or something.”

I thought back, picturing it. “You’re right. That’s what it is. I couldn’t place it, but that’s why it looked so different. I’m sure it’s in charge, and I’m sure it was trying to keep the one that got mad at me from killing me. But why?”

“Maybe they like to eat their food alive,” Tyler said.

Three different hands reached out and slapped his head.

We continued walking for less than an hour, until we got to a place where the tunnel widened into a cavern. We had been traveling all day. It was nearly eight o’clock at night, and it was obvious we wouldn’t be getting out anytime soon.

“I think we should stop for the night,” I said as we all came to a weary halt. “We’re too tired to go on. If we run into more of the shadowling, we may not be able to fight them off.”

The cavern was a large, pear-shaped space, strange rock formations on either side of a clear center. Three openings aside from the one we came through lined the wall. One was obviously a continuation of our route, another seemed to keep going in another direction—I scouted it but didn’t want to go too far from the others to check it out—and the third was a narrow tunnel that led to a wider area, a kind of room where we could all fit easily with enough space to move around. There was even a little sheltered portion separated from the rest of the chamber by a large, fan-shaped stone formation. There were no other entrances. It was perfect.

“We can sleep here,” I said. “Two people can stay awake in shifts to guard the group and make

sure we're not attacked. If we are, the creatures will have to come at us one at a time because of the narrow entrance."

"I can't sleep here, on the ground," Madison said. She had been quiet for the last couple of hours, silently dragging her feet next to Jacob. She was making up for it now.

"That's fine," I said. "You can take the first watch then. If you can't sleep, you might as well guard us."

She sputtered, but couldn't come up with anything to say.

"Okay," Jacob said tiredly. "She and I will take first watch. Who do I need to wake up for the next shift, and when?"

I nodded to him, thanking him for helping to shut down Madison's whining. "Sam and I can take the next watch. Wake us in a couple of hours. After us...Mom, do you and Rick want to take the slot after that?" She nodded. "Good. Then Emily and Zach can take the last watch."

"What about me?" Tyler said.

"Oh. Do you want to join Jacob and Madison?"

"How about I take the watch with Emily? And that other kid."

"The name is Zach," Zach said.

"Nice to meet you, Zach," Tyler said. "I'm Tyler. We'll be on watch together." He smiled at Zach and found an area to curl up to sleep. Zach shook his head.

"Right," Emily said. "So we're going to get stuck in here for the night?"

"Yes," I told her. "You're on last watch, so you can get some sleep now."

"Great."

As I went to sleep, I heard Madison asking Jacob if there were spiders or snakes in the cave that would bite them as they slept. The last thing I remember is feeling a smile grow on my face at how much fun I could have with that.

Jacob shook me awake at around 11:00 PM. I was groggy, but as soon as I realized it was his hand touching me, I went from asleep to wide awake in two seconds. I liked the way his strong hands felt on my shoulder. I sighed and got up.

"Anything happen?" I asked.

"Other than Madison jumping every time someone snored? No, not much. Despite her claims to the contrary, she's already asleep, just in the time it took me to cross the cavern."

"That's good. I'm sorry if it's rude, but I think I prefer her asleep."

He laughed. "Sometimes, I know exactly what you mean. She's not a bad person, though. Just a little rough around the edges and different than most other people."

"Yeah," I said. "Different." I sat up and rubbed my eyes. He had let me sleep for almost three hours, but I was still exhausted. I'd take my turn, though. We all had to do our part. I started to move over to wake up Sam, and he gently grabbed my shoulder again.

"Hey, Dani," he said. "I wanted to thank you."

“Thank me? For what?”

“You’re the heart and soul of this thing. Without you, we wouldn’t have gotten this far. Hell, we probably wouldn’t have made it through the first shadowling that attacked us. When the rest of us were confused about what to do, you took charge. I’m team captain in my sports at school. I recognize a good leader, and you are one. So, thanks. If we succeed in this, it’ll all be because of you.” He squeezed my shoulder softly, tried to make eye contact again—I was able to avoid it—then turned and went back to where Madison was mumbling in her sleep.

“Nice,” Sam said, startling me. I hadn’t realized she was awake.

“Nice what?”

“He likes you,” she said. “I think you’ve got a shot with him. If he realizes what a troll he’s dating. And, you know, if we survive.”

“Yeah, right. Come on, we have some guarding to do.” I snuck a look at Jacob settling down to sleep, lying on his side on the cold stone floor. The shoulder he had touched still felt warm to me.

Nothing happened on our watch. We talked about what kind of animals might be in the cave and decided there probably weren’t any. I knew for sure there wouldn’t be snakes or other reptiles. It was too cold for that. I doubted bats would come this far in, also, because all their food was closer to the surface. At least we didn’t have to worry about getting bitten by something.

When it was time, I woke my mom and Rick up to take over for us. I felt kind of bad for them. The middle watch got the raw end of the deal. Their sleep was split down the middle by their watch, so they didn’t get to rest as much as the others, not in one chunk. I had the same situation, though, so I didn’t let it bother me too much.

Mom smiled at me and kissed the top of my head as she and Rick went over to the flat stone shelf near the front of the cavern. I smiled back at her, said goodnight, and settled back into my place to catch a few more hours of rest.

“I can’t believe it,” my mom’s voice said as it carried across the cavern. They weren’t speaking loudly, but I heard it anyway because of the acoustics of the place. “He refused to come. ‘I have to take care of my daughters,’ he said.”

“Allie, don’t be so harsh,” Rick said.

I tilted my ear toward where they were talking. I didn’t want to miss this. I hadn’t known that Rick knew about my mom and her boyfriend. She had never told me about Jesse. I had to figure it out on my own.

“Don’t be so harsh?” she said. “I asked him to come with me, to protect me as I searched for Bobby. He actually forbade me to go.”

“It is a dangerous thing,” Rick said.

“All the more reason he should have come with me. He’s a cop, for God’s sake. He’s an expert with a gun, trained to handle dangerous situations. He should be here protecting me.”

Rick had apparently decided that the best way to deal with the rant was to remain silent and just

listen.

“Forbidding me to go,” she continued. “He should know better than to try telling me what to do. I begged him to come, to help keep me and Dani safe. Do you know what he said? Do you? He said, ‘I have two daughters I have to keep safe, Allie. I can’t go and you shouldn’t either.’ I told him I was going, and all he could say was that I shouldn’t.

“He told me he loved me. I guess that was a lie. How can you love someone and still turn your back on them when they need you most?”

I heard the rustling of Rick readjusting his position. I think he was uncomfortable in more than one way.

“Well?” she said, turning her anger on him.

“You’re doing the same thing,” he said so softly I almost didn’t make it out over the distance.

“What do you mean by that?” I could picture in my mind what her face looked like as she said it. She was probably sitting with her arms crossed under her breasts, shoulders drawn toward the front, her eyebrows pinched down and her forehead furrowed, her mouth set in a tight line. I’d seen that posture many times, and I was glad it wasn’t directed at me at the moment.

“Allie,” he said, “you’re mad at him for putting his daughters first, before you. You’re mad that he isn’t willing to leave them unprotected to go with you to rescue your son. He claims that it’s not sound thinking to enter a mine and chase after monsters that have kidnapped one who you love.”

“Damn right.”

“Yet you are doing the same thing. No, let me finish.” I heard his jacket rustle and was sure he was raising his arms toward her to gesture her not to interrupt him. “You normally wouldn’t condone this type of thing, going underground and searching for trouble. I mean, look at the situation. You didn’t even ask all these kids with us, all minors, if they had their parents’ permission to go.

“You cast off all common sense, all logical thinking and rushed down here without much of a plan at all, all of it to save your son. If Jesse is a bad boyfriend for putting his daughters first, doesn’t that make you a bad girlfriend for putting your son first, even to the point where you are putting your daughter at risk? Does that make you a bad parent?”

My mother gasped as he finished. I waited for the explosion, for her to yell at him for calling her a bad girlfriend, for her to scream at him for calling her a bad parent.

The silence was deafening, finally broken by a sharp intake of breath from one of the sleeping boys and then a snort.

“I’m not calling you those things, Allie,” he said consolingly. “I’m just saying that when it comes to those we love, there are times when nothing else in the world matters. In those times, situations in which we would sacrifice anything for our loved ones, who can say if it is good or bad?” I heard the movement of his down jacket again and knew he had picked up her hand. “Give him the benefit of the doubt. He may be selfish and uncaring, but he also may just be scared to death over his children.”

“Yeah,” she whispered. “I guess.”

They were silent for the next few minutes, during which time I fell back asleep. I didn't know anything again until Emily shook me awake at the end of her watch.

Chapter 17

I lay there on the cold floor of the cavern, my headlamp off to conserve the batteries. I guess it's true what they say about getting used to things. Before this little journey, I had to have lights on all the time. But I had been so terrified for so many hours the day before, a little darkness hardly seemed threatening. Still, I turned my headlamp on and breathed a little easier in the light.

I did not want to get up. My whole body was sore from the fighting the day before. I groaned as I levered myself up with my staff. The others didn't seem in any better shape. Except the three who had been on watch, that is. They seemed awake enough.

"Anything happen?" I asked Emily.

"No. Tyler and Zach were both trying to impress me." She giggled. "It was hilarious, and adorable. You should have seen it."

I smiled at her, but she cocked her head slightly. Okay, maybe it wasn't a convincing smile.

"Anyway," she said. "I better get my stuff together. I'm assuming we'll be starting off after eating something."

"Yeah," I said. "We still have a mission to complete."

Her frown reflected my feelings. Our mission. To find and rescue our loved ones. The entire thing pressed in on me, making me want to curl up in a ball until it all passed. The shadowling still had Bobby, and we still had to get him back. They knew we were here, probably knew exactly where we were, but we still had to try. Why were they playing this game? Why didn't they just swarm us and take us all prisoner? There was so much I still didn't understand.

"The way I see it, these creatures know what we're doing," Rick said as we were all eating whatever breakfast food we had in our packs. For me, it was oatmeal made with water I heated up on my little backpacking stove. "I don't know what they're waiting for, but I'm sure there are enough of them to capture us all. That presents some choices. Do we continue? Do we go back? Do we change the way we proceed, maybe splitting into two groups or taking passages more randomly? What do we do?"

"I really don't think any of that will make a difference," I said, swallowing the spoonful of oatmeal I'd been chewing. "They're in control here. It's their cave, the darkness is theirs, and we're way too unprepared to dictate what they do."

“Are you saying we should go back?” Jacob asked, concern mixed with sadness on his face.

“No, of course not. Bobby and Allison and Zach’s dad are all still out there. I won’t stop until they kill me or we rescue the captives. I’m just saying that no matter how we change the way we search the caves, we won’t fool them. They are letting us roam free for now, but they could probably capture or kill us at any time. The question is why they haven’t.”

Everyone else was silent. Maybe they were thinking about what I said, or maybe their thoughts were off somewhere else. I heard Tyler humming—it sounded like the Beatles’ *Here Comes the Sun*—and knew at least one person was thinking of other things.

“I say there’s nothing for us to do but to continue on,” I said, “deal with things as they happen, and hope we’re not in over our heads. It sounds irresponsible, but I can’t see any other way we can do it. Can anyone else?”

Silence again.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s get going. I want to be out of this God-forsaken stone maze before another day passes.” There were grunts and other noises that sounded like affirmations.

We had barely gotten back into the main corridor before Sam, walking beside me, raised up her hands.

“Stop,” she said. “Wait.” She reached up and turned her headlamp on its strongest setting and then scanned the ground in front of us. Not satisfied with the light, she got out her super flashlight and flipped it on. She got down on her knees and moved her head from right to left as if following something. Getting up and walking to the edge of the cavern, she followed something with her eyes as she directed the beam up toward the ceiling.

My mother gasped.

I moved around Mom so I could get a better look at where Sam was shining her light. I finally saw it. Above us, suspended by some kind of cord, was a cargo net, its ends weighted. I looked more carefully at where Sam was looking on the ground and found a very thin, almost invisible line stretching across the floor.

A trip wire.

The creatures were tired of dealing with us. They would try to capture us without a fight. I felt several things at that moment. A little pride that they wanted to avoid combat with us. A little anger that they would do something like this, using the mine’s own equipment—nets used to hold down large piles of supplies—to try to trap us. Probably most strongly, though, I felt a little despair. These things were not stupid. At least one of them had the ingenuity to set a trap. True, it was a crude trap, but could I have done any better? I didn’t think so.

“I think we’re in a lot of trouble,” I said.

We made our way past the trap, Sam standing at the wire and making sure everyone carefully stepped over it. We inspected the area in front of us as we made our way out of the chamber, jumping at shadows and double checking every trick of the light that made it seem something could be in front

of us. It was going to slow us down considerably.

“How did you even see that, Sam?” Zach asked. “I mean, even I, with my perfect vision—the best my eye doctor has ever seen, by the way—would have had trouble spotting it.”

“I’ve got pretty good eyes,” she said, shrugging. “I guess I just got lucky.”

“I think *we* got lucky,” I said, “that you were with us. I would have stepped right into it.”

Her face flushed and she looked away, down at the stone floor and to the left. That was why she saw the second trap.

“Shadowling!” she said, whipping out her super-flashlight and turning it on.

At least five of the creatures froze for a moment, holding their hands up to their eyes as the light bathed them. They had been waiting in a small alcove off the side of the passage we were in, hidden in the shadows.

I slid around Sam and struck at them while they were surprised. Someone to my left did the same, but I was focused on the shadowling, so I didn’t see who it was. It didn’t matter. The fact that someone was backing me up was good enough for me.

I clobbered two of them over the head with my staff before they started fighting back. Pushed up against the wall like that, they weren’t able to move effectively, so for every awkward swipe of a claw, we could hit them twice. I finally caught sight of who was next to me. It was Jacob. He swung the sticks almost like he knew how to use them. Nothing like a crash course to learn something.

As I jabbed my staff into the face of one of the creatures, a gunshot rang in the tunnel. Through the ringing in my ears, I heard sounds of a scuffle behind me. The shadowling must have been hiding on the other side of the tunnel, too. I wondered how many there were.

The attacker in front of me was looking around, eyes darting back and forth from my left side to my right. It was trying to find an escape path. I spun my weapon hard enough to knock its arm away and strike it a solid blow on the side of its head. It looked at me, an expression of sadness and resignation on its monstrous face, then it curled into a ball and waited for me to finish it.

Instead, I swung over it to strike the one next to it. Jacob was raining blows on the only other one still conscious, and it looked about to be knocked out. My new target hissed at me, swiping with its claws, but it didn’t have the room to do it effectively. I changed the momentum from a horizontal strike to flip the staff around for a vertical strike. It whistled downward, contacting the top of the shadowling’s head with a sickening crunch, and all the fight went out of the monster. It dropped to the floor, limbs splayed out beside it.

Jacob went to attack the shadowling that had curled up, but I stopped him.

“No. Don’t kill that one. I have a plan. Let it go.”

When no blows fell, the pitiful creature at my feet looked up through the claws it had wrapped around its head. There were still no attacks, so it bounded up and scurried into the darkness, as quick as a lizard.

The others were finishing off the other shadowling that had attacked them. I took a quick look

around, saw everything was under control, and tore off after the escaped creature.

“I’m going to follow it,” I called over my shoulder. “Come with me as soon as you can.”

It was a scary run, and a short one. I tried to keep my prey in the beam of my headlamp at all times, but that was difficult to do. It was still a little dazed from the blow to the head, stumbling occasionally, but even with that, it moved effortlessly through the cave formations and tunnels of varying widths. It was like watching a monkey travel through a forest canopy.

I fell further behind and eventually lost sight of the creature completely. I stopped, panting. While I waited for the others to catch me—hopefully they kept sight of where I went, because I was completely lost—I took a good look around.

Some of the passages we had traversed were narrow and required squeezing through. At least, they did for me. That shadowling somehow zipped across them at nearly full speed. They were not the tunnels I would have taken. But then, I didn’t know where I wanted to go. I hoped the creature went straight for its home instead of where it thought it might be able to escape.

“Dani,” a voice echoed from where I’d come. “Are you down there?” It was Jacob. Of course, he was probably in the best shape of anyone else in the group. He’d be able to keep up with me in running after the beast.

I turned back toward him so my light would lead him to me. “I’m over here.”

I saw his light before I saw him. He walked up, squeezing through a narrow part of the passage, and stopped a few feet in front of me.

“Did you get it?”

“I wasn’t trying to get it,” I said. “I was trying to make it lead us to where we needed to go.”

“Oh.” He took a few deep breaths. “Damn, you’re fast. You should go out for track. You can just pretend you’re chasing monsters. You could win some meets for us.”

I laughed. “I’m not fast enough. I was hoping it would lead me right to where their lair is.”

“And did you ever think that maybe it would lead you right into another group of those things, or to another trap?” Sam said, huffing and puffing as she came through the narrow part of the tunnel. “Not very smart.”

“It was smart,” Zach said, “though maybe not very safe.” It seemed that the whole group was catching up to us.

When the last person, Madison, came through to the area we were all gathered, she had a withering look for Jacob. He shrugged, apology written all over his face. It didn’t do anything to soften that stance, though. Her feet were spread apart, hip cocked to the side, arms folded in front of her. She was the perfect picture of personal affront.

“Just what do you think you were doing, young lady?” my mother said. “That was stupid and brash, just running off like that.”

“I know,” I said, dipping my head to try to reduce the tongue-lashing I was about to get.

“You are not invincible, you know,” she said. “You can be hurt. Don’t go pulling any more stunts

like that.”

“I’m tired of only reacting,” I said. “I feel like we’re being herded to somewhere they want us to go. They’re playing with us, but I don’t want to play their game. I’m not sure why they aren’t killing us or sending dozens of them against us, but I’m done with it. I don’t know if that one I chased was trying to lead me where it could escape or if it was panicked and actually fleeing to where it lives. I took a chance that it would show us the right passageways to find the ones they’ve taken.”

“I understand why you did it, Dani,” she said. “Just don’t make any more of those split-second decisions without talking to us first, okay? You scared me to death. What would have happened if it had led you into a bigger group of those things?”

“I probably would have been captured, and then you would have had to come rescue me.” I smiled at her, showing all my teeth. She shook her head at me.

“I agree with you, for what it’s worth,” Rick said as we looked around the area we were in. “It’s always better to have your own plan than to just react to what your adversary is doing. It’s too bad that shadowling got away, though. Do you think we can use another one to lead us again?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “That trick probably won’t work again. We’ll have to try something else. At least we’re on the right track now. If it was going toward its home.”

We had a choice to make. There was the narrow passage we had come through, and there were four other openings of various sizes coming off the section of tunnel we were in. It was sort of shaped like a summer squash, narrow at the end we came in and getting wider and rounder on the other end. I guess that made the place we were in some kind of intersection.

“It continued on that way,” I said, pointing in the direction almost across from where we had come in. “It could be one of three tunnels, though I’m thinking it was one of those two.” I gestured toward two wells of darkness that resolved into two passages when Sam shone her light at them.

“Left or right?” Sam said, asking no one in particular. Really, though, she seemed to be looking at me, waiting on what I would say. In fact, everyone was looking at me.

To ease my discomfort, I inspected the floor in front of each of them, hunching down to get a better look.

“This one,” I said, choosing the left passage.

“Why that one?” my mother asked.

“More activity here. The dirt seems more disturbed, the little bits of stone and gravel are more parted here, pushed to the side of the cavern. I think this tunnel has seen a lot more people—or things—than the other one. That’s what we’re looking for, the place where these things pass through a lot.

“Sam, can you go back and mark the walls we passed while chasing the shadowling?”

“I already did,” she said. “I’ve been keeping a big piece of chalk in my pocket and as we ran after you, I quickly marked the walls.”

“That was great thinking. Good, I don’t want to get lost coming back out of here.”

As I spoke, she marked the wall in front of me with a big X and drew an arrow down the corridor

back toward where we had come from. I hoped we would be able to use those chalk marks. I tried to suppress the thought that we might not be coming back out, but it was hard.

“Nothing to do but go forward,” I said, hitching up my pack and starting down the selected tunnel. We were alive, for now, and that meant there was a chance to do what we’d come to do. It would have to be enough.

Chapter 18

“I was thinking about it,” I said to Jacob, who had come up to walk at the front with me for a while. “Maybe not all these creatures are bad.”

“What do you mean?” he said, turning his head to look at Madison, who was walking next to him with a sour look on her face.

“I was thinking maybe the shadowling are like humans. You know, some of them are good and some of them aren’t. Some don’t want to hurt us while others do. Some might want to eat us and some others don’t. I don’t think it’s always black and white. Or light and shadow, as it were.”

“You’re thinking about the one cowering in front of you earlier, huh?” he said.

“Yeah, that’s part of it. I’m also thinking about that leader, how he tried to talk the other one out of killing me. If these things were just mindless beasts trying to eliminate us or to take us as food, we already agreed they could have done it by now. Pretty easily, too. Even if they just gathered all those we’ve seen and fought so far, attacking at once, there’s no way we could have withstood that.”

“I know what you mean,” he said. “It’s kind of humbling. I think it’s pretty obvious we’re no match for them and their numbers.”

“We’re not. I wish I understood why they’re holding back.”

We both lapsed into silence, and eventually he and Madison were replaced by Sam. We continued on, speaking of little things, trying to pretend we were anywhere else. There were no side passages for over an hour, though we looked for them carefully.

“When do you think we’ll get to the section with the burning sands?” she asked after we’d been silent for several minutes.

“What?”

“The burning sands. You know, the ones reserved for the people who were violent against nature. In the book.”

“Oh,” I said. “In *Inferno*. You’re still stuck on that, huh?”

“It’s a fitting punishment for people who act against nature, don’t you think? All of them are pretty fitting, though I am not so sure about Dante’s opinion on which sins are most serious. I mean, giving murderers a lesser punishment than liars? Still, most of it makes some kind of sense.”

“Sam,” I said. “We’re not in Dante’s hell. We’re in a different kind of hell. This isn’t a

punishment, just something that happened to us. Or that happened to the ones we loved. We chose to come here. Not that I had much choice.”

“Like Dante,” she said.

“Oh, Sam.” I sighed.

“I also wonder about the punishment given to the thieves. You know, they’re surrounded by vipers and when they get bit, they turn into vipers themselves and stay that way until they bite someone else.”

“I didn’t read that far,” I said.

“Do you think if these things bite us, we’ll turn into one of them?” she asked.

That made me stop and think. “You mean, like a werewolf?”

“No, like the vipers.”

“I…” I wasn’t sure what to say. I hadn’t thought of it that way. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Let’s change the subject.”

“Okay,” she said. “Do you want to talk about physics?” Her face brightened.

We spent the next fifteen minutes talking about physics. I didn’t pay attention, though. What Sam said got me thinking. What if she was right? What if some of the things we were fighting—were killing—had been bitten and changed into the monsters. Could we be killing the miners, security personnel, and missing people who had changed into shadowling? I felt a burning in my stomach and chest, like I had eaten food so spicy I was going to be sick, over the thought.

The tunnel sloped slightly downward while twisting around like a river had run through it. I could imagine water filling the cavern and had to try to think of something else. Being trapped in a cave full of water was not something I wanted to linger on.

As our passageway widened, movements on all sides made my heart lurch.

“We’re being attacked!” I yelled as the creatures descended upon us from ahead on both sides. It was hard to tell, but there seemed to be more than ten of them. With the wide tunnel, at least ten feet in the area we stood, they would have the advantage.

From the start, this attack was different. The creatures acted in harmony, almost like they were running plays. Two split off and came toward me, and others seemed to be teaming up on individuals in our small party, especially Jacob, Rick, and my mother. My remaining friends only had one each to deal with.

All except Madison. She had no less than five surrounding her. Why? I struck a clawed hand coming at me as my mind searched for the reason. I had to give up thinking about it for a moment as both of those in front of me attacked at the same time, one swiping high, toward my head, the other going for one of my legs. Holding my staff in a wide grip, hands about two feet apart, I intercepted the high claw with my staff, my right hand high and the left low. A solid thunk of hardwood hitting whatever these things’ arms were made of echoed in the cavern. Then I swiveled and caught the other monster’s arm as it came in toward my leg, pulling my right hand down and raising the left. The staff contacted the attacking arm and forced it upward, causing the creature to spin. I took the opportunity

to guide the staff in a tight circle, making it come around and slam down on the shadowling's collar bone.

There was a loud snap, and the monster screamed in pain. I continued the motion as the left side of the staff bounced off the creature, slamming the right side down on top of its head. The shadowling's knees got wobbly, and it collapsed to the floor.

I didn't stop, though. I flowed from that attack to the next, swinging the staff horizontally while pulling my head back from the path of the other attacker's claw. Ribs cracked and the creature huffed as all the air was driven from its lungs. Two more quick diagonal strikes, one from high left and the other from high right made the second attacker drop on top of the first.

Their attacks still had been half-hearted, not really seeming like they were trying to seriously injure me, but they were dangerous anyway. I had no choice but to do my best to incapacitate or kill them, even if I thought that there may be ones that were not so evil among them.

I looked over in time to see that three of the shadowling that surrounded Madison had grabbed her arms and a leg. Jacob and Tyler were busy trying to fight others—two for Jacob and one for Tyler and his crowbar—so it was up to me. I lunged at one of the monsters holding Madison as Sam shone her light in another's face.

The one I attacked was so preoccupied with his captive, it didn't see me until the end of my staff crashed into its eye. It let go of her immediately, falling backward, claws coming up to soothe its face as it fell. The dull thump of its head hitting a protruding rock behind it didn't bode well for the thing's future. When its body finally stopped its movement, it lay there motionless, either dead or knocked out.

The other two proved to be no problem. With Sam shining light in their eyes and Tyler coming to help after crushing the skull of the other one he was fighting, both the remaining shadowling went down.

My mother's gun rang out a couple more times, breaking through the screeching and screams of pain from the remaining attackers. A few of them ran away, but most of them were lying on the floor, scattered around the area.

"Is everyone accounted for?" I asked a few minutes later. "Is anyone hurt?"

We were all there, and though we had more scrapes, bruises, and claw marks than before, we were all relatively unharmed.

"Did you see what they did that time?" I said. "A bunch of them ganged up to try to take Madison—"

"They can have her," Zach's voice said from behind me. I don't think he meant for it to be heard. Madison glared at him and Jacob frowned, but no one said anything.

"Ahem." I started again. "Like I said, something like five or six of them went after her, and the others seemed more organized, like they had a plan in place. I don't like it."

"I haven't liked anything since we entered the mine," Tyler said.

“True,” I said. “Me either. But I especially don’t like this. Not only are they showing more intelligence, it seems that they are trying to capture us one-by-one. We can’t let that happen.”

“How are we going to stop it?” Rick asked. “I mean, if they swarm one person but there are others to keep us occupied, how are we going to deal with it? We need plans of our own.”

“We do. The first thing is that we need to use the buddy system. I don’t care where you go or what you do, do not be alone. That includes if you need to...um, answer the call of nature. We need to stick together, very close together, as a group as much as possible. I think we’re getting close. We need to get to where the prisoners are with all of us together. It’s the only way we’ll be able to free them.”

The others nodded.

“Let’s—”

I wasn’t even able to finish what I was going to say. Another group of the shadowling came from where we had just been. A larger group. There was no way we’d be able to beat them in a large area, allowing them to surround us.

“Run!” I said, pushing Sam toward the opposite side of the chamber, where it looked like the corridor tapered in. “Get into that passageway so they can’t surround us.”

Rick ran toward it to lead the way, my mother right after him. Sam stumbled from my push and ran for all she was worth right behind them. Then Emily, Zach, Madison, and Tyler sprinted away from me and the pursuing shadowling. I jerked my head toward where the others had gone, and Jacob started jogging, looking back over his shoulder to make sure I followed. I did, at least twenty of the dark creatures on my heels.

Chapter 19

I dashed after Jacob, just getting to the narrow section of the tunnel as the first shadowling reached me. Thankfully, the ceiling was not too high here, only maybe seven feet up. That would keep them from climbing over and dropping on us. Of course, the narrow passage, with not nearly enough space to swing my staff from side to side, would affect my use of the weapon, but better that than to be where I could be attacked on all sides. I turned to face the oncoming horde, backing down the tunnel as best I could while jabbing at them and swinging the staff vertically.

It seemed like our adversaries had learned that the staff hurt because they were wary in coming toward me. That was good. The more time we had before they overwhelmed us, the better. Maybe someone could figure out a way we could escape. Sam was smart, she'd come up with something.

I ran into something softer than stone. It surprised me so much, I almost allowed a wild claw swing to get me. I dodged to the left, slammed into the stone of the wall, and kicked the offending shadowling in the face.

"What's going on?" I said, not even able to spare a look at what I'd backed into.

"Those other ones from earlier," Jacob said, "the ones that ran. Well, they came back when they heard their friends catching up to us. We're trapped in here."

As if to prove it, the gun went off. Great, trapped between two groups.

"They'll need to take them out," I said. "Quickly. We can't fight all these. Tell them. Pass it up to the front."

"Will do."

I heard him telling those in front of him and then it being passed along. I hoped they could manage it. There weren't probably more than five left in that original group. If reinforcements hadn't arrived from the other side, too. What a pain in the ass.

I kept jabbing at the shadowling coming at me and swinging the staff up and down when I had the chance, but I wasn't doing a lot of damage. It was enough to keep them a few feet away from me, but not enough to whittle down their numbers. I wasn't sure how long I could keep this up.

My entire existence devolved into swinging a big stick around and trying not to be sliced open by sharp monster claws. I was soon sweating from the exertion. Swing, jab, kick, dodge, those were the only things in my life at that moment. The only thing that changed was that another gunshot sounded

occasionally, apparently when my mother was able to get a clean shot without hurting one of us.

The narrow space was heating up. I think *I* was heating it up. Sweat poured down my face, trickling down my chest and back, soaking into my shirt.

“They took care of all of them,” Jacob said. “They’re moving out of this narrow part. Do you want me to take a turn?”

“No room,” I said, panting from my exertion. “We’ll have to wait until it’s wider before we’ll be able to swap.”

“Okay,” he said. He patted my shoulder quickly, not letting it linger so it didn’t affect my fighting. “Hang in there. I’m going through now. Back up as you get the chance.”

“Got it.”

It was a dicey thing. I wanted to turn and run, but that would have been stupid. I wasn’t about to make that mistake after all the effort I expended trying to keep from getting gutted by one of those claws. I backed up while attacking, shuffling like a boxer. The uneven floor made it dangerous, and I almost tripped a couple of times, but regained my balance without dropping my guard. When I felt cool air on the back of my neck, I knew I was almost there.

“A few more steps,” Jacob said. “You’re almost out. As soon as you are, we’ll jump in and attack them as they come through one at a time.”

“Okay.” I was breathing so heavily. I had forgotten how hard it was to fight for more than a minute or so. Even fighting for a minute would make most people throw up. The strain on the breathing, not to mention the muscles, was really intense.

I took one more step and then stumbled. If it wasn’t for someone behind me catching me, I would have fallen. I looked over my shoulder and saw Sam’s face, smiling at me. “I’ve got you. Great job, by the way.”

I nodded and cast my glance back toward the passage I had just come through. As Jacob had said, the shadowling were coming through one at a time. He, Tyler, and Zach were taking turns clobbering them as they did, Rick standing by to get into the rotation.

I sighed, leaning on my staff, and breathed. I’d rest for a minute and then get back into line with the rest of them.

It only took another couple of minutes for our pursuers to stop and retreat. I think what really did it was when my mom stood in front of the passage and calmly took aim at the creatures as they came out. She shot four of them in the face as they came, killing them and clogging the entry into our chamber. The shadowling screeched at each other in their language and stopped trying to climb over the bodies of their companions. Soon, there were none alive in front of us.

“I noticed how you’ve been conserving ammo,” I said to Mom as we searched the chamber we found ourselves in. “Only taking shots when you know you’ll kill them, when you won’t miss.”

“Yeah,” she said, reloading her gun. “I only have so many bullets, and I don’t know how long we’ll be in here. Or how many of those things there are. Besides, I’m afraid of ricochets if I shoot

and miss.”

“Good thinking,” I said.

“I do that occasionally,” she said. “Hopefully it’s enough.”

“Hopefully.”

“So, the group that ran, they went this way,” she said. “Does that mean we’re going in the right direction?”

“Probably.” It was strange, for some reason, having this conversation with my mother. Awkward. Peculiar. I supposed there was no normal or comfortable parts to this entire thing. “Ready to go?”

“Yep.”

We slogged on. One section of this dismal underworld looked much like another. Wide passageways, narrow ones, large chambers with stalactites and stalagmites littering the ceiling and floor, it all passed unnoticed. We weren’t looking at the big things like that. No, we were looking at the small things. Is that shadow big enough to hide some of the creatures? Is that a side passage or just a little depression where the light doesn’t reach? The suspense of when the next attack would occur was causing me to jump at every flicker of light. I was clenching my teeth so hard, anticipating an attack, I was getting a headache.

There was no doubt there would be another one. If we’d all learned one thing well, it was that there would always be more of the dark creatures coming after us. Until we got back onto the surface, we were fair game. And that cliché was as true literally as it was figuratively. I had the definite feeling we were being hunted.

At one point, when a fat drop of water dripped from overhead and landed on my forehead, I almost hit Sam with my staff in my panic. It was a wet, musty, miserable place, and I just wanted to go home.

Less than an hour after our last encounter, they came after us again. It was not clever, not a carefully planned ambush. It almost seemed as if the shadowling were running through the cavern on the way somewhere else and we happened to be there. Some of their eyes widened—just before the light beams hit them and they squinted—as they caught sight of us.

To be honest, it was more of a collision than an attack.

There were probably fifteen of them, and once their shock had passed, they split up and did as before. Three came at me, two went after Jacob, four surrounded Rick and my mother, and the others were attacked singly. Except Emily. Apparently, she was the target for this group. Six of them crowded in around her, only one really paying attention to Zach and the others concentrating on my British friend.

I was not about to let them take her. Anger started building in me. First Bobby, then all the endless chasing and fighting, and now they were trying to take my friend? It was different when they were after Madison. I didn’t have an emotional connection to her. I did with Emily.

The three came at me at once, swiping at me in the same way the others had. Well, I’d had about

enough of playing their games. They would try to attack me, try to take my friend? I'd show them their reward for pressing us.

There was a lot of room in the cavern we were in, and I used it to the full. The first shadowling to come near found how hard a staff could be swung when its wielder held on to the end with both hands and rotated her entire body to strike. I literally caused the creature, about the same size and weight as me, to fly off its feet and slam into the one next to it. I'm pretty sure the strike broke its arm.

With two tangled up together, I went after the third. Gripping the weapon in the center with both hands, I swiveled my hips to rotate my torso, swinging the staff on either side of my body. As I moved it faster and faster, it made a whirring sound. Until it hit the shadowling's outstretched arm, which it promptly broke.

Even breaking its arm didn't slow my momentum that much. I kept spinning the staff, striking the creature every few turns of the weapon. The shadowling was forced back as I hammered it repeatedly. A final blow to its face spun it about and dropped it to the floor. I continued spinning the weapon and turned to the other two, now just recovering from my earlier attack.

I widened my hands and increased the arc of the spins. This decreased the speed, but gave me more leverage to generate more power. I struck downward so hard toward the uninjured shadowling that its arm broke, too, bone bursting through the skin, as it tried to block my strike. The weapon continued down, breaking its skull. The thing's eyes rolled up in its head as it fell. Another three vicious strikes, the last one horizontally to crush the third creature's throat, and all my attackers were down.

I didn't stop, didn't allow the staff to slow. I darted toward Emily, stopping so abruptly when I got there that I slid across the floor several feet. I was striking at my foes as I came to a stop, wide swings batting away limbs and heads, taking feet out from under creatures. I was like a tornado, spinning around the creatures, hammering at them, knocking them down. Killing them.

It wasn't enough.

Three of them had hold of Emily and were dragging her into a side tunnel. Her stick lay on the floor nearby. Once they got her through there, I knew we wouldn't be able to get her back. Those things moved much too fast for that to happen. I flailed at the other beasts around me, but couldn't seem to move toward her fast enough.

An unearthly howl filled the cavern and suddenly, Zach was there, blocking the three from getting into the tunnel. They would have to go through him, his stance said. The shadowling holding Emily moved as if to attack him, but he had other ideas.

It was evident by the way the creatures' bodies stiffened that they were surprised when Zach leapt at them, snarling as he attacked.

As he crossed the distance, Zach swung his bat with all his might. It blew through the first shadowling's defenses and crushed its skull, spraying brain matter on the one next to it. Most of the momentum in the bat was spent, but Zach somehow turned it, added more force to it, and, with a

diagonal swing upward, caught the creature on the side of the head, low near its jaw. The beast's head snapped back and it fell, twitching, its neck at an angle it was never meant to be in.

The third monster caught the bat, the energy dispelled, and prepared to bite Zach. Instead, my previously gentle friend let go of the bat, drew the knife tied to his waist, and slashed the thing's throat out in a savage motion. The attack spun Zach all the way around. When he came to rest, he held the wobbly knife out in front of him, obviously a little disoriented. He shook his head, glanced back and forth, and then relaxed when he saw that Emily was the only one left near him. His shoulders slumped and he dropped his knife, breathing heavily.

I lost track of what was happening with everyone else as I took care of the last two attackers. When I was done, I walked stiffly over to where Zach, Emily, and Sam were huddled in a corner. Emily had been crying but wasn't any longer. Her red-rimmed eyes came up to meet mine.

"Me this time," she said, clutching her cudgel, which she had just retrieved.

"Yeah," I said.

She looked at Zach and her face got—I don't know—warmer. He had risked himself for her, and she had noticed. I left them to it.

"How much longer can we deal with this?" I asked my mom. "If we keep getting attacked every hour, we'll eventually go down."

"I know," she said.

Rick looked like he would say something, but he didn't. The tension of the silence stretched, thinning, like a rubber band that had been pulled to the point it was ready to break.

It snapped.

"Should we give up?" Mom whispered.

"What?"

"Should we go home, leave this place?"

"Are you crazy?" I said. "They have Bobby."

"We don't even know that for sure. In insisting on coming to get him, will I be losing you, too? Will we both be losing everything? I don't see how we can do this. We've survived this long, but half the time, these creatures don't even seem like they're serious. How can they attack us lackadaisically and allow us to kill them like that?"

"I don't know, but—" I said.

"Dani, it was a mistake to come down here. We're going to die. Maybe it's not too late to turn around."

I looked at her, incredulous. "No. Just no. I'm going to find Bobby and the others. I'm going to get them, and we're all going to go back to the surface. We have come too far, worked too hard, faced too much, for us to turn and leave. We're committed. If I have to go alone, I will. I will not let those monsters have my brother. The darkness took Dad. It won't take Bobby. I won't let it. I..."

I turned and walked away from her. It wasn't her fault, this whole thing. I was just so tired. Tired

of being scared, tired of running. Tired. I sighed, took a deep breath, and turned to go back.

I ran right into Jacob.

“Hey,” he said, his eyes searching mine. His were guarded, as if he wasn’t sure if he was welcome. I looked away.

“Hey,” I said. A real conversationalist, I was.

“I kinda heard what you said. Back there.” He jerked his head toward my mom, still sitting there with surprise written all over her face.

“Yeah, well, I’m kind of pissed off right now. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry, Dani,” he said. “I agree with you completely. I’m scared to death down here, and to be honest, I want to go back home, to my house with all the lights and with doors that lock. But I won’t. It’s not my brother, or sister, or dad that have been taken by those monsters, but if I can help others to get those loved ones back, then I’ll do what I can.

“Did you know that I want to go to med school, become a doctor?”

“No,” I said, wondering why he was telling me this. “You’d be a good one, I’m sure.”

He laughed. “Maybe. My first choice was to be a firefighter, but my parents won’t let me ‘waste my life’ like that. You see, I have always wanted to help people. I’ve always had this Prince Charming, go out and save the damsel in distress, kind of thing going on. It doesn’t have to be a damsel, though. I mean, you could mop up the floor with me if we had to fight. I just like the idea of being a hero. You know, saving people and helping those who can’t help themselves. What kind of hero would I be if I turned and ran away at the first sign of danger?”

“Yeah.” I chuckled. “You’d have to pick a superhero name like Chicken Man or something.”

“Exactly. Anyway, I’m with you. Even if it’s just the two of us, I’m with you until...well, until the end of it. Whatever that means. I just wanted you to know that. Don’t give up. Don’t give up on us and don’t give up on yourself.”

He turned to walk away.

“Hey Jacob,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks. You are a hero. And what you said helps. A lot.”

He reached over and pulled me to him, hugging me and stroking my back. “You’re welcome.” He ducked down to try to make eye contact, finally resorting to putting a finger on my chin and gently moving my head up. “Why won’t you look me in the eyes?”

“I’m...I don’t feel comfortable doing that. Anymore. It’s just...I don’t really do eye contact.”

“Well,” he said. “Maybe you can make an exception for me?”

I nodded and met his eyes for about a second.

“That’s a start,” he said, smiling.

He walked back to Madison, who had been watching us the entire time and who was switching between glaring at him and at me. I didn’t care. He had given me the boost I needed.

“Let’s go kick these things’ asses,” I said under my breath as I picked up my staff and headed toward the tunnel where our latest attackers had come out. Though I didn’t care if anyone followed or not, I smiled as I heard shuffling feet chase me down the corridor.

Chapter 20

The euphoria from Jacob's pep talk and the hug lasted almost an hour. The tunnel we had been following had widened out into a huge cavern, with a roof too far ahead for my headlamp to reach and sides that were just beyond the beam when I was standing in the middle.

That wasn't the weirdest part, though. There was trash all over the floor. I mean, a lot of trash. It looked like a fairground after a weekend. There was broken wood, pieces of metal, clothing and other types of cloth, cardboard, even a few empty barrels. How did those barrels get through the narrow passageways we had come through? There must be another way in.

"What do you make of it?" I asked Sam.

"I don't really know. We're very far into the cave. Why would anyone bring this much trash here? It's bizarre."

We began searching the refuse for clues or weapons. For anything, really.

"Remember," I said. "No one is to be alone. At least two, preferably more. Stay together." There were grunts I took as affirmations.

Something that sounded like a strong wind passed through the cavern. I stopped walking and cocked my head, listening. It took a few more seconds until I could place the sound.

"Shadowling!" I said, turning toward the area we had come from.

The sound changed into what it really was, footsteps on stone. Dozens of footsteps.

"We can't possibly fight that many," Sam said. "There have to be at least thirty of them."

"Run," I yelled. "If they surround us, we're done for. Try to stay together."

We ran.

We made it about fifty yards before the creatures' plan became clear. As we moved toward the nearest tunnel, all in a group, the floor was pulled up, trapping us all in a huge piece of canvas. We were trapped.

The last thing I remember was something splashing over the cloth, a foul-smelling chemical of some kind. Then I lost track of everything.

I jerked awake. It was like when I had dreams of falling and woke just before hitting the ground, my

body twitching. I was lying on my back, nothing but darkness above and something sharp digging into my back, like I was lying on sharp pebbles.

My head pounded and my stomach churned. I didn't remember going to sleep. What had happened? I ran my hand across the floor and found it to be chain link, like a fence. Why was I lying on a fence?

When I tried to open my eyes wider, I realized that it was pure black around me. Not the kind of dark of a cloudy night or a darkened room. It was completely black, the kind you only get when you're underground with no background light at all.

I clawed at my forehead to turn on my headlamp, but it wasn't strapped there. Immediately, my breathing became ragged and I had to gulp for air. My heart was in a vice, one that was slowly squeezing, making my chest hurt. The darkness. I had thought I had gotten used to it in my time in the caves, but I understood now that I had only convinced myself of it because I always had my headlamp handy. I was not used to it. It was still my enemy, still a thing alive, waiting, ready to pounce. To kill.

My breathing quickened even more. Part of my brain warned me that I was hyperventilating, but all I could think of was that I needed more air. Ice raced up my back and back down again.

"Dani?" My mother's voice sounded far away, yet also right next to me.

A hand found the top of my head and I let out a pitiful sound, like a whimper. I was too scared even for my reflexes to work.

"Calm down, Dani," she said. "It's me. I'm right here. Hold on."

I heard rustling as she moved and then a spotlight burned a hole in the world. I shielded my eyes from it. It was so bright. But it was light. Glorious, wonderful light.

I gulped air, almost filling my lungs. I settled into my old habit, focusing on my breathing, slowing it. Relaxing. My mother was silent while I did so. She had seen me do this countless times during competition, when my anxiety and fear had tried to take hold of me.

I opened my eyes fully as the light dimmed to a more comfortable level and my sight adjusted. Her face was a few inches from mine, looking at me.

"Mom?" I said, my voice catching.

"Yes, I'm here." She stroked my hair, watching me.

"The dark...my headlamp...where?" I drew in another breath, easier this time. "Where are we? What happened?"

"They caught us. It was a trap. They poured some kind of liquid on the canvas they caught us in, a chemical. I think that's what knocked us out. We were put in here." She swept her headlamp in an arc and I gasped.

We were in some kind of kennel, a large box made of chain link fence, the gate secured by a chain with a padlock. Emily, Zach, Sam, and Madison were with us, all of them looking like they were still sleeping. I saw my headlamp lying on the floor. It must have fallen off in my sleep. I strapped it on and touched the switch. Blessed light came into being. I sighed.

With my own light source available, I scanned the surroundings. There was another cage maybe ten feet away from us, still forms scattered all over the bottom of it. No, not unmoving. I picked up little twitches and chests rising and falling. The remaining members of the team were there. At least none of us were missing.

“How long have we been out?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Mom said. “I woke up when I heard you having trouble breathing. It’s like when you were a baby. Every little sound could wake me up. I’m sure it’s been hours, but I don’t know how long. Oh—” She took her phone out of her pocket. “6:00 PM. The last time I looked at the time, it was three, so yeah, two or three hours, I think.” She moved around, putting her hand to her waist. “Damn.”

“What?”

“They left me my phone, but they took my gun.”

I looked around our small prison. It was only maybe five feet by five feet, with a ceiling lower than six feet. “My staff is gone, also. Do you have a headache? My skull feels like someone used it for a golf ball.”

“Me too,” she said. “It’s probably from whatever knocked us out. Hopefully it’ll pass.”

“I wonder why we’re not being guarded,” I said.

“Are you sure we aren’t? I mean, we can’t see the edges of the cavern. There may be some of those creatures just beyond the range of our lamps.”

“Good point,” I said, moving toward Sam. My body responded sluggishly. I hoped that would pass. “I have a solution, though. I hope.” I went into Sam’s pocket, the one I saw her take her flashlight from earlier. I was in luck. Our captors had left it alone.

Bringing Sam’s super-flashlight out, I switched it on, and the entire room came into clarity. That thing was amazing. I could almost hear it hum like a spotlight.

We were in a rough cavern, water or lava carved, I guessed. It was twenty feet by probably thirty or more. There were two other cages besides the two we were in. They were empty.

A pile of our gear, mixed with trash, was heaped over in one corner. Our backpacks were strewn around, our weapons lying there, taunting me.

There was not a shadowling in sight.

What looked like a main entrance, however, was in sight. Actually, it was the only entrance. This was a good place for the cages. It was a dead end. No wonder they didn’t put guards here. To get out, we’d have to go through other passageways, ones that probably held some of the monsters. Good. At least we had time to try to break out.

“Break out?” my mother said when I voiced my thoughts aloud. “How do you intend to break out?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said, “but we’ll figure something out.”

Chapter 21

When I shook Sam awake, she grabbed my arm and squealed, her normally narrow eyes going big and round. “Oh, it’s you, Dani. You scared me to death.”

“Sorry. Sam, we have a situation, and since you’re the smartest person I know, I figured you could help.”

“Sure,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut and putting her hand to her forehead.

“Headache?” I asked.

“Yeah. You too?”

“Uh-huh. I think it’s whatever chemical they used to knock us out.”

“Smelled like ether,” she said. “The stuff they poured onto the big cloth that trapped us. I think it was some type of ether compound.”

I wasn’t even going to ask her how she knew what that chemical smelled like. “Like I said, I need your help.”

She looked around, surveying our surroundings for the first time. She made a little seated hop and darted her eyes left, right, and up. She brought her hand down to feel the chain link floor. “Oh my.”

“Yeah.” I handed her back her flashlight and she used it to look around the chamber as I had done a few minutes before.

“Why do you think they put us in here, unguarded?” she said. “Why go through the trouble of catching us when they could have just killed us while we were all bundled up?”

“I was thinking the same thing. I don’t know what’s going on, but I do know we need to get out of these cages if we want to do anything useful. If we’re still trapped in here when they come for us, who knows what will happen?”

“Hmm.” Sam had moved to the gate, inspecting the chain and lock holding it closed. The chain passed through the poles over which the chain link was stretched. It was heavy, much too thick to be broken, and the lock looked like it was of good quality, too. “I wish I had my backpack. I have some lock picking tools in there.”

“Lock picking tools?” I said. “How do you know how to use lock picking tools, let alone have a set?” I couldn’t really tell in the lamplight, but I thought she blushed.

“Just something that interested me that I’ve been playing around with. Doorknobs are much easier

than padlocks, but I might have been able to manage it.”

“I don’t suppose you have wire cutters in that pack of yours,” I said, mostly as a joke.

“Of course I do. But they’re not heavy enough to cut the chain with the padlock. Maybe the fence itself. Anyway, they’re over there.” She pointed forlornly at her pack lying in the pile with the others.

I shook my head. Lock picking. “Too bad we don’t have any tools to loosen the bolts here.” I pointed toward the bolts with round heads holding the fence material to the poles. The round side was inside, with the nuts on the outside, but the fence was chain link; we could reach through to try to loosen the other side. If we had a wrench.

“Oh,” Sam said. “I have a multi-tool. You know, one of those things with knives and pliers and screwdrivers all in one, like a Swiss Army knife, but better.”

“Do you have a way to get to your pack?” I asked, frustration building in me.

“You don’t understand, Dani,” she said. “I mean I *have* it.” She drew her hand out of her pocket and held something out to me. It was a shiny silver chunk of metal that could be opened up to reveal all its little secrets.

I stared at her for a moment before my face stretched into a smile. “You keep that in your pocket?”

“Not all the time. Only when I’m going to explore a mine and caves to try to rescue people who have been taken by dark monsters. In that case, I always carry it in my pocket.” She wiggled the tool at me.

“Sam,” I said, taking it from her, “you are amazing.”

“I have my uses. So, do you think we can get out with it?”

I was already opening it up to use the pliers. “I think so. It’s going to take a while, though.”

Slipping the tool carefully through one of the holes in the fence, I began to try to loosen the nut, but stopped.

“Can I borrow your scarf?” I asked.

“Sure.” Sam unwrapped it from her neck and handed it over to me.

I pushed half the scarf through one of the holes in the chain link, right at the bottom. I spread it out on the ground as best I could with my fingers poking through the fence. I was ready now.

I slipped the tool through the hole again, turned it so I could grab it through the fence to squeeze it and tighten it down on the nut. It took me a little while, but I finally got the angle right and was able to loosen it, just a little. I worked at it some more, my fingers wanting to cramp up from the awkward angle, but I kept on.

The nut was almost loose enough for me to take it off the rest of the way with just my hand when I fumbled the tool and it clattered to the floor. It was a dull, muffled sound. The implement had landed on the scarf, just out of my reach. I pulled the scarf in and was able to retrieve it.

“Whew,” I said, a bead of sweat dripping down my nose and dropping off. “That was a close call.”

Sam nodded, too focused on what I was doing to speak.

The first nut came off, allowing me to pull the bolt through. The chain link loosened at the bottom, allowing me to peel it aside a few inches. It had taken me almost ten minutes to do it.

The next bolt only took me five minutes. I dropped the tool twice. Once, I pulled it back with the scarf, but the second time it bounced from the higher height and fell on the stone floor. I was able to reach through the already-loose part of the fence to retrieve it.

By now, everyone in my little cage was awake and watching me. I didn't pay them much attention. I had to get out of this thing before any of the shadowling came back. I didn't have time for anything but getting the last two bolts out. Three were already sitting on the floor beside me.

The fourth was tighter than the others had been. Whether it had been tightened more or it was just stressed because the other bolts were loose and the fence was at an awkward angle, I didn't know, but it took a long time to get that first little bit of movement. Perspiration flowed freely on my forehead now, and my palms were slick with it, too. I was able to reach up through the already loose sections to work on it from the outside. Without that leverage, I probably never would have been able to budge the nut. When it finally started moving, I breathed out and slumped for a moment.

Chittering came from the other room, two of the shadowling discussing something. Maybe more than two. It sounded like they were coming toward us.

It was too soon. I wasn't ready for them yet. I had to get these other bolts out. We were so close. Just a few more minutes. As I loosened the nut to the point I could turn it with my hand instead of the tool, my mind searched for different ideas to keep them from seeing us before we were ready. Anything. Some distraction. I tried to think of something, but came up empty. It was like trying to snatch a fish from a pond. I knew it was there somewhere but couldn't quite get my hands around it. I growled low under my breath.

The bolt came loose in my hands. I set it down and brought the tool up to the last one.

The voices seemed to have stopped just outside the chamber we were in. I thought of telling everyone to turn off their lights, but it wouldn't have mattered. These things could see in the dark. If anything, the light would make their vision worse. Better to worry about things that needed attention. Like the last bolt.

I could not get the nut loose. I reached up through the fence I'd peeled back and used all my strength, but couldn't get the nut to move.

One of the shadowling screeched something that sounded like the end of a conversation. Did I hear its voice raise in volume at the last? Had it turned to come in? I was running out of time. I grunted, trying to loosen the nut, but couldn't. All that effort for the creature to find us and sound an alarm, ruining all my work. We'd never have a chance like this again. I cursed silently. So close. I was so close.

Then it came to me.

"Be quiet and don't look at me," I said. "Shine your lights on the guard when it comes in." The others nodded at me. As they swiveled their lights toward the entrance, I turned my headlamp off and

squeezed through the slack fence I had been working on. There was just enough give for me to get through and out of the cage. Now if only my luck held.

As quietly as I could, I snuck over to the pile of discarded items and crouched behind it. It was just enough to the side from the main entryway that I could see the creature as it came into the room.

It stopped in the entryway, surveying the chamber. It didn't seem comfortable with the humans shining their lights at it. Hand up to shade its eyes, it came warily forward, looking toward the other cage first, since it was closer to where it came in. It sniffed the air, surprising me. I hadn't realized they used their sense of smell. Or maybe it just had allergies or something. I didn't know.

The shadowling came around the cage I had been in. Though it seemed to have difficulty with the lights shining on it, it scrutinized the cage floor, checking on the occupants. When its eyes reached the section of the chain link I had loosened, it stiffened. It was now or never.

When I had competed in karate, I focused on fighting with kicks and punches, not really doing any MMA-type groundwork. I had a few classes, seminars really, on some jujitsu holds and techniques, but I wasn't proficient at them. I tapped that knowledge, hoping it would be enough.

No sooner had the guard seen the fence than I came up behind it and grabbed it in a chokehold. It was a common technique, called a sleeper hold by non-martial artists, my right arm around its throat, left hand behind its head to apply pressure forward, effectively cutting off the breathing.

I wasn't prepared for how strong the thing was.

It jerked violently, swinging me around as it tried to get free. It wasn't able to screech for its companions because I was compressing its throat, but it bucked and scratched and succeeded in dropping its chin beneath my arm.

Its teeth sinking into my forearm felt like my skin was being torn off. I scratched at its eyes and tightened my arm around its throat, lodging it underneath the chin to prevent it from using its teeth again. This close, the musty, foul smell of the monster burned my nostrils, bringing tears to my eyes. Still I held on.

The shadowling backed up quickly, slamming my back against the stone wall of the chamber. It almost caused me to loosen my grip, but I gritted my teeth and pulled tighter, refusing to let the pain defeat me. It tried to roll forward to dislodge me, but I had adopted a wide stance and could not be pulled down so easily.

The battle seemed to take forever, eerie because other than the scuffling of our feet and my labored breathing from the exertion, everything was silent. My friends were watching, directing their lights at me so I could see what was going on. My own headlamp, still off, had been knocked off my head.

Finally, slowly, the beast's thrashings became fewer and weaker and then stopped completely. I kept pressure on its throat, kicking its leg hard to make sure it wasn't pretending. No reaction. I kept it in the hold for a long count of five and then released it. The shadowling slipped to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

I hadn't killed it, but it would be out cold for a while. I looked down at it and wondered if I should finish it off, but rejected the idea. I had killed these things in battle, but to do it in cold blood while it was unconscious? I couldn't bring myself to carry through. I hoped I didn't come to regret my decision.

I slumped against the wall, breathing heavily. I had scratches on the side of my face from when it had been frantically clawing to get free and my forearm burned, but for having taken on one of the monsters hand-to-hand, I felt like I came out all right.

I huffed as I stood up straight and walked to where my headlamp fell. I had heard a clink during the fight, and just a few seconds of searching in the high beam of my lamp revealed that it had been carrying a key. Maybe it had come to feed us or something. In any case, I didn't waste time before opening the locks on both cages to let everyone out.

Chapter 22

As the others went to the pile of our gear to retrieve their property, I pulled the sleeve of my jacket up to inspect where the creature had bitten me. Two punctures and some bruising, apparently from other teeth that had not broken the skin, were clearly visible. It wasn't bleeding much, so I pulled my sleeve back down. I'd clean it and dress it later. There were more pressing issues right now.

Rick's hand on my shoulder surprised me. He handed over my staff and backpack. "Good job. Those things are pretty strong."

"Tell me about it," I said, taking my pack and slipping it on. I grabbed the staff from him and turned to find everyone looking at me.

"What now?" my mother said. She had checked over her gun and was slipping it into her holster.

"Well," I said. "They kindly left all our stuff right here where we could get it. I think maybe we need to use it. The other prisoners should be close. Let's get them out of here."

She nodded to me, and so did Sam, Zach, Emily, and Tyler. Jacob smiled at me as he hefted his sticks. Madison looked blankly at the ground. It seemed that things had been too much for her and she was in a state of shock. She'd have to figure it out herself. We had work to do.

Within minutes, we had a plan. Thinking the other shadowling in the next room might be wondering about their companion, we had to act fast.

We rushed around the corner of the wall into the other chamber as a group, Madison, Emily, and Sam pointing their headlamps left, right, and center, Sam using her super-flashlight to flood the whole area. The rest of us attacked the three shadowling that were within the cave.

I dashed past one of the guards, striking its leg as I passed, making it fall for the others to take care of. The other two were up ahead of me, one on the left side of the cavern and one on the right, next to an opening into the blackness beyond. I chose the right one and Rick took the one on the left.

My opponent was still in a state of surprise, so it didn't cry out right away, but just as I reached it, its mouth opened and it screeched several unintelligible syllables. Things were going to get busier very soon. I hoped my mom was doing as I had asked her to do.

I struck the shadowling across the face with my staff, cutting off its cries. The blow was hard enough to cause it to spin away from me, but I pursued it. It raised its arms to try to claw me, but it

was off-balance. I was able to bat its limbs away and strike it three times in rapid succession, twice with the right side of my weapon and once with the left side. Each hit forced it back a step until it ran into the wall. A quick circle of the end of the staff to transform the momentum into a downward strike to the crown of the head, and it dropped as if it had no bones.

I glanced back at the cages I had hoped would be in the room. My mother was using the key to open the third of three, letting out the groups of people within. As with the previous room, there was a pile of items nearby. The men, women, and even children, who were leaving the cages went to the pile and started pawing through it, some finding items they could use as weapons, others finding property specific to them.

I searched through the people. There were nearly thirty of them. How had the shadowling taken so many? Bobby was not among them. Neither was Allison, Madison's sister. Zach was crying and hugging a man with his back to me. Good, at least his father was safe. But where was my brother?

A man walked up to me. He had tactical clothing on, rugged black material, boots, and a holster.

"I'm Derek Singletary. I head the security team for the mine. Thanks for the help. Stay behind us now. We have a bunch of these creatures to kill."

My mother scoffed. I turned to look at her as she started to say something. I spoke first.

"Listen, Derek, you are not going to go and—"

I didn't have time to finish. Shadowling started pouring through the corridor beyond into the chamber. The alarm had been heard. Even as more of the creatures rushed in, I could hear more of them yelling in other parts of the cave. Now we would find out how many of the monsters there were.

I spun to face the entrance and the dark shapes pouring in. I huffed a breath and readied my staff.

I was starting to get tired. I'd been in the dark for nearly two days, as close as I could tell, and most of that time I had been fighting. Or running. As I dodged an airborne shadowling, striking it in the ribs as it sailed past, I wondered how much more I could take.

The children and those who either couldn't or were too afraid to fight had been put out of the way in the other chamber, where we had been caged. Between the security guards, the miners, and my own party of friends, bodies of shadowling littered the floor. There were a few humans, too. I had a constant ringing in my ears from the gunshots that punctuated the overall sound of battle. It was not only my mother's gun, but also those of the security guards. Apparently, the creatures had no issue with throwing firearms in with the other gear and trash kept in the same room as prisoners. It was interesting to me how ingenious and at the same time stupid these monsters could be.

I squared off against another foe, its eyes lidded against the light and its mouth drawn back in a snarl. It lunged at me, only to have half its head disappear in a spray of blood. Derek, standing next to me, lowered his gun and nodded to me. I nodded back.

"You're pretty good with that thing," he said, pointing his chin toward my staff. I noticed for the first time that there were red streaks along the ends of the weapon.

"I guess," I said, not really in the mood for conversation.

“You made it all the way down here, you and a bunch of other kids, with only bats and sticks?”

“Looks that way.”

“You’re not going to listen to me tell you what to do, huh?” he said.

“Nope.” I said. “We came here for a specific purpose. Neither you nor anyone else is going to get in the way of that.” I realized I was not being attacked. The trickle of shadowling had slowed, was stopping completely. It looked like we’d have a lull in the fighting. But for how long?

“I have authority over the mine property,” he said. “We could make you obey.”

“Look around, Derek,” I said. “We’re not in the mine anymore. We’re in natural caves.”

“She’s right,” one of the miners said. It was Zach’s dad, Adam Pinse. He was a big man, imposing, though anyone who knew him recognized that he was the sweetest person in the world. His messy hair, dirty face, and torn coveralls gave him a sort of sinister look. “You have no authority here. If you try to force these kids to do something they don’t want to do, well, I think we may have some problems.”

I had to strain to keep the smile from my face.

As he said it, three other miners stepped up, wearing the same dirty coveralls he was. Two of them were also large, the third being more of an average size.

Derek looked them over. “That’s how it’s going to be?” he asked, hand resting on the gun he had holstered when it was clear there were no more of the creatures around.

“Yep,” Adam said.

I didn’t want a showdown or anything ridiculous like that. I figured I’d better step in before we started fighting amongst ourselves.

“Listen,” I said. “Why don’t you go and escort the prisoners back to the mine? I still have work here to do. There’s no point in fighting. And here,” I threw the jacket at him we had picked up all those hours ago. “I think this belongs to you.”

He caught his jacket, looking at the name tag. “We need to kill all these things,” he said, but the authority had gone out of it. He put his jacket on.

“No. Your job is to get the people out. Let the National Guard or the police clear the tunnels if they want. It’s not your job.”

He looked at me as if he didn’t believe he was trying to negotiate with a kid. I could see in his eyes that he was turning over the situation, trying to come up with something that would let him save face. He didn’t want his men to see him foiled by not only a teenager, but a girl at that. Sam stepped in.

“You know, you’ll all be heroes,” she said, “escorting and protecting the ones taken by the shadowling, bringing them back out of the tunnels alive.”

“Shadowling?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s what the news has started to call them. They made it up after you all disappeared.”

“Hmm.” He rubbed his chin and mulled it over. “We would be going above and beyond if we brought them back out.”

“You would be the first ones the news and the rest of the town see,” Sam said. We both knew she had him. “You could tell your story. There would be interviews, ceremonies. You would probably even get overtime or hazard pay.”

Or you could take your chances and fight these creatures and maybe die, I thought. I didn’t know if he was a coward or not, but the lure of fame and some extra money would probably tip it in our favor. He had his way out without looking like he was giving in, and his men could still respect his command.

Derek looked into my eyes. I saw in his that we weren’t fooling him at all. He was not only not a coward, but he was pretty smart, it seemed. He let me know with his look that he wasn’t taken in, but he would let it be.

“All right,” he finally said. “We’ll take everyone back up to the surface.”

“I marked our way at every intersection up until they captured us,” Sam said. “I’m not sure how far away that was. If you see chalk arrows, that’s the way we came. Go in the direction the arrows point and you’ll get to the mine and then finally out into the open.”

“Fair enough,” he said. He was still looking at me, considering me. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “My brother is still in here. We have to go get him.”

“Fine.” He held out his hand. “Thanks for the assist. Good luck in there.”

I shook his hand. “Yeah, you too.”

The security force gathered up almost everyone else—Zach’s dad decided to go with us, and two of the miners stayed with him—and headed down a tunnel that slanted slightly upward. Hopefully they’d find the intersections we’d marked.

I turned to those remaining. There were the original members of our team—Mom, Rick, Sam, Zach, Emily, Tyler, Madison, and Jacob—and we had added Zach’s dad and two of the miners on his shift, Armando Anzures and Dan Nefferman.

“I know your daughter,” Sam said to that last one. “She is going to be so happy to see you.” I remembered the looks exchanged between Sam and Raquel Nefferman in class that day. It would be great when her dad returned.

The three men had found suitable weapons when the security guards refused to lend them guns. Zach’s dad and Armando held hardwood ax handles—pick handles, I guess—and Dan had a metal bar that had been mixed up in one of the trash piles. We were about as ready as we’d ever be.

Aside from the way we had come and the way the others went, there was only one other passageway. The opening stared at us like a giant, black, depthless eye.

“Are you ready?” I said.

“Let’s get back my boy,” Mom said.

“And my sister,” Madison added. We had offered to let her go back with the others and promised

to try to find Allison, but she refused. She would see this thing through to the end, she said. She got some points for that in my book. Maybe she wasn't a complete troll.

We headed down the tunnel, going deeper into the belly of the earth, thoughts of Dante and his journey dancing in my head.

Hopefully we'd live to see the light as he did at the end of the story.

Chapter 23

“*I* don’t know why they captured us,” Zach’s dad said. “I thought it was to eat us, but as far as I know, no one was killed or eaten. They fed us some rations and boxes of protein bars they got from somewhere. No one was even hurt after they were captured.”

“Tell ’em about the holes,” Dan, one of the other miners, said.

Adam held up his arm and moved the sleeve up. He had a mark as if something had punctured him in the hollow of his elbow. “We all had them when we woke up in the cages. I think they injected us with something, though they don’t seem smart enough to be doing things like that.”

Sam had stepped up and shone her flashlight on Adam’s arm. “Not injected, removed.”

“What?” he said.

“They didn’t inject anything into you,” she said. “They took blood from you.”

“How do you know that?” he said.

“The hole. It’s from a bigger gauge than a needle to inject. A catheter. Besides, they probably would have injected lower, or on the shoulder. Even a catheter to inject a lot of something would have been placed lower down on the arm. I think they took blood from you.”

“But...why?”

“They probably drink it,” Tyler said. That earned him exasperated looks from almost everyone.

“We’ll have to solve that mystery later,” I said. “For now, let’s find our missing people so we can get out of here.” I started down the corridor, but turned to them again. “And be careful. I’m sure there are more of those things down here, and after the slaughter we just took part in, they aren’t going to be too happy.”

Gunshots rang through the cave. They were from far away, but there was no mistaking what they were. I hoped the others got through to the mine and then out safely, but we had other things to think about. With a sigh, I led the others through the dark passageways.

“Maybe the monsters will go toward the gunshots,” Tyler said, “so they’ll leave us alone.”

I had been thinking the same thing, but was too ashamed of myself to say it out loud. “I would rather neither of the groups got attacked.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Me too.”

We snacked on the food we had brought in our backpacks. For some reason, the shadowling

hadn't even gone through the packs. Once we started off, we continued through a narrow, winding tunnel that rose and then lowered again. It was wide enough to get through without squeezing, but we had to go through single file. I felt exposed at the front, the light from my headlamp striking the awkward, rounded shapes, throwing shadows strangely and giving everything a surreal feeling. I saw flickers of movement from the corners of my eyes, but found that it was just the shadows jumping as I made my way through. Somehow, Jacob ended up in line right behind me.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You seem kind of jumpy."

"I'm fine. I'm just tired, and with the weirdly shaped shadows, it feels like there are things moving around me."

"You want me to take point?" he asked.

I felt a stab of irritation. What, did he think I couldn't handle the front? Did he think he could do a better job than me? Did he think he could fight the creatures better than I could?

I took a breath and let it out slowly. There was no reason to get mad at him. He was being polite, not trying to compete. "Nah, I'm good." I wanted to get out of these caves, get back into the open. Preferably where there was lots of light.

The cavern finally emptied out into a wider pocket, big enough for all of us to fit. I moved toward the far end and waited for everyone to file in. There were three openings aside from the one we came through. One of them was about five feet wide and the other two were narrower. They all slanted downward slightly.

"How far down do you think we are?" Zach asked.

"More than a half mile from the surface," his father answered. "I didn't know there were caves this deep here. I guess no one did."

"Those creatures did," Zach said.

His father didn't have anything to say about that. Even if he did, he didn't have a chance to voice it. There was a soft rustle of movement, and when I swung my headlamp toward it, a shadowling slid to a stop, crouched against the light, in the mouth of one of the narrow tunnels.

It squeaked in surprise, turned, and darted back through the tunnel it had come out of.

"Get it," I said, running after it. "If it tells the others where we are, there's going to be trouble."

We chased it through the tunnel, just as narrow and winding as the one we had been in. My breathing was loud in my ears, and the sounds of the others behind me, their breaths and the scuffing of their feet on the stone, let me know they were keeping up with me.

Unfortunately, I couldn't keep pace with the shadowling. The thing moved like it didn't have bones, slithering through narrow parts, dashing over or under obstructions. I quickly lost sight of it. There were no side passages, at least none that I could see, so I kept moving ahead, hoping I'd catch a lucky break.

The passage widened suddenly again, and I slid to a stop, not sure why. Maybe the dip in temperature tipped me off. Swinging my headlamp toward the floor, I realized I was right on the edge

of a hole that drilled down into the blackness. A couple of pebbles dislodged by my slide went over the edge and bounced off the wall of the hole. They kept clacking for a long time.

I never heard them hit the bottom.

The others stopped, Sam putting her hand on my back to stop herself, then grabbing a fistful of my jacket, and the others colliding behind her because of the abrupt halt. I guessed she reacted more quickly than the others and followed me first when I took off running.

I borrowed Sam's flashlight to survey the hole while she kept hold of my jacket so I didn't slip. It was only about four feet wide and didn't extend all the way to the side of the tunnel we were in. As bright as her light was, I couldn't see the bottom when I shone the light down into it. Of course, I didn't go all the way to the very edge to shine the light down, but I could see at least fifteen feet or so of the wall in the light. We didn't want to fall into it.

There was no sign of the shadowling.

Handing the light back to her—my headlamp light looked dim after using hers—I skirted around the hole to go through the passage, now a bit wider than it had been. The ledge was a good three feet wide going past the hole, but it seemed a tightrope when crossing so near a bottomless pit.

"Be careful," I said. "It may not be bottomless, but it's very deep. I have a section of rope, but I don't want to test if it can reach down far enough to retrieve anyone who falls."

It bothered me. Did the shadowling bring us this way on purpose, trying to get us to pitch into the hole, or was it just coincidence? Did it fall down the hole, or was it still up ahead? If still ahead, was it waiting with a group of its friends to ambush us? The situation made me feel like I had an itch right in the middle of my back, between my shoulder blades. An itch I couldn't reach.

There was nothing else we could do, though. We continued on.

The tunnel gradually widened and the ceiling got higher. We still didn't see or hear anything of the creature, and I thought that maybe it really had fallen into the hole, as unlikely as that seemed.

"Sam?" I said, something occurring to me. "Have you been marking the walls with your chalk?"

"I have, though some of the marks are just slashes. It's hard to stop and draw an arrow when you're running and people behind you are running."

I released a breath I hadn't even known I was holding. "You're the best." Good. At least we weren't completely lost.

A few hundred yards later, we reached a cavern unlike any we'd seen before. It was massive, probably thirty or forty feet wide, with a ceiling so high overhead, I could only see the tips of stalactites with my headlamp. Sam's flashlight could reach higher, but I couldn't even estimate how far away the ceiling was.

There were classic cave formations: fans, popcorn, melted slag-like blobs, and of course the stalactites, stalagmites, and pillars. Crystals grew in some places, too, reminding me of the old Superman movies and his Fortress of Solitude. It was beautiful.

My peaceful observation of the cavern was shattered when my mother screamed.

Chapter 24

The sound my mother made was not a scream of terror but sounded more a mix of surprise and warning. Anyway, it was a good alarm. I turned my head so quickly toward her my vision blurred for a moment. Then my eyes locked on what was happening.

A group of the shadowling had come up on us from behind. They had struck quickly, and one of the miners, Armando, was lying on the ground, blood leaking out of him through a terrible gash in his neck. A gash made by sharp claws. He had been the last in line, just behind my mom and Rick. It looked like the time of the monsters attacking half-heartedly, trying to capture us, was past.

Mom and Rick had turned when Armando was attacked and were fighting now, but things were different than before. The six creatures going after them had a crazed look in their eyes and were attacking savagely, not controlled in any way like before. Was this a rogue group, or had their other battles finally earned us a reputation of enemies they needed to destroy?

In addition to those coming from behind, I caught movement from the sides. More dark figures swooped in to attack with the others. All told, there were probably more than a dozen shadowling attacking us, maybe as many as fifteen.

I was at the very front, so only one came at me, angling from where it entered our corridor at the side. I didn't think, just spun into action, whipping my staff out and connecting with the thing's head as it tried to leap onto me. The swing, with the momentum of my spin behind it, knocked the creature from the air, cracking its head and making it spin violently to crash to the stone floor, body limp. There wasn't time for finesse. I needed to kill these monsters, and kill them quickly.

I glanced at the others as I turned to face one of the shadowling that had targeted Sam, a few feet away from me. The brunt of the attack was around Rick and my mom, with only a few spread out around the others. I needed to get to them before the two were overwhelmed.

The beast in front of me lunged at me instead of Sam, which was my desire. It was so fast, I barely got my staff up in time to block its claw. I was a little too slow to move my weapon to block the second claw coming at me at the same time. Sharp nails grazed my shoulder, laying down a line of fire as red began to come through my torn sleeve. I lunged back a step to evade the first claw as it came again.

Yes, they were definitely fighting differently than earlier. They were ready to kill us now,

undisguised hatred glowing in their overlarge eyes. My opponent pressed forward, slashing at me, mouth wide and ready to bite, wet teeth reflecting my headlamp light.

It suddenly lost its fluid motion when a bright light hit its eyes. Hands raised, it tilted its head to reduce the glare.

I took advantage of the moment and attacked with a savage flurry of strikes. Lunging in, I jabbed the left end of my staff into its throat. Not waiting for the response, I stepped up and spun the other end of the staff around to strike hard at the side of its neck then, changing the direction of the force, brought the left end up again to slam into its groin. I finished by bringing the right end of the staff down on top of its head, followed closely by the left side to the same spot. Windpipe crushed and head cracked, the creature fell, air whistling through its ruined throat as it tried to suck in a breath.

I was already moving toward my mother when its body hit the ground.

She and Rick were not doing well.

At first, they were coordinating. He would slash at the shadowling attacking them, then back off suddenly, giving her an open shot. She'd shoot one or two of the monsters, making each bullet count. Then he would go forward and engage them again. It seemed to work for the first few waves.

But then her gun clicked. Twice. She was out of bullets.

She tried, frantically, to reload, but her hands were moving like she had lost coordination, fumbling and almost dropping the gun. When Rick tried to recover, the five opponents in front of him came forward in a wave. He lunged in toward one, and another of them slipped past his guard and slashed at his arm. He cried out, but back-stepped while slashing at another of them. Without the gun, he wasn't able to take small breaks between attacks and was quickly tiring out.

Another of the creatures jumped on his back, slashing down his left shoulder as it tried to sink its teeth into his neck. He bent at the waist, throwing it off and slashing it with both swords as it fell, but there was something wrong with his movements. The gash on his shoulder looked to be affecting his range of motion. Not good. I put my head down, held my staff tightly in one hand, and sprinted toward them, ignoring the others fighting their own battles around me.

Rick was losing his fluidity, as if the energy had been drained from him. He looked like a prize fighter in the twelfth round, stumbling, dead on his feet. He must have been losing a lot of blood.

A shadow jumped from my right side and landed directly in front of me. I swung at it, wanting to take care of it quickly. I kept one eye on Rick. He received another slash, this one so deep in his left forearm that he dropped his short sword.

"No!" I yelled as I battered away the shadowling's attack, kicked it in the face with a hopping front kick, and then spun while savagely battering it with diagonal downward strikes. Five powerful blows later, its head was no longer round in shape. I stepped on its body to leap toward Rick and my mom, who was still paralyzed with panic. It had only been a handful of seconds.

I launched myself, eyes locked on the scene a few feet in front of me. Rick brought his remaining sword up, cutting a shadowling as it tried to tear out his throat. He had no way of stopping the two

others, one on each side of him, as they slashed his sides. Cloth shredded and blood splattered my mother's face as they tore flesh from him.

He screamed. Then, almost as if it was slow motion, he dropped his sword, eyes wide with pain looking at my mother. His knees buckled and he fell backward, narrowly avoiding the two other sets of claws coming toward his neck and face. He hit the ground hard, his back taking most of the force, but his head bouncing off the stone also.

I landed next to him, a rage building up in me I'd never felt before.

One of the shadowling swiped its claws down toward Rick, and something in me snapped. I screamed at it, spittle spraying out as I did so. I brought my staff around in a hard horizontal strike to the thing's arm, right at the elbow. A sound like a dry tree branch breaking filled the cavern as the limb bent in half the wrong way. The beast didn't have time to scream. I jammed the end of my staff into its throat so hard, the noise made by cartilage cracking was almost as loud as the breaking bone had been. I spun toward the next creature, knowing the one I'd just struck was already dead.

There were four shadowling left around me, all of them turning from Rick's fallen form to me. I hissed at them as I attacked.

It wasn't anything fancy, and it definitely wasn't beautiful, but letting my anger fuel me, I whirled the staff around me, keeping any claws thrown my way from connecting. I was a storm of blows, striking from every angle, not using finesse to find an opening, but instead battering down the upraised arms used for defense. These creatures were strong, but they weren't strong enough to withstand a heavy hardwood staff spun with such speed.

One by one, I relentlessly battered them. I broke bones, shattered noses, crushed eye sockets, and struck at soft tissue. If the creatures had the same anatomy as humans, I was sure they were bleeding internally by the time I was done.

I was finishing off the last foe when I heard an insistent buzz in my ears. It irritated me. What was it, that noise?

"Dani!" It was my mother's voice. I continued to rain blows down on the shadowling at my feet. I needed to make sure it couldn't ever harm any of us again.

"Dani!" she screamed at me again, frantic, fearful. "Dani. It's dead. They're all dead. Stop."

I blinked a few times and looked at her, slowing—but not stopping—my staff as it thudded wetly on the creature at my feet. She looked hysterical, her eyes wide and tearful, her hands on each side of her head, quivering.

I looked down.

The carcass I was hammering with my staff was unrecognizable. It was a mass of red flesh, like dark tenderized meat. I stopped hitting it and saw that both ends of my staff were red, blood dripping from them. How hard did I have to be hitting the beasts to make that much blood?

I widened my vision and saw the others, all of them staring at me. There were no other shadowling standing.

I dropped my staff, threw up, wiped my mouth, and broke down in tears.

I sobbed uncontrollably as my mother took me in her arms and tried to console me. I tried to pull air into my lungs, but could barely manage it. I didn't know what was wrong with me. Was this what it was like to have a nervous breakdown? I focused on trying to breathe, going down deep into myself. It still took me a few precious minutes to calm down enough to remember what had happened.

"Rick?" I said. "He fell. Rick, where is he?"

"Here," he said, his voice barely a whisper. He was a few feet away, in an area the others had cleared of the shadowling bodies.

He was a mess. The blood from his sides pooled under him, and he was so pale I would have thought him already dead if he wasn't blinking his eyes.

"Oh, Rick," I said, going to him. "I'm so sorry I wasn't faster."

"Not...your fault," he gasped.

We all knew he was done for. Even if we had the supplies to suture him up and stop the bleeding, it was obvious the damage was too severe. Even a hospital may not have been able to help him at this point.

"Allie," he said. "Are...you okay?"

"Yes. Thank you. I'm sorry. The gun. I ran out of bullets."

"I know."

Mom went to him and I jerked my head to let the others know to give them some space. We walked to the other side of the chamber, letting them talk by themselves.

"He's not going to make it," Sam said.

"No," I said.

She teared up, little fat droplets rolling down her cheek. Hot, wet tears ran down my face also.

"Is everyone else okay?" I asked, more to distract myself than anything else.

Everyone had a few scratches or bruises, but most of the shadowling had concentrated on my mom and Rick.

"Did they target those two specifically?" Zach asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "They happened to be right there when we were attacked from the back. They were using elementary tactics, ganging up on one or two to overwhelm them and then moving on to the next one. It was just unlucky they were in that spot."

"Or lucky for us," Tyler said. I rounded on him and cocked my fist to knock him out, but Zach's dad caught my arm and held it.

"Wait, Dani," Adam said. "I think he meant that if it would have been any of the rest of us, the creatures would have killed us quickly and moved on to the next one. Half of us may have been dead before they were stopped."

Tyler had backed up a step, his arms up like he was surrendering. His eyes were manic, as if he was facing an executioner.

“That’s what I meant,” he said. “I just meant that Rick is a badass with that sword. None of us could have kept them back so long.”

I relaxed my arm and Adam released it. “Oh, sorry.”

“No problem.” Tyler’s voice was shaky, no doubt thinking about how a couple of minutes before, I was beating the corpse of that shadowling so violently. My stomach lurched.

We gathered our packs, some of which had fallen and been kicked around the cavern as we battled. Those with first aid kits in theirs helped the others dress their wounds.

My whole body felt like one big wound. I had scratches and cuts all over me, most of them small enough that I didn’t need to do anything for them right then. My forearm, where that thing had bitten me, burned, but that was nothing compared to how I felt inside.

“Are you in a lot of pain?” my mother asked Rick.

That was strange. I was too far to be able to hear them speaking. I looked around to see if anyone else gave any indication they could hear. No one was looking toward the pair. Maybe it was some kind of weird acoustics thing the cave did.

“It’s...okay,” he answered.

“I’m really sorry I couldn’t help you,” she said. Her words were halting, shaky. She didn’t know what to say. She knew he was dying. I was sure he did, too, even through the shock.

“It’s fine. I came—” he grunted as he shifted, “—to protect you. I did that. As long...as you’re okay...that’s all that matters.”

There were a few seconds of silence.

“Can...I ask you something?” he said.

“Of course,” she said.

“Did you ever...could you—” he took in a wheezing breath. “Do you think you would have ever been...interested in me?”

Another pause.

“I mean,” he said. “Would it have been possible...for us to be together?”

“No.”

My heart broke over that one word. I felt the tears trying to come back even though they had dried for the time being.

“Oh,” he said.

“Rick, you’re a great guy,” Mom said, “but I’m not interested in you like that. I can’t help who I love.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess it’s stupid. I thought...you at least cared for me.” He sucked in a quick rush of air, hissing at the pain.

“I care about you the same as everyone else. You’re not special, though. I have lots of friends. You’re just one of them. I just don’t think of you like that.”

“I...” he wheezed again. “Okay. Listen...take care of Dani. She’s...a great...kid. Have a...good

life, okay?” Rick made a noise like someone had hit him in the stomach. His voice had gotten softer as he spoke, the last word barely a whisper.

“I will.”

There were no other words. There was no sound at all until my mother’s shoes scuffed the stone floor and crunched on bits of rock as she came back to the rest of us.

“He’s gone,” she said, eyes strangely blank.

Chapter 25

For the second time in a half an hour, rage blossomed in me, a fire being fanned from smoldering embers to a full blaze.

““You’re not special’?” I spat at her. ““I have a lot of friends, and you’re just the same as them’?” I put my head in my hands and squeezed. “I can’t believe you.”

“What?” she asked, but then she drew her eyebrows down and glared at me. “And don’t you talk to me like that.”

“That man loved you,” I said. “He came down here to protect you, risking himself even though you never gave him the time of day. He sacrificed himself to keep you from getting hurt. He got torn up by these damn monsters, dying in pain, shredded by claws. He loved you, and when he asked if you cared, you told him no.”

“It’s not like that,” she said. “He didn’t have to come down here. I didn’t ask him to.”

“I know you didn’t,” I said. “And that makes it all that much sadder.”

“Who are you to question me?” she shouted. “I’m your mother.”

“Yes,” I said, “you are. And right now, I’m embarrassed by that fact.”

She started to say something, but I turned my back on her and walked back toward Rick’s body. Thankfully, she closed her mouth and didn’t make a sound other than a huff of air.

I looked down at the body of my mom’s friend. Memories of our interactions flashed through my mind. He wasn’t perfect, had his faults like anyone else, but he tried. He had always cared much more about Mom than she did about him. I had never asked her about it. We didn’t really talk about feelings around our house.

I could understand her not being attracted to him, though for an older guy, he was kind of handsome. He probably wasn’t her type. The thing was, though, she always kept him at arm’s length, never really seemed to care one way or another about him. Well, she’d never hurt his feelings again. I’d never have to see the pain in those blue eyes again. The last thing he heard was her telling him he was nothing special, after he gave his life for her. That must have hurt more than the physical pain in his shredded body. I was going to miss him.

I picked his swords up from where he had dropped them. We would come back and get his body when all this was over, give him a proper funeral. For now, I would honor him in the only way I

could think of. I wasn't as good with a sword as I was with the staff, but I had trained a little with it, and I would cut any creature that crossed my path until this thing was finished. And every cut would add to his legacy. If my mother wouldn't show him honor, I would. I lifted the sword in salute, feeling a little embarrassed doing so, slid it home in the scabbard I had taken from his body, and went back toward the others.

I handed Sam my staff and Rick's short sword while I passed through the midst of the others on the way to the corridor down which we'd been heading before the attack. "Will you hold these for a while?" I asked my friend.

"Yes."

"Let's find Bobby and Allison and get out of here," I said.

The others looked at me like I was some kind of alien. I didn't really care. For the first time since we had entered the mine, fear was not the overriding factor in me. Anger was.

A little ball of molten lava smoldered in my belly. Fury at the shadowling, at Rick for dying, at my mother for her lack of sensitivity. It all whirled and gyrated inside me, making me feel like I might throw up but also like I could do anything. There didn't seem to be any reason to fear any longer. What could happen? I could die, right? So what. If life was this disappointing, why bother?

I had one goal: find the remaining captives, mostly my brother, get them out, and never have to see another cave again as long as I lived. Nothing else mattered.

"Dani," my mom said softly. It was the tone she used after we'd argued and she was trying to patch things up. Of course, it usually came after a week or two of us not talking to each other at all.

"No," I said. "I don't want to talk about it. If we survive this, maybe we can talk next week. Right now, I want the anger I'm feeling. I want to use it to kill these things. The more I kill, the easier it'll be to get Bobby out."

Thankfully, she stopped as I continued walking. I didn't want to argue with her. I wanted every bit of my annoyance to go toward the shadowling.

As I walked, Sam right behind me, the tunnel widened and flattened. It began to look as if it was one of the mine corridors, though I didn't see any marks from drills or picks or any other tools, but it struck me as odd that the passageway was so uniform.

"Are you okay, Dani?" Sam asked after we had walked for over an hour.

"Should I be? Someone I know just died. Died in a horrible way. My mom made his last few minutes even more painful for him. My brother is still missing, all my friends are injured in one way or another, and we're hundreds of feet down under the surface of the earth."

"True, but I'm concerned about you. That's a lot of stress for one person."

I sighed. "Yeah, it is."

"It scared me, when you were beating on that dead creature. I'm not sure if that scared me more or if it was the way you took out those four shadowling so quickly when Rick fell. I've never seen anyone attack anything so savagely before."

“Really?” I said. “Was it that bad?”

“It was. I still shiver when I think of what I saw in your face and how your stick seemed to break something everywhere it hit. These things are strong, stronger than people, it seems like, but it was like they were as weak and uncoordinated as toddlers when you went at them.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry I scared you. I liked Rick. He didn’t even need to come. He only did it to protect someone who doesn’t seem to care if he lived or died.”

“You know it’s not like that,” she said.

“Maybe. Anyway, that rage is gone. I’m still mad, but I’m controlled. I want to find Bobby and Allison and get out of here. I want this to be done. And I want it to be done quickly.”

“Me too.”

When we came into an area in the tunnel with several squat formations along one side, I figured it was a good place to stop and rest.

“Let’s take five or ten minutes here,” I said. “Eat something, drink, sit down for a little while. Not more than ten minutes, though. We still have work to do.”

Madison eyed me warily as she sat down. No, not warily. She had fear in her eyes. She looked at me as if she thought I had gone insane and would start attacking people. Good. As long as it shut her up, it was fine with me. I could just imagine the stories she’d tell at school. If we got out of here alive.

I stopped halfway to sitting down on a rock that looked a lot like a chair. I chuckled at what I had just been thinking. I was in the center of the earth, fighting for my life against monsters from who knows where, and I was worried about what kids at school would say about me. My chuckle bubbled into a laugh, but I clamped down on it and cut it off.

“It’s good to see you laugh,” Jacob said, coming up to me. I saw Sam moving off to sit with Zach and Emily out of the corner of my eye. Those two had not been more than a foot apart since Zach had defended her. How long ago was that? Two or three months? It seemed like it.

“I was just thinking of something ironic,” I said.

“You want to share?” he said, his eyes twinkling in my headlamp light. I was able to flick my eyes back and forth to his, but not maintain contact. As he had said before, it was a start.

I told him what I had thought and he laughed. It was a beautiful sound, and it made my heart ache. It sounded a little bit like Rick’s laugh.

“Don’t worry. I’ll let everyone know what really happened. I already told you that we would never have been able to do this without you. I believe that even more strongly now.”

“I don’t know why, but I don’t feel like arguing about it,” I said.

“Are you okay?” he said, eyes narrowing as if he was scrutinizing my expression. “You were… intense there for a little while.”

“Enraged is probably a better word,” I said. “It’s true, what Tyler said. If it was any one of us besides Rick, all of us may have been killed, one at a time, as the shadowling picked us off.”

“Us maybe, but not you. But yes, Rick really saved us all. He seemed like a really nice guy.”

Unexpectedly, I started to cry again. I had taken my sadness and pushed it down deep, covering over it with my anger, stomping down on it, and nailing a tarp over it. Jacob’s kind words ripped that covering to shreds, and grief washed over me. I started sobbing, gasping for breath, trying to get air into my lungs.

He put his arms around me and hugged me to him. He stroked my hair with one of his hands, rocking me gently back and forth.

“Good,” he said. “Let it out. It’ll help.”

I did. I sobbed like a child for several minutes, fighting for breath, sniffing through my runny nose. All the while, he held me and soothed me.

Finally, my breathing returned to normal and my tears slowed. They still leaked out, but not in torrents as before. I looked up at him, our eyes meeting. It was the most comfortable I had been meeting someone’s eyes in more than two years.

“Better?” he said.

Then my situation occurred to me. I dropped my eyes and my face turned to fire instantly. I fidgeted and he loosened his arm. I wriggled away from him.

“Um, yes,” I said. “Sorry. I...it’s been a rough day.”

“Don’t apologize, Dani. You’ve been through a lot. More than the rest of us. You can keep that anger if it’ll help to get the captured people back, but don’t let it overwhelm you.”

“I won’t.” I looked over at Madison, who was glaring at me. She wouldn’t say anything, of course. I was a psychotic killer. Still, it made me feel bad. Jacob was her boyfriend, after all. “Thank you. For, you know, just being here.”

“I’m glad I could help,” he said, his smile something that should have been in a museum for everyone to enjoy. “Are you ready to finish this?”

I wiped my cheek, picked up Rick’s sword, and stood up. “I am. Let’s go.”

Chapter 26

I raised up my hand as I stopped. Everyone behind me shuffled to a halt. We had only been moving again for maybe half an hour after our last break.

“Do you hear that?” I asked.

“Hear what?” Sam said.

I looked around at the others. They were all looking at me as if they didn’t know what I was talking about. Zach went so far as to tilt his head like a dog.

There it was again.

“Stay here for a minute,” I said.

I took a breath and switched off my headlamp. Surprisingly, the terror that usually threatened to overwhelm me at the thought of being in the dark didn’t attack me. I looked down the tunnel. The lights from the others’ headlamps still made it possible for me to see well enough to pick out the lumps and other obstructions on the floor.

I continued on for fifty feet or so, following the slight left turn in the tunnel. I stopped when I heard more clearly what I wasn’t able to make out before. It was the sound of voices. They were arguing. I still couldn’t quite get what they were saying, though.

I moved a little closer, just a handful of steps, and stopped. Still, the voices made no sense, like I was only hearing half of what they were saying. Like a bad connection on a cell phone. I took a few more steps, telling myself that was as far as I would go before turning back. The sounds were as loud as someone in front of me talking directly to me, but I still didn’t understand.

Then it occurred to me that I was hearing the screeches and shrieks of the shadowling, not voices at all. Not human voices, anyway. Standing calm, not in the middle of a battle, I could hear the modulation in the sounds, pick out the different speakers. I could even tell when one of them was asking a question. The overriding sense of the conversation, though, was antagonism. Two shadowling were arguing.

I dared not go any farther. If I could hear the creatures, they could hear me, and their eyesight was much better in the dark. There may have been one watching me right then. I silently turned and walked as carefully as I could back toward the others.

As I did, though, I realized I had moved far enough around the turn that their lights were not

visible. I still saw a glow from around the corner, but the beams of light themselves didn't penetrate into the section of tunnel I was in. Strange. I had thought the beams still reached me. Shrugging, I went back to my group.

"There are more of them up ahead," I told them. "They're arguing. I wasn't able to see because they don't seem to need lights, but I think we'll have to go through them. There are no other side passages up to where I stopped."

"Are you sure we have to go through them?" Zach's dad asked. "I mean, can't we backtrack and take one of the other side passages back there?"

"We can wander around these caves forever," Sam answered for me. "The chances of finding the captives are better if we go where there are shadowling."

"Yeah, what she said," I said.

"Let's go, then," Jacob said, getting a glare from Madison for some reason. "We need to find them soon. We've been down here a long time."

The others agreed, Tyler mumbling something about aliens in an underground lair. My mother had been quiet since our argument.

I looked at each of them, made brief eye contact. My heart fluttered when I met Jacob's brown eyes. Madison had nothing but a cold look for me. Zach looked to his dad, a half smile on his face, and then faced me and nodded. Emily looked to Zach, then turned to me and forced a smile also. Zach's dad, his friend Dan next to him, nodded and hefted his ax handle. Tyler hummed something and lifted his chin in greeting. Sam set her jaw and nodded, her serious brown eyes unblinking. My mother wouldn't meet my eyes. This was all we had, the ten of us. It would have to be enough.

"Let's turn off all the lights but one," I said, "and keep that one on red light mode facing down. Everyone grab the shoulder or arm of the person in front of you. Try not to make too much noise or trip over anything. The closer we get before we turn the lights on, the better off we'll be. If we can flood the tunnel with light suddenly, we'll have a better chance of surprising them."

I flipped my headlamp to red light mode and pointed it toward the ground in front of me. I remembered the route, and it was relatively free from big obstacles, so with the help of the red lamp, I should be able to lead them up to where I was before. That would have to be enough.

I gripped the sword in both hands, my right on the hilt and my left on the scabbard. I set off for what I hoped wouldn't be a disaster. If we could take advantage of the internal strife, we might just finish off the group of shadowling without another death in our party. Depending on how big the group was, and how serious the argument. Nothing brings two arguing factions together like a common enemy.

It seemed to take hours, each step excruciating as I strained my ears to hear any change in the argument still progressing up ahead. Every scuff of a shoe, every harsh breath behind me made me wince. We were making so much noise that if the voices stopped for even a moment, we would be heard. We might, anyway. Still, I went on, and those behind me followed.

I put my hand over my lamp and scanned up ahead. I thought I saw something up there, as if someone else was using a red lamp. I blinked twice and shook my head, but it didn't go away. It didn't get any brighter, either. To be honest, it looked like a ghost. A kind of red blob of a ghost, but definitely humanoid.

I allowed my red lamp to illuminate the ground again and moved forward some more. Another few steps, and something told me we had gone far enough. I stopped and turned my head back toward the others. They looked like movie monsters, illuminated by the red light like that. I swallowed. Too much thinking about imaginary creatures and not enough about what we were doing. I forced myself to focus.

I realized then that I had screwed up. I had come up with a plan in my head, even mentioned it to them, but we didn't get into details. Without saying anything, how would we coordinate turning our lights on? I mentally kicked myself, trying to think of how I'd get it across to them. If we didn't all act at the same time, the entire plan could fall apart, as much of a plan as we had.

I took my headlamp off and pointed it toward myself, motioning them to get as close to me as they could. Then, I pointed toward the lamp switch and held up my other hand, squeezing the sword between my knees so I could free up both my hands. I held up my hand, fingers splayed. Then, I dropped the fingers one at a time, counting down. When I dropped the last one, I motioned to the headlamp switch and then mimicked like I was throwing a ball, starting with a fist and throwing my hand out, fingers spreading wide. To make sure I was understood, I then squinted my eyes and held the hand up as if to shield myself from bright light.

I looked at each of them for confirmation they understood. Each nodded. Well, almost all of them. When Madison looked to me, then to Jacob, then to Tyler, I knew she was confused. She opened her mouth to ask, but I gestured emphatically, putting my finger to my lips and then drawing it across my throat. Even in the red light, I could see her pale. She got the idea.

Jacob looked at me, nodded, then started gesturing to Madison. After a minute, she finally got what I was trying to say. I hoped that everyone else really understood what I wanted and weren't just thinking they did.

There was nothing else to do. We'd have to go with it.

I nodded at them, making sure they all were looking right at me. I breathed in, filling my lungs up all the way down into my abdomen, then, in the red glow of my headlamp, I held up my hand, fingers wide. I pulled my thumb in, counting to myself as I did so. *Five*.

I switched the light off, moving the switch over to the white light setting.

Four.

I put the headlamp back on my head and grabbed the sword from between my knees.

Three.

I turned to face where the shadowling argument was building. Maybe they would come to blows before we attacked.

Two.

I twisted my hand around the hilt of Rick's sword and gripped it tightly.

One.

I turned my headlamp on and ran toward the voices, hoping I was not alone.

Chapter 27

Lights flashed behind me, Sam's super flashlight brightest of all. Its beam cut through the darkness like a shark's fin in the ocean, the shadow seeming to split before it. When it fell on the creatures, I gasped. There had to be more than forty of them in the large chamber.

A chamber filled with cages like the ones we had been in. Cages with people in them. But forty shadowling? How were we going to survive this?

Two of the shadowling were standing very close to each other. Their postures told me that they were the ones that had been arguing. One of them was the leader we had seen. Both of them looked at us, putting their hands up to shade their eyes from Sam's light.

But the two were not my primary concern. There were nearly a dozen shadowling between them and us. There was no turning back now; they knew we were here. I wasn't sure if we would survive this, but a slim chance was better than none. If we turned and ran, they would overwhelm us.

I screamed as I ripped the sword from the scabbard. As I did, I hit the nearest creature on my left with the hardwood of the sword's case, snapping its head back from the blow, and sliced at one on the other side with the sword, tracing a red slash across its chest. I heard a gunshot.

I wasn't strong enough to effectively use a full-sized katana with one hand, so I threw the scabbard at another shadowling in front of me and gripped the sword with both hands, controlling my slashes with the right hand and levering with the left. My opponent raised both its claws to ward off the sheath, leaving its abdomen wide open. I dropped low and sliced at it horizontally. Its organs spilled out from the cut as I moved to the next creature.

Sam knew enough to stay back. She focused on shining the light in the faces of the monsters, Rick's short sword in her other hand and staff cradled in her arm with its end on the ground, leaning against her. The others hadn't been fast enough to keep up with me as I charged. Now they were entering the battle, so I needed to be careful not to cut my allies.

I had to hand it to Rick. He kept his sword sharp. A shadowling tried to slash me with its claws, and I parried it aside with the side of the sword. A tight circle with the blade, and I removed the claw from the beast at the wrist with a downward, outward slash. I circled it again, over my head, and came down diagonally, cutting halfway through the thing's neck. I kicked it in the chest as I pulled my blade free, ducking another set of claws and shuffling to the side to get out of range of another of the

attacking monsters.

Jacob was busy with three of the creatures, having a difficult time batting away the strikes coming at him. I lunged, punching my sword through the back of one of his foes. The blade glanced off a rib and exited the monster's front. I think I hit the heart because the shadowling fell immediately, almost tearing the sword from my hand. I jerked it clear as the body hit the ground. Jacob nodded to me as he struck one of the others in the head, and I raised my sword quickly in salute.

That was a stupid move, something I probably did because I had read it in a fantasy book or saw it in a movie or something. It almost cost me an eye. I saw the movement just before the claw would have torn off the side of my face. I bent backward at the waist, barely avoiding the claw, and turned my salute into a cut with the blade vertical, moving the whole weapon horizontally directly in front of me. The movement took three of the claws from the attacker's hand. I followed up with a horizontal slash from left to right, cutting across its chest, and then turned the momentum in another circle to transform the strike into a downward vertical direction, splitting the creature's skull down to the nose.

I pulled the blade free while taking a step back. As the sword came clear, I pivoted the weapon in my right hand, dipping the tip in a long arc and reversing its direction. Using my left hand lightly on the hilt, I guided the steel into a reverse thrust, puncturing the abdomen of a shadowling preparing to slash at me from behind. I drew the blade from its body, turned to my left, and slashed horizontally at the wounded creature, taking its head off. The shock of hitting the nerves and cartilage made my hand vibrate until the sharpened steel made its way through, and the sword moved lightly again. I'd never felt anything like it. It made something inside me squirm.

There was no time for that. I backed away from another set of claws and slavering teeth and ran into something behind me. I brought my sword up, casting a quick glance over my shoulder. Emily, swinging her walking stick at the shadowling, looked at me and nodded. Zach was on the other side of her. The steady rhythm of gunshots had paused for a moment. My mom was probably reloading. I nodded at Emily and lunged at the creature in front of me.

As I turned in a circle with two of the monsters, I caught a glimpse of the two shadowling that had been arguing. The one I had seen before was shaking his head. The other one still screeched at him. It almost made sense to me. I could swear there were some real words in there. Something about "us or them."

I cut at the leg of one of the shadowling I was fighting and then slashed the arm of the other as it threw its claws at me. The one with the injured leg limped back while the second one came at me again with its other arm. I sidestepped, struck downward to cut its arm off at the elbow, used my own elbow to smash its nose, and then drove my sword through the chest of the limping one, angling the sharp steel up under the breastbone into vital organs. I was able to pull the blade free before the torque of it falling took it from my hands or, even worse, snapped the blade.

The remaining creature, nose dripping blood and arm spurting it, backed away from me. I used

basic movements I'd practiced in sword forms when I had played with bokken—wooden swords—several years ago. Left downward diagonal slash, right downward diagonal slash, left horizontal strike, and finally a straight downward vertical strike. The creature, bleeding from several major wounds, slipped to the ground to die of blood loss.

I turned just in time to see the leader shadowling turn his back—it seemed male to me—on the other one. They were less than ten feet from me.

The other arguer pulled back his claw to attack the leader. Something in me was disgusted. I don't know why I would ever expect honor or fair fighting from these creatures, but it really irritated me that it would try to sucker punch another one of its kind. As it swung its claw, I lunged forward like a fencer, covering the distance in the blink of an eye. And struck.

A claw with half a forearm attached spun in the air. The attacker screamed, a more human scream than I'd heard from shadowling before, and blood sprayed me as it spun around to look at me.

Its big eyes were full of hatred. And pain. I could dance around it, acting defensively only, letting it wear itself out, bleed itself out, but I didn't think I'd do that. My anger flashed at this thing. Not only was it bad enough that it took my friends, that things like it killed Rick, but it didn't even have the decency to deal fairly with its own kind.

As far as I was concerned, the planet didn't need any more creatures like this. There were too many humans like that already.

It snarled and launched itself at me, trying to tear me with its claw, rip me with its teeth, and hurl its body into mine at the same time.

“Oh, hell no,” I spat.

I sidestepped and spun, narrowly avoiding its charge. As it passed to my right, I brought the sword around, left hand high, right hand low, blade angling downward. It was a block, a defensive move, but applied to the body moving past, it put a deep gash in the creature's shoulder. It howled.

I turned barely in time to be ready for its second charge. The thing was so fast! This time, it put its arms out, the whole one and the half one, so it was too wide to dodge. It rammed me.

I'd had enough. Just before it was to make contact with me, I dropped into the lowest, most stable stance I knew. And I lowered the tip of my blade so the weapon was horizontal. I held the sword hilt close and lowered my shoulder. Then I prepared for the impact.

The creature's eyes widened when he saw what was happening. It had apparently thought I'd try to slip to the side. It was committed too fully to stop, trying unsuccessfully to backpedal. It slammed into me, its face ramming into my outstretched blade. Its remaining claw slashed my left shoulder, though not deeply, but its teeth never had a chance to reach me. The sound emitted was a mixture of a sword going into a metal-trimmed scabbard, a watermelon being sliced, and a hiccup, the last being the only sound coming from the creature's mouth as it died.

The momentum spent, the shadowling's body dropped to the ground, dragging me down with it by the sword hilt. I stumbled until I let go of the weapon, but regained my balance. Reaching over, I slid

the blade back out of the thing's head. It had gone all the way through. My stomach roiled, mainly at the sound I had heard, but I clenched my abs and raised the sword up again.

The leader shadowling was on the other side of the massive chamber, deftly climbing up a wall to a precarious perch in front of a tunnel. It chittered loudly, and all the rest of the creatures still alive immediately broke off contact and followed it. Before it was swallowed up by the darkness, its eyes met mine, flicked to my left side, and settled on mine again.

It nodded, as if in acknowledgement. Then it was gone.

Chapter 28

I looked to where the shadowling had shifted its eyes. There was a cage there, with people in it, a pile of trash, a lone table, and what looked like boxes of food. Human food; some kind of rations or camping meals. Was that what it had wanted me to see? That it had been feeding the captives, not killing them?

The room was a mess of bodies and awash with blood. We didn't even kill half of the horde in the room; most of the shadowling ran away with the leader. I didn't see any remaining that could pose a problem. Two of them twitched or moved weakly, but none were standing.

I was about to ask if anyone was hurt when my mother gasped. From the sound of it, she was crying, too.

"Bobby?"

My heart stopped mid-beat. I froze. What did she see? *Please, God, tell me that after all this, he's not hurt or dead. Please.*

"Bobby!" she cried again. I located her as she ran across the chamber toward one of the cages.

In it, I saw a familiar shaggy head of brown hair.

"Mom?" he said. "It *is* you. I thought it was, but was sure I was just imagining it. How did you get down here? And where did Dani get a sword?" He squinted toward me and I realized that the headlamps we were wearing were too weak to light a cavern this size. Still, I saw him distinctly. "That is Dani, right? I can't see her clearly."

"Yes," she cried, putting her fingers through the chain link "It is. We came to get you. Hold on and we'll have you out of there."

It was easy enough to do. The keys were sitting on the only table in the place. There were no chairs, just the table. In no time, the cages were opened and my mom was squeezing the life out of my brother. I waited off to the side until she was done.

Another commotion from behind me took my attention.

"Allie," a quivering voice said. "Allie?" It was Madison. My mom turned to look, but then apparently remembered again that Allison's nickname was Allie also. She went back to smothering Bobby.

So that was it, then. The two we had come to get were safe, along with maybe a dozen others.

How had they taken so many people without the town knowing? Some of them looked as if they might be homeless or at least people passing through town. Others, though, I recognized, even if I didn't know their names.

Jacob came up and stood in front of me. "We did it. We got them back safe. All we have to do is find our way back out, and we'll have done everything we wanted."

"Not everything," I said, looking down at the sword in my hand. I'd have to go find the scabbard. I was pretty sure I'd be keeping this sword for the rest of my life.

"Yeah," he said, some of his enthusiasm waning.

We were silent for a moment, watching my mom with Bobby and Madison with Allie.

"You know, I've said it before but it bears repeating. We couldn't have done any of this without you. You were our leader, our greatest warrior, our heroine."

I smiled at that. "That almost sounds poetic."

He cocked his head and got a thoughtful look on his face. "You know what? It does. Someone *should* write a poem about this. About you. Maybe I will. I'm a fair hand at it, if Mrs. Rothman is right. She wants me to publish some of my stuff. Wouldn't that be crazy?"

"Sure would."

He looked into my eyes. Really looked. And I let him. "Honestly, though. Without you, there's no way we would have survived this." He looked at the cages. "Or, at least we would have been captured for whatever purpose they took all these people."

"Aww, you're just saying that because it's true," I joked.

"You're right, I am. You're the best, Dani. I'm glad I got to know you better." He reached over and hugged me, just a quick embrace and pat on the back. I squeezed him back. He released me much too soon.

I sighed.

"Let's hang out sometime," he said. "You know, when we're not a mile under the earth and don't have monsters hunting us."

"Definitely," I said, knowing it would probably never happen. Once we got back out, things would go back to normal, he to his world and I to mine. It was a nice dream, though.

He took three steps, turned, and came back. "Can I have your number? It'll make it easier to coordinate, you know, hanging out."

It took me three tries and a look at my own phone to remember my number. While I had it out, he took it and put his number in. He took a selfie with my phone, the two of us in the picture together, "just so I wouldn't forget who he was." Yeah, right. Like that would ever happen in a billion years.

When I could remember how to walk again, I went over to hug Bobby and ruffle his hair. "You still need a haircut. Are you okay?"

"I am now," he said. "I told Allie that you'd come for us. You say you don't like to fight anymore, but I know you're a badass."

“Watch the language,” Mom said. We both rolled our eyes at her.

“What did they do with you?” I asked. “Did they hurt you?”

“No. See, everything is fine.” He lifted up his arms and turned in a circle. He did look unharmed, but I had seen something.

“Let me see your arm,” I said. He put it out and I checked it over. Sure enough. His right arm had a little scab from a catheter, like the others before had. They had taken his blood, too. I guessed they had knocked all of them out before taking it. None of them seemed to remember it happening.

“What is it?” Mom said.

“Oh, nothing. Just checking.”

I gathered everyone in a group and was preparing to get them to leave when I noticed the glint of metal in the pile of trash near where Bobby’s cage was. I stepped over and kicked an old tire and a piece of cardboard away. There was a briefcase there. A brushed aluminum briefcase.

Memories flashed in my head at the sight. I remembered a briefcase just like that, one my father always carried around. We used to joke that it was his spy briefcase. It had two separate combination locks on it, something I’d never seen before on any other case. Just like this one.

My hand trembling, I reached for the handle. I pulled it out slowly, scanning it, inspecting it. I turned it over. It was a normal-sized case, probably a foot and a half wide, a foot tall, and six inches thick. And heavy, as if it was full of papers. It felt like it weighed the same as the one I had hefted before, handing it to my father as he headed to work.

There, just below the handle on the other side of the case. There were three scratches, straight lines, but positioned in such a way that they formed a sloppy triangle. Or a sloppier capital D. My breath caught in my throat.

A little movie played in my head. My father was in the kitchen talking to my mother. I was maybe eight or nine years old. I peeked around the corner to check where they were, then made a beeline into the room my father used as his office.

I tried to open the briefcase, something I had always wanted to do. The locks wouldn’t open. *Fine*, I thought. *If I can’t open it, then at least I can autograph it.* Hey, I was young at the time. It seemed like a good idea.

I searched through the desk drawers and found a screwdriver, one of the ones with the sharp, flat end. I held it close to the tip to get the most leverage, and then I started scratching my name in the case.

It was more difficult than I thought it would be. I couldn’t control the tool well enough to make round letters. I could only scratch straight lines into it. So I did.

I got three lines down before a shadow broke the light from the hall and fell onto me. I froze and then slowly looked up. My father was standing there, face a thunderhead.

“Dani,” he said. “Why are you trying to destroy my briefcase?”

I had explained that I was writing my name. He took the screwdriver from me, explained the

concept of private property—again—and grounded me from any extracurricular activities, like karate, and everything else I enjoyed.

I saw him occasionally running his fingers over that scratched D sometimes. He always got a wistful smile when he did it.

This was his case. My father's case. But what was it doing down here?

"That looks just like your father's old case," Mom said, startling me from my reverie.

"I know." I wasn't going to tell her it was the same case. He never did tell her what I had done, so she probably wouldn't recognize it. "I think I'm going to keep it. It reminds me of him."

She eyed me skeptically for a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, but you have to give it back if someone else claims it."

"I'll give it back if the owner claims it," I said honestly.

I shouted to get everyone's attention, and soon we were on our way out of the caves, hopefully without incident. I carried Rick's sword—back in its scabbard—in my right hand and the briefcase in my left, mind swirling with all the things I had seen and done. We were finally going home.

Chapter 29

Sam's chalk arrows and her super-flashlight made getting out of the caves, and then through the mine, much easier than I would have thought possible. We didn't run into any shadowling or any other hazards on the way out. We did see where the group with the security guards had been attacked, though. There were five bodies scattered across the floor. None of them were human.

We exited the mine at close to 6:00 AM. As we emerged, I thought it was full daylight. It was so bright, I had to shield my eyes with my hands. When I could finally lower my hand after my eyes had adjusted, I saw the truth. Huge spotlights had been set up, pointing right at us. Figures moved around the base of the lights, but it was too bright to see them.

"It's them," a voice said. "Turn the lights to the side." It was hard to hear over the sound of the gas motors powering the lights, but apparently someone heard. The spotlights were turned so they were not facing directly at us, and then I could survey the scene.

There were dozens of people lined up, many of them with guns.

"Sure," I said. "Now they decide to get the guns out and do something." All I could do was shake my head.

The spotlight motors were turned off one by one, each shut down helping to lower the noise level. I looked to the horizon. The sun was just rising, painting the sky with reds and yellows, signaling the start of a day on the surface. I stood and watched it. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

"...and I crossed over and began to mount the little known and lightless road to ascend into the shining world again," Sam said, almost reverently.

I sighed. "What was that?"

"It's the end of *Inferno*, when Dante and Virgil climb back up out of the depths of hell on Easter morning and see the heavenly stars and the sunrise."

"Oh," I said. "That again."

"Yeah," she said, smiling at me. "That again."

Things moved quickly after that. There were interviews and debriefings and food, blessed food. They let us go to a local motel and get some sleep and clean up, but they wanted us all to stay together so we could give the police all the information we could. After we got a little rest. We were all dead

on our feet. We'd been underground for two days, fighting or running much of the time.

My mom, Bobby, and I got a suite, two rooms and a sort of living room. Bobby and I crashed in one room, and my mom got the other. I was asleep before I even hit the blankets.

"Yes, I know," I heard my mom say. It was loud enough to bring me out of my slumber. I wondered why she was talking so loud, but when I looked at Bobby, he didn't even change his deep breathing. It was as if he didn't hear it.

"I was worried sick about you," a man's voice said, his volume lower than hers, with kind of a tinny ping. Jesse.

"Not worried enough to do anything about it," she said, her voice booming.

"Come on, Allie. We already talked about this."

"We did."

I finally understood. Jesse wasn't in the room with her. He was on the phone. That's why his voice sounded metallic. Not on speaker, though. I felt a little guilty about listening in, but if they were both going to talk so loud, they deserved it.

My mother sighed. "Oh, maybe I'm being too harsh. Someone told me something that helped me understand your side of it." Her breath changed pitch, as if something had caught in her throat. "Anyway, I think I understand why you did it."

"You do?" he said. "That's good. I'd really like to see you later. Maybe we can talk about it some more."

"I..." she said, "I'd like that."

I smiled. Well, at least Rick's lecture did some good. My smile slid off my face. Rick. I stroked the sword next to the bed. We needed to get someone to retrieve his body so he could be buried. In a coffin. Not under tons of rock.

My gaze passed over the briefcase next to my bed. I reached over and put my hand on it, the cool metal feeling good on my skin. It was my father's case. That was enough in itself, but I wanted to open it.

I picked it up and tried the locks again. They were still locked. Of course they were. I tried different combinations, starting with the simple ones like 0-0-0 and 1-2-3. I gave up after twenty or thirty tries. I wondered what was in there. Was it just work stuff, or was it something that would be valuable to me, like pictures of my dad or a journal? I'd have to dedicate some time and effort to it when I had gotten some rest.

I put the case back on the floor, running my fingers over the scratched D one last time before lying down. I settled back to get to sleep, but was interrupted again before I managed it.

"We've talked to the ones from earlier and compared the list to the records for missing persons," a deep voice said. "Then we looked at the list we made of the ones who came out. There are still people missing."

"Are you sure?" another voice, sounding older, said.

“Yes.”

“Damn. What did those creatures do with them? Do you think they ate them?”

“No,” the younger voice said. “We’re not finished interviewing the second group, but no one we’ve talked to yet was hurt or saw anyone else being hurt or killed after they were captured.”

“Okay, we’ll find out more when...” the voices faded as they walked farther away from me.

I looked at the ceiling, shocked. I had heard them, outside my room, down the hallway by the sound of it. I had heard them like they were in the room with me. What was going on? I counted the teeth on the fire sprinkler above Bobby’s bed ten feet away while I pondered it. I got to five before what I was doing struck me.

The room was dark. Yet I was counting teeth on a fire sprinkler head? I looked to the other side of the room and read the placard on the door. I could easily read the checkout times and the instructions for using the door latch. In the dark. A dozen feet away.

I looked down at my forearm, the puncture marks there cleaned and bandaged. That thing I choked, the shadowling, it had bitten me, and now I could see in the dark and hear like a dog. Sam’s talk about turning into a viper, from *Inferno*, ran through my mind. Would I turn into one of them? My heart raced and bile rose up in my throat. My hand started to shake. I didn’t want to be a monster. What was I going to do?

I focused and forced myself to breathe slowly, consciously thinking my heart to stillness. It took a few minutes, but the panic left me and I was breathing normally. I had to think. I had to plan.

I didn’t know how much longer I would have until I turned into one of those creatures, if it even worked that way. Maybe it would just kill me. Either way, I had to figure it out so no one else was affected. Looking into the dark, something that no longer held any terror for me, I guessed my adventure wasn’t completely over. Not just yet.

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A chemical engineer by degree, air quality engineer by vocation, certified dreamer by predilection, and writer by sheer persistence, **Eric Padilla** learned long ago that crunching numbers and designing solutions was not enough to satisfy his creative urges. Weaned on classic science fiction and fantasy stories from authors as diverse as Heinlein, Tolkien, and Jordan, and affected by his love of role playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons (analog) and Final Fantasy (digital), he sometimes has trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy. While not ideal for a person who needs to function in modern society, it's the perfect state of mind for a writer. He also writes epic fantas under the pen name P.E. Padilla, and lives in Southern California, though he would like to be where there are more trees.

BLOOD CAPTIVE

IZZY SHOWS

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BLOOD CAPTIVE

In a world ruled by blood, don't forget to check the shadows.

The dawn of vampires has come, they have dominated the world, and the blood mages that challenged them—the only creatures capable of annihilating their species.

When one blood mage is freed from the dungeons, by a werewolf no less, tensions rise in the vampire court. Werewolves have not been seen in centuries, and a blood mage on the loose could mean the downfall of vampire kind.

She's taken, trained, and turned into a lethal weapon. The shadows are her friends, the vampires her prey.

The time has come for her to prove herself—her first solo hunt. If she fails, she stands to lose everything she's come to depend on.

When the Prince of Vampires stands between her and her prey, she has no choice but to find another way.

But he's not the only complication.

What price would you pay for freedom?

Chapter 1

GRAYSON

The night held the scent of fear, sweat, and the sound of many hearts beating too fast-welcomed sensations for a vampire such as myself. My lips drew tight in a grim smile as I charged down the empty alley with my friends at my side.

"Careful Grayson, you might actually enjoy yourself for once," one of them called, his soft laughter a welcome sound on the wind.

Indeed. I just might.

For one such as me-the prince of the vampires-there were few moments of pure joy. Too much responsibility, and too many expectations, inhibited indulging the momentary pleasures of life. One was expected to weigh all possible outcomes in every conversation and choose that which would ensure the most success for the species as a whole.

I didn't resent it. It was simply a fact of life. I was Prince of the People and thus my life was owed to them.

But there were moments—so very few—where I allowed myself to revel in my most basic nature. Like this one. The hunt.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins along with the stolen blood I'd drained from a thrall earlier in the night. The hours after we have taken blood were the ones in which we felt most powerful, where we could do anything imaginable. You would never be faster, stronger, or more aware than immediately after taking blood.

It was not necessary for me to feed before the hunt; my royal lineage ensured that I was of the strongest stock. I could go far longer than a normal vampire—and I had done so in the past when there were shortages of blood. But those years were long gone. We had risen to supremacy in a world once ruled by humans, and I could take blood when I pleased.

A luxury that I indulged.

My legs pumped harder as I ran, following the scent of the mages we chased. Blood mages were the closest thing a vampire could get to a fair fight, outside of the wolves. The mages had long been an enemy we hoped to eradicate. They alone possessed the power required to exterminate the vampire race.

My father was the one who had managed to devise the collars of iron and ancient magic that

would contain their abilities, allowing us to come to full power. They could no longer keep us in subjugation, removing the need to hide.

Now we hunted the blood mages, both out of necessity and for sport. They could not be allowed to roam free. All must be killed or caged.

I preferred them caged. They made excellent trophies, and when the thralls ran low, they were a good back-up source of blood.

A scream pierced the night, and I forced the thoughts from my mind. No need to reminisce on such things when something much more enjoyable was at hand.

"You're getting that serious look on your face, Grayson," Alex said.

My eyes darted over to my long-time friend, my legs never stopping. There were five men outside of my family who were permitted to call me by my given name—Alex was one of them. To everyone else, I was simply 'Prince.' A title, not a name, and a constant reminder of the responsibility that was mine by birthright.

"Am I?" I forced a smile to my face. He was right. I had, in fact, started to scowl again.

"Are you not enjoying the hunt?"

"I always enjoy the hunt, friend." I winked at him. "I will enjoy it more when there is fresh blood in my mouth."

He shot me a savage grin.

We raced through the night, all but invisible at the speed with which we moved. The scent of our prey grew stronger. They could not hope to compete with our speed. They would run as far as they could and then try to hide the sounds of their heartbeats and the smell of their blood, hoping it would deter us from finding them.

Tricky as they were, they cannot stop from breathing. As long as we were close, we'd find them through that sound alone. And even if they managed enough distance, there were the old methods of tracking to fall back on.

But the sounds of labored breathing reached my ears a moment later and I knew that I would not have to rely on ancient methods; the mages were close, and soon I would feast on them.

The five of us rounded the corner as one, slowing to a walk, and came face to face with the family of blood mages that had been running from us. A mother and three young that looked to be in their teens.

I scowled. I had hoped for older prey, something I could dine on without the guilt of ending the life of a youngling. Alas, four more for the dungeons. It seemed that these were destined for the cages.

A quick gesture of one hand to Raoul, and four collars were produced from the pack on his back.

"Submit, woman, and no harm will come to your children." I kept my voice low and melodic, a special note of command in the tone. It was a talent gifted to all vampires to compel humans, though some blood mages could fight against it. It was always worth a shot, and there was still the chance that she would see the logic of my words.

"I would rather they die than end up in your hands." She dropped her hands to her sides, clenching them tight.

"Calm yourself," I said, my tone dangerously soft.

"Or what, vampire? You'll kill me?"

I sighed. They never learned. Then again, there were never any survivors or runaways to spread the word as to what happened when we caught them, or what happened to the ones who resisted.

The woman began to chant, and my chest tightened. Another minute and she would stop the heart beating inside my chest, or set my blood ablaze. Or perhaps she would take control of me. I could not allow any of those scenarios to happen.

Quick as you please, I leapt behind her and clamped my hand over her mouth. In small numbers, blood mages were not something to be terribly concerned about, especially when there were outnumbered by vampires.

And when there's a royal vampire who'd just fed? Overkill.

Her children scurried away from me. One of the boys let loose a terror-filled shriek. That answered one question—she had not trained her children in the talents of blood magic. Either that, or they were missing the gene. It mattered not, they would go to the cages all the same.

"Raoul." I jerked my head at the woman.

He strode forward and fitted the iron collar around her throat, his strong hands ignoring her struggles.

"Unless you want your mother's neck broken, you will submit," I said to the teenaged younglings.

They were smart enough not to struggle as each was fitted with a collar.

I glanced at Alex. "Not the hunt I was hoping for," I said, allowing disappointment to creep into my voice.

"It's too bad. I was looking forward to you taking the stick out of your ass," he said, grinning cheekily.

I stepped away from the mage and shoved Alex's shoulder. "Careful Alex, or I will be rid of you."

"Then what would you do when you are King? Who would keep you grounded?" He grinned. "No, I do not think you will be rid of me anytime soon."

I chuckled. Alex was right. He knew just when I needed to laugh and when I needed to focus, and he was always ready to give me whatever incentive I needed for either.

We led the family back to the castle. Alex walked beside me, two men walked on either side of the family, and one man followed up the back. Just in case anyone got any ideas about freeing the newly captured mages.

But they wouldn't do that. The blood mages would never risk themselves for another like that.

Blood mages were inherently selfish creatures, caring about their own survival. They had no sense of responsibility to their fellow mages, unlike us. We prided ourselves on taking care of our own.

Even the wolves have pack loyalty. But blood mages? Despicable creatures, altogether.

It didn't take us long to reach the castle, and lead them into the dungeons.

"Should we separate them, Grayson?" Alex asked, glancing at the mother cautiously.

"No need," I said. "They cannot rid themselves of the collars."

He knew that so why had he asked? I frowned in his direction.

He shrugged. "Thought you might not want to put the woman with the others."

Ah.

I took another look, my eyes running casually over her body. She was well-built, with ample curves and pale blond hair. But she did not interest me, else I would have already taken note.

I shook my head. "Put them in a cell together."

Alex and Raoul kept hold of the four mages, while my other men went to grab the keys to the cells.

Bored already, I walked down the line of cells, letting my eyes drift over the various prisoners therein. Some had been here only a few days, brought in from a fresh hunt, others for weeks, months, or years. We generally cycled them out of these front cells after they had been here for a while—assuming a vampire did not kill them while taking blood—but there were some that had been deemed necessary to keep an eye on.

Troublemakers, for the most part.

It was not something I concerned myself with. It was the guards' duty to determine which prisoners were cycled out.

Some of the guards intentionally kept certain prisoners here of which they were, well, fond.

I turned on my heel and walked toward my friends. Perhaps we would go carousing after this. Anything to scratch the annoying itch to get out and do something—an itch the hunt had only intensified.

As I passed a cell, something caught my eye. I stopped and took a few steps back to peer inside.

There was a lone blood mage within—odd, in itself, as they were usually kept in groups—but at first glance she did not appear to be anything of note. She had long brown hair and tawny skin. With her face was turned away from me I could not make out any further features.

I lifted a hand, about to call out to her. I stopped before the words could leave my throat. What was I doing?

"Prince!" Raoul called.

I dropped my hand, hoping they hadn't noticed., I turned and was pleased to see they weren't looking at me.

"Yes?" It took effort to keep my voice steady. I cast a narrowed glare at the blood mage.

Had she found a way out of the collar? Was she working magic on me? It didn't feel like it. I shifted my weight so that I was closer to the cell door, and peered closely, trying to see through the thick mess of hair to her neck.

"Let's get out of here and go do something," Raoul said.

Right. Wasn't that what I wanted?

And yet, a part of me wanted to stay...

I shook my head. No.

"Of course," I said. "Let's find something fun to do." I walked away from the cell to follow my friends out of the dungeons, not letting myself look back even though I felt the urge to.

It couldn't have been magic that had caught my attention.

But then what had?

Chapter 2

NINA

*C*rack.

The sound of the whip greeted my ears before I felt the kiss of leather against my bare back. My teeth clenched together so tightly that I was surprised none of them broke from sheer force.

I will not scream. I'm steel forged from fire and I will not break.

I repeated the mantra over and over. I refused to give the guard the satisfaction of the truth. They had broken me a long time ago.

I liked to pretend that I was still whole. My pride was all I had left; it was the only thing I could hold onto.

They could take my life as they had done to plenty of other blood mage prisoners. But as long as I still drew breath my mind was my own.

"Nothing to say, bitch?" Harsh words, but I was used to a lot worse.

I turned my head to look up at the guard, curving my lips up at the corners into a defiant smile.

"Another please, sir?" My words were so sweet, completely at odds with the situation.

The guard flashed sharp fangs, the mark of what he was—one of the immortal night stalkers who dominated our world.

My grandmother had told stories—before I was taken at only six by the vampires—about a world before the vampires ruled. A system called democracy, where people had been equal. The blood mages had still lived in fear of being found out, but they hadn't had to hide like rats just to survive. According to abuelita, all you had to do was proclaim yourself a Wiccan and just be a little kooky. No one bothered with so-called 'hippies'. The best disguise for a blood mage was disregard.

I wasn't sure I believed the fairy tale of a mythical world where everyone could live more or less in peace, but it was much better than the horror we lived in now.

The vampires had free reign, and they hadn't hesitated to turn humans into cattle. And blood mages? We were either killed or enslaved with no rhyme or reason which one it would be. Maybe the vampire was in a forgiving mood when they caught you, and decided to let you live.

But was it really better down here in the dungeons at the mercy of the guards?

Another crack of the whip and the metallic scent of blood filled the air. The scars from twelve years of torture had roughened my flesh so new wounds didn't sting as much as when I'd been small.

I had learned quick it was better to cry out when hit, so they felt they were getting something out of the torture. Power tripping bastards. Silence drove them crazy. They just whipped harder and harder until you screamed.

So why did I remain silent?

Because fuck them, that's why. It was the only control I had in this life. The guards decided when I ate or slept, but I decided when to scream.

Crack.

I bit my lip to keep the whimper from escaping my mouth.

Keep quiet, Nina. You can't give him the satisfaction.

Of course, eventually, when I couldn't take anymore and death was a real possibility, I would unleash the screams burning in my throat.

Every night he came to take his pound of flesh, I swore this would be the night I kept silent until he gave up without his reward. Maybe then he would leave me the hell alone. Though, it was more likely I'd be disposed, no longer an entertaining toy for the sadistic asshole.

The whip tore into my flesh and a soft yelp escaped my lips. I hadn't been prepared.

"What was that?" The guard bent down so his face was right in front of mine. His breath assaulted my nostrils.

"Not a damn thing." I bared my teeth at him.

Fuck you, buddy.

"Tch. Too bad for you, then." He stood and pulled back his arm, holding the whip high in the air. I turned my head away and squeezed my eyes shut so I wouldn't see the whip coming down. My hands balled into tight fists as I prepared for the attack.

Tension, as I waited for the sharp pang I knew was coming, built inside of me. Maybe not this one, maybe not even the next, but eventually I wouldn't be able to stop from crying out.

Defeat welled inside of me, and with it, the pessimistic voice that had invaded my mind years ago.

Why do you make trouble? Just give him what he wants and he'll go away.

But he'll just move on to another prisoner.

Maybe that was the real reason I refused to give in, because if it wasn't me, someone else would feel this pain. I couldn't bear the guilt.

There were children here. The guards didn't care your age, all that mattered was you being a blood mage. If you're one of us, you were nothing more other than a bit of sport.

At least the children didn't have to endure the other horrors.

My shoulders tightened.

No. We will not go down that memory path. I mentally slammed the door.

"Stop!" An unfamiliar male voice dripping with authority yelled.

My eyes popped open, but I didn't dare turn my head. Had that been real or imagined?

"Unhand me," the guard bellowed. "Who the fuck do you think—Prince!"

Prince.

Disgust curled deep inside my gut. I didn't know the Prince of the vampires, but he must be a truly awful creature to rule over the sadistic guards.

Why had he stopped the guard?

"You will cease your ministrations." The prince's voice had a dangerous edge, but the soft tone stroked my ears pleasantly, so foreign a sensation I hardly recognized it.

"Sire, this is...this is the way of things!"

"You are needed elsewhere, good sir. Surely you won't second guess my orders?"

Silence for several heartbeats before the guard grunted. His footsteps echoed as he marched out of the chamber.

The Prince's footsteps were soft in comparison as he walked closer. My heart raced as panic set in—what did he want with me?

If I hadn't been bound, I would have smacked myself. You would think the thralls would be enough to satisfy him; he must have his pick of the litter. Apparently, he wanted something different, or he wouldn't be down in the dirty dungeons with *me*.

My bare breasts pressed against the rough wood of the table I laid. The damp air that permeated the dungeon caused goosebumps to erupt on my bloody back.

"Hello," he said.

I was surprised how gentle his voice was, and even more embarrassed the way my body reacted to the sound.

Talk about Stockholm syndrome. Down girl. You don't want to get involved with a vampire prince.

"Will you look at me, please?"

What had it cost the Prince to say please? Still, I wasn't stupid enough to disobey the prince. I might as well sign my own death sentence.

Slowly, I lifted my head off the table and looked at the Prince as he had commanded.

I wanted to be disappointed he wasn't horribly disfigured by the evil that tainted his soul. He was so beautiful it took my breath away. Thick white hair—not even a tint of blond to it—fell past his shoulders. Part of it was pulled back into some sort of half ponytail, so it didn't hang into his eyes, but one stray lock had gotten out of line and fallen onto his forehead.

The strangest urge to brush it back into place consumed me. I dug my nails into my palms to stop myself.

He was tall and well-muscled, but it was his striking blue eyes that held me captivated. I could drown in them, and it wouldn't even be a bad way to go.

My lips parted to tell him to leave me alone, but the words wouldn't come out. There was a strange warring sensation inside me—I didn't entirely want him to go. I wanted to keep staring at him,

wanted to commit every inch of his face to memory so I could hold onto it later.

You're being ridiculous, Nina. Get ahold of yourself. He's a vampire. He's the entire reason you're caged down here. He possesses the power to set us all free, and instead he lives it up in the castle. He's just here to use and abuse you. Remember?

He cocked his head to the side as if I was a puzzle he couldn't figure out. "Who are you?"

I arched an eyebrow, tilting my head to the side so that my forehead touched the wood of the table. What a weird thing for him to ask.

My stubborn streak kicked in and I smirked at him, refusing to answer.

Go away. I thought to myself, since I couldn't get the words to come out of my mouth.

"You won't talk to me, will you?" He set his lips in a firm line and sighed. "I'm not here to hurt you."

Liar.

No vampire ever came down for any other reason. And they definitely didn't come just to talk.

"I'd like to know your name." It wasn't a question, but it also wasn't a command. I could refuse.

So, I did. He could like to know all he wanted, but I wasn't going to give it to him unless he pulled the prince card. I wanted him to know I understood the rules, and he wasn't going to get special attention just because he used pretty words.

"Surely, you haven't had a conversation in a long time."

No shit.

"I thought perhaps you might want to...talk."

I shot him a dry look and resisted the urge to roll my eyes. He didn't care about us down here, and I wasn't going to let him pretend that he did.

"Is it such a bad thing to speak with a vampire?"

"Go. Away." The words came out in a croak, rasping against my throat.

His eyes widened. "I..."

"Leave me," I said, before he could get another word out.

His eyes dropped to the floor as he turned his head to the side. I tried not to be impressed by the strong jawline in his profile.

He's not handsome. He's ugly as a toad.

Yeah, I'd keep telling myself that. Maybe it would make me feel better.

"As you wish." He turned and left the chamber.

A confusing pang of sadness gripped my heart. I hadn't expected him to actually leave.

Chapter 3

NINA

My back ached as I leaned against the stone wall in my cell. A guard, not the one who had whipped me, had taken me back to my cell. Surprisingly, he hadn't been horrible to me. He'd kept his eyes averted while I put my on shirt, and hadn't manhandled me on the walk back.

While I didn't know for certain, I suspected the prince had said something to him. It grated against my nerves—I didn't need some prissy, spoiled prince inflating his sense of self-worth by looking out for me. I'd done just fine the past twelve years in this hell. I could take care of myself.

Alone in my cell, I was very much aware of the warm, wet sensation of my shirt sticking to my bleeding wounds. I would have been better off removing the shirt and letting the wound heal. The longer the fabric stuck to my flesh, the more it would only hurt later when I peeled it away. At the very least I should stop pressing against the wall and making it worse.

But I did none of those things. I welcomed the stinging pain washing over me in small waves, reminding me what it meant to be a prisoner in the vampire's world. I couldn't forget how horrible they were, couldn't lose sight of the reality of this world. No matter how nice the prince had wanted seem, I knew the truth.

One way or another, they'd be the death of us all.

The ones who died before they saw the cells were the lucky ones. They'd never know what it was like to yearn for the feeling of the sun on their skin.

God, I missed the sun. I looked just like my mother—brown hair, brown eyes, and you guessed it, brown skin. All right, it's more of a tawny color than anything, not super dark, but still. I wasn't pale as your typical vampire from having not seen the sun in twelve years, but I was a few shades lighter than I probably would've been.

Once when I'd been a child, we'd taken a vacation. An honest-to-God vacation. What, that doesn't sound like a miracle to you? Try living on the run your entire life, and you'll realize what a miracle a vacation was. We went to the beach, and I laid out in the sun for ages, played in the ocean, and enjoyed myself. I'd grown up in a constant state of anxiety, waiting for the hammer to fall-for the vampires to swarm us.

Having a few hours by the ocean...it was the best memory I could store in my mind.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the wall, calling to mind the sensation of the

sun warming my skin. I would give anything to have just one day in the sun again.

Sudden cries jolted me out of my daydream. I frowned, climbing to my feet and edged closer to the bars. I was alone in my cell and there was no one in the cells around me. No one to ask questions of.

I'd learned a while back my isolation wasn't normal. Most prisoners were kept in groups to save space. But apparently, this one guard liked me—and not in a good way—so I got 'special' treatment.

Fucking awesome, right?

I gripped the iron bars and pressed my face against the cool metal, straining to peer down the dark hallway. The suppression collar around my neck clanged against the bars—it was what kept me subservient to my captors. Without it, I would've been free to kill anyone who looked at me funny with a simple spell.

Not that I knew how to use my magic. Training didn't start until thirteen, and only if your parents followed the old ways. I'd known some teenagers who hadn't started training, because their parents didn't believe they were ready.

I would never know what it was like to tap into the magic that burned inside me. Could you imagine being divorced from a part of yourself? It was a horrible feeling. I was painfully aware of it every moment of every day, and it hurt worse than any beating.

Like a giant, ugly wound kept open forever.

More yells came from down the hallway. Incoherent, unfortunately, so that wasn't doing me any good.

I tried to make myself sit back down, but my curiosity was piqued. It was probably just the guards coming back for a little more torture—probably of *me* since my torture session had been interrupted by Mr. Prince. The guard would be super pissed about that, and it would royally suck when he took it out on me.

I should've gone into the corner and made myself disappear but I couldn't move my feet. I needed to see what was happening.

Morbid curiosity and all that.

Then a guard ran past. I jumped back, my eyes wide, before I stepping forward and pressing my face against the bars. What had he been running from?

If I could just get a little closer, I could see what it was...

The guard flew forward, a giant grey wolf on top of him.

What the fuck is a wolf doing down here?

My mind froze as I tried to absorb the information my eyes transmitted, but I got nothing. I stared as the wolf savaged the guard, tearing into his throat and then ripping his heart from his chest.

I should be screaming. The thought didn't transmit to my vocal cords. Probably because I was still gawking as the wolf went to town on the dying guard. I didn't waste any of my time on pity.

When the vampire stilled, the wolf took a few steps back, then slowly turned its head. Its eyes

locked with mine. It still growled, hackles raised.

My blood ran cold, but I still couldn't move. It was dangerous so close to the bars keeping me safe from the wild animal.

How had it gotten in?

A moment later the wolf seemed to calm, and turned its attention back to the guard's body. It rooted around the vampire's waist and yanked the keys from the belt. With one toss of its head, it threw the keys into my cell.

My jaw dropped. Was this a rescue? A chance to escape?

My frequent dreams of escape were never like this. I'd never once imagined a wolf would plow its way into the dungeons and set me free. It felt more like a fairy tale than abuelita's stories.

It took a second before I'd the presence of mind to grab the keys off and reach through the bars to the lock on the outside. I fumbled, trying to find the right one, and the numbness began to fade. Time was ticking by and any minute now more guards would come.

The wolf growled impatiently.

I finally found the right key. I'd never been so happy to hear a clanking sound as when the tumblers fell into place, and the cell door parted. I shoved it open.

The anxiety hit as soon as I stepped out of the cell. I'd never been out without at least one guard telling me where to go, usually with a hand wrapped around my upper arm. I didn't which way to freedom. If I didn't figure it out, and soon, this rescue mission would be short lived.

The yells of the other prisoners dampened my panic. I shook my head to clear. I had to get the other prisoners out, too!

The guards would take their rage out on anyone left behind. I started toward another cell, its occupants reaching through the bars begging for freedom. And before I could get two steps, teeth punctured the skin on my hand. I shrieked. In reality, it wasn't a huge bite, just a little nip, but it shocked me.

The wolf continued to growl, baring its teeth when I moved toward the other cells. He would bite me again if I continued to try getting the other prisoners out.

Why would he set me free, but stop me from saving the others?

The wolf stalked past, and then shot a glare over its shoulder at me. It knew the way out and it was my only chance at freedom. That was a more compelling reason than the fear of getting mauled.

I took a last look at the people I was abandoning--my people. *I'm sorry.* There was nothing I could actually do to save them. Trying to be a hero would end with me back in my cage, or worse. I wasn't big on self-sacrifice, especially futile ones.

Reluctantly, I turned and followed the wolf away from the cries of my fellow blood mages.

Chapter 4

NINA

The wolf sprinted down the corridor and I rushed after it, terrified of being left behind. I didn't know what it was, but it wasn't a normal wolf.

Could it be...? No, that's impossible.

Werewolves were a thing of myths. No one had seen one in centuries, or so the stories claimed. But all the evidence in front of me pointed to a beast with the mind of an intelligent human being. Either this was a very funny dream I was going to wake up from any minute, or I'd just been saved by a creature from ancient lore.

I didn't have time to spend pondering, though, as I had to focus on keeping my legs moving.

It'd been years since I'd done more than walk after the guards as they dragged me from the prison cell to the torture chamber and back again—I had never gone anywhere else in the dungeons, and running hadn't exactly been on the menu. They didn't care about keeping us fit; they cared about keeping us under control.

My lungs burned and my under-used muscles screamed as I charged down the hallway with the wolf ahead of me. It was purposefully going slower than it was capable of; there was no way in hell the wolf was as slow as me. I was thankful that it didn't just take off and leave. I wouldn't have known where to go without it to lead me.

We came to an intersection, but the wolf didn't hesitate, turning the corner and sprinting.

It clearly knew where to go. Which made sense. It had come into the dungeons on its own somehow.

We passed a body on the ground bearing the same savage marks as the guard the wolf had killed. A shudder ran down my spine at the violence, but I didn't have time to stop and dwell on it.

What would happen if we got caught? If I was lucky, the vampires would take me back to my cell—no, if I was lucky they would kill me. I couldn't go back to the cells and the torture after coming so close to escape.

I wouldn't be able to bear it.

I stumbled and barely caught my footing, panic jolting me back to the urgency of the moment. I had to keep my mind on the task at hand.

No multi-tasking for me.

We rounded another corner and came face to face with one of the vampire guards.

I skidded to a halt and backed up a few steps, prepared to run in the other direction. Or maybe throw myself on the ground and beg for mercy. I didn't get the chance to choose.

The wolf leapt onto the man without a moment's hesitation, bearing him down to the stone floor and ripping into his throat.

An odd thought occurred to me. It didn't make much sense to rip the throat out of a vampire. They could survive anything but heart extraction—or the power of a blood mage. I wished I could be rid of the collar so I could help in our bid for freedom.

Then again, I didn't know even the simplest of spells. I wouldn't be able to defend us if it came down to it; I was reliant on the wolf to get me out of this alive.

Which was terrifying in and of itself.

The wolf made short work of the guard and we kept going, charging down the hallway again.

God, I just want five seconds to catch my breath. My blood pounded, and I stumbled again.

My muscles didn't know how to do this. I was going to fall, and the wolf wouldn't notice. The vampires would get hold of me again, take me back to the cell, and a whipping wouldn't be the only thing I got this night.

No, you're going to get out of this alive. Don't think about anything other than moving forward.

I ran, pushing the horrifying thoughts as far to the back of my mind as possible. If I fell, if the vampires came in force and subdued the wolf, if I was taken back...I would deal with the consequences then.

Not now.

Keep going, Nina. Just keep going.

What felt like an eternity of running later, we came to the end of the corridor—two stairways at the very end. One led up and one down. I moved toward the one that led up. To get out, we had to get up from the dungeons.

Pain lanced through my thigh as the wolf bit into me again, a low growl rumbling in its throat.

I shot him a nasty glare. "You know, there are better ways of getting my attention than damaging my leg. I need that for running, you know."

The wolf's eyes bore into my soul. I shuddered.

Fair enough.

The wolf headed for the stairs on the right, the ones that led down, and I couldn't do anything but follow him.

Stairs were even harder than running. I hadn't used stairs since I was six years old, and you would be surprised at how difficult it was to move down stairs at a decent speed without stumbling and falling.

It took all my concentration just to keep myself upright with one foot moving in front of the other.
Just keep going, right?

The wolf froze. I had to backpedal to keep from plowing into him and falling face first down the steep stairs. I ended up landing painfully on my ass. The stone was not a forgiving mistress.

Sucking in a deep breath, I resisted the urge to snap at the wolf for not giving any sort of warning before stopping.

The wolf turned itself and with a jump darted down a hallway I hadn't even noticed—we weren't on a landing, we were still on the stairs, but there was a corridor right there. I stepped off carefully into the hallway, paying attention to the movement just to make sure I didn't fall again. Safely off the stairs, I took off at a run after the wolf.

The corridor was long and dark—I couldn't see my hand in front of my face when I lifted it to test. But I thought better of trying that again when I almost fell flat on my face.

Right, no multitasking while you're running. My brain just couldn't handle it right now, apparently. I was like a goddamned toddler. I had to use all of my brain power just to keep my legs moving. Fat lot of good I was.

It felt like ages passed, but at last we reached the end of the corridor.

A fairly unimportant looking door stood in front of us. My gut clenched as I thought about what might be on the other side. Something awful?

More vampires?

The wolf wouldn't have led me here if it didn't think we—more like it—could take whatever was waiting behind the door. With a deep breath, I reached to clasp the knob and turned it.

The door swung open, revealing the outside world. Grass. God, I'd almost forgotten what grass looked like.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," I whispered reverently.

The wolf didn't appear to want to take in the beauty of the moment. It took off, bounding across the grass, and all I could do was follow.

Forlornly, I cast a look up at the moon.

If only we had escaped during the day. I might have seen the sun again.

I pushed that thought from my mind and cheered myself with another thought.

I would see the sun again.

Chapter 5

NINA

The rays of dawn were just beginning to reach into the sky when the wolf finally slowed from its gentle lope to a comfortable walking speed. It had taken us the rest of the night to reach our destination, but what a destination it was.

We were mere feet away from a freaking mansion.

"Er, I hope you know the people here, because this doesn't look like somewhere I'll fit in," I said, rubbing at my arms. The morning was cold, and though the run had effectively warmed me up, my skin was cold to the touch.

I couldn't stop looking up at the sky, at the grey light that was filling it. My heart yearned to stay outside just a little while longer, to see the sun rise and feel the warmth on my face.

The wolf didn't so much as look at me to indicate it had heard me, it just kept walking toward the mansion.

A man stood at the bottom of the steps that led up to the giant door, clothing in his hands.

He did not look happy to see me.

I grimaced and averted my eyes. I was used to getting looks like that—the guards had hated us blood mages, of course. But I had thought that wherever the wolf was taking me would be a friendly place.

I guess not.

"Hello," I said attempting to force a cheerful smile to my face. I still knew the basics of etiquette, though my interactions with other people had been limited to the guards that had abused me.

When you have an abuelita like mine and you remember how to be polite no matter what shit you've been through. That woman beat manners into me until they stuck like fleas on a dog.

The man cast one look at me—his nose screwed up like he smelled something bad—and then turned his attention to the wolf between us.

"Master," he said, inclining his head.

I arched an eyebrow. Master? Well, that was a surprise.

And then, as if there hadn't been enough surprises for the night, the wolf transformed in front of my eyes, taking the form of a man. He was naked, and I quickly averted my eyes. There had never been a need for modesty back in the dungeon, I never got to choose when to keep my shirt on, but there was

that etiquette thing again. It wasn't polite to stare at a naked man.

At the sound of a throat clearing, I looked back at the man. He was tall, though not as tall as the vampire Prince—where had that thought come from?—and had pale white skin and cropped short black hair. Cold brown eyes stared back at me.

He nodded towards the door and walked up the stairs, clearly expecting me to follow. I shivered, suddenly uncertain if this had been a good idea after all. But what was the other option? Going back to the cells?

Hell no.

I would be eternally grateful to this man for rescuing me. If he wanted to lead me into a shack in the desert, I would follow. I could certainly muster up the courage to follow him into a mansion.

So, that's what I did. I followed him, and the man who'd given him his clothes followed behind me.

Once inside the doors, my eyes took a moment to adjust to the bright lights, and then I saw that we were in a great hall populated with several men and women. It was a fairly diverse group of people, and they were all chattering with one another, but as the werewolf passed by them they all fell silent.

I followed, not knowing what else to do with myself. I certainly didn't want to keep standing in the doorway—they were all *staring* at me. And they weren't friendly stares, either.

Some of them were actively scowling or sneering, while others simply eyed me with distrust. That was cool, I could deal with that, I told myself. No one had trusted me since I was six years old. I could certainly deal with a bunch of strangers eyeing me funny.

It would have been nice if he'd taken me to some sort of paradise where everything was sunshine and roses.

I smirked at the thought as it entered my mind. Yes, that would have been nice, but it was also woefully irrational. I had to keep my expectations rational.

I was grateful just to be out of the cells. Certainly, I was grateful to find myself in a place of such luxury. I had never been anywhere so beautiful. We walked past numerous paintings, and sculptures either stood on their own or topped tables that stood against the walls. Whoever this man was, he certainly had taste.

Or at least, I assumed it was all in good taste. I hadn't exactly had an education in art history.

Or an education at all. I cringed at the thought. All these people...they probably knew how to read, at the very least.

Was that why they were eyeballing me funny? Did they know that I was an ignorant idiot that couldn't count or read?

And then I noticed one man glaring at my *throat*. Reflexively, I reached up and touched my throat, my fingers automatically coming into contact with the iron collar there.

Ah, suddenly everything clicked into place.

They knew what the collar meant. They may not be vampires, but they didn't trust blood mages any

more than vampires did, I was sure. It made sense, you don't exactly trust someone who can take control of your body and treat you like a puppet, even if that person happens to be wearing a collar that stops them from doing any of that.

Not that I would ever do such a thing to a random person. I knew better than that. It wouldn't fall into the rules of politeness that my abuelita had taught me.

At last, we reached the end of the parade past all the wary glances, all the distrustful people, and the wolf-man led me into another room.

Dining room. It took me a moment, but my mind supplied the word at last. There was a giant table that could easily fit thirty people in the long room, with elegant chairs lining the sides, and a lone chair at the far end.

"Take a seat," he said, gesturing towards the table.

Those were the first words he'd said to me. I wanted to make a comment on that—it was in my nature to joke around when I was nervous—but I thought better of it. This was a strange place and a strange man, and he might not appreciate my sense of humor.

The last thing I wanted to do was displease him. He might send me back to the vampire cages, and then what would become of me?

I shuddered.

No, I couldn't ever go back there. I would rather die than live in a cage again.

I took a seat, doing as I was told. I stared up at him, waiting for him to say something else, to break the silence that stretched out between us. Even though I wanted to, I couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't come off as a quip.

Don't piss him off, Nina. He saved you.

Why had he saved me, though? I hoped he'd tell me that soon enough. And why had he stopped me from saving the other mages? Surely they deserved a life of freedom just as much as I did. There was nothing special about me compared to the other blood mages. I was a dime a dozen.

"Are you hungry?" He started walking towards another door, and panic leapt through me.

Was he going to leave me here? I desperately wanted him to stay near me. Like a baby bird, I had imprinted on him, and I knew I wouldn't feel safe in this mansion if he left me alone.

"Starving," I said, keeping my voice as soft as was possible. I was afraid to raise my voice.

He looked back at me and quirked an eyebrow, but said nothing. Instead he walked to the door and knocked on it. A man appeared a moment later.

"Yes, Master?"

"Please bring a plate of food for our guest," he said.

"Yes, Master." The man shot a nasty look my way the moment the werewolf turned his head, and then went back through the door from whence he came.

Ah, joy of all joys. The man preparing my food hated me and I hadn't even said two words to him. How had I managed that?

And then it sunk in that I was going to have *food*. Real food, hopefully, and not the gruel that they fed us back in the cages. My stomach growled loudly, and I looked down at the table in front of me, embarrassed.

The werewolf walked over and took a seat beside me.

I don't know if he was going to say something, because a moment after he sat down the man appeared through the door with a plate in hand. Steak, potatoes, and green beans were heaped on the plate.

My mouth watered. Meat? Oh my God, I was going to get to eat meat?

"That's for me?" I asked, my voice squeaking a bit.

The werewolf cast a look at me that might have been amused, but it was hard to tell. The man didn't have a lot in the way of emotional tells.

The man—chef? Butler? I don't know—carried the plate over to me and set it down, producing a steak knife and fork and setting them down beside the plate. I didn't look up at him, but I could *feel* the resentment exuding from him.

I didn't know why it was that all the people here seemed to hate me so much, aside from the blood mage thing. It was probably just that. Because I was pretty sure I was the first blood mage they had seen, unless they knew some mages that hadn't ever been captured. Somehow, I doubted that from the way they'd responded to me. I knew for a fact that no other mage had been rescued from the dungeons—I'd been down there for twelve years. I would have heard about it.

So, I was a new breed of freak for them. But you would think that living with a werewolf, they would be used to abnormalities.

Shoving all those thoughts from my head, I attacked the food with fervor, forgetting the rules of politeness. I just wanted the food in my belly as quickly as I could get it.

"Careful," the werewolf said. "You don't want to eat too much or too quickly, it will turn your stomach. There will be plenty more food. This is not your last meal."

I swallowed a lump of meat that I hadn't chewed properly, too busy trying to get it down to my stomach as quickly as possible, and forced myself to slow down. He was right, of course. I hadn't eaten real food since I was a small child. My stomach was probably going to take weeks before it acclimated to real food.

I frowned down at the food, already missing it even though I hadn't finished it yet.

"What am I doing here?" I asked as I cut into the steak.

"Yes, let's get down to business. My name is Conall. And as you may have surmised, I am a werewolf. So are all of my people."

I managed *not* to drop my jaw at that. A mansion full of werewolves? No, that couldn't be possible. He had to be pulling my leg on that one.

"Yes, it's true," he said, sounding tired of the topic already. "I recognize that to you, it must seem impossible that we exist. We simply did a better job of blending into the background than the blood

magicians did, for our own survival. But I am tired of simply surviving, and that is why I have formed this coalition. We hunt the vampires. It is my goal to eradicate the species entirely. You will be trained to hunt vampires as well."

"Why me?"

"Why not you? It will be useful to have a blood mage in our ranks."

"Right, I get that," I said, slowly. Even though I didn't really get why he was choosing now to get a blood mage. I mean, we were allegedly very powerful creatures. There wasn't a whole lot that a vampire could do to fight back when we got involved with things short of just killing us—which was why they hunted us in large packs. A blood mage on their own could probably take on three vampires at once, but if you surround one with enough vampires, there's just nothing to be done about it.

We were best at ranged attacks, like all magicians I assume. And it would certainly help any army to have a blood mage amongst them.

"But why me?"

He just looked at me, clearly bored with my questioning. Sheesh, the guy was cold. But that was okay, really. I was willing to do anything he asked—he freed me. I owed this man my life. And he wanted me to take out the vampires that had made my life a living hell? Yeah, I could sign up for that.

Maybe one day he would give me an answer to that question—*why*—but I wasn't going to press him for it right now.

I was just grateful for my new lease on life.

Chapter 6

GRAYSON

A hand on my shoulder jerked me out of the restorative sleep in which I had been so deeply embraced. My eyes snapped open and I glared up at the person who had dared to disturb me, and saw Alex's eyes looking back at me. I softened.

The man was one of my best friends, certainly one of my most loyal men, and if he had awakened me, then it must have been for something important.

"What is it, Alex?"

He looked troubled, and I sat up, a sense of urgency filling me.

"Out with it, man, what's going on?" I swung my legs out from under the blankets and stood, already moving to the wardrobe to extract my clothes.

"Your father wants you in the war room, Prince. He wouldn't say why," he said.

My eyes narrowed as I turned to look at him. He never called me 'Prince' for anything other than a joke, unless it was serious business. He might not know why I had been called to the war room, but he must have picked up the tone of the situation and knew that it was nothing good.

I jerked my head in a quick nod and dressed quickly. Whatever the danger was, we would be able to handle it, I knew that. There had been nothing we as a royal family hadn't been able to handle since the blood mages had been subdued.

Nothing could stand in our way.

I made my way from the room as quickly as possible, hurrying to the war room.

When I entered, my father and five generals were already inside. Annoyance prickled my mind—my father should have called for me first, rather than the generals. I didn't know why he would do something like that, it was entirely outside his normal behavior.

"Hello, gentleman," I said, striding into the room with a self-assured smile. If there was one thing I had learned from my father, it was that you never allowed anyone to see you sweat.

"Grayson, good of you to join us," my father said. He indicated the seat to his right and I took it without another word.

"We have a situation," one of the generals said. "I am sorry to have to bring this to your majesties at such an hour, but I believed it was urgent that you learn of this as soon as possible so that you could formulate a plan."

What he meant was—"I had no fucking clue what to do and I dearly hoped that you would be able to fix this shit for me." General Lucius was a bit of a waste of space, as far as I was concerned. I didn't think the man deserved the title, but it wasn't up to me. It was up to my father.

Though I did not long for the days when the crown would be on my head—I was not that sort of Prince—that man would be the first to go. I would replace him with someone more competent. Someone that could do their job without constant oversight.

"By all means, General, proceed," my father said.

With a clenched jaw, I waited to find out what it was that was so important we had to be awoken so soon after dawn. Everyone should have gone to bed to wait out the day, to wait for the sweet release of nightfall.

"A blood mage has escaped." The words were blunt, but I understood that there was no way to sugarcoat them.

It took a moment for the words to really register in my mind. A blood mage was on the loose in the city. How had that happened?

"That's impossible," I said, speaking before I could fully think it through. This was bad form for me, I knew better than to behave in such a fashion, but I couldn't stop myself.

My father cut me a sharp look, and I felt the force of the unspoken reprimand. I was a direct representative of his. My behavior cast him in a negative light. I bowed my head to indicate that I understood what I had done was wrong.

Everything in the vampire world is about politics. We can't get anything done without having to weigh all the consequences and benefits equally, and some see that as a good thing, but more often than not it leaves me feeling like we should have acted sooner.

General Lucius continued. "The mage did not escape on her own. Several guards were killed in the escape, and they all bear wounds that indicate a wolf attack."

Now there were murmurs from the other generals. My father and I remained silent, absorbing the information that we had been given.

I knew I should be focusing on the fact that a wolf had come in and attacked things—the werewolves had been eradicated eons ago, this shouldn't be possible—but the general's usage of the female pronoun had stuck in my head.

Which blood mage had escaped? I had to know. Was it the female that I had visited earlier in the night?

For some reason, my gut clenched at the thought. I didn't want her out on the streets. I had spoken to a guard after leaving her, to learn more about her. She had been in captivity for most of her life, she didn't know how the world worked. She wouldn't survive out on the streets.

She has a wolf with her.

My lips curled back in a subtle snarl. I liked that idea even less than the idea that she was out on her own. If she was with a wolf...But no, I needed to push these thoughts from my mind. She didn't

matter to me.

I forced my thoughts to turn to the more important topic at hand; we had a werewolf problem. I didn't waste time thinking about all the ways this was illogical or impossible. It had happened and it had to be dealt with.

Did anyone even know how to kill a werewolf anymore, short of extracting the heart? That was the only way to kill a vampire, and I guessed it would be an efficient means of dispatching a werewolf as well. But that sort of fighting was dangerous. It required you to get close to your enemy, and offered up the possibility of them reaching your heart as well.

This was why the blood mages had been such a dangerous enemy when they had free roam of the world—they possessed the power to kill a vampire from great distances. We had been powerless to do anything in retaliation without moving in large packs and quickly finding the blood mage attacking the group.

A werewolf, though, would have to get in close to kill a vampire. It provided a level playing field, and I relished the thought of killing the wolf that had made off with the blood mage.

Somehow, I knew it was she who had escaped.

No, we are not thinking about that now. I reprimanded myself as my thoughts turned back to the blood mage.

"We must go on the offensive," I said once I managed to reclaim control of my mind. "If there are wolves in the city, we must be rid of them as soon as is possible."

"Patience, young Prince," my father said. "We must not be so hotheaded."

I chafed at the reprimand. He called me hotheaded, but I saw no flaw with my plan. If we rooted out the werewolf we would be able to reclaim the blood mage that escaped. She would have to be killed, made an example of...

I found that I didn't like the thought of that.

Of course, there was a much more disturbing thought that took precedence. What if the wolf that had made off with the blood mage was not the only one in the city? The wolves of old had always moved in packs. Where there was one, there were always five more. At minimum. Logic dictated that there would be a pack behind the lone wolf we'd been attacked by, and that was dangerous.

Hunting a wolf pack was dangerous. A wolf on its own was not such a problem to be dealt with, but put any kind of beast in large numbers, and the odds quickly go in the other direction.

If there was a pack, we should move now, so that it didn't have time to get back to its pack members.

I wanted to argue this with my father, make him see the reason behind my suggestion, but decorum dictated that I say nothing. My father had made a statement, and all must defer to him. The council was not on equal levels with the King—this was how it had always been. And I was no different from the council, aside from the fact that they also ranked beneath me. But when it came to the King, well, no one could argue with him.

Especially not in front of others.

I couldn't believe he wasn't going to immediately go on the offensive, though. To wait and see what would happen was an act of weakness.

When I am King, I will not be so weak. I will make a show of force so that my people will always know that they have a strong leader who will look out for them.

No one doubted my father's capabilities that I knew of. No one other than me. Decades under his command, working closely with him, had shown me that he was not the immaculate ruler that he presented to the people. He was plagued with indecision, and he moved too slowly.

It would be the death of him one of these days, but I hoped that day would not come too soon.

I did not yearn for the crown. It came with responsibilities I was not yet ready for. As a Prince I had enough of those already, and I had to remind myself frequently to enjoy the small amount of liberty that came with my position in comparison to my father's.

He had no friends. It was impossible to be close to anyone when you were King. You always had to be concerned with whether or not someone was after your crown. Paranoia came with the job description. There was only ever one person a King could feel safe with, and that was his Queen. Not even his heirs were trusted—perhaps least of all his heirs.

But his relationship with his mate—my mother—was abnormal now, to the point where he might as well not have a Queen. My mother lived, but she had barely been able to carry me to term, and her last pregnancy had been over a century ago. The miscarriages had created a void between the two of them, and in a way it was as if they weren't mated at all.

And so it was that I was the only heir.

Yet another dangerous and weak thing that my father had done.

He should have produced more heirs, in case something happened to me. Heirs were important, not just for the succession of ruling the people, but because without one of the royal blood, the entire vampire race would die out. We are all of us linked together, from sire to sire. The death of a sire means the death of all their progeny. And all vampires are ultimately linked back to the King—if the King has no heir and is killed, then that is the end of our species.

There is a special ceremony that is performed with centuries old magic to officially link the succession from sire to heir so that upon the sire's death the hold of the line is passed down to the heir, rather than the heir dying along with the sire. If the ceremony is not performed, then the line dies with the sire.

For me, the ceremony had been performed when I had reached my prime. So long as nothing happened to me before my father died, our line was secure. And then it would be my responsibility to secure the lineage.

Truthfully, my father had already begun to pressure me on this. It was exceptionally important because I had no brothers, no one to take my place. And yet I resisted for now.

How had I come to this line of thought? I pushed it from my mind, focusing on my father when I

recognized that he was about to speak.

He cleared his throat. "We will send our stealthiest warriors into the city to locate the wolf and the blood mage. The blood mage is of utmost priority—if that collar falls into the wrong hands, they could figure out how to remove its magic and everything we have worked for will be for naught."

All the more reason why I thought a full frontal assault was necessary. But I pushed that thought aside as well; my father's decision had been made.

I could do nothing but stand by him.

Chapter 7

NINA

I spat blood onto the ground to clear it from my mouth, glaring at the wolf across from me.

One month, that was all I had been given to acclimate to the world again before my training had begun. I would have liked a little more time, but that wasn't up to me. It was all up to Conall. I owed him a life debt, and if he said to jump then I was damn well going to jump.

The she-wolf across from me was grinning viciously. She enjoyed the fight, and I think more than that she enjoyed pummeling me. A month had been enough time for my body to adjust to food and for me to begin bulking up so that I no longer looked like a skeleton, but it hadn't been enough time for the wolves to accept me.

Still, they glared at me whenever I walked past them. I heard the insults muttered under their breath, and I knew that they hated me more than words could say. I felt like it was a little over the top, all things considered. I knew that blood mages weren't exactly the most accepted race, but after my collar was removed and they saw that I didn't immediately take control of everyone's mind, I had thought that they would bend a little more.

That was not the case.

I ducked to the side as the she-wolf lunged for me again, narrowly missing her first. She wasn't holding back. If I let her get a good shot in, she might just break some of my bones.

That, I did not want. I wasn't in the mood to break and bruise, but again, that wasn't up to me. I was going to walk away from this, one giant bruise, I had already accepted that.

But that didn't mean that I wasn't going to give this my all.

I desperately wanted to make Conall proud. I wanted him to think that I was worthwhile. I didn't want him to regret choosing me to save from the cells.

Because a part of me was afraid that if he regretted it, he would send me back. I couldn't ever go back to those cells. A shudder ran down my spine at the thought of it, and my attacker took advantage of the moment when I wasn't paying attention.

She landed a punch to my shoulder, sending me spinning backwards. I fought to regain my footing and forced myself to concentrate on the task at hand.

Conall was watching, and I couldn't disappoint him. That just wasn't acceptable.

I balled my hands into fists and bounced my weight from foot to foot, ducking again to avoid

another blow, then darted in to slam my fist into her gut.

She moved aside before I could get there and brought both of her fists down together on my back, using my momentum against me. I slammed into the ground, hard. My head smacked against the dirt and I just barely managed not to groan. All those years of torture really came in handy when you didn't want your opponent to know that they were getting the better of you.

If she thought I was beaten, then there wouldn't be anything I could do.

I rolled onto my back, pulling my legs up and threw my weight forward, landing on my feet. It was a move I had been taught a few days ago, and it had taken a lot of practice to get it down pat.

Yeah, they didn't immediately throw me into beat-you-black-and-blue practice, they had started with teaching me how to fall. You would think that falling would be something everyone automatically knew how to do, like some sort of genetic code. How hard could falling be?

Hard, let me tell you. You have to learn how to hit the ground right, with your palms flat out in front of you so that you can push off as soon as you hit the ground. You have to learn how to hold your head steady so that your neck doesn't slam into the ground, and yet at the same time stop your head from cracking open.

So yeah, it's hard, but I had learned. And then once I had learned how to fall, they'd taught me how to get back up as quickly as possible. I was already a walking bruise from those lessons, and my muscles were sore and screaming at me, but there was no respite to be had.

Every day was another lesson. Every day held more bruises to be added to my collection. There was no downtime for healing. I assumed that was because they wanted to toughen me up as quickly as possible, but no one really said why.

No one really said a lot to me, period.

"Come on, little girl," the she-wolf taunted me.

I gritted my teeth together and came at her, fists swinging. She sidestepped me, but I danced to the side this time to keep her from repeating the same move from earlier.

Another lesson learned. See? I'm not completely useless. I can figure things out pretty quickly.

My breath was coming in hard pants, my lungs were burning, and my arms felt like blocks of heavy wood. It took a lot of effort to raise them up to a fighting stance again, but I managed it.

She swung at me again, and this time I blocked her blow with my forearm and brought my other arm up in an undercut.

My jaw dropped when my fist connected with her face, snapping her head back.

Holy shit, I'd actually gotten a shot in! I really hadn't thought I would be able to accomplish that.

But there was no time to waste getting excited about my lucky shot, because she was wiping the blood from under her nose and her eyes promised death.

She didn't like getting hit. News flash: neither did I! But apparently that didn't matter.

Without warning, she came at me again, fists flying. It was all I could do to duck and block her blows; I was entirely on the defensive. This was bad—defensive wasn't a good position to be in for

long. You tired quickly when all you were doing was blocking blows, and you were never going to win a fight from this point of view.

As I blocked her, I tried to keep my eyes on her body, looking for an opening.

Come on, just give me another one.

But she didn't. She just kept swinging at me, and I knew I was going to go down any minute. There was nothing I could do about it, she was just too fast.

I ran to the side, catching a blow on my back as I went, trying to get away from her so I could get my bearings in the fight. But she pursued me viciously, not giving me even a moment to catch my breath.

Jesus Christ, didn't she know what a fair fight was? This was just training; she shouldn't have been coming at me so hard.

I spun around, and her foot collided with my chest, sending me flying into the ground. I choked, trying to draw air into my lungs. They just didn't want to work. I felt like a thousand-pound truck was resting on my chest, my heart was stuttering, and I knew I had to get back on my feet.

Stand up, damn it. Don't let her beat you.

I struggled to my feet and ducked to avoid her next blow, but her foot connected with my head and I saw stars. I clenched my eyes tightly shut as I stumbled, trying to stay standing, and then her foot connected with my arm and I felt it bend at an angle it *really* shouldn't have.

A scream was torn from my throat and I fell to my knees, clutching my left arm to my chest as I swore up a storm. I couldn't open my eyes to see through the pain, couldn't get my brain to work. All the torture from my childhood hadn't prepared me for broken bones—repeated flesh wounds had been the option of choice for the guards. Most of the time.

My arm was on fire, or at least that's how it felt. I fought to bring air into my lungs.

Could I get up and fight with a broken arm? I seriously contemplated it, as suicidal as that was. I didn't know how to fight with one arm. Hell, I didn't know how to fight period, as of the recent evidence had shown.

At last my eyes opened and I looked up to see the she-wolf staring down at me, waiting to see if I would get back up. I wanted to in that moment. I had never wanted anything more than to get back up and smash her fucking face in, but I knew that I wasn't capable of it.

Not that I wasn't capable of violence, I mean. But rather that I physically wasn't capable of completing the task at the moment.

Later. She would pay for what she had done to me. I swore it to myself, and it made me feel a little better.

"I submit," I said at last, choking out the words.

Movement caught my eye, and I looked over to the doorway that led to the training courtyard, and saw Conall leaning against it. Disappointment was writ across that face.

I hung my head in shame. That look crushed me in ways that a broken bone never could.

Chapter 8

NINA

That night found me in the library, my broken arm set and in a sling cradled against my chest, a grimoire in my lap. Conall had managed to save a few of them from before the days when the vampires took over the world. I don't know how he managed that—was he that old, or had it been done by his family members?—but I was grateful. It was a connection to a part of myself that I had never thought I would have.

I had always believed I would never be able to tap into this part of myself. The iron collar I had worn for twelve years had assured me that I would be divorced from this side of myself for eternity, but Conall had been able to remove the collar and I had felt whole for the first time in a long time.

Now, I had to prove that I could learn the spells in the grimoires and prove to him that I was worth more than just your average hunter. He hadn't brought me here just to learn how to fight hand to hand, or how to stake a vampire. He had brought me here to learn blood magic, so that I could take out the vampires from distances others couldn't accomplish.

I had to learn how to do it.

I peered down at the page. One of the wolves had taught me to read, though it had been a painfully slow process, and I had felt like an idiot the entire time. But secretly, I was elated that this was a skill I now had under my belt, no matter the fact that it was still difficult. I had to sound out some of the words, but I could do it on my own now. The words *meant* something to me, they weren't just random scratching's on a page that I would never be able to decipher.

Every day that I lived in this mansion I learned something new that carried me one step closer to being an independent person. No one would ever be able to take the ability to read away from me, and that elated me in ways I couldn't put into words.

Just as I came to a rather difficult word and was about to sound it out, I heard footsteps from outside the library. I tensed. The wolves were still very hostile towards me because of what I was, and I knew that if they found me learning blood magic—even though that was what Conall wanted from me—they would only become worse.

A part of me wanted to walk away from the blood magic if it would mean acceptance from the pack. I wanted to belong somewhere. No, not just somewhere, I wanted to belong here. I had been separated from my family since I was six years old, and the concept of family was basically foreign

to me. I could only remember what my abuelita's face looked like. She had raised me in place of my mother, who had been killed by the vampires when I was even younger. The faces of the other family members were just a blur to me, they hadn't been as much of a presence in my life.

But this pack, this was an opportunity to have a family again. It was an opportunity to be part of something bigger than me, and that was what I wanted.

The library door opened. I turned in my chair to see who was coming in, and was surprised to see the she-wolf from earlier.

Had she come to break another one of my bones? Instinct told me that I should clear out of the room to prevent that from happening. It wasn't like I could physically stop her from hurting me; she had more than proven that she was the superior warrior here.

But then again, she had the advantage. She'd been training since childhood, just like all the other wolves had. They'd grown up in this life, I'd only come it a month ago.

"Hello," she said, her lips turning up at the corners in a gentle smile.

I narrowed my eyes. What trick was this? She carried a cup in her hand, and steam was rolling off of it. A sweet aroma filled the room. I wondered what was in the cup, because it smelled delicious, but I didn't ask.

Maybe if I didn't respond to her she would just go away. As much as I wanted the acceptance of the pack, I had learned that it was best we kept our distance from each other for now.

She walked into the room and took a seat opposite me, reaching forward so that the cup was held out to me. "Peace offering." She lifted an eyebrow as she held the cup forward.

I hesitated, then reached forward with my good hand and took the cup from her. I blew on it gently, the paranoid thought coming to mind that she might have done something to whatever was in the cup to hurt me. I hated that I couldn't trust the wolves. But no one had done anything to my food or drink in the month that I'd been here, and she could rough me up whenever she wanted, so I doubted she had done anything to it. I took a sip, and the warm liquid slid down my throat, warming me.

My eyes closed and a soft 'mmm' sound came from my lips. "Oh, that's good," I said. "Thanks."

I opened my eyes in time to see her beaming at me.

"I thought you might like it. It's an old family recipe. Good for relaxing the muscles, which I thought you might need after the day you had."

Frowning, I tapped one finger against the cup idly. "I'm sorry, but why are you being so nice? You kind of busted my arm earlier."

She shrugged. "Yeah, sorry about that. I kind of lost it when you caught me by surprise. I won't make the mistake of underestimating you again, though." She grinned. "I thought it was about time someone welcomed you to the group. It hasn't been easy on you, has it?"

My eyes widened. She meant to make peace between us? Well, I couldn't do anything other than accept that. All I wanted was to get along with the wolves, aside from making Conall proud. After today though, I didn't think that was very likely.

I sipped at the tea again, allowing myself to relax back against the chair.

It was then that I felt the distinct sensation of another heart beating. Not that I could hear the heart beating, but I could *feel* it. I could feel blood running through veins in tandem with my own, and I was now aware of it on a level I hadn't been before. My heart sped up to match the beat of the other heart, and my distress escalated.

What was happening? How could I feel another heart beating?

It had to be her heart that I was feeling. I glanced down at the page I was on, reminding me of the spell I had been reading about. It was about biorhythms and how to sync yourself with them—basically, everyone has their own rhythm and a blood mage is capable of seeking out another person's rhythm and controlling it.

I had to stop, but I didn't know how. This was freaking me out.

I pushed at the sensation, trying to get it to go away, and felt a pain in my chest when my own heart stuttered.

She frowned, rubbing at her chest.

Oh God, had I made her heart stutter too? Panic began to rush over me in waves and I watched as discomfort colored her face even more.

"I should be getting to bed," she said, but it came out as more of a mutter. She was clearly distracted by the pain I had given her.

Shame washed over me. "Yeah. Thanks for the tea," I said, trying to smile. It was a little wobbly, but it did the job.

She nodded at me and walked out. As she left, the sensation of feeling her heart beating faded away and I breathed a little easier. I took a sip of the tea again to allow its relaxing properties to rush through me.

If this was what being a blood mage was like, I didn't want any part of it. I didn't want to feel other people's bodies going through their normal processes, and I hated the way I had hurt her. She had come to me offering peace and I had done the one thing all the wolves feared I would do—I used blood magic on her.

Even if it had been an accident, it had still happened.

I should stop. I should put this book away and go find Conall and tell him I can't do any of this.

And yet a morbid curiosity filled me. Could I feel others in the mansion? I had to wonder. I reached out my senses, and sure enough, I picked up the rhythms of the other wolves in the mansion.

Breathing deeply, I forced myself to remain calm. It had been my panic that had hurt the woman. It had been an accident, a reaction, and if I could just maintain control I could disconnect with as much ease as I had connected.

I concentrated, visualizing my magic as tendrils that reached out of the library and called them back to me. I saw them retreating until they curled back inside my body, and I could no longer feel the

other wolves.

I did it. I successfully used my blood magic without hurting anyone or losing control.

Elation began, but at the same time it was tinged with that same amount of shame. I shouldn't be enjoying what I was doing. I had hurt someone and then immediately proceeded to practice the exact same magic.

What kind of person repeated a spell that had hurt someone?

I bowed my head, trying to tell myself that I wasn't horrible, but it was hard to get the idea to fully compute. Maybe the stories were right, and blood mages were all awful, horrible people. Maybe I hadn't been because I hadn't used blood magic before.

Maybe it corrupted you.

But no, that was ludicrous. My abuelita hadn't been a horrible person. She'd been kind, caring, and compassionate. She'd loved everyone around her with so much of her heart that she hurt whenever they hurt. She certainly hadn't been corrupt.

I would just have to be the same sort of mage as abuelita.

But Conall wants to turn you into a weapon. He doesn't want you healing people, he wants you hurting people.

And I had to do what Conall wanted. Not because he was in charge here—basically a King in this mansion—but because I owed him. And it wasn't that resentful sort of owing a person. It was that I was genuinely grateful for what he had done for me.

He had saved me when I hadn't thought it was even possible to be saved. He was my knight in shining armor, and I would do anything he wanted me to do.

And besides, it wasn't like he wanted me to hurt *people*. He wanted me to kill vampires.

The same vampires that had caged and beaten me. I didn't feel even a twinge of remorse at the idea of killing the vampires that had hurt me.

They weren't people, they were monsters.

Clearing my head, I returned to the task at hand. I had completed one spell, now I wanted to see if I could do another. I grabbed a letter opener off the side table near me that I had pulled out earlier when I'd come into the library and carefully cut my finger.

It hurt, but only a little, and a drop of blood welled up on it. I focused on my finger, glaring down at it with immense concentration, and called to mind one of the spells I'd read earlier.

I began to chant the words for a healing spell, visualizing the skin knitting back together.

But nothing happened.

I frowned and tried again, pushing myself harder.

Still, my finger continued to bleed.

Frustrated, I snapped the grimoire shut and shoved it aside. I might be able to sense the other wolves, but I couldn't do anything practical. This was absolute bullshit.

Then I froze. I heard footsteps coming to the library again.

Chapter 9

NINA

The door opened, I twisted in my seat, and saw Conall come in. He was an imposing man, all lean muscle and cold eyes, but I felt a swell of gratitude begin inside of me at the sight of him. I would always feel safe around him, even if I didn't get to see him very much.

Or at all, really. After he had introduced himself in the dining room that first day, and given me the grimoires the next day, I hadn't seen hide nor hair of him. He was a busy man, and he had a lot on his plate. I didn't dare seek him out, knowing that I would have been intruding on valuable time.

And he had never come to visit me.

He glanced at the shut grimoire, lifting one eyebrow.

My skin flushed, and I averted my gaze. It was obvious that I wasn't getting much studying done with a shut book. I wanted to explain that I had been trying, but my mouth was suddenly dry, and I couldn't get the words to come.

It didn't matter. He'd caught me in my moment of frustration, and no excuses I had would cover that up.

Besides, he didn't strike me as the sort of man who accepted excuses.

He just had to walk in then, didn't he? He couldn't have come in a few minutes earlier, when I had successfully completed a spell and was full of elation and confidence. No, he had to pick the moment when I'd given up.

"How is practice going?" Now both of his eyebrows lifted.

I mumbled something along the lines of 'ok.'

He just stared at me, clearly waiting for me to speak up and elaborate. Right. Mumbling wasn't a very becoming way of speaking, and he was used to being addressed by his hunters with clear responses to everything he said.

I had to measure up to them.

"Er, well. Not so well, actually," I said, grimacing. "I can't seem to get any of the practical spells to work. I'm kind of struggling here. I wish there was another blood mage that could teach me, one on one."

He nodded, remaining silent for a moment. Thinking over my words, I assumed.

I shouldn't be whining about not having a teacher. If he had someone to teach me, he wouldn't need me in the first place.

Be grateful he even has the grimoires for you and you don't have to figure this shit out on your own, Nina. Jesus. You're such a spoiled brat.

I reprimanded myself, and felt well and truly shamed for it. He didn't have to say a word against me, I could do that all on my own.

"You could practice on me," he said.

My eyes widened. "That sounds dangerous." I thought about the way I had synced together with the she-wolf earlier and how I had hurt her. I didn't want to hurt Conall.

He shrugged. "No more dangerous than sparring practice is."

"Well, it could be. What if I did something to you that couldn't be undone? I don't think it's a good idea."

His cold eyes settled on mine and the look in his eyes was a very hard, no nonsense one. "Nina. Do it."

I put the grimoire on the side table and stood up. "Okay. I guess I can try. What do you want me to do?"

He frowned. "What's a simple spell?"

"Well, I can sense your heartbeat." I reached out with my magic to pick up the feeling of his heart in his chest. It was a steady beat, albeit faster than mine.

I guess the wolves just ran at faster speeds than your average human being. And aside from my magic, I was very average.

He shook his head. "That's too passive. Try to *do* something to me."

Now it was my turn to frown. I didn't know what he wanted me to do—there wasn't anything *kind* that I could do to him. He wasn't bleeding. I couldn't heal a wound that didn't exist.

And he clearly wanted me to do something more active.

I shook my head. "I don't want to hurt you." I sounded weak even to my own ears.

"Cut me," he said calmly.

My eyes widened and I shook my head again. "No!"

"Cut me, Nina."

I clenched my eyes tight and tilted my head towards the ground. I couldn't disobey him, and yet I didn't want to do what he was asking of me. Hurting him was the exact opposite of anything I ever wanted to do. But I wanted to make him proud, and this was what he was asking of me.

Taking in a deep breath, I straightened my shoulders and opened my eyes again. I looked up at him, concentrating on his exposed forearm. I tried to envision a small cut opening on his wrist there.

Nothing big, more like a paper cut than anything. Just enough to bring the blood out to the surface.

But just like when I'd tried to heal the wound I'd inflicted on myself, nothing happened.

Shoving down the frustration that welled, I tried harder. I felt sweat beading on my forehead as I

concentrated on him.

Come on, just a little cut. Just to show him that you can do something.

And still, nothing happened. All I could do was feel his heart beating, the same steady beat it had been the whole time.

At last, I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I can't do it."

That same look of disappointment that I'd seen earlier that day in the courtyard appeared on his face. Shame washed over me—I couldn't disappoint him!

"You aren't trying hard enough," he said.

But I was! Couldn't he see that I was sweating, that my breath was coming in short little pants? Couldn't he see the way my chest rose and fell with my labored breathing?

It frustrated me that he willfully ignored these signs that I was doing everything I could to do what he asked of me. But that frustration didn't do anything to help me.

God, if I couldn't do this, was he going to send me back out on the streets?

I wouldn't last a single night on the streets. The vampires would find me with no problem, and they would throw me back in the cages. If I was lucky, they would recognize that I'd been in the cages before and they would kill me to punish me for escaping.

If I wasn't lucky, they would take their anger out on me in other, much worse ways.

I couldn't go back to the cages.

Swallowing my terror, I forced myself to focus on Conall. He wanted me to work magic, but I couldn't get a simple cut to open on his skin.

Maybe I was going about this the wrong way. Maybe there was something else I could do with my magic.

I had introduced a stutter to the she-wolf's heart on accident. That had been an internal act, not an external one. Maybe that would be easier.

I didn't want to do anything to his heart, though, so I shifted my focus to his head.

Narrowing my eyes, I waited until I could feel the blood flowing there, and very carefully I visualized the blood heating up.

A moment later sweat broke out on his forehead and he touched a hand to his head.

Excitement swept over me.

And then to my horror he grabbed his head with both his hands, swearing. I had never seen him lose control like that before.

"Stop it!" He snapped at me, his eyes clenched tight.

Panicked, I tried to pull back my magic from him, tried to disengage. But I could feel it getting worse, as if my magic was responding to my emotions like there was a threat to me. Like it had to protect me.

He cried out, falling to his knees on the floor and still gripping his head with both his hands.

I backed up a step, the backs of my legs knocking into the chair behind me, and lifted a hand to my

lips. I had to stop, but I didn't know how.

Calm down, Nina. You can do this if you're calm. Your panic won't help Conall now.

Right. I had to stay calm. I took in deep breath after deep breath, forcing myself to relax. I visualized the tendrils of magic around his head and slowly pulled them off one by one, retracting them into my core.

He remained on the floor for several moments, just breathing deeply, but I was pretty sure he wasn't in pain anymore.

"I'm sorry," I said, starting forward with a hand raised to touch him.

He waved a hand at me. "Get away," he snarled. He rose to his feet again and stalked out of the room, with one last look back at me that I couldn't quite make out.

But he had wanted me to do something to him. Something active, and it wasn't like there was any healing magic I could have done...

I felt the tears burning at my eyes and I hastily blinked to keep them from falling. No, I wasn't going to cry. I wasn't going to be weak like that.

I had done what he wanted; it wasn't my fault if he hadn't liked it after it had happened.

But there was a new kind of determination in me. A determination to master my abilities, to prove to the wolves that I wasn't an out of control abomination, and to make Conall proud.

Most of all, though, I wanted to be strong enough so that I would never *ever* need someone to save me again.

Chapter 10

GRAYSON

I stood in my room, strapping my sword belt around my waist as I prepared myself for the hunting trip I was about to embark on with my friend. Hunts were few and far between these days. Not quite forbidden by my father, but they were no longer quite the norm. And worst of all, my father had grown more and more cautious of late, not allowing me to go on the hunts when they did happen.

It was because the blood mage still had not been found.

I blamed his slow action for that. If we had flooded the streets immediately after finding out about her escape, perhaps we could have found her before she went to ground. No doubt she was hiding somewhere and hadn't set foot outside of her new sanctuary out of fear of being caught.

That was good, though. There was no way she could learn any of the spells that the blood mages of old had been able to perform; there were no blood mages to teach her.

That was another reason the hunts had slowed down—we had all but caught the remaining mages. There were probably a few holdouts left for us to snap up, but for the most part we had done our job.

I didn't know what I would do for fun once the hunts stopped for good; they were my last bit of true freedom in this world of responsibility. And it had been a month since my last hunt—the exact amount of time that the blood mage had been missing for—and I was antsy to get on with it.

I wanted to feel the air rushing around me as I moved faster than light through the streets. I wanted to fight with a mage and grasp them tight and taste the hot blood running into my mouth as they struggled against me.

Goddamnit, I wanted to feel like a true vampire again. So long now had I fed off the willing thralls that it felt like I hadn't earned the right to call myself vampire any longer.

Everyone else was fine with feeding off the thralls—and why not? It was good, fresh blood. Straight from the vein.

But it wasn't good enough for me. Not truly. Nothing would ever compare to the euphoria of a feed made from a fight.

I checked the belt one last time to make sure it was secure. I shouldn't need the sword for anything, but there was the possibility of running into a werewolf now. That hadn't been something we'd had to worry about for so long, but I wasn't going to get caught unaware.

And it wasn't your average, ordinary blade either. It was silver.

If the myths were right, it would kill a werewolf without things having to get messy.

Raoul and Alex stood on either side of my door, waiting for me.

"Are you gents ready for a fight?" I asked with a vicious grin on my face.

"You know me, Gray. I'm always ready for a fight," Alex said.

"This should be fun. I've been cooped up too long," Raoul said.

"You and me both," I said. "I can't wait to run."

We made our way out of the castle, and as soon as we were in the outside air we took off at a sprint.

God, but it was beautiful to feel alive again. To feel the stolen blood pumping rapidly through my veins and the wind tearing at my long hair, whipping it about my face.

We ran into the inner city, where things weren't as carefully controlled. This was where blood mages were most likely to be—they liked to haunt their old homes whenever possible, or at least be as close to them as they could. Nostalgia and all of that nonsense.

I didn't see why they risked themselves doing that. We vampires had never been so foolish. When it had been necessary to leave our homeland because of the vampire hunters, we had done so as pragmatically as possible.

There was no room for emotion when it came to survival.

I glanced at my friends as we ran, grinning at the sight of their grim faces. The hunt was setting into them and they would lose themselves in it for now.

I should throw myself over to the hunt as well. And yet something prickled at my mind, telling me that I should maintain awareness of my surroundings. It didn't seem necessary, and it would detract from the pleasure of the hunt, but I had learned to trust my instincts.

So I kept as aware as possible as we ran through the city, turning down several alleys and then back onto the streets as we hunted for signs of blood mages.

It would likely take us a while to pick up the trail of a blood mage tonight. Their ranks were few now that they had been rounded up like the vermin they were. There were only stragglers now, and these would be the smartest of the bunch. The ones that knew how to hide their heartbeats at all times instead of just when they were as still as possible.

Perhaps they would have even learned to avoid their old homes. They might have set up camp in someone else's abandoned apartment instead of remaining in the homes that they used to live in. The smartest of the mages had left the inner city as soon as the hunts had begun, but our warriors chased them even still.

And it wasn't just this city that we owned.

It was all of them. There were more vampires than ever now, though we had stopped allowing just anyone to turn someone. That now had to be approved by the King himself.

Normally, vampires are born, not turned. Turning is possible, although a dangerous process to go

through, both for the vampire and the human that is chosen. Either of them could die during the process if they aren't careful, although it is more likely that the human would die than the vampire. In the first days of our takeover, there was a flurry of new vampires.

People turned anyone they wanted, and many of them died in the process.

That was why my father had proclaimed that all future turnings had to be approved by him, to protect the people from their own stupidity. And all turnings were now supervised by our Caretaker.

I thrust the thoughts from my mind at the sound of rattling down one of the alleys we had just passed.

"Double back," I said, already turning. Raoul and Alex took a moment longer than me, they were fully given over to the hunt now, but they obeyed as always. We ran down the alley, then slowed so that we could take in our surroundings.

I knew I had heard something down here. It was either blood mage or human, but more likely it was a blood mage, seeing as the alley was empty now. It was hiding somewhere.

There was that niggling sensation at the back of my mind. I needed to be aware of something, I felt like it was staring me right in the face, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

I turned slowly, and that was when I felt the danger of the situation.

"Get out," I hissed.

Instead, my damned friends closed in on me. Protecting me. They knew that my life was more precious than theirs—if I died, our line was doomed. The likelihood of my father finding a new mate and siring a new heir was unlikely at this point, though I assumed he would muster it up for the good of the people. Just like he did for everything else.

I shoved at Alex's shoulder, trying to get him to move out of the alley, but he was stubborn.

"You first, Prince," he said.

Right. Serious situation.

And then the alley flooded with bodies. I don't know why I hadn't been able to scent them sooner, but their animalistic musk was apparent as soon as they filled the alley.

Werewolves.

We were surrounded.

I yanked my sword from my belt, turning my back so that either of my shoulders were pressed against one of Raoul's and Alex's. So long as we maintained the triangle, we would be able to make it out of this, I was sure. If a wolf got onto our backs...but no, I couldn't think about that right now.

One of the men lunged them, darting in close to me, and I cut him down without hesitation, lopping his head off.

Even though it had not been necessary to hunt with a sword in a long time, I was not without practice. I had refused to allow my skills to rust, and I trained with the sword every day.

The training paid off now, as I moved without much thought, relying on muscle memory. I cut down three more wolves, and then the worst sound reached my ears.

Raoul's sharp cry of pain.

I whirled, not thinking of the danger of turning my back to the two wolves that had been before me.

Raoul's heart lay in the hand of one of the wolves.

The world spun and a red haze colored my vision.

My friend. My friend was dead. The wolves had killed him.

With a violent snarl, I leapt forward, and I lost myself in the killing. No wolf stood a chance against me when I was like this.

I was hatred. I was death.

When I came back to myself, I was standing over Raoul's corpse, bloody sword in one hand, and breathing hard. Alex's hand was on my shoulder, but I found no comfort in it.

Raoul was dead.

I felt something break inside of me, a crushing weight descending on me, but I knew that I was physically unharmed. Raoul had been my friend for decades now. I couldn't imagine a world that he wasn't a part of.

"Gray..." Alex started to speak but apparently could think of nothing to say beyond my name.

Shaking my head, I turned my back on his body. I had to collect myself. I had to remember that I was the Prince and that it was my duty to set an example. To figure out what was to be done.

I couldn't react emotionally. I couldn't give in to the crushing feeling that surrounded my heart like a vice.

What was I going to do without him?

I wanted to scream at the heavens for taking my friend from me, but there was no one to curse. I had slaughtered his killers in a rage that I had only succumbed to once or twice in my long life. The loss of my friend was enough to set me off, and I knew that I had to battle with myself to remain in control right now.

Alex was looking to me to determine what we would do next.

Lead, Grayson. That's all you can do. That's what you have to do.

"We need to get his body home," I said. To my credit, my voice did not crack, and I knew that my face gave no indication of the pain slicing through me like a sword.

Alex would know the pain I was in. I had known him longer than Raoul. He knew every one of my tells. There was no hiding myself from him.

I wanted to hide just now. I didn't want anyone to know what I was feeling, and I didn't want sympathy.

It was my fault Raoul was dead. I had been reckless, going out on a hunt when my father had told me time and again that these were dangerous times.

He would have found a different hunt to join if you had not organized one.

I knew that was the truth, but I also knew that if I hadn't been here Raoul and Alex would have

fled the alley without hesitation. They had remained to protect me, unwilling to move without me. I was their highest priority, and my presence had killed my friend.

"It's not your fault, Gray," Alex said, knowing what I was thinking without my having to say it.

Grimacing, I turned back to look at him. "I know that you mean well, Alex, but we both know he would have survived if I had not been here."

Alex said nothing. There was nothing to say to that and we both knew it.

I knelt and collected my friend's body, holding him tight to my chest.

He had a wife. I was going to have to tell his wife he was dead.

Already, I could picture the look in her eyes when she learned the news. Caroline was a dear woman with a gentle heart, softening Raoul's sharp sides in ways that none of us could have ever imagined was possible. Her pain would exceed my own in ways I could not imagine.

Yet I found a small part of myself looking forward to talking with her. It would be a painful conversation, but I suspected that she could understand the depths of my pain. Of course, Alex felt it just as sharply as I did, but neither of us could give voice to the pain that raged inside of us.

Caroline was not bound by the principles that guided the males of our species, and I knew that when she wept it would give some release to my soul.

It was an inherently selfish thought, and it sickened me that I wanted it.

"Come." I barked the command to Alex and together we ran through the streets back to our castle.

It did not take us long, as we took the most direct path there. We weren't hunting any more, there was no need to dart down one alley or another. Our destination was set for us.

Raoul was a light weight in my strong arms, too light. I wanted a solid weight in my arms, dragging me down to the Earth, as penance for my folly. If he were heavy...

But no, there was no use thinking on that. I would have to satisfy myself with the weight that crushed my heart, it was enough to remind me that I had caused this.

I would carry it within me always.

Together, Alex and I walked up the steps of the castle. He opened the great door for me, and I swept inside with only a moment of hesitation. Once others laid eyes on Raoul's body, this would become real. There would be no way to deny what had happened, as a part of my mind so longed to do.

This late in the night, most everyone was gone about their business in the city. Some were looking for more thralls, others were just blowing off steam. Lady Caroline would be in her chambers, I suspected. Unaware of the painful devastation that was headed her way.

I wanted to spare her the pain as long as was possible, so I headed first for the throne room.

My father had to be informed of what had happened.

He sat on his throne, talking to one of his advisors, but fell silent as soon as his eyes lighted on me.

"Son," he said. His voice was quiet and emotionless, but I knew the horror that was inside

his mind.

I alone knew his mind so well. To everyone else, it would appear that he didn't care what had happened, and likely they would rage against this. Raoul had been a beloved member of the court—not quite as much as Alex was, but still. His loss would be felt heavily by all of us.

"We were attacked," I said. I fought to keep my voice steady, knowing that I had to do what I could to appear as my father did.

Everyone could hate him for his emotionless mask, but they looked to him for indications of how to react. So long as he remained calm, so would they.

I walked forward and laid Raoul's body at my father's feet, taking a few steps back. My eyes were riveted on the corpse of my friend. I wanted to look away, wanted this all to be a horrible mistake that would be quickly forgotten. Most of all though, I wanted to remember Raoul as he had been and not as he was now.

But nothing could change the image that had been imprinted on my mind now. I would always see his pale face, the hole in his chest where his heart should have been. No longer would I see the small, subtle smile that he gave me when we joked together. No longer would I see the light in his eyes that only Caroline could bring out in him.

"What happened?"

"We were ambushed by wolves in an alley," I said. "There were many of them, but they are destroyed."

My father nodded, looking down at Raoul's body. I wanted to know what he was thinking, but more than that I wanted him to *react*. I wanted to see anger on his face. I wanted him to rage at the loss of my friend.

I wanted permission to do the same.

It would not be given to me.

"There will be no more hunts." There was a finality to his voice that brooked no argument.

I should have listened to that.

"Father!" I cried, my hands balling into fists. "We must root out the werewolves! This cannot be allowed to stand. His murderers have been killed, but the pack is likely to be far greater than just the ones we ran into. They must be destroyed. You cannot do this."

My father lifted his head slowly to lock his cold, empty eyes on me. There was no emotion in them, no rage at the fact that I had argued with him in front of others.

"You will know your place, my son," he said. "This crown is not yet yours, and you do not have permission to speak."

Rage consumed me anew, and for the first time in my life I knew a desire to attack my father. I wanted to beat him for his indifference towards Raoul's death. I wanted him to know that it was unacceptable.

I wanted him to feel my pain.

But I did none of these things. Instead, I averted my eyes in a show of deference. It was my duty to set the tone for how others would respond to my father, and I had broken decorum once already. I could not do so again. If I did, there would be consequences.

But I swore to myself that when I was King things would be different.

And no matter what my father said, I was going to eradicate the hunters.

Chapter 11

NINA

My breath came in sharp little pants as I took three steps back, eyeing the wolves in front of me. There were three standing together, a few paces apart, and then one on either side of me.

It wasn't a fair fight, but it had been weeks since I'd been given a fair one-on-one fight. Ever since I started doing well in these blasted training sessions, they had just escalated the stakes.

Movement to my right. I threw myself to the ground and rolled under the leaping werewolf, jumping back to my feet a moment later and whirling about to face them. Now I had two in front of me and three on my right—not much better than before, but I could see them all without having to rely on my peripheral vision.

The werewolf I had avoided snarled at me, his fists clenching together.

I bared my teeth at him in a savage grin. In the months of training with the wolves I had picked up a few of their mannerisms, though I resisted their practice of shit-talking the enemy.

It was a waste of breath. Breath that I dearly needed to hold my own against them in a fight.

The three on my right charged as one and it was all I could do to get out of the way for one of them, bringing up my arm to block the oncoming attack of another. I swung my free hand and slammed it into the gut of the offending werewolf, bringing my knee up sharply to meet his groin.

They didn't fight fair and neither did I.

He doubled over as he gasped for air and I brought both of my hands down together to slam into his back. He fell to the ground, but my victory was short lived.

Pain lanced through my scalp—the third werewolf I had ignored had me by the hair and was yanking me down.

Gritting my teeth, I compartmentalized the pain. Something I had learned in the years of torture at the vampire's hands—if you could ignore the pain then there wasn't much that they could do to you. It hadn't been a particularly useful trick as the torture sessions had gone on longer and longer until I gave in to the pain and screamed, but it certainly helped in a fight.

I twisted towards my attacker, forcing him to slacken his hold on my hair, and slammed my head into his chest. More pain cut through my concentration as I connected with the bones in his chest, but I succeeded in shocking him into dropping my hair.

Without hesitation, I straightened up and brought my leg up in a wide arc to slam into his face. I spun, anticipating the attacks of the other wolves, and ducked just in time to avoid a blow.

A crunching sound greeted my ears. My attacker's momentum had carried his arm over me and into the werewolf I'd head butted. I smirked at that and jumped back to my full height, bringing my fist up to connect with the new werewolf's chin.

His head snapped back, but he didn't allow it to break his concentration.

Instead, he swept his foot under my legs, knocking me to the ground.

My head slammed into the concrete and I gasped for air, seeing stars for a moment.

Breathe. Breathe! You have to breathe!

I couldn't, though. I couldn't seem to concentrate long enough to breathe.

My eyes snapped open as I shoved the pain to the side. No time to simmer in it, a fist was flying towards my face.

I rolled to the right, hoping that my attacker would keep going and end up punching the ground, but I saw that he corrected himself before that could happen.

Ah, well, it did one good to have hopes and dreams, right?

Get up! Stay down and you die, Nina.

Right. Heeding my own words, I pulled my legs up into the air and threw my weight forward, landing steadily on my feet. I crouched low, backing up a few paces so that I could get all five wolves in my vision.

It might not be fair to have five on one, but to their credit, they didn't swarm me. That might have been because there wasn't enough physical space to have more than three people around me at once, but I was thankful for the brief respite.

Ah, fuck it. I charged at them, dropping to the ground at the last minute. I braced my weight on my arms and swung my leg in a wide arc, spinning my body with the momentum. The three of them crashed to the ground as I took their legs out from under them.

A hand grasped my hair again, yanking me away from the wolves I'd brought to the ground.

Fuck, this whole business of not keeping them in my vision was really screwing me over.

You have other methods of keeping track of them. I reminded myself.

Right!

Immediately, I spread my awareness throughout the courtyard, my magic snaking out like tendrils and wrapping around each individual. Now I was locked onto their biorhythms and could keep track of them even if I had my eyes closed.

But I was still on the ground and it was only a matter of seconds before someone slammed a fist into my face.

Instead of waiting for it to happen, I rolled my weight backwards, bringing my legs up and keeping my knees locked tight—my feet connected with the head of whoever was attacking me.

The grip on my hair loosened and I jumped to my feet.

I felt the heartbeats of three of the wolves coming at me from behind and waited until they were close before darting sharply to the right. They ran past me, stumbling the last few steps when they realized that they weren't going to connect with me.

Instead of following them, I raced for the other two wolves, leaping into the air as I closed distance with one of them.

I spread my arms wide to help with my balance, and snapped one leg forward. The satisfying crunch of bone greeted my ears as my foot connected with a nose.

The poor wolf collapsed to the ground, howling and clutching at his face.

He didn't do so well with pain.

I landed in a crouch in front of him and threw my arm out to the left towards the other wolf. I visualized his blood turning to ice inside of him, freezing his muscles and preventing him from moving.

It wasn't a spell that lay in any of the grimoires Conall had provided for me, it was one that I had adapted on my own after I had learned how to lock onto biorhythms. Thus, it didn't need a chant and afforded me the ability to keep breathing without wasting my air on a spell.

The wolf's eyes bulged as he tried to move, but he was powerless against my spell.

This was why they were so afraid of me.

A small part of me felt guilty for using my blood magic on him, but this was what Conall wanted from me.

He was watching, I knew he was—I had long since perfected the art of locking onto his biorhythm. I felt him wherever he went in the castle so long as he didn't go *too* far away. He was standing in the doorway of the courtyard right now, watching the fight as it was happening.

He hadn't watched one of my fights since the first one when I'd broken my arm.

I *had* to get this right. If he was watching, I had to make him proud.

Two of the wolves were down now, although I doubted the one whose nose I'd broken would stay down for long, so I performed the same spell on him. He didn't seem inclined to fight it, although he let loose a snarl as the cold crept over him.

I'm sorry. I sent the thought out into the world, though none of us possessed the power of telepathy. Maybe karma would come in handy one day and realize that I didn't want to hurt any of these people.

I was only doing as I was told.

With the two wolves immobilized I whirled to face the remaining three.

They were staring at me with anxious eyes, darting from me to the two behind me and back again. They hadn't expected me to use my blood magic, probably. I had only used it once in a fight before, and the reaction...well, it hadn't been pleasant.

Everyone had avoided me for days after. The training fights that had followed had been particularly brutal.

I'd stayed away from blood magic after that, but Conall was watching. He would expect me to use my magic in a fight against vampires, so I had to use it on the wolves I trained with, otherwise I would never learn to fight with magic.

I couldn't risk learning how to use my magic while in an actual fight to the death. It had to be done now.

Apprehension was etched into the faces of the wolves. One of them snarled at me, but he made no move to attack.

They didn't want to get near me now.

Finish the fight. Be done with it.

I didn't need them near me to do that.

Throwing both hands forward, I visualized the threads that snaked from me to the three wolves, already wrapped around them. I sent the tendrils racing up their heads, visualized it wrapping around them, and began to chant under my breath.

I felt rather than saw them move, their panic palpable in the air. They knew I was using my magic on them, and instinct told them to kill me to stop me from doing it.

That was how it had always been with blood mages; we'd had no allies amongst any race. All of them feared our capabilities, even the other magic users. No one wanted to get near a blood mage.

Without waiting for them to get the upper hand—I couldn't give it to them—I finished the chant.

Cries of pain erupted from the wolves and my eyes snapped open to watch them fall to the ground, clutching their temples.

I'd performed this spell once before. It had been the first spell I'd successfully completed, which was why I'd felt fairly certain that I'd be able to pull it off in a combat scenario. I was bursting their blood vessels, but the natural healing of the werewolves ensured that they regrew before true damage was done to them.

Still, it basically produced a debilitating magical migraine. I kept up the spell, narrowing my eyes as I watched them thrash about on the ground.

There was a sensation of euphoria rushing through me that I had learned always came with the use of my magic. It was a part of me, something I was designed to use.

Just as exercise brings an endorphin rush, magic had its rewards for me—though much the same as exercise, too much of it would leave me feeling fatigued. I had tested my limits on several spells in the library on my own, and was learning the signs that the fatigue point was approaching.

I wasn't anywhere near it right now.

"Submit!" I shouted at the werewolves. It was the only way I could release them. If they conceded the fight and named me the victor, then it would all be over, and I could stop keeping two spells going at once.

"I submit!" The three of them cried as one.

At once, I dropped both of the spells I'd been keeping up. I hadn't bothered getting cries of

submission from the first two; they wouldn't have been able to speak.

Now, I turned to them, one eyebrow raised.

"I submit," one of them said, a soft and bitter note in his voice. The other echoed him a moment later.

Euphoria crashed through me, wave after wave. I was panting from the physical exertion of the fight and the use of magic, but I had won!

In the rush of getting two spells going and keeping them active, I had dropped my connection to Conall.

Now, I turned to the doorway, expecting to see him impressed or proud, or some sort of positive look on his face.

But he wasn't there. He didn't stay to see the end.

Disappointment stole my victory from me.

Anger quickly replaced it.

Chapter 12

NINA

I stormed from the courtyard, not bothering to help the werewolves up. It was bad form, I knew that, but I didn't care at that moment. I wanted to know why the hell Conall hadn't stayed to see the end of my fight.

I had used magic especially *because* I'd thought he would be there to see it. I had risked the ire of the other werewolves, the small peace that had brokered between me and them, and he hadn't even been there.

How dare he!

The mansion was large and his office was on the second floor. I took the steps two at a time, my strong muscles carrying me with ease now. I was no longer the starving waif I had been when he had found me—I was a woman to be reckoned with.

I reached his office a moment later and threw open the door, stomping inside and kicking it shut.

He looked up at me, his expression unreadable although it looked a little like he was bored. Well, I would fix that quickly—he was going to get a piece of my mind.

"Nina, how can I help you?" He asked as he shifted a few papers across his desk, clearly looking for something far more important than me.

This only built the rage inside of me. I stalked closer to his desk, my fists landing on my hips.

"I won the fight," I said. "I used blood magic and I won the fight."

He arched an eyebrow—unimpressed. "Good," he said.

"Good? I've been working my ass off over here, staying up all night learning spells from the grimoires and waking up early to spar with the wolves. I haven't had a single break, haven't had a good night's sleep in ages, and all you have to say is 'good'?"

"What do you want from me, Nina? A pat on the back? That is not the way I run things here. You are doing as you are expected, no more and no less."

It aggravated me that he didn't see what I was doing as more than just good enough. I was working my fingers to the bone trying to impress him, and he didn't see me.

God, I just wanted him to see me and congratulate me on my win. All I was doing was for him. I didn't expect it to pay back the life debt that I owed him—there was only one way to do that, and he was a formidable warrior. I didn't see him ever needing me to save his ass in a fight. But I did expect

him to be the tiniest bit happy about me putting my all into my training.

I could just as easily have been a spoiled brat. He didn't know the first thing about me when he'd rescued me from the cages; how could he? He didn't know what he was getting. For all I knew, he'd just grabbed the first blood mage he'd come across.

He'd never told me his reasons for saving me from the cells, other than that he wanted me to train as a hunter with his werewolves. I knew there was a tactical advantage to having a blood mage on your team, but I felt like there was more he wasn't telling me.

With Conall, I suspected, there was always more waiting under the surface.

But there was no way to dig into that surface. He didn't give me any openings, and I didn't spend enough time with him to learn any of his quirks. I was sure that, just like anyone else, he showed emotion in his own ways. If I could just spend some time with him, then I would be able to figure those things out.

Fat lot of good wishing for that did me. I might as well wish for it to snow in hell. He'd been nice enough to me the first night I was here, but he'd avoided me ever since the training session in the library when I'd given him the migraine.

It was as if he was punishing me for it, but I'd only done as I was told.

I had to give him credit though, he didn't look even a little bit afraid of me. Not like the other wolves. They were all afraid of me. They liked to cover it up with big bravado and bluster, but it was lying under the surface and very much visible.

What was I saying? I seemed to have lost some of my steam. I took in a deep breath and lifted my chin.

"You know, a word of encouragement does a lot in terms of motivation and morale," I said. I wasn't yelling at him anymore, but trying to appeal to his logical side.

"I find that the benefit of being fed and given shelter does enough in the way of motivation for my people."

I swallowed. There it was, the threat he never directly said but one that I was terrified of.

If I didn't perform, he was going to kick me out of here and it would only be a matter of time before I ended up back with the vampires.

A shudder ran down my spine. No, I couldn't think about that. If I thought about going back to the vampires, I wouldn't be able to get anything done.

My motivation would always be to impress Conall and make sure he didn't regret bringing me here. I preferred not to think about the fact that he could send me away at any minute if he wished to. That threat might work for others, but not for me.

For me, it would immobilize me.

"So, you don't care at all that I won against five of your wolves? That has to be a little bit impressive."

He sighed, looking up at me from beneath thick lashes. "You did good, kid."

Exuberance filled me. It wasn't much, but it was a compliment. I'd take it. I lived for scraps with him.

"Now, there is something that I wanted to talk to you about."

My heart jumped into my throat. He wanted to talk to me? Why hadn't he waited for the fight to end and then called me over to him? The man made no sense at all.

But that was okay. I would take what I got from him.

"You've done well with your training, as was expected. Now that you have reached a certain level, it's time for your first assignment."

My eyes went wide. He was going to send me out on a hunt?

Immediately, I wanted to protest that I wasn't ready. Fighting werewolves that didn't want to kill me was a hell of a lot different from going up against a vampire that wanted to rip my throat out with its teeth.

I didn't think I could do it, but I knew that talking back was not an option with Conall. I didn't want him to think I was weak, and besides—he was basically King here. No one talked back to him.

"If you think I'm ready, then I relish the opportunity to prove myself," I said with a deep breath.

"You may not be aware, but in our world, everyone competes for a kill. I do not give assignments to just one person, but to everyone, and the first one to take out the mark is compensated for the successful completion of the kill."

Fantastic. I was going up against wolves that were much more accustomed to tracking and killing vampires. How the hell was I supposed to pull this off? Whatever, there was no point in arguing. This was clearly the way it had always been and would always be—I just had to go with the flow.

"I'll do it," I said.

"One more thing," he said as I started to turn and leave. I arched an eyebrow, curious as to what could possibly be left to say. "If you fail, you will have to leave the family. No more resources will be wasted on someone who cannot hold their own."

I swallowed hard. Okay. So the stakes were high on this one. I was going up against wolves that knew how to do this a hell of a lot better than I did, and if I failed I was going to lose everything I had.

Who said the wolves played fair?

Chapter 13

NINA

With shaking hands, I pulled on the thigh harness I'd been given to hold my weapons. It had several sheaths around the waist for daggers, and could hold a stake on either thigh. I pulled on my boots and laced them up to the knee—you may not think it's very practical, but knee-high boots offer more ankle stability than regular boots.

I would need it. I wasn't as fast or as agile as the wolves, and if I was going to hold my own, then I needed every advantage I could get.

Before I left the room, I checked myself in the mirror one last time. My dark brown hair was swept back into a high ponytail to keep it from flying into my face and distracting me. I wore a plain black long-sleeve shirt, made of breathable fabric, and soft leather pants designed to protect from most falls but also to afford maximum flexibility.

A red scarf was tied around one of my wrists—my own little flair. No one would know what it meant, but to me it was a little rebellion against the wolves. A sign of what I was. They didn't want to accept me, and I wanted to embrace my differences. Even if most of the time I cursed them.

The lower half of my face was hidden by a mask. This wasn't something the other wolves wore, it was something Conall had specifically instructed me to wear. He didn't want the vampires to recognize me if it could be helped, then they'd know that they were going up against a blood mage.

They might try to capture me.

I appreciated the thought—he didn't want me captured because he didn't want to have to break me out again, but I found a different sort of reassurance from the mask. If the vampires thought I was just another hunter, then they would be satisfied with killing me instead of catching me.

I would rather be dead than go back to the dungeon.

Satisfied with my appearance, I left my room and made my way down to the lower level where the weapon room was. Wolves were already in it and stocking up—no one spared a look at me. There was a cold sort of tension in the room, and I knew that it was because I had used my blood magic earlier in the day.

If I hadn't, if I had won the fight fair and square, then they might be bantering with me like they were with their friends.

"Fifty bucks says I get to the mark before you."

"No way in hell, son. I've whipped your ass fifty times already. But if you want to lose your cash, that's on you."

"I want in on that action," another wolf said. "I can beat the both of you with one arm tied behind my back."

I longed for one of them to acknowledge me, so that I could feel like a part of things. All I wanted in life was to belong somewhere, and things had seemed like they were headed in that direction for a minute here. But then I'd gone and ruined everything by using my magic, all to get Conall's attention.

And that hadn't even worked.

I sighed and grabbed two stakes off the wall, sliding them into their holsters, and then proceeded to line my belt with small throwing knives. Some of them were made of wood, while others were cold, hard steel. I didn't know why anyone bothered with them, but I wasn't going to argue with the way things were done. Steel wasn't going to do a damn thing against a vampire, except piss it off.

Satisfied with that, I grabbed a contraption off the wall and strapped it to my right forearm. It held a stake in it, and was designed so that with enough momentum, the stake would be launched. All you had to do was aim and punch, and it would take care of the rest for you.

Only newbies needed that—everyone else had the strength necessary to stake a vampire all on their own. But I was weaker than the werewolves, and I needed the advantage it afforded.

I checked it to make sure that everything was in the right place, and then shook my shoulders out to diffuse some of the tension that had built up.

"Hey," Lisa—the she-wolf that had broken my arm—said.

I almost ignored her by accident, I didn't realize she was talking to me.

"Hey," I said, smiling at her.

"Congrats on your win earlier."

My eyes widened a little bit. "Thanks!" I hadn't expected a single one of them to acknowledge the fact that I had taken out five wolves at once, even if I had done it with blood magic.

She grinned back at me. "You're gonna do fine. Well, you will if one of us doesn't get there first. Good luck."

I felt a little better.

Maybe, just maybe, I could do this after all.

Chapter 14

GRAYSON

I paced my room from one side to the other and back again, my hands locked together behind my back, as I waited for my men to join me. I had sent Alex out fifteen minutes ago to find Jackson and Thomas, the only other two men I trusted.

Bitterly, I wished once again that Raoul was there. Not a day had gone by that I didn't miss him, though I didn't show it to anyone that might be watching me. I couldn't let them think I was weak.

Raoul was the best hunter we had had, no one could compare to him when it came to tracking a kill.

Thankfully, at that moment Alex entered with the other two, interrupting my thoughts before they could go too far down a depressive road.

"Gentlemen," I said with a nod of my head.

The three of them stood side by side, legs spread, hands behind their backs. At attention.

A small smile curved my lips—they knew good and well that I didn't treat them liked soldiers, but they liked to tease me in any way they could. I appreciated anything they did that made me smile these days.

The moments were too few and far between.

"I'm sure you are wondering why I've called you here just after sundown," I said. "We have all just woken up and you would likely rather be getting started on your night."

"Our lives are yours to command," Alex said, a humorous lilt to his voice.

I resisted the urge to glare at him. "Just how far are you willing to go for me?"

Looks of surprise flickered over their faces, and they glanced at one another and then back at me. I had never asked them this before, and they were likely wondering what it was that I was going to ask of them.

"I would follow you to Hell and back, Gray. You know that." Alex spoke first, and the others nodded their heads in agreement with him.

"I'd give my life for you without hesitation, Prince," Thomas said.

It grated on me that he called me 'Prince,' but there was nothing I could do to break him of that. Alex and I had been friends since we were younglings, and I suspected that was why he felt comfortable calling me by name. Not even by name, but rather the nickname he had given me.

This was why I loved Alex most of all; I didn't have to worry about who I showed myself to be around him. I could simply exist when it was just the two of us.

"Good," I said, grinning deviously. "Because we are going on a hunt. I want the head of a wolf."

Slowly, matching grins spread across their faces.

They wanted revenge just as much as I did.

Chapter 15

NINA

Three hours.

That was how long I had been on this blasted hunt, trying to find my mark. I'd been to five different bars and clubs trying to find him, and had finally caught up with him at the sixth. But he hadn't given me a good opening yet—he'd been with three other vampires, and I hadn't wanted to get in the middle of that.

One blood mage against three vampires? No, that didn't seem like a smart decision. Especially since I was an unbloodied mage. I had never taken a life, and truth be told I wasn't looking forward to the experience. I knew it was something I had to do, for Conall, but I would have much preferred going my whole life without killing a person.

Vampires aren't people. They're parasites and they deserve to die.

I told myself this over and over to get it to sink in—but wanting someone dead and actively going to kill them are two wildly different things. Anyone can wish a person dead, but only a certain type of person is actually capable of taking a life.

Was I that kind of person?

I sighed. I was going to have to find out. And honestly, if I wasn't that type of person then I was going to have to learn how to be that type of person. There were no other options. Conall wasn't going to keep me if I couldn't kill vampires for him, and I wouldn't last two seconds on my own.

You've lasted more than two seconds since you left the mansion.

I cheered myself with that thought. That was true. I wouldn't know how to feed myself, or where to find safe shelter, but I hadn't been snatched the moment I'd left the mansion.

Six months since I'd set foot outside of the safe house, and I'd been antsy as hell the moment I was out the door. I had grown used to the halls I'd roamed, the courtyard I'd spent my days in, the library that had owned my nights. I'd developed a rhythm to the life, and it had been comfortable.

Now everything had changed.

I was going to have to fit hunting into my schedule, and somehow still keep up my fighting practice *and* keep learning blood magic.

Don't think about that right now. Focus on the mark.

Right. He was inside a bar right now, although his friends had gone a different way.

I crouched on the fire escape of a building across the street from the bar, waiting for him to come back out. I couldn't go into the club and kill him, there would be too many people that would either attack me or get in the way. I didn't want to add an innocent life to the list—the vampires might rule the world, but for the most part the humans were still allowed to live normal lives.

Thralls were taken, but most of them were willing. Being a thrall meant that you had a roof over your head and food in your belly, even if it meant letting a parasite feed off of you every day. For some people, that was a decent trade off. They thought it was better than living on the streets.

The very thought of that kind of life turned my stomach. I didn't know how anyone could willingly submit themselves to a vampire, but it was none of my business. As long as they were willing, it wasn't anything I could truly protest.

The muscles in my legs ached, and I stood to stretch them. Allowing them to stiffen was a bad idea; if my mark exited the bar and I wasn't agile enough to catch him before anyone else came out then I was going to be in trouble.

And if another wolf came by, I would have to be faster than them. An all but impossible task, but I refused to even contemplate failing this mission.

I spread my awareness into the bar, checking on the biorhythms of its inhabitants. I had picked up the rhythm of my mark when he left the last club, so I was able to pick him out of the crowd.

Good, he was still in there. I was antsy at the thought that there might be a back entrance he would leave by, but it wasn't like I could be in two places at once. Besides, odds were that he would leave the same way he came, right?

Thirty minutes passed without anything interesting happening. A few people came, even less left the bar, and I was getting bored. It was getting harder and harder for me to focus on the bar door; my attention kept wandering.

But I did manage to keep his biorhythm on tap the entire time. I felt his heart beating with stolen blood, felt every time he moved throughout the bar and returned to his seat. Never once did he get near the entrance.

I chewed on my lip, wondering what I could do to pass the time for a while. It was dawning on me that he could spend an hour or two in that bar without coming out; I'd found him when he'd been leaving a club, I had no idea what his usual habits were.

Maybe a climb would get my blood moving again and help me concentrate.

I nodded to myself. I could monitor his biorhythm just as well from the rooftop as I could from the fire escape; if he started towards the door then I would just have to head back down before he got to it.

Decision made, I headed up the fire escape. It felt good to be moving again, to get the blood flowing through my legs. Already, I was glad with the decision—it was dangerous to stay in one spot for too long. A vampire could come along and find me.

Maybe there would be a more comfortable spot on the rooftop. At the very least, I could sit on the

edge instead of kneeling on metal.

It only took me a few minutes to get to the top of the tall building.

The moment I set foot on the rooftop, I realized I wasn't alone.

Chapter 16

GRAYSON

I had separated from my friends over an hour ago, when I had picked up a scent that was familiar and yet unfamiliar to me. It had tickled my senses, begging me to follow it, and I had been unable to ignore it.

Something in my gut had told me this was a hunt I wanted to do on my own. My friends, especially Alex, had been loath to have me part from them—but none of them could deny the order of their Prince.

They had done as they were told, though Alex had warned me that he was going to stay in close range of me. I expected no less from him. He would keep within range of scenting me, and if he smelled blood then he would come my way.

I could hold my own in a fight without him, I had more than proved that time and time again. Still, my friends would not leave me in a fight on my own. I loved them for that, but I was glad that they had allowed me to leave without too much fuss.

I didn't want them around for this, though I couldn't put my finger on the exact why of it.

The hunter—and I was certain it was a hunter by the clothing, though I could not for the life of my figure out the red fabric worn on the wrist—was below me. She wore black clothing, and hid her face, but the swell and sway of her hips had given away her gender.

I could never tell my friends what the sight of her swaying gait had done to me.

My body had reacted on impulse, hardening to a painful degree, and it had taken all of my control to not rush to her and grab her in that moment. I had almost lost control, but I had centuries of experience under my belt and had reigned myself in.

The creaking of metal sounded and I tensed—she was either coming up or going down the fire escape she rested on.

Why do I not kill her already?

Because something was wrong about her. I couldn't figure it out, but something stayed my hand and urged me to figure her out. I had resisted the urge to confront her so far, but her scent was drawing closer now, and I knew she was coming to the roof.

I backed away from the edge, planting myself in the center of the roof, and watched for her.

One conversation. That was all I needed. I could figure out who and what she was, and then I

would kill her.

She is not the wolf you seek. You do not need her head.

That was true. In fact, she was not a wolf at all. Her scent was cinnamon and spice, intoxicating and tempting me with thoughts of what her blood would taste like; not the musky scent of the animal abominations.

Brown hair appeared at the edge of the rooftop, and then her head cleared the barrier.

I stifled the frustrated growl that built in my gut—she wore a mask that covered her face. Her scent teased me with the thought that I might know it, and I had hoped that it would become more clear when I saw her face.

Who the hell wears a mask, anyway? None of the wolves wore masks, so she must not belong to them. But wasn't that obvious by the red fabric at her wrist? My eyes darted to it, once it was visible, and I frowned.

It had to be symbolic of something, but I didn't know what. Perhaps it was an indicator of her clan.

A new group of hunters moving in on the territory, that was what it had to be.

But then why did I recognize her scent? And God, where did I recognize it from?

It could be that I had passed by her in the city before. That might be all it was, and then this silliness was for naught.

Unlikely.

She stepped off the fire escape and onto the roof and her body tensed at once. I could hear her heart beating hard now, smell her apprehension.

She was aware of me.

I moved out of the shadows, my movements graceful, and she jerked her head to look at me.

For a moment, I stopped to stare at the brown eyes that looked back at me. They were beautiful, and I was struck by the notion that I wanted to waste eons just staring into those eyes.

Bullshit. Poetic bullshit. You don't have time for this.

I reprimanded myself and strode forward again.

Her eyes widened—God, they were so beautiful—and she started towards the fire escape again.

"Do not." I warned her, my voice soft and dangerous.

She froze.

"I will simply follow you. You cannot hope to outrun me."

Her heart beat faster, jackhammering against her chest. Pumping her blood faster throughout her body, and again my mind turned to the thought of feeding from her. I knew, somehow, that she would taste better than any I'd had before.

"You're right," she said, turning to look at me again and straightening her shoulders.

I had to give it to her, she had balls. Her eyes darted around the rooftop as she moved away from the fire escape, taking in her surroundings. Looking for a weapon or a way out? It had to be a way out,

she had stakes on her arm and thighs—thighs that were clearly outlined by her tight leather pants.

My eyes stayed there for a moment longer than necessary, and my body hardened painfully again. I wanted her. I couldn't deny that, it was useless, but I knew that I had to maintain my control.

Regardless of whether she was a hunter or not, I did not take women against their will. I was a man, not a monster.

"So, we're at an impasse, I see," she said, a humorous lilt to her voice.

I cocked my head to the side. "What impasse do you see? I could kill you in a moment here."

"And I you, Prince," she said, hissing my title at me.

I froze. How did she know who I was? I had been right when I'd thought her scent was familiar to me—she knew who I was. She had met me before. But when?

I had never traded words with a hunter before, this was a new experience for me. And one I doubted I would repeat with anyone else.

"You know me," I said, narrowing my eyes. "How?"

"Figure it out yourself," she said, laughing bitterly. "I'm sure you've got the brain cells for it."

She walked to an edge of the roof top, her gait was casual but I could see the tension in her shoulders.

What was impressive, though, was that she dared to turn her back on me.

It was a mistake.

Not because I would kill her—why couldn't I do that?—but because she had presented me with a tempting view of her ass. I set my jaw in a hard line. My blood pounded in my head, and everything in me urged me to go to her.

To claim her.

I shook my head, glad that she couldn't see me, and clenched my hands into fists. My nails bit into my palms, providing me with little pinpoints of pain to distract me from the pain that originated elsewhere in my body.

Pain only she could give relief to.

She turned back to me, taking a few steps away from the edge, and tilted her head to the side. "You've been following me, haven't you?"

I quirked an eyebrow, but didn't answer me.

"Because it can't be a coincidence that you just happen to be on the rooftop of this building, when I was hiding back on the fire escape. I don't believe in coincidences."

"What do you believe in?"

"Death," she said, her tone blunt.

I flinched, not knowing why, then focused on what she had said. What did she mean? Of course, everyone believed in death. It was a universal truth for all species, that death would come sooner or later. It could not be avoided, though for the vampires it was more of an afterthought than anything. We were immortal, save for murder.

Perhaps she worshipped a God of death, and the fabric at her wrist was the mark of her cult.

My head tilted to the side.

"We all believe in death," I said, hoping to get more out of her.

"Yeah. It's the universal equalizer. It's the only thing you can count on."

"You have hoped for death," I said, realizing it in the way she spoke of it.

"For years, yes," she said.

"Is that why you hunt? You wish for death at the hands of a vampire?" I kept my tone casual, although deep inside I hated the thought of another taking her life.

She belongs to me.

I averted my eyes so that she could not see them widen in horror. Where had that thought come from? She was a hunter. She did not belong to me, it was an impossibility.

"No," she said.

But she didn't bother to expand on that, and I had to smile. She was tough. I glanced up at her from beneath my lashes, locking my eyes with hers. A swallow caused her throat to convulse just a little, drawing my eyes there. Her jugular was pulsing against her neck, her heart beating so loudly—how did she keep her voice calm while such panic ran through her body?

I took a step closer to her and she took a step back. Her breathing was becoming more rapid, her chest rising and falling quickly, and my eyes abandoned her throat for a moment.

A great testament to what a distraction it was, that it would draw the eye of a vampire away from her throat.

She had curves that would test the patience of a good man, and I was not a good man. Not a monster, but not a saint either.

I was a man with needs, and I needed her in that moment. I took another step closer without thinking about it, drawn to her.

She stepped back.

I narrowed my eyes as I looked back up at her. "You're afraid."

"You're a vampire."

A smirk curved my lips. "Indeed, little hunter, I am."

I strode towards her with purpose now, backing her up until she was at the edge of the building. She lifted her leg to step back and yelped when there was nothing but air to catch her.

On instinct, I moved faster than light to her side, gripping her by the waist and pulling her back onto the building—against me. Her body was flush against mine, her breasts crushed against my chest, her thighs enclosed by my own.

Unable to restrain myself, I bowed my head to her neck and breathed in the scent of her—just as intoxicating as it had been at a distance, only so much more. My body hardened to an impossible degree, and I felt myself pulsing against her, to my great embarrassment.

Step away from her.

Yet I was surprised to find that she was not stiff in my arms, but rather had melted against me, her fingers gripping my forearms.

It's because you're the only thing holding her in place right now. Move away from her, damn it. You're embarrassing yourself.

My lips were inches away from her neck, and a small groan escaped them.

She shifted her weight, her hips swaying against mine, and the friction only heightened my pain.

My breath came in shallow pants, as if I had run a great distance, but I knew that it was because of the control I was exerting to keep myself in place. I couldn't move away from her, but I could stop myself from doing anything else.

Couldn't I?

My fingers shifted, brushing the small of her back, and she whimpered. I tensed, and she shifted her weight again.

Now, we were at an impasse. I knew that I had to move away from her, but she had not told me to go.

It's because you're a fucking vampire and you're inches away from her neck. She knows she can't win now.

True. Very true.

Bastard.

Just one taste...

I bent my head, my lips parted, and my tongue slipped out to graze her neck.

I will not feed on her.

She moaned and I lost reason, my tongue flicking out again in little darts along her neck, tasting her.

She was temptation incarnate, and I was but a prisoner at her feet. I pulled her closer to my body, pressing us tightly together, and she arched her neck, exposing herself to me.

I tilted my head up, leaving the temptation of her neck, and my lips closed around her ear, sucking lightly. She moaned again, and I felt her heart racing against my chest as it heaved up and down with every breath she took.

Her fingers dug into my arms, and she shifted her hips, brushing against my erection.

This woman will be the death of me.

I nipped at her ear before flicking my tongue out to soothe the small hurt. She whimpered.

"Do you want me to stop?" My voice was husky, betraying my need.

"No," she whispered.

Victory.

I sucked at her earlobe a moment longer before returning my attention to her neck, grazing my teeth against her flesh then licking at her skin.

I will not feed on her.

I had to keep telling myself that because the temptation was so great. I wanted nothing more than to taste her blood, to know what it was like, to feel the euphoria of her essence flooding through me. But this I would not do.

Carefully, very careful not to break the skin, I took her skin between my teeth and sucked, and was rewarded with another moan. Her hand abandoned my arm and fisted in the lengths of my white hair, holding me there.

I obliged her, lavishing my attention on her neck.

Her hips moved against mine again, and I pulled my face away from her, hissing out a slow breath.

"You play with fire, little hunter," I said.

She stared up at me, her eyes clouded for a moment but then they began to clear. And then they widened with shock—she was realizing what had passed between us, and her rational mind did not like it.

It shouldn't have been a surprise to me. She was a hunter. It was in her nature to hate me. And yet it wounded my pride just a little.

"Move," she said, bracing her hands against my chest and shoving me back a few steps.

I arched an eyebrow. "That is not what you were saying just a moment ago."

"Shut up. Just. Shut up. Do not talk." Her chest heaved with every breath she took.

"I am perfectly fine going back to not talking," I said, laughing.

She glared at me.

I stepped closer to her again, crowding her, and lowered my face so that I was mere inches away from her. "What's wrong, little hunter? Are you scared?" I lifted my hand, intent on removing her mask so that I could kiss her.

And then she was gone over the edge.

Chapter 17

NINA

*F*uck.

My muscles screamed at me in protest, my unprotected fingers burned, but there was nothing I could do in that second. I had to catch my breath. I'd planned this—somewhat. I'd been hoping it wouldn't be necessary, that there would be another way out, but the Prince had pushed me quite literally over the edge.

While staking out the rooftop I'd found the edge that had a ladder on its side—another safety feature. It would lead down to another fire escape. I was damned lucky that I'd managed to fall straight down instead of flying out backwards, but it had been my best shot at escape.

Why didn't I just stay near the first fire escape?

Because it would have taken too much time to clear the first few levels, precious time during which he could have caught up to me.

Speaking of which, I needed to *move*.

I dragged air into my lungs and started moving down the ladder as quickly as possible. My fingers protested every movement I made, they didn't want to close around the rungs of the ladder as I scaled down it, but I gave them no choice.

My willpower was stronger than my body, and I commanded it to move.

At last I landed on the fire escape and took off down it at a dead run.

My training had included running up and down stairs every day to build up my leg muscles, and it had the added benefit of allowing me to have perfected the art of moving down a flight of stairs at a rather dangerous speed.

I couldn't fall. If I fell he might catch up to me.

I spared a precious second to glance up and ensure that he wasn't following me down. He would probably make for the fire escape I'd been on originally—he was fast enough that he didn't need the head start I did.

He was nowhere to be seen, thank God.

Why did I let him touch me?

Nope, nope, noppity nope. I was not going down that train of thought right now. I kept running down the fire escape until it bottomed out at the ground and then I took off at a sprint out of the alley

and down the road.

It was dangerous, moving on the road instead of through the alleys, but I wanted to get as far away from the building as quickly as was possible.

A few blocks later and I darted into an alley, pressing my back against a wall as I panted. God, I'd been reckless. I should have gotten off that rooftop as soon as I sensed the vampire. Damn the logic of knowing he'd be able to follow me, I should have just beat it the hell out of there.

I had very nearly risked being captured by the vampires again, going back to the cages. Fuck that, I wasn't going to do that as long as I still had breath in my body. I would rather die than go back to the cages.

Very carefully I inched my way to the edge of the wall and peered around the corner. The Prince was nowhere to be seen.

Was he not following me?

I shook my head. More likely than not he was moving through the shadows, faster than light, and I wouldn't be able to see him coming.

After I had time to take in a few extra breaths, I ran down the alley and followed its twists and turns until it emptied out onto a side street. It took me a second to get my bearings, but I recognized this area of the city. I could make my way back to the mansion from here.

The mark!

The thought came flying into my brain a moment after I started moving again.

I cursed. I had to complete my kill or I was going to end up on the streets, easy prey for the vampire Prince. And I didn't doubt that he would come for me as soon as he could track me down. The man had been too intent on me to give me up easily.

But he didn't feed on you. Why not?

I shoved the thought from my mind. I didn't have time to think about that right now, I had to get back to the club and pray that the mark hadn't left already.

Risking wasting more time, I sent my tendrils of magic throughout the street and into the alleys that ran away from it, searching for the vampire Prince. I had picked up on his biorhythm when he'd been pressed against me—my body heated at the memory—and I was certain that I could pick him out of a crowd now.

He wasn't near.

That confused me more than anything, and there was also a small twinge of disappointment.

Ruthlessly, I crushed it. Damn my traitorous body, I wasn't going to examine those feelings.

Satisfied that the Prince was nowhere to be found and wasn't following me, I ran back through the alley towards the bar I'd abandoned minutes ago. It was a risk; the Prince might still be on the rooftop, so I calculated a different route and adjusted accordingly.

Ten minutes later I was in an alley behind the bar, watching the back exit. I extended my awareness into the club and breathed a sigh of relief when I felt the mark inside. His heart rate was

high—likely he was drunk—but he was still there.

Still alive for me to kill the moment he vacated the premises.

I recognized that I was at a strategic disadvantage right now, hiding out behind the bar, but I didn't dare risk going to the other side again. Maybe my mark would come out the back door—unlikely, but a girl could hope. More likely than not he would leave through the front door. I would just have to monitor his movements, and if he headed towards the front, then so would I.

My heart rate, having risen from the mad dash through the city, now started to slow. I focused on it, taking deep breaths to regain control of my body, until I felt like I had everything in hand.

Then, unbidden, my thoughts turned back to the interaction on the rooftop.

I'd known the Prince the moment I'd seen him on the rooftop—no other vampire I'd seen had white hair like his. I didn't know what the King looked like, but I'd be surprised if he didn't have the same stark white hair. It must be a genetic trait of the royal line.

What was most interesting was that he'd seemed to remember me. Somewhat. I'd put my money on it. That had to be why he hadn't killed me right away; he'd been curious about who I was and wanted to solve the puzzle. I'd refused to give that information away, knowing it was the only thing that had kept me alive.

Or at least, that's what I'd *thought* had been his reasoning, until he'd saved me from falling off the rooftop, and his body had been pressed tight against mine.

My breathing shallowed and I closed my eyes, remembering the feeling of his body against mine. The harsh evidence of his arousal pressing into my hip, the feeling of his heart beating too heavily in his chest. The moment when his tongue had touched my skin, teasing me until I'd forgotten all rational sense and had held him against me just as tightly as he'd held me.

He'd turned my body against me. It had to be some sort of spell that vampires were capable of—but then, why had I never been attracted to any of the other vampires I'd met? There had been no arousal with them, no interest stirring inside of me. They'd always repulsed me, and I'd assumed that was because they were inherently evil creatures and that was what it would always feel like to be around him.

But the Prince had been so different. He'd smelled like the earth after a fresh rain—clean, and something a little intoxicating hidden in his scent. Almost like whisky.

Maybe he'd recently devoured someone who had those qualities, and that was why he'd fooled me. Yeah, that had to be it.

It couldn't be that I was attracted to the vampire. I refused to accept that possibility.

But my body reminded me what it had felt like to be against him, and my cheeks flamed in embarrassment.

My attention was drawn a moment later by the sound of rustling in the neighboring alley, my eyes snapping open as I pushed all thoughts aside and focused.

I was not alone.

Chapter 18

NINA

Shifting my weight so that it was all on my back leg ready to propel me forward, I drew a steel dagger from my belt. Hopefully it wasn't a vampire—or maybe, hopefully it was? I didn't want to have to kill a person, but anyone who hung out in a dark alley in the middle of the night probably wasn't there to say hello and how are you doing.

Like me. I was the kind of person you didn't want to meet in a dark alley right now.

I dropped to a crouch and slowly moved forward until I was at the mouth of the alley, able to peer around the corner and see if whoever was there had moved out of their alley.

No one in sight.

Closing my eyes, I extended my senses into the neighboring alley. Just as I'd suspected, a heartbeat answered my call. A moment later and I recognized the source—Lisa.

I let out a sigh of relief and stood up.

"I know it's you, Lisa," I said as I walked into the small clearing behind the bar.

A moment later she walked out of the darkness she'd been shrouded in.

"Hey, kid," she said, smiling. "Good job finding the mark first, but I've got it from here. Go on home."

I set my jaw in a hard line, taking in a deep breath. "Yeah, that's not gonna happen. I got here first, I'm getting the kill."

"What are you going to do with the money? You don't need anything that the mansion doesn't provide. Just go on home."

"Uh, I kind of need to stay at the mansion, which means I need this kill."

Her lips formed into an 'O' as she absorbed what I'd said, but then she shook her head. "Sorry, but I need this kill."

"So do I," I said. I didn't want to have to fight her for it, but I wasn't above doing that. I knew I could knock her out with blood magic just as I had done to the other wolves earlier in the day. I wouldn't have to kill her, just immobilize her, but I knew it would wreck the peace we had built between us.

She was the closest thing I had to a friend in the mansion, and I didn't want to give that up. But I'd been through enough bullshit this night, so I wasn't going to put up with her trying to steal my kill.

"Don't make me hurt you, Nina," she said. "I don't want to knock your pretty little teeth out, but this is the way our world works."

"Give it your best shot," I said, and bared my teeth at her. "I don't think you're going to win."

She dropped into a crouch, but the mark chose that moment to stumble out of the back exit. He reeked of alcohol, and I had no doubt that he had come out here to take a piss rather than choosing one of the bathrooms.

Fucking men.

"Whachu doin?" He slurred, swaying on his feet.

Lisa and I locked eyes, frozen for a moment with indecision.

I didn't waste time, I threw my free hand forward and locked onto her biorhythm, freezing her blood so that she couldn't move. She had just enough time to set her face in a look of immense anger before her muscles locked into place, unable to fight the frigid cold I'd put on her.

A part of me felt guilty, and a little worried about her body temperature dropping too far, but I knew that this would be over fairly quickly. I could warm her blood up for her afterwards, if she let me.

"What the fuck?" My mark sounded a hell of a lot more lucid now, and a quick glance at him confirmed that he'd deduced what was happening.

Vampires must have a quick metabolism if he was clearing up already. Maybe that was why he reeked of alcohol—he was literally sweating it out of his system before it could really sink into him.

Had he been playing the drunk?

No time to wonder about that, I had to handle the situation before more wolves closed in. If Lisa had found me, then it was possible the others wouldn't be too far behind her.

I turned my back on Lisa, compartmentalizing the spell I needed to keep her frozen so that I could focus most of my attention on the vampire.

He lunged at me as soon as I cleared my mind, slamming a fist into the side of my head.

With an *oof* I stumbled to the side.

Focus, Nina.

Months of training with wolves that fought dirty had prepared me for this. I wasted no time, sweeping his legs out from under him with one quick move and then landing two kicks—one to his ribs and the other to his head. I knelt and slammed my fist into his face, then adjusted my hand so that my fingers touched his bare neck.

I didn't *need* to touch someone to lock onto their biorhythm, but it made it a much faster process and I needed all the speed I could get in this moment. It took mere seconds before I picked up on the feeling of his heart beating.

It was a little difficult to sort out Lisa and the vampire's biorhythms now that I had the sensation of three hearts beating, but I pushed through it. I splayed my hand wide open on his chest, slugging him in the head with my other hand to keep him dazed.

I began to chant the spell to boil his blood, closing my eyes to afford myself more concentration. I visualized the blood heating up, watched it start to pop and sizzle as it reached unbearable levels. I could feel it working, so I opened my eyes to look down at him.

Just in time for him to bring his fist up to slam into my throat. I fell backwards, the breath driven from my lungs, confusion taking over me.

He shouldn't have been able to move! What had gone wrong?

I dragged air into my burning lungs and chanted again, the words coming out in a rough rasp. He'd done a number on my throat with his enhanced strength and I had no doubt that I wouldn't speak right for weeks.

I dialed up the intensity of the spell. It must not have worked because he was a vampire and this was a spell I hadn't tried on the wolves, it was too dangerous. I must not have calculated correctly for the healing nature of the supernatural creatures.

My folly in not getting up came back to bite me in the ass when he landed a kick to my ribs, interrupting the spell and leaving me gasping in pain. I grunted and rolled to the side, still chanting. I wasn't going to give up, wasn't going to drop the spell until the man was dead.

I came up in a crouch, watching the vampire across from me.

"Dirty fucking blood mage," he said. "I'm going to kill you and take your head back to the King."

Good. Kill me, don't capture me. No, wait. How about you just die?

I narrowed my eyes as I watched him, my lips never ceasing to move. I wanted to kill him with my magic, prove myself as a blood mage, but I wasn't above falling back on the tried and true stake on my forearm if it became necessary.

No matter what, I was going to kill him.

A small whimper sounded behind me, distracting me. The spell died on my lips as I whirled to face Lisa—she shouldn't have been able to make a sound. What had I done wrong?

Then I saw the look of excruciating pain on her face, her lips twisted open in a wordless scream, the sweat on her forehead, and the unnatural red color of her skin.

Horror rushed over me in waves.

"No, no, no!"

I'd gotten it so wrong. I'd locked onto the wrong biorhythm. I shook my head, rushing over to her. I dropped the spell, relinquished my hold on her body, and she sagged to the ground.

Unconscious.

Right? She had to be unconscious. That was all it was. Right?

"Please, don't be dead. Please, please, please, don't be dead," I said, my voice cracking. I groped blindly for her neck, tears clouding my vision as I tried to find her pulse.

Nothing.

I threw my knife to the side and brushed the tears out of my eyes so that I could see better. Still, I couldn't find her pulse.

The vampire behind me fully forgotten, I pressed my ear to her chest. It did not rise or fall—she wasn't breathing and there was no heartbeat.

I sent my magic flooding into her, looking for her heart, determined to fight nature and bring her back.

I forced her heart to beat once, but it wouldn't pick up the rhythm. I tried again. *Thump*. Then nothing.

"No!"

The sobs broke out of me now, tearing out of my throat as I screamed my rage and pain into the night. This couldn't be happening, I wouldn't let it happen.

Wave after wave of pain crashed over me, and I felt myself losing control. Felt the magic building within me as I tried to grasp it.

It blasted out of me violently, crashing through the alley in a rush to find a target, any target.

To make someone hurt in the same way that I hurt.

Oh God, what had I done?

Chapter 19

NINA

I sat curled in the corner of my room, staring down at the raw skin on my hands. I had tried time after time to scrub them clean, but it was as if Lisa's blood was actually on my hands. I couldn't feel clean again.

I had killed her—and the vampire. When my magic had rushed out of me once the realization of what I'd done had set in, it had killed the vampire in one violent sweep.

This was of no consolation to me. I couldn't believe that this had happened.

I rocked back and forth, clutching my knees to my chest as tears blurred my vision again.

I killed her. I killed her. She's dead because of me.

The thoughts kept running through my mind like a broken record. I couldn't come to terms with what had happened, my heart was breaking into a thousand and pieces and oh God, I couldn't breathe.

I didn't deserve to breathe.

"No, no, no," I sobbed over and over again. It was the only word I could get out of my mouth.

Every time I closed my eyes, I kept seeing her face as she tried to scream, indescribable pain etched into every inch of her face.

I had done that to her. I had killed her.

I was a murderer.

A knock sounded at my door and I froze, my eyes snapping over to stare at it.

Someone was there. On the other side of the door.

Instinct told me to reach out and find the biorhythm to detect who it was, but I refused. I was never going to use my magic ever again. I was an abomination and I deserved to die, but even if the wolves let me live, I was never going to use my magic again.

I wasn't going to kill another person.

Vampire or not, I wasn't going to do it again.

"Open the door, Nina."

Conall. It was his voice on the other side of the door.

I knew that I had to go to it and open up. He'd given a command, not a request, and he was King in this mansion.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't face him after what I'd done. Couldn't bear to see the look of disgust

and horror on his face when he condemned me for losing control. He was going to throw me out of the mansion, and rightly so.

I didn't deserve death, I realized. I deserved to go back to the cages, to be punished for the rest of my life.

Yes. I would accept the banishment he was no doubt here to give me.

Don't be ridiculous. He's here to have you executed.

But that wasn't good enough! Death was too kind.

"Nina." His voice held a note of warning now, and I knew that I was pissing him off by not opening the door. I just couldn't bring myself to move, it was as if my limbs were frozen by the same spell I'd used on Lisa.

No, I couldn't do it. I couldn't face him.

I watched in horror as I heard the sound of a key entering the lock and a moment later the knob turned and the door swung open.

My eyes fell to the floor. I wouldn't look at him.

He hates me.

All I had wanted was to make him proud, and instead I had murdered one of his kin. What was he going to do to me?

I heard his footsteps moving closer to me, but still I didn't dare to raise my eyes.

Go ahead and say it. Just tell me what my punishment is. Exile or execution? Just tell me!

"Congratulations."

My eyes snapped up to his, my mouth dropped open in disbelief. *"What?"*

"Your first kill. You successfully completed your mission. Congratulations," he said. His voice was cold, devoid of emotion.

A shudder ran through me as I shook my head. "But, but...I killed..."

I couldn't bring myself to say her name. I was unworthy.

He crouched in front of me and I averted my eyes immediately. He reached out and touched my chin, lifting my head up.

Still, I looked sharply out of the corner of my eye at the bed in the room. I wouldn't look at him. He couldn't make me.

"Look at me, Nina," he said, his voice harsh.

Reluctantly, I lifted my eyes.

"In order to do this, to be a part of this world and not become a victim—in order to *survive*, you have to Harden your heart, mind, and soul. All that matters in our world is the mission. All that matters is survival. You did a good job."

My eyebrows knitted together, but I couldn't find the words to give voice to my confusion.

Why wasn't he punishing me?

He cocked his head to the side, some emotion filling his eyes that I did not recognize. "I've got big

plans for you, Nina. You're going to go places here."

Then he pressed a kiss to my forehead. "I'm proud of you."

Shock took over and I couldn't have said anything even if I'd wanted to.

But it didn't matter—he was gone.

I was left with my confusion and pain.

GRAYSON

Let her get away.

It was all I could think about as I walked up the steps of my castle.

The woman—the *hunter*—had jumped off the building. Immediately, I'd looked over the edge to see that she'd caught herself on a ladder, but I hadn't pursued her.

I'd been too busy mulling over my actions and trying to make sense of them.

Logic dictated that I should have killed her, but instead I'd allowed myself to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh. She'd awakened a hunger in me that had been dormant for years now.

It wasn't that women didn't interest me, but rather that no particular woman interested me *enough*. When I'd first reached my prime I'd been insatiable, giving over to a hunger I'd only just been introduced to, but once I'd outgrown that I'd realized that there wasn't a female on the Earth that I had enough in common with to truly desire.

That had been okay with me. I'd known that I had time to find one, and that my mate was out there somewhere.

And then the hunter came.

No. Violently, I shook my head. I couldn't think about her. Even the thought of her, the memory of her scent, sent desire rushing to my loins and the need to hunt her down and make her mine returned.

How had I managed not to go after her?

I didn't know what had restrained me. Perhaps it had been the look of horror on her face when she'd realized what had transpired between us. I was an evolved man, and I wouldn't ever force myself on a woman.

The memory of her hips shifting against mine as she melted against me, the sound of her moans as my tongue lavished her throat...She had been willing.

And then she'd fled. That had been more than enough of an indication that she hadn't wanted to continue the experience.

I shook my head to clear the thoughts as I walked through the hall.

She wasn't for me. She was forbidden fruit.

Not that mating between vampires and humans was forbidden, far from it, but a hunter? No, that could not be borne. My father would murder me rather than see such a thing happen.

"Prince!"

Leopold, one of the council members, came rushing to me, a look of distress on his face.

Instantly I composed myself so that he would not see the conflicting emotions on my face. No need for impertinent questions. He fell into pace beside me as I kept going.

"What is it?"

He hadn't heard of my indiscretion, had he? Not even my friends had known what I'd been up to. It was impossible.

"Sir..." He cleared his throat. "There's been a terrible accident."

I froze mid-step, turning my head to look at him. "What has happened?"

He cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable.

"Out with it, man. What has happened?"

"It's your father, my Prince. I'm so sorry."

What? What did he mean?

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

He wet his lips, swallowing nervously. "There's been a horrible accident. The King is gone."

My blood froze.

No, this couldn't be.

I had been cavorting with a hunter and my father was dead?

Instinct told me to let loose my rage, at myself and at the universe, but centuries of training held my composure for me. I couldn't react. I wasn't allowed to react.

Brutally, I shoved all thoughts to the back of my mind. The hunter mattered not now. I must never think of her again.

The responsibilities of my people now weighed on me, and I couldn't let them down.

I am not ready for this.

"My liege." He knelt before me, one fist over his heart. "You are King."

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I write urban fantasy novels for new adults. I read just about everything--fantasy, science fiction, dystopian, historical fiction, and much more. I'm also an avid LARPer. Don't know what that is? Shoot me a message and I'll gab your ear off about it. I love to talk with fans, so don't be shy--be forewarned, though, I can rant a good bit.

I grew up in Wilson, North Carolina. It's a small town about an hour east of Raleigh, and I spent most of my time finding adventure, filling up notebooks with every story that came to my head, and being reprimanded by teacher's for reading in class. My first fiction novel came out in January of 2017, and I release about every two months; so sign up for the newsletter to stay on top of things!

Feel free to send me an email or reach out over social media with any questions you might have, or just to chat!

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SAVAGE DAWN

M.H. SOARS

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SAVAGE DAWN

How do you win a war against an enemy you can't touch?

When a group of Arcadian explorers found clues leading to an ancient portal, they believed it would shed light on their past. None of them could have foreseen that their search for knowledge would unleash a powerful and ruthless enemy that sought to destroy everything in its path.

Stranded in a foreign country without means of communication, soul mates Samiah and Malachiax must find a way home. They embark on the most important journey of their lives, traveling through the harsh Arcadian desert where any mistake can be deadly. But the stakes are too high and there is no turning back.

PROLOGUE

Mora – Present day

Samiah woke with a start, the scream that invaded her dreams still ringing in her ears. Outside, the world seemed to have taken a golden tint, and looking at the clock next to her, she knew dawn was still far away. She leaned on her elbows and blinked a few times, trying to dispel the foggiest in her brain, until her nose registered the acrid smell of smoke.

Tandrum's wrath! The camp was on fire.

She scrambled out of her sleeping bag and reached for her boots first, keenly aware she might not have time to change clothes. Heat and thick smoke had already seeped through the tent canvas, slowly suffocating Samiah and her mate.

She turned to him and shook his shoulder hard. "Mal, wake up."

His eyes flew open, and when he focused on her face, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"Sami? What's the matter?"

Can't he smell the smoke? Samiah let out a curse. She regretted now making him take Ariana's concoction for pain earlier. It had a lethargic effect, and she needed him sharp.

"Mal, come on. We gotta move!" She helped him up and he swayed on the spot. "Where are your boots?"

"Uh, I don't know."

She heard another scream outside as she looked frantically for Mal's shoes. She was tempted to let him go barefoot when she spotted the pair under his bag. She roughly shoved his feet into the mud-caked syno leather boots, not bothering to tie the laces. Once they ran outside, the graveness of the situation smacked Samiah in the face, leaving her light-headed and gripped by sheer horror. Fire had enveloped most of the tents. Gigantic flames curled and stretched upward, towering over them like a ruthless god of death.

Why is no one attempting to stop it? She wondered where the elementals in their party were. Her teammates Aron and Ariana would have been able to control the damage.

There was no time to dwell on questions. Samiah grabbed Mal's hand and tried to find her team

members, but it proved virtually impossible to see anything through the choking fog. They managed to reach the center of the camp where everyone had congregated mere hours before, celebrating the group's discovery.

Samiah stopped in her tracks when she finally came across survivors. She couldn't believe her eyes, though. Every person in front of them was engaged in some sort of animalistic fight, snarling and clawing at their opponent. Samiah watched in dismay as a mob dragged and viciously beat to death a Jackur girl. The violence was so gratuitous and vile that it froze her on the spot.

"We have to do something," Malachiax said.

Yes, but what? Samiah thought. The two of them wouldn't stand a chance.

She turned once she felt someone at her back. Professor Shix, Samiah's mentor, was coming their way. In her happiness to see a familiar face, she failed to notice the pointy trowel in his hand. He raised his arm menacingly and Malachiax moved in a blur, placing himself in front of her and using his body as a shield. He tried to block the attack by raising his hands, but he wasn't fast enough and the trowel pierced his shoulder.

"Mal!" Samiah screamed.

Malachiax fought to subdue Professor Shix, who seemed to have acquired a burst of super strength. His face was devoid of any recognition. His nostrils flared and spittle had built up in the corners of his mouth. Malachiax pushed Professor Shix away, but the man was undeterred. He let out a guttural roar and charged Mal, who managed to move out of the way. Professor Shix came back at him and tried to punch the side of Mal's head. Despite his unnatural strength, the professor's movements were sloppy and Malachiax dodged his blows easily. But the loss of blood was taking its toll on him.

Samiah snapped out of her paralyzing fear and tried to find a weapon, anything to help her mate. She spotted a half-burnt log from the previous night's bonfire and dashed for it. It weighed more than she expected, though, and she didn't even know how it would help.

Her focus was brought back to the fight when she heard Malachiax scream in agony. An unwavering sense of protectiveness took over. She ran back, using the momentum to swing the log with all her strength. She wasn't aiming at Professor Shix's head, but somehow that's where the log connected. The impact sent him and Mal sprawling to the ground. Malachiax struggled with the dead weight on top of him, and it was only when Samiah drew near enough that she saw the damage she had inflicted. Professor Shix's skull was bashed in, pieces of his brain scattered on his clothes.

She dropped the log and covered her mouth. She couldn't believe what she had done. In the blink of an eye, she had killed the person who had always been there for her. A person who had inspired so many Arcadians and whom she had loved like a father. It didn't matter that Samiah hadn't meant to do it. A heavy weight settled in her heart and a knot lodged itself in her throat.

Malachiax's struggles brought her thoughts back to the situation at hand. Samiah shoved her guilt to a darker corner in her mind. She would deal with that later. Bile rose in her mouth as she pulled

Professor Shix's body off her mate. The trowel was buried deep in Malachiax's shoulder and his face was scrunched in pain. Her heart twisted in agony as she touched his clammy forehead and cheeks with shaky hands. When Malachiax opened his eyes, Samiah saw her fear reflected there. He opened his mouth to speak, but Samiah pressed her finger to his lips. Talking would only cause him more pain.

She looked closely at the wound, and despite her lack of healer's training, she knew it was bad. Her hand hovered over the trowel, indecision clouding her mind. Her vision blurred, Samiah only realizing she was crying when she felt the tears roll down her face.

"Please, my love. Stay strong," she whispered.

Samiah's heart drummed inside her chest and she couldn't breathe. The trowel needed to be removed, but what if she ended up injuring Malachiax further? The urgency to flee the camp wasn't forgotten either. It wouldn't take long for them to be discovered by the crazed individuals they had seen. Samiah braced herself for what she must do, but a movement in her peripheral caught her attention.

She turned to it, moving her body so Malachiax remained behind her. She expected to see a person, not the dark, billowing smoke that emerged from Professor Shix's body. It briefly took the shape of a being before it zapped into her like an ice-cold spear. She fell to her knees and clutched her stomach. In that moment, she understood everything.

Chapter 1

Argor – Two weeks earlier

The small team of explorers had gathered around a crystal table, admiring the holographic images Professor Shix had sent them. Pictures and an unknown calligraphy stared at the group, and Samiah was still pinching herself. After so many years of exploration and dead ends, they had finally discovered something significant that could shed some light on their past.

The massive door of the Argamanx Royal Library opened with a loud bang, and Samiah glanced up in time to see Malachiax approach them with eager steps. Her heart skipped a beat as it always did when she looked at her mate. Everything about Mal drew Samiah to him. The mass of untamable curly hair, the strong chiseled jaw, the way he moved. An invisible thread linked them. They had been bonded a little over a year ago, and Samiah's feelings for Malachiax hadn't dulled one bit.

"We got it!" He shook the piece of syno paper in his hand. "Lord Droom has approved our trip to Mora."

Excited shouts erupted among the group, making the librarian on duty pull a face they promptly ignored. The library was empty. They weren't bothering anyone.

"Really?" Samiah reached for the official paper, not willing to believe until she saw the royal seal with her own eyes.

Years had passed since Professor Shix first discovered an ancient Arcadian scroll describing a portal to another dimension. Arcadians had only developed the technology to travel via connectors recently, about a hundred thirty-five years ago. So if what the artifact said was true, it meant their forefathers already had access to that technology, thousands and thousands of years before.

The scroll was extensively damaged, and nobody had been able to discern from it the exact location of the supposed portal. Many scholars believed the script to be a hoax and that to search for it would be a waste of time. But Professor Shix believed it was authentic, and Samiah did too.

Soon after the ancient script came to the surface, Professor Shix put together a group of explorers with the intention of finding the portal. As a former student, Samiah knew of Shix's brilliance and was one of the first to volunteer. Malachiax had been selected because of his affinity with earth, a handy

ability as a pioneer. That was how they had met.

There Samiah was, dressed like a blind Sion had picked her outfit, her face practically glued to her com-slip, when the trim, handsome Argamanian with wild hair and scruffy jaw got into her personal space and introduced himself. His easy smile and the spark in his deep blue eyes had left Samiah speechless. Within moments of meeting, she knew she had found her person, someone with whom she shared a core-to-core connection, her soul mate. A rare and extraordinary occurrence in Arcadia.

Those memories brought a tiny smile to her face. She looked up and found Malachiax staring at her, trying to suppress a grin. Somehow, he knew Samiah's thoughts had strayed from their upcoming trip.

The site lay just outside of Mora, a country in the middle of the white, deserted plains of Arcadia. Two teams comprised of Morians and Jackurians had stumbled upon it more than fifteen days ago, and Samiah's team was still stuck in Argamania. Professor Shix, the leader of their group, had been traveling abroad when the site was discovered, and he had gone straight there. Samiah and Malachiax were forced to wait for their sovereign's approval.

That Lord Droom didn't like Mora's ruling family was not a secret. They weren't exactly enemies, but Argor's relationship with Mora had always been strained. If not for the explorers from Jackur, the collaboration would have never happened. For that reason, it had been extremely difficult to get approval to meet with the professor.

Malachiax hugged Samiah tight and she laughed at his enthusiasm.

"I think you need to go to your private quarters," Aron said with a serious frown, and Samiah fought the urge to roll her eyes. *Must remember to respect my elders.*

"Ignore him. He's just an old grouch." Ariana waved her hand through the holograms, making them disappear. She was Aron's younger sister and could get away with addressing him so. "When can we leave?"

"Our designated gateway will be ready for us in an hour, and I don't want to be late. Lord Droom can still change his mind," Malachiax said.

"Then we must get ready. Remember to pack light. It's warm in Mora this time of the year. We won't need our heavy coats." Ianox made that helpful observation like we didn't know that already. He was only a few years older than Samiah and Malachiax, but he loved to act as if he was so much more experienced.

"It might be warm, but I'm still bringing my insulation suit. You never know. It's always good to be prepared," Walani said as she typed something on her com-slip.

Walani's comment wasn't a surprise. Despite her sharp mind, she had a tendency to overthink everything. Samiah could attribute her peculiarity to her gift, but that wouldn't be a fair assessment. Not all one-glancers were that obsessed with details, after all, only maybe ninety-nine percent of them.

They left the Argamanx Royal Castle grounds soon after, using the elevator to go down the tower—where the center of Argor’s government was perched atop—instead of the castle’s gateway. They weren’t deemed important enough even though Malachiax was royalty. They headed to the Grand Gateway Station on foot since it was within walking distance; it would have taken longer to wait for a hover transport that could fit their entire team.

The Argamanian hub was a large compound made of the same translucent bricks as the castle. As Samiah stared at the building, she thought for the thousandth time how the construction would have been beautiful if it weren’t for the retractable metal dome ceiling that sat on top. This feature was reminiscent of old days when the building had been used to house airspeeds. Now the vast open room had rows upon rows of cylindrical bases they called connectors, closely monitored by specialized technicians.

The bases powered the gateways, which were high-frequency transport beams that linked Argamania to the rest of the planet. Since the implementation of that type of transportation, Arcadians had forgone airspeeds and archaic airglides for long-distance traveling. Samiah had never seen one in operation, for they had become obsolete before she was born, though there were still a few traditional modes of transport such as hover cars and the mammoth spacecrafts used for interstellar voyages.

Two royal guards were stationed at the entrance, carrying electroshock rods at their hips, a frown on their faces. The level of security at the station was over the top. It was as if Lord Droom was expecting an attack at any moment—from whom, Samiah didn’t know. They hadn’t had a war or even a small conflict in generations. Arcadia was a planet in peace.

The station was bare in the same sterile manner an industrial warehouse would be, with kramer sheet walls and krax stone floor. The use of krax was a precaution in case some crazy deviant decided to use a gateway without authorization. The stone neutralized Arcadian gifts—another sign of their sovereign’s paranoia. Samiah shook her head and pushed aside her dangerous thoughts.

When Samiah and her teammates reached the gateway bound to Mora, Commander Haarx was there, flanked by several of his Nox Elite soldiers. Not a single shred of emotion showed on their stony faces. He sneered as he gazed upon them, and a shiver of apprehension ran down Samiah’s spine. She feared Lord Droom had changed his mind and sent his minions to prevent them from going. The commander had been against their venture from the beginning for reasons unbeknownst to Samiah.

"Commander Haarx, is there a problem?" Aron asked.

The man ignored Aron, his dark gaze passing by Samiah before it landed on Mal. Those unnerving black orbs gave her chills every time.

"Just here to make sure you go where you're supposed to."

What an infuriating man. Where did he think we would go if not Mora? She ground her teeth.

He moved closer to Malachiax and whispered, "You may have won this round, boy, but I'll be watching you."

His words carried an underlying warning only a fool would ignore. Commander Haarx's hatred toward Malachiax was undeserved but not unexpected. Lord Droom favored Samiah's mate and had never once attempted to hide that fact. It wasn't only because he was Lord Droom's nephew. Malachiax possessed a charisma few could resist. His heart was bigger than the Tandrum's moon. But Mal's influence threatened Commander Haarx. He didn't want to relinquish even the smallest amount of his power over their ruler.

His ill disposition toward Malachiax wasn't the only reason Samiah was leery of the man. Something was alarmingly wrong with him. His aura was completely unstable, never setting in any particular color. Since she'd come into possession of her aura-reader gift, she never once encountered someone like the commander. Samiah's ability allowed her to see other people's aura and core. The aura was a representation of each Arcadian's nature; the core contained the key to their gifts. Commander Haarx's core was empty. He didn't possess a gift, which meant the Sacred Powers of Arcadia had not blessed him. Samiah had only shared this knowledge with Malachiax, but she'd always wondered if Lord Droom knew. She would rather believe their ruler was unaware, for how could they blindly follow a sovereign who put his trust in a soldier their own planet hadn't deemed worthy?

Commander Haarx's soldiers stepped aside but remained close enough that Samiah's team had to walk single file. This particular gateway was a small one and could only transport four people at a time. Samiah traded glances with Malachiax and without needing to read his mind, she knew what he was thinking. Lord Droom had selected a small gateway to show how much he didn't care for this mission.

For each journey, a unique key was required in order to avoid unauthorized traveling. The technician typed something on her com-slip and a moment later, Aron's and Ariana's com-slips beeped. Samiah and Malachiax went first with Ariana. The others would have to wait until the connector recharged to follow them.

They weren't beamed to the main gateway station in Morang but to the temporary one set up near the discovery site. As soon as Samiah stepped off the connector, the hot, arid air of Mora assaulted her skin. The orange sun reflected on the white rocks around them, making the temperature rise even higher. She put her shades on to protect her eyes and felt immensely better. She looked sideways at Malachiax and caught him grimace. The brightness bothered her prism-colored eyes, but Arcadians with deep blue and green eyes like Malachiax always suffered more. He would be developing a headache in no time.

He hated coming here. Not only because of the weather but because he couldn't see the beauty in such a barren land. Samiah, on the other hand, thought Mora's rough landscape was extraordinary. During the day, it was pretty much sand and rocks, but at night the nightbloomers would make an appearance, and what a sight. They only existed in Mora. They were trees and other plant life that stayed buried in the ground during the day and only emerged to the surface when the three Arcadian

moons appeared in the dark sky. Their trunks and leaves glowed in different colors. Even the fruits had a translucent sheen to them.

"I hate Mora," Ianox said loudly behind us. He had the diplomacy of a catling.

"Keep your thoughts to yourself, Ianox," Ariana said. "We don't want to cause an incident with the Morians because you have the need to be honest all the time."

Ianox scowled but kept quiet. With their party complete, they started the downward path to the main camp. From their vantage point, Samiah could see the gray tents spread in a wide circle right in front of a vast rock formation. On those rocks, the explorers had found the primordial script and drawings that matched the one on the ancient scroll.

As soon as they entered the settlement, Professor Shix found them.

"Thank the Sacred Powers you're here. I've been going crazy trying to reason with the Morians. I need a quorum, and the Jackurians have no gumption."

"Professor Shix!" Ariana exclaimed, pretending to be appalled. She wasn't fooling anyone; her feelings toward the professor were known across the galaxy. Only the object of her affection seemed unaware of her devotion.

"See, it's not only me." Ianox dropped his bag and wiped his face with the back of his hand. He looked winded after a downhill walk. Samiah couldn't imagine how he was going to make the same trip up the mountain.

Malachiax chuckled and offered Ianox a canister of water. He was too nice. Half the time Samiah wanted to throttle the silly man. He was a know-it-all pain in their rears.

Professor Shix led them to a huge tent that seemed to be the center of operations. Inside, a group of people surrounded a small crystal table in the middle of the enclosure. Language and symbol experts stood, analyzing the same holograms Professor Shix had sent them.

Walani didn't waste any time, dropping her bag and pushing her way through to the table. Without acknowledging the presence of the other professionals, she took her com-slip out and started to work right way. Social skills weren't her forte, but most one-glancers were like that. Samiah's opinion was that the inability to forget anything overwhelmed their brains, and to balance, they didn't bother to interact with people.

Samiah looked closer at the group and their auras appeared for her. She wasn't surprised when they were enveloped by slight variations of indigo blue. It meant they were seekers and highly intuitive individuals.

She turned to Professor Shix. "When can we see the scripture wall in person?"

"Ah, Samiah, always so eager. Let me introduce you to Lady Lochiana of Morang first. She was the one who discovered the wall."

Samiah's jaw dropped. She couldn't believe she was meeting the living legend. Lady Lochiana was one of the most renowned explorers in Arcadia. She had made her fame discovering new planets and being part of first-contact missions. She had abdicated the throne of Mora to be an explorer.

Rumor said she had ditched Lord Droom days before their bond ceremony in order to go on a mission to an uncharted galaxy. It would explain why he hated the House of Morang so much.

Lady Lochiana was a beauty who turned heads everywhere she went. Her hair was the lightest shade of pink and it tumbled down her back in luscious waves, contrasting nicely with her flawless gold-brown skin. She was an aura-reader, so her eyes were prism-colored like Samiah's, a trait all aura-readers shared.

"Hello, Samiah. Nice to meet you." Lady Lochiana cocked her head and narrowed her eyes before her smile brightened. She had seen something in Samiah's aura that pleased her.

Aura-readers couldn't see their own auras, so Samiah was burning with curiosity, wanting to know what she had seen. Lady Lochiana's aura was light lavender, which denoted vision and imagination. No wonder she was such an excellent explorer. If Samiah concentrated, she would be able to see the color of Lady Lochiana's core, where her gift resided.

"It's such an honor to meet your ladyship in person," Samiah said after finally finding her voice and making a tiny curtsy.

Lady Lochiana waved a dismissive hand. "Please, drop the formalities. I gave up that life a long time ago. Here, I'm simply Lochiana." She glanced at Professor Shix. "I keep trying to make him drop the 'Lady' bit, but he's a stubborn man."

"I'm way too old to start learning new habits. No matter what you say, you will always be Lady Lochiana to me." Professor Shix gave her an elaborate bow in jest, which made Lochiana laugh.

She turned to Samiah. "Come. You must be eager to see our discovery. And bring a hovering chair."



When they reached the massive boulder and stopped in front of a somewhat smooth wall, Samiah thought they were taking a break. Odd since they had just left the camp. Lochiana ignited her chair and sat down, not bothering to use the sun reflector. Samiah traded looks with Malachiax, who seemed as confused as she felt. Maybe for different reasons, though.

"Why are we stopping?" Samiah asked Professor Shix.

He frowned at her. "Because we have arrived." He placed his hovering chair next to Lochiana's and sat down as well.

Silence descended upon the newly arrivals. Samiah studied the wall in front of her, but nothing was there.

Am I missing something?

"This is *it*? Where are the drawings and script?" Ianox asked.

Samiah caught Professor Shix exchange a knowing glance with Lochiana. They were keeping something from them.

"Should we tell them?" Lochiana asked, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

"Nah, it's better if they don't know. I want to see their reaction."

"Know what?" Ianox dropped his bag and put his hands on his hips. His aura flared red and Samiah had to blink a couple of times to pull her gift back. It was hard to pay attention to the current situation when auras distracted her.

"If you want to know, you'd better wait and see." Professor Shix leaned back and stroked his chin, the corner of his mouth twitching up.

Samiah rolled her eyes. Professor Shix loved surprises, and sometimes he acted like he was still a youngster. She had learned to accept his ways a long time ago. Unfortunately, Ianox didn't have a learning curve.

There was nothing for it but to follow Professor Shix and Lochiana's example. They ignited their hovering chairs, sat down, and waited. Samiah felt bad for Malachiax. Even with the shades and the sun reflector, he was extremely uncomfortable. She reached for his hand and laced their fingers together. He looked at her and smiled, making Samiah's heart kick up a notch. His hair was getting long, she noticed. He would be able to bind his wild curls fairly soon. For now, he kept his dark hair off his face with the help of the syno leather headband he had stolen from her.

"What do you think the professor is keeping from us?" he whispered near Samiah's ear, raising the tiny hairs on the back of her neck.

She shook her head and tried not to think of the effect Malachiax's proximity was having on her. "It could be anything. I'm just eager to see whatever it is we're waiting for."

They waited a long while. Samiah even dozed off; the many sleepless nights she'd spent obsessing about the ancient scroll finally had caught up with her. When she woke up, she could feel a change in the air. It was sort of a humming just above the skin, like the air was charged with electricity.

Lochiana had perked up on her seat. She kept looking at her com-slip and then back at the wall. The sun had almost completed its descent on the horizon, and soon the first moon of Arcadia, Maya, would appear in the sky.

Malachiax must have sensed the same thing, as he stood and walked closer to the massive wall in front of them. Samiah followed him and, for some unknown reason, felt compelled to touch it. At first, she didn't feel anything. The surface was warm from the sun, as it should be. But then something changed. It was very subtle at first, but as it progressed, it was impossible to ignore. The rocky surface was growing cold at an abnormal speed.

"Mal, feel this."

He touched the stone wall and looked at her, alarmed. "It's freezing. How can it be?"

Samiah drew her hand from the wall when it started to turn glacial. She took a few steps back and pulled Malachiax with her. The wall began to shimmer, and like a vision, words and drawings appeared on it. They glowed in the same manner the nightbloomers did, but it felt wrong somehow.

She got a sense of foreboding and shivered. Malachiax draped his arm over her shoulder.

"Isn't it spectacular?" Professor Shix exclaimed from somewhere behind them.

Walani, who had joined their party at some point, looked intently at the wall. Then she turned to Lochiana. "The scripture only appears once a day, and never at the same time?"

"Yes, though so far we haven't been able to discern a pattern. It doesn't seem to be related to the sun's or moons' cycles. It only appears near nightfall. That much we were able to gather."

"It might be related to changes in temperature and humidity levels." Walani typed something on her com-slip.

"Yes, it's possible. Unfortunately, we didn't have a strong air elemental until now." Lochiana's gaze fell on Ariana.

Ariana crossed her arms and looked annoyed. "Well, if you hadn't kept us in the dark, I could have already paid attention to those factors."

"Ah, and what fun would that be?" Professor Shix hugged Ariana sideways, and she melted into his embrace. "Besides, I'm not concerned with the time the scripture appears. I want to know what it says. If it's a portal, how do we open it?"

"Oh, it's a portal. I'm sure of it," Walani said, and all eyes turned on her.

"You've already cracked the code?" Professor Shix asked, almost jumping up and down.

"Not completely. But see that symbol there?" She pointed at the drawing of a round image. It looked like a half-open shutter. "It appears on the ancient scroll and next to it the word 'portal' in an archaic version of universal Venusian."

"No, it doesn't. I've looked at the ancient scroll a dozen times, and that symbol is not there. I'm certain." Ianox crossed his arms and pinched his mouth.

Walani's lips twitched upward as she typed something on her com-slip. A holographic image shot up from her device. The quality of the hologram wasn't as good as if seen from a crystal table, but it was clear enough. In that image, they could see the symbol Walani had referred to. The catch was that the symbol hadn't been there before.

"How is that possible?" Professor Shix took a step forward and touched the symbol on the hologram.

"Remember when I mentioned that those random blank spaces through the scroll didn't make any sense? Well, I ran the scroll through the carbonox machine—"

"You did *what*?" Ianox took a menacing step toward Walani. "You could have ruined it!"

"If a paralyzed mummy like you had done it, yeah, there was a high chance that would have happened," Walani shot back, and Ianox's complexion slipped from pale white to red, his brown eyes squinting hard over his large nose. Calling someone a paralyzed mummy was akin to saying someone didn't have a single functioning brain cell.

"Okay, that is enough." Professor Shix came between Walani and Ianox.

Samiah would have laughed if she hadn't witnessed this a thousand times before. Ianox and

Walani hated each other and were quite outspoken about it.

"Did Professor Shix have you check everyone's aura before they joined his team?" Lochiana whispered to Samiah.

She sighed. "Unfortunately, no. I wish he had, though. For a wise man, he doesn't believe in antagonizing auras. I would have vetoed Ianox in a heartbeat. His aura is too brown."

Lochiana nodded. "It never bodes well for a team to have a self-absorbed member. Ianox holds too much anger and blames the world for his shortcomings. If only he realized that anger is what's keeping him from achieving his full potential."

Samiah was left speechless. Lochiana had seen all that with only a glance at his aura? Noticing her stupefied stare, Lochiana continued. "My gift is very strong. I can see more than auras."

Suddenly, the discussion between Ianox and Walani no longer seemed that important to Samiah. "What did you see in mine?"

Lochiana put her hand on Samiah's belly, surprising her. "You hold new life."

Chapter 2

The scripture and drawings faded from the wall as soon as Zidriel, the second Arcadian moon, joined Maya in the sky. Samiah and the group went back to camp. She couldn't wait to be alone with Malachiax and share the news. She never expected it to happen so soon. The mechanics of conceiving life were the same for Arcadians as for any other animal, but it only happened when the planet decided it was time. It usually didn't occur until couples had been bonded for more than a few years.

The process was an intrinsic flow of energy that connected all of them to the planet's core. The gift of carrying life was bestowed by the Sacred Powers of Arcadia, the true prevailing power. Arcadians didn't need to worship gods or goddesses like they had seen in many otherworld civilizations. Everything they needed was provided by their planet, and they cherished it instead.

Samiah and Malachiax's tent was situated toward the edge of the camp, far away from all the comings and goings of the many explorers gathered. Professor Shix knew the weather of Mora was going to bother Malachiax and he would need peace and quiet to recover. Once inside their temporary refuge, Samiah handed him Ariana's concoction. It would help him with his headache, but Malachiax shook his head stubbornly.

"Please, don't make me drink this. You know I hate the side effects."

"The side effects are better than to be in constant pain, Mal." She forced him to take the bottle from her hands, but he still didn't drink its contents.

"Maybe later." He threw the bottle on top of his sleeping bag.

"Why are you so stubborn?" Samiah crossed her arms and frowned at him.

Malachiax gave her his famous lazy smile that turned her insides to mush before he moved closer. He placed his hands lightly on her forearms and gazed down. His dark blue eyes had tiny specks of light gray and looked like a miniature galaxy. His violet aura had a tinge of red. In Malachiax's case, it meant passion, not anger. He grazed Samiah's skin with his fingers with a feathery touch, eliciting a soft moan from her lips. She uncrossed her arms and rested her hands against his hard chest, feeling how fast his heart was beating. He leaned down and placed a light kiss on her neck, making her shiver.

"I saw you in deep conversation with Lochiana. Did she say anything about your aura?" he

whispered near her ear, and she had a hard time forming coherent thoughts.

"She did." Samiah dropped her hands and laced their fingers together. Then she guided their joined hands to her abdomen and waited for his reaction.

Malachiax's eyes widened before he looked down. She saw his posture turn rigid, and then his head snapped back up. Samiah's heart drummed loudly in her chest as she waited for him to digest the news. She knew it was big and unexpected, and she became consumed with an irrational fear that he wouldn't be happy about it. Then she caught a tentative smile building on his face as the surprise sank in.

"You're expecting?"

She nodded, unable to form words. Malachiax's tentative smile broke into the biggest grin she had ever seen. He crushed Samiah's much smaller frame against his as if he wanted to drown in her. She felt him shake as he rested his chin on the crook of her neck, and she hugged him tighter, letting the emotion of the moment take over. Malachiax kissed her neck and her jaw before trapping her face between his hands. Tears had already left trails on his cheeks as he stared at Samiah with bright eyes. Her vision was blurry, but she tried to keep her own tears from falling. If she started crying, they would both be a sobbing mess.

"I love you," Malachiax said before he kissed her.

Samiah laced her fingers behind his neck and pulled him closer, but it never seemed to be enough. She felt the heat in her core spread through her limbs, and her legs could barely hold her upright. She staggered backward, mouth still fused with Malachiax's, when the ground began to shake. She pulled back, breaking the kiss.

"Mal, control yourself." She faked a stern look.

"How can I? This is the best news you could have ever given me. It's worth a little shaking."

He kissed Samiah again and the world outside their tent ceased to exist.



The next morning, Samiah met Lochiana under the food tent. Malachiax was still asleep when she left, and she didn't want to disturb him. The renowned explorer raised an eyebrow when she looked at Samiah, then smiled knowingly. Samiah felt a warmth spread through her cheeks and reconsidered her initial excitement at being in the same room with another aura-reader. *Goodbye privacy.*

"So, you've told him?" Lochiana filled her plate with a couple of red star-shaped fruits.

"Naturally." Samiah followed her example and got a serving of the same delicacy. They didn't have that in Argor.

They picked an empty table, and after a moment, Lochiana spoke again. "You're so lucky. I envy you."

Samiah almost choked on her food. "Why?"

Lochiana's gaze traveled past Samiah's shoulder and went out of focus. "It's so rare to find one's soul mate. I've always envied those who did. "

"But you've been betrothed before," Samiah said and immediately regretted it. That was gossip, and she didn't know if it would offend Lochiana somehow.

She gazed down and a low-spirited smile appeared on her face. "That's true. And the sad part was that I loved him."

"So why didn't you go through with the bonding ceremony?"

Lochiana looked up, and the melancholy in her eyes put a damper in Samiah's happiness. "Because I realized he wasn't my soul mate. When the opportunity came to explore an uncharted galaxy—" She paused and glanced down at her food. "—it trumped all my feelings for him. If he had been my soul mate, the wish to stay would have been greater."

Samiah nodded, pretending she understood. Soul mates were almost a myth in Arcadia, so no one even took that into consideration when they decided to bond. Lochiana said herself that she had loved Lord Droom.

"Do you regret it?"

"Not in a million years. We discovered a cousin planet of Arcadia in that mission. I would have regretted if I hadn't gone."

"You mean Planet X-57?"

"Yes. The natives call it Planet Earth, which is odd considering more than half of its surface is covered in water."

"I've read about it. I would love to go some day."

"You will. So, do you already have names picked out for them?" The change of subject was so sudden that it took Samiah a moment to process Lochiana's words.

She dropped her fork when she did. "*Them?*"

"I sensed two life forces in your womb." Lochiana smiled.

Samiah put her hands on her belly and stared at it in wonder. Malachiax was going to be ecstatic, more so than he already was. Twin births in Arcadia were considered a high honor. For it to happen to them so soon meant Samiah and Malachiax were truly blessed. Waiting for the ten months was going to be torture. Samiah was so engrossed with the news that she only noticed Mal's arrival when he sat next to her and kissed her cheek.

"What?" he asked. He must have seen the elation on her face.

Samiah told him, and he made such a big fuss that soon the entire camp was aware of their news. By the time they were finished receiving handshakes and congratulatory hugs, Samiah's face hurt from all the smiling. The excitement even helped Malachiax with his headache because that day, he didn't grimace once in pain. On the contrary, he seemed more chipper than ever.

Samiah and Malachiax settled in the camp's routine. They would do research and explore the area during the day, and as night approached, they would gather in front of the wall to wait for the scripture

to appear. Days ran together, and Samiah was frustrated and tired with the lack of results. Despite Ariana's power, they still hadn't been able to discern a pattern. And no one had gotten any closer to discovering how the portal worked. They already knew the language on the wall was old Venusian, but it still didn't make any sense. Samiah's mood grew worse when Malachiax came to her one day with more bad news.

"What is it?" she asked the moment he sat next to her. His jaw was clenched, his lips pressed into a white slash.

He propped his head up with a fist and handed Samiah his com-slip. She read the message twice to make sure her eyes weren't deceiving her. Lord Droom's patience had expired, and he demanded their return to Argor immediately.

"But we can't. We haven't made any progress," she said.

"Do you think he cares? I think word got out that Lochiana is here. He's just doing it out of spite."

"He can't be that petty. They broke off their commitment so long ago. He's happily bonded to your aunt."

"The entire planet knows he doesn't love her. He bonded with Aunt Lini to save face. I don't hold that against him. After all, my aunt has always known his true love is Lochiana."

Samiah couldn't believe Lord Droom would put that slight from the past above Argor's interests. But that was the only explanation why he would demand their return so suddenly. They couldn't defy him. Argor was their home. Lord Droom could exile them if he wished.

"What are we going to do?" Samiah asked, not hiding the anxiety in her words.

"I can stall him for a couple of days. Tell him there's a problem with the gateway here. He'll know I'm lying, but he won't do anything. At least, I hope he won't."

She glanced at the wall and took a deep breath. "That means we must find answers soon."

Chapter 3

The news of Lord Droom's request spread like wildfire through their small team. Aron and Ariana were upset, but resigned. Professor Shix said he was going to stay no matter what. If Lord Droom wanted to exile him, so be it. Lochiana offered asylum to anyone who wished to stay and finish the project. It was a tempting offer to Samiah, but with Malachiax's condition, it wasn't something they could contemplate.

The next day, everyone worked harder. No one wanted to miss the moment the ancient portal was finally opened. But as usual, nothing new was gained during the day. Ianox in particular was taking the lack of progress harder than anyone else. He had bickered with Walani earlier and stormed off to an unknown location.

Near nightfall, almost the entire camp was gathered in front of the mysterious boulder, waiting for the magic to happen. Ianox came in late, and Samiah noticed he couldn't walk straight. When he got closer, she could see his eyes were bloodshot and his breath reeked of Razor's Blood, a powerful mixture that dulled the senses and made people act stupid. *For all the Sacred Powers, he is indeed a paralyzed mummy*, she thought with a scowl.

He stumbled and almost knocked her down, aggravating her even further. She wanted to punch his throat, but she contented with only pushing him away.

"Watch it."

"Aww, look at darling Samiah, already all protective of her little ones."

Malachiax grabbed Ianox's arm and turned him around. "What are you doing?" He wrinkled his nose. "And what have you been drinking?"

Ianox pulled his arm from Mal's hold and took a few wobbly steps back. "None of your damn business."

"How can you do this, Ianox? You're embarrassing us," Malachiax said through clenched teeth.

"Oh, forget him. He's an embarrassment no matter what," Walani said from her position closer to the wall.

Ianox turned on the spot and glared at Walani's back. Samiah's power kicked in and all she could see was the red glow around him. She was annoyed that Ianox's sudden changes of mood kept triggering her gift. She usually had better control over it. She had to concentrate to stop seeing his

aura. When he came into focus again, she noticed his hands were balled into fists at his side, his lips curled into an ugly sneer.

He bent down and Samiah realized what he intended to do a moment too late. The rock flew from his hand with incredible speed and accuracy for someone who was physically impaired. It missed Walani's head by a finger and only because she tilted her head out of the way to look at something on the wall. But instead of bouncing against the hard surface, the rock embedded itself in the stone. Ianox's strength surprised Samiah. He wasn't a fan of physical exercises.

Walani's head snapped up. She looked at the pierced wall and then squinted in Ianox's direction.

"Did you just try to hit me?" Without waiting for his answer, she walked toward Ianox with purpose. The wall started to shimmer behind her but she didn't notice.

"You bet your ugly face I did." Ianox moved with the intention to meet Walani halfway, and Samiah braced for the fight that had been brewing for months.

Half the explorers stared in disbelief at the commotion Ianox and Walani were causing. The other half stared at the wall. Samiah didn't know what to do. Ianox's aura had turned a shade darker, and to her dismay, Walani's aura didn't look much better.

She mumbled a curse and wished she could gag Ianox somehow. If only she had the ability to persuade the fool to stay out of trouble. But the common Arcadian gift to influence others only worked on some alien races. For it to work on Arcadians, the gift would have to be dominant, and she didn't know anyone who possessed that.

Mal stepped between them. "Stop this nonsense immediately!" He raised both arms to keep them apart.

"He tried to hit me with a rock. The coward!" Walani attempted to reach Ianox, but Mal was stronger than she was.

"That was what you deserved," Ianox shot back.

Professor Shix seemed too enthralled by the wall to intervene, but Aron and Ariana came to the rescue. Aron pulled Ianox away and Ariana did the same with Walani. The girl went willingly, and as soon as she realized the scripture was visible again, Ianox and the rest of them ceased to exist.

Ianox kept fighting Aron, but the man squeezed Ianox's arm harder. "Either you stop this spectacle or I will be forced to restrain you."

Ianox lost his steam and calmed down for the moment. He might be slightly out of control, but he wasn't stupid. No one wanted to mess with Aron. His control of fire was legendary.

Relieved that the situation seemed to be more or less taken care of, Samiah turned to the wall. There was something peculiar about it in that moment, and excitement rushed through her veins. The scripture and drawings were the same but they glowed a different color—deep red, like blood. Walani raised her hand to touch it and something in Samiah made her want to warn her teammate against it. Samiah wasn't going crazy, for Lochiana grabbed Walani's hand before she did and pulled her back for good measure. She must have sensed the wrongness emanating from the wall as well.

The scriptures and drawings started to move, blending in a swirl and spinning so fast they soon disappeared altogether. It looked like contained energy going in circles. Gasps and shouts erupted from many, one-glancers stood hypnotized, and the more sensible explorers started to move away. As the spinning reached an impossible speed, it seemed the wall behind started to collapse inward, only to do the opposite in the end and explode toward the group. The force of the shower of stones knocked down those closest to the wall as the cascade of debris fell on them. A foreign, high screech followed the explosion, freezing Samiah's blood and making her want to cry. It kept ringing in her ears even after the wind had carried the sound away. After that, utter silence remained.

A suffocating fog created by dust enveloped them, making it impossible to see. Sandy film settled on Samiah's skin, hair, and clothes. *Washing it all off is going to be fun.* A purposeful, light breeze helped disperse the grimy haze. Once it was cleared, Samiah saw Ariana a little bit ahead of them with her eyes closed and brows furrowed in deep concentration. Samiah's attention turned to the wall, or what was left of it. Where moments before there were glowing scriptures, now there was a gaping hole. A midsized airspeed would have been able to fit through. Inside the newly opened cave, the darkness was so absolute not even the light from the moons could penetrate it.

A one-glancer from Jackur took a step forward with the clear intention to enter the unknown void when Professor Shix's voice boomed in the valley.

"Nobody moves."

He walked past the Jackurian and stopped in front of the cave entrance, so close that if he raised his arm, it would disappear inside. He looked up and down and at each side to assess the situation, then stared ahead and scratched his chin. After a moment of consideration, he retrieved his com-slip from his vest pocket and pointed it toward the cave. A blue laser beam shot out, followed by a very faint beep. Professor Shix's shoulders hunched forward before he pocketed his com-slip again. He walked backward, maybe afraid to turn his back to the huge emptiness in front of him.

"Yoni, prepare the AXPs. Nobody goes in until we have received data from them."

Samiah wondered what kind of information Professor Shix had acquired with his com-slip to make him so wary. He took Lochiana aside and had an agitated conversation with her. Samiah observed them with rapt attention, the flickering of their auras reflecting their tense body languages. She was burning with curiosity but knew her mentor wouldn't share anything with the team until he had solid information.

The entire camp started buzzing about with purpose. Gone was the apathy from before. Samiah didn't think anyone noticed Professor Shix's peculiar reaction to the opening of the portal. Neither she nor Malachiax could do anything until the Artificial Explorers came back safe and sound.

They decided to return to camp and wash off the grime. She knew there would be a big celebration by the bonfire that night—what had happened was huge and exactly what they had been waiting for—but somehow, she didn't feel like celebrating. Her heart constricted painfully in her chest, and a sense of foreboding hung heavily above her head.

Once Samiah and Malachiax were back in their tent, he grabbed her hand and made her look at him.

"Samiah." Her name was but a whisper on his lips. He caressed her cheek and captured her gaze with his mesmerizing eyes. She knew exactly what he wanted to say. As explorers, their jobs were to use the portal once it was opened. Now he didn't want her to go. The risk was too high. She felt the same way toward him. *But is it fair to ask him not to go?*

"Mal, I'm afraid. I thought discovering the portal and opening it would have a different effect on me. I have a bad feeling about it, though, and I can't shake it off."

Malachiax hugged her, and she rested her chin on his shoulder while he stroked her back. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. Not until we know it's safe."

Not what Samiah wanted to hear but exactly what she knew he would say. Malachiax let go of her and ignited a hovering chair. He sat down and leaned back, closing his eyes. His face was tense and his eyebrows were furrowed. She knew what it meant.

"Did you take Ariana's concoction?" She came up behind him and started to massage his scalp.

"No, and I don't want to."

"Mal, I know you're trying to hide the amount of pain you're in. Please, if not for yourself, do it for me. I can't stand to see you suffer."

Samiah moved from behind him and knelt next to his chair. He turned his face in her direction and seemed to contemplate her words. She held his gaze until he sighed in defeat. "You know I can't say no when you put it like that."

She rested her head on his lap, enjoying the feel of his warmth against her cheek. Malachiax ran his fingers through her hair, and Samiah closed her eyes, savoring the moment. She held the world in her hands. She had found her soul mate, the Sacred Powers of Arcadia had blessed them with two little ones, and she had accomplished so much in her career already. By all rights she should be elated, not feeling the awful dread swirling in her chest. She let her mate see what was in her heart with a push of her thoughts into his mind. In silent agreement, they decided to skip the celebration.

Chapter 4

Mora – Present day

Samiah was disoriented. One moment she was sound asleep next to Malachiax, and the next, she had killed her mentor. She couldn't hold on to her thoughts. Memories of her life flashed without order and disappeared, like they had never happened. She was losing herself, and she didn't know how to stop it. She couldn't feel her body either. *What is happening? Where is Mal?* she thought in panic.

His name brought a recent memory to the forefront of her mind. Malachiax's face when she told him about the twins. Samiah grabbed it like a lifeline, an anchor. The swirl inside her head ceased, and she became aware of her surroundings. Her breathing was labored, and numbness had spread through her body. She felt some dark and twisted thing trying to get hold of her conscience again, seep through her memories, and distort everything. But she was aware of its presence now. She wouldn't let it destroy her essence. It was a battle of wills, Samiah's conscience against the malign presence. She fought hard until her head felt like it would explode, but she never wavered; she had too much at stake. She needed to save her family.

The alien entity raged and screamed inside her head. It was pure evil, thriving on destruction and despair. It was lost in its madness, and it wanted to take Samiah there too. There was so much suffering. *How could anyone be put through this and not go insane?* But Samiah refused to be its victim. She thrashed against its hold, her nails digging into the rough ground. *My body will not be possessed. My mind will not be controlled. Not tonight, not ever,* she chanted loudly in her head. With a final, determined push, she purged the being from her body.

She lay there panting and wide-eyed for a brief moment until Malachiax's face hovered above hers.

Oh no. Mal. Has the alien wraith possessed him? A lump the size of the Tandrum moon formed in her throat. She didn't think she had it in her to fight the love of her life if he had been taken. But Malachiax's concerned gaze told her he was still himself.

"Sami, talk to me."

She took a couple of deep breaths before she sat up.

"I'm okay." There was a metallic taste in her mouth, and she realized it was blood. She had bitten her own tongue.

Samiah scanned Malachiax's face, and his paleness drove another sharp knife to her side. She gazed down at his shoulder and discovered the trowel was gone. Blood flowed freely from the wound. No wonder he looked like a ghost.

"Mal, we need to bind that."

His head snapped up. "There's no time. Come on, let's go."

The urgency in his voice spurred Samiah into action. She got up and turned to look behind her, then wished she hadn't. The frenzied mob had spotted them and was coming their way. They ran as fast as they could, but the camp was still on fire, and billowing smoke was everywhere. Soon the mob was gaining on them. Malachiax glanced back and without slowing down, he made a brusque movement with his arm. The ground shook and split in two just behind them, growing bigger as the jagged fissure ran toward their pursuers. Those people were so crazed that not a single one noticed the ground open under their feet.

Some of the enraged explorers managed to hang on to the edge of the massive hole, their fingers digging deep into the uneven ground, trying to find leverage. Samiah hesitated when she recognized Ariana and Walani among them. She tugged Malachiax's hand, making him stop and look at her.

"Mal, it's Ariana and Walani. We must help them."

His gaze traveled over her head and a muscle ticked in his jaw when he saw them. He pressed Samiah's hand harder. She turned around in time to see the section of the ground where Ariana and Walani were hanging from break away and crumble in the abyss.

"No!" She took a couple of steps in their direction, but Malachiax pulled her back.

"They're gone, Sami. I couldn't keep the ground from collapsing. I'm sorry." His words were laced with sadness and guilt.

She turned to face him. "It's not your fault. You didn't know they were there."

He nodded once, and they resumed their escape. They needed to get to the gateway. They rounded a corner and came upon Aron creating circles of fire with his hand and laughing like a madman. Now they knew who had started the fire. They skirted around him, trying not to draw attention to themselves. Samiah was torn between fleeing and finding a way to help Aron. If she could purge the alien being from her mind, so could anyone. In the end, the will to survive and protect her family won.

She pulled Malachiax in the opposite direction, but he stopped in his tracks.

"Mal, you can't fight Aron. He's gone mad, and you're not strong enough to take him down."

"Sami, I know. But look, he has Ianox trapped. I can't simply leave him behind."

Samiah looked beyond Aron and his rings of death and saw a hunched figure on the ground. Cowering. She couldn't be certain, but it looked like Ianox. And he wasn't possessed—he was terrified. Malachiax was right. They couldn't leave Ianox behind to be burned to death by Aron.

Samiah couldn't add to her growing guilt.

"We have to help him," she said finally.

"Do you think he has gone insane too?"

"No. If he were, he would be fighting back, not trembling in a corner."

Samiah's logic appeared to make sense to Malachiax, as he raised his arm and concentrated hard. Nothing happened, not even a slight tremor. That wasn't good. The loss of blood must have taken its toll on Mal. Samiah was grateful for her gift, but she couldn't deny that being an aura-reader put her at a disadvantage in life-or-death situations. She searched frantically for any kind of weapon, but the only things she found nearby were small pebbles.

Ianox screamed when a ball of fire set his sleeve ablaze. He rolled on top of it and managed to put the flames out. His face was distorted in pain, and his eyes were bulging out of his skull. Aron continued to laugh maniacally. He pulled his arm back, ready to send another fireball at Ianox, when Malachiax tackled him to the ground.

"Mal!" Samiah screamed.

The impact sent them rolling until they ended up near a tent that had turned into a giant torch. Aron straddled Malachiax and had his neck in an iron grip, squeezing the life out of him. Samiah, in a feeble attempt to save Mal, swung her bag at Aron's head, but he didn't even glance her way. She might have hit him with a fluffy pillow; there was nothing inside it to make any substantial damage.

She dropped the useless object and attempted a choke hold on her friend. He finally let go of Malachiax to deal with her. He grabbed her arms and flames erupted from his hands. Samiah let out a bloodcurdling scream, for the pain was excruciating. She had never felt anything like it. Her knees buckled as she tried to pull away from Aron's fiery grip, but he held on. He was going to keep burning her until all that was left were her charred bones.

Samiah closed her eyes and tried to soar above the pain. *Impossible*. She opened her eyes and searched for Malachiax. She wanted to see him one last time before the fire consumed her whole.

Chapter 5

Femror wasn't a Draki who believed in things such as feelings. As the alpha warrior of their clan, he trusted his muscles and sharp mind above anything else. Feelings and intuition were nonsense frivolities more in line with his half sister's abilities. However, Femror couldn't shake off the strange pang in his chest when he woke in the middle of the night. It was an acute pain that made his dual heart pick up in pace.

He threw his legs off the dried moss pallet on which he slept and sat up. He rubbed his chest as if by doing so, the ache would go away. No such luck. He got up, knowing going back to sleep would be impossible, and walked out of his tent to relieve the sentry of his duty. He would take the night watch's shift.

Femror had been sent by his father to patrol the harsh desert plains of Mora without being given a reason why. Not that he needed a reason. His father was the king; and blood relation or not, Femror had sworn to obey his sovereign without question.

Santor, the sentry on duty, glanced up when he felt his general's approach. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No. Anything out of the ordinary?" Femror let his enhanced sight scan the vast plains, but the land was deserted aside from them and the scattered nightbloomers.

"No." Santor tried to suppress a yawn unsuccessfully.

Femror was about to tell his warrior to rest when an orange glow on the horizon caught his attention. His entire body tensed. Santor noticed the change in his leader and followed Femror's gaze.

"Bloody moon. What do you think that is?"

Femror flared his nostrils as he took a deep breath. He smelled it immediately, the sharp tang of blood spilled and death.

"Raise the others."

Santor didn't need any further instruction from his leader before he dashed back to the Draki camp and raised the alarm. Femror returned to his own tent to grab his shield and spear. Trouble was in the Valley of Lakra. He now regretted not pushing his party further until they reached the sacred site. He hoped the trouble had nothing to do with the portal, but he wasn't foolish enough to place his fate and the fate of his warriors on wishful thinking.

Reaching inside his traveling sack, he retrieved the small vial of Razor's Blood. He had enough

to last a couple of days. Putting the vial back, he closed the sack, tying it around his waist. He wouldn't drink the dark liquid until he deemed necessary.

Once Femror stepped outside his tent, he found his warriors ready and waiting for him. There were only fifteen of them, not nearly enough numbers to contain the evil that lurked behind the magic seal placed on that rock wall thousands of years ago. If it had been unleashed, may all the gods protect them.

“We ride fast and hard. We don't stop until we reach Lakra.”

“Our mounts are fresh. We should reach the valley before Maya vanishes from the sky,” Santor said.

“Good. If you see Arcadians acting in an erratic manner, don't think twice—drink the potion.”



Santor's estimate had not been wrong. Femror and his warriors made it to the Valley of Lakra in record time and soon discovered the glow on the horizon had been caused by a massive fire. Ruthless flames consumed every surface in their path, even materials that by the law of nature shouldn't be flammable. It told Femror the fire in front of him had to be the work of a bloody elemental. He cursed under his breath as he and his warriors skirted around the raging inferno toward the portal. He would have continued without stopping if some invisible thread had not pulled his attention toward a different direction. Femror stopped and focused his sight toward that odd pull.

Santor stopped by his side and asked, “Do you see something?”

“I'm not sure. Lead the others toward the portal. We must make sure the seal is still intact.”

The Draki warrior obeyed Femror without question and soon disappeared out of sight. Femror didn't know what kept him rooted to that spot, waiting, but he remained there until he saw a figure dash between the flames in the valley below. The pull or whatever it was became stronger, and before Femror could stop to think what he was doing, he jumped toward the raging fire, landing in a crouch, and followed the unknown Arcadian.

The hot smoke made visibility scarce, and not even his enhanced eyesight could penetrate the barrier. Soon Femror couldn't see who he was pursuing anymore, relying solely on that invisible thread.

The smoke became less thick when he reached a clearing. He could see perfectly who he had been pursuing without reason—an Arcadian female—and his entire world went off-kilter.

Femror's blood pumped in his veins and a low, guttural sound emanated from deep within his throat. It was the Draki mating call. Femror balled his hands into fists and willed his body to remain rooted to the spot, even though his primal instincts demanded he grab the female in front of him and take her to safety. He couldn't do it, though.

She looked over her shoulder and searched in the darkness. Femror couldn't let her see him, so he

called on his powers and blended in with the background. Her gaze narrowed when it landed on the spot where he was, but she saw nothing. Femror swallowed hard when he took stock of her stunning face. He had never seen anything more devastatingly beautiful in his entire existence.

The Arcadian female took off again, and Femror went after her, like a hunter following his prey. He couldn't help himself. He never thought it would happen to him, not after all those hundreds of years since he'd achieved maturity and none of the female of his own kind stirred in him anything but physical desire.

It didn't matter. Femror Alabaki, prince of the Draki and leader of the most fearsome army of warriors in the entire land, had found his mate.

Chapter 6

Aron let out an enraged roar and Samiah found herself free. But the pain remained. She crawled backward in time to see her teammate attempt to punch someone. She didn't stop to see who Aron was fighting with but looked for Malachiax instead. Finding his sprawled form ahead, her heart stopped beating for a second. She flipped on her belly and slithered toward him, the progress terribly slow. Grinding her teeth, for the burns on her arms were torturous, she pushed through the pain because nothing mattered in that moment besides Malachiax.

Samiah finally reached his feet and attempted to pull him away from the fire. She cried out when she couldn't and lowered her head to the ground, defeat caving her chest in. Getting out alive seemed like an impossible task now.

She sensed someone crawl next to her and was caught by surprised when she found Ianox there. He didn't say a word before he wrapped his hands around Malachiax's ankles and moved him away from the raging blaze.

"Is he alive?" Ianox asked in a small voice when Samiah joined him.

"I don't know."

Samiah would have checked Malachiax's vitals if she could use her arms. The color had completely drained from his face and she feared the worst. Ianox, for once, took the initiative and pressed two fingers against Malachiax's neck.

"He has a pulse. It's weak, but it's there."

Samiah let out a shaky breath and thanked the Sacred Powers. But the noise of battle made her aware of her surroundings again and the sense of urgency returned. They needed to get out of there. She noticed that whoever attacked Aron was winning the fight. It didn't give her a sense of security, though, only made her warier. She caught the shape of a leg move in a blur and connect with Aron's midsection. He stumbled backward, tripped over her forgotten bag, and fell against the burning tent. Hungry flames immediately engulfed him. He screamed and thrashed, but the more he moved, the more tangled he became with what was left of the structure. If he had been himself, he would have been able to control the fire.

When his attacker came into view, Samiah's heart sank. Lochiana had just killed Aron, and now she was coming for them. Samiah put her body between Malachiax and the woman, but the attack

never came. Lochiana knelt next to Malachiax instead and with the gentlest touch felt his pulse. A moment passed before she looked at Samiah.

"He has lost too much blood. We need to move him fast."

"Y-you are not possessed. How is that possible?" Samiah asked.

"Oh, they tried. But my will is too strong for them. Can you two move?" Lochiana glanced at Ianox.

He nodded and with Lochiana's help, they managed to drag an unconscious Malachiax all the way up to the temporary gateway. The distance wasn't great, but with the extra burden and Ianox's lack of stamina, it took forever. That they didn't come across any more possessed explorers was a miracle.

When they reached the gateway, Lochiana didn't waste any time and ignited the connector. Once they stepped on it, the air surrounding them began vibrating at rapid speed, the pressure building. The world around them disappeared, and all Samiah could see was pulsating light. She knew they weren't going back to Argor, not without the codes. She also doubted Lochiana had any desire to see Lord Droom again. Where they were going didn't matter. As long as Malachiax got the help he needed, they could end up on another planet for all she cared.

The journey lasted no more than a minute. The pressure around them stopped suddenly, and Samiah had to take a step forward to keep her balance. Arrivals through gateway traveling were never smooth. They stepped off the connector into a small courtyard. There were several stucco wall buildings covered by ground-creeping woody plants and connected by clear glass tunnels. Small orb lights illuminated the space. In another time, Samiah would have thought the place cozy.

Lochiana ran ahead, her footsteps not making any sound on the soft purple naigon grass. She disappeared through a sliding door, leaving Samiah, Malachiax, and Ianox behind. Mal remained unconscious, his prone form propped between Samiah and Ianox.

Samiah looked up at the sky and noted she could no longer see Maya, which meant dawn wasn't too far away. *And what a savage dawn it will be.* She knew the morning sun wouldn't bring any hope, only shed light onto despair.

The sliding door opened again, and Lochiana came running out, followed by two royal guards and a short woman with bright red hair wearing a healer's robe. Malachiax was quickly placed on a hovering bed that floated next to the healer. When the woman put her hand directly above Mal's chest, a light purple glow emanated from her open palm. The examination only lasted a few seconds. Without glancing at Samiah or the others, the healer took Malachiax away. Samiah ignored her companions and followed the woman. She didn't plan to leave her mate's side.

The healer took Malachiax through a pair of thick, translucent doors, but when Samiah tried to follow, she was stopped by two giant Morians who blocked her path. Both had short blond hair, strong jaws, and necks as thick as trees. They were almost identical, probably siblings.

"You can't go in there," one of them said.

"Watch me." Samiah tried to go around them, but the one who had spoken blocked her. She

narrowed her eyes. "Get out of my way or I'll make you sorry."

She knew her bold words meant nothing—she could barely stand on her own two legs—and yet she stared hard at the Morian blocking her path.

"You're covered in filth and in need of healing yourself. You can do nothing for your mate. He's in good hands," the second Morian said.

He had kinder eyes, but they did nothing to soothe Samiah. The need to go after Malachiax was still there, unrelenting. She felt a hand on her shoulder and found Lochiana by her side.

"They're right. Healer Xarma is the best in the country. You don't need to worry about Malachiax. Despite the blood loss, his injuries have not affected any vital organs."

"How do you know? Are you a healer too?" Samiah couldn't keep the bite from her tone.

Couldn't they understand? It killed her to be apart from Malachiax not knowing the extent of his wounds.

Samiah was still glowering at Lochiana when the other woman's irises began to swirl. She didn't understand what was happening at first, but once she felt the rage dissipate from her veins, it finally dawned on her. Lochiana was compelling her. Samiah was shocked. How was she able to do that? Wasn't aura-reading Lochiana's dominant gift? Despite those questions bouncing in her head, there was also a huge sense of betrayal. She couldn't believe Lochiana would do such a thing to her. She thought they were friends.

Samiah wanted to look away and sever the link, but it was too late. Quickly and surely, she felt the anguish seep from her body. Without so much worry toward Malachiax occupying her mind, she could feel the searing pain on her arms at its full strength. Also a new kind of concern became present. Her babies. Samiah put a protective hand over her belly—despite how much it hurt for her to do so—and in that gesture, she gave her condition away.

After being led to another room by one of the giant Morians, she didn't fight him when he began his examination. After scanning her body from head to toe with the soft glow from his hands, he asked Samiah to sit down. She felt immediate relief when her body sagged against the plush chair. She hadn't realized how drained her body was.

The healer came to Samiah carrying a bowl with greenish balm in it, and Samiah braced for more pain. It didn't happen. Instead, her arms became numb as soon as the healer covered her wounds with the paste. She couldn't recognize her limbs any longer. They looked exactly like two sad pieces of burnt log. Eerily similar to the log she had used to kill Professor Shix. A lump formed in her throat again. Samiah wanted to cry for her mentor, for all those they had lost, but she couldn't allow herself to do it. If she let the tears fall, she wouldn't be able to stop crying. She had to remain strong.

"What's your name?" Samiah asked her attendant to distract herself.

"Eniax." He had in his hand a little prick pen that he used to take a sample of Samiah's DNA.

He connected the pen to a crystal screen. Then Samiah watched it do its magic. Bleeps and random images she didn't understand appeared on the screen. A moment later, Eniax retrieved a tray

that contained two very thin, almost transparent films. Artificial skin was Samiah's guess.

"Now this part might be a bit upsetting. It won't hurt, but it's okay if you want to close your eyes."

"I want to watch. I won't throw up. I promise."

Eniax stared at Samiah as if he didn't believe her. She didn't know how bad it would be, but she doubted it would be more gruesome than seeing Professor Shix's brain scattered all over the place. Samiah soldiered on and kept her eyes open.

Eniax had been right. This part of the procedure was not pretty. He had to scrape the burnt skin and muscle away. The damage on her limbs was so extensive that once he was done, she could see her bones. Next, Eniax grabbed a syringe with blue liquid inside. When he injected it in the muscle that was left on Samiah's arms, it stung a little, despite the balm. She bit her lower lip and winced. Eniax threw her an apologetic glance and quickly applied the artificial skin over her burns. To secure them in place, he wrapped her arms with healing cloth.

"The injection will make your muscles regrow. By nightfall, the healing should be complete. You might feel a certain discomfort for the next Tandrum's moon cycle. I'm going to check your baby's vitals now." He attached a clip to Samiah's finger, and almost immediately, the images of Samiah's babies appeared on the screen. They were only tiny little dots, but she could see the pulsing of their hearts. Samiah became overwhelmed with a foreign feeling. It was elation, love, worry, and a sense of protectiveness, all bundled in a messy package that settled in her heart. Her eyes prickled and she held her breath.

Eniax looked up from the monitor and turned to Samiah. "Two?"

She nodded, unable to speak.

"I have never seen it happen to someone so young. You and your mate must be very special."

Samiah let out a shaky breath before speaking. "I don't know about me, but Mal is most definitely special."



Malachiax didn't stay long under Xarma's care, but it took him a few hours to wake up again. Samiah was waiting by the side of his bed, watching his chest rise and fall, when he opened his eyes and blinked a couple of times. For the first time since this whole nightmare started, Samiah's heart kicked up a notch in happiness, not despair. She nudged Malachiax's arm with her still sore hand, prompting him to turn his head in her direction. Confusion and sorrow were etched in his night-sky eyes.

"Sami? What happened?"

"You don't remember anything?"

"I do have memories, but they don't make any sense. It feels like I just woke up from a horrible dream." He pulled a face when he tried to turn his body. "I guess it was real, then."

"Yes, it was all real. I still haven't processed everything."

"Our crew? Are they all gone?" His voice was choked, and Samiah's heart clenched in response.

"Yes, we and Ianox are the only survivors. Plus, Lochiana."

Malachiax swallowed hard. "How?"

Samiah told him everything, and it felt like a barb twisting in her side to see guilt take over Malachiax's expression. He was so good and so thoughtful that, no matter her reasoning, he would always carry the burden of their friends' deaths with him.

When Samiah related her experience with the alien wraith, she saw the gradual horror shadow Malachiax's gaze. She explained the wraiths were lost souls that had been trapped in a prison so long ago that time had ceased to mean anything to them. Misery and destruction were all they knew. It was impossible to tell how many had come through the portal, but both of them knew they needed to act fast before more Arcadians fell prey to the evil beings.

"What do we do now? How do we fight them?" Malachiax asked.

Samiah didn't know the answer to his questions. How could anyone fight something so intangible?

A knock on the door kept Samiah from voicing her fears. It opened a fraction and Ianox's face appeared through the crack.

"How are you feeling?" He directed his question at Malachiax before he came into the room with careful steps.

Ianox had cuts and bruises on his face, and his left arm was wrapped in a thin gauze just like Samiah's. There were no signs of arrogance in his demeanor, only uncertainty. Samiah focused on her gift and realized immediately that Ianox was depressed. His aura was a light gray color instead of brown.

"A bit sore, but nothing I can't handle," Malachiax answered.

Ianox's gaze wandered restlessly and unfocused before it stopped on the bandage around Mal's shoulder. He swallowed hard and brought his hands together in a fidgety motion. "I want to thank you for saving my life."

"I didn't. Lochiana did," Malachiax was quick to point out.

"No, it was you. You were hurt, yet you still fought for me. I'll be forever in your debt."

Samiah saw in her mate's eyes that he would counter that logic until he turned purple.

"Have you heard from Lochiana?" she asked.

Ianox shook his head. "When can we go home?"

"I'm sure by now Lord Droom and the council are aware of the situation. We must contact them to obtain the codes for the gateway," Malachiax replied.

Ianox made a motion to retrieve his com-slip from his pocket only to realize he didn't have it. He went in search of one, but he never returned.

Chapter 7

Lochiana pushed aside her guilty feelings as she strode toward the Morang castle. This was the second time she had used her compulsion gift against an Arcadian. The first had been an accident when she was a youngster and hadn't known she possessed the ability. She never spoke of it, never confided in anyone that the Sacred Powers of Arcadia had blessed her with two dominant gifts instead of one. She knew, even at that young age, the dangers such an ability could bring.

The guards stationed at the front gates stiffened in surprise when they noticed her approach. Lochiana didn't visit the royal palace often, always preferring to stay at her small apartment on the outskirts of town when she visited Morang. Her childhood home evoked too many memories she'd rather forget. The guards, in their defense, recovered from their surprise fast and promptly opened the gates for her. Lochiana might have abdicated the throne, but she was still royalty in their eyes. She would never get rid of that unwanted mantle, no matter how hard she tried to lead a commoner's life.

"My lady, are you all right?" one of the guards asked when she came closer.

She looked down at her clothes, which were now covered in soot and blood. She could only guess what her face looked like.

"No," she answered sharply. "We are under attack. Lock the gates and summon the captain. Time is of the essence."

It was the first time the guards had heard Lochiana speak with such an imposing tone. She had always been friendly and approachable, even before she decided to explore the stars. Her parents had called her eccentric. But now she sounded just like her father. The guards traded an alarmed glance between them before the tallest of the duo tapped the silver band around his wrist. Lochiana didn't wait to listen to him deliver her message, continuing the trek to the palace.

Once inside, she stumbled upon Margriet, her former lady-in-waiting. The young Morian let out a shriek before composing herself and making a tiny curtsy. The girl hadn't aged much since the time she served Lochiana; then again, out of all the Arcadians, Morians were the ones with the most delayed aging.

Lochiana ignored the formality and the fact that it was still too early for any palace worker to be running about. "Where are my parents?" she asked.

“They went to the lake estates, milady.” Margriet stared at Lochiana with wide eyes and when Lochiana let out a curse, the poor girl turned bright red.

“Find me a com-slip. I need to get in touch with them as soon as possible.”

Lochiana’s sharp tone made Margriet snap out of her stupor, and she finally noticed Lochiana’s appearance.

“Forgive me asking, milady. Did something bad happen?”

Lochiana paused and debated telling Margriet the truth. She couldn’t handle if the girl went into hysterics; she had enough on her plate as it was. In the end, she decided that not warning Margriet would do more harm than good.

“Yes, something terrible has happened. Find help and make sure all doors and windows in the palace are shut and locked. I’m also expecting the guard’s captain. Please take him to the assembly room and ask him to wait for me there. I’m going to change.”

Margriet eyes turned even rounder than before, but she nodded and dashed off down the corridor. Lochiana didn’t know if trusting the girl had been a wise decision, but she didn’t have time to go in search of another palace worker. She wanted to remove the grime from her skin before she met with the royal guard’s captain. It wasn’t a vain sentiment—she didn’t care about her appearance, at least not in that moment—but the soot all over her was a reminder of the horrible things she had done. She had killed a man. Even if deep down she knew bathing wouldn’t remove the stain on her soul, she couldn’t bear the sight or the scent. She smelled like death.

She found the hallway on the second floor empty. The sun was just beginning to rise on the horizon and most of Morang’s palace household was still asleep. With her parents’ absence, there was no need for workers to start their chores at the break of dawn.

Right before Lochiana opened the door to her chambers, she felt a presence looming behind her. Her breathing hitched as she looked over her shoulder, but she found no one there. It was the second time that day she had felt the eerie sensation of being observed. *You’re beginning to act like Margriet*, she thought, irritated, and shook her head. She couldn’t let the evening’s events turn her into a paranoid mess. If she let fear conquer her, she would never be able to go on another exploration mission again. She entered the room and locked the door behind her. *Prudence is not the same thing as paranoia.*

Lochiana’s eyes scanned her peach and gold chamber, and her mind was taken to another era. Her heart twisted sharply as her gaze settled on the wide bed and Lord Droom’s image came unbidden. It was there he had taken his revenge. It was there her love for him had died.

Irritated at herself for letting those memories take hold, she spun around and started removing her soiled clothes as she walked to the bathroom. Once there, she eyed the tub longingly. Soaking her stiff muscles in warm water sounded marvelous, but she didn’t have the time for such luxury. She opted for a hot shower instead.

Soon the bathroom became enveloped by steam, and Lochiana couldn’t hear anything beyond the

sound of the jet of water over her head. Distracted, she didn't notice when the door to the bathroom opened. She only realized she wasn't alone in the room when she saw a shadow move ahead, followed by a guttural sound.

Lochiana's heart kick-started. She jumped to the side just before whoever had invaded her privacy pounced with a roar. Skidding on the wet stone floor, she hit her hip against the edge of the bathtub, letting out a yelp. She didn't let the sharp pain deter her, though; she just kept running until she was back in her bedroom again.

A weapon. I need a weapon. She frantically scanned the room but couldn't find any object that could inflict damage before her attacker followed her. Lochiana spun around and widened her eyes when she saw Margriet there. Only it was no longer the shy girl staring at her but a creature with bloodlust in her eyes. Lochiana shuffled back until her spine pressed against the dresser.

"Margriet. You can fight whatever has taken hold of your mind. I've done it. You can too."

Lochiana's words had no impact on the girl. Margriet curled her lips and growled like a wild animal. Lochiana's pulse pounded in her ears as she reached behind her, searching blindly for anything to use against her former lady-in-waiting. Her hands curled around a perfume bottle just before Margriet came at her once more. Lochiana waited until the last possible moment to move out of the way, and the young Morian girl crashed against the piece of furniture.

Lochiana didn't look back as she made a dash for the door, then stopped when she caught her naked reflection in the mirror. She wasn't a prude, but she couldn't possibly brave the outdoors without any layer of protection. She veered toward her old armoire instead, hoping she would find more than pretty gowns in there. Yanking the double doors open, she cursed when all she saw were delicate and sparkly attire.

A noise behind her made Lochiana look over her shoulder. Margriet was standing again, her body poised to strike. Without thinking, Lochiana pulled her arm back and threw the bottle of perfume with all her strength at the girl. It hit Margriet's shoulder, not her head where Lochiana had been aiming. Without taking her eyes off Margriet, Lochiana reached back and grabbed the first piece of cloth her fingers brushed against before running to the door. Her feet skidded to a halt when she found the way blocked by the most magnificent and frightening being she had ever seen.

Her brain worked furiously to process the information her eyes were conveying. The male in front of her looked like something straight out of a book of myths and legends. He was taller than she was by a head and with a chest almost as wide as the span of the door. His skin was the color of a crystalline lake and covered partially by translucent scales. The corded muscles on his neck and alpine arms revealed pure power, and if Lochiana had to guess by the number of weapons strapped to his body, he was some kind of warrior.

He glanced at her face before his gaze dropped to take in her nakedness. His jaw clenched. Lochiana clutched the dress tight against her chest in an attempt to cover herself and glared at him. The warrior's gaze snapped back to her face, and Lochiana became ensnared by his golden yellow

eyes despite being annoyed at him. His eyes were so foreign and yet so beautiful.

A snarl brought her back to the present. The warrior's attention diverted from her to Margriet, who was still poised to attack. His entire frame seemed to tense before he pulled a dagger from the belt around his hips and, in a blur of movement, threw it in Margriet's direction. The weapon found its mark, embedding itself to the hilt on Margriet's stomach. She let out a bloodcurdling scream as she clutched her belly and fell.

"No!" Lochiana screamed and took a step in the girl's direction. That was a killing blow.

The warrior grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "There's nothing you can do for her. She's been taken."

Lochiana whipped her face toward the intruder and leveled him with a glare. "She could have been saved. You didn't need to aim to kill."

He narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. "Yes, I did. Now come. We don't have much time. I'd like to be out of this city before madness descends." He started pulling Lochiana toward the door, but she was having none of it. She planted her feet to the floor and tried to pull her arm from his grasp. Try being the operative word, for the warrior had her in a fierce hold.

"Let go of me. I'm not going anywhere with you."

The warrior glanced at her with a glint of impatience in his eyes, as if Lochiana were a little child.

"Would you rather stay here and fight your possessed servants instead?"

His words made Lochiana's heart clench so painfully, she could barely breathe. Her stomach bottomed out and the fire in her veins diminished. "They have all been taken?"

The warrior nodded, his eyes flashing with an emotion Lochiana couldn't understand. Dropping her gaze, she stared at his chest instead. She thought about her new friends, Samiah and Malachiax, and her heart broke. She wanted to cry for them, for all the devastation she had already witnessed, but if she succumbed to despair and sadness, she wouldn't be able to function.

"You can't wear that." The warrior's voice brought Lochiana back to the current situation.

"Excuse me?"

The stranger let go of her arm and went to peruse the armoire. "What's all this nonsense? Don't you own any sensible clothes?"

Lochiana narrowed her eyes at the warrior's back. "I don't live here anymore, and those clothes are the ones I left behind." She didn't know why she felt the need to tell him that.

He made a strange sound in the back of his throat before he pulled a tog-styled beige dress and lobbed it in her direction. "This one will have to do."

"Who do you think you are to order me around?" she spat back, even though the dress he had selected was indeed a better choice than the black, heavily embroidered number she had grabbed before.

He turned around and seemed to grow taller somehow. "My name is Femror Alabaki. I'm prince

of the Draki.”

“The lizard people,” Lochiana whispered in awe. “You’re real, then.”

Femror’s eyes turned to slits and his lips became a thin flat line. “Don’t ever use that word around me.”

Lochiana didn’t mistake the threat in his tone, but she refused to be intimidated by the warrior. She narrowed her eyes and squared her shoulders. “What are you going to do if I do?”

He cocked his head and the corner of his lips twitched up. “I might have to kill you.”

Chapter 8

A persistent, horrible sound of metal scratching against metal woke Samiah. She had fallen asleep on the chair next to Malachiax's bed. Somehow, her head had dropped on top of his stomach, and the odd angle had made her neck stiff. In the left upper corner of the room, an intermittent purple light kept flashing silently. The hairs behind her neck rose. Something wasn't right.

"Mal, wake up." She shook him gently.

His eyes popped open, before he sat up fast, on high alert.

The desire to flee came to her suddenly, like a powerful wave crashing against the shore. They were here. She knew it in her bones.

"Come on, Mal. We have to go."

Malachiax didn't question her motives or the urgency in her tone. He quickly got out of bed and put his boots back on. There was nothing to be done about the stupid clinic clothes. Samiah opened the door carefully and found the common room in complete disarray. Crystal screens were shattered. Desks and chairs lay broken, spread hazardingly throughout the space. In a corner, she found the source of the noise that had woken her—a partially broken cleaning droid kept bumping against the metal rod of a desk.

"What in the world happened here?" Mal asked.

"I can't believe we slept through all this." Then she remembered. Eniax had mentioned the balm for pain would make her drowsy after a couple of hours. She didn't realize it would knock her out completely. "Come on, let's find Ianox and get out of here."

They found him still asleep in the first room they checked. Samiah woke him a bit too roughly while Malachiax attempted to use the crystal screen to access the relays. When he cursed, she knew he had failed.

"Ianox, did you manage to speak with anyone in Argor?" Malachiax had a com-slip in his hand, but the crease on his forehead told Samiah the device was also useless.

"Yes, I spoke to Commander Haarx. He was supposed to send me the code."

"Did he?" Malachiax had his finger poised over the com-slip.

"Not before I fell asleep."

Malachiax scrolled and typed away, but after a moment, Samiah saw the hope vanish from his

eyes. His face twisted in anger before he threw the com-slip hard against the wall, shattering it in a hundred tiny pieces. For Mal to lose control like that, the frustration must be too great. Samiah felt like breaking something to smithereens too.

"Are you crazy? How are we going to call for help now?"

With his hands balled into fists, Malachiax looked at Ianox. "There's no calling for help. The relays are dead. We're on our own."

Ianox curled his arms over his head and his eyes appeared pained. He was panicking, and that wouldn't help anyone. They needed to move.

"Okay, let's think. We don't know how bad the situation is outside, but I'm assuming the worst. Based on the level of destruction we saw at the camp, there is a very low probability we'll be able to reach the main gateway station undetected. We don't have the code to go to Argor, and the gateways might not be operational anymore," Samiah said.

"We could maybe use a rover transport," Ianox said.

Malachiax shook his head. "They were never meant to be used for long-distance traveling. They won't work outside the city parameters."

"What are we going to do, then? Are we trapped here?" Ianox hugged himself and started to sweat profusely.

"We're not trapped," Malachiax replied. "We'll find a way to reach Argor, even if we have to walk all the way there."

"We'll never make it!" Ianox screamed.

"Be quiet, Ianox. Or do you want to be found by a possessed Morian?" Samiah snapped.

Upon searching Ianox's room, Mal found a small thermo sack inside one of the storage cubes. That was the only thing useful there. They went back to the common room and made their way carefully through the debris. It appeared the whole place was abandoned, but at that point, they couldn't assume anything. They tried to search fast and efficiently. The compound wasn't large, and only the common area had been vandalized. That helped. They didn't find any real weapons, but they stocked up on clinical supplies and parcels of food and water.

Samiah detached the metal leg of a desk and swung it in front of her a couple of times. It was a bit too long to be practical but not too heavy to be burdensome. It would make a fine improvised weapon. Malachiax and Ianox followed her lead and acquired similar items themselves. They were headed toward the main exit when a thought occurred to her.

"Wait."

Malachiax and Ianox were ahead of her and turned around.

"What is it, Sami?" Mal's grip on his metal rod increased as he searched their surroundings.

"Ianox, did an alien wraith try to possess you last night?"

Ianox blanched. "No, I don't think so."

"And after I purged the being from me, it didn't try to possess you either, Mal."

"What are you getting at?" Malachiax's stance relaxed a bit.

"I'm trying to pinpoint the reason both of you were spared. And the only common denominator last night was that you were both impaired. Ianox had lost his mind to Razor's Blood, and you had taken Ariana's concoction for your headache."

She saw understanding cross both their faces.

"And today, we were heavily sedated during the attack," Ianox said, showing enthusiasm for the first time since last night.

"I have sedatives and balm for pain, but it's not like we can use them without cause. We won't make it very far if we keep falling asleep," Malachiax pointed out.

"So our first priority is to find Razor's Blood," Samiah stated.

Both men traded glances, and Samiah bristled, feeling left out. "What?"

"Sami, have you ever had Razor's Blood?" Malachiax asked.

He knew the answer to that, but she indulged him anyway. "No, what's the big deal?"

"Well, the first problem is it won't be easy to find. Morians, as a general rule, are not fans of the beverage."

"Well, I know that." She crossed her arms, hating that Malachiax was lecturing her in front of Ianox. "But Jackurians love it. If we can find a store that caters to them, I'm sure they will have it."

Ianox put his hands on his hips. "And how do you propose we find such a store without access to a working com-slip? We're bound to come across a frenzied mob for sure."

"Fine, we won't search for it here. We'll head to Jackur and stock up there. Meanwhile, you'll just have to sedate yourselves," Samiah said.

"Jackur is out of the way, Sami. Plus, Razor's Blood affects each person differently. You saw what happened to Ianox last night."

Ianox had the decency to hang his head in shame.

"Well, it's better than being possessed. I can fight against the wraiths, but it's obvious that I'm a minority. It's too risky, Mal."

They had a staring contest, but Malachiax looked away first. He gazed down and let out a heavy sigh. "Fine, we'll head to Jackur. There is a chance they haven't been attacked yet."

He rummaged through the supply sack and grabbed a glass container with green pills in it. He took one out and broke it in three pieces. When he offered Samiah a section, she shook her head. "I'm not taking it."

Malachiax's face hardened. "Yes, you are. After all that talk about risks and whatnot, do you want to go out there unprotected?"

She touched his outstretched arm and stared deep into his eyes. "Mal, it already tried to possess me, and I fought it off. I can do it again. I swear. One of us needs to remain clearheaded."

His lips stretched in a thin line, and Samiah could hear him grind his teeth. He finally put the third piece back in the container, scowling at her the whole time.

"How do we know how much will be enough to keep them at bay?" Ianox asked.
Samiah turned to him. "We don't. That's why we need Razor's Blood."

Chapter 9

As Durgin lay on his bed, staring at nothing, he could still see his brother's face. Terrified. Confused. In the final moments, clarity had returned to his gaze, even if his twin's face was no longer a carbon copy of his. Thick, dark green veins protruded from his enlarged forehead, and his deep purple irises had a red ring around them. Kramer straps kept Drex tied to the metal slab, and the one around his neck had already left dark bruises.

Drex grabbed Durgin's wrist and, without words, begged him to end his suffering. Durgin clenched his jaw hard and shook his head, even knowing he was his brother's last hope of final peace. Drex grunted and stared at the clock on the wall behind Durgin. They didn't have much time; the head scientist would soon return, and Durgin would never see his brother again.

He'd done it then. He'd entered his brother's mind and turned off the switch, staying longer than he should only to watch the lights from the pulsating brain cells dim one by one until nothing was left but utter darkness. Durgin hadn't let himself cry until he was back in his chamber; then he did so for hours, allowing himself to drown in guilt and sadness. But once the tears had dried up, he vowed to not shed a single one ever again over his dead brother. What was done was done.

Durgin heard a commotion outside his quarters and jumped out of bed. Crossing the living area with long strides, he opened the door to the hallway just in time to see Argamanx guards rushing by. Commander Haarx, the leader of the prestigious Nox Elite and his father's right hand, brought up the rear. He noticed Durgin standing there in the hallway and slowed down. His lips curled into a sneer the man reserved especially for Durgin whenever he was alone in his presence.

"My lord." He bowed his head like it pained him to do so. Durgin knew it did.

"What's going on, Commander?"

The soldier narrowed his eyes at Durgin and clenched his jaw. Durgin smirked in return as he leaned against the cold pearly wall. Commander Haarx was a mountain of a man, and one would say it was stupidity to the infinity power to antagonize him. But Durgin had a penchant for living on the edge. It was the only explanation.

The deep lines and creases on Commander Haarx's face were the only giveaway of his age. Pushing six hundred years old, the commander was in top physique. One look at his bulky arms would have anyone cowering.

“One of the Dimidium escaped, my lord. We’re gathering all guards at our disposal to bring him down before he can do any more damage.”

Dimidium. Durgin hated that word. It was what his father’s scientists called their experiments. A burst of bitter laughter threatened to escape his mouth, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep it bottled in. If only Commander Haarx knew Durgin was also a Dimidium. But Lord Droom had kept that information to himself; no one knew besides his white-coat minions that he had experimented on his own offspring. Durgin had been the successful outcome, Drex the failure.

“One Dimidium against the entire Argamanx Royal Guard?” Durgin said, overdoing the condescending tone. “He must be some specimen.”

“He’s not a specimen. He’s a beast!”

Durgin winced at the commander’s outburst. *Tell me how you really feel, why don’t you?* Commander Haarx had made no secret of what he thought of Lord Droom’s experiments. Was he afraid that his father’s hellions would one day replace Commander Haarx and his precious Nox Elite?

Durgin had never seen him lose his composure like that. He had struck a nerve, and he’d better take advantage of it. He stared at the commander with one eyebrow raised and cleared his throat.

The soldier finally became self-aware, and his face closed off again. “Forgive me, my lord.”

“I don’t understand the fuss. It’s not like he can go very far unless he can fly.”

The Argamanx Royal Castle stood on a hundred-story tower, and there were only a few ways to exit the estate. None of them would be viable options for the fugitive. Without a special code, the gateway was useless. The old system of lifts was still in use but heavily guarded. And the last option would be to plunge into Serenity Lake and certain death.

Commander Haarx frowned. “Of course we’re not worried he’ll escape. We’re concerned about the safety of our civilians. Who knows what that aberration might do to our people?”

Durgin had to concede to the commander’s point. Not all Dimidium were violent, mindless beasts, but there had been a few incidents involving the most unstable specimens. What if the one that had escaped was such a case?

“You should come with us, my lord. We could use the help, and your father would be so pleased.”

Durgin wasn’t fooled by Commander Haarx’s sudden respectful tone. This was more than a test—it was a challenge. And Durgin could never back down from one. The last thing he wanted was to spend quality time with the commander and his cronies, but he had to make sure the lab’s escapee was indeed a menace. Durgin knew Commander Haarx would strike first and ask questions later.

Durgin followed Commander Haarx through the maze that was the Argamanx Royal Castle. The hallways’ perfect translucent walls were covered by many pieces of extraordinary artwork in overly elaborate gilded frames. There was barely any space between them, as if every former resident had added to the collection and never disposed of anything. The opulence had always suffocated him.

They came outside into the never-changing balmy weather, and the first rays of dawn peeked into the sky. They met with the Nox Elite soldiers in the royal gardens where the palace’s private gateway

was located. Durgin received a stiff and reluctant head bow from them. A few of the soldiers sneered, doing little to disguise their opinion of him. They all believed Durgin was an overly entitled royal who didn't have to work for a thing in his life. Durgin snorted. If only they knew the ugly truth.

The group of soldiers was gathered around Lancer, Commander Haarx's son. He and Durgin were about the same age, but he looked much younger. He had an open and friendly face with an air of innocence that served him well. People easily trusted him, and in his line of work, that was a great asset to have.

"I don't believe it. He's already at the outer edge of Argamania." Lancer glanced at his com-slip.

"That's impossible." Commander Haarx grabbed the device from his son and stared at the screen for a few seconds. Durgin was confused himself. How had the Dimidium managed to escape the tower and cross Serenity Lake so quickly? Unless he knew how to fly, which brought an entirely new string of problems.

Without wasting any time, they stormed the palace's gateway, scaring the technicians who were present. They used every connector available, traveling in groups of four. Within seconds, they were beamed to the gateway on the outskirts of town. Excitement coursed through Durgin's veins as they ran beyond the boundaries of Argamania, despite the nature of his mission. He had become quite the recluse after Drex's death. He hadn't realized how much he missed the physical exertion, the challenge.

There was a clear division between the center of the city and its outskirts. The beautiful houses that made Argamania one of the most treasured cities in the world gave way to buildings with dilapidated walls and rooftops barely in one piece. Narrow streets paved with cheap sandstone were covered in filth, and the smell of garbage and urine was almost unbearable. The few citizens who were wandering about that early in the morning scurried away when they saw the dark-clad Nox Elite soldiers approaching.

They finally got a visual of the escapee, and the moment the Dimidium realized he'd been found, he made a mad dash toward the thick forest that surrounded the city. He chose the least direct path, going uphill. Durgin wondered what he was up to when the ground beneath their feet started to shake, followed by a loud rumble. He looked up in time to see huge rocks barreling down toward them. He shouted out a warning to the soldier closest to him, but it was too late; caught in the direct path of a boulder, he was dragged by it and disappeared in the grainy dust. Durgin's pulse skyrocketed as he jumped, ducked, and veered, never once losing sight of the fugitive. He felt the strain on his legs, and breathing became more and more difficult.

He heard the Dimidium's labored gasps ahead as he shortened the gap between them. *At least the chase on the steep hill isn't affecting only me*, Durgin thought bitterly. He caught a flash of the Dimidium's sleeve before a sudden gritty fog engulfed him. Not willing to lose the fugitive when he was so close, Durgin ran ahead without caution. No warning sound came that time before the massive stone flew his way as if it had been thrown by a giant. He jumped to the side, narrowly escaping

being squashed, though the momentum forced him to roll on the rough ground enough times to make him lose count. His elbows burned where they had been scratched raw. He could hear the sound of his heart pumping hard, almost as if it wanted to break free.

A movement in his peripheral caught his attention. Durgin rolled onto his stomach and saw the Dimidium approach with a feral expression on his face. He froze on the spot, for the face that stared at him was almost identical to that of his brother—or to be more precise, to the aberration he had become in the end. Durgin's breathing became shallow. The Dimidium's nostrils flared, and he curled his lips back to reveal a row of jagged teeth. Durgin noticed when the thing bent his knees, body poised to strike. The Dimidium jumped, and all Durgin could do was cover his head with his arm and brace for the impact.

A loud thud nearby made him look up. The Dimidium's body lay ahead, unmoving. His head was twisted at an odd angle. Commander Haarx ignored Durgin to make a beeline toward the aberration. His face twisted in a scowl before he spat on the corpse.

Lancer stopped next to Durgin. "Are you okay, my lord?"

He expected to find smugness on Commander Haarx's son's face. Instead, he saw genuine concern.

"I'm okay, soldier. Only a few bruises." He got up with Lancer's help, pain radiating through his entire body. He locked his jaw and sucked it up.

Their attention diverted to Commander Haarx who had his boot on the fugitive's chest, his lips curled in disgust.

"What is that thing?" Lancer asked.

"I don't know."

Durgin breached the distance between him and Commander Haarx. Upon closer inspection of the body, he noticed that the thing wasn't as similar to Drex as he had originally thought. No, the scientists had managed to advance far more with this one. Bile filled Durgin's mouth. That could have been him.

"What are we going to do with the body, Commander?" Lancer asked.

"Burn it. This aberration should have never existed." His eyes connected with Durgin's, who saw twisted satisfaction there. "Maybe now that one of Lord Droom's creations almost managed to kill his son, he will heed my advice."

Durgin's face felt like it was in flames. Even so, he opened his mouth to offer a rebuff, but everyone's wrist communicators began to beep at once. Durgin glanced at his communication device and pressed the small screen to read the incoming message.

It was a level five alert. They were under attack.

Chapter 10

Samiah expected to find utter chaos outside, but the reality of it was shocking in ways she couldn't have foreseen. All shops on the main street had been ransacked and torn to pieces. Transport hovers had been mangled beyond recognition. She couldn't be certain, but it seemed the path of destruction led to the House of Morang's palace at the end of the avenue. The mammoth vine gates to the royal estates were wide open, inviting and foreboding at the same time. Signs of struggle were visible in bits of torn clothes and small puddles of blood. Samiah balked when Malachiax veered toward it.

“Where are you going?”

He looked over his shoulder, a deep frown marring his forehead. “We must look for survivors.”

“Are you crazy? What if we find a crazed mob instead?” Ianox said before Samiah could voice a similar reply.

“I'm not going to simply turn my back without checking if there is anyone in the palace who needs help.”

Ianox crossed his arms and glowered at Malachiax. “I'm not risking my neck for anyone.”

“I risked my life and Samiah's to save yours.”

He didn't wait for Ianox's reply, just kept walking toward the white construction at the end of the stoned pavement. Samiah bit her lower lip while guilt gnawed at her insides. She had the same selfish thoughts as Ianox, not wanting to risk her life or Mal's to check for survivors. Malachiax didn't even think twice about it. She pondered, not for the first time, how such a wretched person like herself could have a soul mate as wonderful and good as Malachiax.

She followed him in silence, lost to her dark thoughts. She wasn't surprised when she heard Ianox's footsteps close behind her a few seconds later. He must have realized his odds at survival were greater with them.

The sun had dipped closer to the horizon, painting the sky with a red glow. Night would soon be upon them. It would help conceal them from anyone possessed, but it would also make it harder to spot any alien wraith lurking about in search of a potential host.

They found the double doors to the palace unmanned and open. Their cheery cerulean blue color was at complete odds with the dark splatter Samiah could only guess was more blood. She

swallowed hard as she walked in carefully, straining her ears to catch any warning noise, but only the sound of their footsteps echoed in the empty hallway. She wished she could muffle the noise, for she didn't want to alert anyone of their presence.

They would have covered ground much faster if they had split up, but going their separate ways presented too many risks. So together they stayed, checking each room on the ground level first. They found them all empty. Some were untouched, others wrecked beyond recognition. Only one thing was certain—they couldn't stay in the palace much longer. She was glad the Morang's official home wasn't a mammoth construction like the Argamanx castle. Its size was more in line with a manor than a palace.

Without a word, they headed to the second floor and stopped at the landing, again waiting, listening. The hallway was dark, and by looking at the pieces of broken glass on the floor, she knew why. Seconds passed before they heard something fragile shatter down the corridor. Samiah swallowed hard and unsheathed the metal rod strapped to her back, holding it tight in her already sweaty hands. With her heart galloping at full speed, she traded a glance with Malachiax and read fear in his gaze. She didn't dare speak out loud, so she touched his mind telepathically, something she discovered she could do moments after they were bonded. The gift wasn't reciprocal; he couldn't enter her mind.

"Be careful," she said through the bond.

He nodded and faced forward once more. Samiah noticed he wasn't acting lethargic, which meant the drugs hadn't kicked in yet. She hoped that at least his mind was protected.

The sound had come from the last door down the hallway. It was wider than the ones from downstairs and had intrinsic carvings in its dark wood with golden highlights. Samiah suspected it led to one of the royal chambers. Malachiax stopped in front of it and took a deep breath before pushing the door open all the way. He didn't enter right away, scanning the room from the threshold. Samiah rose on her tiptoes and looked beyond his shoulder. The room was in complete disarray, much like the ones downstairs. Furniture lay in pieces on the ground, and shards of glass were mixed with debris of objects she didn't recognize.

Malachiax walked in, and she followed close behind. Then a moan reached them, coming from somewhere near the canopy bed. Whoever or *whatever* was in the room was hidden from view. They veered in that direction, trying to avoid the fragments of sharp objects, and found a young Morian curled into a ball on the floor. Samiah's breathing hitched. The girl's face and arms were covered in scratches, and white foam pooled in the corners of her mouth. Malachiax bent down to touch her, but he drew his arm back quickly when she hissed at him. Samiah focused on her gift and confirmed the girl's aura was completely black. The young Morian was possessed.

She grabbed Malachiax's arm and pulled him back, out of the Morian's reach.

"Kill me," she said. It wasn't the voice of a young woman, too harsh and guttural.

"Who are you?" Samiah asked.

“You don’t want to know.” The being began to thrash and scratch the girl’s face, making deep gouges on her cheeks.

“For all the Sacred Powers,” Ianox mumbled behind us. “What’s she doing?”

“She’s taken,” Samiah replied.

“We must help her,” Malachiax said.

“There’s no help. I’ll die, and I’m taking this sweet, innocent soul with me,” the wraith seethed. Samiah could feel the malice of his words deep in her bones.

The girl’s hands curled around her middle, and that was when Samiah noticed the dagger embed in her abdomen. The handle was white, with swirls carved on the polished surface. Samiah had never seen such a design before. It wasn’t a common dagger. The skin around the wound was black as if it was rotten.

“Who did this to you?” she asked.

“Filthy lizard scum. We hate them more than we hate you!”

“The Sacred Powers have mercy on us.” Ianox took a step back, his face turning ashen all of a sudden.

“Do you know what she is talking about?”

Ianox just shook his head. “We don’t speak about them. Never, ever speak about them.”

The Morian let out a bloodcurdling scream right before her entire body turned black and disintegrated into a pile of ashes. Samiah waited for the wraith to emerge from her body, and when it didn’t happen, she let out a sigh of relief. A young girl had just died, and she was *relieved*. *I’m despicable*, she thought with a heavy heart.

“Let’s get out of here,” Malachiax said, pulling Samiah out of her guilty thoughts.

They ran back to the ground floor, not as stealthy as Samiah would have liked, but it seemed that aside from the now-dead girl, the palace was deserted. The whole experience shook Samiah to the core, and she could bet it had also affected Malachiax deeply. She wouldn’t think about that. She had to remain positive. They may not have found survivors, but they had gained precious information. Whatever alien beings had invaded their planet, they could be killed. Samiah only had to find a way to do so without killing the Arcadians they were possessing.

She saved that piece of knowledge for later. There was no time to dwell on it now. They had to find Razor’s Blood and reach Argor before it was too late.

When they made it out of the palace, night greeted them. The lampposts that should have provided illumination were dark. Mercifully, the streets were still devoid of life. It seemed the entire population had vanished. The capital of Mora was a ghost town. Samiah had visited cities in other planets like this, sad skeletons of a civilization long gone. Was Arcadia headed in that direction? Would explorers from another planet walk through the ruins of theirs and wonder what kind of evil had befallen them?

By the time they had reached the outskirts of Morang, the three moons of Arcadia were already

high in the sky, partially hidden behind clouds. Buildings and houses were sparse here, and ahead the desert spread before them. The few nightbloomers beside the road illuminated the way in an eerie manner. They didn't have any leaves or fruits and their bare, twisted limbs looked like scrawny arms reaching out for them. Those were dying trees; Samiah knew that much.

There was a time when highways as the one they followed were used for long-distance traveling, before the gateway technology was developed. Samiah wasn't sure why they still remained, maybe because of sentimentalism or because they were part of their history. It didn't matter. She was glad their race prized knowledge above all else, and history was part of that knowledge they so feverishly pursued. If it weren't for this road and the signs along the way, they couldn't have hoped to reach Jackur.

Samiah glanced back and when she couldn't see the outline of the capital of Mora anymore, she let out a relieved sigh.

It had been premature. She stepped on something soft and slippery and almost lost her balance in the process. Malachiax grabbed her arm, stabilizing her, and she looked down. There was something shiny and thick covering her boots. Malachiax produced a light orb from his sack and she wished he hadn't.

"Wait, is that blood?" Ianox said loudly, his voice carrying in the light wind.

It was blood, and next to her boot, a severed arm. She jumped back and collided against Malachiax, her pulse now ringing in her ears. He curled an arm around her waist and pulled her to his side while he pointed the light out into the darkness. It showed a trail of blood. Who knew what they would find at the end of it. Part of Samiah didn't want to find out.

She stepped to the side and let Malachiax take the lead. Using the orb, he followed the dark red trail on the ground with careful steps. Ianox clutched Samiah's arm, and together they kept close to Malachiax's back. She didn't even mind the contact; that's how terrified she was. At the end of the path, there was a huge pool of blood and in the middle, a crude wooden spike. The light followed the thorn up and up until it revealed a dismembered head.

They let out a frightened scream in unison, and Malachiax dropped the orb. It went out as it hit the ground. He bent down and searched blindly for it. Ianox whimpered next to Samiah. Despite the darkness, she could still see the severed head of a young man, mouth open in a perpetual silent scream and two empty holes where his eyes had been. Claw marks had left gouges on his cheeks. It was the most atrocious thing she had ever seen. She felt bile rise in her throat, and a moment later, she was kneeling on the ground, emptying the contents of her stomach.

Malachiax came to her side and placed a hand on her back. Once there was nothing left for her to heave, he cleaned her face with a cut of cloth. His eyes searched hers, and she tried her best to hide her fear, knowing how futile it was to keep anything from him.

"Come on. We can't stay here. Whoever did that might not be gone." He helped Samiah up, for her body was now shaking uncontrollably. He pulled her into his arms and tried to hug away the tremors.

"It's going to be okay."

She wanted to believe his words, but no sooner had they left his mouth when they heard the shuffling sound of several dozen feet moving across grit, followed by feverish, high-pitched screeches. It was hard to isolate the direction. Ianox moved closer to them. Malachiax put the light orb away, the darkness absolute until their eyes adjusted to the lack of light. When Samiah's sight returned, what she saw made her stomach drop. Hundreds of possessed Morians were closing in on them. Their path of escape diminished with each breath.

"We're trapped. We're going to die," Ianox wailed.

"We're not going to die. Listen up. When I say go, we run," Malachiax said with resolve.

He raised his arms, ignoring the injury on his shoulder. When he brought them down, the ground in front of the Morians exploded with a deafening roar.

"Go!" Malachiax screamed.

They ran as fast as they could. Malachiax had Samiah's hand in a vicious hold, propelling her forward with him. Ianox kept pace. She heard outraged screams not far behind them and looked over her shoulder without slowing down. The explosion hadn't incapacitated all of their attackers; there were too many, and Mal's gift only went so far. Fear gave her a bout of stamina, but no matter how fast they ran, they had nowhere to hide. Soon enough, their bodies would collapse from the strain. They were already slowing down as their breathing became more labored. The crowd was gaining on them.

Ianox tripped and fell against them, bringing everyone down. The fall knocked the wind out of Samiah, and she couldn't move. That was it. The end. Her legs were liquefied and her lungs felt like they had been scorched. She just hoped they killed them quickly.

A loud and out-of-place noise came from above. Samiah couldn't identify what was making it until the shape of an old air glide came into view. It passed them and went straight toward the mob. As soon as it was close enough, a jet of flame shot out from it, burning everything in its path. It made a couple of more loops, targeting Morians it had missed. They flailed and rolled on the ground in vain. The fire had taken hold of their bodies in a merciless grip.

A whiff of burnt flesh brought Samiah's nausea back. She clamped her mouth shut with her hand and fought the urge to dry heave. There was no time for weakness. She didn't know who their savior was, but she didn't intend to wait to find out.

"Come on. Let's go," she urged Malachiax and Ianox.

"Aagh, I can't. I think... I think I broke my ankle." Ianox clutched his leg, his face contorted in pain.

Malachiax used the light orb again to check Ianox's injury. It didn't look bad, but broken ankle or not, it would still hinder their escape. Samiah helped get Ianox up, but she had no idea where they were going now. She grimly realized there was no way they would make it to Jackur, and without shelter, the likelihood of survival was slim.

Lost in her pessimistic thoughts, it took her a while to notice she could no longer hear the air glide. The complete silence was ominous, and her heart thundered inside her chest. She unsheathed the metal rod strapped to her back and braced for another attack. Malachiax and Ianox did the same. They formed a tight circle with their backs to each other and waited. It wasn't long before they heard footsteps.

Malachiax shone the light orb in the direction of the sound and a scrawny figure appeared with hands raised. His hair was blond and short, sticking out from his head in every direction in messy bits. His clothes were too big and ratty with patches visible here and there. But the most important aspect about him was that his aura wasn't black. It was the only thing that mattered to Samiah at the moment.

"I mean no harm," the young Morian said.

Malachiax raised his makeshift weapon menacingly. "How can we know that?"

Samiah touched his shoulder. "It's okay, Mal. His aura is normal."

Though normal wasn't quite the right word to describe the aura of this stranger. Peculiar would be a better adjective. His aura was split evenly in two colors, yellow and orange. Despite the proximity of them on the spectrum color, they represented opposite personalities. Samiah had never seen anything quite like it. Weird aura or not, she didn't sense any threatening inclination from him, and he had just saved them from certain death.

"My name is Samiah. This is my mate, Malachiax, and our associate, Ianox."

"I'm Garyanx Menix. You can call me Gary. Welcome to my home."

Chapter 11

Lochiana struggled with her bound hands as she was lead via a narrow tunnel down to who knew where. She should be afraid, but all she felt at the moment was ire aimed at the warrior who had thrown her over his shoulder when she'd refuse to leave the palace with him.

She had been utterly terrified when they met with a band of fearsome warriors just outside the city limits, all covered from head to toe with wicked-looking weapons. They were prepared for battle. Lochiana used her gift to access their auras and found no antagonism against her, which eased her mind, but not by much. Especially when Femror put her back on her feet and forced a bitter liquid down her throat. It burned as it trickled down, and it made her wobbly almost instantly. She must have shown her wariness on her face for Femror was quick to explain what the liquid did—it protected against possession.

After speaking with one of his warriors in a hushed tone, Femror had proceeded to put her on top of a mount, a furry beast with tusks protruding from its mouth that were sharp enough to impale her with ease. Lochiana didn't recognize the species, but the animal seemed docile enough, and it barely reacted to the extra weight on its back. Her hands had curled around the leather reins, and Lochiana considered for a brief moment kicking its hide and attempt an escape. Femror must have guessed her intention, for he quickly mounted behind her forming a cage around her body with his strong arms as he pulled the reins from her hands. She'd stiffened at the proximity, but her skin broke out in goose bumps that weren't entirely from displeasure when his warm breath fanned over her neck. She'd attributed her reaction to the liquid she had drunk, the substance she would learn later to be Razor's Blood. As if she were going to feel anything besides contempt for that brute.

After a half day riding hard, Lochiana no longer felt the effects of the strong concoction favored by the Jackurians. Hence her renewed anger at her kidnapper. She would bide her time for the moment and not openly challenge the warrior. She couldn't win against him with brutal strength, so she had to master him with her mind.

As she walked in silence behind him, she paid close attention to every fissure and hole in the gray stone walls. She wasn't a one-glancer, but attention to detail was one of the many skills she excelled at. *We'll see who will have the last laugh, Femror*, she thought with a sneer.

One of the most peculiar things she noticed was that, despite the lack of sunlight, she could see clearly inside the cave. There were no orb lights or glowworms anywhere. She didn't want to talk to Femror, but the need to know everything about her location trumped her desire to give him the silent treatment.

"What kind of magic is this?" she asked.

"Magic?"

"Yes, magic. How can I see well in the darkness? There's no illumination anywhere."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He chuckled. The bastard *chuckled*. Lochiana didn't think he was capable of humor, never mind that he was amused at her expense.

"Why am I here?"

Femror didn't answer right away, and it seemed his shoulders had gone tense. "You're responsible for this mess. I'm sure my father would like to have a word with you."

Lochiana didn't like the implication in his tone one bit. She glared at his back and wished her drop-dead vision would do just that, make him drop dead. *You don't really want him to die*, her conscience stated, and she grew irritated at herself. Okay, maybe not die, but stumble and fall on his face, at least.

Femror veered sharply to the right and stopped in front of a door made of real wood, not the commonly used syno material. He opened it with a flourish and said, "After you, my lady."

Lochiana hesitated, and when she glanced at the warrior, he raised an eyebrow at her. She could practically hear his thoughts: *Don't do it, and I will throw you over my shoulder again*. She scowled at him and ventured in.

She was in a private chamber; she could tell that much. In one corner were a small wooden table and four simple chairs. Next to it was an entire wall dedicated to an arsenal of weapons worthy of a small army. Femror walked around her and made a beeline to it, stripping off his weapons as he walked. Lochiana's mouth went dry as she observed the way the powerful muscles on his back flexed, and how his scales changed colors when they caught the lights from the glowworms attached to the walls. Whatever magic worked on the tunnels wasn't present here.

Her gaze dropped to his ass, which was covered by a short kilt made of some kind of animal fur. Femror chose that moment to look over his shoulder and caught Lochiana ogling him. Her cheeks burned as her gaze snapped back up to see a smirk on his lips.

"See something you like?" he asked.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and glowered. "I'm just returning the favor. Only I was wearing way less clothes before, so it's hardly an eye for an eye."

Femror's smirk blossomed to a full smile, and Lochiana realized what she had said. "I can fix that." He made a motion to untie the belt holding his kilt in place and her eyes turned as round as saucers.

"No! That won't be necessary." She spun around to look at the rest of the room and avoid his

penetrating gaze. *For all the Sacred Powers. Am I still under the Razor's Blood influence?* she thought feebly, knowing very well she was sober. She couldn't understand the odd twist in her gut whenever Femror looked at her as if he wanted to know all her secrets.

On the other side of the chamber, Lochiana found a raised pallet covered with colorful rugs and pillows, and a few animal skins. His bed, she guessed.

"Are you hungry?" Femror's voice nearby made Lochiana jump on the spot. She pivoted and found him right in front of her and very close. She had to crane her neck to look at his face.

"No," she lied. Now that the prospect of food had been presented to her, she found herself quite famished.

"Right. Well, I'm starved." His gaze dropped to her lips, and Lochiana noticed his Adam's apple bobble up and down. Did he want to kiss her?

She took a step back, not because she was appalled by the idea but because she probably would have liked it. It had been so long since she wanted to be kissed by a male that Lochiana didn't know how to react.

Femror spun around and disappeared through a door Lochiana had missed in her initial perusal of the room. He returned a moment later carrying a tray with two ceramic bowls on it, placing them on the table before he sat down. Lochiana stretched her neck, trying to see what was inside the bowls without actually taking a step forward. Femror looked in her direction and then pointed at the chair next to his.

"Sit and eat. You will need your strength."

"You really need to stop ordering me about. I'm not one of your warriors."

"No, you definitely aren't." Femror kept staring at her with that intense look of his.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He frowned and leaned back, crossing his arms. "I don't understand your question. It means you are not one of my warriors. Like you just said."

Lochiana stared at him through slits for a moment. Femror eventually shrugged and started to eat whatever grub he'd brought into the room. Her stomach growled loudly, and she hated that her body had betrayed her like that. *Stop being so stubborn, woman. Go eat something.*

She followed what her conscience told her that time and joined Femror at the table. The bowl contained some kind of cold stew that didn't look appetizing at all. Beggars couldn't be choosers, though, and Lochiana dove in without even smelling it first. It was very bland, nothing compared to the spicy and rich Morian food she loved, but Lochiana had learned to appreciate a nutritious meal regardless of flavor. It was one of the first things she had to get accustomed to when she joined the Offworld Exploration Program.

Once she finished scraping every single drop of the unidentified soup, she found Femror staring at her with amusement in his eyes.

"What?" She frowned.

“I thought you weren’t hungry.”

“I need strength if I’m to get out of here.”

“Oh, and where are you planning to go?” He smirked.

“Get help, for starters. Warn the rest of Arcadia.”

“You are assuming I’m not here to help.” He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head, showing off his biceps. She was sure he was doing it on purpose.

“Are you?” She raised an eyebrow at him. “All I hear from your mouth are orders and threats. Honestly, I think I’d better take my chances with whatever came through the portal.”

Femror’s expression changed suddenly like the flash sandstorms that plagued the Valley of Bones wasteland. He dropped his arms to the side and leaned forward. “Don’t ever say something foolish like that again.”

Lochiana’s spine went rigid, and not because of his angry reply. Somehow she knew his harsh words stemmed from a deep-rooted fear. What did he know about the alien beings?

“You didn’t even hesitate before you killed Margriet.”

“No. And I don’t regret it. Once someone is taken, there’s no hope for them. Killing the host as fast as you can is a kindness.”

“You’ve seen it happen before.”

Femror clenched his jaw hard and his gaze seemed to turn inwards. “Yes.”

“When?”

“Many millennia ago, before your kind walked the planet.”

Lady Lochiana couldn’t imagine a time when Arcadians had not been on the planet. In fact, one of the reasons Professor Shix had been so obsessed about the portal was because he hoped it would lead to clues to their origins.

“Well, I was able to fight off possession.”

Femror’s eyes widened as his facial expression changed once more. “You did? How?”

“I don’t know. I just did. I guess I’m too stubborn.” She smiled wryly, trying to lighten the mood and gain his trust.

“Amazing,” Femror murmured, more to himself than her.

Lochiana was uncomfortable at the way he kept staring at her in awe. She didn’t know what was doing her head in more, this new glance or the previous heated gazes.

“How did you defeat them the first time they came?” she asked to change the subject.

Femror shook his head and clenched his jaw. At least he dialed the intensity from his gaze down a notch. “That’s a story you should hear from my father.”

“The king?”

“Yes.”

Lochiana stood suddenly and looked impatiently at Femror when he didn’t follow her lead. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

“We can’t go yet.”

“Why not?” She put her hands on her hips.

“Your dress must go.”

Her heart did a somersault before it thundered inside her chest. She narrowed her eyes at him and folded her arms. “Excuse me?”

Femror’s gaze traveled down the length of her body, slowing making the trip back up and stopping on her face. “You heard me. Strip off your dress. Now.”

Chapter 12

Gary's home was a clever contraption, and Samiah suspected it followed the same principle of the nightbloomers. It was buried deep in the ground, accessible only by an almost invisible trapdoor. Before they followed him in, she searched for the air glide, but she couldn't make out its shape in the darkness. The steps groaned as they put their weight on them, like an old person who couldn't bear the burden of a decrepit body anymore.

Dimmed light orbs illuminated the tiny space, and it felt like she had been transported to another era. All his chairs, tables, and cabinets were made out of nightbloomers' wood so old, the surface had lost its characteristic translucence. The use of organic material in the manufacturing of furniture or any other type of construction had become obsolete after the invention of synthetic organic matter. Samiah thought most Arcadians had donated their real wood furniture to depositories and museums.

She walked in awe as she touched every polished surface. First, the working air glide, and now this. Who was this person, and why was he holding on to all these artifacts? He motioned for them to sit around the table and offered them some kind of brew. Ianox and Malachiax eyed the warm liquid with suspicion.

"It's morango fruit tea. Hearty and harmless." Gary took a sip from his mug.

The sweetness and warmth of the brew spread through Samiah's body and limbs. She felt better immediately.

"This is delicious. Thank you," she said.

They drank their tea in silence, each lost in their own head. So much had happened and changed in a day. She wondered what had happened to Lochiana. Had she been present when that poor girl was stabbed? Or had she managed to escape the palace before the aliens attacked? She had said her will was too strong for possession. Samiah truly hoped she had escaped, even though the probability was small.

"Do you live here by yourself?" Malachiax asked.

Pain flashed through Gary's eyes before his gaze settled on the table in front of him. "I do now. My cousin and I shared this place. He was kind enough to take me in despite...." He closed his eyes and shook his head almost imperceptibly. "And then those people came and killed him."

The blood drained from Samiah's face. The head on the spike. "I'm so sorry."

"I was on my way back from making a delivery when I saw Trenianx being torn apart. There were too many of them. He didn't stand a chance. I took the air glide as high as I could, trying to hide behind the clouds. They were so lost in their frenzy they didn't even hear the roar of the propellers. After they destroyed Trenianx's body, they left. I would have given him a proper burial, but I was too afraid those monsters would come back and do the same to me."

"What are we going to do? Is there any hope that Jackur still stands?" Ianox asked.

"Do you know what's going on?" Gary's body sat rigid on his seat.

Malachiax and Ianox looked at Samiah. She was the only one who had experienced possession and survived to tell the tale. She didn't want to rehash every gruesome detail again but she did anyway. Gary deserved to have as much information as possible. When she mentioned the girl they had found in the palace, Gary frowned and seemed to be deep in thought.

"Do you know what the wraith meant by 'lizard scum'?"

Ianox closed his eyes and shuddered. Malachiax gave him a side-glance but Samiah decided to ignore the fool.

"There are old stories that mention a race of shapeshifters who possessed skin resembling that of great winged lizards. There's never been concrete proof they actually exist, and I'm afraid they are nothing more than cautionary tales to scare naughty youngsters."

"They aren't myths, and they're vicious," Ianox said through clenched teeth.

"How do you know? Have you ever seen one?" Samiah raised an eyebrow at him.

Instead of answering her, he chose to lower his head and stare at the table instead. *Typical.*

"Well, lizard people or not, someone either knows how to kill the wraiths or stumbled upon it by accident. I wish the dagger hadn't disintegrated with that poor Morian girl," Malachiax said.

Samiah reached out and grabbed Mal's hand, squeezing it. He looked at her with a pained expression on his face, and it broke her heart. Somehow, he felt responsible for the death of that Morian youngster too, even though they could have done nothing to save her.

She turned to Gary and explained to him their theory about Razor's Blood and thus their need to reach Jackur. His eyes gleamed and his aura became brighter for a moment.

"I believe I can help you with that." He stood up and walked toward the back of the room where a curtain from wall to wall stood shut. Gary pulled the fabric and revealed what was hidden behind him. A treasure.

"For all the Sacred Powers. Is that what I think it is?" Ianox rose suddenly, knocking his chair over. He hopped on one leg, looking like a misplaced phom-phom.

Gary had a proud smile on his face. "Indeed, my friend. The best supply of Razor's Blood you'll find on the entire planet."

"But you're a Morian. Morians hate Razor's Blood," Samiah stated.

Gary's brow creased. "I'm not a Morian. I'm from Jackur, and so was my cousin."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sound judgmental. Are you willing to sell some to us? We can't transfer

the credits to your account without a com-slip or working relays, but you will get paid."

"Payment? I'm not charging you for it. You can have all the Razor's Blood you want as long as you take me with you."

"Of course you're coming with us." Malachiax walked to him and took a bottle of Razor's Blood from the stash.

"How long do you think it will take to reach Argamania traveling by air glide? I have no idea how fast those things can go," Ianox said.

Gary made a disgruntled sound, and all eyes were on him.

"What?" Samiah asked.

"We can't take the air glide. I used all the fuel I had to create the fire jet."

She went back to the table and took a seat with her head in her hands. "We'll never make it to Argor. Our hope was to find a working gateway station in Jackur. It will take weeks, maybe months to reach Argamania on foot."

"The air glide might not be a viable option, but we can ride the wild antlers. I know where a herd prefers to pasture not far from here," Gary suggested.

"Wild antlers? Are you mad? Those things are vile and would sooner bite your hand off than let you ride their backs." Ianox made an exasperated gesture with his hands.

Malachiax seemed to contemplate Gary's suggestion and then focused on Ianox. "That would probably be true if we didn't have someone in our party who could communicate with animals."

Ianox took a step back, seeming mortified. "How did you know?" His gaze turned accusatorily to Samiah. "You told him! I asked you to keep your mouth shut, and you told him. I thought aura-readers had a moral code."

"I didn't tell him anything!" She smacked her hands on the table, rattling the empty mugs.

"Ianox, do you think I'm dense?" Malachiax said. "After you set those famished catlings on Walani during our last trip, everyone knew what your gift was. I don't understand why you want to keep it a secret. There is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Easy for you to say when your gift is elemental. I wish *I* could blow the ground to smithereens." Ianox folded his arms and pouted like a petulant youngster.

"Yeah, and who is saving the day now? Trust me, Ianox. Every gift is precious and useful."

Samiah saw the effect Mal's words had on Ianox, both in his external reaction but also in his aura. The brown color became lighter, bordering on a beige hue.

It was settled. They would look for the wild antlers in the morning and be on their way to Argor. Gary assured them the wild antlers were very fast animals when they wanted to be. But it was impossible to calculate how long it would take them to reach their destination. Plus, they had the alien wraiths and possessed people to contend with.

Things needed to be done before they ventured out the next morning, though. Gary helped them figure out the right dose of Razor's Blood to drink. On their own, they would have had to find out via

trial and error, but Gary used his knowledge to come up with individual doses for each of them based on muscle mass and genetic makeup.

Samiah grabbed the vial meant for her and examined the dark reddish liquid inside. She needed to know something.

"Is Razor's Blood safe to drink if a woman is expecting?"

Gary stopped what he was doing to look at her. "Are you with child, Samiah?"

She glanced down and put her hands on her belly. "Yes. Twins."

When Gary didn't say anything, she looked up again. His hand was frozen in midair and his mouth slacked open. He shook his head and put his outdated measuring instrument down.

"Forgive me, but I've never met an expectant woman this young before, never mind one carrying twins. That's extraordinary."

For some reason, his comment embarrassed Samiah. She didn't think she was anything special. She was selfish, impulsive, and filled with flaws. Malachiax was the good one. He had always been the better half. She avoided his gaze and played with the vial in her hand.

"To answer your question, yes, it's safe. Razor's Blood does not harm unborn children. Once the seed is planted, a woman's womb becomes a fortress. There isn't much that can harm a baby while inside its mother's body."

His answer took away some of her stress. As long as she kept breathing, her children would be safe. She focused her attention on Gary's lab and archaic paraphernalia, wondering why he would live this way. Was he an outlaw?

"Your home is pretty unique."

The corners of his mouth lifted, softening his features. "You mean to say why do I keep all this junk around?"

"I wouldn't call it junk, but honestly I don't understand why you don't own any modern devices. Are you some sort of fugitive?" It was a valid question. In order to acquire anything new these days, you would need an ID.

Gary took a seat at the table across from Samiah and gazed down at his folded hands. "Not exactly. You're an aura-reader, so you tell me. What do you see?"

"Your aura is... I've never seen anything quite like it. And your core. I can't say I recognize your gift."

"Yes. My aura is different, and where I come from, different equals bad. My whole life, people treated me like a second-class citizen just because I have a strange gi—" He paused and licked his lips. "Never mind. I was tired of my life as a pariah, so when Trenianx invited me to come live with him and help with the Razor's Blood business, I didn't think twice."

"I understand." She wanted to ask what his gift was, but she didn't think Gary was ready to share that part about him yet. "Was your cousin a fugitive, then?"

"Trenianx?" Gary snorted. "No. He was a bit paranoid. He didn't trust the establishment, so he

preferred to stay under the radar. Be invisible."

Gary's eyes turned red, and Samiah could see his effort to keep the tears at bay. She reached over and squeezed his hand. "It's okay to feel sad."

A lone tear escaped, and he turned his face. "He was the only friend I had."

"I know we can't compare, but now you have us."

He looked at Samiah, perplexed, like he couldn't believe her words. It was hard to imagine a life where people shunned you just because you weren't the norm. There was a time when aura-readers faced the same persecution. But that had been so long ago that no one even remembered it anymore.

Why must people always fear what they can't understand? Samiah thought bitterly.

Chapter 13

Femror watched in amusement as the Morang heir glared at him. He'd chosen his words carefully to get a rise out of her. He didn't know why it gave him such pleasure to see the fierce woman all flushed with indignation. His blood answered in kind, pumping furiously through his veins. He was testing the bond, he realized. Until that point, he hadn't been completely sure Lochiana was his mate.

He had never experienced anything like it before—the bond was for life, and it wouldn't be broken even after the death of one mate. Femror had only the tales of those who had been bonded to go by. Now, staring at the pink-haired Arcadian and feeling how his very core reacted to her, there was no doubt in his mind. The problem was what the fuck he was going to do about it.

“Will you relax? I don't want to drag you to see my father butt naked. But you can't wear that party dress if you want him to respect you.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What does he have against pretty clothes?”

Femror cocked an eyebrow. “You said yourself that you left your fancy dresses behind. I take it that you also don't like them very much.”

She stiffened visibly and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “They belonged to a lifestyle I was no longer a part of. I didn't have any use for them out in space.”

“You have your answer. If my father sees you wearing that, he will immediately assume you value frivolities over practicality.”

“What am I going to wear, then?” She gestured with her arms in frustration, and the sudden movement made a strand of her hair fall over her face. She brushed it off with a jerky movement, and Femror felt the compulsion to run his rough fingers through her mane. *Don't even go there, idiot.*

He walked to the other side of his chamber and retrieved a bundle of clothes from a wooden chest by the foot of his bed. He lobbed it at Lochiana from across the room, suppressing a grin of pleasure when she caught it with ease. Good to know that besides a sharp tongue, she also possessed dexterity. As a Draki warrior, he couldn't have a mate who didn't match him in every way.

Femror shook his head. What was he thinking? Was he seriously going to pursue a mating bond with the woman in front of him? They weren't even the same species, and he doubted she had any inclination to give up her freedom to live the Draki way. The opposite wasn't an option. His kind

went into hiding for a very good reason. Femror couldn't leave his clan and join Lochiana in her adventures off planet. That was, if they survived the invasion.

What a fucking dilemma.

She eyed the pieces of clothing in her hands, a woven tunic and a pair of leather pants. "Whose clothes are these?"

"Mine." She raised both eyebrows at Femror. "*Were* mine when I was much younger. They should fit you."

Lochiana took a deep breath and stared at the clothes once more. Did she not want to wear them? The thought bruised his ego. He was tempted to tell her to forget it and go meet his father with the idiotic dress she had on.

She raised her gaze to his. "May I have some privacy, please?"

He tried not to be too happy about her decision. They were only bloody clothes, after all. And still his dual hearts responded by jerking forward and increasing their pace. Femror made sure his facial expression showed nothing, though. He nodded and left the room, waiting just outside of his chamber. He stared at the wall in front of him and tried his best not to picture Lochiana naked on the other side of the stone barrier. It was futile; he had the memory imprinted in his mind from the quick glimpse he had back at the Morang palace.

She emerged not too much later, and seeing Lochiana wearing his clothes, carrying his scent, flared up the bond like nothing else. Femror wanted to mark her somehow, maybe kiss the breath out of her. But he did nothing. He was a seasoned warrior; he could control his urges. Besides, he would never force himself on any female.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice thick.

"As ready as I will ever be." She looked down and tried to smooth the crease lines on the tunic. "Besides not calling your father 'oh Mighty Lizard King,' what else should I pay heed to?"

"Don't hide anything from him. He will know if you are lying or being obtuse on purpose."

"Oh, is that a Draki special ability?" She looked closely at him.

"Why do you ask? Do you want to know if *I* can sense when you are lying?"

She stood taller and frowned at him. "I don't lie."

"Good. I hate liars."

"What about you, Femror? Do you lie?"

Femror clenched his jaw and avoided her gaze. If it were his choice, he'd never lie, but he would do it if the king commanded, if he believed it served a greater cause. He could lie to Lochiana right now and say he never lied. And yet, somehow, lying to her felt like one of the greatest offenses in the world.

"Yes, I do."

Chapter 14

The sun had just appeared on the horizon, a big ball of swirling energy. Gary used a periscope to check if the coast was clear up above. That was another gadget Samiah had only seen in a depository. Once outside, it didn't take long for them to see the heat emanate from the rocky ground in lazy waves. She glanced briefly toward the pile of charred bodies and a shudder went through her. Her gaze turned upward, scanning the sky for any lost wraith. It was mercifully clear, and she let out a relieved sigh. Not even the scavenger banshees dared to be present, like they knew not to feast on what remained of those poor Morians.

She was glad Gary's home was underground and perfectly hidden. Without a host they could see, the wraiths had obviously left in search of others. She shouldn't be grateful for that—it meant other people would fall prey to them—but the feeling stayed nonetheless. *Is it wrong to be happy we weren't attacked last night?*

"The wild antlers' sanctuary is beyond that hill ahead." Gary's speech was slightly slurred, and he walked funny.

Malachiax and Ianox chuckled behind Samiah like two silly youngsters. Ianox's ankle looked much better after Gary took care of it the night before, but she suspected it wouldn't make a difference in his current state. Razor's Blood affected each person differently, but it seemed Samiah was the only one who still remembered she was an adult. *This is going to be a very long trip.* Samiah had been afraid Mal's headache would flare up thanks to the powerful mixture, but he didn't appear to be in any pain. One less evil to worry about.

The uphill trek wasn't bad, but thanks to the liquid fire coursing through her veins and the warm orange sun above, she could feel sweat dripping down her back, her shirt sticking to it. The sanctuary sat on the valley below and looked like a mirage. The wide, aquamarine-colored lake was surrounded by luscious naigon grass, a stark contrast to the bare landscape surrounding them. From that far, the magnificent beasts looked peaceful enough, munching on the grass. The raw power they emitted could not be denied, though. Wild antlers were taller than a man, their body wide, overdeveloped muscles barely hidden under their coarse fur. Antlers sprang from their pasterns and fetlocks, looking like little twisted thorns. Massive horns erupted from their heads in perfect spiral loops ending in a sharp tip. They were a variation of white and gray, and in the open plane of the

desert, they would be hard to see.

They continued their trek down, but that side of the hill was much steeper. Loose gravel made the descent slippery and noisy. Samiah reached the base first and noticed the herd had stopped grazing and watched them warily. She was not an expert on wildlife, but with bodies tense and ears flat, they seemed to have taken a defensive stance. *Not good.* She wanted to reach for her metal rod but was afraid the action would be perceived as a threat. If those animals decided they were a menace, they would attack without mercy.

She seemed to be the only one aware of their precarious situation, the men continuing to guffaw as if they were on a field trip. Samiah turned to tell them to be silent when it happened. Gary and Malachiax were coming down the hill too fast when Gary lost his footing on a loose rock. He fell and the momentum made him roll down the hill, taking Mal with him. She watched in horror as they rolled together in a blur of limbs, stopping just a few paces from the herd.

The biggest beast in the group let out a terrifying roar and prepared to charge.

"Mal, watch out!"

Malachiax and Gary were too stunned by the fall to try to protect themselves. Ianox stopped next to her, his palms pressed to his cheeks and his eyes wide. She grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer.

"Do something."

"I-I don't know how."

"What do you mean you don't know how?" she said through clenched teeth.

He whimpered and closed his eyes. She couldn't believe he was having a panic attack now. She shook him hard.

"Don't you dare lose your mind now. I won't allow it. Stop cowering and use your gift already."

The leader of the herd charged, and Samiah shoved Ianox out of her way. She grabbed her weapon and let out an enraged scream as she ran toward the devil on four legs. Malachiax had managed to scoot out of the way, dragging Gary with him, but the beast was no longer interested in them as he perceived Samiah to be the biggest menace. He came her way fast, and she had no hope to survive the impact. She thought about her babies and asked them for forgiveness.

When they were a few paces from collision, the animal suddenly stopped. Samiah was coming fast, so it took her a couple of steps to completely halt. Her arms remained ready to swing the metal rod if needed. She was so close to the wild antler that she could feel its warm breath as it huffed air out through his huge nostrils and mouth.

She heard Malachiax congratulate Ianox for his good work, but she didn't dare break eye contact with the monster in front of her. A moment later, Malachiax pulled her away, making her lower her arms in the process. Her pulse rang in her ears, and her heart beat so fast she was afraid it would crack her rib cage.

"That was close," Ianox said, and Samiah spun around to glare at him. He raised his hands as a

peace offering. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to work under pressure."

"Well, you'd better learn fast," she snapped.

His face closed off, and his lips turned into a thin line. She didn't care that she had bruised his ego. She had almost died thanks to his shortcomings. Coddling him wasn't going to help anyone.

"How does this talking to animals thing work, exactly? I'm afraid I've never met anyone with your ability." Gary's speech was surprisingly clear all of a sudden.

"It's not like talking because they can't really talk. I can feel their moods, and I can steer their will to benefit me." Ianox approached the leader and touched the animal's horn without fear.

"That's fantastic," Samiah said. "Can we get going already? We've wasted too much time, and we've barely started."

"Sami, be nice." Malachiax strapped her makeshift sword on her back again, and she folded her arms. *Why am I the bad guy now?* she thought bitterly. Ianox was the one who had almost killed them all.

"I'm afraid we all need another dose of Razor's Blood. My mind feels too sharp. It must have been the excitement." Gary pulled a bottle from his pack and distributed everyone's dose.

Samiah drank hers in one gulp, hating the burning sensation in her throat and the bitter taste in her mouth. She couldn't believe people actually drank it for fun.

Gary singled out the animals he felt would have more stamina and be the fastest. Ianox wanted to claim the leader for himself but Gary told him that if he did so, the herd would be lost and probably perish in the desert. Begrudgingly, Ianox agreed to pick another ride.

Samiah mounted her antler with Mal's help and tried to ignore the heavy scent emanating from the animal. The creature was too wide and no matter what she did, she couldn't find a comfortable position. She held on to its towering horns and stared ahead. All she could see were endless white plateaus that disappeared in sandy clouds. Her vision blurred for a moment, though she didn't know if was because of the heat or her intoxicated state. She prayed to all the Sacred Powers that they would be able to hold on to their mounts and not fall and break their necks.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, her focus was a bit sharper. She glanced at Ianox, who seemed as uncomfortable as she felt. His face was flushed, and Samiah wondered if he would be able to keep the beasts under control.

"How strong is your hold on the animals?" she asked.

"I'm good. Don't worry about it." His tone was clipped, and he didn't bother to glance her way. Of course he would be angry with her for calling attention to his mistakes.

Malachiax steered his mount close to Samiah's. "Stop goading him, Sami. We don't need this kind of antagonistic atmosphere. We need to stick together."

She held her tongue, hoping that putting their trust in Ianox's abilities wouldn't turn out to be a costly mistake.

Chapter 15

They rode hard during the day, only stopping to relieve themselves and eat. The wild antlers had incredible endurance and could go on for long periods of time at a brisk pace. Ianox's control of them hadn't wavered, not even when fatigue took over or when he was too inebriated to know his own name. His gift was strong, but it still didn't put Samiah's mind at ease.

They stayed away from any main roads or cities, not knowing if the wraiths had reached that far or not. There wasn't much talk while they rode, and when they huddled together for the night, Samiah only traded quiet whispers with Malachiax while she was wrapped in his arms. She needed his strength and optimism to keep going. He was certain they would find a way to stop this brutal invasion before it was too late, but doubts still lingered. *How do you fight an enemy you can't touch?*

Every night, Ianox was the first to fall asleep. The effort to keep control of four wild animals drained all of his energy. On their third night, she caught Gary playing with a weird-looking apparatus. It was hard to see in the dark, but it looked like a metal box with a shutter on the front. Gary sensed Samiah's stare and looked up.

"What's that?" she asked.

"This is an old recorder." He touched the object with reverence. "It was Trenianx's biggest treasure. I couldn't leave it behind."

"Does it still work?" Malachiax asked.

"Yes. I've been recording our trip. I'm not sure yet how I'm going to transfer the film to a crystal table."

Somehow, his trivial concern made Samiah's heart lighter. It was like there was no doubt in his mind they would reach Argamania. Gary put the device away and lay down on the hard ground. He sighed and covered his eyes with his arm. His aura showed Samiah that sadness alone wasn't the cause of his burden. It had to do with his secret. Whatever he was keeping from them, it was eating him away.

The straightest way to Argor was to cut through the dry and hot wasteland. They had packed as much water as they could carry but the Razor's Blood had taken up a lot of space in their bags. By the fourth day, they were down to one measly bottle of water to share among themselves. Samiah was

also concerned about their mounts. They hadn't had any water since they left. Gary guaranteed they could go for days without drinking, but she thought that was borderline animal cruelty. On the fifth day, Samiah finally noticed a change in the landscape and her heart began to hope again. The harsh, rocky whiteness gave way to luscious green, blue, and purple vegetation. Scattered ancient trees popped up here and there, until there were so many they formed an almost impenetrable green wall ahead of them.

"This must be the edge of Alios Forest," Malachiax pointed out.

"Then we're in Lorexian." Gary looked at an old parchment he'd explained was an atlas of Arcadia.

Samiah had seen an atlas before through a protective glass at the Royal Depository in the Argamanx Castle. The paper in Gary's hands had yellow stains, and she couldn't guess how old it was. There was a strange sheen to it, not common on paper, and she wondered if some kind of preservative coating had been applied to it. Paper made of natural organic matter didn't last long, and by the looks of it, this particular atlas had been in constant use. She should be thanking the peculiarities of Gary's late cousin because if it weren't for his eccentricity, they couldn't have hoped to make it to Argor. It was scary how they relied so much on their technology.

Gary frowned and pursed his lips before he spoke, distress lacing his words. "There is a small town just on the other side of this forest, and unfortunately, going around it would cost us time we don't have."

Samiah's heart squeezed inside her chest, and her mouth turned dry. She knew that completely avoiding civilization would be impossible, but they still had a long way to go before they reached Argamania.

"Let's hope for the best. We're far from Mora. Maybe this city still stands," Malachiax said with more conviction than she felt at the moment.

"I'm not going in there," Ianox said suddenly, and they all turned to look at him. He had already backed his mount up a couple of steps.

"Into the forest?" Malachiax asked.

"It is said that those who go into Alios Forest either go mad or never return."

Samiah locked eyes with Malachiax, and with only that single glance, he pleaded with her not to engage in an argument with Ianox. She bit her tongue and kept quiet.

"Those are legends and not based on any truth. I thought you were a man of science," Malachiax said.

Ianox simply shook his head and closed his eyes. "There's where the lizard demons are said to live."

"Lizard demons?" Samiah couldn't hold her tongue any longer. Malachiax cut her a warning glance, earning a shrug from her in response.

Gary cleared his throat before he spoke. "No, you are mistaking it with *Arion* Forest."

She frowned at her companion. She'd never heard of Arion Forest before.

"Are you sure?" Ianox asked, almost begging it to be so.

"Yes. Trust me. I wouldn't want to enter Arion Forest either. Alios is safe."

Samiah was lost in the conversation, and her patience was already wearing thin. Without waiting for a decision to be made, she kicked her mount's hides and urged the beast into the forest.

Malachiax followed her right away, and then she heard the sound of Gary's and Ianox's beasts close behind. She slowed her pace so she could ride alongside Gary.

"What was that all about?" she whispered so Ianox couldn't hear her.

"Is Ianox originally from Argor?" Gary asked suddenly.

His question caught Samiah off guard. "I thought so, but I'm not completely sure, to be honest. We aren't close. Why?"

The young Jackurian clenched his jaw and frowned. "I just had a thought." He paused and shook his head. "It's of no consequence."

It was her turn to grind her teeth. Gary couldn't simply hint at something and not follow through. What kind of torture was that? If it concerned Ianox, one more reason for Gary to voice his thoughts out loud. Samiah already didn't trust Ianox, and if there was something they should be concerned about regarding his odd behavior, they needed to know. She was about to insist on the matter when the small hairs on her neck rose and the feeling they were being observed took hold. Her spine went taut as her eyes scanned their surroundings. Her ears strained for any sound that didn't belong to nature. Nothing seemed out of place; no hidden figures were behind the larger-than-life trees that made Alios Forest famous.

She tried to dispel the feeling of foreboding, but the tall ancient trees with their wide trunks were smothering her. Their crowns stood so far off the ground, she couldn't discern the shape of the leaves in the lowest branches. They completely blocked out the sun, enveloping them in a greenish gloom. They maneuvered around gigantic roots that looked more like fallen logs blocking their path. The ground was covered with dark green wild moss that created a soft carpet under their mounts' hooves. Little critters and animals skittered out of their way, and the anxiety wrapped around Samiah's heart eased off. She took it as a good sign that the wildlife was still behaving as it should.

Maybe this small town has not fallen yet, Samiah thought, trying to hold on to hope. But as the forest began to thin out and the sky was visible again, her heart sank. Rising smoke tainted an otherwise unblemished sky. Their rides stopped of their own accord, as if they could sense in their very cores the wrongness ahead of them.

The forest ended at the beginning of a downhill path. They had left the flatness behind, and Samiah could see the town spread before them on an uneven landscape—little mounds dotted with colorful houses and old, translucent brick roads. All of the dwellings looked devoid of life, and the source of the smoke lay hidden behind a hill. They had seen the exact same phenomenon in Morang.

"I think we should take another shot of Razor's Blood," Ianox said.

Samiah could still feel the effects of the last shot she had taken. She shook her head. Gary peered at her, his outstretched hand holding her dosage of the beverage.

“It hasn’t been long enough since our last dose. Someone has to maintain a clear head, and it’s better if it’s me.”

“Sami, it’s too risky,” Malachiax countered, but she wouldn’t be swayed.

“I was able to fight that wraith on my own. I can do it again if necessary. Razor’s Blood might protect you from possession, but it won’t help in case you need to fight against a frenzied mob.”

“Then I should be the one abstaining from my dose.”

“No!” she shouted, then berated herself for her lack of control. Giving away their location wasn’t in the plan. “Mal, I can’t lose you to those things,” she said in a much lower tone.

Malachiax opened his mouth to counter her argument, but Gary interrupted him. “Samiah is right. You’ll do much more damage if you become possessed. With her in control, she can at least guide us so we won’t do something stupid.”

Knowing he wouldn’t win this fight, Malachiax drank his share of Razor’s Blood. His gaze never left Samiah’s as he gulped down his shield against their unknown enemy. She knew relinquishing the protector role to her wasn’t something he did with a light heart; he would hate every second of it, and she loved him for it. But losing him to those beings wasn’t an option.

She could see the change in his demeanor immediately by how his facial muscles relaxed and by the goofy grin that followed. He moved closer and leaned sideways so he could pull her to him and give her a sloppy kiss. Gary and Ianox made gagging sounds, and by the heat spreading through Samiah’s cheeks, she knew her face must have turned a deep shade of red. Their rides became agitated; maybe they didn’t like to be so close to each other, or maybe Ianox’s control was slipping. Malachiax finally pulled away, but his heated stare never left her face. She would have enjoyed the moment if she weren’t so terrified about what possibly lay ahead. She chanced a glance at Ianox, but he was already on his way down with Gary by his side. Samiah’s ride calmed again, and she steered it toward their unknown future.

The moment they entered the town, she felt oppressed by the houses lining the streets. Their cheery colors clashed with the tomblike silence that greeted them. An irrational urge to spur her ride to a steady and fast gallop overcame Samiah, the crawling pace too difficult to bear. But the noise their hooves would make against the hard brick was something they were trying to avoid at any cost. Stealth above speed.

They reached the main town square and finally uncovered the source of the smoke. In front of a peculiar water fountain with statues depicting men and women with wings stood the biggest building they had seen so far. The flames had died, leaving behind a big piece of charcoal that barely resembled a town hall. The two-story structure seemed on the verge of collapsing.

Once they circled the fountain, they saw a lonely figure standing right in front of it. Covered in soot and with clothes torn in several places, a youngster had his back to them. He didn’t appear to be

older than ten. He was so oblivious to everything he didn't even hear their approach. Samiah's heart broke at the sight.

Malachiax climbed off his ride and took a couple of tentative steps toward the child.

"What are you doing?" Ianox whispered as he tried to catch hold of Mal's shirt. He was too intoxicated and missed, almost falling off his mount. He threw his body forward and hugged the beast, trying to keep his balance. "He might be one of them."

"He's just a child, Ianox." Malachiax turned to the boy again. "Hello."

The boy snapped his head in the direction of Mal's voice, his prism-colored eyes widening in fear. He was an aura-reader like Samiah.

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you." Malachiax took small steps in the youngster's direction, raising his hand in a peaceful gesture as if to give his words more meaning.

"They killed everyone. They took Mother and Father, and they burned them." He pointed at the still-smoldering building with a trembling finger.

Malachiax knelt in front of the boy so they were at the same eye level. "What's your name?"

"Sonni." He eyed Malachiax with suspicion. "You have a strange accent. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Argor."

Sonni tilted his head to the side, a new glint appearing on his innocent face. "Where is that? Is it far from here?"

The child's question threw Samiah off. He was old enough. He should have known where Argor was. She looked at him more closely, focusing on her gift so she could see his aura. She was baffled when she couldn't.

"Not that far, but we'll get there and send help."

There was a long pause before Sonni spoke with complete calmness. "I can't let you do that."

The aura that wasn't there suddenly appeared. All black. But before Samiah could utter any warning, Sonni slashed his arm in front of him. She stared in utter horror, paralyzed, as Malachiax collapsed to the ground, clutching his throat. She thought she screamed, or maybe they all did.

Everything turned into chaos. Bedraggled children poured into the town square out of nowhere, all with soulless eyes and blackened auras. Ianox tried to calm their animals as Gary kept Samiah from running to Malachiax, who was wasting away before her eyes. His face turned paler with every pump of his heart that spilled his blood away. When her ride veered suddenly to the opposite direction of the frenzied children, she yanked at the horns, trying to steer it toward Mal. She couldn't leave him there. It was irrational. She could already feel the invisible thread that linked their souls stretch to an impossible length, ready to snap. Mal's essence was vanishing. He was dying. She had to save him.

In an act of desperation, Samiah jumped off her ride, not caring when her elbows and knees were scratched raw. She grabbed her metal rod and swung away, hitting anyone who crossed her path. She felt like a deranged woman with tunnel vision, only seeing Mal's sprawled form ahead of her. Sonni, the boy who had attacked Malachiax, stood next to him. He didn't look crazy at all. His calm and

calculating demeanor was much more chilling than the wild behavior of his companions. That was a fact Samiah should have taken into consideration, should have remembered, for she knew Sonni wasn't like the others. He was a much more cunning and powerful enemy than his counterparts. Maybe he was their leader. But she only cared about Mal.

She fell before she could reach him. A burning sensation flared on her back and spread throughout her body. Someone landed on top of her and pulled her hair back so hard she thought it would peel off her scalp. She thrashed on the ground, her arms twisting at impossible angles, trying to pull her attacker off, but all her efforts were in vain. Her face was brought down hard against the stony ground, the impact reverberating through her entire skull. She couldn't focus, couldn't move. Then she heard a battle cry, and the pressure on her back vanished. She didn't look back, didn't care to see what had scared her attacker off. She crawled in Mal's direction instead, ignoring the fight that still raged around them.

When she finally reached him, she rolled him over and saw the gash in his throat. Blood still poured freely from the wound. She placed her hand over it, trying to stop the flow. Malachiax stared at her wide-eyed. She'd never seen so much fear in his gaze. The little flecks of silver in his irises had dulled, turning his eyes almost the color of midnight, starless.

"It will be okay, my love. Stay with me."

He opened his mouth but before he could say anything, his eyes rolled back, hiding behind their sockets.

"Mal! Wake up! Don't leave me."

Caught up in her despair, she didn't notice something was coming in their direction until she heard the sound of a spear ring awfully close to her ear. She was splashed with blood in the next moment, the slick fluid hot on her back. She turned to see a youngster impaled by the weapon, the expression on his face still frozen in an animalistic manner. His body gradually turned black until it vanished into ashes. Just like the Morian girl.

Samiah whipped her face in the opposite direction when she sensed someone approach. Her eyes widened when she took in the tall warrior who stopped a few paces from her and Malachiax. His skin was aquamarine green and partially covered by translucent scales. Eyes the color of gold peered at her with curiosity. His hair was long on top but shaved on one side. Silver fringe covered part of his face when he cocked his head to examine her further.

"Who are you?"

"Your childhood's nightmare." He flashed a wicked grin right before she felt a prickle on her neck. Then the world turned black.

Chapter 16

Slowly, Samiah regained consciousness. At first, it felt like she was wading through mud, her limbs heavy. She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids wouldn't cooperate, so she strained her other senses instead. Her ears heard nothing but her breathing. The exposed skin on her arms was caressed by something soft and warm. Her head lay on a pillow of sorts. Whoever had taken her did not wish her immediate harm.

Memories began to slowly trickle down inside her brain, and Mal's face came to the forefront of her mind. He had been injured. Badly. Her eyes flew open, breaking through the lethargy as if her worry for Malachiax had fired up every single cell in her body. She pushed herself to a sitting position and her muscles protested. She was sore everywhere, but the worst pain came from her forehead and scalp. Touching the tender spot, she felt a bandage there.

The sound of water dripping echoed around her, and she finally took stock of her room. Rough, red stone walls surrounded her, and besides the bed she occupied, there was only one small table with a ceramic pitcher on top. Little light orbs buried deep inside indentations along the wall gave the room a warm glow. The chamber was chilly, though.

Where am I?

The sound of footsteps approaching made her heart lurch in her chest as a spike of adrenaline shot through her body. She stared in the direction of the dark opening that gave away nothing but an impenetrable void. She jumped out of bed and scanned the room. There was nothing there to serve as a weapon besides the pitcher. She made a grab for it just as she felt a presence looming by the entrance. Pivoting on the spot, she raised the pitcher high above her head. Lochiana stood there, holding a tray in her hands.

"You're awake. I'm glad." Her eyes focused on the pitcher and the corners of her lips twitched upward. "That wouldn't have done much damage to our hosts."

Samiah lowered the makeshift weapon, glad to see that Lochiana was alive and well, but she felt far from relaxed.

"Where are we? Who took us?"

"Old myths of Arcadia who were long forgotten and wish to remain so." She walked to the table next to the bed and placed the tray on top of it. There was a ceramic bowl with some kind of brew in

it, but eating was the last thing on Samiah's list of priorities.

She shook her head. "Please don't speak in riddles."

Lochiana sighed out loud and sat on the edge of Samiah's bed. "I don't know the truth of their story. Their king wasn't very forthcoming with information. All I have to go on are the tales we were told as youngsters when we behaved badly. 'If you are naughty, the lizard beasts will take you away and tear you apart, limb by limb.'" Lochiana changed her tone of voice to sound like a grouchy old lady.

"Are you talking about the lizard monsters? Ianox mentioned them during our journey. I didn't think they were real."

"Me neither. The good news is that they don't seem to want to hurt us right now. The bad news is that they don't seem inclined to help us either."

"Where's Mal?" Samiah went straight to what was important to her.

"He's in the chamber next to yours."

"I want to see him." Samiah took a step toward the exit.

"You will once the healers are done with him. They shouldn't be interrupted."

"He's my mate! I need to be by his side. How do I know the healers aren't harming him?" Samiah made a start for the opening, but Lochiana jumped off the bed faster than Samiah could blink and blocked her path.

"They won't harm him. If you burst into that room with accusation in your eyes, they will take it as an insult. I've read their auras, Samiah. They are a proud race and are easily offended. The best thing you can do right now is eat and regain your strength."

Her irises began to swirl and Samiah raised her hand, blocking Lochiana's gaze from hers. "Don't you dare compel me again."

"You remember?" She sounded surprised.

"Yes, of course I remember." She took a few steps back just to be safe.

"That's fascinating."

Samiah peered at her, not understanding what she found so fascinating.

"I apologize for using my powers on you. It's something I'm still learning to control. I didn't mean to do it again now."

"Do you make it a habit of compelling people?" Samiah replied sharply. It seemed to her that Lochiana was sorrier to have been caught than anything else.

"No, of course not. You are the second person I've done it to. The first time was when I came into possession of my full powers. I've been trying to mask it ever since."

"How many people know about the truth of your gift?"

"Only you. If anyone knew, they wouldn't trust me, or they would try to exploit me in some perverse way."

Her words gave Samiah pause. The power to compel Arcadians in the wrong hands could be

tragic. “I won’t tell a soul, but only if you promise to never use your powers against me or Mal.”

Lochiana nodded, seemingly relieved by Samiah’s vow.

“I promise. Now eat your food. The Draki king wishes to speak with you.”

“The Draki?”

“That’s what they are called. Please, don’t ever say ‘lizard beast’ in front of them. They don’t like that name very much.”

Lochiana shuddered, and Samiah wondered if she had experienced firsthand their displeasure at that moniker. Samiah walked to the table and picked up the bowl. She smelled the brew first and didn’t recognize any of the fragrance.

“What is this?”

“I’m not sure. I just ate mine without question. I knew it wasn’t poisoned, so....” She shrugged and laced her hands behind her back.

Samiah took a bite of the cold brew, trying her best to ignore the grainy texture and the bitter aftertaste it left on her tongue. It didn’t make her sick so she considered that a win. She ate it all. Her belly now full, her strength began to return little by little.

“Ready?” Lochiana asked.

“Are we going to meet the king now?” Samiah swallowed hard as the drop of apprehension dripped down her back.

“Yes.”

“Then I guess I’m ready.”

She followed Lochiana into the darkness, wondering why they weren’t using a light orb. As soon as she entered the pitch-black hallway, she realized there was no need for it. She could see everything clearly, from the uneven stone ground beneath her feet to the swirly symbols painted on the rugged walls.

There were many twists, and along the way, they passed other tunnels that led up or down. Lochiana never seemed unsure of where to go despite the labyrinth nature of the cave. Samiah would file away that observation to ask her later.

The further they moved from her chamber, the more her heart constricted with worry for Malachiax. She should have insisted to check on him first. Samiah turned her sense of awareness inward and felt the link that connect Mal’s core to hers intact. He was alive. She would have to take solace in that for the time being.

She lost track of time. They seemed to have been walking for hours before the tunnel they were in opened to a vast chamber bathed in silver moonlight. Samiah would have looked up to see where the light was coming from if not for the sight—or more exactly, the assembly—that awaited them. Close to a hundred Draki peered at her and Lochiana, some with open curiosity, others with suspicion. They stayed close to the walls, leaving the middle of the round chamber empty, thus providing them an unobstructed view of the dais. A single throne stood there and a male Draki Samiah could only

assume was their king sat on it, looking at them with an air of superiority. He was accompanied by a younger male and female, one on each side of his throne. Samiah immediately recognized the male warrior and her spine went rigid. He was the one who had saved her. Upon noticing Samiah's reaction to him, he nodded in her direction and smirked. Next to her, Lochiana made a small sound in the back of her throat.

"I see the other soul gazer is awake," the Draki king said, his booming voice reverberating through the walls.

Soul gazer? Samiah glanced at Lochiana, but her gaze remained fixed on the Draki warrior. Samiah returned her attention to the king.

"Approach the dais so I can have a better look at you," the king commanded.

She hesitated. Lochiana touched her arm to get her attention, and then she nodded. She walked with Samiah, even though she hadn't been ordered to do so. Her action didn't seem to bother the king, and Samiah was glad she hadn't let her face him alone.

As she drew nearer, she noticed the king's skin was wrinkled and the scales covering part of his face were not as pearly as those of the young warrior. His hair was as white as the Morian desert plains, his eyes a deep shade of red. She couldn't hold his scrutinizing gaze for too long, so she glanced at the female to his right. Samiah was struck by the devastating nature of her foreign beauty. Her skin was flawless and a light blue color, almost gray. She didn't possess any scales where Samiah could see, and her lovely face was framed by long, strawberry-blonde hair. Her eyes were what gave her pause. She had prism-colored eyes like she and Lochiana.

"Yes, my daughter Chrysa is also a soul gazer, just like her Arcadian mother was," the king said, drawing Samiah's attention back to him.

She didn't know what to say to that revelation, especially considering the first thought that popped into her head was *So you can breed with us*. She wished Mal were there. He was much better at diplomacy than she was.

"Thank you for saving us," she said instead.

The king seemed surprised by her reply. Perhaps he had been testing her. The emotion was fleeting, though, soon replaced by a glower.

"That wasn't on my command. Femror made that decision on his own." The king looked at the warrior next to him. The young Draki clenched his jaw but said nothing.

"If I were a merciless king, I would cut your throats as punishment for what you brought upon us again."

The king's open threat felt like a sucker punch to Samiah's stomach, and she took a step back. Maybe Ianox had been right to fear the Draki. Then it occurred to her that she didn't know about his fate or Gary's.

"You had all the chance in the world to warn us about the portal, and yet you chose to stay hidden in your cave and do nothing," Lochiana said without a hint of fear in her voice.

The king leveled her with a glare, but Lochiana seemed unperturbed by it. She lifted her chin and stood tall and proud. The king merely made a *tsking* sound and leaned back on his throne, rubbing his chin. Samiah slid her gaze to Femror when he shifted his position. She caught a slight change on his face. It seemed to her that the corner of his lips had curved upward as he stared intently in Lochiana's direction.

Then the last word from the king's remark was finally processed by her brain.

"Again?" she asked. "Does that mean the portal has been opened before?"

The king flattened his lips and stared at her through slits. Seconds went by while the Draki leader remained quietly staring at her as if she were a spineless critter. She didn't avert her gaze that time. She was losing patience, but Lochiana cracked first.

"Well?" she asked.

"Yes. The portal had once been active. It was how my people first came into this world."

"Did you come from the same land as those wraiths? Do you know what they are?" Samiah couldn't help the eagerness in her voice. Learning new things gave her more thrill than traveling across the galaxy.

"No," Femror stated, breaking his silence. "The portal changed its nature after we came through. It does not lead to our land any longer."

"Where does it lead, then?" Samiah's gaze bounced around the three Draki on the dais.

"To a place of solitude and despair where darkness is so absolute, not even the light of the brightest star can break through," the king's daughter said.

"Wonderful." Lochiana threw her hands up in the air. "How do we close it?"

The king shifted on his throne and his expression twisted as if he were in actual pain. "Sealing the portal the first time came at great cost. We had to give up part of our essence to do it. Are your people willing to make the same sacrifice?"

"If it means saving the planet? Absolutely," Lochiana replied.

The king cocked his head and grinned ruefully. "Do you also speak for your former betrothed?"

Samiah frowned at the king before she glanced in Lochiana's direction. How did the Draki king know about Lord Droom?

"Why do you single him out? He will abide by the council's decision."

The king's grin turned into a full-bloom smile, and a glint of madness flashed in his red eyes. "Well, my dear, it seems you don't know the man you once loved very well. I singled him out because Lord Droom holds the key to your salvation."

"What key?" Lochiana asked through clenched teeth.

"The Spheres of Sharra, naturally."

"Impossible," she said as her face turned ashen.

"What are the Spheres of Sharra?" Samiah asked, hating that she no longer knew what they spoke of.

“The Spheres of Sharra are—”

A loud commotion interrupted the king, and a moment later, Ianox was brought into the throne room, thrashing against the hold of two humongous Draki warriors. They threw him roughly onto the ground in front the king’s throne.

“What’s the meaning of this?” the king asked, leaning forward.

“He attacked a healer,” one of the warriors answered.

The change in the room’s atmosphere was unmistakable. Samiah could feel the animosity and anger aimed at them humming above her skin. Murder was written in the king’s eyes as his sharp nails dug into the armrests of his seat.

“We saved and sheltered you, and that’s how you repay us? By attacking one of our own?”

Ianox raised his head and spoke the words Lochiana had warned Samiah not to say.

“The lizard king.”

The king stood, towering over Ianox as the nightmare the legends claimed him to be. He was no longer young, but he still possessed a strong warrior frame. Femror took an offensive stance, and Samiah felt other warriors in the room do the same.

“There will be no more assistance. Guards, take the prisoners away.”

Prisoners?

“Wait,” Samiah said as a beefy hand wrapped around her forearm. “You can’t do this. We need you to help us save the planet.”

“Arcadia be damned.” Those were the last words the king spoke before his mighty warriors dragged them all to an unknown fate.

Chapter 17

“Watch it,” Lochiana said as a stocky Draki warrior shoved her forward into a stony cell.

Samiah was pushed next, not too gently either. The sound of the metal bars clicking shut made her cringe, but two hunched figures in the corner of their prison kept her from turning around to glower at their captors.

“Mal,” she whispered, not believing her own eyes.

He looked up upon hearing his name and her heart rejoiced at seeing his face. Samiah ran to him and jumped in his waiting open arms, forgetting that he had been injured and that her reckless action could harm him further.

“I thought I had lost you.” She buried her face against his chest and let out a loud sob.

His strong arms wrapped around her back as he pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head. “You won’t lose me that easily, my love.”

She looked up, and with eyes already blurry, she stared at the bandage around his neck. She swallowed the lump in her throat before her eyes took stock of his gaunt face. He must have read the anguish in them, for he lowered his head and kissed her with a maddening possession, as if they were alone in the room. Samiah forgot their companions as well, matching the tempo of his feverish tongue beat by beat while her hands laced behind his neck.

A throat clearing behind her made Malachiax pull back, and she missed the connection instantly. He pulled her across his lap, and with hands still locked behind his neck, she looked over her shoulder to find Gary standing next to Lochiana and Ianox. She narrowed her eyes at the latter.

“What are we going to do now?” she asked.

Lochiana followed Samiah’s gaze and delivered a glower of her own in Ianox’s direction. His reaction was to walk to a corner and stare at the ground. *Imbecile*, Samiah thought angrily.

“Could anyone explain why the Draki are so angry at us?” Gary asked.

“Ianox attacked one of their healers, and to boot, he called the Draki king a lizard,” Samiah replied.

“He *is* a lizard, and I thought their healer was trying to kill me.” Ianox raised his head to stare hard at her.

“Oh be quiet, Ianox. We don’t have time for your half-baked excuses.” Lochiana walked to the

prison door and tested the metal rods. “This seems to be made out of pergamax.”

Gary frowned and stood next to Lochiana, examining the earthly colored metal. “That’s impossible. These rods are too smooth. Pergamax is too unstable and would never hold such shape.”

“True, unless it is mixed with another metal—copper, to be exact,” Lochiana replied.

“I have never heard of such material.”

Lochiana glanced at Gary. “You wouldn’t. It’s a common metal from Planet X-57.”

“Earth?” Samiah said. “How would the Draki have access to an otherworldly metal?”

Lochiana looked at her with a glint of excitement in her gaze. “That is something we must find out.”

“We have to get out of here first and stop whatever came through the portal,” Malachiax said.

“The Draki king knows how. He said Lord Droom has the key to do it. The Spheres of Sharra.” Samiah looked at Lochiana. “What are they?”

“It can’t be true. Lord Droom can’t possibly have all the spheres in his possession. That would be a serious violation of the Arcadian treaties,” Malachiax said.

Samiah twisted in her position to peer at him.

“You know what they are?” He nodded and she got a little angry. “How come you never mentioned them before?”

“I’m sorry, Sami. The existence of the Spheres of Sharra is a secret only known by the royal families and the highest-ranking officers. I couldn’t tell you.”

“But *what* are they?” she asked a little too impatiently.

“They are the Sacred Powers of Arcadia in tangible form,” Lochiana replied. “Each ruling family is—or *was*—responsible for one sphere. If what the Draki king said is true and Lord Droom possesses all of them...,” Lochiana paused and closed her eyes for a moment, “it means he betrayed the council. One ruler should not have all that power in his hands.”

“If that’s true, he will never let us take the spheres,” Samiah said.

“He must have had a good reason to take them—that is, if we can trust the word of the Draki king,” Malachiax replied.

“I don’t think he was lying,” Lochiana said, surprising Samiah. She caught her incredulous stare and added, “I want to believe Malachiax, but I’m not as naïve when it comes to Lord Droom as I used to be.”

Samiah wondered what had truly happened between Lochiana and Malachiax’s uncle. Lochiana revealed nothing in her stony expression.

“What are our options, then? The Draki won’t help us now.” Samiah glared at Ianox.

Lochiana returned her attention to the gate, more precisely to its lock. “One problem at a time. First, we must escape.” She crouched in front of it and squinted. “If only we had a small, sharp piece of metal, I could try to pick this lock.”

“May I see it?” Gary asked.

Lochiana stood and made room for Gary. He took her place in front of the lock and stared at it intently for several beats. Finally, he unfurled from his crouch position, rubbing his face before he bent down and retrieved a small leather pouch from a hidden compartment on the side his boot.

“What’s that?” Samiah asked.

“Tools.” Gary grinned at her.

“You own footwear with secret storage?” Lochiana crouched next to Gary to have a better look at his shoes.

“My cousin Trenianx’s invention,” he said with pride before he began to work on the lock.

He took several metal objects from his small tool pouch, some with sharp tips, others with odd shapes. Samiah couldn’t begin to guess their uses, but Gary seemed to know what he was doing. It wasn’t just a simple lock; it took him close to an hour to figure out the mechanisms of the Draki handicraft. When they finally heard a metallic click, Samiah jumped off Malachiax’s lap, ready to get out of that place.

“Did it work?” Ianox took an eager step toward the gate.

Without answering him, Gary stood up and pushed it open. “Ta-da!”

“You did it!” Lochiana clapped her hands.

Gary smiled at her. “Sorry it took so long. I’m not that skilled in mechanics.”

Lochiana tapped his shoulder as she walked past him. “Well done, Gary. Come on now. We must hurry.”

They followed her out of the suffocating cell, almost running down the tunnel. Then everything turned pitch black.

“I can’t see anything,” Samiah said.

“Tandrum’s wrath! Me neither,” she heard Lochiana say a little far ahead from them.

“We should have grabbed a light orb from the cell,” Malachiax admonished behind her.

“We didn’t need a light orb to navigate the cave tunnels before,” Samiah said, annoyed at herself for not grabbing a light orb regardless.

“I’m afraid whatever magic allowed us to do so before is gone now,” Lochiana replied.

“They are going to catch us and eat us,” Ianox whined.

“Shut up, Ianox,” Samiah snapped.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and jumped on the spot.

“Relax, Sami. It’s me,” Malachiax said near her ear before lacing his fingers with hers. “Let’s not panic. We’ll make a live chain and stick close to the walls.”

Samiah raised her hand in front of her and searched blindly until she felt someone’s chest. “Who is this?”

“It’s me, Gary.”

“I have Ianox,” Lochiana said in the darkness.

A moment later, Gary stated, “Me too.”

“All right. Are we all linked?” Malachiax asked.

“Yes,” they all replied in unison.

“I think I’ve found the wall,” Lochiana added.

“Okay, let’s keep moving close to it,” Malachiax said.

“But where are we going? How can we know which way leads to the exit?” Ianox asked.

“We’re only deprived of sight. Use your other senses,” Malachiax replied.

They inched forward, hugging the rough stone wall, and with each step, the fear kept growing inside of Samiah. She tried to heed Mal’s words and trust her instincts, but the darkness was so absolute, so oppressive, that it felt like she was drowning in it. She held Mal’s hand in a vicious hold, terrified of losing him in that bottomless nightmare.

She easily lost track of time. It felt like they had been walking for days, but she knew it wasn’t so. Suddenly, she felt Gary stop in front of her.

“I feel a bifurcation ahead. I believe one way goes up and the other down,” Lochiana said from the front of the line.

“Anything else you can sense?” Malachiax asked.

“There’s a breeze coming from the path upward.”

“Then that’s where we should head,” Ianox said.

“I’m not sure. The air seems fresher going downward,” Lochiana replied.

“If there’s a breeze coming through the path that leads up, it means there’s an opening. We should head in that direction,” Ianox insisted.

Samiah hated to agree with Ianox, but his argument made sense. “What do you think, Mal?”

“Let’s go up. If there’s an opening, I can work with that.”

They continued their way upward, but as the path grew steeper and steeper, Samiah wondered if they had made the best decision. But when a gush of cold wind ripped through their group, she let herself hope again. She also began to discern Gary’s shape in front of her, which meant the tunnel was becoming less gloomy.

“There’s light ahead,” Lochiana announced, and that gave Samiah renewed stamina. She ignored the ache in her legs and pushed through the upward trek. The glow that invaded the darkness became brighter, revealing a sharp corner ahead.

“I think that’s the way out,” Ianox said.

Excitement filled Samiah’s heart only to be crushed when they turned the bend and came face-to-face with a group of Draki warriors. She had no doubt they had been waiting for them.

Chapter 18

“Going somewhere?” The warrior in the middle smirked at their group, his hand resting lazily over the sword hanging from his belt.

“You will let us go,” Lochiana replied, and the mountain-sized Draki glowered at her.

“Your sneaky mind games won’t work on us, *Lady*,” the warrior sneered at her.

Malachiax took a step back and pulled Samiah with him. Since they were all still linked by hand, they all retreated. He squeezed her hand as if he was trying to tell her something. She had an inkling what he was going to do.

“Please don’t do it, Mal. It’s too dangerous,” she spoke to his mind.

He squeezed her hand again, more forcibly that time. *Tandrum’s wrath. He’s going to do it.* Every muscle in Samiah’s body tensed as she braced for Mal’s next move. She squeezed Gary’s hand, hoping to convey the same silent message Malachiax had given her.

“Where’s Femror? I would like to speak with him,” Lochiana said, no fear showing in her voice.

“Oh, it seems Femror has caught the eye of the lady,” one of the Draki said, and the rest laughed.

They didn’t hear Lochiana’s reply, for in that moment, the ground between them and the band of warriors exploded in a shower of rocks.

“Run!” Malachiax shouted before he dragged Samiah back into darkness.

Mercifully, the others caught on with the program and didn’t break the link as they ran down the tunnel that had turned pitch black once more. Samiah tripped over something and collided against Mal’s back, losing Gary in the process.

“Samiah!” he yelled.

“I’m right here. Keep hugging the wall.”

More than ever in her life, she wanted to have just a smidge of the fire gift in her core.

“We’re never going to leave this cave alive,” Ianox whined, and Samiah thought it would be fantastic if she didn’t have a conscience. She would then be able to leave the fool behind in the darkness and not lose any sleep over it. They were in that mess thanks to the idiot. *Blast my morals!*

“I think I found the other tunnel,” Malachiax said.

It was impossible to know for certain if they weren’t going back to their cell, but the ground did become steeper. Not much later, Samiah heard a splash followed by Mal’s curse. Her own boots

turned soaking wet with the next couple of steps she took.

“Why is there water here?”

“I don’t know. Let’s keep moving.”

They followed Malachiax’s lead. What other option did they have? But the water kept rising, and when it reached Samiah’s mid thigh, she made Malachiax stop.

“We can’t keep going. The water is getting higher.”

It was then that she noticed she could no longer touch the rough wall. She reached with her right arm and only found empty air. “I don’t think we are in a tunnel anymore.”

“The air does feel cooler here,” Gary said.

A rubble echoed all around them and Samiah’s heart skipped a beat. “Did you all hear that?”

“It didn’t sound good,” Lochiana replied right before the ground beneath their feet vanished and they were sucked down a hole with a loud *whoosh*.

It happened so fast, Samiah’s scream lodged in her throat and she lost her hold on Mal’s hand. The drop didn’t last long—maybe a few seconds—before they fell into a gelid pool. The temperature shock seized Samiah’s lungs, and she thrashed in the darkness, creating a mess of bubbles. She couldn’t find the way up, and panic made her sink farther into the water.

Dark spots appeared in her vision, and she knew she was seconds away from passing out when a pair of hands grabbed her arms and yanked her in a specific direction. Samiah hoped it was toward the surface. Her head finally broke through the barrier, and she filled her lungs with air in a big gasp. Water spluttered from her mouth as she coughed. Once the fit stopped, she blinked to get rid of the thick water drops on her lashes and took in her surroundings. It was a cave illuminated by glowworms attached to the walls and the domed ceiling. Samiah squinted and spotted the hole they had come through.

A splash nearby caught her attention, and she turned in time to see Femror and Malachiax emerge from the dark surface.

“Mal!” She swam in his direction.

“Samiah!” He met her halfway and pulled her into his arms, resting his chin on her shoulder. “I couldn’t find you.”

“I’m here. I’m here.”

Femror disappeared under the water again. *Where is he going?* Samiah’s eyes swept the chamber and landed on Gary and Ianox already out of the frigid lake. The only person missing was Lochiana. Had she...? No, Samiah couldn’t entertain the idea. Lochiana had to be okay.

Once they crawled onto the rocky shore, Samiah’s body began to shake uncontrollably. Malachiax pulled her flush to him, but he was also as cold as ice. Samiah searched the dark surface of the lake, which remained undisturbed for far too long. She began to think the worst had happened. What if Femror couldn’t find Lochiana in time? She closed her eyes and asked the Sacred Powers to spare her friend. She couldn’t bear the thought of losing someone close to her again.

Her eyes had begun to prickle when Femror finally resurfaced with Lochiana in his arms. She was unconscious. He floated on his back and swam to shore using only one arm while the other held Lochiana's head above the water. As soon as they were ashore, he began the process of reviving her. Samiah covered her mouth with her hand and sobbed. They could not lose Lochiana.

Femror pressed his palms over Lochiana's chest and pumped with precise vigor right before he clamped her nose shut to blow air into her mouth.

"Come on, Lady. Don't give up on me now," Femror said right before he restarted the steps.

It was only on the third time that Lochiana started to cough up water. Femror turned her onto her side and massaged her back while she emptied her lungs of liquid. The gentleness of his action was a stark contrast to his fearsome warrior persona.

Once Lochiana stopped heaving, she leaned on her forearm and scanned their group. Then she looked at Femror, who had not taken his gaze from her the entire time. He seemed stricken and worried beyond measure.

"You saved us. Why?" she asked feebly.

"I couldn't let you drown in our lake. We drink from this water," he replied, but his words didn't match his expression.

Lochiana sat up and frowned at him. "Thank you, nonetheless. I suppose now you must take us to your father."

Femror got to his feet and offered his hand to Lochiana. She stared at it for a couple of seconds before she accepted the help. Once she stood in front of him, he took a couple of steps away from her, as if being near her caused him actual pain. He turned to us. "Are you all fit to travel? It's a long way from here to Argor."

"Wait? Are you helping us escape?" Samiah asked.

"It seems so." Femror walked to the side and retrieved a burlap sack from the ground that Samiah had completely missed.

"Why?" Lochiana eyed the warrior not with suspicion, but wonder.

Femror glanced in her direction and clenched his jaw before replying, "Because Arcadia is my home, whether I like it or not. I don't want it to perish at the hands of the Myserians. They will destroy everything."

"Myserians?" Samiah frowned.

"That's what we call the wraiths that are now loose once more. They must be stopped."

Femror shoved his hand inside his sack and pulled out a flask made of some sort of animal skin. He removed the cap and took a large sip before offering the beverage to the others.

"Drink up."

"What's that?" Samiah eyed the flask with suspicion.

"It's Razor's Blood." Lochiana reached for it and drank a large sip with a grimace.

The flask was passed around. When Samiah was feeling its effect fully, she asked Malachiax.

“What are the chances Lord Droom will give us the Spheres of Sharra?”

“I honestly don’t know, Sami. I’m still having a hard time believing he has all the relics.”

“Oh, he has them. There’s no doubt about it.” Femror hoisted his bag over his shoulder and stared hard at the group.

Malachiax frowned at the warrior before replying. “If that’s the case, we’ll just ask him to give us the spheres.”

Lochiana snorted. “Fat chance of that happening.”

“Lord Droom trusts Mal. He’ll listen to him,” Samiah replied to support her mate, but she wasn’t one hundred percent sure her sovereign would do it. She trusted the man as far as she could throw him.

“And if he doesn’t?” Gary asked.

The corner of Femror’s lips twitched upward. “If he doesn’t, we’ll have to steal them.”

Chapter 19

Femror led them out the Draki hidden compound through a series of mazelike tunnels and secret passages. Lochiana realized bitterly that they would have never made it out on their own. She couldn't wrap her head around Femror's motives. Sometimes he seemed to be on her side, but other times he was downright antagonizing. She was still mad at him for standing by and doing nothing when his crazy-ass father imprisoned them. There was no doubt in her mind that the Draki king had one screw loose in his head. She wondered if that was the reason Femror had decided to help them.

They emerged through a trapdoor buried deep in the ground and kept out of sight by the clever placement of leaves and branches over it. It only took a moment for Lochiana to recognize her surroundings—they were in Alios, the famous forest in Lorexian known for its larger-than-life trees. Night greeted them in the silent and gloomy forest; only a few patches of dark green moss were bathed in silvery moonlight.

They walked in silence for a while, until Samiah blurted out of the blue, “How long have you been following us?”

Lochiana suppressed a grin. It had taken the Argorian woman long enough before her inquisitive nature made itself known. Lochiana couldn't wait to see how Femror would react around her. She had learned that the quickest way to get on his nerves was to pester him with endless questions. She didn't know why, but she took great pleasure in annoying him.

Femror didn't answer right away, just kept walking at a brisk pace. Lochiana thought that perhaps he was trying to run away from Samiah. She noticed Samiah was about to prompt him again when he finally spoke. “Since you left Mora.”

Lochiana frowned, knowing that not to be true. He couldn't have followed Samiah and Malachiax while he was busy kidnapping her.

Samiah stopped abruptly in her tracks to glare at Femror's back. “And it didn't occur to you to help us when that mob of enraged Morians attacked us?”

Femror's spine went rigid before he looked over his shoulder. “I misspoke. I wasn't following you myself. My warriors were, and I had given them orders to not interfere unless it became a life-or-death situation.”

Lochiana's snorted. "Your idea of what constitutes a life-or-death situation differs widely from ours."

"I saved you, didn't I?" Even in the gloominess, she could see the eyebrow raise he gave her. Oh, he was such an infuriating male.

"If you call throwing me over your shoulder and taking me against my will as saving me, then I guess you did." She shrugged and was happy to see the glower Femror aimed at her.

"Could you two bicker any louder? I would *love* to attract some Myserians. I live for the thrill, you know?" Ianox said, and Lochiana narrowed her eyes at the short, annoying man. His gaze bounced everywhere as if he expected to find danger lurking in every corner.

"You speak sarcasm. I'm shocked," Lochiana replied and next to her, Gary chuckled.

"This is going to be a very long trip," Femror muttered and resumed walking. "Keep it up, folks. I want to reach Argor by nightfall."

"That's physically impossible," Gary said. "We are too far to reach Argor by foot in one day. It will take us at least a week."

"Good thing we aren't going on foot, then," Femror replied, but he didn't care to add anything to his statement.

Typical, Lochiana thought. "You're not going to share your plans with us, are you?"

Femror didn't reply, and Lochiana made a vulgar gesture to his back.

"I saw that."

Lochiana's jaw dropped before she glanced at Samiah, who just shook her head and shrugged. He couldn't possibly have seen it, unless he had secret eyes on the back of his head. *Great*. One more mystery about the Draki for Lochiana to unveil.

He led them deeper into Alios Forest where the vegetation was so thick, they had to push branches out of the way and literally carve a path through the green wall. Moisture clung to her skin, turning it sticky and itchy, and her hair was plastered to her head. She actually missed the cool water from the underground lake. She twisted her thick strands into a bun, which helped cool off her neck at least.

Lochiana heard the sound of water rushing nearby before they reached the stream. *Femror must be leading us to the Seven Sisters River*. The vegetation gave way to a beautiful meadow with yellow and blue flowers scattered over soft grass. It was almost as though somebody actually tended to the place. A small waterfall cascaded down mossy rocks in a shower of silvery sparkle and fog into the stream. It was quite the sight. Lochiana took a moment to admire the scenery, as opposed to Femror who didn't seem one bit interested in nature and kept going until he disappeared behind the water curtain.

"Where did he go?" Samiah asked.

"Maybe there is a cave behind the waterfall?" Malachiax said, and Samiah shuddered.

"I'm going after him." Lochiana stepped in the same direction Femror had disappeared and didn't

wait for them. She wanted to know what the Draki warrior was up to.

A small chamber was indeed behind the cascading water, a hidden place where small canoes had been stored. Upon hearing her approach, Femror looked up.

“We’ll travel down the river until we reach the border to Argor. Then we continue on foot to the capital. We’ll have to split into two groups.” Femror pushed two canoes into the shallow water and threw his burlap sack into one.

“Are you crazy? You want us to venture down one of the most dangerous rapids in all of Arcadia in those tiny things? One hit against a rock, and they will split in half.”

“It’s the fastest way to get to Argor, and also the safest.” Femror tapped the side of the canoe closest to him. “This is solid wood from one of the ancient Alios trees. It will hold, trust me.”

Lochiana eyed the canoes again and bit her lower lip. She agreed it would be fastest, but safest? That they would have to see. But what other choice did they have?

“I’ve gone down the Seven Sisters before. It’s difficult, but not impossible.” Malachiax stared at the canoes. “Mind you, I was on a raft designed to endure the white waters.”

“Now you get to experience the Seven Sisters the Draki way.” Femror smiled ruefully. “Take one canoe, and I’ll handle the other.” He added a couple of oars to each one of them. When no one made the move toward the small boats, Femror glowered. “What are you waiting for, a formal invitation?”

“I’m not getting into a boat with you.” Ianox crossed his arms and glared at Femror.

“Thank the fucking blue skies. I would have thrown you into the river the first time you opened your mouth to whine anyway. It saves me the trouble.” Femror hopped into the canoe with the grace of a catling. The boat didn’t even wobble. Something unfurled in the pit of Lochiana’s stomach. Here she was again appreciating something the warrior did.

His gaze connected with hers, and he smirked, as if he knew the nature of her thoughts. She flattened her lips and raised her chin. When he offered to help get her on board, she ignored his hand and managed on her own. Thank the Sacred Powers she didn’t make a fool of herself.

She sat on the bench opposite his and glanced at the rest of their companions. It was clear that Samiah and Malachiax would stick together, and since Ianox had already announced he wouldn’t be traveling with Femror, that left Gary to come with them. He waddled through the shallow water and when Femror offered his hand, he accepted it.

Lochiana glanced at the other canoe and caught the glower Samiah was aiming at Ianox. She wasn’t happy about the trip’s arrangements. Malachiax leaned forward and kissed Samiah on her cheek, then flicked her nose before taking his place in the middle seat. *They are so adorable together*, Lochiana thought with a sigh. She wished to find someone one day with whom she could share such a deep bond as theirs. Her eyes involuntarily sought Femror and found him staring at her again. She couldn’t decipher his expression, and she didn’t feel like having a staring contest, so she glanced at the canoe’s floor instead. She would have held his gaze longer if her mind weren’t in such turmoil about the things she was beginning to feel whenever he was near her.

The canoe began to glide smoothly through the water, but they could not help getting wet once they crossed through the waterfall. The water wasn't as cold as the underground lake, but it was enough to warrant a shudder from Lochiana's body. At least she wasn't sticky anymore.

"The sun will be up soon," Femror said, but Lochiana refused to look in his direction. She had the prow position, so she turned on her bench seat instead, giving her back to the warrior.

Morning was indeed a few minutes away; she was already able to see the deep orange tinge of the sky through breaks in the deep foliage of the trees. The river cut through several countries, and throughout its length, there were parts with incredible rapids—seven to be exact, hence the name Seven Sisters. Only thrill seekers found pleasure riding them. If her memory was correct, they would have to survive three of those rapids before they reached Argor. She didn't know exactly when they would come up, but she was sure Femror did.

The current was much stronger already. They cut through the deep waters as an arrow cut through air. The landscape hugging the river became a blur, and soon a cool breeze hit Lochiana's cheeks. She closed her eyes to enjoy the peaceful moment, knowing things were about to get much more complicated.

She would have to face Lord Droom again for the first time in twenty years. Of all the odds stacked against them, that future encounter was what terrified her the most.

Chapter 20

The sun was already high in the sky when Femror moved his canoe closer to theirs to warn them the first rapid was approaching. Malachiax nodded and held the oars tighter in his hands. His eyes became as alert as his body. Samiah's heart started to thunder in anticipation. She'd never gone rafting, so she had no idea how she was going to handle it. She'd seen recordings, though, and she knew they were crazy intense.

She curled her hands over her belly. *Hang in there, little ones.*

"Sami, I want you to tie that cord by your feet to the bench and hold on to it." He pointed at the coiled rope underneath her seat.

"Should I tie it around my wrists?"

"No. We don't want to risk you getting trapped to the canoe in case it capsizes."

"Capsize?" Ianox almost shouted from the seat behind Malachiax. "I thought you said you had done this course before."

"I did, a couple of times. But the river is unpredictable, and like I said before, I was on a raft, not a small canoe."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Samiah looked out at the water and noticed they had picked up speed already.

"Just make sure you don't fall overboard."

Samiah nodded and got to work, twisting the cord around the bench several times before creating a loop she could use to hold onto. She glanced at Malachiax once and saw his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He caught her stare, and the corners of his lips twitched upward.

"*I love you,*" she said through the bond. He didn't reply out loud, winking at her instead. He was in the zone already. With a heavy heart, Samiah twisted in her seat to stare ahead because she didn't want to give her back to the wild river. She could already hear the loud roar of the white waters. Femror's canoe was ahead of them. When it disappeared from view, Malachiax warned, "Here we go."

The drop was sudden and Samiah's stomach bottomed out while her body lurched forward. Her yell was muffled by the sound of the violent waters bashing against the rocks that peaked along the stretch of white foam and small waterfalls. *And Malachiax has done this for fun?*

Water splashed into the canoe, drenching Samiah from head to toe. Her hair became pasted to her face and some strands were over her eyes, blocking her view, but she didn't dare let go of the cord, not when the canoe kept being jerked left and right by the strong current. Samiah couldn't hear anything but the pound of her pulse in her ears and the rumble of the river. After a violent lurch, she felt the metallic taste of blood in her mouth. She must have bitten her tongue.

It felt like an eternity before the waters finally calmed, but it took much longer for her heart to do the same. Up ahead, Samiah caught Femror stretching his arms over his head and relaxing his stance. She let out a sigh of relief; they'd all made it.

Samiah finally deemed it safe to let go of the rope and noticed the deep red marks it had left imprinted on her palms from holding on too tight. She opened and shut her hands to make the blood flow through her fingers again.

The sound of someone throwing up made her look back. Ianox was bent over the side of the canoe, puking his guts out.

"So, not so bad, huh?" Malachiax smiled at her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Fuck this shit."

Malachiax threw his head back and laughed, a delicious rich sound that Samiah hadn't heard since this whole nightmare started. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed it.

"I think for the first time I'll have to agree with Samiah. That was fucking hell," Ianox said before he resumed emptying the contents of his stomach.

"For all the Sacred Powers, what a bunch of weaklings you guys are." There was humor in Malachiax's tone, so all Samiah did was stick her tongue out at him.

He moved closer until he was kneeling in front of her. "Now, jokes aside. How are you feeling?" His gaze dropped to her stomach before he placed his open palm there.

"I'm fine. *We* are fine." She covered his hand with hers. "Are the other two rapids as bad as this one?"

The levity vanished from Mal's gaze, and he shook his head. "No. Worse."

Ianox raised his head and stared at them, terrified. "Worse? We're going to die." He lowered his head again and resumed his nasty business.

Malachiax caught the equally terrified expression on Samiah's face. "Don't worry. It feels worse than it actually is, especially if you're not steering the boat."

"Mal, you're such a bad liar."

He pouted, making an adorable face that Samiah couldn't resist. She leaned down to kiss him, but from the corner of her eye she caught movement, so all she did was give Mal a quick peck on the lips before she turned her attention to her friends.

Femror brought his canoe closer to theirs again. His eyes quickly assessed their group before they focused on Malachiax.

"All good?"

“Yes.” Mal stood up and returned to his bench seat.

Femror nodded and was about to say something else when Lochiana shushed him.

“Do hear that?”

He furrowed his eyebrows and a moment later, his spine went rigid. His reaction alarmed Samiah, and she strained her senses as her eyes scanned the shore. She had to focus really hard before she heard the murmur of hundreds of voices in the distance.

Femror seemed to have focused on one particular spot down the shoreline before he let out a curse. “Blast all the three moons. Fucking Myserians.”

“Where? I don’t see anything,” Samiah asked, but a few seconds later, she was able to see a large group of bedraggled people marching together.

“Quick, everyone hide.” Malachiax dropped to the bottom of the canoe and pulled Samiah with him. She curled into a ball, for there wasn’t much room to lie flat on her belly. She hoped it would be enough.

As they went farther down the river, the sound of the deadly march became louder. It meant either the river was getting narrower or the current was pushing them closer to the shore. Either way, neither option was good for them.

An irritating buzz reached Samiah’s ear. She raised her hand to shoo away the insect when she caught sight of what it was. *Shit*. A zarpon. Nasty little buggers with a stinger the size of her finger. The last thing they needed was to be stung by it. The side effects usually varied from mild fever to hallucination, hindrances they couldn’t afford. The insect mercifully flew away and Samiah refocused her attention on the sound of the Myserians.

“Aargh!” Ianox screamed from his side of the boat so loud that even the fishes downriver heard him.

“Shut up, you idiot,” Samiah shout-whispered.

“I just got stung.”

For all the Sacred Powers. It had to fucking be him.

“By what?” Malachiax asked.

“A zarpon,” she answered, and Malachiax cursed out loud.

Samiah noticed then that the sound of footsteps nearby had stopped. With her heart stuck in her throat, she raised her head to take a peek. The entire mob of possessed Arcadians stood still and had their gazes fixated on their canoes. Samiah covered her mouth to suppress a gasp. They all had deep, bloody gouges on their faces and arms, and were covered in soot.

Seconds went by before one of them let out an animalist cry that was answered by the rest.

“Fuck!” Malachiax went back to his seat and grabbed the oars.

Samiah sat back up as well and saw that Femror had done the same. They had to get out of there fast. Some of the Myserians jumped into the water and attempted to reach their boat, but for whatever reason, they were drowning instead. Maybe the Myserians didn’t know how to swim. But if their

hosts died, those wraiths would come after them and, Samiah realized grimly, the adrenaline from the ride had killed the Razor's Blood effect.

"Faster, Mal. Faster," Samiah urged.

They were going through a narrower part of the river now, and up ahead was a tree with branches that hung above the water. They would have to cross right under it. Some of the deranged people had taken note of that as well and made a run for it. Femror's canoe passed under it right before a Myserian reached the lower branch and jumped, narrowly missing.

The next Myserian who jumped didn't miss the mark and landed right between Malachiax and Ianox, who screamed at the top of his lungs and cowered in the corner, leaving Malachiax to fend for himself. He managed to keep his balance as he dove to the right to miss the punch aimed at his jaw. He then hit the possessed man hard with the oar, throwing him overboard.

Samiah was about to breathe a sigh of relief when she was grabbed from behind and pulled off the canoe and underwater. She fought to get free from whoever was holding her, but the person had their arms wrapped around her middle. She kicked back with her legs several times until the hold slacked and then she elbowed her way to freedom. She had stayed too long underwater and her lungs were burning by the time she broke the surface. Drawing air in with loud gasps, she searched frantically for her boat. She spotted the small canoe downstream, but mercifully it wasn't that far away yet. Samiah swam as fast as she could, but when she finally grabbed the boat's edge, she only found Ianox there, staring wide-eyed at nothing.

"Where's Mal?"

"H-he jumped after you."

"No." Samiah's heart constricted painfully inside her chest as she twisted around, still holding the canoe, to scan the area close to it. "Mal!" she screamed when she couldn't see him.

What if he's drowned? She took a deep breath and prepared to go under again when she heard a loud gasp nearby. "Mal?"

"Sami. Where are you?"

"I'm here." She swam around and saw him floating on the other side of the canoe, not far away.

"Thank all the Sacred Powers." He swam to her with fast strokes and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her body close to him for a demanding, almost desperate kiss.

Samiah gave in to the emotion as well, shaking.

"Uh, you two should get into the boat," Ianox said. "I believe the second rapid is approaching."

Samiah frowned, for the current still felt mild to her. Until it changed suddenly and the canoe lurched forward, making her almost lose her hold. Malachiax quickly helped her get back on board before he followed. He barely had time to retake this seat when they reached the first drop, much steeper than any from before. Samiah widened her eyes when she saw what was waiting for them—a whirlwind of foam and raging waters. Malachiax had been right, the first rapid was child's play compared to this.

Sacred Powers save us.

Chapter 21

Lochiana's heart leaped to her throat when a Myserian jumped into the river, narrowly missing their canoe. Femror didn't miss a beat, just kept rowing them farther away from the shore without a glance back. They picked up speed as the river widened once more. Lochiana couldn't see if their friends were okay from her position on the front of the boat. She prayed they were.

Despite not being as close to the shore as they were before, the rock formations that jutted toward the river made a perfect platform for the Myserians who still pursued them like demented animals. In fact, a group of five was making a beeline to a protruding rock coming up ahead. Lochiana heard Femror grunt and knew he had seen it as well. She wished she had oars so she could help. The Myserians were getting closer and closer, and she knew they would be able to make the jump into their canoe at the rate they were going. She leaped from her seat and bent over the prow of the boat so she could use her arms as paddles.

"What are you doing?" Femror grumbled behind her.

"I'm trying to help you. We're going too slow."

She kept making rowing motions with her arms, not slowing down even when her muscles began to burn from the strain. The wood from the boat's edge dug into her chest, but Lochiana pushed that pain aside too. The canoe sped up through the shore's optimum jumping point just before the first Myserian reached its edge. She heard him let out a guttural scream, and then the canoe was hit by something.

"Tandrum's wrath! It's a zarpon's nest!" Gary yelled.

Lochiana heard the nasty insects before she even turned around. Femror had dropped the oars to fight off the dozens of zarpons that now circled him.

"Get rid of the nest!" she yelled, but neither Femror nor Gary seemed to hear her.

She got to her feet and tried to walk without tipping the boat over. She would have done it on purpose if she hadn't noticed they had picked up speed. *We must be approaching the next set of rapids. Fuck!*

"Don't get any closer!" Femror raised his arm, trying to prevent Lochiana from walking around him.

“I’m trying to help you, you idiot!”

Gary, who had fewer zarpons to contend with, crawled toward the nest. More zarpons flew out as he raised the round shell and threw it to the river. The nasty insects came her direction and Lochiana prepared to be stung to death, but Femror pushed her onto the floor and covered her body with his. He created a protective barrier around her head with his arms, blocking everything besides his own face. He closed his eyes and grunted, his expression twisting into a grimace. Lochiana felt a couple of stings on her arms, but it was nothing compared to the assault Femror was receiving. She heard a loud cracking noise before the boat tipped forward and down. They had reached the second set of rapids.

Femror raised his head long enough to yell at Gary to get the boat under control. Lochiana couldn’t see if the Jackurian had managed it or not, but she guessed not by the way they kept being tossed left and right, hitting rocks harder than they should. At this rate, their canoe would break into pieces.

“Brace yourselves. There’s a big drop ahead!” Gary shouted.

Lochiana felt Femror’s body tighten on top of hers right before the canoe tipped to an almost vertical drop. They hit the bottom with a loud crash and water was suddenly everywhere. Femror’s body was yanked from hers, and she could no longer feel the bottom of the canoe. They had capsized, the current thrashing her body as if she were a rag doll.

Kick your legs, Lochiana.

Her back hit a hard surface, but her hand found some leverage. She held on to it before she could see which way the surface was, then kicked her legs and swam toward it with the last breath of air she had in her lungs. She broke the surface with a gasp, only to be shoved against another rock again. If she kept going like that, she would end up drowning. She tried to scan her surroundings through the white waters, looking for something she could hold onto. She spied a lower, feeble branch protruding from a rock on the other side of the river a little ahead. If she could get across, she might have a chance to pull herself out.

Lochiana took a deep breath before she pushed herself off the rock at her back. She didn’t fight the current; that would have been foolish and impossible. She went with the flow but veered her body toward the other side of the shore. Her plan worked, and she managed to cross the wild river. Now she couldn’t miss her chance. When the branch came within reach, she made a grab for it. Her wet hands curled around the slick branch, fighting for a secure hold. Ultimately losing her grip, she would have gone downstream if the sleeve of her tunic hadn’t caught the branch. That gave Lochiana the chance she needed to get a better grip of the wood. She was thankful for her natural dexterity and years of physical training as she pulled her upper body over the limb before she threw her leg over, mounting the log. Once she was certain she had a good hold, she raised her upper body and searched the river. Where were Femror and Gary?

She saw an arm covered in scales shooting out of the water in the distance and Lochiana didn’t waste any time—she had to save Femror. She crawled back on the log until her feet touched firm

land, then took off in a sprint, following the river. She tried not to lose sight of Femror, who seemed to have his head above water, at least. *Please don't drown; please don't drown.*

She found another jutting section ahead and realized it was now or never. She needed to get Femror out of the river before he lost the fight against it. But he was coming down right in the middle of it, and to get to him, Lochiana would need to venture back into the river again. She noticed the current wasn't as strong there. *This must be the last stretch of the rapid.* She eyed Femror's bobbing form approaching and stepped into the river, realizing she was in a shallow section; the water didn't go above her waist when she reached the middle. Despite that, Femror was coming down hard and fast, and he was a big male. He collided with her and Lochiana had trouble maintaining her balance. If she fell, it would be game over for the two of them. She dug her feet into the soft sand and bent her knees, locking them tight. Biting her lower lip, she curled her arms around Femror's torso and began the slow process of dragging him to the shore.

"Come on, warrior. A little help here would be appreciated," she grunted as her muscles strained with his weight.

He blinked in her direction, but there was no recognition in his gaze. *Shit.*

When she finally reached the shore, her legs gave out and she fell next to him. Femror coughed and grimaced at the same time. He hadn't drowned, but his face and most of his torso and back were covered in awful-looking blisters. The zarpons' stings.

"Femror, can you hear me? Open your eyes." Lochiana shook him gently.

He turned toward her voice, and when their gazes connected, she felt something shift in her heart. He raised his hand to caress her cheek, but then his eyes rolled back into their sockets and he started to shake. Lochiana grabbed his shoulders and shook him hard.

"Femror! Wake up, wake up."

"He's gone into anaphylactic shock," a woman's voice said from nearby. Lochiana whipped around to find Chrysa, Femror's sister, standing not too far from the riverbank, and next to her, a half-drowned Gary.

Lochiana didn't have time to rejoice in seeing Gary alive or ask how Chrysa had gotten there. She was losing her mind with worry. The words "anaphylactic shock" kept bouncing in her head as fear gripped her heart and squeezed unmercifully.

Femror was going to die.

Chapter 22

“Hold on tight. This is going to be a bumpy ride,” Malachiax yelled over the loud roar of the raging river.

Samiah barely had time to loop her hands through the cord around her bench seat when their canoe tipped dangerously forward and went over the first steep drop. She curled into a ball and screamed as they fell. The impact rattled her bones and a loud crash reverberated in her ears. Cold water invaded the canoe, hitting her skin without mercy; it felt like small pebbles had been thrown at her. She unfurled from her fetal position and faced the river once more.

Another drop came, but that time she decided to stay upright. Their canoe made an awful cracking noise as it hit a boulder, and Samiah clenched her jaw hard. *We are never going to make it*, she thought in despair. She noticed they were going straight toward a big rock formation smack in the middle of the river. If they hit that at full speed, they would be done for.

She looked over shoulder and pointed ahead. “Mal, watch out for that boulder.”

“I see it.” The muscles on his neck bulged as he strained to make the canoe veer off the collision path. They dashed close to another smaller rock, and Samiah didn’t think twice; she leaned over the side of the boat and pushed against the slick surface as they zipped by it, almost falling into the water in the process.

“Samiah!” Malachiax screamed at her, but her risk had paid off. The canoe veered to the right just enough to miss the boulder.

There were no more close calls, and before Samiah knew, they had gone through the second rapid. Her pulse still pounded in her ears as she sagged on her seat and let out a loud exhale. She heard the sound of oars hitting the wooden floor before Malachiax’s arms were around her shoulders and his warm breath fanned near her ear.

“Don’t ever pull a stunt like that again. If you had fallen—”

“But I didn’t and we’re safe now.”

“Sami...,” Malachiax started.

“Hey, isn’t that Femror’s boat?” Ianox asked from behind them. Both Samiah and Malachiax turned their gazes to the much calmer river. Samiah’s heart sank when she saw what was left of her friends’ canoe.

“Oh no.” She covered her mouth with her hands.

“Do you think they’ve all drowned?” Ianox asked.

Without answering, Malachiax returned to his seat and took control of the canoe once more. Samiah stood on high alert and scanned the green water. They couldn’t be dead; she refused to believe that. But as they progressed down the river without any sign of her friends, she began to lose hope until movement far down the shoreline caught her eyes. She couldn’t be certain what it was, for bushes and trees blocked her view. She thought at first the Myserians had caught up with them, but as they drew nearer, she recognized Lochiana’s silhouette down the muddy bank, leaning over Femror’s prone form on the ground.

“Mal, you need to row faster. I think Femror is in trouble.”

Malachiax steered the boat toward the shore, and Samiah jumped out before it had completely reached dry land.

“Lochiana,” she said in a low voice, not wanting to draw attention to any danger that might be lurking within earshot.

Her friend turned around, and Samiah caught the tears in her gaze.

“What happened?”

“He was stung by several zarpons. The idiot used his body as a shield to protect me,” Lochiana choked out. Her face twisted into an expression that looked like agony before she glanced at the fallen warrior again.

"Draki are very sensitive to some venoms. A zarpon sting can be fatal if not treated right away," the king's daughter said, and Samiah widened her eyes. She hadn't even noticed her presence, but she was glad to see Gary next to her.

Several questions bounced in her head, including how Femror's sister had gotten there, but those would have to be answered later, for Samiah understood the urgency of the situation.

“What can we do?” she asked.

"I-I don't know. I only had the basic healer's training." Lochiana caressed his face with the gentlest touch, and Samiah noticed for the first time that there was something going on between Lochiana and the warrior. She called upon her gift and saw, as bright as day, the shimmery line that connected Lochiana's core to Femror's.

For all the Sacred Powers. They’re soul mates. Has Lochiana already realized that?

“Sinclair root paste has chemicals that counteract the effects of skin inflammation. It could help. It’s fairly common on riverbanks such as this.” Gary approached the duo and knelt next to Femror.

His gaze traveled down the warrior's shaking form, taking note of the swollen and purplish patches all over his skin. Samiah couldn't even imagine the amount of pain the Draki must be in. She had been stung by a zarpon when she was younger and had cried for hours.

Gary pulled one of Femror's eyelids back before speaking. "We need to act fast."

"Tell us what to look for." Malachiax shifted forward while Ianox hung back.

Chrysa took a sharp intake of breath, the sound drawing Samiah's attention to her.

"Cinthe. We must find some Cinthe flowers," she said.

"What?" Lochiana questioned. "That's crazy."

"No, Chrysa is right." Gary stood suddenly. "Cinthe has extraordinary healing powers. The healer from my village used it for everything."

Chrysa spun around and raised her nose in the air, as if trying to catch the scent of the flower.

What a peculiar female.

She looked over her shoulder. "Quickly, there are a few over that hill." She pointed at the distance.

Lochiana sprang into action, hooking her arms under Femror's body and pulling him up. She was stronger than she looked, but not strong enough to carry a male the size of Femror by herself. Gary and Malachiax went to assist her, and when Mal tried to gently push her out of the way, she resisted.

"I got it," he said with kindness in his eyes. Had he also sensed the connection Lochiana had to the Draki warrior?

Samiah looped her arm around her friend's and dragged her away. "Come, we'll move much quicker if we let Mal and Gary carry Femror."

Lochiana peeled her gaze off the warrior to look at Samiah. Her eyes conveyed anguish only those with a deep link to another being could understand. Samiah knew more than anyone how strong the need was to protect one's soul mate.

Ianax had already taken off with Chrysa when the rest followed them up the hill. Samiah and Lochiana brought up the rear since Malachiax and Gary couldn't defend themselves while they carried Femror. Any precaution was necessary; for out in the distance, Samiah could still hear the guttural noises the deranged Arcadians were making. She hoped they'd find the flower to help Femror soon. The longer they lingered, the greater the odds they would be found. She couldn't help thinking about the hurdles they still had ahead of them. They hadn't traveled far enough down the river, so they would have to make the rest of the trek on foot after all.

When they finally reached the top of the hill, Gary was already running back toward them with a bouquet of white flowers in his hand. Chrysa followed in his footsteps and asked Malachiax and Gary to lay Femror down once more. She knelt next to him after taking the flowers from Gary, squeezing them between her hands, crushing all the petals together, and making a ball out of them. She produced some kind of yellowish milk, which she quickly applied to each sting on Femror's body. The warrior's face, which had been until that point scrunched in pain, relaxed. The tremors in his body also stopped.

"Is it working?" Lochiana asked.

"It seems so. Still he probably will develop a fever. We need to find shelter," Chrysa replied.

"Where exactly are we?" Ianax asked.

"Samion's Park. I used to camp here when I was younger. We're maybe a day from Argamania if

we travel on foot."

"A day? We don't have a day. Femror needs a proper bed to recover." Lochiana glowered at Malachiax as if she blamed him personally for the bad news.

Malachiax narrowed his eyes at Lochiana but didn't make a comment. For once, Samiah also didn't jump to defend her mate. She knew where Lochiana was coming from.

"We'll find what we need if we head southeast," Chrysa said without looking up.

Samiah frowned. "That will lead straight to Bangor. We should stay away from cities."

"We'll find what we need if we head southeast," Chrysa repeated as if Samiah hadn't even spoken.

"What's the matter with that female?" Ianox asked. "Is she unhinged?"

"Listen to what Chrysa says," Femror said with a rough voice.

Lochiana turned to him immediately, peering at his face with intent.

"You're awake. Thank the Sacred Powers," she said, and her outburst managed to get a small twist from Femror's lips.

"It sounds like you were worried about me."

"Of course I was worried about you. You almost died."

"Nah. Draki can't be killed that easily."

"Do you think you can stand? No matter what we decide, we can't stay here," Malachiax said.

Femror grimaced as he tried to sit up on his own. Lochiana, surprisingly, didn't try to assist him, and Samiah wondered why. Once the warrior was in the upright position, he replied, "Yes, I think I can walk, but not as fast as you wish I could."

Lochiana stood up suddenly and declared, "We'll head to Bangor and see what we can find there."

Her tone left no room for argument.

Chapter 23

*C*urse the three moons, my body hurts everywhere. As Femror tried his best not to grunt with every painful step he took, he vowed to never put himself in the direct path of zarpons again. *Who am I fooling? I would do it again if it meant protecting Lochiana.* He would rather die than see her suffer. She walked a little ahead of him, but from time to time, she would peer over her shoulder to check on him. His male pride hated that she had to witness him in such a weakened state. He would be forever grateful that she didn't attempt to help him get up earlier. She seemed to know it was the last thing he wanted. For that same reason, he had refused assistance from Malachiax and Gary. *I can walk on my own, thank you very much.*

Chrysa, who had been walking ahead of him as well, slowed her pace so she stood by his side. Without glancing his way, she asked, "How are you faring, brother?"

Femror hadn't been surprised to see his sister earlier. She had the sight, after all; she must have sensed they were in peril.

"I've been better, thank you for asking."

He wondered if she knew what their father had asked him to do. As if she had plucked the thought from his head, she said, "Yes, I know."

His response was to grunt. Could she also see the turmoil in his heart?

"The world turns as it will, brother. Don't worry about things you cannot change."

The problem was he could change it. Ultimately, it was his decision to make. Femror shook his head to dispel his thoughts. Even with all the conflicting feelings bouncing inside his head, Femror knew that, in the end, he would do what must be done for the greater good. Even if it meant alienating his soul mate forever. He was a warrior, a prince of the Draki. His duty would always come first. *Had* to always come first.

The group made slow progress out of the park thanks to him. At least they weren't being pursued; he would take solace in that. When they reached the wide road that lead to Bangor, they found it deserted. Femror had already noticed this phenomenon in Morang. It seemed the Myserians had a solid plan this time. Instead of destroying the bodies of their hosts as they'd done the first time they came through the portal, they were using the Arcadians for another, probably sinister, reason. What were they after?

The dark gray road was flanked on both sides by a range of mountains, leaving their party too exposed for Femror's liking. During the entire journey through the valley, Femror felt like livestock being corralled to the slaughterhouse. Despite his foreboding feeling, they made it to the city of Bangor without being ambushed. Any sane person would consider that a positive outcome, but instead of making Femror relax, the lack of any problems during their journey made him more uneasy. *The calm before the storm.*

Bangor was a small mining city and as such, it had been designed to fulfill its purpose without thought for aesthetics. To put it nicely, it was a fucking eyesore. Buildings were nothing more than sad gray boxes, some in much need of a new paint job. The only splash of color was the murals they found painted on some of the walls. The houses in the city's outskirts seemed to have been vacated in a hurry, but they didn't come across destruction until they reached a commercial avenue. Stores had been ransacked and destroyed; merchandise lay torn and abandoned on the street.

"Okay, now what?" Ianox put his hands on his hips and openly glared in Chrysa's direction. She didn't catch the gesture, but Femror did. He curled his lip and let out a growl.

Lochiana didn't glance Femror's way. He wasn't even sure if she had heard him, but the fact that she was staring daggers at the good-for-nothing Arcadian sat very well with him. Pride filled his chest.

"We'll search the stores. Grab anything that might be useful such as food, clothes, water, etcetera," Lochiana said before she spun around and came closer to Femror. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been run over by one of your floating cars," Femror said with a smirk.

"Hover transports float, like you said. It wouldn't be possible to be run over by one." Her beautiful eyes sparkled with glee, and Femror caught the phantom of a smirk on her plump lips.

"Fine. I feel like one of your hover transports fell on top of me." He grinned openly at her now, even if it hurt his face to do so.

She raised both eyebrows and her jaw dropped before she turned to stare at one such vehicle. "For all the Sacred Powers. That's it! We'll use one of the transports to reach Argor."

"Aren't you forgetting something? They don't work outside of cities, and they're powered by the relays," Ianox was quick to point out.

She shook her head and smiled at Femror, ignoring the dumb shit. "The new models, yes, but these"—she touched the transport next to her—"these are still powered by solar energy. Bragadá was one of the last countries in Arcadia to adopt the new relay technology."

A palpable energy of renewed purpose could be felt in the group. Even the useless Ianox seemed more motivated to get his ass moving. Femror wished he could help, but the little bit of strength he had was only enough to keep him standing, if that.

Lochiana got busy with the hover transport she had deemed more salvageable. It was bent in the front, and the glass windows had been shattered, but it looked more or less intact on the inside. Femror shuffled his way toward her. Upon feeling his presence nearby, she turned to him. She was so

excited about her project that she rewarded him with the brightest smile he had seen from her. His dual hearts stopped beating for a moment only to kick-start a second later in a furious rhythm. He had heard a saying many millennia ago from a fisherman in his former land that applied perfectly—Femror had fallen for Lochiana hook, line, and sinker. As he stared at her mesmerizing prism-colored eyes, he silently begged her to reel him in.

He was so caught up in her stare that when he started seeing double, he didn't think much of it, not until his legs gave out under his weight.

"Femror!" Lochiana yelled and caught him right before he could face-plant on the stone pavement. His arms went around her tiny waist, and he buried his face on the flat of her stomach. The scent of her skin invaded his nose and he shuddered.

"Are you sniffing me?" she asked.

"No," he replied with a grunt. "It's called breathing."

Despite that obvious lie, he didn't move from his semi-crouched position.

"You need to sit down." She pulled him up, but somehow, Femror managed to maintain the close proximity.

He didn't know what possessed him when he brought his nose right below her ear and took a good whiff. He heard Lochiana's sharp intake of breath, and he would have pulled her closer if she hadn't taken a couple of steps back.

"You shouldn't have done that," she whispered.

He swayed on the spot and took a couple of wobbly steps toward the hover transport. She didn't attempt to help him that time.

"Would you have said the same thing if I looked like this?" Femror used the little shapeshifting gift he still possessed and transformed his appearance. Gone were the green hue of his skin and the scales.

Lochiana's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "You can shapeshift."

"Yes. So, do I look less revolting to you now?" It cost him to speak. He shouldn't have shapeshifted in his weakened state. His vision was beginning to darken at the edges. He didn't know why he showed his ability to her or why her answer mattered to him. He'd never once wished to look like the Arcadians; he was proud of his heritage.

"I don't find you revolting. Not by a long shot. I just—" She shook her head.

"My apologies. I don't know why I did this." *Lies*. "It must have been the Cinthi flower." *More lies*.

Lochiana took a couple of deep breaths. "That's okay. Just don't do it again."

Femror opened his mouth to reply, but the world around him began to shift and he could no longer feel his legs. He raised his arm to find something to hold on to, a tether before the dark vortex took him under, only to find empty space. He thought he heard Lochiana shout his name, and then nothing.

Chapter 24

They reached Argamania by nightfall and found the streets in their neighborhood deserted. The shops were all shut and dark. *At least they weren't destroyed*, Samiah thought. It gave her hope that Argamania hadn't fallen prey to the Myserians. Despite the lack of disturbance, they exited the hover transport quickly, for they didn't want to linger too long out in the dark.

Malachiax and Gary carried Femror, who had passed out when they were in Bangor and had not regained consciousness since then. He shivered and moaned nonsensical words during the trip, a consequence of the fever that had taken hold of the warrior. Samiah didn't need to use her gift to sense the anxiety emanating from Lochiana. If it weren't for Chrysa's lack of worry, her friend would probably be acting much more frantic.

The group went up the stairs of Samiah and Mal's apartment as quietly as they could, but their footsteps still echoed around them. None of their neighbors appeared to say hello, and Samiah couldn't hear any sound coming from the closed doors along the hallway. At that hour, their building complex should have been livelier. *Where has everyone gone?*

Samiah let out a sigh of relief when they found their apartment undisturbed. Nothing was out of place. The automated light orbs illuminated the room as they crossed the threshold, and their main crystal table flickered to life. They hadn't lost the relays here.

Malachiax and Gary brought Femror to the guest room, and only when he lay down on the double-sized bed did he stir and open his eyes. It was no surprise to Samiah that the first word out of his mouth was Lochiana's name.

Lochiana hurried to the bed and sat on the edge next to him, placing her palm over his forehead. "I'm here. How are you feeling?"

"Hot."

"You should. You have a fever." She glanced at Samiah. "Do you have any anti-thermal medication?"

Samiah went in search of the pills, not knowing if Arcadian medicine would work on the Draki. She returned to the room quickly with the bottle of blue tablets and a glass of water.

"Will this work?" she asked Chrysa.

Femror's sister nodded. "Besides their dual hearts, the Draki's genetic makeup is similar to

yours.”

Samiah knew nothing of the Draki’s physiology. Blast, she hadn’t known they existed until a few days ago. But she caught on that Chrysa hadn’t included herself in her statement. “You don’t have a dual heart?”

Chrysa merely shook her head in response before she seemed to lose focus again. “There’s a message waiting for you.”

Samiah frowned and glanced at Malachiax. He left the room and a moment later returned with a printout in his hand. “The palace issued a level 5 lockdown. All citizens are to report to the closest shelters and wait for instructions.”

“No wonder there isn’t anyone around,” Samiah mused. “What should we do?”

“We can’t wait for Femror to recover. We need to seek an audience with Lord Droom immediately,” Malachiax said.

Lochiana’s spine became taut before she stood up.

“Lord Droom can’t know we’re here,” Chrysa said.

Samiah frowned at the young Draki. “Why not?”

She shook her head and looked out the window. “He can’t know.”

Samiah traded a worried glance with Malachiax, but before she could say anything else, Lochiana replied, “I agree. As a matter of fact, I think only Malachiax, Samiah, and I should go.”

Ianax, who had been hovering just outside the room, stated, “I won’t stay behind with *them*. I’m coming too.”



As they neared the center of the city, Samiah realized Argamania was prepared for war. Royal Guards and Nox Elite soldiers patrolled the streets with laser-sharp focus. As depressing as the sight was, she was relieved that their city had the necessary time to take precautions.

When their hover transport approached the perimeters of the Argamanx Royal Estates, they were promptly stopped by a heavily armed soldier. Samiah had never seen so many weapons strapped to one person.

The soldier flashed an orb light on Malachiax's face, then hers, before he aimed the glow at the back of the transport where Ianax and Lochiana sat. Ianax covered his face and squinted at the bright light's assault, while Lochiana stared ahead impassively.

"State your business," the soldier commanded.

"I'm Malachiax Praterni, Lord Droom's nephew. We've just come from the site in Mora."

"You've come from ground zero?" the soldier asked, his eyebrows almost meeting his hairline.

"Yes."

The soldier brought his wrist-com device to his lips and repeated what Malachiax had just told

him to someone on the other side of the line. He received a reply Samiah couldn't hear from the car, but a second later, the soldier let them through. It didn't take long for Samiah to notice their vehicle now had a royal escort. They crossed Serenity Lake until the hover transport stood over a platform. There was a whooshing sound before they felt the car move upward from the gust of pressurized air that propelled the vehicle in the direction of the Royal Castle of Argamanx, a grandiose construction that stood on the tallest and largest elevated grounds in Arcadia. It was no wonder Argor was the hub of their planet. To think that Lord Droom deemed it necessary to acquire even more power.... The thought alone gave Samiah shivers of dread. She hoped Malachiax was right about his uncle and he had a good reason for taking the Spheres of Sharra.

Once the hover transport leveled with the upper ground, they were instructed by the soldiers to exit the vehicle and continue on foot toward the castle. Their group huddled together, and soon they found themselves surrounded by Nox Elite soldiers instead of Royal Guards as was customary. The soldiers didn't glance in their direction or show any emotion. They were the most skilled soldiers in Argor's army and answered to Commander Haarx. No wonder they looked like winter statues.

They were led to Lord Droom's private office. Samiah let out a sigh of relief when she didn't see Commander Haarx among their sovereign's advisors. *He must be busy somewhere else overseeing the city's security.*

The conversation in the room ceased as soon as their small group was announced. Samiah couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but it seemed Lord Droom actually looked relieved to see Malachiax alive and well. He opened his mouth to say something when his gaze landed on Lochiana. Samiah glanced at her friend and noticed the unmistakable tension in her body. Lochiana's jaw was locked tight, and her hands had curled into fists by her side.

Lord Droom stood from his chair and walked around the table without taking his eyes off his former fiancée.

"It's been a long time, Lochiana."

"Yes," she said not showing an ounce of emotion.

They kept staring at each other for a long time until Malachiax cleared his throat to catch his uncle's attention.

"We have important information regarding the invasion."

Lord Droom finally ended his staring contest with Lochiana and shifted his unnerving gray eyes in Mal's direction. "Go on."

Malachiax spent several minutes giving a detailed account of the events from the time the portal opened until they arrived at the castle. He also managed to include the information they had learned from the Draki without mentioning them. They had agreed beforehand that all knowledge about the Myserians had been extracted by Samiah in the brief moment a Myserian had invaded her mind. She knew how much it cost Malachiax to be deceitful, but he couldn't ignore Chrysa's demand.

Lord Droom and his advisors listened to everything in silence and with matching grim

expressions on their faces.

“How can we stop this invasion? We must close the portal at once,” one of the advisors said.

Malachiax hesitated. He couldn't ask Lord Droom to dismiss those men and women without raising suspicion.

“What is it, Malachiax?” Lord Droom asked.

Mal clenched his jaw, and Samiah could clearly see he didn't want to ask his uncle about the spheres in front of his advisors. In the end, he relented. “There's a way to do it. But we need the Spheres of Sharra.”

The advisors traded a look among themselves and started talking all at once. The common denominator of their concerns was how they were going to retrieve all the spheres from across the planet. Lord Droom remained silent, calmly staring at the mayhem without a shred of emotion. Samiah wasn't surprised that his closest advisors weren't aware the spheres were right under their noses, somewhere in the castle.

“I would like to have a private word with Lady Lochiana,” Lord Droom announced suddenly.

The loud chatter stopped, and the advisors all turned to stare at her. Samiah also looked at her friend, but she couldn't tell by the woman's expression what she was feeling. Her face was stony and impartial. Even her aura remained neutral.

The grand clock in the room chimed the late hour. Only after the gongs had come and gone did Lochiana reply. “As you wish, my lord.”

Chapter 25

It was with great effort that Lochiana managed to quell the rage inside her chest and keep an impartial face. She wouldn't let Lord Droom know how much being near him still affected her after all these years.

She followed him to a private room adjacent to his official office chambers, and when the door clicked shut behind her back, she tried not to wince. The last time she had been inside a room alone with him, he had shown his true colors. Those memories still assaulted her in her dreams—or nightmares, to be more precise.

She had been such a fool in love that she had dismissed the warning signs she glimpsed in his aura during their courtship. Or maybe Lord Droom's true prevailing power was deceit. It didn't surprise her that his advisors had no idea he possessed the Spheres of Sharra.

He strode toward a glass tray cart on the other side of the room and poured himself a drink. In true form, he didn't offer her one—not that she would have accepted anything from him anyway. He spun around and leveled her with an intense stare only he could master. Lesser Arcadians had cowered under that scrutinizing stare, but Lochiana wouldn't be one of them. In fact, she raised her chin in defiance and glared right back at him.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want the truth. I know my nephew well. He's a terrible liar."

"Unlike you, I suppose."

Lord Droom's lips twisted into an ugly grin. Lochiana couldn't believe she had once thought it sexy. "Dear Lochi, what could you possibly be talking about?"

"Don't call me that," Lochiana said through clenched teeth, losing control of her emotions. Two minutes with the hateful man, and he had already managed to get under her skin.

His smile grew.

"You have the Spheres of Sharra." She decided to go straight to the point.

Lord Droom's eyes narrowed before he stalked in her direction. "Who told you that?"

"It doesn't matter. I don't even want to get into why you took them in the first place. We need them to close the portal."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I took them to keep them safe. The other nations were

sloppy—so much so that, to this day, they still don't know their spheres are gone."

"You mean they don't know you stole the spheres from them. That's treason."

Lord Droom chuckled. "Treason? Don't be absurd. I'm the head of the Arcadian Council. I can do as I please."

Lochiana caught a flash of feral madness in his eyes. The same glint he had possessed when he'd beaten and raped her in her own room after she told him she wanted to postpone their bonding ceremony. Her blood turned ice cold, and her heartbeat accelerated. Lochiana's body became a coiled spring, ready to unfurl in case Lord Droom decided to attack her again.

"We need the spheres," she repeated.

"And you expect me to just hand over the most powerful objects in all of Arcadia to you based on the testimony of a low-born aura-reader?"

Lochiana's nostrils flared. "Yes. It's either that or deal with what's coming, and trust me, you can't hope to survive the Myserians."

Lord Droom narrowed his eyes before invading her space and grabbing her forearm. He brought his lips close to her ear, and Lochiana froze on the spot as she cringed at his touch.

"I'll give you the spheres in exchange for another taste of you."

Lochiana managed to break free from the terror that had her locked in place, pulling her arm from his grasp as she took a gigantic step back. "You're despicable."

"Come on, Lochi. I know that deep down you loved it when I was rough."

Lochiana's pulse pounded in her ears as her heart felt like it was going to burst through her chest. "You come near me again, and I swear to the Sacred Powers, I will rip your balls off and feed them to the banshees."

In a blur of movement, Lord Droom had Lochiana pinned against the door, his rough hands digging into the skin of her upper arms. "Your filthy mouth is giving me a hard-on." He thrust his pelvis against hers, and Lochiana wanted to throw up.

She struggled against his hold, but all she was doing was getting him more aroused. She head-butted him instead, hitting him square on the nose. He let out a shout before stepping back with a hand over his bloody extremity. Hatred emanated from his gaze, and now she feared for her life.

He took a menacing step her way but stopped abruptly when a side door to the room opened and a young man appeared on the threshold.

"Father, I—" The Argorian stopped in his tracks when he took in the scene, Lochiana with her back pressed against the main door and Lord Droom holding his bloody nose. "My apologies, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Lochiana saw that as her opportunity to escape. "It's no problem. Lord Droom and I are done here."

She opened the door behind her and stepped back into the private office chambers, schooling her face again, for she didn't wish to let anyone know how terrified she was. Samiah peered at her

through slits, but Lochiana ignored the scrutinizing stare. The other aura-reader could look as long as she wanted; she wouldn't find any clue in Lochiana's aura that something was amiss. She had learned a long time ago to conceal her emotions.

Lord Droom came back into the room a moment later, bloody nose already cleaned up. He was followed by the young man who, unbeknownst to him, had saved Lochiana. Looking closely at him, she could see the resemblance. *This must be Lord Droom's son, Malachiax's cousin.*

Lord Droom ordered all his advisors to leave the room. They balked but none complained. Once they were gone, he pierced Malachiax with a hard stare.

"Lady Lochiana was kind enough to plead your case. Do you want the Spheres of Sharra? You may borrow them if you can break through the spells that protect them."

"Spells? What kind of spells?" Samiah asked.

"I don't know. When the spheres were brought together, some kind of magic was awakened. No one has been able to reach them ever since, which tells me I was right in bringing them to Argor," Lord Droom answered in a calm manner.

"What happened to those who tried?" Malachiax narrowed his eyes at his uncle.

From the corner of her eye, Lochiana noticed Lord Droom's son shift in an uneasy manner. She would have questioned him if his father hadn't spoken next.

"They all died."

Chapter 26

Samiah was beside herself. She couldn't believe Malachiax had agreed to face whatever traps the Spheres of Sharra had laid out for him. She wanted to beg him not to go, but one glance in his direction and she knew that no matter what she said, he wouldn't change his mind.

As soon as Malachiax left with Lord Droom and the door to his chambers closed, Samiah found a chair and sat down with her head in her hands. Lochiana sat next to her and squeezed her shoulder.

"It will be okay, Samiah."

She looked up and glared at her friend. "You don't know that." She turned to Durgin, Lord Droom's son. "What kinds of traps await Mal?"

Durgin's jaw clenched and he shifted his focus to Ianox for a moment. Samiah had forgotten the idiot was there. She didn't understand when Durgin went to stand directly in front of her teammate and said, "You're hungry. Go find something to eat. Don't come back here."

Ianox did as Durgin commanded, and Samiah's jaw dropped as he left the room without so much as uttering a single peep. She looked at Lochiana and found her staring at Durgin through slits.

"You have the compulsion gift."

Durgin spun around and nodded. "Yes."

"Does your father know?"

"No."

Samiah was sick and tired of all the secrets and power plays. "Why did you send Ianox away?"

"He can't be trusted, and what I'm about to say could get me executed for treason."

Durgin's expression matched his words. For the first time, Samiah saw him as more than a spoiled royal.

"We're listening," Lochiana said.

Durgin ran a hand through his long hair and stared at nothing. There was pain in his gaze, something Samiah had never noticed before. "My father has been doing shady things behind the council's back."

"You mean like stealing the Spheres of Sharra?" Lochiana crossed her arms.

"Among other things."

"What other things?" Samiah narrowed her eyes.

“Experiments.”

“What kind of experiments?” Lochiana took a step forward, and Samiah suppressed the urge to shake the guy. *Get on with it already.*

Durgin stared hard at Lochiana for a few seconds before he replied. “Genetic mutation experiments. He’s playing creator, and I’m afraid he wants to use the Spheres of Sharra to produce an army of mutants.”

Samiah shook her head as her brain tried to process Durgin’s information.

“He can’t do that without the council’s approval,” Lochiana replied. “Without proper studies, such experiments could be devastating to our planet’s ecosystem.”

Durgin smiled without humor. “Do you think my father cares?”

“What about Malachiax? If what you say is true, then Lord Droom will never let Mal take the spheres.”

“You’re right. He has no intention of letting him take them.”

“So he’s using Mal to retrieve the spheres for himself. He’s risking my mate’s life for his nefarious purpose!”

“He’s not using Malachiax. He lied. The traps didn’t spring into place by some magical power. I set them up.”

“You? Why?” Samiah asked.

“Protection.”

She realized then what should have been clear to her from the start—Lord Droom intended to kill Malachiax. She stood suddenly, ready to burst out the door. “We must go after them.”

“Stop!” Durgin’s voice boomed in the room and Samiah felt compelled to obey. She spun around and watched him with wide eyes, her breathing inexplicably shallow. “If you go after him, my father will kill both of you without mercy.”

“So what do you suggest, then?” Lochiana asked.

“I was the one who set up the traps. I’ll wait until Malachiax is inside the Heliex and out of my father’s prying eyes to rescue him and get the spheres.”

“The Heliex?” Lochiana frowned.

“It’s a secret chamber in the castle’s dungeons. Very few people know of its existence.”

“How do you plan to get there without your father knowing?” Samiah asked as she tried to break free from the compulsion that kept her in the room. Perspiration had already pooled on her hairline from the mental effort. She hadn’t felt so impotent when Lochiana compelled her. Durgin’s power was ten times worse.

“There’s a hidden entrance to the Heliex he doesn’t know about. You must leave the castle’s premises while I go after Malachiax. Head to the industrial area on the south side of Serenity Lake and search for warehouse number eighty-nine.”

“What’s in there?” Lochiana asked.

"It's one of my father's labs." Durgin walked to his father's desk and wrote something down. "Give this to the head technician there." He handed a piece of paper to Samiah. It was a note written on official royal paper, signed by Lord Droom. She raised her eyebrow at Durgin.

"I've been faking my father's signature for a very long time. It will work, trust me. She won't accept anything but a written order."

Lochiana pulled the paper from Samiah's hand and grinned before looking up. "What exactly are H5s?"

"A successful project. You've been to Planet X-57, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then I believe you will recognize it. Now you must hurry. Meet me at the outskirts of the city by the Seven Sisters rest stop. We must leave within an hour."

"Why?" Lochiana asked, and Samiah could have guessed where her friend's thoughts had gone. She was probably concerned about Femror and if he would have the ability to travel.

"Before you arrived, my father had given the order to raise the protective dome around the city. If we're caught inside it, we will never be able to leave."

Chapter 27

Lochiana couldn't wait to get out of that forsaken castle. The effort to keep a calm façade after her private session with Lord Droom had worn her thin. Keeping Samiah from running after her mate had proved a good distraction, though. Despite Durgin's assurances that he would get Malachiax out of the Heliex before the worst happened, Samiah wasn't convinced.

Ten days ago, Lochiana wouldn't have understood her friend's level of anxiety, but she was beginning to feel a similar emotion toward Femror. In fact, despite their task, her heart was begging to forget the mission and run back to him. She shook her head. *Nonsense*.

They left Lord Droom's private office and speed-walked down the wide, opulent corridor. Life-size portraits of the Argamanx royal family encased in gilded frames lined the walls. When they walked in front of Lord Droom's, she shuddered. She had sat for the artist weeks before her bonding ceremony, and now a matching portrait of hers as well was somewhere in this castle. She doubted Lord Droom had destroyed it.

When they finally reached the double doors that would lead to the castle's lifts, two Nox Elite soldiers blocked their escape route. Their closed-off expressions and hands over their electroshock rods didn't bode well.

"Good evening, soldiers," Lochiana said with a fake smile. "Would you mind stepping out of the way?"

"I'm sorry, my lady. We have express orders to not let anyone out of the castle."

"What is this nonsense now? Are we prisoners?" Samiah put her hands on her hips and glowered at the soldier.

"We are on level-5 lockdown. No one leaves the premises." The soldier stared hard in Samiah's direction and his hand curled tighter around the handle of his weapon.

Lochiana ground her teeth. *Has the stress fried Samiah's brain? Why is she acting so stupid?* She didn't have time to ponder that. She had to act fast if she wanted to avoid an idiotic confrontation between her friend and the soldiers. Lochiana scanned their black uniforms and spotted the higher-ranking soldier by the insignia on his chest. She stepped directly in front of him, surprising the man. His eyes widened, but before he could utilize his electroshock rod, Lochiana had already ensnared his gaze. She felt the power surge within her core as her irises began to swirl. The soldier's jaw

slackened right before his eyes lost the fire in them.

“You will let us pass.”

Lochiana didn't need to venture deep into the man's mind to know her compulsion had worked. She stepped back and waited. A second later, the soldier blinked and then said to his colleague, “Let them through, soldier.”

“But sir—” his companion started.

“I said let them through. That's an order!” Lochiana's victim barked. His companion had no choice but to obey.

They stepped into the night, and once the castle's double doors had closed behind their backs, they broke into a run. They arrived at a small construction similar in style to the castle in less than a minute. That's where the elevators down the tower were. Usually, the place had several royal guards on duty, but there was only one man there. Lochiana didn't pause to thank their good luck, heading straight for the kill. She stepped in front of the guard and repeated what she had done to the Nox Elite soldier.

Once inside the metal box, Lochiana leaned against the wall and let out a heavy sigh. She hadn't realized how smothered she had felt in that castle until she was out of it. She turned to Samiah when she felt the weight of her friend's stare.

“What?”

“You used your gift on those men without a thought.”

Lochiana didn't like the implication of Samiah's comment. She stared at the woman through slits. “So? What's your point? I got us out, didn't I?”

Samiah shook her head. “You misunderstand me. I'm not judging you. I had always felt strongly about the use of compulsion, even on other alien races. I always thought it was immoral in a sense. But now I'm *glad* you used it against those men.” Samiah watched Lochiana with bright eyes, and Lochiana could see the turmoil there. “I'm such a fucking hypocrite.” She lowered her gaze and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Lochiana's aura-reader powers came unbidden, but instead of seeing Samiah's aura, she saw the festering dark energy wrapped around the other woman's core. Guilt and lack of self-worth were smothering Samiah's bright gift.

She took a step closer and wrapped her arm around Samiah's shoulder, her irritation suddenly gone. “You're not a hypocrite. You are a survivor. This is war, Samiah. By the time this is all done, we will all have smears on our souls. There's no helping it, so don't let the guilt drag you down.”

Samiah wiped a lone tear that had escaped her eye. “You're right. I'm sorry about the moping fest. It won't happen again.”

The elevator lurched to a stop and the sliding doors opened. Lochiana prepared to use her gift again in case they were approached by another soldier, but the two royal guards didn't say a word when she and Samiah stepped out. As soon as they were out of sight, they broke into a run toward the

industrial district, for there was no time to procure a rover transport.

Lochiana followed Samiah because the few times she had visited she never went farther than the upscale neighborhoods in the capital. Lochiana saw the change immediately and knew they had arrived at the industrial district. The beautiful mansions that surrounded the palace disappeared, and in their place, large square buildings appeared. They all looked the same, though.

“How in the world are we going to find warehouse eighty-nine?” she asked as she slowed her pace. In their haste, they had forgotten to ask Durgin for clear directions.

The sound of a rover transport approaching drew their attention right before they saw the glow from its headlights. They jumped behind a dumpster and hid from view. It was an armor transport manned by heavily armed Nox Elite soldiers.

“Wanna bet they’re headed to Lord Droom’s secret lab?” Samiah said.

No, Lochiana didn’t want to bet on anything. But logic was telling her that Samiah was right. “Let’s follow them.”

Lochiana was glad the armored hover could not move very fast so they were able to keep pace. It stopped in front of one of the largest buildings in the district after they had been following it for a couple of minutes. Soldiers exited the vehicle and entered the building soon after.

“It’s warehouse eighty-nine,” Samiah said. “What do we do now? We can’t possibly go in there after them.”

Lochiana cursed because Samiah was right. But she was also too aware of the passage of time. They had already wasted too much of it. They needed a distraction. She looked around and noticed some of the buildings had cameras installed, which meant a security system. An idea formed in Lochiana’s mind.

“What happens if someone tries to break into one those buildings?” She pointed at the constructions next to their final destination.

“Probably a silent alarm is sent to law enforcement.”

“Shit. That won’t help. We need to create a big fuss.”

Samiah narrowed her gaze and focused on a particular building. It was smaller than the others with a bold red-lettered sign. “Would a fire do the trick?”

Lochiana lips unfurled into a grin. “Yes, absolutely.”



Breaking into the small fireworks factory had been almost too easy, and setting fire to its stock was child’s play. Lochiana and Samiah were now crouched behind a dumpster as they watched the flames consume the building. A high-pitched alarm echoed around them and within seconds, the Nox Elite soldiers stormed out of warehouse eighty-nine to investigate the cause.

Lochiana and Samiah left their hiding spot and dashed toward the lab while the soldiers were

distracted. They found the door to the compound wide open and entered the building, frantic lab workers scurrying in a frenzy all around them. They were rattled and probably planned to evacuate the premises. *Shit. They can't run away before we get what we came for.* Lochiana spotted an older woman who seemed to be in charge and strode in her direction.

“Who are you and what are you doing here? This is a restricted area.”

“I’m here under the orders of your sovereign, Lord Droom. I came to retrieve this.” Lochiana handed the fake letter to the woman, who grabbed the piece of paper with a jerky movement. Her shrew eyes quickly scanned the letter before she let out a curse.

“Of course. Today of all days he wants the H5s.” She turned around and issued a command. Two lab technicians stopped what they were doing and disappeared behind a large door at the end of the room.

“Have you two been briefed on how to operate them? she asked Lochiana and Samiah.

Lochiana traded a glance with Samiah before facing the woman. “No. There hasn’t been time.”

“For all the Sacred Powers.” She walked toward a nondescript wall and pressed her palm against it. As if by magic, a filing drawer slid forward. *Clever.* The lab technician pulled a stack of papers from it and lobbed them at Lochiana.

She looked down at the pages filled with handwritten notes. “What’s this?”

“The manuals on how to operate the H5s, of course.”

“But it’s handwritten,” Samiah added.

The lab technician stared at them as if they were paralyzed mummies. “Of course it’s handwritten. We can’t have any digital trace of what’s going on here, now can we?”

Lochiana and Samiah didn’t have time to offer a remark, for in that moment, the other technicians returned with the H5s. Lochiana took a step toward the animals, unable to believe her eyes. Now she understood what Durgin had meant—the H5s were supersized horses.

“Now, even though I’ve written a manual on how to operate the H5s, they are not that hard to handle. There’s a small control panel on their saddles. Since there are only two of you and you are taking seven of them, you can set the unmanned animals to follow you. Their systems are connected.”

“Wait, are you saying these animals are robots?” Samiah asked.

“No, I’m not saying that all. They are something else entirely. You’ll see.” The lab technician smiled enigmatically before she walked away.

Chapter 28

Malachiax felt the ground crunch beneath his feet as he walked deeper into the strange underground maze. Lord Droom had called it the Heliex. It was a secret place buried in the bowels of the Argamanx castle. They had used one of the many hidden passages in the castle to reach the private elevator that took them all the way down. By Malachiax's estimation, the Heliex must be submerged, buried deep in Serenity Lake.

Samiah and Lochiana had wanted to venture in with him, but Lord Droom forbade it. Only Malachiax could go. Neither woman was happy about it, but Malachiax was. He didn't want to risk either of them.

He glanced back, only to be greeted by a thick wall of shrubs. He had only taken a couple of steps, but the path he had come through was now blocked. Malachiax shuddered and faced forward again. This was a test, not a walk in the park, he reminded himself. He ignited the light orb in his hand—the only object Lord Droom had allowed him to bring—and continued.

The light cast everything it didn't touch in darker shadows, turning the maze more sinister than it probably was. Malachiax decided to put it away and waited until his eyes adjusted to the gloom. He resumed walking on high alert as he wondered what kind of spells protected the spheres. His uncle was only too eager to let him try to retrieve them, but the question was, if he succeeded, would Lord Droom let him take the prize with him?

The complete silence unnerved Malachiax, and the maze hedge walls were beginning to smother him. He had the strangest sensation at the nape of his neck, as if several eyes were on him, waiting. Malachiax noticed the path was getting narrower as the walls grew taller until he reached a dead end. Cursing, he spun around and retraced his steps until he heard a twig snap. He froze on the spot and strained his ear before looking over his shoulder. Nothing. There was another faint noise to his left. It sounded like leaves being shuffled.

“Hello?” he called out and waited for one, two heartbeats.

Despite the silence, he knew something was coming, his body as tense as a coiled spring. He took a step forward before a low growl reached his ears and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Swallowing hard, he slowly turned around and saw two orange orbs staring at him from inside the hedge wall to his right. Malachiax shuffled away, his heart slamming against his ribcage. A cold

sweat broke out on his forehead.

A low growl came from the shrubs right before a large cat jumped from it, not too far from where he stood. The animal was huge, bigger than any wild feline Malachiax had ever seen. It had white fur and canines longer than his forearm, bathed in the glow of its unnatural orange eyes. Sheer terror seized Malachiax's heart. The large cat crouched lower, its belly almost touching the ground, and Malachiax knew his time was up. He took off in a run, not looking back when the animal let out a roar and gave chase. He could hear its paws pounding hard on the ground.

Malachiax was a fast runner, but he couldn't outrun that beast. He came to a crossing and veered to the left right before the cat pounced, missing him by a hair's breadth. Malachiax's legs burned from the strain as he practically flew through the maze.

Suddenly, the ground disappeared from under Malachiax's feet and the loss of balance propelled him forward. He fell hard onto his belly, hitting his chin in the process and skidding across the rough surface. It took him a moment to recover—too long—but once Malachiax stood again and glanced over his shoulder, there was no wildcat hot on his heels, nor any indication of its existence. The maze was silent again. *Was it a hallucination, then?*

Malachiax shook his head and looked ahead of him, while his heart kept beating at a rapid pace. How was he going to find a way out of the maze? What if the real peril was to get lost forever? He let out a frustrated sigh and looked up. At first, only darkness stared back at him, but then a light blinked. Malachiax held his breath. *Is that another spell?* There was another twinkle, followed by another and another. It was some sort of blinking arrow, pointing in a particular direction, Malachiax realized. Would it lead to the spheres or to his doom?

He shook his head. It didn't matter. He followed the blinking lights with a new vigor to his step while his body was braced for whatever nasty surprise the maze decided to throw at him.

He walked for minutes, the long path ahead of him seeming endless. There were no more sharp corners and dead ends. *Maybe this is the way to the spheres.* He let hope fill his heart again.

A light breeze came through the tunnel and a weird smell reached his nose. Malachiax stopped in his tracks and took a deep breath. His heart kicked up a notch as euphoria took over his veins. The smell wasn't strange; in fact, it was delicious. He couldn't describe it. He let his nose lead him that time, ignoring the blinking lights and leaving the straight path. He soon couldn't see the lights anymore, but he didn't care; he had to find the source of that heady scent. His body had begun to tingle and happiness he never knew flowed into his heart.

The path opened to a square, and in the middle stood a water fountain illuminated from within with blue light. Malachiax walked toward it, his eyes glued to the statue of the half-naked woman, which was the construction's focal point. He was in a daze, like he was walking on clouds. Upon nearing it, he noticed the statue had been carved to resemble Samiah's likeness, and his breath caught. He sat on the shallow lip of the fountain and dove his hand into the crystalline water without taking his eyes off the statue. His fingers tingled as he made contact, and when he cupped a handful of it to

drink, it tasted better than the purest nectar. He cupped some more water and kept drinking it, for his throat was now parched and he had to satiate the sudden thirst. It wasn't enough, though, so he jumped into the fountain and went under, letting the water invade his body through his nose and mouth, becoming one with it.

When his vision began to fail him, Malachiax didn't care.

Chapter 29

Durgin cursed as he ran through the narrow secret passage that led to the heart of the Heliex. He'd thought he would have enough time to reach the Heliex and disable the worst of the traps, but he hadn't foreseen bumping into Commander Haarx on the way there. He had lost precious minutes answering the soldier's inane questions, and now Durgin feared he would be too late.

There were two entries to the Heliex, but his father only knew of one. Durgin entered the palace's kitchen, ignoring the curious glances the royal cooks aimed his way. No one dared speak to him. The last time he'd come this way he had barked at the head chef and scared the shit out of him. He had just lost Drex, and he was a mess. His rotten past behavior served him well, for now the staff left him alone.

He made a beeline to one of the largest freezers where they stored meat and entered the frosty chamber without a second thought. He looked over his shoulder just in case someone had decided to spy on him through the small window on the door. He couldn't let people find out about the secret passage.

Satisfied he had no spies, Durgin pressed his open palm against one specific tile on the wall, and a trapdoor opened on the floor in front of him. Without hesitation, Durgin took the steps down the gloomy tunnel, waiting until the trapdoor had shut above his head to bring out his light orb.

There were no security feeds here since his father didn't know about the tunnel Durgin had discovered when he was a lad in one of his many exploration trips through the castle. The air was stale and moldy, proof that no one had used it in a long time. He reached the end of the corridor and found the rusty metal door shut. He pressed his thumb against the electronic lock he'd installed and heard the faint click. Pushing the door forward, he came into the center of the maze where the final and fatal trap was located. He stared at the water fountain and saw the lines of power he placed there. Together, they formed an intricate design that would trigger a terrible compulsion from which there was no escape.

It was very quiet in the maze. Deadly. Durgin strained his senses, and then he saw the splash. *Fuck!* He was too late.

Fearing the worse, he ran toward the fountain and found Malachiax completely submerged under the clear water with eyes wide open. Bubbles were coming out of his mouth and nose, but there was

no struggle from his cousin.

Cursing under his breath, Durgin dropped his light orb and pulled Malachiax out. As expected, his cousin fought him, for he was compelled to return to his water tomb.

"No, let me go! I need to go back. I need the nectar." He thrashed against Durgin's hold.

Durgin didn't think twice before he punched Malachiax's jaw and dragged him out while he was still dazed from the blow. Durgin knew he only had a few seconds to connect to Malachiax's mind and break the compulsion. He grabbed Mal's face between his hands and forced him to stare into his eyes. He felt his power stir, and a couple of seconds later, Durgin was inside Malachiax's head.

Chaos. Absolute chaos.

Durgin could see clearly the threads of his trap mixed with Malachiax's neurons. They were woven so tight he had to be extremely careful to untangle all the knots without damaging Malachiax's brain cells. Sweat pooled on his forehead as he concentrated on the task. Every time he entered someone's mind that deep, he lost his sense of everything, including time. When the final knot snapped, Durgin fell onto the floor, drained. He rested his back against the fountain's edge and tried to control the erratic beating of his heart.

After a moment, Malachiax asked, "What happened? And why are you here?"

"I'm here because I didn't want your death on my conscience."

Malachiax rubbed his face before running a hand through his hair. "I don't understand."

"There's no time to explain." He stood up with difficulty, then offered his hand to his cousin.

"Let's collect the spheres and get out of here."

"Do you know where they are?"

"Yes." Durgin jumped into the shallow fountain pool and pushed a button located at the base of the statue. There was a low rumble before the stone parted in the middle, revealing a square metal box with symbols carved on it.

"That's it?"

"Yup. Now let's go before my father senses they're gone."

Chapter 30

Samiah paced back and forth in front of her companions, waiting impatiently for Durgin to return with Malachiax. She had already bitten her nails to the nub, a terrible habit she'd thought she had overcome but clearly had not. The lack of action was making her anxiety levels rise through the roof. The others were busy studying the manual the lab technician had given them, but Samiah couldn't concentrate on anything until Malachiax was safe and sound by her side.

Once in possession of the H5s, they had been able to reach Samiah and Malachiax's place without incident because Samiah took them through the outskirts of the city to avoid bumping into any patrols. Not taking the most direct path had cost them precious time. When they'd finally arrived in Samiah's apartment, Lochiana explained with only a few words what needed to be done. Femror still hadn't looked one hundred percent well, but at least he had been up and walking. Together they'd grabbed any supplies they would need for their trip back to Mora.

A noise out in the distance brought Samiah to the present. She squinted in its direction until she saw a dual-seat hover approach. Samiah could only see the glow from the ride's thrusters until the vehicle stopped a little ahead of the group, and she recognized Malachiax's wild curls.

She let out a choked cry and ran toward him. He jumped off the hover and met her halfway, catching her easily in his arms, burying his face in the crook of her neck as his entire frame shook. She noticed his clothes were wet, but she filed her questions for later. All that mattered was that he had come back to her in one piece.

"I thought I would never see you again," she said.

"Me too. But I'm here now. I promise we'll never get separated again." He cradled her face between his hands and kissed her hard, as if he wanted to make sure she was indeed there.

"Did you get the spheres?" Lochiana asked, and Malachiax broke the kiss to look in his cousin's direction.

"Yes." Durgin tapped the burlap sack hoisted over his shoulder.

A loud whoosh over their heads made them all look up. A shimmery veil was slowly unfurling in the sky, expanding toward the city's boundaries.

"Fuck! They've ignited the dome. We must hurry." Durgin made a beeline toward one of the H5s. He caught the long side-glance Gary gave the dual-seat hover and added, "We can't take the hover.

It's not powered by solar energy and will stop working as soon as we're out of Argamanx relays' reach."

Reluctantly, Samiah let go of Malachiax and climbed onto her mount. The H5 stood eerily still, not acting at all like a regular animal. The lab technician had said they weren't robots, but they sure acted like they were.

"We'll cut across the forest until we reach the city limit. It's not the quickest path, but it will be the only one not patrolled by my father's forces."

"How do you know that?" Femror asked, drawing attention to himself and his sister.

Durgin's eyes widened, and his jaw slacked open. Samiah, in her worry over Malachiax, had completely forgotten that most Arcadians didn't know about the Draki's existence. Durgin scanned the warrior before his gaze shifted to Chrysa. Samiah noticed his reaction to her, and if she had to guess by the sudden stiffness of Femror's back, so did he.

Mal's cousin smiled lazily, still staring at Chrysa, before he replied, "Because I compelled the soldiers responsible for this section to take a very long nap."

At least he didn't make the mistake of calling Femror and Chrysa lizard people.

Malachiax kicked his mount's hide, and when it didn't respond, he let out a frustrated sigh. "Come on, move."

"They don't respond to that," Samiah said, but before she could add to it, Durgin approached Mal and quickly explained the control panel.

They were off after that, following Durgin through the forest that hugged the Seven Sisters. If her calculations were correct, they should cross the city limits within ten minutes. Samiah glanced at the sky once more and saw that the dome's edge had already vanished from view, which meant it was getting closer to the ground. She had never seen it in use before, but she had read about it. Once the dome was shut, no one could come in or out of the city.

The path became steeper as they went up a hill. Samiah knew it be to be the final stretch. Unfortunately, the dome had already touched the ground in some parts, and like a curtain, it was closing in.

"Faster! Faster!" Durgin urged from the head of the line.

Samiah glanced down at her control panel and saw her H5 was already going at maximum speed. There was a red button near the speedometer, but she had no idea what it was for since she hadn't bothered reading the manual. Mal kept pace with her, but she then noticed Gary's mount decrease speed and fall behind.

"Gary!" she screamed.

"Something is wrong with my mount. I can't make it go faster."

Samiah locked gazes with Mal and immediately knew what he intended to do. "*No!*" she yelled through the bond. He shook his head before he turned around and went after Gary. She was furious at him, not for wanting to help their friend but for leaving her behind after he had just promised to never

be separated again. *Not this time, my love*, Samiah thought as she steered her mount to the right and back to where they'd come from.

Malachiax leveled her with a glare when he caught her approach, which she promptly ignored.

"How can I help?" she asked after she circled around and rode on the other side of Gary's H5.

"Loop your reins around Gary's. We're pulling him with us."

Samiah did as Mal instructed, and together they managed to help Gary's mount gain speed. They were still going slower than they should, though. She looked ahead and noticed the dome had almost closed; all that was left was a sliver that kept narrowing with every breath she took. *We aren't going to make it*, she thought in despair. There was barely any room left for two mounts to go through side by side, much less three.

As if he was reading her desperate thoughts, Mal yelled, "We can make it, come on."

"On the count of three, press the red button on your control panel!" Gary yelled.

"What? What does it do?" Samiah looked at her friend.

"Just trust me. One, two, three, go!"

Many things happened all at once. Samiah and Malachiax locked gazes right before they pushed the red button on their respective control panels. Their mounts lurched forward with a jerk and Samiah almost lost her balance in the process. There was a loud snap just before Gary's mount fell behind once more. He had untied himself. Samiah and Malachiax could do nothing because they were already at the dome. Malachiax brought his H5 flush against Samiah's, and together they needled through the opening.

Her pulse was pounding in her ears when Samiah looked over her shoulder. The opening had sealed shut. The dome was complete. She let out a choked sigh when she saw that Gary had made it as well.

"Shit. I honestly thought you weren't going to make it." Durgin brought his mount closer to Samiah and Mal.

"It was close," Mal replied, while Samiah narrowed her eyes in Gary's direction. Something wasn't right. He was curled over his H5 and holding one arm close to his chest.

"I think Gary is hurt." Samiah tried to steer her mount in her friend's direction but the H5 wouldn't move. "What's wrong with this thing?"

"Did you push the red button?" Durgin asked.

"Yes."

"That's why." He didn't elaborate before he took off in Gary's direction. Lochiana and the rest huddled around Samiah and Malachiax and waited.

"What happened to him?" Samiah asked to no one in particular.

"It's his hand. He lost his hand," Chrysa replied.

Chapter 31

Samiah watched as Chrysa bound Gary's wound with the expertise of a true healer. It had been a clean, precise laser cut and as it was, it had already partially cauterized. She thanked the Sacred Powers that they would not have to deal with blood loss on top of everything else. In regular circumstances, they could have tried to reattach the extremity, but unfortunately, his hand had fallen on the other side of the dome. Even if it hadn't, they didn't possess the necessary equipment to preserve it until they had access to a healer's facility.

Gary eyed the stump with a somber gaze, but other than that, Samiah couldn't read the Jackurian's expression. She considered for a split second, peering at his aura, but she decided to respect her friend's right to grieve without being spied on.

He refused to take any painkillers, for it would affect the Razor's Blood effect. Durgin had also offered to take away some of the pain using his gift, but Gary flat-out refused. It had been the angriest Samiah had seen her friend react.

While Chrysa finished patching Gary up, Durgin went to investigate what had happened to Gary's H5. In the end, it had only been a matter of a loose wire.

"What the fuck are these things, anyway?" Femror eyed his own mount with distrust. "I've never seen animals that could be controlled by technology."

"You wouldn't see them running out in the wild because they are one of a kind. My father's most prized possession. Well, I guess not anymore since we stole them from under his nose." Durgin smiled and glanced in Chrysa's direction. The young Draki didn't notice his stare.

"Will you quite ogling my sister? She's not a piece of meat."

Durgin whipped around in Femror's direction and frowned. "I'm not ogling anyone. I was checking on her progress with Gary's wound. We need to hit the road."

"I'm done," Chrysa announced.

"Gary, are you going to be okay to ride?" Malachiax tapped the man on his shoulder.

"Yes. I can hardly feel any pain anymore. Thank you, Chrysa."

The Draki princess smiled before she turned toward her mount. She touched the animal's nose and began to whisper soft words Samiah didn't understand.

"What is she doing?" Durgin continued to watch her.

“Something you Arcadians would never be able to comprehend.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Durgin glared at Femror.

“If I have to explain it, then you don’t deserve to know.” Femror jumped back onto his ride with tremendous grace. Samiah envied his agility.

Durgin opened his mouth to offer a retort, but Malachiax touched his shoulder and with a simple but stern glance told Durgin to can it.

They rode hard as they fled Argor, but Samiah’s heart wasn’t relieved that they had managed to escape—it was heavy. After a while, she looked over her shoulder and saw in the distance the shimmering dome that now surrounded Argamania. Her breath caught, and she slowed down until she completely stopped. Her eyes prickled, and she bit her lower lip to keep from crying. Malachiax stopped next to her and, without a word, threw his arm over her shoulders. She leaned on him and together they stared at the only home they had ever known. The life they knew was over. Even if they managed to close the portal, there was another threat to contend with, perhaps even greater than the Myserians.

Lord Droom.

“We’ll come back someday,” Malachiax said.

Samiah wanted to believe his words, but she found it impossible. She turned to him and smiled tightly. “I hope you’re right.”

They turned around and rejoined the others. They kept traveling through the Argamanx Forest as long as possible until the trees gave way to open fields. The first rays of sunlight broke on the horizon, the sun redder than orange, painting the sky a deep blood red. A fitting sight for that savage dawn. They avoided the small villages on the way, but even from the distance, they could see that those places had been abandoned in haste. Samiah hoped those Argorians had made it to the city.

They were going up a hill when Samiah first heard the thundering sound of thousands of feet stomping hard on the ground. A shiver of dread ran down her spine. She turned to Malachiax and saw the same apprehension in his gaze.

Once they reached the top, the vast land of Argor spread before their eyes. The vantage point gave an obstructed view of the mountains in the distance and of the army of people in the valley below. Samiah sucked in a breath as her stomach bottomed out.

"For all the Sacred Powers," Gary said.

"Fuck!" Durgin rubbed his face and held his reins tighter.

"What do we do now? The only way around that army is hiking up the mountains," Samiah said. She didn't need to add that such a move would be mean leaving their precious mounts behind.

"We must travel through the Valley of Bones," Chrysa said as she stared out at a shadowed portion of the land in the distance.

Samiah could hear a pin drop, for nobody said anything for several minutes. The Valley of Bones was a wasteland, deadly. Flash sandstorms were known to hit suddenly, offering anyone caught in the

middle zero chance of survival.

Durgin turned to Chrysa and asked, "What do you see, Princess?"

There was no mocking tone in his question, but still Femror growled at Durgin.

Chrysa closed her eyes and shuddered. "I cannot see anything. I've been denied the sight."

Durgin's jaw clenched as he stared once more in the direction of the Valley of Bones.

"I say we risk it. We don't have any other options. If we hide and wait until the army passes through, we might be too late to save Argor or the planet," Malachiax said.

"I agree," Femror replied.

When no else opposed, Malachiax said, "Let's do it."



With every hard gallop of her mount, the sound of the Myserians weakened until Samiah could no longer hear it. But putting distance between herself and that walking terror didn't ease the tight grip of fear around her heart. She had heard the stories of the Valley of Bones. The desert of yellow-colored sand occupied a grand part of the Argor territory. Trying to cross the wasteland out in the open was a foolish idea, for the temperatures were almost unbearable. But the desert had received its fame and name due to its unpredictable sandstorms.

Before the ground changed from dark soil to soft sand, Samiah had already begun to feel the shift in the atmosphere. The air had become dry and hot. The heat wasn't anything Samiah had ever experienced before; it was a smothering blanket that made it hard to draw air into her lungs. She also sensed the impact on her mount by the change in its breathing. It had become more labored, and without being prompted by Samiah, it began to slow on its own.

Samiah glanced at her companions and noticed the same phenomenon. She wished for a scarf or a piece of cloth to wrap around her head to prevent her from collapsing from a heat stroke. She could rip part of her top off, but that would leave her back partially exposed to the scorching sun. She was thankful that she had at least brought a pair of shades.

Malachiax rode next to her, his stoic expression revealing nothing but determination. She knew he must have already developed one of his excruciating headaches.

"Are you okay?" she asked telepathically. He turned his face and gave her a rueful smile. *No, he's not okay*, she thought.

"How much longer until we cross the desert?" Samiah asked anyone who could answer.

"I flew over it once. My guess is we're past the halfway mark," Gary replied.

Samiah was beginning to think the Sacred Powers would grant them this blessing and allow them to cross the valley without any issues. But that had been foolish thinking. When had things gone their way since they'd started the journey?

They heard the storm before it broke on the horizon, a dark cloud of sand bearing their way. The

wind changed, swirling Samiah's hair across her face.

"What do we do?" Gary asked.

"Gattica. We head to Gattica," Chrysa replied, as if they had any idea what she was talking about. She took off to the left, going up a sand dune without waiting for any of them.

"Fuck!" she heard Femror yell.

They followed Chrysa, for what other option did they have? So far, the Draki princess hadn't let them astray.

When they reached the top of the dune, there was nothing down below besides more sand. No shelter in sight. Behind them the sandstorm roared, getting closer. Chrysa didn't miss a beat and kept urging her mount to go who knew where. The wind was getting stronger now and gusts filled with sand hit Samiah's face. She dared to look over her shoulder and saw only swirling darkness fast approaching. The sandstorm would swallow them within a minute. Samiah faced ahead once more and could only make out flashes of the red attire the princess wore. Then suddenly she vanished.

Samiah would have cried out but the sandstorm finally caught up with her. She couldn't see anything, and her body felt like it had been pierced by a thousand needles. She closed her eyes and braced for the worst.

Chapter 32

The silence that followed the raging storm was deafening. Samiah opened her eyes and found herself inside a vast cave bigger than Central Gateway Station in Argamania. Stalactites of all sizes and shapes hung from the light gray rock ceiling and shimmered wherever the light touched them.

"Tandrum's wrath! Where the fuck are we?" Femror said as he appeared suddenly out of thin air, followed by Malachiax, Gary, and Durgin.

"I don't know," Samiah replied as she gazed in awe in every direction. "Where's Chrysa and Lochiana?"

"Down here. You have to come see this," Lochiana replied from somewhere below.

Samiah dismounted and walked to the edge of what looked like a cliff. It wasn't a far drop, and she could see the path Lochiana and Chrysa had probably used to get down. But what made Samiah's eyes widen and her jaw drop was the wreckage of a spacecraft bigger than anything she had ever seen, half-buried in the rocky ground below. Even if Samiah hadn't understood a thing about starships, she would have known the one she stared at wasn't Arcadian.

"The Sacred Powers have mercy on us," Gary said.

Samiah didn't need to glance at her companions to know they were as excited and astonished as she was. Malachiax wrapped an arm around her shoulder and together they stared at the remnants of the alien spacecraft.

They made the trek down the path and joined Lochiana and Chrysa, who was the only one in their group without an ounce of surprise on her face.

"How did you know about this place?" Samiah asked.

She cocked her head and shrugged. "I didn't."

"But you said—"

"Chrysa has the sight. Sometimes the messages or visions are not clear," Femror interrupted.

"I've never met an Oracle before." Durgin stared at Chrysa in awe. "How does it work?"

Femror cut a glare in Durgin's direction. "That's a bit intrusive, don't you think? How does it feel to have your gift, whatever that may be?"

Durgin narrowed his eyes at Femror, and Samiah saw their antagonizing auras. *Just fucking great.*

Another pair, she thought bitterly.

Malachiax placed himself between the duo.

"That's okay, Femror. I don't mind answering him." Chrysa looked into Durgin's eyes without fear. "It feels like a supercharged hunch or a compulsion, like today. I felt the pull and a single word popped into my head. *Gattica*. Unfortunately, I don't know what it means."

"Do you think this cave is called Gattica?" Samiah asked.

"Maybe."

"No, not the cave," Gary said from far ahead, very close to the wreckage already. "It's the name of the spacecraft."

They followed Gary, and when Samiah stood next to him, she was able to read the name *Gattica* painted in silver lettering on the side of the ship.

"How long do you think it has been here?" She stepped closer to it. Malachiax reached out and placed a hand on her forearm.

"Be careful. You don't know if it's stable."

She gave him a droll look. "It seems it hasn't moved in a hundred years."

Durgin kept staring at the spacecraft with a narrowed gaze, then turned to Chrysa. "Are you getting any new supercharged hunches about the ship?"

To Samiah's surprise, the young princess smirked at Durgin, much to Femror's displeasure, if Samiah were to guess by the deep frown on his forehead.

"I think we should investigate, see if there's a way in," Gary said.

"We should get moving," Lochiana replied, but the long glance the Morian gave the spacecraft told Samiah she was as curious about the alien intergalactic vessel as Gary was. Who was she kidding—she was dying to explore as well.

"The sandstorm still rages outside," Femror said.

"How do you know? Do you have the sight too?" Durgin asked, but the question felt more like a taunt than pure curiosity.

Femror rolled his eyes. "Arcadians, so out of touch with nature. I can feel it in my bones, in my blood."

Durgin merely harrumphed and broke eye contact first. "Let's find a way in."

They walked the perimeter of the massive ship, careful about where they stepped. The hull was a dull gray, with scars and scorch marks scattered along its massive body. The part that jutted out of the rock was as tall as the Argamanx castle, and Samiah could only guess how much of its body was buried in the ground. If she craned her neck, she could make out small windows in certain parts along the side. Samiah had a strong suspicion this gargantuan beast could have been perhaps a colonization starship. Her heartbeat accelerated at the idea.

"I believe I found it." Gary had stopped in front of a ramp leading to a wide-open entrance. Nothing could be seen within the darkness that devoured its interior, and yet the Jackurian didn't

hesitate as he went up.

Samiah searched inside her sack and found a couple of light orbs. She joined Gary and gave him one. "Here."

"Oh yes, thank you. I could use some light." He reached out with his right hand, having forgotten he no longer had it. He clenched his jaw before he picked up the light with his left hand. Samiah wanted to say something, but all words of encouragement she could think of felt hollow.

They should have not bothered with the light orbs, for the moment they crossed into the spacecraft, automatic overhead lights turned on with a crackling noise, scaring the shit out of Samiah.

"Interesting," Gary said.

"Yes, it's almost as if they are—"

"Fluorescent," Femror completed Samiah's sentence. He caught her stare and gave her a sheepish grin. "I have memories of this."

"How is that possible? Have you been here before?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Then how can you have memories of something you've never seen before?"

Femror shrugged. "I don't know."

"Why am I not surprised?" Durgin muttered to himself.

"You better watch your tongue, royal prick spawn."

"Or what?" Durgin took a step toward Femror with fists closed by his sides.

"Ugh! Enough with this back-and-forth bickering. We're trapped in a cave, not knowing if we will ever make it to the portal, and you two idiots are trying to win a 'who has the biggest dick' contest. Get some perspective." Lochiana stomped ahead and left Femror and Durgin staring at her back, both speechless.

Gary whistled. "That got intense quickly."

Malachiax chuckled, and just like that, the atmosphere became less tense.

The ramp ended on a grid pathway and underneath it, Samiah could see metal pipes running along its length. Sleek sliding doors were at the end, and when Lochiana stood in front of them, they parted automatically. Samiah wondered what was powering the spacecraft. She also noticed that, despite the film of dust that covered the spacecraft's hull, its interior was fairly clean.

The doors opened to another corridor, much darker and narrower than the first. The walls were covered with some type of silver metal. The illumination wasn't as bright, and it gave the narrow passage an eerie ambience. Samiah felt like anything could jump on them. At the end of the tunnel, they found a single door, but unlike the first, this one didn't open automatically. In fact, it looked Arcadian-made, and the metal didn't match the one from the walls. It had a crystal screen similar to the ones Samiah had seen in some high-level security buildings in Argamania. Gary touched the screen, and it lit up blue at first, then red with an "*Access Denied*" message flashing on it.

"Strange." Gary took a step back.

Durgin took Gary's spot and pressed his palm against it. The light turned green right before they heard a click.

"What in the world?" Gary said.

Durgin looked over his shoulder, and if it weren't for his astonished expression, Samiah would have believed he had been lying to all of them.

"I smell something foul," Femror said.

Okay, so not everyone believes Durgin's innocence.

He pushed the heavy door forward and entered the room. Lights again turned on automatically, and Samiah could guess from the peek she got from the door that it was some sort of lab. She followed Durgin and took notice of the workstations, the carbonox scanners, and digital microscopes—all Arcadian technology as far as she could tell. The room was bright and sterile, and there was a sharp smell in the air she couldn't place. Tall glass cylinders stood clustered on one side of the room filled almost to the top with milky water. Samiah thought she saw something move inside and got closer. When she stood near it, a blue light at the base of the cylinder switched on, revealing what was inside.

Samiah screamed.

Chapter 33

Durgin's mind was churning as he took stock of his father's top-secret project. He had been there before when he was an experiment himself, but the exact location had been scrubbed from his mind. No wonder the scan recognized his palm print; he had been allowed to explore the cave, for the scientists believed they had complete control over him. At some point, Durgin had believed the few memories he had of this place were nothing but a figment of his imagination, or worse, a result of his mutation. He couldn't believe they had stumbled upon it almost by accident. *No, not by accident*, Durgin thought as he turned to stare at the beautiful Draki female. *Chrysa led us here.*

Samiah stood in front of a tall glass cylinder, petrified after screaming at the top of her lungs. Durgin had no interest in investigating what had spooked his cousin's mate; he knew what kind of grotesque creatures he would find inside the cylinders.

The strong smell of formalin irritated Durgin's nose and brought memories to the surface he'd worked hard to bury. All his companions were interested in the glass cylinders now, but Durgin ignored them and went straight to the main crystal table.

He pressed his palm against the screen and the device turned to life with a series of low beeping sounds. The screen prompted Durgin to insert a password and he cursed under his breath. He hadn't the faintest idea what it could be. He wasn't foolish enough to believe his father had used his name or Drex's, so he typed Lochiana's name instead, but the crystal screen turned red. Then he typed his mother's name, Lini, thinking Lord Droom would be twisted enough to use the name of the woman he loathed. Still wrong. Durgin had one more attempt before the system shut down and an alert was sent to his father. As a matter of fact, he might have already known of their presence, which meant they couldn't linger.

"Try 'sharra matrix,' all lowercase," Chrysa said next to his ear, spooking Durgin. He hadn't even noticed her approach. Durgin spent a few seconds staring at her striking face, unable to tear his eyes away. She turned and their gazes collided. He had always thought he had an unusual eye color—deep purple, almost electric—but hers would win any contest. Her prism-colored eyes were brighter than normal; they almost glowed.

"I had another supercharged hunch." She grinned, mistaking his attention for a question.

He forced his gaze away and typed in the password Chrysa had provided. The crystal screen turned green and an array of icons with strange names and numbers appeared for them.

"I'm beginning to love your hunches," he said, almost to himself, but Chrysa heard him. She took a sharp intake of breath, and from the corner of his eye, Durgin caught her wringing her hands together. He cleared his throat and continued, "Any particular icon that catches your attention?"

She moved closer to the crystal screen, and consequently, closer to him. Durgin didn't move; he actually quite enjoyed the proximity. Chrysa squinted at the screen and let her delicate hand hover over it, not touching anything. Then she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Durgin watched, mesmerized, as her hand moved slowly over the screen before it dashed across in a swift movement and pressed on a small black dot in the bottom corner. Durgin hadn't even noticed it.

The image with the icons disappeared only to be replaced by a series of charts and data. They were scientific notes, Durgin realized. A surge of excitement went through him. He had no doubt that he must download the notes somehow. If only he had a com-slip with him.

"What's that?" Gary appeared on Durgin's other side.

"Clues to what my father is really up to and perhaps what he wants with the Spheres of Sharra. I need to find a way to download the data."

Gary pulled a strange apparatus from his sack and said, "Would images work?"

"What's that?" Durgin asked.

"A camera from before holograms and crystal tables existed."

"And does it still work?"

"It did before. I hope it didn't sustain water damage when we faced the Seven Sisters."

Durgin moved so Gary could have a better angle to register the images with his camera. He sure hoped Gary's peculiar gadget proved useful.

"What the fuck is this place?" Femror asked as he joined the group, and Durgin was suddenly irritated. The Draki warrior rubbed him the wrong way.

"A lab. Isn't it obvious?" Durgin replied.

Femror growled, and Durgin regarded him with an innocent look, but the twist of his lips revealed his true feelings.

"The starship is not of Arcadian make, but this lab is. I don't understand," Samiah said, breaking the tension.

"What I want to know is why the scanner recognized your print, Durgin." Lochiana crossed her arms in front of her chest and watched him through slits.

Durgin clenched his jaw and avoided the woman's scrutinizing gaze. He didn't wish to disclose the reasons why. He didn't want them to know he was just as freakish as those creatures inside the cylinders, even if he didn't look like a monster.

"Hello, everyone? You need to come look at this," Malachiax said from the other side of the room.

Durgin was glad for the interruption, and for that reason, he was the first to walk in his cousin's

direction. He stopped abruptly when he saw what Malachiax had discovered. He stood in front of the biggest cylinder of all, thrice the size of the others. The only problem was that the glass was shattered; whatever had been inside was gone.

"Anyone have any idea what broke free of that?" Femror asked.

"Whatever it was, we can't stay here to find out," Durgin said. No sooner had his voice echoed in the room than they heard a low skittering sound.

"What was that?"

Gary had crouched in front of the cylinder's base and read from the identification tag on it. "Specimen Kraken-3P."

"That doesn't sound good," Femror muttered just before the far wall in the back of the lab exploded in a shower of twisted metal and torn cables. In the middle of the debris stood a creature the size of a hover transport. Eight legs protruded from its shelled body; and where the face should be, a four-lip mouth opened like a carnivorous flower. Its eyes were inside. It was the most grotesque thing Durgin had ever seen.

"Everybody, run!" he commanded before his father's monster jumped.

The group broke apart when the monster landed in the middle where they had been. Durgin grabbed Chrysa's hand and dragged her with him out of the lab first.

"Head to the exit! We can't get trapped inside the ship," he screamed over his shoulder. He didn't dare slow down to see if the others had followed them.

There was a sound of metal being crushed right before an enraged roar.

"Femror!" Chrysa shouted and tried to pull away from Durgin.

"Keep going!" He dragged her along. He couldn't let that monster get near her, no matter the cost. They emerged outside and Durgin practically threw Chrysa over her mount. The H5s, despite all the manipulation done to their brains, were anxious and ready to bolt. A common animal would have done that already, but these creatures had been engineered to suppress their most basic instincts of survival.

Gary, Samiah, and Malachiax practically flew out of the ship, breathing hard and scared shitless.

"Where are the others?" Durgin asked.

"I don't know. They were right behind us." Samiah looked over her shoulder and paused.

Without warning, Chrysa took off, charging up the ramp and back into the spacecraft before Durgin could stop her.

He cursed, then turned to Malachiax. "Take the spheres and get to the portal. Don't come after us." His voice had a different timbre to it, and Durgin recognized he had used his gift by accident. He should take the order back, but he wasn't thinking straight. Without a glance back, he went after Chrysa.

Chapter 34

Femror watched Durgin drag his sister out of the lab, and for the first time since he'd met the Arcadian, he was thankful to him. One less person for Femror to worry about. The nightmarish creature roared as it snapped its gargantuan claws up in the air. He had no doubt they would crush his bones as if they were made of sand. Unluckily for him, the beast stood in his way to the exit.

He pulled the small dagger from his belt, wishing he hadn't lost his spear in the Seven Sisters. He felt quite ridiculous facing the monster with such a feeble weapon, but he would have to make do. From the corner of his eye, he caught Lochiana standing up from where she had fallen. *Damn it! What is she still doing here?* She glanced at the way out before she shifted her gaze in Femror's direction and hesitated.

"What are you waiting for? Go!" he shouted at her, which was a mistake on his part.

The giant critter switched its attention to her. Probably thinking she was easier and more appetizing prey, it dashed in her direction faster than Femror could blink, its eight legs moving so fast they became a blur. Lochiana jumped out of the way just in time, only to crash against a metal table and fall with a loud crack.

Femror didn't think twice before he went after the beast, jumping high enough to land on its shelled back. He jammed the dagger with all his might right in the middle of the beast's head, hoping it would be a killing blow. All he managed to do was enrage the monster more. Using the embedded dagger as leverage, Femror ducked when those monstrous claws attempted to cut him in half. The creature began to thrash violently until Femror lost his grip on the dagger and fell to the floor, rolling out of the way right before the monster could spear him to the ground. Its claw broke right through solid metal in the spot Femror had been. He got back up again, but he wasn't fast enough to avoid the clawed back-blow to his midsection. The impact sent him careening across the room where he hit a metal shelf, pain shooting up his back.

The monster came at him again, and Femror realized he was trapped. He jumped to his feet and assumed a defensive position. He was positively crazy to attempt hand-to-claw combat, but what other choice did he have? The beast opened its freakish mouth to reveal rows of sharp teeth. Femror clenched his jaw as his body tensed with coiled energy, ready to unleash.

That was until his sister came back into the room, mounted on her H5 like a true warrior princess, and shifted Femror's attention. Without fear, she charged against the beast and collided against its side. Her mount let out a loud shriek when the monster pierced its chest with its sharp claw. Chrysa had already jumped off, nimble as a catling, and out of the beast's reach. Pride filled Femror's chest. He had no idea she was that agile.

He cursed out loud when Durgin burst through the door a moment later. *What's with everyone acting like moronic hero-wannabes today?*

Lochiana reached his side, out of breath and with a manic expression in her eyes. It wasn't exactly panic, more like an urgency to get the fuck out of there. Her hand wrapped around his arm, and the touch sent rivulets of scorching heat through his body. He wanted to do many things to her, *with* her, but all of them would have to wait.

Chrysa ran into Durgin's arms, and together they circled the monster and reached Femror and Lochiana. The beast was blocking their way out, more pissed off than ever.

"We have to get out of here," Femror said.

"It's blocking the way," Lochiana replied.

"We'll go back to where it came from." Durgin eyed the big gaping hole on the other side of the room.

It was obvious they couldn't fight the monster. *If only I had my spear with me*, he thought bitterly.

They ran for the only way out left to them, plunging into the darkness without thought. Two steps in and Femror's feet met nothing. The ground had vanished, only cool air greeting them as they fell down to the unknown.

Chapter 35

Lochiana felt the rough, cold ground under her palms before anything else. Her pulse pounded in her ears at the same rapid pace her heart drummed inside her chest. She took deep breaths to try to calm down. Panicking wouldn't solve anything. *If I could stop falling down holes, it would be great*, she thought as her eyes adjusted to the gloom.

"Hello?" she called out, and it echoed all around her. She heard a grunt not too far from where she lay. "Who's there?"

"It's me, Femror," he replied right before his callused hands found her arm. "Are you in one piece?"

"I think so."

She began to slowly discern his silhouette in the darkness. He was very close, his warm breath fanning across her face. Her skin tingled where he touched her, and she was glad for the cover of shadows. She didn't want him to see her flushed cheeks. Lochiana felt a clench between her legs and she chastised herself for her wanton feelings when they were facing a life-or-death situation. They didn't even know what had befallen their companions.

"Are you able to stand?" His voice felt like a caress. He'd never addressed her with such tenderness before. What was going on? Had he hit his head?

They stood up together, and yet Femror seemed reluctant to let go of her arm. He called out his sister's name, and they heard nothing but the echo of his voice. Lochiana remembered she had stuffed a small light pen in the back pocket of her pants and pulled it out.

The faint glow gave her a vague idea of where they were, an underground chamber hidden underneath the mammoth spacecraft. *How in the world are we getting out of here?*

She pointed the light toward the ceiling and found a chute of sorts. That was where they had come from. She continued her exploration, keenly aware of Femror next to her. He had let go of her arm only to place his hand on her lower back protectively. She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat and tried her best to ignore the fluttering feeling in the pit of her stomach.

The light hit a wall and Lochiana caught a yellow shimmer from it. They moved closer and crouched together to have a better look at the strange porous substance that seemed to grow on the rocks.

"What do you think this is?" she asked.

"I don't know. Some type of fungus, perhaps." Femror swiped his fingers over it and brought the yellow smear to his nose. "Odorless."

Lochiana unfurled from her position and aimed the light around the cave, noticing more clusters of the same organism. They were everywhere, in a varying range of colors. Suddenly, her nose started to itch and she sneezed a couple of times. Femror had the same reaction.

He cursed out loud, making Lochiana laugh. She didn't know why she thought the situation was funny.

"Why are you angry?" she asked between giggles.

"I never, ever sneeze. Something is off here." He rubbed his nose, forgetting the fungus on the tip of his fingers, which resulted in painting his nose yellow.

Still laughing, Lochiana reached out to wipe the smear off. Her breath caught when Femror grabbed her wrist and stared at her with the same hunger she had witnessed from him before. No, not the same hunger—it was ten times more intense. It was overpowering, overwhelming, raw. She didn't shy away from it that time, though. Instead, she let the unrelenting need unfurl from the center of her core and spread throughout her body. She wanted him so much she couldn't think straight. Where was that unadulterated desire coming from? It was as if she could finally see clearly what had been in front of her all along.

Lochiana sucked in a breath when he caressed her wrist with his thumb. His eyes seemed to glow a fiery yellow in the darkness. She felt a tug toward the Draki warrior as if there were an invisible line linking her core to his.

Suddenly, he let go of her arm and took a step back. Lochiana felt cold immediately, missing his scorching touch. His breathing had become labored, and everything about his frame told her he was as tense as a coiled spring. The veins on his neck bulged as he clenched his jaw. He looked like a predator, but Lochiana wasn't afraid. She knew on a cellular level that Femror would never hurt her, though how she was so certain of that, she didn't know.

She took a step in his direction, not wanting to fight the compulsion that urged her to move nearer.

"Don't come any closer," he warned, but it sounded more like a pained groan.

"What's going on? Why do I feel..." Lochiana paused, not knowing how to describe the emotions swirling in her chest, or her body's reaction to him. "Why do I want you to touch me... everywhere?"

"Do you also feel the pull?" He took a step forward.

"Yes."

Femror's nostrils flared. "Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For this." He breached the gap between them, cradled her face between his hands, and crushed his lips against hers in such a savage manner that it left no room to doubt what was going to happen between them. The craziest thing of all was that Lochiana welcomed the assault with sweet abandon.

She opened up to him, to his invasion, matching the frenetic rhythm of his tongue beat for beat. She laced her fingers together behind his neck as she tried to meld herself to the warrior. Through the layers of her clothing, she could feel the double drums of Femror's heart, and wondered if that was the reason everything about him seemed to be twice as intense.

His hands trailed down her sides, and when his fingers brushed the underside of her breasts, Lochiana hissed and bit his lower lip. Femror groaned right before he cupped her ass and lifted her. She felt him walk until her back was pressed against the rough wall. He ground his pelvis against hers, showing Lochiana exactly what awaited her. His arousal's friction against her core made her light-headed and boneless. There were too many layers between them; she needed to connect to him skin to skin.

She trailed her fingers down his ripped torso until she found his length. Femror made an animalistic sound in the back of his throat and suddenly stopped moving. He pulled back and watched Lochiana's face.

"I've desired you since I first saw you, but are you sure this is what you want?"

Lochiana didn't understand where the question was coming from. Couldn't he see the burning need etched on her face?

"Yes." Her answer whooshed out her lips in a heated whisper. "I don't understand what's going on, but I have no wish to stop it. I want your mouth everywhere. I need you inside me just as I need air to breathe."

Femror took one, two deep breaths before his hands made quick work of the ties on her pants. He cupped her sex, inserting two fingers inside, and her eyes rolled back in their sockets.

"Yes," she whispered as her nails dug into his back.

He removed his fingers, and Lochiana opened her mouth to complain only be silenced by his tongue. He kissed her slower that time, almost reverently, before he leaned back.

"I'll try to be gentle, but I can't promise anything."

"I don't care about gentle. I want you to claim me."

Chapter 36

Samiah watched Durgin dash back inside the starship and was powerless to stop him. One thing was clear—they couldn't leave this place without them. She turned to Malachiax and was shocked to see he had turned his back on the ship and was preparing to mount his animal.

"Where are you going? We must go after them."

"No, you heard Durgin. We must get to the portal and find a way to shut it forever."

"You can't be serious." When he didn't answer her, she grabbed his arm and turned him around.

"Malachiax!"

Samiah didn't recognize the man she loved. The hard set of his jaw, the emotionless gaze showed her a different person. She ventured into his head and brushed his conscience with a featherlight touch. She felt a stir, right before she saw something that didn't belong to Malachiax's beautiful mind. An idea that wasn't his.

A loud roar followed by a thundering crash brought Samiah back to her own head.

"I'm sorry, Sami, but we need to go." Malachiax pulled his arm back from her hold and mounted his H5. He pressed the control panel and steered the ride up the path back to where they had come from, not looking back even once to make sure she was following him.

Samiah stared at her mate, frozen, without understanding what had just happened.

Gary touched her shoulder to get her attention.

"I believe he has been compelled."

She whipped around in the Jackurian's direction. "What?"

"When Durgin issued that command, I believe he used his gift."

"That's impossible. He wasn't even looking in Malachiax's direction."

Gary shook his head. "I'm afraid his powers are stronger than he realizes. I don't think he intended to compel Malachiax. We don't have a choice now. We must go after your mate."

As if Samiah was ever going to let him venture out in the open alone. She glanced one more time at the starship's wreckage and hoped her friends would find a way to get out of there alive.

She climbed back on her mount and took off after Malachiax. When she reached the plateau, he wasn't there. She yelled his name and received no reply. With a curse, she increased the speed of her ride, going in the direction she thought was the exit. As the solid rock wall drew nearer, Samiah

closed her eyes. If she had gone in the wrong direction, the impact was going to hurt like a mother. *Here goes nothing.* She felt a slight air resistance right before the scorching orange sun of the desert warmed her skin. The sandstorm had passed, thank all the Sacred Powers.

She spotted Malachiax galloping at full speed out in the distance, and she increased her mount's pace. Gary must have been right; Malachiax was acting like an obsessed person. She didn't know how he could possibly know which way to go.

She turned to Gary, "How does he know he's going in the right direction?"

"He must have put the coordinates into his H5's navigation system."

"What? We can do that?"

"Yes. Didn't you read the manual?"

Samiah grumbled and chose not to reply. What else could these superpowered animals do?

Samiah's hand hovered over the red button that would give her mount a speed boost but remembered it had rendered her ride useless for minutes afterward the last time she'd used it. She eventually caught up with Malachiax, and her heart felt better when he at least acknowledged her presence.

"I'm sorry. I can't help it," he said as if it cost him too much to utter those words.

"Durgin compelled you."

"I know. I'm going to kick his ass when I see him again."

"You can fight it, Mal. I know you can."

Malachiax stared straight ahead and grimaced. "Perhaps, but it's not worth the struggle. The portal must be sealed no matter what."

Yes, but at what cost?

Chapter 37

Durgin landed on something soft and cushy before he rolled onto the floor with a thud. He squinted at the glaring blue light that seemed to emanate from everywhere. Once his eyesight adjusted to the brightness, he noticed he was surrounded by several translucent oval-shaped pods. He touched the one nearest to him and his finger made a dent. The material was pliable.

Standing up, he scanned the room. He was still inside the ship, somewhere in a lower compartment filled with these soft, membranous pods. He took a step forward and his boot crushed something. Looking down, he saw the floor was littered with pieces of broken crystal that seemed to pulse with energy. He realized the light in the room was coming from them. He bent down and picked up one large piece. Indeed, there was trapped energy inside, pulsing as if the stone were alive. Uncurling from his crouched position, he pocketed the crystal to examine later.

Where were his companions? Where was Chrysa?

He heard a low whimper before he could call her name and made a beeline toward the sound. He found the Draki princess sitting on the ground, hugging her knees and swaying back and forth. He crouched next to her, not knowing if he should hug the female or do something else.

"Chrysa, what's the matter? Are you hurt?"

The Draki shook her head and continued to cry softly. Durgin followed her gaze and saw the shape of a person inside the pod. *More of my father's experiments.* Durgin grimaced as bile pooled in his mouth. He didn't wish to peer closely to see what kind of horrendous creature his father had designed.

He grabbed Chrysa's hands and pried them away from her knees. "Come on. We have to go."

She didn't offer resistance as he pulled her up, but before she let him drag her toward the edge of the room where he had seen something that looked like a door, she said, "All they ever wanted was a second chance."

Her comment made him pause, but one quick glance at her tear-streaked face and he decided to forgo asking any questions. He didn't want to upset Chrysa further. She was such a conundrum. One moment she could be a fierce warrior princess, and the next, she was as fragile as a flower.

The door at the end of the chamber slid open with a whooshing sound when they got near it. On the other side, they found a room in complete darkness. Durgin ventured in first, triggering the motion

sensors. The lights above flickered to life until the entire space was bathed again in that strange fluorescent glow. It only took Durgin a moment to guess what this place had been used for and his heart skipped a beat. There might be hope for them after all.

In the center of the room, a sleek connector stood on a small dais. Durgin's excitement was warranted, even if most of the relays in Arcadia were disabled. The connector in that room was the prototype his father had shown him a couple of months ago. It didn't rely on relays' energy to operate. Instead, small batteries composed mostly of krax stone powered the device. Durgin didn't know exactly how the technology worked, but in that moment, he didn't care. He bent next to the device, glad he'd had the chance to see it in operation before. A compartment on its side contained the operating control. It had been so well designed that no one could see the outline of the hidden slot. He pressed on it and the operating control slid out from its hiding spot.

"What's that?"

"A connector. We're getting out of here."

"What about Femror and Lochiana?"

Shit. Durgin had forgotten about them. In theory, these new connectors didn't need a matching set at the arrival's location; the connector wasn't fixed in one place but traveled with its users. Basically, they could be beamed anywhere they wanted, as long as they had the coordinates. He wasn't sure about the distance limitations, though. That gave him an idea.

"Are you able to see with your gift the exact location of your brother and Lochiana?"

"I've been trying to locate him this whole time."

"And?"

She shook her hand. "I'm getting nothing but utter silence."

Durgin stood up and touched her hand. "You must try again."

She frowned and glared at Durgin. "Don't you think I know that? It's this place. Something is dampening my reach."

"What if you had an amplifier?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if you used my energy to propel yours?"

"I've never heard of such a thing being done before. How would that even work?"

"Call it a hunch?" Durgin smiled at her sheepishly and her frown deepened. "I've done it before," he finally confessed, and the humor vanished from his expression. "I have the power to enter someone's mind. The core of your power resides in your psyche. I could maybe give you the boost you need."

"You want to enter my mind? Are you insane?"

"I won't read your thoughts or compel you. I swear." Durgin raised his hand.

Chrysa bit her lower lip and stared at the ground. Finally, after a loud exhale, she brought her gaze up again. "Okay, let's try this, but no shenanigans."

Durgin stepped into her personal space and she stiffened. "Relax. I'm not going to hurt you." He stared into her eyes and felt the surge of power ignite his core. He knew his deep purple irises would be swirling right now, and yet, Chrysa didn't look away.

He was prepared to battle his way in—most people had natural barriers around their minds—but Durgin entered Chrysa's mind with ease. It wasn't that she didn't possess barriers. In fact, he could see a wall of thorns and roses woven around her psyche, but she had created a gate for him and left it open.

He sucked in a breath as he was greeted by the most breathtaking and at the same time impossible world. He was on top of a mountain covered by a deep green carpet. Flowers that came up to his waist had faces and they sang a lullaby. Out in the distance, a castle made of water glimmered under the pink-colored sky. Durgin looked up and saw a school of winged fish making different patterns as they flew over his head.

A shape materialized ahead of him, hazy at first, until Chrysa appeared and stopped right in front of him. "What do we do now?"

"Now you try to find your brother again." He offered his hand to her and shuddered upon the contact when an electric charge traveled up his arm. Chrysa made a small sound in the back of her throat, and her eyes turned as round as saucers. She had felt it too.

That had never happened to Durgin before, but then he had never tried to connect with someone like her. The foreign energy still swirled around his core when he closed his eyes and became one with Chrysa, saw what she saw. It was as if their minds had merged.

They were back in the starship's gateway, but soon they took flight. As they soared over the hundreds of pods in the chamber next door, Durgin felt Chrysa's sadness, but the princess didn't look down. She went up the chute they had come from and would have missed the second one if Durgin hadn't tugged her toward it.

"I-I shouldn't go in there," she stammered.

"They must have gone down that way. We need to investigate."

Reluctantly, she heeded Durgin's words. That second chute led out of the starship and into a cave. Yellow fungi covered part of the walls and ceiling, shimmering against the only source of illumination in the room, a light pen. Next to it, two naked bodies were fused together.

With a resounding snap, Durgin was shoved back into his own head. Chrysa stared at him, out of breath and red-faced.

"Well, at least we know they're alive." Durgin smirked.

"I told you I shouldn't have gone there."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. It's not like you've never seen two people having sex before."

Chrysa crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Of course not. Voyeurism is not my thing."

Durgin raised his hands up as if he was backing down. "My apologies, I didn't mean to offend you." He stepped on the connector and offered his hand to her. "Come on. Let's get your brother."

Chrysa hesitated and Durgin let out an impatient sigh. "May I remind you that we have to stop an invasion?"

Grumbling, she joined Durgin on the connector, ignoring his hand. She glared at him instead. "What are you doing?"

"I'm typing in the coordinates to where they are. It's not going to be exact, but I hope it'll be close enough."

"You *hope*?"

"Yes." He peered at her through his eyelashes. "Not much different than me believing in one of your hunches, is it?"

She narrowed her eyes to slits. "I don't like you very much right now."

Durgin put a hand over his chest and faked a hurt expression. "Ouch. You wound me. Ready?"

"What's going to happen?"

Durgin didn't reply, just pressed a button on the control panel. The vibration under their feet began, and soon they were surrounded by a tight energy wall. When the vibration intensified, Chrysa took a step closer. She grabbed his arm as the light surrounding them turned brighter, almost blinding. The hum all around them was so loud Durgin had to shout over it. "Close your eyes."

Chrysa did as she was told, scrunching her face and biting her lower lip. Durgin kept his eyes open; he would have to endure a little discomfort to make sure the connector worked as it should. He felt his body become boneless, and on instinct, he pulled Chrysa into his arms. She didn't fight him, but she may have let out a scream when their bodies shot upwards into a tunnel of multicolored light. Durgin felt the pressure on his body as if every molecule was fighting to maintain its integrity.

The trip only lasted a few seconds before they landed on the ground with a jerk. Durgin's knees buckled and he had to work extra hard not to fall on his ass. Chrysa had buried her face against his chest, and his arms had wrapped around her smaller frame. He didn't even remember doing it. That gateway trip was the most intense he'd experienced in his life; his ears still rang from the pressure, and his eyes took a while to adjust to the sudden gloom.

It turned out he didn't need his sight to know they were in the right place.

"Tandrum's wrath!" Femror yelled from not too far away.

"Oh, hello. Did we arrive at a bad time?" Durgin replied with a smile in Femror's general direction, even if he couldn't see shit. He knew the gesture would piss the Draki warrior off, and that gave Durgin endless pleasure.

Chapter 38

They rode nonstop until they left the Valley of Bones behind and the ground changed from soft yellow sand to white, dried-out land. They had finally crossed Moran's border. Samiah wanted to stop because her back ached and her legs were as stiff as a board. Plus, she needed to relieve herself badly, but Malachiax wasn't stopping. He would ride until he fell off his mount and broke his neck. She couldn't imagine what the physical strain was doing to his body. If she ever saw Durgin again, she would punch him in the throat.

Samiah recognized the rock formation ahead and tears prickled her eyes. Or maybe it was just the sand. Nonetheless, she knew the portal lay just on the other side of those mountains. She had let herself hope they would be able to make it after all when her mount let out a shriek and his forelegs gave out. Samiah was thrown off her saddle, the momentum propelling her forward like a cannon ball. She brought her arms up right before she hit the coarse ground hard, rolling a few times before she came to a stop. A sharp pain shot up her arm causing Samiah to let out a hoarse scream. Panting, she tried to move, but the attempt only served to double the pain.

She heard the sound of hooves on the solid ground fast approaching until they stopped abruptly. An animal whined before a pair of worn leather boots came into her line of vision. Samiah didn't need to look up to know Gary stood next to her, not Malachiax.

He rolled her body over, eliciting another cry from her. Tears filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks in fat rivulets.

"I think your arm is broken," Gary said.

Breathing hard, Samiah replied through clenched teeth, "Just fucking great. What happened to my mount?"

Gary looked out in the distance. "It's dead."

"Dead? How can an H5 just die like that? I thought they were super-special animals." Samiah discovered that talking was keeping her distracted from the pain.

"Maybe that particular specimen couldn't handle the nonstop hard ride. Can you sit up?"

Samiah wanted to say no, but she couldn't just lie there and not move. "I-I think so. And Malachiax?"

The sound of another set of hooves approached. Samiah and Gary looked in that direction to see

Malachiax running back to them. She let out a shaky breath, but that one wasn't pain related. She was relieved. Malachiax had fought off the compulsion. He had come back for her.

He jumped off the horse before it had even stopped and made a dash in their direction.

"Sami. Are you okay?" He crouched by her side and touched her cheek, tenderness and worry etched on his face. The manic glint in his eyes was gone.

"My horse is dead, and I broke my arm. You got free from the compulsion. How?"

Malachiax nodded. "When I heard you scream and saw you on the ground, something snapped in my brain. My love for you won in the end. I'm so, so sorry I couldn't do it sooner. Will you ever forgive me?"

The swirling guilt in Malachiax's eyes made Samiah's heart shatter into tiny pieces. "There's nothing to forgive. It wasn't your fault."

"We need to bind your arm, but there's nothing we can do for the broken bone until we get to a healer's center," Gary interrupted them, holding a piece of cloth in his hand.

Right, we don't have time for sentimentalism.

Malachiax took the cloth from Gary and made quick work of her useless limb, looping it around her arm and tying it behind her neck, creating an improvised sling. When he offered pills for the pain, she refused. Mal gave her a look that said, "Now you know how I feel."

He helped get her onto his mount before he sat behind her. Samiah's gaze dropped to her arm, and then she glanced at Gary's stump. *What a sore bunch we are*, she thought with a grimace. *If we can finish our mission without anyone else losing or breaking any body parts, it will be great.*

To avoid losing another mount or *both* to exhaustion, they maintained a much slower pace. The sense of urgency still lingered over their heads, though, much sharper than before.

Mercifully, they reached their final destination without any more incidents. They stopped at the edge of the cliff and looked down at what was left of their camp. Charred ruins. Samiah's gut twisted painfully when she spotted the dark fissure on the ground, the chasm Malachiax had created when they were trying to escape. He stiffened behind her, and she suspected his gaze was also fixed on that spot. Using her good hand, she squeezed his and leaned against his solid chest. She could say nothing that would alleviate his guilt, though, and it broke her heart that she couldn't help her mate more.

Samiah let her gaze travel down the valley until it landed on the gaping hole on the side of the mountain. No one could tell at first glance that the cave was actually a portal to a hellish dimension. The valley was eerily quiet; no wraiths were lurking nearby. She didn't know if the Myserians that had made it through the portal were only the first wave or if they were too late. The three of them took another dose of Razor's Blood, which Samiah noticed didn't affect them as much as it had in the beginning. Maybe their bodies were getting used to it.

Malachiax veered his mount toward the downward path. Once they reached the valley below, they circled around the camp, as going through it wasn't an option, even if it was the most direct path. When they reached the entrance of the cave, Malachiax dismounted and helped Samiah do the same.

She bit her lower lip and tried to hide from Malachiax how much pain she was in. He didn't notice her grimace, for he had already turned to retrieve the box containing the Spheres of Sharra. He paused for a second and stared at the box in his hands, frozen.

"What is it, Mal?"

He looked up and shook his head. "Nothing."

Samiah narrowed her eyes at him. She knew her mate too well to read the lie in his gaze. He finally unlatched the box and a warm glow emanated from inside, illuminating his entire face. Samiah and Gary moved closer to have a better look at the objects of power Lord Droom had hoarded and was willing to kill his own kin to keep. The spheres, made out of clear glass, would fit in the palm of one's hands. Inside each one, some type of contained energy swirled and changed colors. Malachiax retrieved one and stared at it intently.

"I have no idea what we are supposed to do with them."

"The Draki king said they had to make a great sacrifice the last time they closed the portal," Samiah replied, also mesmerized by them. Her hand hovered over the globes, as if an invisible force pulled her toward them. She finally wrapped her fingers around one sphere and retrieved it from the box.

"Yes, but how do the Spheres of Sharra fit into this?" Malachiax asked.

"They don't."

They all turned to look at the newcomer, none other than the Draki king who was accompanied by at least fifty of his Draki warriors.

"What?" Samiah asked, then instinctively hid the sphere in her hand behind her back.

"Did you really think my son would disobey a direct order from me and risk his life to help a bunch of Arcadian troublemakers? I thought you were smarter than that." The king *tsked* and shook his head.

Samiah's head was spinning. She should have checked Femror's aura for any signs of duplicity. *Damn it!* She couldn't believe she had made that stupid mistake.

"Are you saying Femror was working for you the entire time?" Malachiax put his sphere back in the box and shut the lid.

"Naturally." The king grinned.

"What do you want with the spheres?" Malachiax stepped in front of Samiah and she realized he was stalling, buying them time. He wanted her and Gary to run, but run where?

Suddenly, the sphere in her hands began to warm. Samiah felt tendrils of energy sneak around her wrist as her arm became numb. *What is going on?* She swallowed hard and sent a warning to Malachiax. "*Something is happening to my sphere,*" she said through the bond.

Mal's shoulders became more tense, the only indication he had heard her message.

"I want back what was stolen from us many millennia ago," the king replied.

"Your sacrifice. What exactly did the planet take from you?" Samiah asked.

The king made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "That's none of your concern. Now hand over the spheres and no one gets hurt."

"No." Malachiax held the box tighter against his chest. "I'm not giving you anything. The Spheres of Sharra were separated for a reason. No one should have complete access to their powers."

"Do you even know what the spheres do, boy? What they are capable of?"

"People are willing to betray and kill for them. I think I get the gist."

"You realize you are surrounded and outnumbered. I really don't wish to spill your blood or your mate's, but I will if you resist."

As if on cue, the archers in the group pointed their arrows at them. Samiah's gift flared up and she saw that Malachiax was getting ready to unleash his powers on the Draki. But the flame in his core didn't shine as bright. The hard trip across the desert had taken a toll on him. She knew he wasn't strong enough to inflict any damage.

The archers' bowstrings drew tighter; any sudden movement on their part and the Draki would let those arrows loose.

A ripple went through the air between them and the warriors, diverting their attention. There was a bright flash before Lochiana, Femror, Durgin, and Chrysa appeared in front of them.

The sudden apparition spooked one of the Draki and he let his arrow loose. Samiah watched in terror as the sharp tip of the weapon cut through the air. She let out a scream and raised the sphere as raw power crackled through her limbs. Time seemed to halt, and Samiah was able to see everything happen in slow motion. The arrow was headed straight for Chrysa, and Samiah knew the tip would find its mark right in the middle of the princess's chest. Durgin flexed his legs and prepared to jump in front of her; he would take the hit and most likely perish. Samiah couldn't let that happen.

She didn't know what kind of power allowed her to move faster than the others, but she knew what she must do. She ran toward her friends and knocked the arrow off its course, the impact jarring her broken arm. The pain should have been unimaginable, but she felt nothing but a faint throb. With a loud whoosh, time returned to normal and Samiah discovered all eyes were on her.

Chapter 39

Lochiana's scream was still lodged in her throat when Samiah appeared out of nowhere and knocked the arrow aimed at Chrysa off its course. There was a moment of stunned silence before Lochiana asked, "For all the Sacred Powers, how did you move so fast?"

Her friend was still breathing hard and staring wide-eyed at the arrow that now lay on the dirt. Lochiana noticed Samiah had one sphere in her hand while her other arm hung from a sling. A band of energy seemed to have leaked out of the sphere and wrapped around her wrist.

"You can wield the Sacred Powers of Arcadia," the Draki king said in awe.

"What?" Samiah turned toward him.

"Legend says only the worthy are able to use the Spheres of Sharra," Femror replied.

Samiah narrowed her eyes in his direction, her face twisting in sudden anger. "You! You betrayed us!"

She took a menacing step toward Femror, and Lochiana thought she was going to unleash whatever power she had control of on the warrior. Lochiana felt a surge of protectiveness take over, despite the fact that she was still embarrassed by what had transpired in the cave between them. They hadn't had much time to talk about it before Durgin and Chrysa caught them butt naked. What stopped Lochiana in her tracks was the guilt-stricken expression on Femror's face as he glanced at the Draki king.

"What is she talking about?" She stared at the warrior.

"Femror was working for his father the entire time. The spheres have nothing to do with closing the portal," Samiah replied.

Lochiana's stomach bottomed out, and she felt a sharp pain in her chest, as if someone had twisted a sharp knife through her heart. "Is that true?" she whispered, almost begging him to deny it.

"Yes," he said through clenched teeth, avoiding her gaze.

"How could you?" She couldn't hide the hurt in her voice.

He turned to her then, his eyes flashing an emotion Lochiana couldn't understand. The pull she felt toward him was stronger than ever, but her mind rebelled against it. She could not have fallen for another duplicitous male.

"Because when it comes to absolute power, everything is fair game," a new voice boomed out in

the valley. They all looked up to find Lord Droom there with his army of Nox Elite soldiers.

Lochiana was robbed of air as her heart twisted sharply in her chest for other reasons than heartache. Fear was now controlling her emotions. She flared her nostrils while her hands balled into fists by her side. Femror moved and put himself in front of her as a shield. She snorted and glared at his back, but stood frozen to the spot.

“I’m a bit disappointed, Malachiax,” Lord Droom continued. “I’ve always thought you would be the one noble enough to wield the spheres for me. I never once considered that your low-born, forked-tongue mate would be the one with that kind of power.”

Samiah shifted back until she was side by side with her mate. The Draki warriors immediately turned their attention to the newest threat, their archers aiming their arrows in Lord Droom’s direction. He regarded them as if they were nothing more than pesky little bugs. He snapped his fingers and more black-clad soldiers stormed the valley, effectively surrounding them. They were outnumbered.

The Draki king wasn’t a fool, having noticed that too. Still, he squared his shoulders and raised his chin in defiance. “I will not let you take the Spheres of Sharra.”

“*Let me?*” Lord Droom threw his head back and laughed. “Do you think I’m afraid of a bunch of insignificant lizards?”

Lord Droom’s insult elicited hisses and growls from the Draki warriors. Lochiana noticed the tension in Femror’s shoulders and that his knees had bent slightly. He was prepared to engage. Lochiana wanted to stop him, which was a foolish notion. He was a warrior; that what he had been trained to do. Besides, he had betrayed her. Why did she care so much about him?

The Draki king peeled his lips back right before he let out a guttural roar. Mayhem issued as Draki arrows flew across the air while other warriors drew their swords. She expected Femror to join the fray, but he spun around and dragged her away.

“What are you doing? Let go of me.” Lochiana tried to break free from his hold.

“Stop fighting, woman. We must leave.”

“You aren’t going to fight? What kind of warrior are you?”

That made Femror stop, only to glare at her. “That’s not my fight any longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m no longer bound to the king. I’m bound to you.”

“What?”

A loud boom echoed around them and the ground shook, right before a huge fissure opened in front of them. Femror held Lochiana tight and jumped an impossible distance, clearing the gap. The impact of their landing jarred her bones, and Lochiana stumbled against his chest. She tried to step back, but he wouldn’t let her.

“You are my mate,” he said before he kissed her hard.

Lochiana didn’t have time to enjoy the kiss, for Femror ended it too quickly. Her mind was still

stuck on the word he had used. *Mate. How can that be possible?*

More explosions sounded in their vicinity. Lord Droom wasn't holding anything back. Lochiana didn't know if he was using his weapons arsenal or if he had elementals in his party. She was only sure of one thing—he wanted the spheres and intended to destroy them all to reach his goal. They ran as fast as they could as stones double her size whizzed too close to them. At least one telekinetic soldier was among them. They were in deep shit.

Femror and Lochiana reached the rest of their party, who huddled together behind a boulder.

“We need to get out of here,” Femror said.

“Tell us something we don't know,” Durgin grumbled. “Your warriors won't be able to hold my father off for much longer using their rudimentary weapons. He's brought elementals and the telekinetic, not counting our blasters.”

“Where are the spheres?” Lochiana cut in. She didn't need a list of how royally screwed they were. “We can't let Lord Droom get hold of them. Maybe we should split them up.”

“Good idea.” Malachiax opened the box once more and Lochiana felt an odd pull toward them. She almost succumbed to the urge when Samiah caught her attention.

“What about the portal?”

Lochiana threw a glance to the gaping hole not too far from them and cursed.

“I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about it, Sami,” Malachiax replied.

“That's not true. The portal can be closed.”

They all turned to look at Chrysa.

“Do you speak lies like your brother?” Samiah replied, not hiding the bite in her tone.

“No. The portal can be closed, but not on this side.”

“What do you mean?” Gary asked.

A loud boom sounded above them right before a shower of pebbles rained above their heads. Malachiax closed the box's lid once more.

“Are you saying we need to go through the portal?” Durgin asked.

“No. The portal's nature is twisted and unpredictable. We must reach the other side a different way. We must travel across the galaxy.”

Another explosion sounded too close to them, and they knew they couldn't linger much longer.

“If that's the only way, then we need to borrow a starship from the Offworld Exploration fleet. Before the portal opened, there was one ship being prepared for a voyage. There are only two problems, though. How do we get there, and who is going to pilot it?” Lochiana glanced at them all.

“I have the solution for both problems,” Durgin said.

She narrowed her eyes in his direction, but before she could say anything, she felt a sharp pain around her neck. The next thing she knew, she was being dragged across the rough ground. She heard Femror's yell, but she was too busy trying to break free from the cord around her neck to know what he'd said. She stopped moving only to be dragged to a kneeling position by her hair. Pain exploded on

her skull, and she could feel blood dripping down her forehead. Lord Droom glared down at her with malice and undiluted hate.

“You think you can trade me for that filthy beast? How dare you humiliate me like that, you fucking whore.”

“Let go of me, asshole.”

“I’ll teach you to respect me.” Lord Droom raised his hand and slapped her hard across the face. The blow took the breath out of her and Lochiana couldn’t see straight. She heard an enraged roar before she was knocked down to the side. Leaning on her forearm, she raised her head in time to see Femror storm Lord Droom and deliver several blows to his face in rapid succession. Lochiana opened her mouth to warn Femror, but she was too late. Lord Droom used his gift and unleashed a high-voltage charge straight into the warrior’s chest. Femror’s entire frame shook before his body fell to the side, motionless.

“No!” Lochiana screamed through tears, pushing herself to a standing position.

Lord Doom stood as well and wiped the blood from his lips. He glanced at Femror’s sprawling form and spit on him before walking toward Lochiana.

“He’s not dead.” The thought came to Lochiana’s head, but it wasn’t hers. It sounded like Chrysa.

“Turn around,” the voice commanded. Lochiana did so only to be hit in the chest by two small globes. They shattered in front of her and swirling blue and red smoke escaped the broken vessels. *For all the Sacred Powers. Are they Spheres of Sharra?* The dual-colored smoke twisted together before it zapped into Lochiana. She fell forward and clutched her lower belly, for that was where she felt the power concentrate, in her womb. *Fuck me. I’m pregnant,* she thought as realization hit her.

There was no time to think about the implications, for she could feel Lord Droom’s presence looming behind her. She spun around before he could grab her, and a blast of fire shot out from her hands. He dodged out of the way, but he wasn’t fast enough to avoid the fiery jet completely. With a roar, he threw himself to the ground and rolled around, trying to extinguish the flames that had ignited his sleeve. Lochiana stared at her hands in shock. Where had the power come from?

A low growl snapped her to attention, and she ran to its source. Femror. She kneeled next to him and touched his face. “Femror, talk to me.”

He blinked his eyes open, then smiled at her. “I’m afraid this is turning into our ritual.”

“Shut up. I thought you were dead. How could you survive that powerful electrical current running through your body?”

“I’ve got two hearts, remember? In fact, I think one stopped beating for a minute or two.”

Despite the battle that still raged around them, Lochiana found herself smiling at his stupid joke. “I’m glad. I’m so not ready to raise your spawn alone.”

Femror’s eyebrows furrowed together. “What?”

“No time to explain. Come on. Let’s go.”

She helped him up. When Lochiana turned to the spot she had last seen Lord Droom, he was gone.

But the battle still raged between the Nox Elite and the Draki, despite the clear disadvantage the Draki possessed in terms of weaponry. Lochiana and Femror rejoined their friends and found Malachiax and Samiah staring daggers in Chrysa's direction.

"What happened?" Lochiana asked.

"Chrysa threw two of the spheres at Samiah, breaking them. Now their power is inside her."

Lochiana glanced at Femror's sister with a question in her gaze. She had done the same thing to her. "Why?"

"It had to be done," she said without an ounce of regret.

"Focus, people. We still have three intact spheres left and a portal to close. We need to get to that starship," Durgin urged.

"How do you propose we do that? We're surrounded, in case you haven't noticed." Samiah glared at him.

"The same way we got here."

Durgin threw the connector in his hand to the ground. After he pressed a few buttons on the control panel attached to his wrist, the circle expanded, doubling in size.

"What the—" Malachiax started.

"It's a new connector. A prototype, actually. It doesn't require a receiving twin at the destination. Now everyone hop on. We don't have much time."

Without complaint, they all followed Durgin's command. Lochiana already knew what to expect and held on to Femror without shame.

Before the vibration from the connector reached its apex, Femror glanced in his father's direction and Lochiana followed his gaze. The king was holding the frontlines with all his might, taking on several Nox Elite soldiers at the same time without fear or sign of weakness. Lochiana laced her hands with the warrior, her mate, and squeezed tight, right before the pressure built up and they vanished.

Chapter 40

They landed right in the middle of Morang's Cosmodrome, Mora's spaceport. Though landed wasn't exactly the right word to describe it—more like slammed into the ground. Samiah's ankles screamed, and her broken arm felt like it was in flames. If it weren't for Malachiax holding her, she would have propelled forward. She leveled Durgin with a glare.

"What the fuck was that?"

He raised his hands. "Hey, don't blame me. This is a prototype, and it obviously still needs a few tweaks. It brought us here, didn't it?"

"Yes, but at what cost," she admonished through her excruciating pain.

"You should have taken the pain meds, Sami."

"I don't want any fucking pain meds!" she barked, and Malachiax recoiled.

She didn't know why she was acting like such a bitch. It wasn't because of the pain.

"I'm sorry."

Malachiax pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "It's okay, Sami."

No, it wasn't okay. She felt raw and on edge. She couldn't shake the feeling that her irritable behavior had everything to do with the power of the spheres that now resided inside of her thanks to the crazy Draki princess. *What was she thinking? Why would Chrysa break the fucking Spheres of Sharra?* Those thoughts kept bouncing in Samiah's head, and it was an effort to shut them off. She focused on her surroundings instead.

Mora's spaceport wasn't the largest operational space launch facility in Arcadia, but it was the busiest since the Offworld Exploration Program was based there. The place was deserted and mercifully untouched by the Myserians. Several spaceships were docked there, but only one already engaged for departure.

"Is that the one?" Durgin pointed at the sleek spacecraft surrounded by four metal towers with scaffolding webbed around each one. Samiah had never seen such a model before. It was more compact than the ships she was used to, but it had bigger boosters that jutted out from its tail.

"Yes. It's called *Et Beatus* and is scheduled for its maiden voyage in just a few days." Lochiana glanced at Femror, who was looking at the spacecraft with his mouth open. "I take it you've never seen one of these from up close, huh?"

“Nope.”

“*Et Beatus?* What does it mean?” Gary asked.

“The Blessed,” Femror replied, still staring in awe at the starship. Lochiana raised an eyebrow and the warrior shrugged. “The Draki know many languages.”

“Well, how fitting,” Durgin murmured and started walking in its direction. “Come on, let’s go.”

A surge of excitement and apprehension filled Samiah’s heart as they took the elevator up to the platform. Durgin stopped in front of the ship’s main hatch and cursed when he couldn’t access the control panel.

“Uh, does anyone have the password to this?”

“Shit. No. I didn’t even think about that.” Lochiana put her hands on her hips and glared at the crystal panel as if it had done her great injury.

Chrysa, who had been quiet until that point, said, “Let Samiah try.”

“What? Why me?”

“You have the power in you.”

“The spheres,” Malachiax said, and the girl nodded.

Samiah inhaled loudly and took Durgin’s spot.

“Here goes nothing,” she said as she pressed her palm against the screen.

A string of information flashed on the panel, disappearing faster than Samiah could read it, and a few seconds later, the light turned green and the ship’s main hatch opened. She looked over her shoulder and caught everyone staring at her with different levels of curiosity. Only Chrysa remained neutral.

Durgin was the first to enter, and the rest followed. Samiah’s pulse pounded in her ears as they made their way to the starship’s cockpit. Suddenly, a sharp twist in her chest made Samiah’s steps falter. This wasn’t a regular exploration trip. Those had risks, but there was always the certainty that they would return home. Not this time. They were leaving Arcadia for good.

Durgin took the captain’s seat and slid into the role as if he had been born to do it. He pressed several buttons and the control panels came to life. He glanced at Chrysa.

“Where to, Princess?”

“The answer is right in front of you.”

Durgin frowned and stared at his controls. A hologram shot out in front of him, and they could all see the charted map of a galaxy unfamiliar to Samiah.

“These are the coordinates that had already been programmed. This ship was bound for a solar system on the outskirts of the Via Láctea Galaxy,” Durgin said.

Lochiana approached the hologram and squinted at the image before turning to the group. “This ship was bound for Planet X-57. We’re going to Earth.”



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Michelle Hercules always knew creative arts were her calling but not in a million years did she think she would become an author. With a background in fashion design she thought she would follow that path. But one day, out of the blue, she had an idea for a book. One page turned into ten pages, ten pages turned into a hundred, and before she knew, her first novel, *The Prophecy of Arcadia*, was born.

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