

VANESSA NELSON



FORGED

THE GREY GATES - BOOK 4

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Vanessa Nelson

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With grateful thanks to my fabulous beta reader, Maia,
whose insights have improved all of my books – thank you
for your patience and unfailing good humour.

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Chapter One

A BITTER WIND CUT through Max's sweatshirt and loose-fitting, lightweight trousers, reminding her that winter was on the way. She should have put an outdoor coat on, but it hadn't seemed worth the effort of struggling to get a narrow sleeve over the finger-to-elbow cast that held her dominant hand and wrist immobile. She hadn't intended to be out in the garden for this long, and hadn't even bothered with socks, shoving her feet into unlaced, calf-length boots.

The small altar in her garden now gleamed, thanks to her little bit of outdoor work. The leaves that had covered the shallow metal dish had been removed and the old, clouded water replaced so that the beaten surface of the vessel shone in the morning light.

Even though she was cold from her uncovered head to her toes, it still felt good to be outdoors, with fresh air against her face. She paused for a moment, staring down at the altar and feeling some calm seep into her. The altar was simple. Nothing more than the metal dish sitting on top of an old wooden stool.

The local birds liked to use it as a bath from time to time. Max was reasonably certain that the Lady wouldn't mind. The Lady was supposed to love all creatures, no matter how small or humble. Max had never been quite sure about the extent of the Lady's affection, but she could use some of Her peace just now.

She turned back to the house, boot laces flapping as she walked.

A pair of giant dogs ran past her as she headed for the kitchen door, caught up in some game that only they knew the rules to. Max smiled, watching her shadow-hounds play. Cas and Pol were in their everyday forms, short coats gleaming in the weak sunlight. They seemed to be taking it in turns to chase each other, making a full circuit around the house before Max had reached the door.

As she pushed the door open, the dogs barked. She stopped at once, turning to look for them. The barks had been sharp, calling for her attention. Something had interrupted their play. They were all business as they ran back around the corner of the house, attention going along the drive, past her battered pick-up and to the road.

It didn't take long to spot what had alerted her dogs. A small convoy of vehicles pulled to a stop outside her gates. Three cars, sleek and dark and bristling with magic.

She stayed where she was, dismay turning her stomach. She recognised that magic, and its presence here was not a good thing.

A twinge of pain in her arm reminded her that the bones were still healing. It had only been two days since she'd woken up in hospital, still healing from a hard fight with a demon and a descendant of the dark lord who had been intent on performing some kind of dark magic ritual. She'd managed to stop them - with help - but had needed not only conventional medical treatment but a healing magician.

One of the first things she'd seen on waking up in the hospital bed had been a flower arrangement and a card sent by the High Priestess, letting Max know that the Order was expecting her back. Max had ignored the command. The High Priestess might be in charge of the Lady's temples and all Her workers across the city, but she wasn't in charge of Max. Not anymore. And the Order of the Lady of the Light had no claim on her, either. Eight years before, Max had closed the Grey Gates, sealing the dark lord into His realm. Her reward for her efforts had been for the head of the Order to dismiss her, call her a liar, and send her out into the world with nothing.

So Max had not followed the High Priestess' command. She'd left the hospital and come back to her own home. She still needed time to heal, for her broken bones to finish knitting back together. Then she could get back to work. The work she had determined for herself. There was plenty to be done, including tracking down a demon on the loose in the city, but none of the tasks she'd set for herself involved meekly going back to the Order.

And yet, the three vehicles pulling up outside her gate all bore the familiar trace of Order magic.

For a moment, Max was tempted to turn around and go back inside the house. Pretend that she wasn't home. But her pick-up was in front of the house, and anyone in the vehicles would have already seen her and her hounds. She did take a moment to grab a blanket from a hook on the back of the kitchen door, draping it around her shoulders, gathering it to her as she headed along the driveway towards the gates. It wasn't elegant, but she didn't care, and she tried not to care that she was still in yesterday's clothes. The Order might be here to see her, but she didn't need to invite them onto her property or look pretty for them. They could talk to her at the gates, and she needed the extra layer for warmth.

The doors of all three vehicles began to open, and Max halted in surprise. It wasn't the Order that had come to visit her. Not precisely. Although pairs of Order warriors got out of each of the vehicles, the other occupants were priests and priestesses, including one very familiar figure. A tall woman with long dark hair held back from her face in a simple clasp and a stern expression got out of the middle vehicle, the ornate stitching on her grey robes reflecting the daylight. The High Priestess herself. There was nothing mundane like a winter coat or heavier boots for the Lady's servants. Instead, Max was almost certain that the priesthood wove magic into their robes to keep them comfortable no matter what the temperature was. It allowed them to wear the simple robes year-round.

Max was again tempted to turn around and go back into the house. The High Priestess was near the top of the list of people

that Max did not want to deal with right now. She held her ground. After Max had disobeyed the High Priestess, ignoring her command to return to the Order, Emmeline had chosen to come here rather than try to summon Max to one of the city temples or, worse, send her underlings to gather Max up like troublesome baggage. There had to be a reason for the personal visit, rather than another summons.

The High Priestess paused after she got out of the car, her eyes going past the line of vehicles. Max's house was outside the city, far beyond where most people wanted to live. Barely half a mile away from the border to the Wild, the border clearly visible in the line of giant trees and tangled plant life, and anyone with magic sensitivity would be able to feel the heady magic of the Wild.

With the Wild so close to her home, Max had almost grown used to it. Like a giant, sleepy predator just outside her gates. She never forgot it was there, but she had learned to live with it. With a start, she realised that this might be the closest the High Priestess had ever been to the Wild. Emmeline had spent her entire life in the city, one way or the other. She would know about the Wild. Everyone did. But, like most city residents, she might never have seen it up close. Inside the city, particularly in its heart with its wide streets and beautifully crafted buildings, it was possible to pretend that the Wild didn't exist, or it was just some far-distant thing that didn't matter day-to-day. Out here, outside the edges of the networks of buildings and roads, it was impossible to ignore.

“How do you live with it so close to you?” the High Priestess asked. She had wrapped her arms around her middle, the first sign of vulnerability that Max could ever recall seeing from her. It made her seem almost human, almost ordinary. Just another city dweller awed by their first real sight of the Wild. And yet, Max knew that hint of vulnerability was not a sign of weakness, studying Emmeline while the High Priestess’s attention was elsewhere. She had skin as pale as Max’s own, untouched by sun, no grey showing in her dark hair. The High Priestess could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty, the fine lines around her eyes and mouth suggesting a higher age, but it was impossible to tell.

“You get used to it,” Max answered. She hesitated, then opened one of the gates, letting it swing wide, and took a step outside the fence. Her property was bounded by magical wards, but they were designed to deter supernatural predators, not people. The shadow-hounds that had come with her were far more effective against any people who might venture this far out of the city.

“Aren’t you worried about what happens when the Wild expands again?” Emmeline asked, turning to face Max.

Since it seemed a genuine question, Max took a moment to consider. “Yes and no. I don’t want to lose my house, but there’s nothing I can do about the Wild. If it expands, it expands.”

“We can’t afford to lose more ground,” the other woman said, her eyes back on the Wild. Her tone was soft, reflective,

and Max stayed quiet. She'd heard that view expressed by a lot of different people over the years, particularly those who had been displaced or chosen to move following the last expansion of the Wild about ten years before. The great, sprawling city with its many districts and farms and green spaces covered almost all the land that its residents had left to work with, trapped between the coastline with the ever-present fog and the Wild. Even with the limited area, there was still a broad swathe of land between the city and the Wild that was almost uninhabited. A very few people - like Max - were prepared to make their homes there. Max couldn't speak for the other outliers, but she valued the quiet and solitude far more than the press of people in the city. The constant reminder of the Wild was a small price to pay.

Max shifted her feet. She wasn't as concerned about the expansion of the Wild's effect on her house as she was about the effect on the city's food production. The land set aside for farming was already working at full capacity. Losing any of that area would mean having to look for alternative places to grow food, or alternative means of production. The city had more than enough to feed its population just now, but if anything happened to the existing farms and greenhouses, there was a real risk that people would starve. Barely two weeks before, the city had been close to running out of fuel, the council forced to issue rationing orders. The protests had been widespread and ugly. Max didn't want to find out what would happen if the food supply was interrupted.

“You look tired,” Emmeline said, catching Max’s attention. The woman seemed to have put aside her sadness and was frowning at Max.

“I’m still healing,” Max said, biting back a spike of irritation at the woman’s words. On the surface, there was nothing wrong with what the High Priestess had said. From some people, it would have been an expression of concern. But Max’s history with Emmeline was full of the older woman’s bitter disappointment and criticism. So she did not believe for one moment that Emmeline was expressing concern. Max knew she looked tired. She’d seen it for herself in the mirror that morning. The fine trace of scars across her skin had been more visible than usual, the planes and angles of her face looking more pronounced surrounded by the tangle of her reddish-brown hair. There had also been heavy purple shadows underneath her eyes. It was true that she was still healing, but she hadn’t slept well in the hospital. Too many machines beeping, too many people around, and too many memories threatening to surge into her mind if she let her attention drift for a moment.

“Walk with me. We need to talk,” the High Priestess said. She waved a hand, ordering her retinue to stay where they were, and moved forward, away from the vehicles and further towards the Wild. There wasn’t much more road to explore before the dark grey surface gave way to long grass and ground-hugging shrubs that gradually grew taller and denser towards the Wild.

Surprised both at the direction Emmeline had chosen, and the wish to talk, Max followed. Cas and Pol moved with her, heading out to either side, watchful as ever. There were magical barriers in place all along the frontier of the Wild, but they were not perfect, and the occasional supernatural creature slipped through. Max trusted her hounds to spot any danger long before she did.

The High Priestess walked in silence for long minutes, putting distance between them and the warriors, priests and priestesses gathered around the vehicles. Long enough for Max to regret not putting socks on with her boots earlier, or stopping to see if she could, in fact, fit her heavy coat over the cast on her arm. The cold seemed to grow as they moved away from the vehicles. They were almost at the end of the road when the High Priestess stopped, turning to face Max. She had folded her hands together in the sleeves of her robes, a favourite pose of many of the Lady's priesthood, and was watching Max with an expression that she couldn't read. Max gathered her blanket around her more closely, seeking a little bit of warmth.

"You haven't gone to the Order," Emmeline said. Rather than the sharp tone Max was used to, and had been bracing for, she sounded almost regretful.

"I told you. I did what was asked of me. And I was dismissed," Max said, pushing down another wave of irritation. "The Order has no further claim on me."

"We do have need of you, though."

“That cannot possibly be true,” Max said, a disbelieving laugh escaping her. “The Order has plenty of far more powerful and capable magicians.”

“But none of them are you,” Emmeline said simply.

“There is nothing remarkable or special about me,” Max said. The words were out before she had time to think and she clamped her mouth shut before she could say anything else. She’d always believed that to be true. At least until recently. Even now, she knew that she was an unqualified magician by the standards of magic the Order used. She had never been able to master the complicated formulas and calculations that underpinned their spells. And yet, in the last few weeks she had managed to call powerful magic - light magic - more than once using her own anger and instincts. She’d been introduced to the idea that there were other ways of using magic, and come to the realisation that she might not be incompetent after all. There had been no time to practice it since her release from hospital. She had been thinking about it all the same, wondering what else she might be able to do if she didn’t have to perform complex calculations to use magic.

“You were graced by our Lady Herself,” Emmeline said, a frown gathered between her brows. “And She does not grant Her favour lightly.”

“I don’t believe you,” Max said, more bluntly than she had intended.

“You think I am lying to you?” the High Priestess seemed astonished by the idea, her voice higher than it had been.

“You may believe it,” Max conceded. “But I don’t.”

“Your very life is a gift from Her,” Emmeline said. Her face was in a tight expression that was familiar to Max. The High Priestess was both disappointed and angry.

“According to the temple’s teachings, all life is a gift from Her,” Max countered, her ears echoing with familiar refrains from her childhood in the orphanage. All the orphans had been cared for in that their basic needs for clothing, food and shelter had been met. If anyone had complained about the plainness of their clothing, or the lack of more than basic comfort, and some had from time to time, they were told in no uncertain terms that everything they had was a gift from the Lady Herself, and they should not complain about their good fortune. Even as a child, Max had been able to see that many of the teachers and workers in the orphanage had believed that. They believed in Her grace and kindness, and their duty to fulfil Her wishes in this world. Then there were others, like Emmeline, where Max had never been entirely sure if they truly believed in the words they said and the teachings they repeated. The Lady’s teachings offered hope to a population that badly needed it, with the constant pressure on resources and the ever-present threat of the Wild.

“You are ungrateful for the gift of your life? For all the effort and thought that went into your creation?” Emmeline asked, a hard edge to her voice.

Max’s brows lifted. This was new. Not the part about being ungrateful. She’d heard that before, along with lazy and

stupid. But the idea that any effort or thought had gone into her creation was something she'd never heard before. The High Priestess's words tugged at an open question in Max's mind. All she had ever been told was that she had been given into the orphanage's care as a newborn, her parents not wanting to raise her. Nothing more. She had asked questions, growing up. Everyone around her who had been abandoned as babies had asked questions. All of them had, at one time or another, held a fanciful idea that their true families would reveal themselves. No one's ever had. Those given to the orphanage as babies were rare, though. Most of the orphans had come into the Lady's care as slightly older children and were grateful for the shelter and safety of the orphanage. As Max had grown up, she'd come to understand why. More than one child was there because one or both of their parents had died by violence, or there had been violence towards the children, or because one or both of their parents were addicted to some narcotic or another and had no attention or energy left over to care for their children. Those older children in particular had valued the order and routine of the orphanages and the Lady's temples.

The lack of answers had left a gap in her mind, a hole in her own personal history.

"I've never been told what my origins were," Max said slowly.

Before she could ask anything more, movement near her house drew her attention. Another vehicle had drawn up. It stopped and a pair of warriors got out the front, a familiar

figure getting out of the back. A medium-height man with reddish brown hair. Even from this distance, Max could see he was wearing a pinched expression. Kitris. The head of the Order. The one who less than a week ago had seemed reluctant to hunt a demon in the city, when the very purpose of the Order was to deal with dark magic and enforce the Lady's laws. A demon sprung from the dark lord's domain should have been of primary concern to Kitris. Demons were amoral and destructive. The one Max had met had seemed intent on creating as much chaos as possible, not caring who might get hurt or killed in the process.

"We decided it was time to let you know," Emmeline said as Kitris started walking towards them.

"Tell me what?" Max asked, scowling.

The High Priestess didn't answer.

Max watched Kitris' approach with a tight knot of apprehension forming in her stomach. She could not imagine what he was doing here, or what he might know about her origins.

"Have you told her yet?" Kitris demanded as he drew to a halt a few paces away. Close enough that they could speak without being overheard, but outside some invisible line that Kitris had drawn around himself. He looked paler than he had the last time Max had seen him, shadows under his eyes, as if he, too, had been having trouble sleeping.

"No, I was waiting for you," Emmeline said. Her voice had a flat, displeased tone that Max was familiar with. She had never

heard it directed at anyone else, though, and her attention sharpened. It suggested a past history between the High Priestess and head of the Order that she had not imagined before.

“Well, get on with it,” Kitris said, his expression still tight. “I’ve got better things to do.”

“You have sworn your service to the Lady,” the High Priestess told him, her back straightening so that she looked down at the slightly shorter man. “There is nothing more important than that.”

Kitris glared at her, power gathering in the air around him, reminding Max of just how formidable a magician he was. “We have one of His descendants and a full demon from His court on the loose somewhere in the city.” There was a snap in his voice and a complete lack of respect. This was a side to Kitris that Max was familiar with. The absolute conviction that he was right. “They have already tried to use the Arkus Codex to do some kind of ritual. We need to find them before they manage to do anything worse.”

Max had to bite her lip to keep quiet at the abrupt change in Kitris’ attitude. He had not believed in the Arkus Codex when he had been told about it. He hadn’t wanted to do anything about the artefact. When Max had somehow managed to stop Evan Yarwood, former chief of detectives and a descendant of the dark lord Himself, along with the demon Queran, from completing whatever ritual they had in mind, Kitris had taken charge of the Codex. The Order was the right place for so

dangerous an artefact, but it still annoyed Max that Kitris was trying to claim some authority or credit for the capture of the book.

“And Miscellandreax has a part to play in that,” Emmeline said.

Max’s attention snapped back to the High Priestess. The other woman was still glaring at Kitris, the pair of them locked in some unspoken power struggle that Max wanted no part of.

“It’s Max,” she said. The first thing that came to mind.

“We named you Miscellandreax,” Emmeline said, turning her glare on Max.

“That’s the name I was given. I’ve chosen a different one,” Max told her.

“It’s the name we chose for you,” Emmeline snapped back.

“What do you mean?” Max asked, frowning. She’d known that some of the orphanage babies were named by the temple, but no one had ever said that was the case for her.

“You’re making a mess of this,” Kitris told the High Priestess. He turned to Max. “What she means is that Emmeline and I are your parents. We created you. We named you.”

Max stared at Kitris, her mouth open, shock holding her frozen in place. Parents. She had never heard the word applied to her. She’d known that there must be some somewhere. But she’d all but given up thinking about them. “This is a joke,” she said, lips and face numb. “The two of you had an affair

and I'm your child? That's ...” Her voice trailed off as she struggled to find a suitable word.

“Don't be so ridiculous,” Emmeline snapped, high spots of colour burning in her face. “There was no affair. The Lady Herself instructed your creation.”

“That's ridiculous,” Max said, borrowing Emmeline's word, feeling as if the ground was shaking under her feet. “What possible reason could the Lady have for wanting me created? And why choose you?” she asked, eyes travelling between the pair. She couldn't, right now, imagine a less likely couple.

“Because I am descended from the Lady Herself,” Kitris told Max, more than a trace of arrogance in his face and voice. “My great-great-grandfather was one of the Lady's children in this world.” Max stared at him. He seemed entirely human. And yet, tracing his ancestry back to the Lady explained a few things, such as Kitris' long life span. She remembered having a similar reaction to Evan Yarwood, a descendant of the dark lord. Evan seemed entirely human, and yet could do things no ordinary human should be capable of.

“And I am Her servant,” Emmeline said, cutting through Max's thoughts. “The Lady wished for a child to be created who would continue Her divine presence in the world, and be born into Her house.”

The world spun around Max. She wavered, stumbling sideways, and was held up by two solid, warm bodies. Cas and Pol. They braced themselves against her, keeping her upright, Cas at her back, Pol at her front. Pol's eyes were watchful and

wary on the High Priestess and Kitris and Max knew that Cas would be wearing a similar expression behind her. The numbness that had taken over Max's body lessened. She could always count on her dogs. She put her good hand out, reaching behind her to pat Cas' back, then stroking Pol's silky ears, as his head was at her waist. The sensation of her dogs' fur under her skin grounded her, settled her back into her body and the here and now. The news was still ringing around her mind, setting off dozens and dozens more questions, but she would not fall. Not now.

“Explain,” Max demanded. Her voice was flat and hard. She looked from Emmeline to Kitris and still could not fathom that either of these people was in any way related to her.

“What more do you need to know?” Emmeline asked, brows lifting. Max stared at her, but the High Priestess seemed completely sincere, as if unable to imagine what else Max could possibly want to know about her origins and creation.

“The Lady spoke to me,” Kitris said. He had lost all his bitterness, his face and voice full of wonder. Max stared again, almost not recognising the man in front of her. The usual stern expression had vanished, leaving him looking younger, his face full of warmth that Max had never seen before. “She told me that I had been chosen to do Her will. I was to provide Her with a child here in this world. A child who would stand as a beacon of light and hope against the dark lord.”

He believed it, Max saw, a tremor running through her. He believed that the Lady had spoken to him, and that he had been

following Her commands. Max's mind spun again, trying to make sense of what he was saying. And not saying.

“Did the Lady speak to you, too?” Max asked Emmeline.

The High Priestess still had her hands folded into her sleeves, her shoulders tense. She pressed her lips together and didn't answer.

“You need to tell her,” Kitris said, the wonder gone from his face, his tight expression back. “If you don't, I will.”

“Not me,” Emmeline said, reluctance clear. “One of my fellow priestesses had a vision. She was afraid of what it meant. She didn't feel worthy of fulfilling the Lady's wishes,” the High Priestess said, scorn in her voice. “The Lady provided her with the necessary magic to complete the conception. As she was too frightened, I took her place.” The High Priestess met Max's eyes, her own burning with what looked like fury. “And when you were born, you were so ordinary. I had imagined something quite different from a child that the Lady Herself commanded to be produced.”

A cold knife slid through Max's gut. The insult was nothing new. Max had always known that the High Priestess had a low opinion of her. But the other information. That was new. Emmeline had cheated. That's what it felt like. Max could so easily imagine it. The ambitious, young Priestess Emmeline, seeing a way of advancing herself in the hierarchy of the temple. She would have made it out to be a selfless act, Max was quite sure. Putting herself in the place of the other priestess, taking on the burden. All the while believing that

she, Emmeline, would be the one to birth the Lady's chosen one.

"I always was a disappointment to you," Max said, forcing the words out through her clenched jaw. "Perhaps you shouldn't have interfered?"

Kitris gave an unexpected bark of laughter, grinning as the High Priestess glared at him. "It seems she is my daughter, after all," he said. "I told her that," he said to Max. "When you were born and Emmeline confessed her deception. That she was not the one the Lady had spoken to." He didn't look at Emmeline as he said that, and the divide between them made sense. Apart from in his dealings with Max, Kitris had never liked or tolerated deception well. He would have believed he was fulfilling the Lady's wishes, never imagining that Emmeline had lied.

"It shouldn't have made any difference," Emmeline said, glaring at him. "We were fulfilling the Lady's wishes."

Max wanted to be sick. She believed them. The story was too crazy not to be true, and the underlying bitterness and resentment from both Emmeline and Kitris was too honest to be a lie. She had always wondered who her parents were - every abandoned child did - but now she had answers, she wished she didn't know. She had been created. Forged by magic. By two people who could barely tolerate each other. Created. Her mind snagged on that word and turned it over, looking at it from different angles.

"So I am, what, a tool?" Max asked, voice rising in pitch.

“You were supposed to be,” Kitris answered calmly. “That didn’t work out.”

Max stared at him, words choking her into silence. She drew a breath, the short, silky hair on Pol’s head and the solid frame of his skull under her fingers, reminding her of where she was and that she was not alone. She forced herself to attempt some coherent speech. “I did what you asked,” she told him. “I went into the underworld. I closed the Grey Gates. I kept Arkus sealed away. That was what you required of me.”

“You lie,” Kitris said, calm melting into burning anger, spots of colour on his cheeks.

Max pressed her lips together to stop her own anger from pouring out. She had never understood his continued insistence that she had failed, that she had lied. But he had never wavered in his refusal to believe her.

“I don’t think she does,” the High Priestess said, surprising Max. “Tell me, Kitris, how did you close the Grey Gates?”

“I’ve told you before. You wouldn’t understand. Your knowledge of magic isn’t advanced enough to grasp the concepts,” Kitris said, not looking at either Max or Emmeline.

“You could try to explain. No,” Emmeline said, removing one of her hands from her sleeves and holding it up to halt anything Kitris might have said. “Tell me, Miscellandreax, how did you close the Grey Gates?”

Max stared at the woman who she supposed was technically her mother and was tempted not to answer. Very tempted. But

she had carried the secret inside her for eight years. And very few people had been willing to listen to her side of the story.

“When the Order warriors died, I was pulled in between the Gates,” Max said, her breath full of the grey smoke and fire of the underworld, she remembered the heat of it scorching her skin. “I ended up lost somewhere far away from the entrance. It took me a while to find my way back, but when I did, I closed them behind me on the way out and set the latch.” She lifted her hand, looking at the skin of her palm and fingers. She had lost almost all the skin on the underside of both hands when she had heaved the Grey Gates shut, the metal too hot for any person to bear. “When the Gates were closed, a wave pushed me back up into the daylight world,” she finished. She’d ended up surfacing in the middle of a lake not far from the city, the water around her boiling with the heat from the underworld, gasping for air in the middle of a shoal of dead fish.

“That’s the story you told me eight years ago,” Kitris said, lines bracketing his mouth. He was still furious. “And I say you lie.”

“I don’t know how you can possibly say so,” Max said, “as you’ve never been near the Grey Gates in your life, have you? You lied to everyone. You sent me to close them. Me. A failing apprentice. You didn’t even send one of the Guardians to try. No, you sent me. And didn’t even tell me why.” Her voice rose in pitch again, her own anger rising along with tears at the memory of the pain and chaos of the underworld.

“It is what you were made for,” Kitris said, voice and face hard.

“He is right,” Emmeline said, a rare note of sadness in her voice. “It was difficult, watching you grow all those years, knowing that when the Grey Gates next appeared you would have to be the one to close them.”

That had the ring of truth about it. The pair of them had created her to do their bidding. Kitris had sent her to the Gates because that’s why she had been born. The explanation made sense. But it didn’t help the foul taste in her mouth, or the searing sense of betrayal. They had both kept secrets from her for her entire life. And more than that. “You didn’t expect me to live,” Max said, her face frozen again. “Neither of you. You thought you were creating a sacrifice to make sure that Arkus stayed safely locked away in the underworld.”

They didn’t deny it. Max read the truth on their faces.

She felt as if she was standing with strangers. She could not comprehend what they had done. Created a child, thinking it was the will of the Lady, and then sent that child to die. Her mind refused to hold onto the idea, spinning, trying to find something else to get hold of. Like why they had waited so long to tell her. No sooner had the question occurred to her than it was out in the open. “Why are you telling me now?” Max asked, speaking past the hard lump in her throat.

The pair exchanged a look that sent more apprehension sliding across Max’s skin.

“The city is in danger,” Emmeline said. Her mouth tightened, fine lines appearing around it as she glared at Max, her displeasure clear. “You are needed back at the Order.”

Max stared back at the High Priestess for a long moment, trying to get her mind to work, to puzzle that through. It was not new information. And yet, Emmeline thought it was important. As did Kitris, judging by the hard look he was levelling at her. The pair of them seemed of one mind on this, and it still made no sense to Max. Until, all at once, it did.

“You thought that by telling me this, I would feel obliged to obey you?” Max asked, her voice rising in pitch to disbelief. It fit with what she knew of them both. Too used to wielding power and having their wishes obeyed.

“We gave you life,” Emmeline said, still with that displeased expression.

“I did what you created me for,” Max told them, the words jagged and painful in her mouth, her chest hurting as thin cracks slid across her bones, threatening to pull her apart. “I saved the world. I’ve done my job. You can ask nothing more of me.”

“Your work is not done,” Emmeline said, brows drawing together in a frown. “There’s a demon and a descendant of the dark lord in this realm. They must be stopped.”

“And there are Portents,” Kitris added, his voice heavy. Signs in the daylight world that the dark lord was trying to escape from His realm once more.

“That’s what the Order is for,” Max said to them both, throat closing. That was the simple truth. “Leave me alone.”

She turned on her heels, her dogs moving to let her change position, and stalked back along the road, ignoring the silent gazes of the Order warriors and the gathered priests and priestesses.

As she put her hand on the gate, one of the warriors moved, striding towards her. She stiffened, turning to face him. She recognised the warrior. Kitris’ second in command, whose name she could never remember outside his presence. As he came closer, his name slid into her mind again. Samuel. She had no idea why she could never remember it. He was an ordinary-looking man, built with the same compact, muscled frame as many of the warriors, with mid-brown hair and eyes to match. He was frowning as he approached her.

Max lifted her chin, meeting the hard brown gaze. Samuel was Kitris’ shadow, always there. He always gave the impression of a dedicated warrior, committed to his oaths and the Order’s cause. Despite being the unofficial second in command of the Order, Max could not remember Samuel saying anything to her. He’d barely acknowledged her presence. Until today.

He stopped in front of her.

“You’ve upset Kitris,” he stated, voice flat. “What did you say to him?”

“Ask him,” Max said, hearing the snap of temper in her own voice and not able to do anything about it. If the warrior was

asking her what had been said, then the conversation she'd just had with Emmeline and Kitris had been out of earshot. She was glad of that. It had been difficult enough with just the three of them.

“I am asking you. Kitris works hard. He doesn't need any more difficulties.”

Max pressed her lips together, holding in hasty words. Cas and Pol pressed into her sides and she put her hands on their backs. “If Kitris wants you to know, he'll tell you,” she said. Bitterness flavoured her words. She couldn't imagine Kitris kept many secrets from his second in command.

Samuel was not satisfied with her answer, the frown on his face growing deeper. But she had nothing more to give him. She was not going to repeat what she'd just learned to this angry warrior.

She took Cas and Pol back through the gate to her house, closing it behind her. It wouldn't stop the priesthood or the Order if they decided to try to get in, but the action made her feel better. The little click of the lock closing was loud in her ears and she lifted her hand from the gates, almost expecting her skin to be burned. Nothing. It was just an ordinary gate. She turned her back on Samuel's disapproval, and the silent stares of the priests, priestesses and other warriors, taking the massive tangled knot of pain in her chest with her into the house, Cas and Pol pressing close to her sides.

Chapter Two

MAX MADE IT INTO the kitchen, shut the door behind her and took the necessary few steps so that she could see out of the window, then froze, standing in her untied boots on the hard tile floor with the blanket still drawn around her shoulders. She stared at the people and vehicles gathered on the road. From the distance, it looked like Emmeline and Kitris were having a furious argument. Both of them were where Max had left them, just at the end of the road, standing a few paces apart, their postures rigid, partly turned away from each other.

The hurt Max had carried back along the road and into her house bloomed in her chest, too big and too raw to hold in. There were tears on her face and she muffled a sob behind her hand. It was second nature to her to try not to cry, even in her own space. Even now, with all the shocks of the past minutes crashing into each other in her mind, sending more spikes of pain around her body. She wanted to curl up, to huddle on her

sofa under a blanket with her dogs and not move, not speak, until the world made sense again.

But her body wouldn't move, locked in place.

A flash of light outside caught her attention and she stiffened, eyes snapping back to the people and vehicles, aware of just how vulnerable she was. She had just defied the head of the Order and the Lady's High Priestess. Anger and hurt had carried her through the encounter, but now she was back in her own house, she realised that it had not been wise. Either Kitris or Emmeline could command their people to drag Max out of her house, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Nothing anyone could do. The Order and the Lady's Houses had their own rules and conducted their own business. If they wanted Max, then they would have her.

Another flash of light came and she saw it was sunlight glinting off the vehicle doors as they opened and closed. The High Priestess and Kitris had moved from the end of the road and were getting back into their respective vehicles with the priests, priestesses and warriors following them.

Max watched with a mix of disbelief and relief as the vehicles made smooth turns and then drove away, back towards the city, leaving the road empty.

She was crying again, her mind turning over what Kitris and Emmeline had said. Her parents. She couldn't think of them in that way. The people who had created her. That was better. She had been forged out of Kitris' obedience and Emmeline's ambition, and the thought made her skin crawl.

Then she remembered the other thing Kitris had said. That he was descended from the Lady Herself. Which meant that Max was, too. Which meant that she was like Evan Yarwood. Only her ancestor was the Lady, not the dark lord.

That meant she wasn't human. Not quite. She couldn't remember how many generations back Kitris had said the line went back, but it was enough that she was mostly human. The rest of her, a tiny part of her, was made up of the Lady of the Light. Her mind spun again. She'd never been able to master magic the way that Kitris used it, but she had been able to pull and use light magic. And now she knew where it came from. The Lady Herself.

Her knees gave out and she slid down to the floor, Cas and Pol settling beside her, their great, warm bodies pressing into her, anchoring her to the here and now. One of them gave a soft whine. They knew something was badly wrong, but there was no possible way she could explain it to them. And nothing they could do to help. At least, not more than they were already doing.

Amid all the chaos of her mind, there was a lump of ice forming. She had been lied to. Over and over and over again. By both Kitris and Emmeline. The High Priestess had denied all knowledge of Max's origins. Kitris had never given her an explanation as to why she had been sent to close the Grey Gates. They had treated her with cool disdain, always quick to express their disappointment in her progress.

At least that disappointment made a certain sort of sense now, Max thought, as Cas' head settled on her chest. The head of the Order and one of the Lady's Priestesses had created a child. They had expected great things of the child, and Max had never lived up to what they expected of her. At least in their eyes. Neither of them seemed to see any value in the fact that she had, in fact, done the very thing that they had created her to do. She had closed the Grey Gates. Her. On her own. With no training that had prepared her for the horrors of the underworld.

The core of ice melted as blistering, hot anger flooded through Max. They had made her as a tool. A weapon they could use. And nothing she had ever done had been good enough. Well, she was done with them. Completely done. They had no hold on her anymore. She had her own life. Her dogs. Friends. A job she enjoyed and was good at. All those things were hers. Things she had found and formed and worked on herself. Not things that she'd been given.

She stroked Cas' soft ears and rested her cheek on the top of his head, hugging him close and then patting Pol so he didn't feel left out. She had her dogs. Even just them and nothing else would be more than enough. More than she had ever hoped for in those long-ago days at the orphanage.

Chapter Three

SHE WAS STILL ON the floor, still huddled into the blanket, when Cas and Pol moved, lifting their weight off her and turning as one in the direction of the road, low growls emerging from their throats. There was someone else coming up the road.

Apprehension sliding over her skin, wondering if Kitris and the High Priestess had decided to come back and take her with them by force, Max scrambled to her feet, hampered by the blanket which had tangled around her injured arm, and turned to look out the window. A moment later, a single vehicle pulled up and parked outside the gates. Like the ones that had just left, it was covered in Order magic.

The vehicle doors opened and a warrior and a shorter man in mage's robes got out. Max's brows lifted. Bryce and Guardian Orshiasa. She could not imagine what they were doing here, and how they had come to travel together. It seemed she was being faced with another very unlikely pairing. She could not

begin to imagine why they were here, or what more shocking information she was about to find out.

She left the house and headed back towards the gate, the blanket still draped around her, the laces of her boots flapping around her ankles. Cas and Pol came with her, bounding ahead with big, happy strides. They knew Bryce and didn't seem to have any hesitation about Orshiasa.

Bryce lifted a hand in greeting. He was dressed casually, as always, but not carrying any heavy weaponry. Just a handgun at his hip and doubtless several knives around his person, including concealed in the body armour he wore. He was built of lithe muscle that spoke of regular, tough training. He had a face that had been in one too many fights and dark hair that had been recently trimmed close to his head. He wasn't handsome in any conventional sense, but she liked looking at him. Even though she had seen him the day before, just before she had left hospital, her stomach did a happy flip seeing him.

By contrast, her former apprentice master, Orshiasa, was much less welcome. He was slightly shorter than Kitris, a slender man with yellow-toned skin and close-cropped dark hair liberally sprinkled with grey. He normally wore a tight, disapproving expression around her. Even so, he was one of the finest magicians she had ever met, and had been a tough master. She could not imagine what he was doing here.

“Good day to you, Miscellandreax,” Orshiasa said. He was on the other side of the closed gate, and inclined his head to

her, his pale eyes meeting hers for a moment. “I apologise for the intrusion, but there are things I wish to discuss with you.”

“Did Kitris send you?” Max asked.

“No, he did not. Although Bryce says that he was here recently?”

“He just left,” Max said. She eyed her former mentor, and then Bryce.

“Os was on the High Priestess’s team,” Bryce explained. It took Max a moment to place the name. Osvaldo was one of the Order warriors, and seemed to be one of Bryce’s closest friends. She had been so preoccupied with the High Priestess and Kitris and then standing up to Samuel that she hadn’t realised any of the other warriors were familiar faces. “He sent me a text. Said it looked like you had an argument.” There was curiosity in his face, but he kept the questions to himself, perhaps out of deference to Orshiasa.

“There was a lot of arguing,” Max said. She hesitated, her hand on the latch of the gate. She should let them in. She was more than happy to let Bryce onto her property and into her house, much less comfortable with Orshiasa. This was her home, after all. But the old man had never actually harmed her, and he had travelled all this way to see her. Besides, she was curious as to what her former apprentice master wanted. So she opened the gate. “Won’t you come in?” she asked. “I wasn’t expecting visitors, but I can probably find some tea.”

“Thank you,” Orshiasa said gravely. He walked through the gate, Bryce following. Bryce had to stop for a moment as Cas

and Pol crowded him, demanding attention. When they were satisfied, the dogs bounded away again.

“How are you?” Bryce asked, gaze sharp as he looked her over. It was the assessment of a warrior sizing up his troops.

“On the mend. Slowly,” Max said, hearing the frustration in her voice. It hadn’t been that long since she had been injured, she knew, but only having the use of one hand was making everything harder and slower. “Thank you for asking,” she added, realising she had sounded grumpy.

“Your arm has not healed?” Orshiasa asked.

“Not yet,” Max said, turning away from him and heading for the house. She wasn’t sure why he was surprised. Healing magic was rare, and broken bones were difficult. She’d been given more treatment than most people would get, and was grateful for it, even if Orshiasa seemed surprised. She couldn’t think of a graceful way to put a question to him as to how quickly he thought she should heal from multiple breaks. The revelations of Kitris and Emmeline’s visit were still sending shockwaves through her. The pain in her chest had not gone, but had spread out to a more muted sense of discomfort. She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to feel or react. What was the appropriate response to finding out she had been made to fulfil a goddess’ request?

She tried to shove the questions aside as she led Orshiasa and Bryce around the corner of the building, past the kitchen window that looked onto the garden and the road, and through the kitchen door into her house. She halted a couple of paces

into the room, taking in the mess. She wasn't the tidiest person at the best of times, and she'd had even less time for housekeeping tasks than normal in the past weeks. Every surface was littered with used dishes, mugs, food packets and the pile of papers that never seemed to get any smaller no matter what she did to it. For a moment she wondered if she actually had enough clean mugs to provide tea for her uninvited guests, heat creeping up under her skin. Her house was more than adequate for her needs, put together with second-hand, mismatched furniture and badly in need of a fresh coat of paint inside and out. She glanced over her shoulder, wanting and not wanting to see her former master's reaction to her home.

The Guardian was standing just inside the doorway, looking around with open curiosity. He stayed where he was, Bryce his shadow.

Max couldn't read Orshiasa's expression. Or Bryce's. Embarrassment still prickling under her skin, she headed for the kettle.

"Would you like tea?" she asked the pair. "I'm afraid I don't have any coffee here."

"A glass of water would be most kind," Orshiasa said.

"Same," Bryce said, when she glanced at him.

They took seats at the table at her invitation. Orshiasa continued to look around while she poured glasses of water and brought them, one at a time, to the table before finally

taking the blanket off her shoulders and sitting down as well. Cas and Pol had come inside and settled on either side of her.

“You have a lovely home,” Orshiasa said, a smile pulling his mouth. “It has a great sense of calm and peace.”

“Thank you,” Max said, more heat in her face at the unexpected compliment. He had been sincere in what he said. Orshiasa was always truthful. And she was impressed he had managed to see past the chaos to find any sense of calm. She took a sip of water. “You wanted to discuss something?”

“To business. Yes.” Even though his tone was brisk, Orshiasa paused, looking at her with an intent gaze that made her feel like a student again. “You faced a demon and a descendant of the dark lord and survived,” he said. Max couldn’t read the tone of his voice. He was narrating facts, and she had no idea how he felt about them. “And, I am told, not for the first time.” He glanced at Bryce, who was wearing a watchful expression, no hint of emotion leaking out from him, either. “It is a rare person that survives even one meeting with a demon.”

Max grimaced, taking a sip of her water and wishing she’d taken the time to make some tea. She was still cold from being outside, and the memories Orshiasa was stirring up were not helping that at all. “I could happily have lived my life without meeting the demon,” she told her former master. She scrubbed her hand through her hair, realising that she hadn’t even brushed it that morning. “What do you want to know?”

“I want to understand how you survived,” Orshiasa said bluntly. Max could not help but hear the years of disappointment in his voice. She had never been a good student, in his eyes. Never able to learn the spells he was trying to teach her. It was no wonder he wanted an explanation as to how she, the least able of all the apprentices, could have lived through more than one encounter with a demon.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” she told him, her voice flat. It was the truth.

“Then perhaps you will tell me what you do know. I only arrived when the demon and the descendant had fled,” Orshiasa began. “Will you tell me what happened before then?”

Max stared at the clear water in her glass, avoiding looking at him, a phantom stab of pain running through her head, her mind taking her back to the night at the docks barely a few days before when she had faced down Evan and Queran. She had killed one of Evan’s co-conspirators, the dark magician Oliver Forster. She’d been trying to hit Evan, but Queran had moved too fast, dragging the descendant out of the way and her bullet had gone into the magician instead. At the time, it had just been her, Bryce and the vampire Lord Kolbyr in the old building, facing the dark lord’s descendant and trying to stop whatever Evan and Queran had been planning.

“I’ve told the Guardian what I saw and what I remember, although I couldn’t sense or understand the magic,” Bryce said. She looked up to find him watching her with dark eyes

flecked with light. He had saved her life more than once in the past week or so. And had been in the hospital when she'd woken up. His calmness steadied her and she took another sip of water before turning to Orshiasa.

“Evan and Queran had set up a spell circle in the middle of the old temple,” she began, and told Orshiasa what she could remember about the events of that night. How Evan and Queran were trying to perform some kind of ritual from the book they'd stolen. The Arkus Codex. How Oliver Forster had been helping the pair. Max had managed to get into the spell circle and shoot the demon, and interrupted them. She grimaced. She'd been almost blind at that point, body full of pain. “They left when they sensed the Guardians approaching,” Max finished with a rueful smile. “I'm not sure I really did stop them.”

“You did enough,” Orshiasa said, voice soft.

Startled, Max met his eyes. She'd never had praise when she had been his apprentice. He'd never been satisfied with anything she had done. There had been a time when hearing that she had done enough would have made her almost giddy with delight. Now, she stared at him, wondering if she had heard him right.

The moment passed quickly as he started asking her more detailed questions about the fight, pressing her for information and knowledge about exactly what had happened and what spells had been used. Max could see and sense his frustration as she was unable to answer many of his more technical

questions. She couldn't even remember any of the spell formulas he asked about. She shook her head slightly when she tried to describe the experience of stepping through the spell circle in more detail. Her bones ached with the memory of the pain.

"I remember the remnants of that spell circle," the Guardian said, his face and voice serious. "It was sophisticated work. Almost impenetrable. And you broke it. With no skill at all."

Max bit her lip to stop a hasty retort. She wasn't his apprentice any longer. And with the pause she realised he had not, in fact, been criticising her. It might almost have been praise. Again. She was glad she was sitting down.

"So, now you have told the tale, how do you think you survived?" the Guardian asked. And there was the old master she remembered. Never wanting to give her an answer. Always wanting her to work it out for herself.

The remarkable conversation she had just had with Emmeline and Kitris suggested a possible answer. That tiny part of her that came from the Lady might well explain how she'd managed to survive more than one encounter with a demon. She didn't speak, the revelations too new and too raw for her to talk about them.

"I don't know," she said instead, voice harsh. "From what I've learned, it seems Queran is a watcher demon. And he's been keeping an eye on me." Her skin crawled at the thought, remembering the voice whispering to her out of the darkness at the orphanage.

Orshiasa's brows lifted. "That makes sense," he said, surprising her yet again.

"Why would you say that?" Max asked.

"Because you have a great deal of affinity with light magic," Orshiasa said, another smile on his face, his eyes bright. He leant forward. "I did not realise just how much potential you had until I came into the temple at the docks and saw what you had done. You have a remarkable gift, Miscellandreax."

That clear praise was almost as shocking as the information Kitris and Emmeline had given her. Max stared back at him, not sure what to say. When she had been his apprentice, he had found fault with almost everything she did. And now he was here, telling her she had a gift. And an affinity for light magic.

Her chest hurt again. If what Kitris had said was true, then she had some of the Lady inside her, which meant it was no wonder she could use light magic. The Lady lived in the light.

"Funny, you didn't think I had any potential when I was your apprentice." The words were in her voice, hard and flat, and she hadn't realised she'd spoken them aloud until Orshiasa sat back, his smile fading. He folded his hands into his sleeves and inclined his head.

"You are right. You were not capable of learning the Order's magic. It is beyond your grasp," Orshiasa said. His voice was calm, neutral, simply stating facts. In it, Max heard the echo of a hundred other times she'd been told similar things. *Incapable. Stupid. Lazy. Incompetent.* The hurt bloomed in her chest again and she forced herself to breathe through it.

“Did you know Kitris is a descendant of the Lady?” she asked the Guardian.

His brows rose in apparently genuine surprise and she had a stab of bitter pleasure that she was not the only one learning new things. “No, I did not. A descendant of the Lady is very rare. It does explain some things, though. Such as how he was able to close the Grey Gates when you failed to do so.”

Max stared back at him, jaw tight.

“That is not correct, Guardian,” Bryce said. He was quite calm, just stating facts. “Max closed the Gates, not Kitris.”

“That is not what Kitris said. He claims he closed the Gates himself,” Orshiasa said. He was still looking at Max, rather than at the warrior.

He was testing her, Max realised. Being provocative. Trying to get a reaction from her. For what reason, she had no idea. She stayed quiet, wondering what he might do next. He had used silence in their lessons quite often, waiting to see what she would do. It had taken her an embarrassingly long time to realise that she could sometimes just do nothing, and that was the proper response.

The silence stretched on. Long enough for Max to become aware of the sound of birds in the garden outside, the sigh of her dogs’ breathing and the creak of her house settling as the sun warmed part of the roof. Orshiasa bowed his head, another smile pulling his lips, as if she had just done something really clever.

“So. Kitris did not tell the truth,” Orshiasa said. “He is still the head of the Order. I owe him my respect and I owe the Order my service.”

“I do not owe either of those things,” Max said. Orshiasa’s smile widened, and she realised she was still caught in one of his games.

“No. You do not. You have a great deal more freedom.”

Max’s first reaction was disbelief, but her ears had caught the hint of something in Orshiasa’s voice that sounded almost like longing or envy, and she stayed still and quiet for a moment, letting that thought turn over in her mind. It was true that she had found not being part of the Order liberating. She didn’t have to try and follow their rules or live up to their expectations of her. She had a job with a clear purpose. There were rules she was expected to follow as a Marshal, but she also had a great deal of freedom as to how she got her job done. Whereas Orshiasa was still inside the Order. An immensely powerful Guardian, a superbly skilled magician, but subject to the whims and commands of Kitris, who seemed to have become erratic in the time since Max had left.

“What do you know about descendants?” she asked Orshiasa instead. “Evan is a remote descendant of the dark lord, but he seemed extremely powerful. I would have thought that the, er, effect became diluted over time?” She tried to ask the question as if her interest was in Evan alone, and not because she had just learned she had part of the Lady in her. Orshiasa seemed to find nothing wrong with her question, but Bryce sent her a

frowning glance, unseen by the Guardian. She avoided Bryce's gaze, looking instead at the Guardian.

“Your logic is sound. With the descendants we have encountered before, that has been the pattern. Those closer in heritage to the dark lord, or even the Lady, have been stronger, with those who are more human being weaker in magic. Not weak, you understand, as the inheritance from the dark lord still conveys power several generations down. But weaker.” Orshiasa folded his hands together on the table top, looking as if he was prepared to sit there for most of the day and discuss the matter.

“Interesting,” Max said, drawing the word out. “So, Evan should not be hugely powerful. And yet, he did seem to be a strong magician.”

“I would guess that there are other magicians in his ancestry. Also, that he had honed his skill with practice over the years,” her former master said. “Even a weak magician can become more skilled with time,” he added.

Max tried not to take that personally. She'd heard that statement before from him. He'd always believed that she could become better, if only she tried harder. Well, she had tried. As hard as she could. And it had not worked.

“Kitris, for example,” Orshiasa said, as if continuing the conversation, “is one of the most powerful magicians I have ever known. If he is a descendant of the Lady, that makes a certain sort of sense. However, his parents were also extremely skilled and strong.”

Max couldn't help the little leap of interest in her at that snippet of information. When she had been in the Order, learning about Kitris' parents would have been of a kind of academic interest. Now, though, she had a far more personal connection. Kitris' parents would have been her grandparents. Her chest ached at the thought. She'd never had any family to call her own, and Orshiasa had, without knowing it, trailed the possibility of a family tree in front of her.

"Kitris wants me to find Evan and Queran," she told Orshiasa and Bryce. She wasn't quite sure what reaction she had hoped for, or why she was sharing the information. But it seemed relevant to what they had been discussing, and as she had thought about Kitris and his family, she had felt the invisible strings of obligation that Kitris and Emmeline had tried to put on her closing around her. Families came with a network of give and take that she had observed from the outside but never experienced for herself. And somehow the pair of them had thought she would do as they asked just because they had created her.

"That seems sensible," Orshiasa said.

A spike of irritation went through her. Not just because Orshiasa agreed with Kitris, which was annoying enough. But mostly because she had already set herself the task. When she had woken up in hospital and realised that the demon and the former chief of detectives were still alive, and still loose in the world, she had decided that she needed to stop them. Somehow. Faddei - her boss - and Bryce had made a start on

searching the city while she had been in hospital, and she was keen to do her part. As much as she could, with only one hand.

She didn't see any reason to tell Orshiasa what she planned. Like the rest of the Order, he no longer had any authority over her. But it shouldn't be up to her acting alone to hunt down the dark lord's agents.

"Why isn't the Order going after the demon and descendant?" Max asked, lifting her chin as she turned back to her former master. "They fall within the Order's jurisdiction."

"That is so. However, Kitris has determined that we should first study the Arkus Codex and learn its secrets before we try to apprehend the demon and descendant," Orshiasa said. There was an undercurrent to his voice which told Max that he was not happy with that idea. She remembered when she had last seen the Guardian and head of the Order together, in Malik's bar, earlier in the evening before she had confronted Evan and Queran. The Guardian and head of the Order had been arguing, an open disagreement in a public space, and she wondered now just how deep the divisions ran. Orshiasa had been careful to say that he owed Kitris his respect only.

Max's breath caught. Kitris had ordered Orshiasa to study the Codex. But her former master was here instead. Most likely without Kitris' knowledge or permission. Supporting the idea that Max should go after the demon and Evan. He could do it himself, Max knew. He was as powerful as Kitris, and had the resources of the Order at his disposal. No one apart from Kitris would question the orders of a Guardian. Orshiasa

could have the entire contingent of warriors out searching the city, if he wished. But he hadn't done that. Instead, he'd come here to ask her how she'd survived her encounters with a demon. It wasn't a full-scale rebellion against Kitris. But it was against the spirit of the task Orshiasa had been given. She took a long, slow breath, considering the implications of that. It did not seem to be a good thing that the most respected Guardian in the Order was quietly disobeying the head of the Order. And she didn't want to get involved. But she could hopefully get some more information, as Orshiasa had come to her for help.

"I assume the Codex is well-guarded?" she asked Orshiasa. "Evan and Queran went to a lot of trouble to find it in the first place and they had an army's worth of trained soldiers working with them," she added, just in case the Guardian thought she was trying to insult him. "I can't imagine they're just going to let the Order keep it."

"We are aware," Orshiasa said. "All precautions are being taken."

He wouldn't tell her anything else, Max sensed. He also seemed quite confident in whatever measures were being taken. She could understand that. The Order's property was the most secure stretch of land in the entire city, guarded not just by highly trained warriors, but also by layers upon layers of magic. Even though she was still uneasy at the Arkus Codex being out in the world, the Order was the safest place for it.

If the Guardian wouldn't tell her about the safety measures, perhaps he would tell her about the research he was doing. She leant forward slightly. "Have you learned anything about the Codex that might be useful? Such as what ritual they were trying to perform?" Max asked. She might not know the specifics of what the Codex contained, but she was quite sure that Evan or Queran had been after something specific when they had set up the ritual in the old temple building.

"We found the bloodied page," Orshiasa admitted, frowning.

"The one Queran left his handprint on." Max nodded. "It was that page they had been looking at," she offered, hoping to prompt the Guardian to give her more information.

"It didn't make much sense. It wasn't a higher level spell," Orshiasa said. Max had to hold in a dozen questions and the urge to shake him. For once, she'd like a straightforward, complete answer.

"So they weren't trying to open another portal or the Grey Gates?" Bryce asked.

The question clearly startled Orshiasa. He seemed to have forgotten that the warrior was there. The tentative warmth that Max had been feeling towards him cooled. Like the other Guardians, Orshiasa had always seemed to view the warriors as useful pieces to move about in whatever game they were playing. The Guardians rarely interacted with the warriors as people. In the Order, there had rarely been more than a handful of Guardians, an elite group vastly outnumbered by the warriors, but still firmly in control.

Before Orshiasa could answer, the shrill sound of a phone ringing cut through the conversation. Max dug into the pocket at the front of her sweatshirt, pulling her gun out first, which she set on the table next to her water glass, and then her phone. The number on the display was vaguely familiar, so she answered.

“Hi, this is Max.”

“Max, honey, can you meet me in the city with those hounds of yours?” The warm voice of the city’s chief medical examiner was unexpected. Audhilde, one of the oldest vampires in the city.

“Sure. Is something wrong?” Max asked, getting up and putting the gun back in her pocket. She took a quick glance down at her outfit. Yesterday’s clothes, and she hadn’t brushed her hair. Still, it would have to do. The idea of struggling out of this outfit and into something else with only one hand was not appealing.

“I’ll say. You remember the two bodies from the temple? Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan?” Audhilde asked.

“Of course. Well, sort of. I heard that they were missing from the mortuary,” Max said, frowning. That had been one of the first things she had learned when she had woken up. “Have you found them?”

“No. But there’s been a report that they were seen walking around the city,” Audhilde said.

“Sorry. This line must be bad. I thought you said that two dead bodies had been seen walking around the city?” Max asked, standing perfectly still in her kitchen, a sense of dread creeping across her body. Both Oliver and Hemang had been quite definitely dead. Audhilde herself had confirmed it, and the ancient vampire didn’t make mistakes with things like that.

“You heard me right. This is not acceptable, Max.” The vampire’s normally warm tone had cooled. She sounded offended. “Those men were dead. They have no business being upright and walking.”

“Send me the address to meet you,” Max said. “Do you want me to see if I can get Aurora and Ben to bring their hounds, too?” she asked, naming the most experienced shadow-hound handlers and trainers in the city.

“Not just yet,” Audhilde said.

“Alright. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Max said, and ended the call. A moment later, a text popped up on the screen with an address that made Max’s brows lift. “That’s in the Forster Family territory,” she said to herself. She memorised the address and put her phone away, looking up to find both Bryce and Orshiasa staring at her with intent expressions.

“Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan are alive?” Bryce asked, sounding astonished.

“No,” Max said, shaking her head. “Audhilde wouldn’t make a mistake like that. They were dead.”

“But walking around,” Orshiasa finished. He looked unusually serious, even for him. “Give me your hand, Miscellandreax,” he said, holding out both of his. She offered him her good hand. “No, the other one.”

Puzzled, she held out her immobilised hand and arm. Orshiasa might have been verbally disapproving, but he had never physically hurt her, and she trusted he would not do so now. He put his hands around her fingers, his skin shockingly warm against hers.

“This may sting a little, but I have a notion that you are going to need to be fully fit,” Orshiasa said.

Before Max had time to think, a warm coil of magic slid over her skin and underneath the cast, burrowing deep into her arm, scorching along the bones. There were three brilliant, white hot, breathtaking points of intense pain that made her gasp. She put her good hand on the table to brace herself. The heat and pain faded, leaving a sensation of what she could only think of as wholeness. Orshiasa moved his hands, taking hold of the cast on her arm and peeling it back as if it were paper.

Max looked down at her arm. It was mottled with bruising and the imprint of the cast, but her fingers worked perfectly when she moved them and there was no pain as she gently rotated her wrist.

“You healed me,” she said to Orshiasa, amazed. She had known he was a highly accomplished magician, but she had never known that healing magic could be so complete.

“It seemed appropriate,” he said. He sat back in his chair. He looked pale and she frowned in concern. “No. Do not worry. Healing takes energy, that is all. I will sit for a moment and then Bryce will take me back to the Order. But now you are ready for whatever may be required of you.”

“Thank you,” Max said, the words feeling small and inadequate. He had just spared her at least another week of wearing the cast on her arm and being on restricted duty. She turned her arm again, marvelling at the smooth movement, then realised something else. Audhilde needed her, and she could now dress appropriately for work.

And, now that she was healed, she could start looking for Evan and Queran. Once she'd found the walking corpses for Audhilde.

Chapter Four

MAX PARKED HER PICK-UP behind Audhilde's sleek city car and got out, breathing in the scent of damp tarmac, the faint trace of exhaust fumes and the clean, sharp scent of citrus fruit.

The address Audhilde had given her was quite far into the city, inside the territory claimed by the Forster Family. It was a residential street made up of terraces of large houses on either side with a wide strip of a private garden in the middle, the garden hemmed in by a head-high iron fence. The houses themselves were built from pale sand-coloured stone, the ground floors elevated from street level and accessed by wide, shallow steps made of the same stone. The stone had a faint gleam in the early night, reflecting back the white glimmer of street lights. There was some magic in the air, but it seemed benign. A lot of the wealthier areas had spells in place to reduce traffic noise, and keep buildings clean. And this was a very upscale area. The wealth wasn't just evident from the size of the houses, or the sleek cars parked outside them, but also

the private gardens and the scent of citrus fruits heavy in the air. The fruits were difficult to grow outside the special habitats created in the city's farming areas. So the residents here probably had at least one full-time gardener. Not something most people could afford.

Max picked her shotgun from the passenger seat and set it into the loop on her thigh, along with a spare magazine of shells. Her handgun was already in place, extra ammunition and her back-up gun settled under her jacket in the small of her back. It might only have been a few days since she had been on duty, but it still felt strange - and good - to be back in her working clothes, consisting of a dark red leather jacket that had seen better days, and close-fitting trousers made of hard-wearing, flexible cloth. It also felt good to be clean, thanks to a couple of spare cleaning spells she'd found in her jacket. She'd even managed to run a brush through her hair.

She got out of the pick-up and signalled for Cas and Pol to get out of the open back of the vehicle. They landed silently on the road surface beside her, eyes bright, inspecting their surroundings with interest. It seemed that they had missed working, too.

Looking around, she saw a shadow standing on the other side of the road, tucked behind a pair of sleek vehicles. It looked like a man, and someone she should be familiar with, although he was too far away for her to make out the details of his face. He seemed to be looking in her direction. She frowned, tempted to cross the street and find out what he wanted, but she spotted Audhilde at the doorway of the nearest

house in conversation with someone just inside the open door. The home owner, Max assumed. She glanced back across the street, but the shadowed figure was gone, so Max turned back to the house and made her way across to the front step.

“You called a Marshal?” the home owner said in disgust, lip curling. Not just any city resident, Max realised. This was someone she had come across before, in less than good circumstances. Grayson Forster owned and ran a bar called the Sorcerer’s Mistress, and underneath the bar had been an arena which had hosted fights between various supernatural creatures. The underground fights had gone on for a long time until one of Grayson’s creatures had escaped while Max was visiting the bar and the Marshals service had shut down the operation. As far as Max knew, the bar was still there, but she wasn’t sure how profitable it was now that the illegal fights had been stopped.

“Would you rather I had called the Order?” Audhilde asked, a sharp edge to her voice.

Max stayed quiet, stopping at the bottom of the steps. Audhilde might have looked petite and delicate next to the taller human, with soft brown curls tumbling around her head, but she didn’t need any help from Max - or, indeed, anyone else - dealing with the likes of Grayson. Max was curious as to what she might learn if she just stayed quiet.

The young man glared at the ancient vampire, but didn’t say anything hasty or rude, which suggested he had some common sense at least.

“Did you bring me what I asked?” Audhilde’s voice was almost back to its normal, warm tones.

“Yes,” Grayson said. The light inside the house caught highlights in his carefully arranged blond hair as he reached behind the door. Max forced herself to stay still. It was unlikely he would pull a weapon on Audhilde, even in his own Family territory. His hand reappeared, holding the top of a paper bag. “I picked this out of Oliver’s laundry. It’s a few days old, but should still have his scent.”

Max’s brows lifted. Audhilde had sent a prominent member of one of the Five Families on an errand to fetch dirty laundry. And Grayson had obeyed. He had also come here without his bodyguards, Max noted. Perhaps he didn’t think he needed them in his own Family’s territory.

“Tell Max what you told me,” Audhilde ordered, taking the bag from Grayson.

The man’s eyes flicked over Max and dismissed her. When he spoke, his eyes were on the vampire. “This was Oliver’s house. One of my cousins phoned me to say that she’d seen Oliver and someone else around the back of the house last night. Which she thought was strange, as we’d been told he was dead. I couldn’t find any trace of him, but called Audhilde as a precaution.”

“You said Oliver and someone else. Do you know who?” Max asked.

“No. My cousin thought it looked like one of the Raghavan Family. Which didn’t make sense, as Oliver didn’t have any

connections with them.” Grayson’s eyes flicked over Max again. He was telling the truth, as far as she could tell. She wondered how he would react if she told him that Oliver Forster had been involved in the raid on the Vault, using dark magic to search individual magicians’ storage areas for a dark magic Codex.

“Apart from you, who else has been around the back of the house?” she asked. With the help of the laundry Audhilde was holding, her dogs should be able to pick up Oliver’s scent, but she wanted to know how compromised the scene might be before she set to work.

“No one as far as I know,” Grayson said, brows lifting. “It’s just the service entrance. Why would anyone go there?” His tone held a careless arrogance that set Max’s teeth on edge. He had stopped short of calling it the servants’ entrance, but she knew that was what he had meant. Of course a man like Grayson Forster would have servants, and have as little to do with them as possible.

“Where can we find your cousin?” Max asked.

“She doesn’t want to speak to anyone,” Grayson said, whole body going tense. “That’s why I’m here.”

Max looked back at him for a moment. There was no point in demanding more information about his cousin. She was here as a courtesy to Audhilde, not in her official capacity. As a Marshal, she had no authority over human affairs, and the police were extremely unlikely to put pressure on a high-ranking member of one of the Five Families. So she was stuck

with the second-hand information he was providing. Always assuming that his cousin had told him everything.

“Alright. What was your relationship with Oliver?” Max asked.

“We were brothers,” Grayson said, shoulders square as he looked back at her. She remembered the confident, arrogant man she had first met in the Sorcerer’s Mistress and saw him again at that moment. She also saw a hint of defensiveness. They had been half brothers, not full brothers. Oliver’s father had been something other than human, and Grayson was entirely human. Grayson was a skilled magician, but nowhere near as powerful as Oliver had been. She couldn’t help wondering which one of them had been older, and which one had resented the other more. She was tempted to ask, but it was none of her business and not really relevant to finding Oliver.

“Where can we find you if we need to?” Max asked instead.

“Through the Family office,” Grayson said. He flicked a switch on the wall beside him and the house interior went dark. He stepped out and pulled the door shut. Max heard the quiet snick of a lock and felt the frisson of magic engaging. Of course Oliver Forster’s house would be protected by magic, and from the feel of the power, any would-be burglar trying to break in would be lucky to escape with their life.

“Was there any sign that Oliver had been inside the house?” Max asked.

Grayson stared back at her. “I didn’t check. He’s supposed to be dead. Why would he be inside the house?”

“Why would he be out at the back of the house?” Audhilde countered, sounding annoyed. “You should let us look inside.”

“No,” Grayson said, seemingly revolted by the idea. “This was Oliver’s home. I’ll not have strangers trampling over his belongings. You can look outside, that’s all.”

“We will start there,” Max agreed. She didn’t want to start a full-blown argument with one of the Five Families within their territory. “But we may have to get access to the house if the trail leads there,” she added.

“It won’t,” Grayson said, sounding confident. With that, he came down the steps, brushed past her and stalked away, getting into one of the larger, shinier cars parked on the street.

“I remember when that child was learning to walk,” Audhilde said, coming down the steps to stand beside Max. “He was trouble even then. Like his brother. Oliver was older, in case you’re wondering. And there’s at least one other, older brother, too.”

“Interesting,” Max said. Her phone vibrated and she pulled it out, reading the text on her screen. “Faddei and Vanko are nearly here. They’ve asked us to wait for them.”

“You called for back-up?” Audhilde asked. Rather than the disgust that had been in Grayson’s voice when he had spotted Max, Audhilde seemed nothing more than curious. Max felt heat run up her neck and across her face. It seemed her

preference for working alone had been noticed. She shouldn't be surprised, as the old vampire did not miss much. She decided not to tell Audhilde that she had called Faddei as a courtesy, to let him know what was going on, and he'd insisted that he would join the search. Bryce and Orshiasa were on their way back to the Order, and Max had wanted her boss to know that Oliver and Hemang seemed to have been spotted wandering about the city.

“Oh, and while we're on unexpected things, what happened to your arm?” Audhilde asked.

“Orshiasa healed me,” Max answered. She lifted her hand, marvelling at the smooth movement of her fingers. “That cast was really annoying.”

“Interesting,” Audhilde said, eyes narrowed as she looked at Max. “And what did Orshiasa want of you in return?”

“Nothing,” Max said, with perfect truth. She'd answered the Guardian's questions before he had healed her.

Before Audhilde could press her for more information, another battered and dented pick-up, this one with an enclosed back, arrived on the street. The driver parked it in the space Grayson had left and not two but three people got out of the vehicle. Faddei, Vanko, and Zoya. All three Marshals were dressed in leather jackets and hard-wearing trousers, and all of them gathered shotguns from the back of the pick-up before heading along the street to join Audhilde and Max.

“I'm surprised Max called you,” Audhilde said, a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

“So am I. But I’d like to encourage it, so let’s not tease her too much, ok?” Faddei said, grinning. With his bald head, broad shoulders and tattoos, Faddei didn’t look like the head of one of the city’s law enforcement agencies. But his muscular build was paired with a quick mind and a thirst for knowledge that every Marshal grew to appreciate. He was no longer on active duty, but still dressed for work in a similar outfit to Max’s.

Max felt heat rise to her face but stayed quiet. Her preference for working alone was well-known among the Marshals, and a point of contention between her and Faddei, although he respected her wishes and her reasons for the request.

“Faddei said something about walking corpses?” Vanko was unofficially Faddei’s second in command, built in a similar way to the head Marshal but with tousled blond hair and a far readier smile and streak of mischief. He lifted a brow at Audhilde. “You’ve not been doing something occult in the mortuary, have you, Audhilde?”

“You know perfectly well I reserve that sort of thing for weekends at home, young man,” Audhilde said, a grin crossing her face. Her humour faded quickly. “One of the Forster Family spotted Oliver and someone else who might have been one of the Raghavan Family in the road behind these houses. That one there,” Audhilde said, and pointed, “belongs to Oliver. Belonged, I suppose, although that might depend what we find.”

“They were dead, weren’t they?” Zoya asked. Her warm-toned brown skin gleamed in the street lights, brow wrinkling. She’d changed her hair since Max had last seen her, the thick braids now a deep red colour. “I mean, everyone said they were dead.”

“If we’re talking about Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan then, yes, they were both quite definitely dead,” Audhilde said. There was not a sliver of doubt in her statement.

“And now possibly walking around the city,” Vanko put in.

“Let’s go and find out, shall we?” Faddei suggested. “I hope your cast is off because the arm is healed?” he added, frowning slightly at Max’s hand.

“It’s healed,” she told him. “I’m fine.” She turned to Audhilde. “You requested a scent sample?”

“I did. I’m sure your hounds would be able to find a trail, but I thought it might help,” Audhilde said. “We’d best get on. They were seen here in the early hours, and there’s no telling how far they’ve gone,” she said.

Max called her dogs and, with the other three Marshals, followed the petite woman along the front of the terrace and around the end. The terrace was separated from the next block of buildings by a service road that led from the street in between the high stone walls that enclosed the rear gardens of the houses, before the road turned sharply behind the buildings. The road was narrow and unlit, the houses casting deep shadows as night set in. Max grabbed her torch from her

pocket and clicked it on. The beam showed an uneven road surface, badly in need of repair, and several rubbish bins sitting haphazardly along the road, a few bags of rubbish lying beside them. However neat and tidy the residents liked their houses to appear from the front, that clearly didn't extend to the back.

The stone wall was well maintained, broken at regular intervals by solid wooden gates that led into the individual gardens. She couldn't see any other living creature in the range of her torch, but a trace of unease slid across her skin as she looked ahead. The service road was bounded on one side by the wall at the back of the terraced houses, and on the other side by an equally tall wooden fence that seemed to border another set of gardens. Her torch beam didn't travel very far, and the path ahead was an enclosed space, full of shadows where anything could hide.

“Let me give the dogs the scent,” Max suggested.

Audhilde didn't say anything, just opened the paper bag she'd been given and held the open mouth of it out.

“Get the scent,” Max told her dogs. First Pol then Cas approached the vampire and took a long sniff inside the bag. Her dogs' presence next to Audhilde made her look even more petite - their raised heads were as high as Audhilde's shoulder. “Go find him,” Max told her dogs.

They cast about with their noses on the ground, starting in a tight circle then widening out into a spiral before Pol headed

off along the narrow, dark road, moving with a quiet, steady purpose. Cas followed, matching Pol's pace.

“Well, Oliver has definitely been here,” Max told the others. She drew her gun and set off after her dogs.

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Chapter Five

OLIVER'S HOUSE HAD BEEN roughly halfway along the terrace, from what Max remembered, and her dogs went about the same length along the service road before they stopped at a collection of bins, a couple of which had been knocked over, the contents spilling onto the ground. The smell made Max's eyes water and she couldn't help but think that the home owners should spend some energy and resources in keeping their rubbish spaces intact and out of reach of predators. The city had its share of rats and foxes as well as the supernatural creatures that might wander through from time to time.

Behind her, she was aware of the three Marshals spaced out across the roadway, Audhilde between them. The spacing was deliberate, to give them maximum cover in case they encountered anything.

In front of her, Cas and Pol started circling, noses to the ground. They were moving slowly, staying in a tight space. As Max watched, they each shifted into their attack forms, their

teeth and claws and coats lengthening. She tightened her grip on her gun. Her hounds had far better senses than she did, and they'd identified some kind of a threat in whatever it was they were sniffing. She glanced back at the other Marshals to make sure they were on alert. She need not have worried. They had seen the change in the hounds, too, and were staying vigilant.

“Do they need the scent again?” Audhilde asked as the dogs continued to circle.

“Not just now,” Max said, keeping a close watch on her dogs. “They’ve followed the trail here, but it looks like it’s got confused.”

“Confused?” Audhilde echoed Max’s term.

“Sometimes if there’s a stronger scent overlaying the trail, or magic has been used, it can disrupt the scent,” Max said, still watching her dogs. “As they’ve changed form, I’m guessing they’ve come across a trace of a predator. They haven’t given up on finding Oliver, though.”

“Anyone else feel like we’re being watched?” Zoya asked, voice tense.

The others all agreed, even Audhilde. “I can sense a few people in the houses. Perhaps they are wondering what we are doing,” the vampire said. “But I don’t think that’s what we’re feeling.”

Now that the others had drawn her attention to it, Max became aware of an itch between her shoulder blades. And realised, too, just how vulnerable they all were in this tight

space with high boundaries on either side. A few months ago she would have said that four Marshals, a pair of shadow hounds and an ancient vampire could handle any threat. Now, though, she knew better. Queran and his new master, Evan, had proved themselves to be powerful and resilient. And she had no idea how to deal with a walking corpse.

Pol moved apart from Cas, nose to the ground, and began pacing away. Max called Cas to her side and started following.

“What happened?” Audhilde asked, voice tense.

“Pol’s the better tracker of the pair,” Max explained, quickening her steps to keep up with her dogs. “If he thinks there’s a trail, then there’s a trail.”

They were heading towards the other end of the service road, and the end of the terrace of houses. Max frowned. She trusted her dogs absolutely. Which meant that Oliver had been here, but for some reason hadn’t gone into his house. Instead, he had moved on. She glanced over her shoulder at the back of what she guessed was Oliver Forster’s house, but couldn’t see anything obvious that might have stopped him from going in. He was the owner, so the magical protections on the building should have let him in. Always assuming that they were indeed following Oliver Forster, somehow risen from the mortuary table. The house looked empty. Whoever was watching the Marshals and Audhilde, they weren’t in that particular house.

Max turned back to face ahead. Cas was staying beside her.

There was a darker patch of shadow towards the end of the road, tucked against the wall. As Max turned her torch towards it, the shadow moved. She called Pol back at once, levelling her gun at the shadows and at the edges of her sight saw the other Marshals doing the same. The other Marshals' torch beams joined hers. The shadow was too far away to make out much detail, but the brighter light picked up more movement. More than one thing had been huddled there in the shelter of the wall.

Long legs slid across the uneven surface of the service road. Too many legs.

Max's mouth dried, her pulse thudding in her ears. Her first thought was that they were facing a mammoth spider. More than one. But the legs were thicker. And there were only four legs on each creature. As they moved away from the wall, Max saw that there were three creatures, all of them with large bodies - larger than an adult human - suspended between four legs that were jointed like a spider's. The creatures' backs were nearly the height of the wall. Yellow eyes gleamed in the torch light over long noses that ended in enormous teeth. Max swallowed hard. She'd never seen anything like these creatures before. Not in any of the Marshals' texts.

"Sweet Lady. What are those?" Zoya whispered.

"Dark dogs," Audhilde answered, her voice grim. "Made of black magic. Foul things."

"Not just dark magic," Faddei said, as grim as Audhilde. "Demon magic. They are creatures of the underworld."

Max opened her mouth to say that she had never seen such things in the underworld, then swallowed. That wasn't helpful right now. "What kills them?" Max asked, her voice too high.

"Bullets might work if you have enough of them," the vampire said, "but the easiest way is with magic."

The vampire's voice had changed, deepening as she spoke and Max risked a glance over her shoulder. Audhilde had shed her human appearance and was wearing her vampire face. A vampire's natural form was designed to seduce their victims. Audhilde was no exception. She looked stunning, her otherworldly beauty striking even in the poor light. The warmth and humanness that she displayed in her everyday form was sharpened, honed into something glorious and compelling and dangerous. Max had to stop herself from taking a step towards her.

"Stay out of my way," the petite woman said, and strode forward between Max and her hounds.

The first of the three dark dogs watched Audhilde's approach with its teeth bared, and scampered forward, clearly not believing her to be any threat. Max set her gun to automatic, rapid fire and held her ground, several paces away from the vampire.

Audhilde lifted her arm and a wave of power burst out from her, thudding into the dark dog, throwing it off its feet and into the wooden fence on the other side of the road. The fence cracked, spilling the creature into the garden behind it.

The other two creatures charged forward and Max lifted her gun, holding it ready just in case. Audhilde had seen them coming, though, and sent them flying with another wave of power. Her power was an extension of her. Warm and vibrant, with a dark undertone and the feeling of centuries behind it. It was beautiful and deadly, and Max had to stop herself again from moving forward towards the ancient vampire.

Movement at the corner of her eye had her turning, gun levelled, only to see Vanko and Zoya moving forward, their attention on Audhilde.

“Vanko. Zoya. Stand your ground,” Max called. The lure of a vampire in their true form was difficult to resist for most people, and for an unlucky few, impossible to resist, particularly with a powerful vampire. And there were almost no other vampires in the city as powerful as Audhilde.

The pair of Marshals hesitated, but only for a moment. Faddei moved after them, holstering his weapon and grabbing each of them by the arm, pulling them backwards, further along the service road.

Satisfied that Faddei would look after the other Marshals, Max turned her attention back to the dark dogs and Audhilde. Cas and Pol were on either side of her, low growls in their throats, and she commanded them to stay where they were. She had no idea what the dark dogs were capable of and didn't want her hounds getting tangled up in the battle between the dark magic creatures and the vampire.

Audhilde flung more magic at the dark dog that was approaching her. The creature was ready for her, and the blast sent it sideways rather than reeling again. It righted itself and approached, teeth bared, long strings of saliva hanging from its open mouth.

Audhilde did not yield. Instead, she put her hands in front of her, palms together in the classic pose of a magician drawing their power. Vivid orange light formed between her hands. Audhilde threw a ball of the orange light at the nearest dark dog just before it reached her. The ball broke open against the creature's dark skin, spilling vivid orange and red and blue flames across its body. It screamed, the sound raising every hair on Max's body, and stumbled back, hitting one of the other dark dogs. The magic fire transferred across to the second dark dog and it, too, screamed.

The ground in front of Audhilde was empty, the vampire keeping watch over the burning creatures as their long, multi-jointed legs tangled together in the midst of the magic fire. The smell of burning hair and flesh filled the air, catching at the back of Max's throat.

With two of the three dark dogs burning up, Max looked for the third, wondering if it had run away rather than face the magician who had killed its companions. She couldn't see it anywhere on the street. She lowered her gun a fraction, taking a closer look around. It didn't seem to be anywhere close.

Audhilde was focused on the two burning bodies. Making sure they were dead or, more accurately, dying. Even as Max

watched, the legs twitched in the flames in a way that suggested the creatures hadn't given up on their lives quite yet. She half-raised her gun again, even though her bullets would not nearly be as effective as the vampire's magic.

"Where's the other one?" Max shouted over the crackle of flames.

"I lost sight of it," Faddei shouted back.

"Perhaps it's gone?" Vanko asked. Trust Vanko to find a positive outlook.

Audhilde didn't answer or speculate, focused on the flames and the creatures which were, finally, beginning to die. Apparently satisfied that the dark dogs were dead, the vampire turned to Max, opening her mouth to speak.

As she turned her back, a great, dark leg slid over the side of the fence at Audhilde's back, followed by the body and other legs of the third dark dog. It had moved through the gardens. Max opened her mouth to shout a warning. Audhilde must have seen Max's expression change. The vampire whirled, with her faster-than-human reflexes, bringing her hands up with more magic gathering.

If the vampire was fast, the dark dog was faster, by nothing more than a fraction of a moment in time. It was just enough. Max watched in horror as the creature slammed into Audhilde, sending the vampire tumbling to the ground. Audhilde released her magic into her attacker and rolled away. The creature screamed, striking out with its awful legs, catching Audhilde, sending the vampire to the ground again. Its hide

smouldering from the vampire's magic, the dark dog followed its prey, standing over her, its giant mouth open.

Max opened fire, taking care to aim above Audhilde's head, emptying a full magazine into the creature.

It squealed, its head whipping around, focusing on her. It left the vampire on the ground and headed for Max, barely pausing at the bullets hitting its body. She fumbled to reload her gun and started firing again when it was a few feet from her. It surged forward, using one of its too-long legs to swipe at her, sending her stumbling back into the stone wall. She managed to stay on her feet, and keep her gun.

Cas and Pol snarled and moved, both of them heading for the same leg, as if they had planned and coordinated the move. They grabbed hold of the creature's leg, dragging it sideways, away from Audhilde and Max.

Max reloaded her gun and braced herself against the wall, firing again. Over the roar of her dogs, the screams of the dark dog and the rapid pulse of her own weapon, she heard other gunfire. As she ejected another empty magazine, she glanced over and saw that Vanko, Zoya and Faddei were standing in a line several paces away, all of them firing into the creature.

Four Marshals firing at it finally, finally stopped the creature. It slumped to the ground, black ichor seeping from its body, the smell of it making Max want to gag. Her dogs let go of the leg they had held onto and came back to her side without being asked. She gave them each a pat for a job well done.

She looked around. The two dark dogs that Audhilde had set fire to were smouldering husks, slumped together in the remains of the wooden fence. The dark dog she and the other Marshals had shot wasn't moving. Nor was Audhilde.

Max holstered her gun and went to the vampire's side, kneeling on the pitted road surface.

Audhilde looked impossibly small and fragile in the poor light. She was back in her human form, the unearthly beauty of her vampire nature tucked away. There was a huge swelling on one side of her head, blood seeping sluggishly from a wound hidden in her hair.

Max's chest ached. She was used to thinking of the vampire as indestructible, and it was shocking to see her so still and injured.

"I'll call for a medical team," Faddei said.

"No, wait. I'm not sure that the hospital will be able to help her. I'll call her house instead," Max said. She pulled out her phone and hunted until she found the number that Audhilde had included on the invitation to afternoon tea what felt like a lifetime ago.

The phone was picked up on the second ring.

"Marshal Ortis, this is an unexpected pleasure. How may we help you?" The voice at the end of the phone was the older woman in Audhilde's household whose name had vanished from Max's memory.

“I’m with Audhilde. She’s been injured. Head wound. Should we call for paramedics?” Max asked.

The woman answered immediately. “No. Give us your location and we will be there as soon as we can. Is she breathing?” There was a quiver to the last few words.

“Yes. Her breathing is steady, but the head wound looks bad and she’s not waking up,” Max said, then gave the address and directions.

She hung up the phone to find Faddei standing a few paces away, his own phone held to his ear.

“He’s calling Raymund,” Vanko said. He and Zoya were standing back to back, weapons ready, keeping an eye on their surroundings. “Sorry,” Vanko added, sounding embarrassed.

“For what?” Max asked, getting to her feet.

“Getting, er, distracted,” Vanko said, not looking at her. It took Max a moment to remember that Faddei had had to drag both Vanko and Zoya away from Audhilde in her vampire form.

“I’ve never felt anything like her power before,” Zoya said, still sounding slightly dazed. “How did you resist it?”

“I don’t know,” Max said honestly. “I mean, I felt it,” she added. “Perhaps I’ve just spent more time around vampires recently,” she said. Apart from Audhilde, Max had also spent time with another ancient and probably more powerful vampire, Lord Kolbyr. She had also managed to resist his lure. With the events of the day jumbled up in her head, another

possibility occurred to her and she wondered if the tiny bit of her that wasn't human, courtesy of Kitris, had helped her to resist not one but two vampires. It was the sort of thing she might have asked Kitris if she had been at all inclined to talk to him, or believed he might give her a straight answer.

She should have asked Orshiasa more about descendants, she realised. It still felt odd to think of herself in that way, however true it might be. Orshiasa had given her some useful information, believing that they were discussing Evan and possibly Kitris. If she ever got the chance to speak to her former master again, she made a mental note to ask him more about the inherited qualities that descendants might have. The various teachers Max had had over the years had clearly established that she didn't have the aptitude for working magic like the Order did, but she did have some magic.

“That makes sense,” Vanko said, and gave an exaggerated shudder, “although I don't envy you spending time with Kolbyr.”

“He terrifies me,” Zoya admitted candidly. Her eyes and most of her outward attention were still on their surroundings.

“Careful, he might hear you,” Vanko said, mischief on his face.

“Oh, stop. I don't need any more nightmares,” Zoya grumbled.

“Are Audhilde's people coming for her?” Faddei asked, coming back to them.

“Yes. They should be here in a few minutes,” Max said. She checked the load in her magazine and repressed a sigh. She’d gone through more ammunition in that one encounter than she normally did in a month. She was going to need to start carrying even more spare ammunition if there were any more dark dogs lurking in the city. She couldn’t rely on having a powerful vampire with her at all times. And she would hate for Audhilde to get injured again. As it was, she was trying not to look at the vampire too much, the ache still in her chest. “If you’ll wait for Raymund and Audhilde’s people, I’m going to check what those creatures were guarding,” she told her boss. From the quirk of his mouth, he’d noticed that she’d come close to giving him an order. She didn’t want him or the other Marshals injured if she could help it, and she had Cas and Pol as formidable back-up if needed.

“Be careful,” he warned her. He didn’t try to stop her, though.

“Always,” Max said, and called her dogs to go with her.

Chapter Six

MAX SHONE HER TORCH ahead as she walked, scanning the patch of wall that the dark dogs had been huddled against. It looked like they had been guarding the gate into the back garden of the last house on the terrace. As she approached, she caught a sharp, bitter scent that might be from the dark dogs.

The narrow beam of her torch didn't show any more creatures, not even a rat or fox, waiting for her. She stopped next to the wall and rose onto her toes, trying to see over the top of it. Even with the extra height, she couldn't see much. The garden was wreathed in shadow, but none of it seemed to be moving. There wasn't any magic on the wall or gate that she could sense. The surface of the gate and the handle gleamed with some liquid coating in her torch light, so she pulled a cloth from one of her pockets and draped that over the handle before she turned the latch.

Over her career as a Marshal, she had opened a lot of doors not knowing what might be on the other side. But she'd never

been worried about a creature from the underworld surging up to meet her.

The gate gave way with an ominous creak. She pushed it all the way open, back against the wall, and paused, shining her torch into the garden area. It looked as if it had once been well-tended, but had become overgrown, the plants growing into each other. There was a stone path of sorts between head-high shrubs and at least one ornamental tree that had become choked with creeping vines. But all she could see were plants. Nothing else. She glanced down at her dogs. They were still in their attack forms, but they weren't focused on anything in particular.

“Alright,” she said, mostly to herself, “let's go and see what was so special about this particular garden and house.”

Cas and Pol went ahead of her and she stepped through the gate with her gun ready.

A few paces along the path and she realised that she was not the first person to use it recently. There were broken branches suggesting something about her height had made its way through here not that long ago. Looking down, she saw that one of the stones was missing from the path and in the space was a clear boot print cast into stark contrast by her torch beam. The print was heading in the direction of the house. The same way she was going. Someone, rather than something, she amended in her mind.

As she passed the missing stone, the faintest trace of magic washed over her skin, sliding under the collar of her jacket,

tugging her senses. It felt wrong. Like dark magic that had been further corrupted, made even darker somehow. Something that shouldn't exist in this world. The sensation of magic reminded her of the grey smoke of the underworld.

Max's fingers tightened on the grip of her gun and she took slow, careful breaths, trying to calm her heart rate. This wasn't the underworld. This was the daylight world. And she was not alone. Not this time. She had her hounds with her.

Cas stopped in front of her, going stock still, so she had to stop, too, or run into the back of him. Pol moved to stand next to his brother, both of them focused on something ahead.

The shadowed bulk of the building loomed over their heads. There were at least four storeys, including the basement, the house's windows glinting in the faint starlight, each one seemingly empty and devoid of life. And yet Max knew she was being watched. She could feel the pressure of unseen eyes and glanced over her shoulder to make sure that there was nothing behind her.

She raised her torch, shining it ahead to the back of the building. The light gleamed off the blank windows and a narrow, wooden back door, set into the basement level. A little further along was a set of stairs leading up to the elevated first floor. At the top of the steps was a balcony and two glass doors that would give access to the house. But Max's attention snagged on two large shapes settled on the lower steps.

Her dogs growled low in their throats, and Max's mouth went dry. She'd found Oliver Forster. And Hemang Raghavan.

She couldn't help notice that, for corpses, they looked surprisingly alive. They had found clean clothes from somewhere, and she imagined that they could walk down a street without attracting too much attention. The only sign a casual passer-by might notice that suggested something wasn't quite right was a certain hollowness to their faces, with dark smudges under their eyes. Apart from that, if Max hadn't known better, she would not have guessed that they had no business walking around, and should in fact be in storage lockers in the mortuary.

The pair of supposedly dead men were sitting on the lower steps in eerily identical poses, elbows on knees, hands dangling, both of them with their eyes fixed on her as if they had never seen her before. The air around them was full of the foul magic and hints of grey smoke that Max had sensed in the garden. Things that should not be near any normal person. Something had happened to the pair to get them off the mortuary tables. Something that set Max's internal alarms flaring.

She carefully lowered her gun. The pair in front of her were some kind of threat, but she didn't know what she was dealing with, and they hadn't made any aggressive moves. Not yet, anyway. It would be helpful if she could talk to them, and maybe learn what had happened. Still, she kept her gun on automatic fire and her hounds were close by, their attention also fixed on the pair of apparently ordinary men sitting on the house's back steps.

“Oliver Forster. Hemang Raghavan. You aren’t where you’re supposed to be,” Max told them, her voice level.

The pair didn’t move. Didn’t blink. That was enough to make Max want to raise her gun again. She breathed through the internal struggle of wanting to lift her weapon, wanting to run, wanting to scream, her whole body rigid with the effort it took to stand still.

“Oliver Forster?” she prompted.

The pair moved. Turned to each other in a smooth, almost coordinated movement.

“Are you Oliver or am I?” Hemang asked.

“I don’t know,” Oliver answered. He turned back to Max. “Which one of us is which?” he asked.

Max’s skin crawled. Now she knew what was wrong with them. The smoke should have told her earlier. They weren’t Oliver and Hemang any longer. The faces and bodies were the same - Oliver with tanned skin and blond hair very similar to his brother, Grayson, and Hemang with warm-toned, mid-brown skin and silky black hair that never seemed to tangle - but something else looked back at her from behind the apparently normal eyes.

“You’re wearing the body that used to belong to Oliver Forster,” she said to Oliver - or, rather, not-Oliver - and tilted her head, “and he is wearing the body that used to belong to Hemang Raghavan.”

“Raghavan,” not-Hemang said, lips curving up in a chilling smile. “I know that name. We met a lovely little morsel. Shivangi Raghavan.”

“Hemang’s sister,” Max said, nausea rising. Shivangi Raghavan had been pulled through the remains of a dark magic ritual what felt like half a lifetime ago, but in reality was perhaps two weeks before. She’d been dragged into the world underneath. Max could still remember her screams. The woman had believed that service to the dark lord would gain her wealth and power in His realm. She had willingly participated in setting up the ritual, and had been preparing to use a number of innocent people as sacrifices to power the spell. Even so, Max did not think anyone deserved to be trapped in the underworld.

“She was delicious,” not-Hemang said, face still fixed in that awful smile.

“We haven’t had such lovely new meat to play with for quite a while,” not-Oliver added.

“She said she was a person of status and influence in this place,” not-Hemang said, tilting his head, eyes fixed on Max. He still hadn’t blinked, Max realised, her fingers tightening on the worn grip of her gun.

“She and her brother were, yes,” Max said. “But we don’t let dead people or demons have authority in this world,” she added, hoping she sounded confident. It was true that the law said no demon could rule, but demons had never been known for following the law.

“She told us about you, too,” not-Oliver said. He hadn’t moved, but Max could feel the air around him thickening with magic. “Marshal Max Ortis. You interfered with the ritual Shivangi and the others were preparing.”

“She called you a nuisance,” not-Hemang said, his gaze fixed on Max as if he was assessing her potential as prey.

“She was right,” not-Oliver said. “You destroyed our pets.”

They must mean the dark dogs, Max thought. Only a demon would call such terrible creatures pets.

Her gun wasn’t going to be enough, she realised, mouth dry. Each of the bodies in front of her had been taken over by something from the underworld. Demons. She forced herself to name them, even if it was just in her mind. But these were not like Queran. The watcher demon had been walking the daylight world for a long time. He’d had time to settle into the skin he was wearing and adopt more human mannerisms. Like blinking. It was strange how something so small and mundane became important when it was missing.

The pair of demons wearing the dead bodies of Oliver and Hemang were still staring at her. Waiting for something. Waiting for her to answer them, perhaps?

Max stayed quiet for a moment, absorbing the weight of the magic not-Oliver was gathering around him. The partly human Oliver Forster had been a powerful magician in his own right. She wondered if that made a difference to the amount of power the demon could draw on, or if the thing inhabiting Oliver’s body had brought its own power with it.

At the edge of her hearing, she caught the sounds of a vehicle moving along the service road. Perhaps Audhilde's people come to collect her. Or perhaps Faddei had called in reinforcements. A tiny bit of her own fear lifted. She might not need to face these things alone for much longer. The relief was short-lived, immediately replaced by worry for whoever else might come into the garden. None of the Marshals were equipped to deal with demons.

"You have the advantage," Max said, trying to keep the demons' attention on her. If they were focused on her, they wouldn't be hurting anyone else. "You know who I am, but I don't know who you are."

Not-Oliver's face moved, lips peeling back in the parody of a smile. "No, you don't, do you? This will be fun."

The word *fun* made her want to run away. She didn't want to find out what demons might consider fun. She held her ground with effort, hearing low growls from her dogs as they picked up on some of the tension. "What are you doing here?" she asked the demons.

"Nosy little thing, aren't you? And just as weak as Shivangi said." Not-Oliver's voice sent chills down her spine, carrying a lower, deeper undertone than should be possible from a human throat. His lips peeled back from his white teeth again. "What we're about is none of your concern."

Just as she was forming the words to ask him more questions, the pair stood up, the movements abrupt, as if they were still adapting to their new bodies.

“We’ll let you live. For now. But do not follow. Do not interfere, Marshal Max Ortis,” not-Hemang said, his voice carrying the same deeper, non-human note as Oliver’s.

Not-Oliver flicked his fingers in her direction and a wave of dark magic slammed into her, sending her off her feet, back into the thick plant life in the garden. She landed hard, the sound of breaking branches overwhelmed by the low snarls from her dogs and the crash of breaking glass.

“Stay!” she yelled, fear for her dogs getting her back to her feet, gun still in her hand, light-headed with relief when she saw that her dogs had obeyed. They were standing stock still in front of her, focusing on the space where not-Oliver and not-Hemang had been. At the top of the steps was a dark gap that should have held the house’s glass doors, suggesting that the demons had simply walked through the doors to make their escape.

Max didn’t hesitate, going up the steps to the open space, boots crunching on broken glass as she reached the balcony. Her hounds were with her, apparently unbothered by the jagged shards under their paws. She shone her torch into the house and stopped in her tracks, outside the building, held motionless by the sight that met her eyes. Cas and Pol stayed with her without being asked. Her stomach twisted. The harsh light of her torch swept the room, throwing everything into shadow and sharp relief, highlighting the horror inside. Bodies. Several of them, the air that Max drew in full of the metallic taste of blood. She forced herself to do another, slower, sweep of the room with her torch. Four dead at least,

and from the quantity of blood and the extent of the wounds she could see, none of them had died easily.

“Coming up behind you.” Faddei’s familiar voice sounded just before she heard boot treads on the steps. “Vanko and Zoya as well. Where’s the threat?”

“Gone, I think,” Max said. She was still in the threshold of the room, she realised, reluctant to take a step forward and see more closely what the demons had done. “But we’re going to need some more back-up. There are dead people. We’ll need the police, too,” she added.

Faddei stopped just behind her. She normally hated having people at her back, but this was Faddei, so she made herself stay still, attention on the room in front of her. His torch light joined hers and he hissed out a breath.

“Vanko, call the duty detective,” he ordered. “Tell them we’ve got multiple dead at this address.” He paused. “You said more back-up?” he asked, sounding surprised.

“I saw Oliver and Hemang. Or, rather, I saw their bodies,” Max said, and glanced over her shoulder at her boss. “They’ve got demons in them now.”

Faddei muttered a curse. “We’re going to need the Order,” he said, grim. “Always assuming Kitris actually answers the call.”

“Hold on. Let me try something,” Max said. “Can you keep watch for a moment?” she asked.

“Of course.”

She took a step sideways and back out onto the balcony, pulling out her phone and dialling Bryce's number. He'd made sure that they had each other's contact information before he had left the hospital.

He answered on the third ring. "Is everything alright?"

"No," she said honestly. "Is Orshiasa still with you?"

"Yes. We're almost back at the Order." That meant they weren't far away. The Order of the Lady of Light owned several blocks that sat awkwardly amid Five Family territories, and which were off limits to the city residents, including the Five Families. "What do you need?" Bryce asked. There was no hesitation in his voice. She wanted to hug him.

"Can you join me and other Marshals at a crime scene? We could use Orshiasa's expertise. There are more demons in the city," Max said.

"Text me the address and we'll meet you there as soon as we can," Bryce said, and hung up.

Max sent the text, including an instruction to come around the back of the building, and looked up to find Faddei watching her with his brows lifted. Vanko and Zoya were beside him, keeping watch on the room with the bodies.

"Orshiasa?" Faddei asked.

"He's supposed to be trained in dealing with dark magic and demons," Max said, then shook her head, aware she sounded defensive. "I was speaking to him and Bryce earlier. He said he'd studied the Codex. He might be able to tell us what

Oliver and Hemang were doing here. Or, rather, not-Oliver and not-Hemang.” She blew out a breath, shaking her head again. There had been too many shocks and moving parts to this day already, and the night wasn’t over. Then she remembered why she was here in the first place. The medical examiner had called her. “Did Audhilde get away alright?”

“Her people are with her,” Faddei said. “We gave them some privacy.”

“It’s a blood bath,” Vanko said, interrupting them. Max could feel a trace of his magic in the air, and saw that he’d added some light to the room ahead of them so he could better see the crime scene.

“It looks like a whole family,” Max said, feeling sick as she turned back, reluctantly, to face into the house.

The room was a large, beautifully furnished living space with huge leather sofas, what looked like a handmade rug covering most of the polished wooden floor, and an enormous television on one wall. It must have been a calm and peaceful place to sit, she thought, with the glass doors giving a view over the tangled garden. Now it was full of the quiet of death. Most of the sofas were occupied with bodies. She counted four. It looked like it might be two older adults, and two younger adults, although it was hard to tell with the amount of damage that had been done to the bodies. The rug and the floor were stained and spattered with blood, and closer to where the glass doors had been the blood was covered with shards of glass. Max could see sparks across the rug and heavier

impressions where the demons must have tracked broken glass and blood across the floor as they went through the room. Along with the heavy metallic weight of blood in the air, she caught traces of a lighter, lemon scent that was probably whatever the household had used to keep the floors clean.

“This looks more like an animal attack than magic,” Vanko commented.

“Yes. But we did just encounter three dark dogs,” Faddei observed.

Max found she could all-too-easily imagine the dark dogs in this room, tearing apart the terrified people who had been alive not that long ago.

“We need to clear the house,” she said, not moving. She didn’t want to go into the building. Didn’t want to see what other horrors waited for them inside. What more damage the dark dogs and the demons might have done.

“Let’s wait for the Guardian and warrior to get here,” Faddei suggested. “Vanko, Zoya, can you go around the front of the building and make sure no one comes in that way?”

“Sure,” Vanko said, heading back down the steps to the garden.

“If you see either Oliver or Hemang, stay out of their way,” Max added.

“We plan to, don’t worry,” Zoya said, following the other Marshal.

Leaving Max, her dogs, and Faddei alone with a room full of corpses.

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Chapter Seven

NO SOONER HAD VANKO and Zoya vanished than more lights shone in the garden and another group of people made their way along the overgrown stone path to the back steps of the house. Audhilde, together with two members of her household. The younger vampire, Lukas, who Max had first met at his day job as a petrol station attendant, and the older woman whose name she'd forgotten. The woman was human through and through. From what Max could remember, she seemed to serve as a sort of housekeeper and general manager for the ancient vampire.

In the middle, Audhilde looked more fragile than Max would have believed possible. From the tenseness in Lukas' body and the wary looks he was casting around, he also thought she was vulnerable. Max understood the impulse. She had a strong urge to protect the old vampire, too.

“Did you find them?” Audhilde asked. The terrible swelling had gone down and Max couldn't see any blood on her head,

but she wasn't moving as smoothly as she normally did. Still injured, if Max had to guess.

"I did," Max said. "To be more exact, the bodies were waiting here." She took a short breath before going on, delivering the bad news as plainly as she could. "Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan's bodies have been possessed by demons."

"Demons? How is that possible?" Audhilde asked, eyes snapping with fury. "Not in my mortuary, I'm quite sure."

"Representatives of the Order are on their way. They might be able to tell us more," Max said.

"That's not all, is it?" Audhilde said. She had reached the bottom of the steps and was staring up at Max. "I can smell blood. A lot of it."

"It looks as if the dark dogs killed the people who lived in this house," Max said. "We've called for the duty detective."

"I'll need to call my deputy," Audhilde said. It was an admission that she wasn't up to the task, and Max wondered just how badly injured she still was. The vampire might be walking and talking, but her people were hovering around her, ready to intervene at any moment. Audhilde grimaced. "You'd think I'd be old enough not to be taken by surprise by a dark dog." She glanced at Lukas. "We need to do some more training."

"As you wish," Lukas said. He was still keeping watch around them, alert for any possible threat to Audhilde.

“We need to take our lady home,” the silver-haired woman said, glaring up at Max as if Max was somehow personally responsible for Audhilde’s injury.

“Go ahead, please,” Max said.

“Have you cleared the house yet?” Audhilde asked, staying where she was.

“No. We’re waiting for the Order,” Faddei said. He went down the steps and gently put a hand under Audhilde’s elbow, leading her to sit on the lower steps. “I’m pleased to see you on your feet and talking, but you took a heavy blow. You need time to heal,” Faddei said. He was the only Marshal that Max was aware of with a healing gift, and might be able to sense just how badly injured the vampire still was. Max also noted that Audhilde let herself be led to a seat and took it without complaint, a sure sign she was still not herself.

“She had a severe injury to her head,” the silver-haired woman said, her worry clear. “She needs to be home and resting.”

“Oh, Lizzie, don’t be such an old woman,” Audhilde said, a welcome trace of mischief in her face and voice. “It’s not the worst injury I’ve had. I’ll live. I’ll leave when my deputy gets here,” she said, and pulled her phone out, dialling a preset number.

Faddei, Max and the shadow-hounds kept watch while Audhilde made a call to her deputy. By the time she was finished with that, a low rumbling from beyond the garden wall told Max that more vehicles had arrived. More than she

had been expecting. And even at the distance, she could sense the trace of Order magic.

“Seems like the Order is here,” Audhilde said, with a sharp-edged smile. “No, Lizzie, I’m staying here for a few more minutes. I want to know what they have to say for themselves.”

They didn’t have long to wait before a group of half a dozen warriors approached the house. Bryce was in the lead, and Max recognised all the others as well. In their midst was the slight figure of Orshiasa. For the first time that Max could remember, he looked shaken. When the warriors had come to a halt, spreading out to provide protection for the Guardian, Orshiasa made his way forward.

“Was that a dark dog I saw on the road?” Orshiasa asked, looking past everyone else to meet Max’s gaze.

“There were three of them,” Max told him. “Audhilde managed to deal with the first two. They burned. The Marshals shot the other one.”

“It took four of us and a lot of bullets to bring it down,” Faddei added, voice grim. He was facing Orshiasa, shoulders square. Max knew that look. He wanted answers. The head Marshal could look intimidating when he wanted to. “You seem surprised?”

“I am shocked,” Orshiasa said candidly. “We haven’t seen dark dogs since the last breach of the Grey Gates when I was a boy. That was a very long time ago.”

“It looks like those days are coming again,” Audhilde told him. She sounded angry, Max realised. “Two bodies walked out of my mortuary with demons inside them. What do you know about it?”

Orshiasa’s mouth opened then closed. He bowed his head for a long moment and when he lifted it, his expression was hard to read. “That had nothing to do with the Order.”

Unease slid through Max. Orshiasa had his own personal code of honour, part of which did not allow for lying. But that statement had been evasive.

“I didn’t ask if the Order were involved, old man,” Audhilde snapped. “I’ve had my head kicked by one of those beasts and I haven’t felt pain like this for decades. I’m in no mood for your games. Tell me what you know.”

“The demons. Which bodies were they in?” Orshiasa asked Max instead, in a tone that told her he already knew the answer.

“Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan.” She managed to sound calm, and watched him carefully for his reaction. He didn’t want to tell them anything, but that code of honour he followed also meant he was sworn to protect people in danger from dark magic. Two demons walking in the daylight world counted as serious danger.

“I feared as much,” Orshiasa said. “To answer your question, Audhilde, I believe that the demon Queran and the descendant Evan Yarwood were attempting to bring forth a lesser being from the dark realm. That is the ritual they were seeking to

perform when Marshal Ortis managed to stop them.” Max couldn’t help a start of surprise that Orshiasa had given her very public credit for her efforts. It took a moment for her mind to catch up with what he had revealed. He knew what ritual Evan and Queran had been trying to perform. He had managed to decipher that much of the Arkus Codex. And had also managed not to tell her that in their earlier meeting.

“A lesser being? Those two demons were not lesser anythings. They were full demons. More powerful than Queran, if I had to guess,” Max said, frowning, before anyone else could react.

“Pardon. I did not mean to imply weak. Just that they were not trying to raise the dark lord Himself, or open a portal to the underworld,” Orshiasa said.

“But they were trying to bring something through from the underworld?” Faddei asked, voice and body tense. “And just when was the Order planning to share this information?”

“We didn’t think the ritual had been completed. There was no reason to believe that there was any real danger,” Orshiasa said. But his voice was clipped and he wasn’t meeting anyone’s eyes. Another evasion.

“The demon bled on the Codex,” Max said slowly, pulling the pieces together in her mind as she spoke, “and then Oliver died lying across Hemang’s body. Wait. A lesser being? Is that why Hemang’s body was there to start with? Was he supposed to be the host?”

“You would need to ask Evan or Queran about their intent with regard to Hemang. But, yes, the demon’s blood may have activated the spell.” Orshiasa was frowning, lips pressed into a thin line. “I knew it was possible,” he added.

“The police have been looking for Oliver and Hemang’s bodies,” Audhilde said, her voice trembling with what looked like repressed fury. “With no idea what they might be getting into. With no protection from the Order or its warriors. There are dead people inside that house. Their deaths are your responsibility,” she snapped at Orshiasa. She got to her feet, a petite woman vibrating with anger. “Lizzie, Lukas, you may take me home now.”

The silver-haired woman and younger vampire flanked Audhilde immediately. The ancient vampire paused to give Orshiasa a close-up glare before continuing to make her way back along the garden path and into the darkness.

The Guardian bowed his head to the vampire as she passed him, in a mark of respect, and his eyes followed Audhilde’s progress, as if making sure she would be safe. He turned back when Audhilde moved out of sight. Before Orshiasa could speak again, Bryce took a half step forward.

“You said there was a crime scene, and Audhilde mentioned dead people,” he said, speaking to Max.

“Yes. There are at least four dead people in the room behind us. It looks like they were killed by a creature. I would guess the dark dogs. The two demons went through the window into the house. We haven’t cleared the house yet. There are two

Marshals at the front door to make sure no one goes in that way,” Max said.

“Alright. We’ll go in first,” Bryce said. He raised the heavy automatic weapon he carried, and looked at Orshiasa. “When you’re ready.”

“Have everyone wait out here until we’re finished,” Orshiasa told Faddei.

The head Marshal didn’t look pleased at being told what to do, but gave a terse nod. He moved away from the bottom of the steps and Max followed him with her dogs so that they were standing in a little patch of fragrant plant life while the Order warriors and Guardian filed past them into the house.

Max exchanged silent glances with Faddei, and could almost read his mind. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Eight

BEFORE MAX COULD GROW restless or bored, there was the sound of more vehicles arriving in the road at the back. She couldn't help wondering how they were all going to fit into the space.

“We haven't heard anything from the neighbours yet,” Max said, surprised when she realised that. This was a quiet, wealthy area in the Forster Family territory. Gunshots were not commonplace at any time of the day or night. Someone should have noticed and raised a fuss about it by now.

“I noticed that,” Faddei said. “They might be busy writing letters of complaint,” he added, a trace of humour in his voice.

“Or calling for the police, I suppose,” Max added.

“If they're annoyed now, they'll be furious when they realise that there were demons in the neighbourhood.”

“And Lady Forster is going to be equally furious when she realises that a demon is wearing one of her sons,” Max said with a sigh.

“That will be another fun-filled council meeting,” Faddei agreed.

The vehicle engine noise had cut off and been replaced by the sound of voices. There was a group of people coming along the path through the tangled garden, a familiar figure in the lead. Despite the late hour, Detective Ruutti Passila looked as if she was ready for a fashion photo shoot in her perfectly fitted leather jacket and jeans, short blonde hair in an artfully arranged halo around her head, blue eyes bright in the reflection of Faddei and Max’s torches.

“Good evening to you both. I had a call about bodies?” Ruutti asked, glancing past the pair of Marshals. “The Marshals’ service is dealing with break-ins now? I’m assuming that the charred remains in the alleyway are your doing?”

“Good evening to you, too, Ruutti,” Max said. She’d worked with the detective on a number of occasions, and usually found her as grating and difficult as everyone else seemed to find her charming. The detective might look human, but she was a siren and used her innate magic to encourage people to talk to her. Her sharp mind and intelligence helped, too, and despite her porcelain doll appearance, she had the highest clearance rate of any detective in the city. “There’s a Guardian and Order warriors clearing the house. We’ve been asked to wait outside.”

“A Guardian?” One of the people behind Ruutti spoke, looking nervous. “Is there magic involved?”

Max identified him as Audhilde's deputy. He was dressed in white coveralls, ready to work.

"The remains you saw in the alley were from dark magic creatures," Faddei told him. "There were two demons here. The Order is making sure the house is safe."

"Alright. Dark magic and demons are their job. But you called us," Ruutti pointed out.

"There are human bodies in that room there." Max indicated the broken glass doors. "At least four. They look like they were killed by the dark dogs. Those are the creatures in the alley."

"Has anyone spoken to the neighbours?" Ruutti asked, pulling out a notebook. Max might not like the woman that much, but she was very good at her job.

"No," Max said, and gave both Ruutti and the deputy medical examiner a brief summary of how she had come to be here and what had happened.

By the time she had finished, Audhilde's deputy, who was a more than competent medical examiner, was looking quite green, and Ruutti was frowning.

Movement behind Max made her turn and she looked up to see Orshiasa and Bryce coming out of the building.

"Anyone spoken to Lady Forster?" the detective asked as the Guardian and warrior approached.

"No," Faddei said, and nothing more. He didn't volunteer for the task.

“Alright,” Ruutti said, and made a note. “That sounds like a job for the chief or deputy,” she added, partly to herself.

“The house is clear of dark magic or other dangers,” Orshiasa told them. He did not look pleased about something, though.

“What’s wrong?” Ruutti asked him directly.

“The bodies in the room up there have been dead for quite some time. There was a preservation spell put on them. It seems that the demons have been using this house for a few days,” the Guardian said.

“Most of the rooms have been disturbed. It looks like the dark dogs were kept in one room as a sort of kennel, and the demons used other rooms,” Bryce said.

“There are more bodies,” Orshiasa added plainly. He looked past Ruutti to the medical examiner. “You are going to need all of your people.”

“As am I,” Ruutti noted. “How long do you think the people in the room up there have been dead?” she asked the Guardian.

“As long as four days, perhaps. The medical examiner is going to have difficulty in being more precise, because of the spell,” Orshiasa said.

“Any idea why the people were killed?” Ruutti asked, reminding Max of the sharp brain behind the beautiful face.

“I can’t be sure as to motive,” the Guardian said, his face tight. “Demons do not need a particular reason to commit terrible acts.”

“They chose this house, though,” Max said slowly, looking up at the building. “They stayed here rather than at Oliver’s house along the street.”

“No one would expect Oliver Forster to be at a different house on this street,” Ruutti pointed out.

“And Oliver lived alone,” Max added. “Were there any ritual markings on the bodies?” she asked Orshiasa. There had been a serial killer in the city a few weeks before who had been using his victim’s blood to mark out dark magic. It seemed likely to Max that there were other spells which might use a person’s blood.

“Some,” Orshiasa said, and paused long enough that Max wondered if he was going to say anything else. “I do not recognise the precise spell. It was some kind of dark magic. Possibly to keep the victims alive longer, or cause them more pain.”

There was a moment of silence after that, as everyone absorbed what Orshiasa had said. Using magic to increase pain fit perfectly with what Max knew of demons.

“So, Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan were here, rather than Oliver’s house, because they needed people to kill,” Ruutti said, her face and voice tight as if she was holding onto her composure with difficulty. “I’ll call for more people and one of the police magicians,” Ruutti said. “Is there anything else you can tell me about this house or the scene inside?” she asked.

Max had to admire the detective. Ruutti had focused in on the things that were within her jurisdiction. Nothing more. She wasn't asking about demons or dark dogs or foul magic. She just wanted to know about the house and the bodies. Things she could deal with. It was a lesson Max thought she should probably try to learn, even as her mind strayed to wondering what the two demons might be up to now, and where they might be headed. If they had made this house their base for a few days, they might be looking for somewhere else to hide out.

As Ruutti stepped away to make her phone calls, and the medical examiner and his team moved up the steps into the house, Max turned to Orshiasa.

“What will you do now?” she asked.

“I must report this to Kitris,” Orshiasa said. His tone was neutral, and yet she had the impression he was not happy about that requirement.

As head of the Order, Kitris should certainly be told that there were more demons on the loose in the city. And in the normal way of things, he should also be the one to order the next steps. But Kitris hadn't been behaving normally for some weeks now, closing the Order off and refusing to answer calls from outside. One of the warriors Max had spoken to had suggested that Kitris was consumed by the idea of there being more Portents in the world. That was not a good sign, and yet Max couldn't help thinking there was something more going on. She hadn't seen Kitris for nearly eight years, and had now

encountered him several times over the course of the past few weeks. He was just as arrogant as she remembered, and also changed. She didn't know enough to say what had changed or why, just that something had. The Kitris she remembered from her first days in the Order would not have hesitated to mobilise the entire Order to scour the city looking for the demons. The Kitris she had met earlier in the day was unlikely to do that.

Remembering their conversation earlier also reminded her of the news that he and Emmeline had shared. No, Kitris might not mobilise the entire Order to hunt down two more demons loose in the city. He would expect Max to do it.

The thing that stung was that she knew she would do it. She had already decided that she needed to find Evan and Queran. Having even one demon in the city was a serious danger to the residents, and the city itself. And now there were two more demons, walking around in bodies that were reasonably well known. They couldn't be allowed to stay, Max knew, a knot forming in her stomach as she tried not to think about the amount of destruction and damage that three demons might do in the daylight world. She needed to stop them. All of them. Even if she had no idea how she might do that, she still had to try. This was her world, not theirs.

“Where is Kitris?” Faddei asked, cutting through Max's spiralling thoughts.

“At the Order,” Orshiasa said, answering the plain question.

“And is he likely to respond to the news of two more demons in the city?” Faddei asked. He was watching Orshiasa

as closely as Max had been. Perhaps also worried about what Kitris may or may not do.

“He must,” Orshiasa said. “I will speak to him myself,” he added, and turned away, heading down the path towards the garden wall.

Bryce hesitated. “We need to escort the Guardian back to the Order perimeter, but I’ll come back if I can,” he said to Max.

“Thank you for responding so quickly,” Max said, and watched as Bryce and the other warriors headed away, surrounding the Guardian before he had reached the gate. She knew it was the warriors’ job to defend the Guardian, to form a protective ring around any of the Order magicians so that they had the space to work while the warriors fought with non-magical means, but she still wished Bryce had been able to stay.

“We should look through the house. See what we can learn,” Faddei prompted.

“You want access to my crime scene?” Ruutti asked, brow lifting. “Then tell me what is going on? Demons in the city? Dark magic creatures?” She transferred her glare between Max and Faddei. “Can I expect more bodies?”

“If we knew what was going on, we’d tell you,” Faddei said. “As it is, we need to see if we can pick up a trace of these demons. Max’s shadow-hounds brought us here. Perhaps they can pick up the trail again?” he asked Max.

“Hopefully,” she agreed, “but you’re right that we need to look through the house first.”

About an hour later, Max really wished she had kept her mouth shut. Going through the house had been a stomach-churning experience. The room that the dark dogs had been kept in was filthy, the walls gouged with deep scratches, as if the creatures had tried to escape. The rooms that the demons had used were not as soiled, but the demons seemed to have taken everything out of every drawer and cupboard and wardrobe in the place and strewn it over the floor.

Then there was one of the upstairs bathrooms filled with at least three more bodies, all of which bore what looked to Max like ritual markings. Orshiasa hadn’t been able to identify the spells, so it was no surprise that she didn’t know the symbols, either. Some kind of dark magic was all she could be sure of. The demons had been busy. There was no trace of magic left around the bodies, so nothing to help her understand what the spells had been or to help her track down the demons. Max made a mental note to ask Ruutti for copies of the photographs that would be taken of the markings. If Max and her hounds were having difficulty tracking the demons, there might be something in the spells that could help. As a last resort. Max wanted to stay as far away from dark magic as possible.

From the amount of disturbance and the layers of filth that she could see, it looked as if Oliver and Hemang’s new inhabitants had made their way here as soon as they had left the mortuary. All of the bodies looked to have been killed about the same time, as far as the medical examiner could

determine. He and his team were meticulously recording all the wounds and details of the deaths while a crime scene team moved around them, documenting and collecting evidence.

Ruutti was in the living room when Max and Faddei came back downstairs. The detective was staring at the bodies with a tight expression.

“Are you alright?” Max asked.

“I knew them,” Ruutti said. “The younger couple. We went to school together. They were distant cousins to the Lady Forster.”

“I’m sorry,” Max said. It was a polite reflex, but she also meant it.

“I need to meet the chief and deputy and go to see Lady Forster,” Ruutti said. She looked at Max. “That lug of a warrior is back outside waiting for you, along with some friends. Apparently, Kitris has decided not to mobilise the Order.”

Max nodded, trying to keep her expression neutral despite the disappointment that stabbed through her. Kitris would have heard from perhaps the most respected Guardian in the Order that there were demons in the city. More than one. And the head of the Order, whose very purpose was to keep the city safe from dark magic and the dark lord’s interference, had chosen not to send Order Guardians and warriors out in response. Frustration replaced the disappointment. She didn’t understand what Kitris was about. When she had been at the Order, he had been hard-working and dedicated. Now he

seemed to not care at all about the presence of demons in the city. It was not right. She remembered Orshiasa's visit to her house, and the careful way that the Guardian had skirted around some of the questions she'd asked him, or just not answered. He had to be concerned about Kitris, too. But he owed the head of the Order his respect, he'd said. And wouldn't openly defy him, in Max's own observation. She blew out a breath and shook her head, trying to focus on something she could do rather than wishing for Kitris to behave differently.

"I'll get Cas and Pol and start working around the area," she told Faddei, "see if we can pick up the trail."

"I've just had an alert from Therese. There's been another minor breach in the Wild wards and it seems like a few things got through," Faddei said. He shook his head and glanced at Max. "You've been out of the loop, but there have been quite a few breaches in the past few days. I need to go and deal with this one."

"Go," Max said, waving him off. Dealing with supernatural creatures that breached the Wild wards was the primary purpose of the Marshals, after all. Multiple breaches of the Wild wards did happen from time to time, if a large predator found a weak spot in the wards and left a thin patch for others to follow. The breaches were exhausting to deal with. Not only did the Marshals have to contain the creatures that got through, but they also needed to repair the wards, with whatever help they could get from the police magicians and, on rare occasions, the Order. Max didn't envy Faddei or her fellow

Marshals the task of dealing with the breaches. “Take Vanko and Zoya. If Bryce is here with more warriors, I’ll have plenty of back-up.”

“Call me when you have news,” Faddei said, and headed for the house’s front door.

“I’d like to know, too,” Ruutti said, a hint of her normal sly mischief peeking through. “You can call me or find me at Malik’s,” she added.

Max shook her head slightly. She’d introduced Ruutti to Malik when she and the detective had been working on the serial killer case, and only then had realised that both the detective and bar owner were sirens. When Malik had been badly injured, Max had called Ruutti to help, and the pair had been inseparable since. They were an odd pairing, and it was none of Max’s business. So she didn’t say anything, heading out into the cool night air. After the stench and closeness of the interior of the house, the bite of winter’s approach was a welcome change.

She found Bryce waiting with the same team he’d had earlier. Warriors she knew. Osvaldo, Khari, Joshua, Hop and Killan. She took an extra look around, seeking the other warrior she associated with Hop and Killan, a tall woman called Gemma, who seemed to hate Max. But she couldn’t see anyone else.

“Orshiasa is talking to Kitris,” Bryce said by way of greeting. “But he sent us back in case you want to go after the demons.”

“Alright,” Max nodded. Cas and Pol were lounging on the small patch of grass near the house’s back steps, but bounded up to her when she called them. “The house is crowded and too full of smells. Let’s try walking around the perimeter to see if we can catch the demons’ trail.”

“Do your hounds have the scent?” Osvaldo asked. He was one of the oldest warriors, with grey threaded through his black hair and lines showing on his dark skin.

“Oliver’s, yes,” Max said, heading along the garden path with Cas and Pol silent shadows to either side.

“Then, let’s go demon hunting,” Khari said. Her cool, pitch-dark skin blended with the night, teeth flashing in a brief, fierce smile as she followed Max out of the garden gate onto the crowded service road. Max glanced up at the sky and saw a bright, clear moon. A perfect night to track down demons.

Chapter Nine

EVEN POL'S SUPERB SENSE of smell couldn't follow a trail for long when the owner of the scent got into a vehicle and then merged with the city traffic.

With an escort of six Order warriors, Max followed her hounds for three city blocks until they lost the scent at a busy road junction. She glanced up at the street lights and spotted a few cameras, then called Ruutti to see if she could pull the camera footage.

By that point, it was past midnight. Max was worn out and hollow. Orshiasa might have healed the broken bones in her arm, but she had suffered other injuries as well and was weighed down with exhaustion. She needed food and sleep. In that order.

Trying to hide just how tired she was, she walked with the warriors back to the street where she had left her pick-up. To her surprise, the warriors stayed with her. She dug into the lock-box in the back of her pick-up and pulled out some snacks for her dogs and for her, sharing the people food

around the group before leaning back against the side of her pick-up.

“It might take a while for Ruutti to get the footage,” she said.

“We can wait,” Bryce said. She looked at him properly for the first time since he had arrived on the scene with Orshiasa. He was in his working mode, focused on their surroundings, keeping watch for any potential threats. Still the same man who had been sitting by her hospital bed when she had woken up and who had kissed her thoroughly and completely when they had been trapped in the Vault not that long ago. Apart from her hounds, she couldn’t think of anyone she’d rather have with her to search for demons. Bryce carried himself with the quiet self-assurance that came from being absolutely superb at his job, and had an air of purpose and calm about him that she wanted to lean into.

He must have sensed her watching him because he looked back, brow lifting.

“You’ve been given orders to wait with me?” Max asked. It sounded like a stupid, stilted question, but it was the first thing that came to mind now she had been caught staring.

His mouth curved up in a rare smile.

“Yes, ma’am.” It was Joshua, not Bryce, who answered. Like all the other warriors, he was standing at a form of parade rest, but keeping an eye on their surroundings. In sharp contrast to his wife, Khari, Joshua had skin even paler than Max’s own, and strawberry blond hair in soft curls around his head. He looked at Max, mischief lighting his face. “The Guardian’s

exact words were: *Get out there and find those demons and don't come back until you know where they are.*"

"That's what he *said*," Khari said, with a grin, "but what he *meant* was that we should follow you around until you found the demons."

"Yeah," Osvaldo agreed, smiling, "you've got a serious talent for finding trouble, Marshal."

Max laughed. The teasing was unexpected and welcome after the difficult day. "Please, call me Max," she said. "And I'm really hoping not to find anymore trouble today. I need some sleep."

"There's space at the Order for you, if you want," Osvaldo said. His tone was as easy and friendly as it had been before, but Max went completely still, becoming very aware that it was just her and six warriors with no witnesses. What if Kitris had ordered them to bring her back to the Order?

"We're going where you are," Bryce said, a subtle shift in his posture letting her know that he'd seen her tense up. He had moved a fraction closer to her, in a way that made Max feel protected rather than threatened.

"Yeah, sorry," Osvaldo said, and grimaced. "I didn't mean to suggest we were going to drag you in."

"It's okay," Max said, running a hand through her hair. "It's not somewhere I'm keen to go back to." She stayed quiet for a moment, trying to think of what to do next.

“I don’t suppose the demons did anything helpful like tell you why they were here?” Osvaldo asked.

“Yes. Or where they might be going next?” Bryce added.

Max shook her head. They hadn’t really expected a positive reply from her. She had the sense they asked the questions out of thoroughness. She approved. It was all too easy to overlook small details, particularly when she was tired. “No, sorry. They were really evasive, but that seems normal for demons. We’ll need to find them the old-fashioned way, by tracking them down.” But not tonight, she added in her own mind. Even if she found the demons tonight, she wasn’t equipped to deal with them. “I need to resupply at the Marshals’ offices. And I’d like a closer look at the dark dog we shot. Raymund will have it in one of his exam rooms.”

“We’d welcome a look, too,” Bryce said. “In case there are more of them out there.”

“Good. I’ll call him on the way,” Max said, and moved around to the driver’s door of her pick-up. Cas and Pol jumped up into the back without being asked. She looked across at the warriors. “You know the way. Meet you there?”

“Sure,” Osvaldo said.

The agreement seemed too easy, and Max discovered why as Bryce opened the passenger door of her pick-up. “I’m calling shotgun,” he said.

“You’re lucky the seat is free,” Max told him, starting the engine. “It’s usually covered in fast food wrappers.”

“I’ve sat in worse,” Bryce said.

She looked at him before she pulled out onto the road. He wasn’t looking at her, but keeping his eyes on the buildings and area around them. On watch. She couldn’t help wonder just what, exactly, Orshiasa’s full orders had been that she now had a tight escort of half a dozen Order warriors.

And, as she started the drive to the Marshals’ headquarters, old memories pushed their way up to the surface again, making her wonder just how many of them would survive.

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Chapter Ten

THE MARSHALS' HEADQUARTERS WERE unusually busy for the late hour. Max took it as a good sign - if her fellow Marshals could spare the time to be here, it meant that whatever breach Faddei had been called to deal with must have been fixed. There were usually only a few people on site at this time, with Marshals either out on assignment or getting some much-needed sleep. Word must have spread about the never-before-seen creature that the science team had brought back for examination. To Max's eyes, it looked as if everyone on site had made their way to the science building, curious to see what the fuss was about.

Raymund Robart, the Marshals' chief scientist, was a little puzzled but otherwise unbothered by having an audience of not only a handful of Marshals but six combat-ready warriors of the Order for his initial examination of the dark dog that Max, Faddei, Vanko and Zoya had shot.

He and his team had brought the dark dog to the largest examination room, which had not only a live camera feed, but

also glass walls on two sides which allowed people outside to get a good look at what was going on inside.

With her ammunition resupplied, Max leant against one of the pillars supporting the glass wall and stared into the room. Raymund and his four person team were all dressed in blue overalls, with the hoods pulled up and face shields in place. Judging by the careful way the scientists were moving around the corpse, they weren't entirely sure it was going to stay dead. Which she could hardly blame them for - after all, Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan had apparently got up and walked out of the mortuary after being declared dead.

Seen under the harsh lights of the examination room, the dark dog was even more terrifying than it had been when it had been attacking her earlier in the night. Its body was about half again as long and twice as thick as Raymund, who was a tall, thin man. The creature's head was large in proportion to its body, curving fangs showing at its mouth, gleaming under the overhead lights. The oddly jointed legs that protruded from its sides and dangled over the edges of the examination table made Max queasy just to look at. It might be called a dog, but it had moved more like an enormous spider. The creature's skin was smooth and dark, and seemed hairless from the distance. Its overall appearance was not improved by the many, many bullet holes covering its body. There were still traces of its dark, foul-smelling blood on the corpse, making Max glad she was outside the glass.

“How many bullets did it take to bring it down?” Khari asked. She was standing nearby, next to her husband, both of

them focused on the dark dog.

“I used four full magazines, and I think Faddei, Zoya and Vanko used about the same,” Max said. She drew her weapon and released the magazine, showing the warriors the bullets in there. “We carry the same calibre as the police. Each magazine holds twenty-one bullets.”

“So that’s, what, over three hundred bullets?” Osvaldo asked, lifting a brow at Max.

“That sounds about right,” she agreed. She put the magazine back and holstered her gun.

“Is that normal for a supernatural creature?” Hop asked. He and Killan were both stocky, muscular men a head shorter than Max, with light hair cropped close to their scalps. They were generally quiet, but it didn’t seem to be out of hostility. They seemed just naturally reserved, but they were paying attention to everything going on around them.

“No,” Max said. “Mind you, we normally use tranquilliser rounds for the creatures we hunt. Some of them take a lot more than others,” she added, frowning as she remembered that there had been a number of creatures recently which had needed the stronger tranquilliser dose that Raymund had developed rather than the doses that the Marshals normally used.

“We’re going to need to carry armour piercing rounds if there are any more of them in the city,” Osvaldo said.

“Agreed,” Bryce said.

“Do you have any with you?” Max asked, curious. The Marshals didn’t have armour-piercing bullets, but they did have armour-piercing shotgun shells full of tranquilliser. Somehow, she didn’t think that the tranquilliser was going to work if they came across any more dark dogs.

“In the cars,” Bryce answered, not taking his eyes off the dark dog.

Max turned her attention back to the creature just as Raymund lifted up one of the dangling legs. It looked like it was taking the scientist’s entire strength to lift it onto the edge of the metal examination table. As the leg moved, Max caught sight of something on the creature’s underside, just near the leg joint. The faintest trace of a symbol, its shape distorted by the creature’s dark skin.

She moved, hammering on the glass and waving for the scientists to get out of the room, then remembered they couldn’t hear her and ran for the intercom that was on the next pillar along from hers.

“Get out now,” she yelled into the speaker.

The scientists in the room jumped, startled by the interruption, then looked at each other, hesitating. Raymund looked over at the intercom and Max, brows lifting.

“Right now!” she called, drawing her gun.

Around her, all the Marshals had come on alert and every warrior had their automatic weapons ready.

Finally, Raymund moved, urging his team outside. As the last team member was getting to the door, Raymund holding it open, the dark dog moved. The legs twitched, its body wriggling on the table.

Max gave an inarticulate yell through the speaker and the scientists hurried, shutting the door behind them. Outside the room, Raymund hit the large red button that was installed inside and out of every exam room and Max heard the steel bars thud into place, anchoring the door.

Not a moment too soon. Even as the door closed, the dark dog was getting back to its feet.

“Do you see the way it moves? Holy Lady, that is so, so wrong,” Khari whispered. She sounded like she was trying not to be sick, but her weapon was steady, aimed at the glass and the creature inside the room.

“What happened?” Raymund demanded, striding around the side of the room to Max. She spared him a quick glance. He had pulled off his hood and face shield, his hair was standing on end, and he was even paler than normal. “That thing was dead. How is it moving?” He sounded shaken. She didn’t blame him. Things that had been shot that many times should absolutely stay dead.

“I don’t know, but there was a symbol of some kind under the leg you moved. I recognised it as dark magic,” Max said.

“Can you tell us more?” Bryce asked.

“No, sorry,” Max said, trying not to flinch too obviously. It was an instinctive reaction, a reminder of her own shortcomings. She had not advanced far enough in her magic studies at the Order to be able to accurately identify dark magic symbols. “Can you get a photo of it from the security cameras?” she asked Raymund.

“Yes, I can,” he said, and moved to the other side of the corridor. There was a make-shift monitoring station set up there with some screens, a laptop and a small printer.

“Killan, get back to the vehicles and bring the armour piercing rounds,” Bryce said, voice tense.

Killan headed off at a flat run, no questions asked. As he disappeared from view, Faddei arrived, out of breath, as if he had run from the office building. The panic button Raymund had pushed would have sent alarms blaring in the Marshals’ office building.

Inside the room, the dark dog was stretching to its full height, towering over the people outside. Max wanted to look away. As Khari had said, the way it moved was so, so wrong. But she couldn’t. The thing looked like it was waking up from a nap, and she’d seen how aggressive they could be.

“This is three layer bullet resistant glass, isn’t it?” Bryce asked, his eyes on the creature.

“Yes,” Faddei answered before Max could. “What in the Lady’s Name? That thing was dead,” he said, staring into the room.

“Max saw some dark magic symbol on it,” Vanko said. He wasn’t that far away, and like everyone else, was focused on the creature. “Raymund’s getting a photo now.”

“Have we tried gassing it?” Faddei asked, voice and face grim.

“Not yet,” Raymund said, coming to stand beside Faddei. He had a few print-outs in his hands and gave one of them to Faddei, handing another to Max and keeping the last one.

Max holstered her gun. If four magazines full of bullets hadn’t stopped the creature before, her gun wasn’t likely to help her now. It might feel reassuring to have it in her hand, but it was next to useless. Heart thudding too fast, she looked at the photograph. The symbol wasn’t that much clearer, but it niggled at her memory. She thought she’d seen it before. Somewhere. But she couldn’t remember where.

She took a photograph of the image with her phone and offered the print to Bryce. He took it while still holding his weapon ready. Max dialled a number she never thought she’d have to use again.

“Marshal Max Ortis. How absolutely delightful to hear from you.” Lord Kolbyr’s voice was smooth and silky, as if he had been doing nothing but wait for her call.

“I am sorry to call so late, and to be so abrupt, but we’re dealing with a dark dog that’s just revived itself after being shot a lot,” Max said.

As if it knew it was being talked about, the dark dog flung itself against the glass wall, lips peeling back in an unheard snarl as it was unable to break out on the first attempt. Even though it was still trapped in the exam room, the Marshals and scientists scrambled away from the glass wall, and Max heard curses from the Marshals and a cry of alarm from at least one of the scientists. The sight of the creature, its enormous fangs bared, so close to them, was terrifying.

“Where is it?” Kolbyr asked, sharp-edged and business-like.

“At the Marshals’ headquarters. The science building. It’s in one of the exam rooms. It’s trying to get out. Before it, er, woke up, I saw a symbol on its underside. I’d like to send the symbol to you to see if you recognise it,” Max said, words pouring out in rapid succession.

“Do it now. I will wait,” Kolbyr said.

Max fumbled with the settings on her phone, but managed to send the picture through to Kolbyr as the dark dog prowled around the inside of the room. It threw itself at the other glass wall, snarling again as the glass held against its assault.

“That’s a reincarnation spell,” Kolbyr said, his voice sounding loud in the crowded corridor. Max realised she must have put him on speaker by accident. He sounded almost out of breath, as if he was running. “You won’t be able to kill it with bullets. Do your best to keep the thing contained and I will be there as soon as I can.” He hung up.

Max stared at her phone for a moment, gut twisting. She looked up and saw Faddei and Raymund staring at her.

“You have Lord Kolbyr’s number?” Raymund asked.

“Not important right now. Did he say reincarnation? Did I hear that right?” Faddei asked. Max nodded, not trusting her voice.

A shadow moved in the room. The dark dog was back in front of her and the warriors. It threw itself at the glass again. The tiniest crack appeared on the inside pane, and Max heard a sharp intake of breath from the Marshals and scientists gathered around her. She wanted to take a step back and forced herself to hold her ground, trying to think past the sick feeling in her stomach. The room had been built and designed to hold some of the most dangerous creatures the Marshals’ service dealt with, with a powerful gas available in the vents to sedate any animal that needed treatment before being released back into the Wild. None of its previous occupants had even scratched the glass, let alone broken it.

“Clear your people out of here,” Bryce said. The dark dog was now using one of its feet to explore the crack in the glass. It had been all around the room, looking for a way out. And now it had the possibility of escape in front of it. The evidence of intelligence made Max’s skin crawl.

Running footsteps announced the return of Killan. He was carrying a backpack and a matte black case almost as big as he was. He set the case on the ground by the monitoring station, dropped the backpack, which landed with a dull thud, suggesting it was a lot heavier than it looked. He opened the backpack and unclipped the case.

“Brought the heavy gun as well, just in case,” he said, breathing hard.

“Good idea,” Bryce approved. “Change out ammunition,” he told the other warriors. They moved at once to obey, getting ammunition from the backpack while Killan pulled bits and pieces of metal out of the case. Hop shouldered his weapon to give Killan a hand with the assembly.

“We could try the gas,” Raymund protested, seeing the gun that Hop and Killan were putting together from the parts pulled from the case. Max had seen the weapon in use before. She didn’t have a proper name for it, but heavy gun was an accurate description.

“Too late. The glass is cracked, which means the seal is broken,” Faddei said, voice tense. “We’ll all be exposed.” He looked around. “Everyone who isn’t me, or Max, or a warrior, get out of here. Right now. Move it.”

Faddei rarely raised his voice, but people paid attention when he did. With a few looks back over their shoulders, everyone else cleared out of the space.

The dark dog threw itself at the glass again and a much larger crack appeared.

“The walls at this end of the building are reinforced concrete and steel,” Faddei told the warriors. “We need to contain the creature here. If it can get through that glass, it will be able to get out of the other walls.”

“Understood,” Bryce said. He took a quick look around. “That doorway, there,” he pointed just beyond the monitoring station to an internal doorway. “Set the heavy gun there. Hop, Killan, you’re on the gun. You’re the last line of defence, so make sure it doesn’t get through.”

“Sir,” Hop and Killan said together, lifting the enormous weapon and carrying it to the doorway.

“Faddei, Max, and hounds, get behind Hop and Killan,” Bryce ordered.

Before Max could move, the dark dog hit the glass again and burst out of the examination room in a flurry of too-long legs. It landed in the corridor barely three body-lengths away from the warriors and stood still for a long, heart-stopping moment, seeming to stare straight at Max, its teeth bared, light-coloured eyes gleaming and a low, growling sound emerging from its throat that lifted every hair on Max’s body. She had her own gun raised before she was aware of reaching for it. She didn’t fire. Her bullets wouldn’t do any good.

Around her, Bryce, Khari, Joshua and Osvaldo were standing in a line, weapons raised. Forming a barrier. Trying to herd the creature, Max realised. Trying to keep it in the part of the building that Faddei had said should contain it.

Cas and Pol had figured out the plan, too, and were standing in front of Max, both of them in their attack forms, dwarfed by the enormous creature. She wanted to call them back, but didn’t dare move or speak for fear of provoking the creature.

It lifted its lip higher, showing even more of its white teeth, then charged forward.

The warriors were firing almost as soon as it had moved, their faster-than-human reflexes kicking in. Max stumbled backwards, wanting to be out of their line of fire and away from the dark dog. Faddei grabbed her arm and pulled her, dragging her with him behind the heavy gun that Hop and Killan had set up.

The sound of automatic weapons fire in the close quarters of the corridor was deafening, ringing around Max's skull. She yelled for her dogs, not sure if they would even hear her. To her relief, they came back to her. She put her hands on either side of her head, trying to block out some of the noise, and watched as the four warriors of the Order fired armour-piercing rounds at the dark dog.

The larger bullets had a much greater impact on the dark dog than the Marshals' hand guns had. The dark dog screamed in fury and turned and ran, dripping more stinking black blood as it moved. Bryce glanced back, as if making sure she and Faddei were safe behind Hop and Killan, then moved ahead with the others, following the dark dog. Hunting it down.

As Max watched them walk away and disappear around a turn in the corridor, another memory rose. The first time that warriors had stood between her and danger. Nine warriors of the Order had been assigned to protect her when she had gone to the Grey Gates. They had put themselves between her and the opening to the underworld, following the orders that they

had been given by Kitris. They were supposed to protect Max while she closed the Grey Gates. Instead, they had all died in screaming agony as the underworld curled forth, sucking Max through the Grey Gates with the echoes of their cries still ringing in her ears.

And now more warriors of the Order were putting themselves between her and danger again. She couldn't stand by and do nothing.

There was a white-hot spark of anger in her chest with a lot of fear around it. Someone had put the symbol on the dark dog. Either of the demons inhabiting Oliver's and Hemang's bodies would be her guess. But whoever it had been, they had intended the dark dog to cause as much damage and destruction as possible. To kill more people. Like the family who had been killed in their home and left rotting in their own blood.

She couldn't let other people die. Not if she could help it. She didn't have a weapon like the ones the warriors carried. But she did have a bit of the Lady inside her. That had to be good for something. The dark dog was a creature of the underworld and the dark lord. The Lady's magic should be able to hurt it. Or so she hoped. She had to try.

"Stay here," she told Faddei, anger giving her voice a sharp edge.

His eyes widened as he met her gaze. He nodded, once. She didn't know what he had seen in her face, but it didn't matter. Right now, she had a monster to deal with.

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Chapter Eleven

THE ONLY THING MORE stupid than walking into danger was running into it, Max told herself as she ran along the corridor after the warriors, trying to ignore the weight of her body. She had been tired before the dark dog revived. There was no time to be tired right now. A spark of anger lit at the cruelty of the demons in bringing the dark dog into this world. The fury lifted her feet, and she let it grow until it was white hot, her magic rising along with it until it was almost blinding inside her as she ran.

She rounded the corridor to find the creature in a stand-off with the warriors. The dark dog was backed against the end of the corridor. There were no doors to either side of it, just blank walls, so it had nowhere else to go. The warriors weren't firing at it any longer, just crouched in open doorways further along the corridor, weapons trained on the dark dog. Ready to fire if it moved and keep it trapped. Waiting for the dark magic master to come and deal with it.

The creature saw Max as she came around the corner and snarled, the low sound reminding her just how stupid of an idea this was. But there was magic building in her. And she could not stand by and let anyone else get hurt because of her.

She stumbled to a halt, breathing hard, and set her hands in front of her, palm to palm, calling the magic out. Blinding white light formed between her hands.

The creature lowered its head and charged towards her, those awful legs moving so fast they were almost a blur. Max threw the magic away from her, silently willing it to slow the creature down, to halt it before it could do any more damage. Brilliant white light cascaded over the dark dog, coiling around its too-long legs, and the creature stopped, halted mid-stride by the magic Max had unleashed. It snarled at her, saliva dripping from its mouth onto the floor.

“Nice work,” Bryce commented. He’d moved out of the doorway and was now standing next to her, his weapon still trained on the dark dog. Osvaldo was with him, in a similar posture.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Khari said from Max’s other side. She and Joshua were mirroring Bryce and Osvaldo.

“I didn’t know I could do that, either,” Max said. The magic in her was still bright and fierce. But not endless. She could sense the edges of it, the limits of what she could do. “I can’t hold it forever,” she added, feeling embarrassed. She could not help thinking that if she had been a more capable magician, she would have been able to sustain her magic for longer.

“No one expects you to,” Osvaldo said, in a matter-of-fact tone that reassured her more than the actual words.

“The armour piercing rounds did some damage. We can hold it back if we need to,” Bryce added. “So I suggest we all take a few steps back.”

“Good plan,” Joshua said.

They were far too close to the creature, Max realised. If it broke free from her magic, or the magic failed, the dark dog would be on them before even the warriors could react. So she moved backwards with them, past the doorways they had been sheltering in, to the end of the corridor.

“Better,” Bryce approved.

“Now what?” Max couldn’t help the question. It was one of the strangest experiences of her life, standing among warriors staring at a creature held mid-air by her magic.

“We wait for Lord Kolbyr. If that thing moves before he gets here, we shoot it,” Bryce said.

“Simple and direct. I always like your plans, boss,” Khari said. Max didn’t need to look at her to know that she was smiling.



Max’s whole body was aching with effort, the great well of magic inside her down to something more like a small pond. The creature was still held in the air, but she could see one of

its legs twitching. It wouldn't be long before it broke free. There was nothing she could do. All she had been able to do was hold the spell, and that was failing. Her eyes stung. She had to hold on for as long as she could. She didn't want anyone else to die.

“Get ready,” she told the others, her voice hoarse. “I'm almost out of power.”

“Ready,” Bryce confirmed.

“Lord Kolbyr's here.” The voice belonged to either Hop or Killan. Max didn't know them well enough to tell their voices apart yet.

The announcement was followed by rapid footsteps and Max risked a quick glance over her shoulder to see that the ancient vampire had arrived. He wasn't alone. There were another four vampires with him, two men and two women, all dressed in similar, beautifully tailored dark suits.

“Marshal Ortis. You are just full of surprises,” Kolbyr said, coming to stand between her and Bryce. That put him far too close to Max for her comfort, but in the circumstances, she didn't feel she could object. He was a finely made, slender man with sleek black hair who barely reached Bryce's shoulder and radiated cold power. He looked like a human male somewhere between thirty and fifty, the weight of his years carried lightly at the moment. “A holding spell. That was most creative of you.”

“It was more a guess,” Max said, “and it's not going to last much longer.”

“To manage it even for a few moments is an accomplishment.” It was a perfectly sincere statement and Max didn’t know what to do with the compliment. Kolbyr was one of the city’s foremost experts on dark magic. Praise from him was, she suspected, rare. He didn’t wait for a response, carrying on in the same brisk, businesslike tone. “Greta, do you have the spells prepared?”

“Yes, my lord,” one of the female vampires said.

“Then put them in place,” Kolbyr ordered.

Dark magic, the chill of it making Max shiver, filled the air as the four vampires behind her released whatever spells they had prepared. A heaviness crept past her, the magic seeping into the corridor, coating everything, including the creature.

Max gasped as the dark magic slid over the light magic she had been using, taking over the weight of holding the creature in place.

“You may stand down now,” Kolbyr told her. “We have this in hand.”

“Alright,” Max said. Releasing her magic was hard, and it hurt. The bright light dimmed, fading to the merest spark deep inside her. She staggered sideways, coming up against the wall and staying there, barely upright.

“Are you ok?” Bryce asked, frowning. He was still standing with the others, but had turned his head to follow her movement.

“Worn out,” she admitted. She hated to admit to the weakness. Right now, though, she wasn’t sure if she would be able to walk on her own. She slid down the wall to sit with her back against it, knees raised.

“The Marshal used more magic than is wise,” Kolbyr told Bryce. “If you and your people will remain in place, I will see what can be done about this creature.”

“We’re not going anywhere until it’s dealt with,” Bryce said.

Max watched, fascinated, as Kolbyr stared at the dark dog for a while. It didn’t look as if the vampire was doing anything, but Max could sense and almost see the shift in the air around him as he prepared his own magic. When he was ready, he lifted a hand and spoke a word that hurt Max’s ears. Dark magic slid across his skin, out through the air and onto the dark dog’s nose, coating the creature’s body and sliding down its legs.

The creature screamed and then fell to ash particles on the floor.

It happened so quickly that Max thought she had imagined it. But, no, the floor was coated with flecks of dark grey ash, and more flecks were floating in the air, gently descending to the ground.

Kolbyr swayed on his feet. It was a tiny movement, so small that if she hadn’t been paying attention to him, she would have missed it. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and pressed the cloth to his mouth for a second. When he put the cloth away, he was as calm and collected as he usually was.

“My. It has been a while since I’ve used that spell. I must thank you, Marshal, for the opportunity.”

“Is it dead now?” Bryce asked. Max choked on a laugh. Trust Bryce to get to the most important question.

“Quite dead, my dear warrior. It will not be coming back to life,” Kolbyr assured him. He turned back to Max. “There is never just one of these things. What happened to the others?”

“We found three,” Max said, fighting her way up to a standing position, still leaning against the wall. “Audhilde killed two of them with fire. That last one injured her and then attacked us. We thought we’d killed it.”

“Audhilde is injured?” Kolbyr asked. It seemed to be genuine concern, but Max didn’t trust it. There were complexities and undercurrents in vampire politics that she didn’t pretend to understand, and she wondered if she should have mentioned Audhilde’s injury at all.

“She is in the care of her people,” Max said.

“That is good,” Kolbyr said. “So there were only three of them.”

“Should we have expected more?” Max asked.

“Perhaps.” He glanced at the pile of ash. “I would like to hear more.”

Chapter Twelve

MAX WAS QUITE SURE that Kolbyr had never been anywhere quite as disorganised and scruffy as the Marshals' offices. They had left Raymund and his team collecting every particle of ash from the corridor, Raymund lamenting the fact that he hadn't had a chance to properly examine the creature before Lord Kolbyr incinerated it. The scientist had seemed quite surprised that no one else shared his dismay.

Faddei had invited everyone to the office, as the largest space available, so that they could compare notes and discuss what to do next. Somehow, Lord Kolbyr had included himself in that, although he had left his four vampires with Raymund. Just in case any part of the creature had any thoughts about coming back to life, he had said. Only Raymund had seemed hopeful about that prospect. Max wished she was sure that he would change his mind if the dark dog did come back to life and try to kill him, but, knowing Raymund, he would see it more as a learning experience than anything else.

She had found one of the comfortable chairs and someone - she couldn't remember who - had brought her a mug of coffee and a day-old doughnut.

The room was crowded with every available Marshal, the six warriors and Kolbyr. The dark dog was dead, and the Wild ward breach was contained - for now. The Marshals should be resting, or writing reports, but they were all here. Max understood. No one had seen anything like the dark dog before, and everyone wanted to know more.

In deference to the vampire's rank, he had been shown to one of the comfortable chairs, while most of the Marshals perched on desks or office chairs around the room, listening for all they were worth.

Faddei began by summarising the events of the day and night so far. Arriving at Oliver Forster's house. Finding the dark dogs in the alley. Discovering Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan possessed by demons. Then the grim discoveries in the house.

Kolbyr listened intently, as if the summary was being given for his benefit alone, and not for the benefit of everyone in the room.

When Faddei was done, he lifted a brow at Max, and she told them about the conversation she had had with the two demons. Kolbyr listened to her with the same intensity as he had shown Faddei. Max and Faddei also described the conversation with Orshiasa and the Guardian's guesses.

When Max was finished, she was so tired she thought she might melt into the chair or fall asleep between one word and the next. Kolbyr's quiet voice woke her up more effectively than a jolt of coffee.

"The demons didn't share their names?" he asked. The room was cold, his aura slipping out, betraying a lack of control that was not reflected on his face.

"No. Is that important?" Max asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Kolbyr said. "No, I am not trying to be difficult," he said, clearly reading the irritation on Max's face. "It's just that we do have records about some named demons, so if we knew their names, we could do some research."

"I see. Well, it didn't seem as if they were going anywhere," Max said, forcing herself to sit forward. The position was uncomfortable and helped keep her awake. "So it's likely you may get a chance to meet them at some point."

"I will look forward to the prospect," Kolbyr said, his eyes bright. He turned to Faddei. "Are we quite certain the demons are not using the docks as their base? Queran and the descendant had settled in there, I recall."

"The Order has been keeping an eye on the docks," Bryce answered, and Max saw a few people start. He had been standing still and quiet, and it seemed that some of her fellow Marshals had forgotten that there were Order warriors in the room as well. "There's been no sign of the Syndicate, or the demon or Evan Yarwood." Max spared a moment to be thankful that the large, well-armed and well-trained group of

fighters that Evan had assembled appeared to have gone to ground. She still didn't know how Evan had built up an army under the noses of everyone else around the city. Bryce had been responsible for killing a large number of Syndicate members, but Max didn't think they were all gone, sadly. She dragged her attention back to Bryce. "We would have heard by now if two dead men had been seen there," he added. Max wondered how many people saw the dry humour in that last sentence.

"The Syndicate has gone?" Kolbyr asked, surprised.

"They aren't at the docks," Faddei clarified. "But I am quite sure they are far from gone."

For some reason, Max's mind chose to give her a replay of the dark dog turning to ash in front of her eyes. She had had no idea that Kolbyr possessed that kind of power, and couldn't help wondering what might be left if the vampire got to the Syndicate first.

"We don't have any clear idea of what the demons are up to," Faddei summarised.

It was said in an absolutely matter-of-fact voice, but Max couldn't help a tiny flinch. She was the only one who had spoken to the demons face-to-face, and hadn't managed to get any good information out of them. Like where they might be going next.

"The police are on alert with orders not to approach either Oliver Forster or Hemang Raghavan," Faddei continued, looking around the room. "And that goes for all the Marshals,

too. They are demons. If you see them, call it in but do not approach them. Let the Order deal with them. We've got more than enough to deal with. And I want to thank Lord Kolbyr for coming so quickly and disposing of the dark dog. We are grateful," Faddei said, inclining his head to the vampire.

"I am sure that the warriors would have contained the creature until a Guardian could be summoned," Kolbyr said. His tone was perfectly polite, giving due respect to the warriors. Max was sure she wasn't the only one thinking that they would have been waiting a very long time for a Guardian if Kolbyr hadn't turned up. "I am glad to have been of service." He inclined his head back to Faddei.

A sliver of unease crept down Max's spine as she wondered if Kolbyr's service had put the Marshals in debt to the ancient vampire. She had been careful to ask him to identify the symbol only. Everything else had been his doing. It was not a good idea to owe favours to someone like Kolbyr.

Faddei didn't seem bothered, so she tried to set the worry aside. As she was struggling to keep her eyes open, it wasn't difficult.

Faddei had said something else, that she had missed, and the other Marshals were filing out of the room. It must be near dawn, she thought. She should be getting ready to head out into the city and see if she could track down the demons. She really should. But she didn't think she was capable of getting out of the chair right now.

There were voices nearby, a conversation that she couldn't catch, then a shape in front of her. She opened her eyes to find Faddei there.

“Kolbyr has just left. Bryce is going to drive you home. Once you've had some rest, we'll work out a plan for what to do next,” he told her. “No, don't argue. Orshiasa might have healed the bones, but you're still recovering. Get some rest.”

“Alright,” Max said. She made it to her feet and looked around at the almost empty room, remembering the faces and names of the people who had been there. Marshals who she had known for years. People she cared about. All of them were at risk if the demons were allowed to roam the city unchecked. She had to stop that from happening.

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Chapter Thirteen

THE SCENT OF SOMETHING divine drew Max out of a deep sleep. There were voices in the kitchen, which was unfamiliar and yet, in the early stages of waking up, she didn't find it worrying. As her mind cleared, she remembered getting home early in the morning with an escort of six Order warriors as well as her dogs. So having people in her house wasn't a shock, even if she had half-hoped, or half-expected, that they might leave while she slept. They were still here, though, and one or more of them was cooking something amazing. Despite the grumbling of her stomach, the presence of other people stopped her from walking through the house in the t-shirt and shorts she'd used for sleeping. She dragged herself out of bed, her body heavy and lethargic with the after-effect of healing bones and sore from the various new bruises she had acquired. She took a quick, hot shower, which helped ease some of her muscles, then dressed in a short-sleeved, black t-shirt and her work trousers, shrugging a sweatshirt on. She still hadn't found a company to deliver heating oil for her house, and the fast-approaching winter meant her house was

cold. She was going to need to find another way of heating her house before too long as she didn't want to deal with burst pipes. Mind turning over possibilities of electric heaters, or opening up the old fireplace in the house, she carried her jacket with her through to the living room.

Cas and Pol were lounging on the sofa, looking remarkably content. She left them alone, continuing on to the kitchen.

Her kitchen was a large room - the same size as her living room - but it was crowded this morning. There were four warriors as well as the amazing smells that had dragged her out of sleep. Khari and Joshua were at her stove. It looked like Joshua was in charge of whatever was cooking and Khari was settled comfortably next to her husband. Hop and Killan were at the table, with their weapons stripped down, engaged in some kind of maintenance. They both stood up as she appeared.

“Good morning. No, please, don't get up for me,” Max said, uncomfortable with the old-fashioned courtesy. She turned to the stove. “What is that? It smells incredible.”

“It's Joshua's survival stew,” Khari said, grinning. “It will keep most people going for a full day.”

“And it's ready, so have a seat and we'll get you set up,” Joshua said.

Max didn't need to be asked twice. She sat at her table, at the end not covered by bits of weaponry, and Joshua put a full bowl of stew in front of her along with a spoon and a hunk of buttered bread. She stared at the bread. “I don't remember

having that in the house. Or any of this,” she added, nodding to the stew.

“We did some shopping on the way over here,” Khari explained. “Are you feeling ok?” she asked.

“A bit light-headed, but otherwise fine,” Max said, and tucked into the stew, pausing after her first mouthful. “This tastes even better than it smells. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Joshua said. “And if Hop and Killan will tidy up, we can all eat.”

Max had never seen weapons put back together so quickly. The pair tucked their weapons away and accepted bowls of stew and more bread from Joshua and Khari.

“Bryce and Os are doing a perimeter check. We’ll switch with them when we’ve eaten,” Hop said. Half of his bowl of stew was already gone, Max noted. She didn’t blame them. As well as tasting amazing, with every mouthful she could feel energy coursing back into her body. She knew that Joshua, like almost all of the Order warriors, didn’t have any formal magical ability, but the way the food lifted her mood and her energy felt close to the healing magic she’d experienced in hospital.

Hop and Killan finished their bowls and headed outside. Max kept eating. Even the bread tasted delicious, perhaps enhanced by the flavours in the stew. She glanced up as she ate at the clock on the wall and saw it was late morning. She’d slept longer than she had intended, but she had needed the rest

and by the time she finished the stew, she had enough energy that she was ready to get out and look for the demons again.

As Khari and Joshua settled at the table with their own food, Max's phone rang. She picked it up immediately, hoping for good news or a lead she could follow.

Instead, she heard Therese's voice at the end of the line. The Marshals' dispatcher was as dispassionate as usual. "I've got a call for you," the woman said.

Before Max could respond, there was a click on the line and a new voice, sounding like a young male, spoke. "Hello?"

"Hello. This is Marshal Max Ortis. You were looking for me?" she asked.

"Erm. Well. I think so. I was looking for Miscellandreax T'Or Orshiasa," the voice said. He was definitely young.

"I don't use that name anymore, but that's me," Max confirmed, not looking up from her empty bowl. The warriors could probably hear both sides of the conversation.

"Er. Alright. Well, there's someone here who needs to speak to you," the man said.

"Alright. Put them on the phone."

"I can't do that. It's ... well, it's Priest Xavier. He's ... well, he's full of the Lady's light and he's asking for you to come here," the voice said. "Oh, I should have said who I am, shouldn't I? I'm Michael. I'm an apprentice at the Lady's temple."

Max hesitated, her stomach unsettled despite the wonderful food. She didn't remember a Priest Xavier, and she'd never heard of anyone being filled with the Lady's light before. Then she stopped, remembering the remarkable revelations from Emmeline and Kitris. The Lady had apparently spoken directly to Kitris and to one of the priestesses.

"Where are you?" Max asked.

The young man, Michael, gave a temple address that she recognised as being close to the city centre.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Max promised, and hung up the phone.

Bryce and Osvaldo had come into the kitchen while she had been on the call, and were leaning against the kitchen counter, bowls in hand while they ate. Bryce lifted a brow at her.

"Where are we headed?" he asked.

Max rubbed her hands across her face, as if she could erase the strange phone call and even stranger knowledge in her mind. "I need to go to one of the temples," she said, and got to her feet, picking up her empty bowl. "I'll check in with Faddei on the way. Hopefully, there's been some more news on the demons, or at least where to look."

"We're coming with you," Bryce said.

The sink was already full of hot, soapy water, so Max washed her bowl and spoon, using the activity as an excuse not to answer Bryce or look around the room. When she had

done that, everyone else had finished their meals and were handing their dishes to Osvaldo.

“I’ll clean up here and follow you with Hop and Killan,” Osvaldo said.

Max looked around the room, weight settling in her chest, not wanting to open her mouth in case she said something rude. It might be strange having other people in her house, and yet it wasn’t a bad thing. She trusted these people, she realised. They had walked with her through the Wild, when Queran had taunted Max by leaving clues for her to find. The warriors had never once complained about her slow pace. They seemed determined to follow her now, and were more than capable of looking after themselves against most threats. And if she hadn’t had Bryce with her when she had been pulled through into her own Vault, she would not be here now. The Syndicate would have killed her.

All the same, the weight and reluctance wouldn’t leave her. She didn’t want to have people around her who could be hurt. The memories of the nine warriors who had died at the Grey Gates were still fresh, even eight years later, and she didn’t want anyone else to die because of her.

“We’re going to come with you, one way or the other,” Khari said, her usual good humour tempered into something a lot more serious. “We want these demons out of our city, and you’re the best chance of getting that done.”

Max nodded, once, not trusting her voice, stripped off her sweatshirt and put on her jacket. As she was double-checking

her ammunition and gun, Cas and Pol appeared in the doorway, eyes bright and ears lifted.

“Yes, you’re coming, too,” Max told them.

“We gave them some of the stew before I added the final spices,” Joshua said. “I hope that’s ok.”

“No wonder they looked so pleased with themselves,” Max said, a smile pulling her mouth. “Thank you,” she said to Joshua. She glanced at the stove, wondering if there might be some leftover stew for her later. The pot was almost empty. Just about enough for one more human-sized portion.

“It’ll keep until you’re back,” Joshua said, following her look.

“Thank you,” Max said again, face heating up that she had been caught staring. It was selfish of her to want more, but the stew was one of the best things she had ever eaten. She glanced up at Bryce. He was watching her with a hard-to-read expression. “Alright. Let’s go. Apparently, I need to see a priest.”

Chapter Fourteen

AS MAX PARKED HER pick-up on the street outside the temple, she realised why the address had been so familiar. She had been here within the last few months. Late at night, when a serial killer had left a young woman's body on the street not far away, the area lit by police lights. There had been a group of priests and priestesses gathered among the pillars of the temple, watching the police and crime scene techs at work. When she was leaving the scene, Max had climbed the steps to the temple and looked inside, halting at the threshold. There had been a very old, kind priest who had spoken to her, but she still hadn't felt able to go in. Kitris had told her she was barred from the Lady's Houses. Max hadn't been quite sure if she should believe him, but she hadn't wanted to test it and find herself banned from the space. The Lady's temples had been places of quiet and refuge for her growing up. She could all-too-easily imagine the pain of finding that she was, in fact, barred from entry. The anticipation of that pain as much as Kitris' words had kept her from even trying.

And today, even though she had been invited, she hesitated at the threshold.

“Are you alright?” Bryce asked her. He’d been mostly silent on the journey here. It hadn’t been an unpleasant silence, more that they were each lost in their own thoughts. She’d left a message for Faddei, and hadn’t heard back, so there had been no new information for them to turn over.

“I will be. I think,” Max said. Drawing in a deep breath, she took the single, necessary step forward to cross the threshold.

Inside the temple, the air was lightly scented with cinnamon and apples, warm and clean against her face after the chill and traffic fumes outside.

The temple itself was almost empty, the only people present forming a small group at the front, close to the Lady’s altar. The magic that kept the Lady’s altar gleaming washed over Max as she moved forward, the sounds of her footsteps swallowed up in the hushed interior. The floor was scattered here and there with a random assortment of chairs, from large, comfortable armchairs to three-legged wooden stools, and a variety of floor cushions and rugs. The Lady’s temples accommodated anyone who came through the doors and wanted to stay for a while.

As Max walked forward, her chest hurt. It had been over eight years since she had been inside a temple and she’d almost forgotten the sense of belonging and peace that settled over her in the Lady’s Houses. The priesthood said that everyone was welcome, and Max had always felt that to be

true when she was inside one of the temples. Outside, she had been clumsy and slow and stubborn and stupid, according to her teachers. Inside, she was one of the Lady's children, welcomed the same way as everyone else. Inside, she had value, and she belonged.

The serenity of the temple space settled around her, relaxing her shoulders, evening out her breathing, seeping into her and soothing the raw, hurt edges inside her even as her heart ached. Eight years since she'd felt this peace. She gathered as much of it to her as she could, continuing on her way. There were people waiting.

The group at the front of the temple turned out to be one very old priest, settled cross-legged on a floor cushion, with three much younger temple servants hovering around him.

The priest had his eyes closed, but lifted his head as Max approached. With a start, she recognised him as the kind old man who had spoken to her on her previous visit. Then he opened his eyes and rather than the gentle human gaze she had expected, blazing brilliant light shone between his lids.

"Finally, you have come," the priest said. That wasn't the voice Max remembered. This voice was too big for a human body to hold, ringing through her head and chest along with a primal jolt that shook her to her core. The sense of peace she had wrapped around herself vanished, shock taking its place. The priest wasn't there anymore. Something else was in his place. She hadn't thought that anything from the Lady's realm would do that. She had always believed that only servants of

the dark lord would take over a person's body, displacing the original and rightful occupant.

“What have you done?” she asked the entity in the priest's body.

“What was necessary. Leave us.” There was a strong compulsion built into the command, the words directed at everyone around the priest and Max. The three temple servants scurried away, heading for the back of the temple. The warriors who had followed Max into the temple fell back, heading for the open entrance at the front. She saw Bryce frowning slightly, as if he couldn't understand why he was moving.

Max dragged the nearest chair - a low stool made of plain wood - closer to the priest and took a seat. She had a feeling she was going to need the support.

“What have you done with Xavier?” Max asked. The shock was beginning to wear off. It helped that she was becoming quite familiar with talking to otherworldly things housed in seemingly human forms. Although this entity, whatever it was, was completely different from Queran, or the demons possessing Oliver and Hemang. Max didn't sense any malice or dark magic around. Which made sense, as this was the Lady's temple and even Her brother wouldn't be quite so bold as to send one of His minions into Her House.

The bright, unblinking eyes stared back at Max, head tilting in apparent confusion. “I have come here to speak with you, and your first concern is for the old man?” the voice asked.

“You are possessing his body,” Max pointed out. This wasn’t a demon. The Lady’s court didn’t have demons. She wasn’t quite sure what the Lady did have, as none of Her servants had ever been recognised in this world. The Lady preferred to watch over Her people from a distance, and not interfere quite so much as Her dark brother. Or so the priesthood told them.

“He invited me to use this vessel in order to communicate with you,” the voice said. The priest’s head tilted slightly. “I assure you, he was quite willing.”

Max found her jaw clamped tight and forced herself to relax. Of course, a priest would be willing to allow one of the Lady’s court into his body. The Lady was their divine maker and could do no wrong in their eyes. And before she had recognised the entity in the priest’s body for what it was, Max would have agreed with them almost completely. But now, her faith had been shaken. Taking over another living being was against the Lady’s laws, as far as Max knew. Even if the host was willing.

“You wanted to speak with me,” Max said, in a tight voice. “What do you want?”

“So direct. So to the point.” The priest’s face twisted into a smile. The entity didn’t quite have full control over the old man’s body and the smile wasn’t quite right. Along with the blinding light in place of eyes, the whole effect was chilling. “I have sensed my brother’s creatures in this world. They need to be stopped. I have need of your services, daughter.”

Max was glad she was sitting down. The world slowly spun and looped around her. This wasn't just an entity from the Lady's realm. This was the Lady Herself. Sitting in front of her, housed in the frail body of an old man.

"Bethel?" Max whispered. The Lady's servants chose not to speak Her name as a mark of respect, but it was not forbidden, or taboo in the way that invoking Arkus' name was.

The priest's face softened into another smile. This one was better. The Lady must be getting more control over the body She was wearing.

"Even so." The Lady blinked, Her eyes seeming to be even brighter when she opened them again. "I have watched you from afar, but I confess it pleases me to see you in person, my child."

"I don't understand," Max said, feeling numb. She'd always thought that the temple spaces were a reflection of the peace and serenity that the Lady carried with Her. But Max was anything but calm and serene just now.

Movement behind her drew her attention and she looked over her shoulder to see Emmeline and Kitris coming towards her and the Lady.

"I sent for them. I hoped to have more time to talk with you alone, but it seems it is not to be. And this body is frail. It will not hold me much longer," the Lady said. She lifted Her gaze to Emmeline and Kitris. "Sit. Listen."

The pair did so, taking places on either side of Max so that she was bracketed by her parents, facing the Lady. Max's skin itched with discomfort. She couldn't think of a good reason why the Lady would have wanted to see Emmeline, Kitris and Max all together.

"You honour us, beloved Lady," Kitris said. He sounded as shaken as Max felt. He had spoken with the Lady before, Max remembered, and had seemed humbled by that experience. It seemed a second visit was equally striking.

"Beloved Lady," Emmeline echoed, bowing her head. Her eyes were bright, not with unshed tears, but with naked excitement. She had been in the Lady's service her entire life, Max realised, and never once expected to face her goddess. Yet here the Lady was, sitting in front of her.

"My brother has sent some of His servants into this world," Bethel said. "They must be stopped before they do more damage."

"Of course, my Lady," Emmeline said. She paused, then asked, "How do we do that?"

"Miscellandreax has failed in her duties," Kitris said, voice tight. "But we will do what we can."

"You have a darkness about you that I do not remember, Kitris," the Lady said, turning Her full attention to the head of the Order. "Don't you remember what I told you? Max was to make her own choices and her own decisions." Max's brows lifted. Somehow, Kitris and Emmeline had left that piece of information out when they had spoken to her the day before.

“She has refused to go back to the Order,” Emmeline said, her chin up, not looking at Max.

“That is not necessary,” the Lady replied, and turned Her eyes to Max. The priest’s body swayed, the light in his eyes dimming. “My time is growing short. Listen, child. You were made from a part of me. I sensed my brother’s restlessness and wanted to give this world the ability to resist Him. But I cannot interfere in this fight. Not directly. That is the bargain we struck, my brother and I. This world is yours, not mine, and not His. You are its champion. You must defend your realm, daughter. Defeat His creatures. Use what I have given you.”

Max half-opened her mouth to protest. Both Kitris and Emmeline had already tried to coerce her into finding and dealing with Evan and Queran. And here was the Lady Herself wanting her to deal with all of the dark lord’s creatures in this world. Her temper spiked. She was thoroughly fed up with other people trying to tell her what to do. Particularly when she was more than capable of working out what was required for herself, without their help.

But this was the Lady asking. Not the ambitious High Priestess, or the arrogant head of the Order. The Lady, whose concern was for Her people, and not Her position in society. And She had decided that the matter was urgent enough, and serious enough, to take over the body of an ageing priest to deliver Her message. The least Max could do was listen.

While Max's mind was still spinning with the implications of what the Lady had said, Emmeline leant forward. "A part of you, great Lady?" Emmeline asked. "Miscellandreax is my daughter. Mine and Kitris."

Max shot the High Priestess a sour look. Amidst the talk of struggle between the Lady and Her brother, trust Emmeline to fix on the one thing that involved her.

"Hardly," the Lady answered, more than a hint of scorn in her voice. "You did not bother reading the ritual, or seek to understand it, did you? Just hastened ahead to perform it and hoped it would bring you glory. You may have carried Max, but she is my daughter. With a little bit of Kitris." The Lady turned to Max, the light in her eyes fading rapidly. "You needed the humanity to be able to live in this world. You are of this world."

"I'm human," Max said, through stiff lips, the denial coming from the soles of her boots all the way through her body. She was ordinary. Human. Not the creation of the Lady.

"Hardly," the Lady said again, Her voice dry. "Do you think a mere human would have survived everything you have endured?" Her tone was full of acid, then Her face relaxed, a smile pulling Her mouth even as the light in the old priest's eyes dimmed even more. "Be well, daughter."

The priest's body slumped forward, a long, deep breath leaving his lips. Before he slid sideways onto the ground, Max knew he was dead.

She stared at the old man's body, noticing that his open eyes were filmed over and white from lid to lid. Her heart ached at another death in front of her.

Grieving for the priest didn't stop her mind from working. The Lady had claimed her as a direct daughter, not the child of the human Emmeline and the mostly human Kitris. No, Max was the Lady's own child. She remembered her brief discussion with Orshiasa. Max was a descendant of the Lady, but it wasn't through several generations.

Her mind rebelled. If she truly was the Lady's own, direct daughter, then she should be full of the Lady's power and light. And surely also full of her goodness, too. And yet, Max felt nothing but human, clumsy and weighted into her body.

"No. She can't go," Emmeline said, surging forward and grabbing hold of the priest's shoulder. She shook the man's body. "Lady, we need more."

"You won't get anything more," Kitris said, his voice hard and flat. He looked across at Max, displeasure pinching his mouth. "It seems you were even more favoured by the Lady than we had believed possible. You will come back to the Order with me, and we will begin preparations to defeat the demons."

"No," Max said. Her mind was spinning, a dozen questions crowding into her throat, the foundation of her world shaken. Not human. Or at least, only a little bit. Mostly, she was something else. She didn't know what she was, or what it meant, but she was very sure of one thing. She was not going

back to the Order. She was not going back to be under Kitris' command, or to live by his rules. She lifted her chin as she met his angry stare. "You cannot make me. And I will not go."

"The demons," Emmeline said, her voice rising to a wail.

"Need to be stopped, yes," Max said. She pushed herself to her feet, and crossed the short distance to the old man's body, crouching beside him. She touched two fingers to her forehead in a mark of respect. "I'm sorry," she whispered, even knowing that Xavier couldn't hear her. "You deserved a better death than this," she said.

"He died in Her service," Emmeline said, drawing herself up to her full height and glaring at Max. "There is no greater honour."

"He died with powers too great for a human body coursing through him," Max contradicted, getting to her feet and staring back at the High Priestess. Not her mother, she reminded herself. But the woman who had carried and birthed her. It was unsettling, to say the least. She looked back down at the dead man. The Lady had seemed - to Max at least - to have more to say. But the old man's body had not held out long enough. And whatever questions Max might have had had been waylaid by Kitris and Emmeline's complaints to the Lady so that there had been no time to ask the Lady what Max might do, or how she might defeat the demons walking in this world. Or what she really was - what did it mean to be the Lady's daughter? And not just in the polite phrasing that everyone

was the Lady's son or daughter, but in the actual sense that she was part of the Lady. That the Lady was, in truth, her mother.

The words and the ideas wouldn't stop turning in her mind. She needed peace and quiet to think, to work out what it all meant. And she wasn't going to get it here.

Max shook her head, a bright spark of anger lighting in her chest. Emmeline and Kitris had been too busy playing politics and looking after their own interests to really listen to what the Lady had been trying to say. Max didn't understand it herself - not fully, not yet - but she knew that she was not going to be helped by doing whatever the High Priestess and head of the Order might want her to do.

And she was angry at the Lady, too. That anger was a bright, vivid red in her mind, a great lump of hurt in her chest. She'd barely begun to understand that Emmeline and Kitris had cooperated to create Max with the understanding she would be a champion for them. And here was the Lady Herself telling Max that was her duty. That Max was to protect this world.

Her earlier thoughts spun back around. She was tired of people telling her what they wanted her to do, and expecting her to obey their wishes.

There wasn't enough air. Panic and anger and betrayal tightened her chest. She closed her eyes and forced a breath in and then out. When she opened her eyes, the first thing that she saw was the dead priest. Xavier had given his body willingly to host the Lady. Even though she had only met him once, and briefly, he had struck Max as one of the kindest

human beings she had ever encountered. He had deserved better from his goddess than to be used as a tool in Her manipulation.

She couldn't stay here. In the Lady's temple. What had once been a place of peace and belonging was tainted. She needed to leave. To move. To go somewhere. She didn't know where, just somewhere that wasn't here.

She turned away, walking towards the temple entrance. As much as the Lady's planning stung, Max and the Lady agreed on one thing, at least. The dark lord's creatures in this world needed to be stopped. And Max was determined to see that got done.

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Chapter Fifteen

MAX HAD ALMOST REACHED the door of the temple when Kitris and Emmeline caught up to her.

“Stop right there, young lady,” Emmeline said, her voice full of authority.

Max kept walking, but lifted a brow and glanced across at the older woman. “Seriously? You’re going to scold me like a child?”

“It’s what you deserve,” the High Priestess said, spots of colour blooming on her cheeks. “You can’t run away from your responsibilities.”

“I am not,” Max said, fighting to keep her voice calm. “I’m not going to follow your way, though.”

“That’s ridiculous and childish,” Emmeline said. “The Order was created to deal with dark magic. How can you possibly hope to deal with the demons without them?”

“Really?” Max asked, and tilted her head back towards the front of the temple. “Weren’t you listening just then?”

“I listened,” Emmeline said, pale and furious. “The Lady used my body as a host for Her child. And left us with you,” she said scornfully.

“That’s right,” Max said, putting false cheer into her words. “You thought you would get a lot more credit for being the mother of the world’s saviour. Well, that didn’t happen, did it? Mind you, I didn’t get credit for my work, either, so I think we’re even on that score.”

“You’re needed back at the Order,” Kitris said.

Max looked at him and paused, seeing what the Lady had noticed. There was a darkness around Kitris that she hadn’t seen before. The light inside the temple didn’t seem to reach him, his face shadowed.

“If you’d wanted me to blindly follow your instructions, perhaps you should have taken more of an interest in my upbringing,” Max said. She sounded like a little lost girl, she realised, and clamped her mouth shut. She hadn’t meant to reveal so much of her pain. This pair had created her for nothing more than their own ambition, and then handed her over to an orphanage to raise.

“We gave you everything you needed,” Emmeline said, face and voice stiff. She wouldn’t meet Max’s eyes, though. “Neither of us had the time to raise a child. And you were cared for.”

Max couldn’t speak for a moment, feeling as if she might explode from the conflicting emotions swirling in side her. Rage. Betrayal. Bitter disappointment. And regret. Now she

knew the truth of where she had come from and she almost wished she didn't.

She had a moment of displacement, wondering what the three of them looked like to an outsider. Would anyone see a family resemblance between her and Emmeline, or her and Kitris? She had Emmeline's height, and a similar shade of hair to Kitris, but that was about it. For which Max was thankful. She was her own person. She didn't want to belong to them.

"You need to come back with me now," Kitris said. He was pale, his own anger clear. He didn't seem shocked or unsettled by what Emmeline had said. But then, if he had been unhappy with the way Max had been raised, he could have intervened at any time. And he had not.

"I spent years at the Order and you failed to teach me anything worthwhile," Max told him, the pain in her chest giving way to anger.

"You were an incompetent student," Kitris fired back, white around his mouth. "You couldn't grasp the most basic lessons."

"Yours is not the only way of using magic," Max told him, fury almost choking her. "No. I'm not going to argue or debate this. I will not come back to the Order. But I will do my best to find and deal with the demons. They are a threat to this world, and cannot be allowed to roam free. If you want to help, that's fine, but I'm going to do this my way," she told him, and turned away from him.

She had intended to walk out of the temple and head somewhere to do something, but she was brought up short by the sight of the six warriors standing around the door, all of them staring at her, Kitris and Emmeline. The warriors' superior hearing meant they would have been able to hear every word spoken in the entire temple. Max felt heat rush up her face. They had just learned that, apparently, she wasn't just Kitris' daughter, but the Lady's daughter as well. Max wasn't sure how she felt about that herself, and she certainly wasn't ready to deal with anyone else's reactions just now.

"Thank you for your help," she told the group. "I've got demons to find," she added, and walked between them, out of the temple.

As she went down the temple steps, she saw Cas and Pol waiting for her in the back of her pick-up and the world settled back under her feet. She knew where she was with her dogs. "Want to go hunting?" she asked them.



She got behind the wheel of her pick-up and started the engine, somehow not surprised when the passenger door opened and Bryce got inside. She pulled away from the temple, noticing the two Order vehicles following them, as they had earlier in the day. Khari and Joshua were in one, Osvaldo, Hop and Killan in the other.

It was only after she'd been driving for a few minutes that she realised she had no idea where she was going or where to start looking for the demons. She had turned her pick-up in the direction of the Marshals' offices out of long habit, but that didn't feel quite right. Instead, she took a turn at the next junction, heading for somewhere she would always be welcome. The Hunter's Tooth. As soon as she made the decision, the burning fury eased a little.

"We're going to see Malik?" Bryce asked.

"We are," Max confirmed, even though she'd only just made the decision.

"Good idea," Bryce said.

Max shot him a sideways look, lips twitching. "You don't need to agree with me," she said.

"I know. But Malik is one of the best connected people in the city," Bryce said. "If anyone can give us a lead, it's likely to be him."

Max nodded and turned her attention back to the road, trying not to think about the scene in the temple or the things she had learned. Bryce's presence made that easier. He stayed quiet, and she gradually felt her temper cooling over the course of the drive.

When she reached the Hunter's Tooth, she parked the pick-up and got out, leaning against the side for a moment, not wanting to take all her anger and uncertainty and pain into Malik's space. He had been badly injured and left for dead less

than a week ago. Even though she could see that the bar was open again, he might still be healing and she didn't want to bring her negative emotions inside his territory. He worked hard to keep it neutral.

The Order vehicles pulled up beside her pick-up and the other warriors got out.

There was an awkward silence, Max trying not to look at everyone. Cas and Pol jumped down from the back of the pick-up and pressed themselves against her, the warmth and reality of them holding her, reminding her of what mattered. Her dogs would never let her down.

“Tough break on the family,” Osvaldo said, breaking the silence.

Max choked on an unexpected laugh.

“Yeah, Kitris for an old man?” Joshua added, nose wrinkling.

“That is tough,” Bryce agreed. He was standing nearby. “Family evenings would be mathematical quizzes.”

Max groaned, trying not to laugh. It was too easy to imagine. Kitris had tested her often enough about the magical formulas she had failed to learn.

“So, this makes you a demi-god?” Khari asked, tilting her head. Her eyes were bright, full of mischief. “What does that make Kitris? A semi-demi-god?”

“Is it like musical notes?” Osvaldo asked. “What's the next one? Hemi? A semi-demi-hemi-god?”

Max laughed outright, along with the others.

“Thank you,” she told them all. “But I’m just Max. I’m-” She stopped herself before she could say that she was nothing special. That was a throwback to her childhood, and her time in the Order, when nothing she had done had been good enough. She hadn’t wanted to be special then. She had just wanted not to be stupid or slow. And now, she still didn’t want to be special, but it was different. She wanted to be herself and to have the freedom to work out who that was.

“It doesn’t change anything. We’re with you,” Bryce said quietly, with no hesitation. Max wanted to hug him. While she was still reeling from the news that she was the Lady’s own child, Bryce had simply accepted the information.

The warriors’ good natured conversation and quiet acceptance calmed her enough that she turned towards the building. Even though it was barely past noon, she was very tempted to order something stronger than coffee when she got into the bar.

As she moved away, she was aware of the Order warriors following her. For the first time, she didn’t want to try to send them away. They had just provided her with a bit of grace and good humour at a time when she badly needed it. Trying to get rid of them would be churlish and ungrateful. Besides, there shouldn’t be any dangers in Malik’s bar. Nothing to worry her or the warriors.

The front door swung open under her touch. It had been repaired, and was painted its usual dark green. Inside, it

seemed that nothing had changed. There was the same mix of mismatched furniture, old posters and age-flecked mirrors on the walls, a few patterned silk screens breaking up the large floor area, and the gleaming horseshoe-shaped bar in the middle of everything.

There were a few other patrons in the bar, playing pool at the tables set up to one side of the space. The rest of the bar was empty apart from the familiar figure of Malik, who looked like he was polishing glasses.

At the sight of the siren, Max felt her shoulders relax. He looked whole and healthy, his mid-brown skin showing no signs of paleness, his curling hair cut short again over a beautiful face that drew the attention of many of his patrons. He looked across as she and the warriors came in, and his face transformed into a warm, welcoming smile. More tension left her body. Coming here had been the right thing to do.

Max went over to the bar, leant forward across the polished surface, and accepted a kiss on her cheek, which was Malik's usual greeting for her.

"It's good to see you back to full health," she said to him. She didn't take a seat, just leant on the bar.

"And you. I heard there was some trouble at the docks," Malik said, his eyes travelling over the rest of the group. He exchanged friendly nods of greeting with the warriors, then turned his attention back to the bar as Cas and Pol rose on their hind legs, putting their front paws on the wooden surface on either side of Max. "Max, don't your hounds ever learn?"

Malik asked. There was no anger in his voice, though, and he gave each of the hounds a pat and scratch behind their ears. The dogs had stayed with him when he had been vulnerable, and Max had been taken elsewhere.

“You fed them too well,” Max answered, smiling.

“That must be it,” Malik agreed. His eyes travelled over the group again, turning serious. “As lovely as it is to see you, I doubt you’re here just to catch up.”

“Do you have time to talk?” Max asked.

“Of course. Grab a seat, and I’ll bring some drinks over,” Malik said.

With the bar being fairly quiet, it wasn’t difficult to find an isolated table. Without a word spoken, Hop and Killan settled at a table nearby, leaving Max with Bryce, Khari, Joshua and Osvaldo for company. With their non-human, sharper senses, Hop and Killan would still be able to follow the conversation.

As they took their seats, Max checked her phone and saw she’d missed a text from Ruutti. The detective had tried to pull as much camera footage as possible from around the house where the demons had been staying, and the street where they had vanished, trying to work out where they might have gone, but there’d been nothing helpful so far. Max relayed the information to the others, seeing her own frustration reflected on their faces. The demons seemed to have vanished.

Malik joined them with a tray of coffee mugs and plates of what looked like fresh baking. He handed mugs across to Hop

and Killan along with one of the plates, setting the other mugs and plates around the table with Max and the other warriors. Once everyone was served, Malik took a seat opposite Max at the round table.

“There’s been a lot more trouble,” Max told Malik. “Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan’s bodies have been taken over by demons. They had been staying at a house guarded by dark dogs. They got away. They’re somewhere in the city, and we need to find them.”

Malik went motionless, not even blinking. He stared at Max for a long moment, a coil of scent trailing the air around him. Malik was the only person Max had ever met who could change their personal scent, and she wasn’t sure if it was voluntary or some instinct that followed his mood or well-being. He normally smelled delicious. The scent that met her nose just then was sharper than she’d encountered before. It smelled like freshly squeezed lemon juice. Max guessed it was a sign of Malik being disturbed by her news.

“Dark dogs are not something to be taken lightly,” Malik said at length, his voice almost unnaturally calm. “And something like that would be talked about. I haven’t heard anything.”

“We just found them last night. It looks like the demons kept the dogs in the house they were occupying,” Max said. “There were three we found, and they are all dead.”

“Good,” Malik said, relaxing a fraction. He blinked, the sharpness of his scent mellowing a little. “What about Queran

and Evan Yarwood?”

“We don’t know where they are,” Max said. “The police are keeping an eye out, and I assume the Order operatives are as well.” She pointedly didn’t look at any of the warriors when she said that.

“The Order has cleared the docks,” Bryce said, “but we’re not sure where else to look.”

“So, there are now three demons and a descendant,” Malik said. The motionless state had gone, and he looked almost back to normal, apart from the shadows of memories Max could trace across his face. “I remember the last time Arkus managed to get a few of His creatures into the city. It was troublesome for a while.” Malik took a drink of his coffee, seemingly unaffected by the potent brew.

“Troublesome?” Max repeated, unable to help the sarcastic edge to her words.

“That’s one word for it,” Osvaldo commented. “Yes, children, I am old enough to remember those times.”

Max smothered a laugh, turning it into an unconvincing cough. She had known that the warrior was old, by the grey in his hair, but she hadn’t realised just how old. Osvaldo’s non-human heritage clearly came with an extended life-span. She was less surprised to learn that Malik had been alive then, too. Although the siren carried the weight of his years lightly, there was a sense of timelessness about him that meant she’d always assumed he was older than he appeared. Far older, from what he had said. The last time the dark lord had managed a wide-

spread interference in the city had been well over a hundred years ago.

“Alright, grandpa, why don’t you and Malik educate us youngsters? How did you stop the demons last time?” Khari asked.

Oswaldo and Malik exchanged glances across the table, both of them wearing the kind of grim expressions Max was more accustomed to seeing when police officers had to deliver bad news to families. She sat up a bit straighter.

“You don’t know, do you?” she asked reluctantly.

“The Order did something. We’re not sure what,” Malik said, looking at her. “This was, what, a hundred and fifty years ago? Before Kitris was in charge.”

“The Guardians took three dozen warriors with them,” Oswaldo said. “I was barely out of training then. Not experienced enough to be chosen. Only a handful of the whole group came back. Orshiasa was one.”

Max put her hands around the coffee mug Malik had put in front of her, needing the warmth. She had always known that her old mentor was highly respected among the Order, but she had not realised that he had been one of the few Guardians who had actually faced down demons and lived.

Which made her look back on his visit to her house in a new light. He’d said he had wanted to understand how she had survived an encounter with a demon, never mentioning that he,

too, had lived through one. His question hadn't just been academic interest, but a personal request for information.

"They used magic?" Max asked. It was an educated guess. The Guardians were supposed to be the most powerful magicians in the world, and spent years training to reach that title. While she might have found Orshiasa's training impossible to follow, she had always respected her former mentor's abilities with magic.

"I assume so," Malik answered, glancing at Osvaldo. "No one who was actually at the final confrontation has ever talked about it."

"The two warriors who came back were damaged," Osvaldo said, the hesitation in his voice letting Max know that he wasn't talking about physical damage. Having been into the underworld, she understood. There were some things that no person should have to face.

"We can ask Orshiasa," Bryce said.

It was logical and sensible, but from the expressions on Bryce and the other warriors' faces, Max thought they shared her doubts that Orshiasa would tell them anything. He hadn't spoken about the incident in over a hundred years. He hadn't brought it up when speaking to Max the day before. And even with the very real threat of more demons in the city, he hadn't offered up any information when he had been called to the crime scene the night before and had seen what the dark dogs and the demons had done.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” Malik asked. He was watching Max intently. “Something else is bothering you.”

“It’s been an eventful couple of days,” Max said. She couldn’t feel the heat of the coffee any longer. She added milk to the mug and took a drink. The liquid was lukewarm, but she needed the caffeine.

Bryce made a sound suspiciously like a suppressed laugh. “Eventful, she says,” he commented, slanting a smile at Max which took the sting out of his words. “You should tell him,” Bryce added.

“I know,” Max answered. Still, she hesitated before going on. “Apparently, Kitris is my father.” She grimaced. “Or, rather, he participated in a magic ritual that led to my creation.” The words felt strange in her mouth, but they were far easier to say than *father*. “And the Lady Herself organised my creation.” It was going to be a long, long time before that felt anything but strange. Even saying the words made Max feel as if she had been transported to an alternate world.

“That actually explains a few things,” Malik said, the brightness in his eyes startling Max into meeting his gaze. “You have always been immune to my power. And Ruutti’s. And you can resist Kolbyr better than any human I’ve come across.”

“Huh,” Max said, sitting back in her chair. “That’s true,” she acknowledged. She remembered the Lady saying that she had survived things no normal human would have. It had sounded

negative from the Lady, but the things Malik had pointed out were more positive, as far as Max was concerned.

“So, you carry the Lady’s light in you,” Malik said. He dipped his chin as a silent mark of respect. “There are not many that can claim that. The Lady does have some descendants in the city, but there are very few of them.”

“Oh, really?” Max asked, curious. She didn’t ask Malik for more details, though. Malik might be in touch with almost everything that went on in the city, and share information when it was needed, but he also had a personal code about when not to share information. She suspected that he would not tell her the identities of the other descendants, and didn’t want to put him in the position of having to refuse to answer.

“Kitris is one of the descendants,” Bryce added. Malik nodded, as if it was new but not surprising information.

“So, we have demons in the city and we’re not sure where they are. The Order should be looking for them, but we’re not sure if they are doing that. And you want to find the demons,” Malik said. He lifted a brow at Max. “Does that sum it up?”

“That sounds right,” Max answered, the weight of the task she had set herself landing on her shoulders and pressing her onto the hard seat. “We only found the two wearing Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan yesterday. We’ve no idea where Evan Yarwood and Queran might be. Or even if they’re aware of each other,” she added. Neither of the demons the night before had mentioned Evan or Queran. That didn’t mean much, Max knew.

“Give me a bit of time, and I’ll see what I can find out for you,” Malik said. “It might take a few hours, though. If the demons haven’t been spotted yet, then they are being unusually quiet.”

“Alright. Thank you,” Max said.

Malik excused himself from the table and headed back to the bar, pulling his phone out from behind it.

“What now?” Khari asked. “I mean, I’m all for sitting here for a bit. We haven’t had a quiet moment for a while.”

“There’s a cookout at the community garden,” Osvaldo said, a trace of longing in his voice. The emotion more than the words themselves caught Max’s attention.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Killan said, leaning forward.

“A cookout?” Max asked, turning the unfamiliar term over in her mind. She couldn’t place it.

“You’ll love it,” Khari said, with utter confidence. “Everyone brings something for the table. It’s held outdoors, plenty of room for the hounds.”

Max saw the longing Osvaldo had expressed reflected on the other warriors’ faces, even Bryce’s. They wanted to go, she realised. All of them. But they wouldn’t say so directly. And she knew that if she decided to go somewhere else, they would follow her, and ignore their own wishes.

So even though being surrounded by people was not something she enjoyed, Max nodded. “That sounds interesting. Let’s go there.”

The smiles around her made her smile in turn, and lightened the chaos in her mind and heart. A cookout sounded like a good way of taking her mind off her own problems for a while.

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Chapter Sixteen

MAX'S KNUCKLES WERE WHITE as she gripped the steering wheel, the pick-up slowing as she eased her foot off the accelerator. Her stomach was tight with nerves and she just hoped she didn't look as nervous as she felt. It was as if she was at the threshold of the Grey Gates once again, not knowing what waited for her in the underworld, rather than heading for the cookout. There would be food and drink and people. No monsters or demons, or so she hoped, and yet she was still tense with nervousness. She had second-guessed herself at least a dozen times on the way over here, but the delight that the warriors had shown had kept her going, following the Order vehicle across the city. This was clearly a rare treat for the warriors and she didn't want to disappoint them - to disappoint Bryce - by changing course.

"It's alright. They don't bite," Bryce said. He was settled in the passenger seat, and had been customarily quiet on the way over. He sounded quite serious. Max's face heated. She hadn't hidden her apprehension well enough.

“I know. It’s just ...” her voice trailed off. She didn’t know how to explain to Bryce that she didn’t know how to speak to normal people. She had a few friends, and treasured all of them, but spent most of her life with other Marshals, or her dogs, and a lot of the conversations centred around their work. She had no idea what ordinary people talked about.

The Order vehicle in front of her made a turn, going into a large parking lot next to a pleasure garden, which was a mix of neatly trimmed grass and riotous flower beds. Max kept going, missing the turn. She muttered a curse and stood on the brakes, hand going to the gear lever to change into reverse. Her hand froze. Her stomach was twisting with unease, her mouth full of a foul, bitter taste.

“We don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” Bryce offered, his tone gentle.

“No, it’s not that,” Max said, frowning. “There’s something wrong.” That was it. It wasn’t just nerves at being in the midst of a crowd of people. She’d been growing more and more uneasy as they drove across the city, and now she couldn’t ignore the sensation any longer. She lowered her window, taking a deep breath of the air, and could smell nothing but traffic fumes. Then the trail of something else, something *other*, crossed her skin and she fought the urge to reach for her gun. There wasn’t anything there to shoot at.

“What is it?” Bryce asked, switching immediately into what she thought of as his work-mode. He was calm and focused, eyes scanning their surroundings, looking for a threat.

“I am not sure yet. The sensation has been getting stronger as we drove. I think the source is a bit further on,” Max said.

“Keep driving, and I’ll call the others,” Bryce said, pulling his phone out of a pocket.

Max drove on, barely hearing Bryce’s low-voice conversations, following the sticky, spider-feet-against-her-skin sensation. It grew stronger as she drove along the side of the pleasure garden. The place was full of people. There were children running about, some of them shrieking in delight as they chased each other. There were adults and teenagers mingling, most of them with drinks in hand. At the edge of the garden was a row of tables and an open grill. The scents drifting to Max’s nose cut through the foul taste and made her mouth water. There was more than one skilled cook in the garden.

The road turned around the end of the garden and into what looked like a row of sheds, small workshops and garages. To one side, bordering the garden they had just passed, was a large market garden full of raised beds of plants that looked like a variety of vegetables. There also seemed to be a small orchard. Max had come across a few working gardens, but never one on this scale outside a commercial farm. She guessed that the community that tended the garden could get most of their fruits and vegetables from their own labour.

To the other side was a large, disused tenement building. It wasn’t that unusual a sight in the city, even in an area like this, which was quite densely populated. She turned away from it,

back to the row of sheds and smaller buildings in front of her. The ground was worn and cracked concrete, but it was free of any weeds or other rubbish, suggesting that someone, at least, looked after the area.

There was nothing in the sight in front of her to make her skin crawl or her fingers itch to pull her gun, but she was fighting the urge with every breath. She stopped the pick-up, turned it so it was facing away, towards the exit, and got out, heading for the lock-box in the back of the pick-up for her shotgun and some more ammunition.

Cas and Pol were on their feet, both of them in their attack forms, their noses slightly raised as they tested the air around them.

Max checked the load of tranquilliser shells in her shotgun and pulled more ammunition for both her handgun and the larger weapon from the lock-box before shutting it. Judging by the way her skin was crawling, it seemed unlikely that whatever she had sensed would be brought down by tranquilliser rounds. But she could still hope.

Cas and Pol got out of the truck and joined her, walking past the end of the pick-up and onto the cracked concrete. The crawling sensation on her skin got worse as she moved towards the buildings.

“What are we dealing with?”

Osvaldo’s voice startled Max. She’d been focused on the scene in front of her, and trying to work out where the awful sensations were coming from.

“Not sure yet,” Bryce said. “Be ready.”

There was a large crowd of people not that far away, Max remembered, and from the eagerness of the warriors to get to the cookout, she guessed that they had friends, perhaps even family members, in the garden.

“I don’t know what’s in there,” Max told them, her voice high and tight. Her palms were damp on the rough grip of her shotgun. She spared a moment to think how foolish it was to carry a non-lethal weapon when she was surrounded by far heavier automatic weapons, but it gave her some small comfort, so she kept it in her hands. “I can’t place the scent, but there’s something wrong.”

“We’re with you,” Khari said. Max didn’t need to look at the warrior to know that she and her husband would have their weapons ready and be focused on the scene ahead of them.

“Alright,” Max said, and took another step forward. She wanted to turn and run. The impulse was strong enough that she had to focus on the next step, and the next. The metal seven-pointed star badge she wore under her jacket warmed up, catching her attention. Marshals’ badges were imbued with spells that reacted in the presence of magic. Quite a lot of the more dangerous supernatural predators had natural magic, and the little bit of warning from their badges had saved more than one Marshal. There was magic in the air around her. But the badge hadn’t reacted when she had first come across the skin-crawling sensation, which made her wonder just what that was.

“Ugh. What is that?” one of the warriors behind her asked. “I keep wanting to turn away.”

“Some kind of protective spell, I think,” Max said. “It usually only lasts a few feet.”

“Keep going,” Bryce ordered. He was level with her shoulder, Cas and Pol a pace in front of her, both dogs with their bodies lowered to the ground, ears pinned back. Shadow-hounds were sensitive to magic and she could only imagine how uncomfortable it was for them to be pressing forward through the protective spell.

Then she reached the other side of it and the pressure to turn back vanished. She breathed a sigh of relief, and got a mouthful of another bitter taste for her trouble. The badge under her jacket warmed up again.

“There’s more magic somewhere around,” she told the others, speaking as quietly as she could. “It could mean a big predator,” she said, “or it could be something else.”

“Alright,” Bryce acknowledged, not taking his eyes off the area in front of them.

Oswaldo, Hop and Killan were taking the rear positions, Max realised, with Joshua and Khari out to either side of her and Bryce.

As they moved forward, Max’s skin twitched with every step. The badge was still warm. Whoever had put the magic into the metal had been sensible enough to add in a control which meant that the badges would not overheat, even in the

presence of very powerful magic. It was simply a warning for the Marshals that there was magic around them. The scratching sensation that was spreading over her skin let her know that whatever magic was around, it was dark in nature. Most of the predators from the Wild had what Max thought of as natural magic, which was simply a part of them, and neither dark nor light. But there were some creatures that carried dark magic, and they were all dangerous.

She'd never been able to sense a dark magic predator from over a city block away, though, which made her even more apprehensive about what was ahead.

The buildings in front of them were made of a variety of materials. The ones closest to her were a group of three buildings made of dull red brick, with slanted corrugated metal roofs and wooden doors that were all firmly closed. The central building was slightly larger than the others. Beyond the first group, the other workshops and garages were built in a far more haphazard way. It didn't matter what they were made of, or how disused some of the other buildings looked. All of them would need to be checked and cleared.

The prickling along Max's skin seemed more defined on her left side, so she turned in that direction first, the warriors and her hounds moving with her.

Khari and Joshua moved ahead as the group approached the building Max was heading for, going to either side of the wooden door. They exchanged glances, then Khari grabbed the door handle and pulled it open, revealing a dark interior.

A coil of scent trailed out of the open door. Something sweet and rotten. It could be something as innocuous as over-ripe fruit. But the badge Max wore was still warm, and that wouldn't happen if all she was facing was a neglected harvest. She'd come across a few supernatural creatures that had a similar scent, and all of them were vicious and furious.

She swapped her shotgun for her handgun, and saw the warriors taking note. She pulled the pen light out from one of her pockets and clicked it on, aiming the narrow beam into the building.

With the daylight outside, and the narrow focus of the light, she didn't see much, but she did catch something moving at the edge of the light.

“Get back,” she told Khari and Joshua. The warriors obeyed without hesitation even as Cas and Pol stalked in front of Max, bodies low to the ground, the long hair on their backs standing up. Her dogs knew their jobs, and knew there was something dangerous inside the building.

“Ugh, what is that smell?” Khari asked. She was on Bryce's other side, Joshua next to Max.

“From the brief look I got, and the smell, I think it's a cuchara,” Max said. When she got blank looks from the warriors, she added, “Think of something like a man-sized cockroach with giant, razor-sharp antenna and a foul temper.”

“Charming,” Khari said.

“Do you find them often?” Bryce asked. A sensible, practical question.

“No,” Max said, frowning as she stared ahead. “They usually live in the root systems of the larger trees in the Wild. We almost never get them in the city, and certainly not this far in.”

“How do we deal with them?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, the only way to deal with them is to kill them,” Max said. “Once they’ve found their way somewhere and made a nest, they keep coming back. They have a hard outer shell, but they aren’t bulletproof.” She took a breath. “And there’s never only one. There’s usually a family group with a minimum of four adults and often a bunch of juveniles. Up to ten. The juveniles are less dangerous than the adults.” She was pulling out her phone as she spoke, dialling the Marshals’ offices.

“What?” Therese was as cold and abrupt as ever.

“It’s Max. I think I’ve come across a nest of cuchara,” she said, and gave the address. “Requesting back-up, clean up, and containment. Be advised that we’re near to a large group of civilians.”

“You think?” Therese said. “Do you have a confirmed sighting?”

Max was about to say no, and start arguing with the dispatcher, when something moved in the doorway of the building. “Sighting confirmed,” Max said, and hung up before Therese could ask any more pointless questions. Max trusted

Therese to get the job done, though. The woman had about as much personal warmth as a cuchara, but she was almost inhumanly efficient.

The domed shape of a cuchara's head was clearly visible at the edge of the door. The head was a dark brown, gleaming a little in the sunlight. Max tried not to shudder. Marshals had to deal with all manner of creatures, but as far as she was concerned, giant insects like the cuchara, or giant spiders, were the worst. Nothing with that many legs should be the same size as or bigger than a human, as far as she was concerned.

“Why is it just sitting there?” Joshua asked after a moment. “Can't it see us?”

“Their eyesight and hearing are fairly poor,” Max said, “but it's most likely waiting for the others to gather around. They don't tend to attack one at a time.”

Next to her, Bryce made a few quick hand gestures which Max assumed were directed to Osvaldo, Hop and Killan. She glanced over her shoulder to find the other three warriors moving closer and then spreading out so that the warriors formed a loose semi-circle, facing into the buildings.

Max's phone buzzed. She glanced down. Faddei. She took a step back and answered it. “Yes?”

“Cuchara? How many?” Faddei asked. He sounded tense, and she could hear engine noise in the background suggesting he was in a vehicle. Probably on his way.

“I’ve only seen one so far, but you know there’s never just one,” Max said. She hesitated. “There’s some kind of a party going on,” she said. “Lots of people and children. They’re too close for my liking.” As well as being vicious, cuchara could move *fast* when they wanted to.

“Got it,” Faddei said, sounding grim. “Therese is calling in the local police to get everyone clear. I’ll be there soon,” he said, and hung up, letting her focus on the task at hand. Her boss knew, like all Marshals, that it was dangerous to be distracted while facing any kind of creature.

The cuchara at the door was still there, apparently watching them. It had long, thin appendages at the base of its skull that seemed to drift in the breeze, but which Max knew were actually sensors. The razor-sharp antenna she had told the warriors about were slightly further back, behind its head. It was tasting the air, checking wind direction, trying to work out how many threats to it and its family were outside the building. And it would be relaying that information back to the rest of the group.

Raymund found the creatures fascinating, particularly their apparent ability to communicate with each other. He claimed to have run experiments which proved that the cuchara shared information on food sources and shelter, although Max was not sure how he had managed to make any kind of a study of the creatures. As she had told the warriors, the Marshals did not even attempt to sedate and capture them. They had tried that before Max had joined the service, and from what the older Marshals had said, the outcome had never been good.

Movement behind the creature drew Max's attention and her heart sank. There was definitely more than one. She had expected it, but it was still disappointing to see it confirmed.

Another head, with another set of long, slender sensors, appeared in the open doorway. More of the rotting smell seeped out into the air, along with a trail of cold magic. Cuchara never seemed to possess enough intelligence to use the magic they carried, but it added a lot of weight to their attacks.

As she absorbed the presence of the creatures, she realised that the insects' presence was different from whatever it was she had sensed earlier. Her skin was crawling again, a visceral response to her memories of cuchara. This was a more familiar effect, though. She'd been around cuchara before. She knew what it felt like. Whatever she had sensed earlier had been different. Far more dangerous.

She blinked, wondering if she'd missed something, and what that might be, and then frowned. The heads that she could see seemed larger than the adults she remembered from before.

As she opened her mouth to warn the warriors about the creatures' natural magic, the heads both disappeared. Max tightened her grip on her gun.

"That's not a good sign," she told the others. "And they have some magic, which makes them fast and sneaky," she added.

"Understood," Bryce said. He sounded tense.

"Do we just keep waiting?" Khari asked.

As if hearing her question, the creatures moved. Max had forgotten just how fast they could move, and how awful it was to see people-sized cockroaches. The cuchara swarmed out into the daylight in a mass of thin, spiked dark legs and shimmering, golden brown shells. She started firing as soon as the first creature left the building, deafened a moment later by the warriors' heavier weaponry. As the first bullets hit home, the creatures started screaming, the sound setting Max's teeth on edge. She stopped firing. Her handgun wasn't going to do anything when there were six warriors firing their heavier weapons.

Luckily, Cas and Pol had stayed where they were, between Max and the threat, and the warriors were being careful not to fire on them. Her dogs crept back, closer to her. They had worked with firearms enough to know to stay out of the way. They were both still in crouch positions, bodies touching the ground, ready to move if needed, their attention focused on the creatures spilling out of the building.

Max stared, horrified, as creature after creature spilled out. Far more than she had been expecting. More than the six to eight adults that were normally found in a family group. And they were much bigger than she remembered. She lost count, unable to keep track of the individuals in what seemed like an endless flow of giant, shining shells with too many legs. She had her gun held ready, just in case she spotted an opening where she could assist.

The warriors were holding their ground, firing systematically at the creatures swarming out of the building. Somehow,

without speaking, they had coordinated their pattern of firing so that all the escaping cockroaches were covered.

The warriors' bullets should have been enough - more than enough - to hold back the swarm of the cuchara. Even in those numbers, the heavier weaponry should have stopped the creatures in their tracks. But the cuchara just kept coming, the blanket fire of the warriors barely slowing them down. The creatures were moving faster than Max had ever seen them do before. They seemed far more resistant to weapons than she remembered. She could only see one dead so far.

Even as she noted that, an individual broke free from the group and surged forward, moving almost too quickly for Max's eyes to track. The creature was on Joshua between one heartbeat and the next, the warrior disappearing under the great bulk of the creature's shimmering brown body and multiple legs. The creature's antenna whipped around and down, towards the warrior. Max cried out in useless warning, knowing how sharp the antenna were. She heard a muffled grunt from Joshua, smothered by an insect that was larger than he was.

Cas and Pol surged up, grabbing hold of the creature's legs, dragging it backwards, off Joshua, their low, furious growls audible even through the guns.

As the creature moved, Max saw a ripped sleeve, bright red blood coursing down Joshua's pale skin. The brief glimpse she caught suggested a terrible wound, but the warrior was moving. He had a knife in his other hand and was cutting into

the creature even as her dogs dragged it away. As the cuchara was pulled off him, Joshua reversed his blade and sliced into the creature's neck, behind its head. The cuchara went still. Cas and Pol dropped it immediately. Dead.

A crashing sound drew Max's attention back to the other buildings. One of the other doors had opened and another swarm of cuchara was flooding out.

"Sweet Lady," Max said, "there's so many of them." She froze in sheer terror at the number of the creatures swarming into the daylight.

This second batch was cleverer than the first, splitting up so that they presented more targets for the warriors to fire at.

"Keep firing!" Bryce ordered, and Max realised that the other warriors had been distracted, like her, by the attack on Joshua and the sight of the new cuchara. She took a half-stride forward, intending to see what she could do to help, but Joshua waved her back. He was on the ground still, blood still flowing down his arm, but he picked up his main weapon and started firing again.

Panic closed Max's throat. There were too many creatures, and they were moving too fast. Almost faster than bullets. It was only a matter of time before the warriors ran out of bullets, and she didn't think they'd be able to kill all the cuchara before they got free.

Even as she thought that, a bunch of hard shells and too many legs darted to one side, skirting around the warriors' weapons, and headed away. Towards the garden full of

innocent people not that far away. Max turned, following their path, mouth open in a soundless and useless cry of warning, mind spinning. Too many creatures. Innocent people. There must be something she could do apart from just stand there, useless, in the middle of the fight, foul magic filling the air around her. Dark magic. Dark magic should be stopped by light magic. Or, at least, the two should cancel each other out. That seemed logical. If she could only do something with the light she had. She remembered the dark dog in the science building, and how she had been able to slow it down, hold it suspended until Kolbyr got there. Perhaps she could do something similar here? If she could hold the cuchara, the warriors would be able to concentrate their fire.

She put her gun away and put her hands in front of her, palm to palm, searching for the spark of light and magic inside her that she'd called on before. It surged up, brilliant and almost blinding in her mind's eye. With no real idea if it would work, she collected light in her palms and then turned her hands out, willing the light to spread and slow the cuchara down.

Trails of white light spilled out from her hands, weaving between bullets until the light reached the creatures that were in front of her and the warriors. The light spread out across the creatures, catching on their smooth outer shells, tangling around their hard, slender legs. The cucharas' movement slowed. They didn't stop, like the dark dog had, but they definitely slowed. Whatever magic the cuchara carried was resisting Max's efforts. Fighting back.

“Keep doing that,” Khari said, voice tense.

“The gardens,” Max said, not able to raise more than a whisper, the better part of her energy focused on the creatures she could see.

“We’re aware,” Bryce said, as tense as Khari.

Max poured more energy into the magic. She could feel the cucharas’ natural magic writhing against the restraints she’d created. She could feel each and every creature resisting her magic. Even with at least two dead, there were so many of them. Their natural magic, cold and dark, pushed back against her, the sensation slippery and sticky across her skin, turning her stomach. And they knew what she was doing. Even as she watched, the creatures turned towards her so she was faced with a row of shining, domed heads and too many eyes and those long, awful antenna whipping into the air.

She held her ground, a dull ache growing behind her eyes as she concentrated on the magic and holding the insects as still as she could.

The effort of maintaining her magic was tiring her out and she sank to her knees, trusting her dogs to look after her while she held the cuchara as best she could. Around her, she was dimly aware of the warriors continuing to fire. The resistance to her magic began to fade, one creature at a time, the power she needed to continue the magic lessening as the cuchara fell under the warriors’ bullets.

Eventually there was nothing left for her to hold and she let go of the magic, blinking to clear her sight. Her whole body felt drained and she wasn’t sure she could stand up just yet.

What she could see from her kneeling position was quite enough.

The once-tidy and peaceful area in front of the gardening shed was now a scene of carnage. The fresh green scents of plants and the sweet and citrus tang of the orchard fruits drowned out by the foul odour of dead cuchara. There were fragments of shells and jagged spikes of dismembered legs sticking up among piles of the softer, inner parts of the creatures.

“All dead?” Osvaldo asked.

“Yes. Get the heavy gun out. Let’s move,” Bryce said.

Max was upright, but only just, wavering as the warriors sprinted past her, heading for the gardens. She could hear more gunfire. The lighter sounds of the weapons that the police carried, and then the heavier rattle of the warriors’ heavy gun. The firing didn’t quite cover the screams. She tried to move, tried to get up, to go and help the others. Her body didn’t move. She was shaking, even on her knees, face wet with tears as she heard more gunfire. And more screaming.

Chapter Seventeen

THE GUNFIRE AND SCREAMING stopped. Everything went quiet and she was left, swaying where she stood, with dead creatures around her.

The creatures had gotten uncomfortably close, Max realised. The ground just in front of her knees was coated with cuchara blood. A disembodied leg twitching in its death throes almost touched her. The movement of the leg reminded her of the sensation of the cuchara's magic moving against her own.

She scrambled backwards and managed to get to her feet, stumbling away to brace her hands on her knees and throw up everything she had eaten for the last day. She stayed there for a moment, the tiniest bit of breeze carrying the scent of green, growing things to her nose, reminding her that she was next to a working garden. Her body was cold and hot at the same time, embarrassment heating her face. The warriors had kept going, running after the escaped cuchara. She hadn't been able to move. She hated being so weak, but no power in the world

could have kept her stomach from revolting. At least there was no one near her, apart from her dogs.

She managed to straighten up, and realised she wasn't alone. Joshua was still there. A stab of guilt went through her. She'd forgotten about him for a moment. He looked terrible. His already pale skin was almost translucent, deep hollows under his eyes, blood coating his arm and the ground around him. He was still holding a weapon, though. Still keeping watch while she had been able to do nothing apart from be sick.

She fumbled in a pocket for a painkiller patch and slapped it onto her neck. She wasn't in pain. Or so she thought. But she needed the jolt of something to get her moving. A spike of magic, clean and welcome, went through her, lending some strength to her body. Enough for her to move.

That done, she headed across to Joshua. He flopped back onto the ground, his eyes looking unfocused, his gun falling to the concrete beside him.

She knelt by him, eyes moving, taking in the extent of his wounds. One of his arms had been shredded. She could see bone. The cuchara's razor-sharp antenna hadn't managed to cut through Joshua's body armour. That was the only reason he was still breathing, Max realised. His clothing had been ripped down to the hard shell of the armour. There was more blood coming from under the armour, too.

She stared at the injuries and felt absolutely useless. She had field dressings in her pockets, but the wounds on Joshua's

body were beyond any field dressing that she had. Proper medical assistance was needed.

She grabbed for her phone, needing two goes to get it out of the pocket as her fingers were shaking so badly. Therese answered on the second ring.

“I need medical. One of the Order warriors. It’s bad,” Max said, her voice harsh.

“On it,” Therese said, and hung up.

Feeling awkward, Max flopped down to the ground next to Joshua and reached for the hand at the end of his savaged arm. His fingers were ice cold under hers.

“Stay with us,” Max said, voice soft. “I can’t bear to lose anyone else.”

Running footsteps made her look up. The rest of the warriors were heading back at a flat run.

“Oh, Sweet Lady. Josh,” Khari said, her voice cracking. “Is he ...?”

Max realised she was crying again while she was kneeling next to Joshua’s still body. Khari must have feared the worst. She shook her head, words coming out quickly as she tried to reassure Khari. “He’s breathing. I’ve called for medical. I just-” She had to stop as her throat closed up. “I don’t know what to do,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Let us look,” Bryce said. He offered her a hand and she took it, letting him pull her to her feet, his skin shockingly warm against hers after Joshua’s ice-cold fingers. She

followed Bryce a few paces away, turning back to see Hop, Killan and Osvaldo kneeling around Joshua, pulling out what looked like far larger field dressings than the ones she carried. Khari stood by, looking as if she wanted to burst out of her skin. Max was impressed with the warrior's restraint as she held herself still, letting the others work on her husband.

Max couldn't stay standing. The little bit of energy she'd got from the painkilling patch had faded. She flopped to the ground again, Cas and Pol coming to settle next to her. They were still in their attack forms, which told her that the awful day wasn't over yet. But she couldn't move. Not right now. Not yet. Nothing was trying to kill her right now. She just needed to breathe. Just for a moment. Just until her heart stopped trying to thump its way out of her chest, and she could stop crying.

The air overhead whipped and whirled with the arrival of the Marshal's medical helicopter, and a pair of paramedics descended from the vehicle, managing to avoid landing on the cuchara remains. The paramedics who responded to the Marshals' calls for help were used to grisly sights and as soon as they were on the ground, they moved quickly to Joshua's side. The helicopter stayed overhead, the noise a welcome distraction for Max. Luckily, the helicopter pilot had chosen to hover away from the dead insects, so the down draft wasn't stirring up the dismembered pieces.

"You called the Marshal's medical team?" Bryce asked softly. He was standing beside her. "For one of us?"

“Of course,” Max said, looking up at him, a frown on her face. She hadn’t even considered not calling them. Joshua had been hurt by one of the creatures the Marshals hunted. He needed medical help, and she knew how to get it for him. It was completely logical in her mind.

Bryce crouched in front of her and put a hand on her face, the touch gentle, his fingers slightly rough. “Thank you,” he said.

He didn’t kiss her, which Max was both glad about, as her mouth still tasted awful, and disappointed by. But his look brought warmth to her face and right down to her toes.

“Joshua needed the help,” she told him.

“You really don’t see us as any different, do you?” Bryce asked, as if it was amazing.

“No, of course not. You’re people,” Max said, hoping he could see the truth of that in her face and hear it in her voice. She understood his surprise. The Order revered its Guardians and apprentices, but not its warriors. “Do you see me as different?” she asked. It was suddenly important for her to know, particularly after the visit from the Lady. She hadn’t begun to understand what it all meant for her. Or what it might mean for him.

“No. You are Max,” he answered, the warmth in his look bringing more heat to her face, along with what felt like a foolish smile.

If they hadn't been in public, with a mass of dead cuchara nearby, she might have kissed him. As it was, she wrinkled her nose, the stench of the dead insects the only thing she could smell. She couldn't stay here forever. Except she wasn't sure she could get up yet. She'd used every bit of the magic she had and felt hollowed out.

"I don't suppose you have any Order brandy, do you?" she asked.

Bryce grinned. He pulled a familiar silver flask out from underneath his body armour and handed it to her. The metal was warm from his body heat. She took a small amount, rinsing her mouth. It was just what she needed. Her mouth as clean as she could get it, she took a much larger swallow, feeling a gentle warmth spread across her body. She took another swallow before handing the flask back to Bryce.

With a little bit of energy creeping back into her, she managed to get to her feet. She looked across to where the paramedics were working on Joshua. They had stripped Joshua of his shirt and body armour, and Max could see a deep gash along his ribs. The paramedics had a bag of fluids on a metal stand, tubes going into Joshua's other arm, and were working quickly to try to stem the bleeding. Max was distantly surprised that Joshua had any more blood left in him, seeing the large dark stain on the ground around him. Khari was kneeling at her husband's head, her eyes following every move that the medics made.

Max couldn't see the other warriors, then realised they had gone back to the vehicles as they were walking back from that direction, carrying what looked like an army's worth of ammunition. She glanced down at the ground and winced. As well as the dead insect parts, the ground was covered with shell casings and empty magazines. It had been a hugely expensive fight, in more ways than one.

The paramedics moved, loading Joshua onto a stretcher, Khari getting to her feet and exchanging a few words with them, before heading towards Bryce. The warrior was grim-faced.

"They reckon he'll live," Khari said, voice clipped. "They're taking him to hospital now."

"Good. Do you want to go with him?" Bryce asked.

Khari's brows lifted, as if surprised she'd been given the option. "No. I want to kill something," she said, voice flat and hard.

"Alright," Bryce said. Max blinked at the easy acceptance, but these were warriors and they knew each other well. He looked at Max. "When you're ready, we should clear the other buildings."

"Yes," Max said, more heat creeping up her neck and across her face. In the swarm of the cuchara, she had forgotten that they had only opened one building so far.

"That magic was helpful," Bryce added.

Max choked on an unexpected and welcome laugh. She was getting to know Bryce better and better, and knew that he rarely spoke unless he had something of purpose to say. He also had a habit of understatement that she found endearing. He had just paid her a sincere compliment.

The other buildings weren't the only thing she should worry about, though. Her impulse to laugh died as she remembered the screams and gunfire she hadn't been part of. "Did you get all of them?" she asked, her stomach turning again. She'd not even asked about the people who'd just been trying to enjoy a day out.

"Yes," Bryce said, face tightening for a moment.

"There were a few injuries," Khari added, her eyes bleak when she looked at Max. "We're not sure everyone is going to make it."

"Lady, save them," Max murmured, closing her eyes briefly on the prayer. She heard the words echoed around her. She kept her eyes closed a moment more, realising that she'd said the prayer as she always did. As a supplicant to a goddess. The Lady had claimed Max as Her daughter. That hadn't settled into Max's skin. Not yet. Perhaps not ever. But if Max saying a prayer for the good health of people injured by cuchara might help, she was more than happy to do that. She said a silent prayer for Joshua as well. Khari had said he should live, but Max had seen the extent of damage to the warrior's arm, and knew that didn't mean he'd be whole again.

Max opened her eyes, determination taking hold of her. No one else was going to get injured today. She shoved her hair back behind her ears and nodded. “Right, let’s get these buildings cleared.”

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Chapter Eighteen

WITH THE SOUND OF the medical helicopter fading overhead, the remaining warriors moved with her, Cas and Pol towards the row of buildings.

Before they could check the other, closed, buildings, they needed to make sure there was nothing left in the one they'd opened.

Max wasn't sure what was worse. Picking her way past the bits and pieces of dead cuchara, or the stench wafting out of the open door when she eventually reached it. A quick glance inside the building told her that there were no more adults, and no juveniles. There was, however, a large nest in one corner, the stack of eggs almost up to the ceiling.

"Raymund and his team are going to have their work cut out," Max commented, her voice harsh as she fought to control her breathing against the stench in her nose and mouth. "Wait a moment," she said, taking a step forward. She didn't go beyond the building threshold, pulling her torch out and shining it at the eggs. "That's not normal," she said.

The egg-laying creatures that the Marshals hunted had various different ways of creating their nests and arranging their eggs. All of them were fairly haphazard and looked organic. The eggs here were set in tidy columns from the floor to the ceiling. As Max moved her torch beam around the interior of the building, she caught glimpses of metal between the rows of eggs.

“That almost looks like a frame of some kind,” Bryce said, just behind her.

“Yes,” Max agreed. She remembered thinking that the cuchara had been larger than normal, and unusually resistant to bullets. She’d never heard of the insects working with metal, either. Their natural habitats were forests, and they would seek out wooden structures in the city. Not metal. More unease crept over her along with revulsion as she drew in another lungful of the stench.

“Let’s check the other buildings,” she suggested.

Bryce didn’t say anything, just followed her to the next door. This time, Killan and Osvaldo took up position on either side of the door before Osvaldo pulled it open. Khari had taken Joshua’s place at Max’s side, her face tight. Max had to admire the woman’s dedication. Her husband was badly injured, but Khari was focused on her job. She seemed almost disappointed when nothing leapt out of the building at her. She’d told Bryce that she wanted to kill something, and looking at her determined face, Max could see that was still true.

The larger, middle building was, thankfully, empty of creatures. Max's eyes widened as she took in the amount of equipment that had been crammed into the space. Every wall was taken up with racks and hangers, and there were hooks hanging from the ceiling as well. She didn't recognise half of the tools she saw, and every one of them looked well-used, and well cared for. There was not a speck of rust on any of them.

"It's the tool shed for the community gardens," Bryce told her, perhaps catching the surprise on her face.

"It's impressive," Max said.

They moved on to the third building in the small group. The door had been torn off this one when the second batch of cuchara had emerged, and the warriors' attention sharpened as they moved closer. Max's mouth was dry, wondering if there were some cuchara left behind. Even as that grim thought occurred to her, Cas and Pol surged past her, low growls in their throats.

"Come here," she called to her dogs, wanting them out of the line of fire if the warriors had to shoot something. And out of the path of any oversized cuchara that might burst out. They obeyed, returning to her side, their attention fixed forward.

Hop and Osvaldo moved ahead, following a wide arc that took them past the damaged door, taking a good look inside as they went past.

"Nothing moving in there," Osvaldo said. He and Hop were still holding their weapons ready, pointing into the building.

“Good,” Max said, but still moved forward, wanting to be sure.

The building seemed to have been a storage shed. It was full of the remains of what looked like sturdy wooden shelving. Whatever had been stored there was long gone. As was the back wall of the building.

There were several metal frames on the floor. They’d be tall if they were upright, two long posts with what looked like oversized egg cups strung between the posts. The frames looked like the same ones Max had seen in the other building. The ones that had been full of cuchara eggs. These frames were empty. Max tried to be thankful about that, but couldn’t quite get there. Nothing about this was normal or right.

With no more cuchara to worry about, Max swore, moving around the outside walls. There hadn’t been a back door. Something or someone had made their own exit, bursting out of the building, leaving bricks and splintered wood in its wake.

As she drew closer, her skin started crawling again. The same sensation she had felt earlier, before the cuchara.

“Something got out,” Bryce noted. “More cuchara?”

“Possibly. Although it doesn’t feel the same,” Max said, resisting the urge to scratch her arms. Rubbing at her skin wasn’t going to get rid of the horrible sensation.

“Marshals service on approach.” The call came from somewhere behind them, on the other side of the building.

The words had never been so welcome. Max and the warriors made their way to the front of the buildings and the dead insects. A group of five Marshals, including Faddei, were heading towards them, all the Marshals with their handguns out, pointing at the ground. The Marshals stopped at the edge of the dead.

Faddei took a long look around, assessing the carnage of dead cuchara, his eyes stopping on the large patch of blood on the concrete where Joshua had fallen.

“You’ve been busy,” he said.

“One of the warriors was injured. He’s on his way to hospital,” Max told him, knowing he’d be concerned.

“Good,” Faddei nodded, and lifted a brow, waiting for her to go on.

“There’s something wrong here, Faddei,” Max said. “The warriors opened that building and all these creatures came out. Then another lot burst out of that building,” she said, pointing to the damaged door. “They were all adults. All bigger than normal. And more resistant to bullets.”

“Yes,” Faddei said, scowling. “The ones in the garden were tough as anything. We got them all, though. Thanks to some help,” he added, tilting his chin to Bryce and the others.

“Happy to assist,” Bryce answered.

“That building has eggs in it. You need to see that. And the other building, too,” Max said. “Something went out the back

of that building. We haven't had a chance to clear the others yet."

"Alright. Let's have a look in here, then we'll work our way down the row. Just in case. Any idea what went out the back?" Faddei asked.

"No clue. But it went through a brick wall," Max said.

"Alright. Live rounds for everyone," Faddei said, glancing at the other Marshals to make sure they'd heard him. He needn't have worried. The Marshals were all alert. Zoya, Pavla, Yevhen and Sofiya. Max exchanged terse nods with them as Faddei went to check inside the room where the eggs were.

He came outside with a deep frown on his face, glanced at Max, then headed to the other building. He was frowning even more deeply when he came out. "Raymund and the clean-up crew are on the way," Faddei said. "He'll want to see that, too, before we destroy it."

"What's up?" Pavla asked.

"I think you need to see it for yourselves," Faddei said.

The other four Marshals exchanged glances and moved over to the room, looking through the door.

While they had a moment of relative quiet, Faddei jerked his head to Max, asking her to move away to one side with him. She followed.

"Are you alright?" Faddei asked her in a low voice. She'd been hearing that question a lot lately, and wondered how bad she looked.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “I mean, I’m fine to do my job.” Colour rose in her face again. They might be standing apart from the other people around them, but she knew that every one of the warriors would be able to hear every word. They had kept fighting even though one of their number had been badly injured. She couldn’t do any less than keep going, too.

“That’s not what I was worried about. Let me know if you need some time off. There’s been a lot happening,” he said. He was frowning again.

For a moment, Max thought he was referring to the news that Kitris, Emmeline and the Lady Herself had dropped onto her, that she was carrying around like a lead coat. But she hadn’t found time to update Faddei on those particular bits of news, and wasn’t sure she wanted to, either. Apart from the significant concession that she had wrung out of him - that she would work alone - Faddei had always treated her the same as the other Marshals. The Marshals might work hard, but Faddei took care of his people. And Max was one of his people. She valued that and didn’t want to lose it to some idea that because of what the Lady had said, she was somehow special or needed different treatment.

Then she realised that Faddei was more likely concerned about her recent hospital stay. With everything that had happened, she’d almost forgotten that she’d had her arm broken barely a few days before, along with other injuries. It felt as though that had happened to another person.

“Keeping busy is helping,” Max told him. It was true. If she was shooting at cuchara or hunting demons, she didn’t have time to think.

Faddei didn’t look entirely satisfied, but there was no more time for conversation as the other Marshals were coming back from looking into the buildings, wearing almost identical scowls. Faddei moved across to meet them, so they ended up in a large group with the warriors.

“Someone has been breeding cuchara?” Pavla asked. “Those metal frames are not something I’ve ever seen before.”

“That’s what it looks like. And messing with them somehow, making them more powerful,” Max said.

“They were awful enough beforehand,” Zoya commented, nose wrinkling in distaste. “I don’t want to have bigger and tougher ones running around my city.”

“Me neither,” Yevhen agreed, his expressive face reflecting his complete agreement. He had similar colouring to his wife, Pavla - both were dark-haired and pale skinned.

“You said Raymund’s on the way. Do you think he’ll want to keep some of the eggs?” Max asked, her tongue sticking on the words, but needing to ask the question. After the onslaught they had just faced, she also didn’t want the risk of any more of these particular cuchara in the city.

“He probably will,” Faddei said, “but he’s not going to.” There was no room for argument in his tone and Max nodded, satisfied. Raymund was generally left alone to run the science

division as he saw fit, but Faddei was still ultimately in charge. The two of them might disagree from time to time, but Max could not imagine Raymund going against Faddei's direct order.

"We need to clear the rest of the buildings," Bryce said.

While the Marshals had been talking, the warriors had been standing guard, keeping an eye on their surroundings, making sure nothing else approached. Max saw Faddei's small start of surprise and was glad she hadn't been the only one caught up in the potential threat of the cuchara, all but forgetting they still had work to do.

A stab of guilt went through Max as she glanced at Khari. One warrior had been badly injured. If the warriors hadn't been there, then he would not have been hurt.

But if he and the other warriors hadn't been here, and she'd tried to investigate on her own, there would be a swarm of cuchara loose in the city. And if she'd waited for back-up, even if every single Marshal had turned up, their lighter weapons would not have been as effective against the creatures as the weapons the warriors had used. In many ways, they were lucky that only a few people had been injured. The cuchara had been contained. That truth didn't help much, the sensation of guilt finding an echo and an origin in the loss of nine warriors eight years ago, when they had formed a protective ring around her and faced the Grey Gates.

She could still remember their faces. Nine warriors. She'd never known how Kitris had made the decision of who or how

many to send. The senior warrior on the team had been a medium-height woman with cool, deep black skin and black hair in short, tight curls around her head. Naomi. She'd barely spoken a word, but she, like the others, had put their lives before Max's. Naomi and her team had believed that they were doing the right thing, in service of the Order. Max still wasn't sure that was the case. Yes, the Grey Gates were closed. But the cost had been too high, as far as she was concerned.

“Ready?” Bryce's question cut through her memories.

“Ready,” she confirmed, drawing her handgun.



Going through the rest of the buildings in the row - the workshops and the garages - was both terrifying and boring at the same time. Every time they approached another building in the row, everyone would tense up, wondering what they might find inside. And every time the doors were opened, when nothing was found, the tension would ease out again. They did find what looked like a makeshift laboratory that, from the smell, was used to make a popular hallucinogenic sold in bars and clubs around the city. Faddei called the location in to the police, and they moved on. Max could only hope that the laboratory owner was not well connected with one of the Five Families, or Faddei would be forced to defend himself in the next council meeting against accusations of invasion of privacy. Never mind that the Marshals had been searching for

deadly creatures, and had the right to make entry to any building or other premises if they thought creatures might be in there, the Five Families still expected their properties to be respected. They would complain about what they saw as an invasion of their space. They would also complain about any injuries that might happen as a result of a creature on the loose. Not for the first time, Max was glad that Faddei was the one who had to deal with the politics.

Cas and Pol remained on alert, in their attack forms, which made Max's nerves wind ever-tighter as they progressed down the row. Even though there were no more cuchara or eggs, something had put her dogs' acute senses on alert. And she couldn't shake the sensation that something was badly wrong. As they moved further away from the cuchara, the crawling sensation against her skin lessened, but never faded completely.

By the time they'd cleared all the buildings, everyone looked worn out. Faddei suggested they head back to the cuchara to check in with the clean-up team and regroup. Max saw and heard a few sighs of relief. They all needed a break. The warriors handed around protein bars, and Max saw the Marshals' brows lift at the ready sharing of resources, although everyone accepted.

As they came back to the mass of dead insects, a large, familiar truck pulled to a stop at the edge of the concrete and made a complicated turn so that its back was facing the dead insects. The truck held the Marshals service's cleaning equipment, and having done some shifts with the Marshals'

clean-up team in her training, Max knew that it was much easier to bring the vehicle as close as possible to the cuchara.

As the truck made its turn, another, smaller vehicle pulled to a stop near Max's pick-up and the Order vehicles. It was the science team's minibus, the doors opening to let out a half dozen scientists already dressed in coveralls, many of them carrying face masks along with plastic face shields. Max wasn't surprised to see Raymund in the lead. Cuchara were rare enough that he would have wanted to see this for himself.

"What a mess," Raymund commented, coming to a stop at the edge of the array of creature parts. "This wasn't done by our bullets, was it?"

"No," Max said, hearing the frustration in her voice and struggling to contain it. Raymund had few social graces, and it was just like him to be more annoyed by the carnage than relieved by the fact that no one had been killed. "The Order warriors managed to take down the cuchara. The cuchara were moving almost fast enough to escape bullets."

Raymund frowned at her, mouth pinched, clearly not believing her.

"It's true," Bryce said. "If Max hadn't managed to slow them down with magic, we'd be looking at a lot of dead people right now. As it is, a few of the creatures did get loose and there were quite a lot of injuries in the gardens nearby."

Raymund turned the frowning, pinched expression on Bryce. "That seems unlikely," the scientist commented.

“What part?” Max asked. “The creatures moving fast, or the fact that we would have had a lot of dead bodies?”

“The movement,” Raymund said, the disapproval fading. “I’m well aware how deadly these creatures can be. I’ve left another team in the gardens. There were only a few creatures there.” He seemed disappointed by the small numbers, but Max was just relieved that only a few cuchara had escaped. They had done more than enough damage.

“I’ve never seen them move that fast before,” Max said, “and the magic they had seemed stronger than I remember, too.”

“You managed to slow them down?” Faddei prompted.

“Yes. Something like what I did with the dark dog,” Max said. Then she grimaced. “I don’t recommend it. I could feel all of them moving, trying to escape. It was really unpleasant.”

“That explains the pile of vomit I saw over there,” Raymund said.

“If you give me some wipes and a bag, I’ll clean it up,” Max offered, heat rising in her face. Trust Raymund to notice that detail among everything else.

“No need. We’ll gather it up along with everything else,” Raymund said, his tone a little softer. “I’m glad that no one was killed.”

“This isn’t a normal nest, either,” Faddei said. “You need to see what’s inside the buildings,” he told Raymund.

Brows lifting, and wearing an expression that suggested he wasn't sure that whatever was inside would be worth his attention, Raymund followed Faddei around the edge of the dead creatures to the buildings.

Max took a few steps back, away from the dead, giving the scientists and clean-up crew some more space to work and trying to put some distance between her and the stench. The remaining Marshals and warriors joined her. Cas and Pol had found a spot of grass at the edge of the concrete that wasn't covered in cuchara guts and were lying down. They looked almost relaxed, but they were still in their attack forms. Still sensing something that made them uneasy.

Max drew in a long breath, regretting it when she got a mouthful of foul air, and turned to Bryce. "Thank you. And the others. I don't think I said that already." She shook her head. There were probably at least a dozen other things she should say, but she could at least start with a simple thanks. "If you hadn't been here, it would have been awful."

Bryce was wearing a frown of his own. "This really isn't normal, is it?" he asked. "This many cuchara, and the speed at which they moved, I mean."

"No," Max shook her head.

"No," Zoya echoed. "I've never seen this many together. The family groups we've encountered before have been four to six adults and up to ten juveniles. We came across a nest of eight adults and a dozen juveniles about six years ago. That was the

largest one we'd found until now, and it was right out at the edge of the city. Remember?" she asked Max.

"I do," Max answered. "Every Marshal was called back to duty for that one. We ended up herding them back into the building and setting it on fire," she said, a sour taste blooming in her mouth at the memory. It had been a truly horrible night, every Marshal in attendance grim-faced, but knowing there was no other option. The cuchara had to be eliminated.

"So, no, this isn't normal," Zoya said to Bryce.

"And my skin is still crawling," Max added.

"What do you mean?" Pavla asked, frowning.

"Can't you feel it?" Max asked. "Like someone's trying to dance on my grave."

"Sounds unpleasant," Yevhen said. "But, no, I can't sense anything."

"The shadow-hounds can, though," Zoya pointed out.

Everyone looked at Cas and Pol, then back at Max.

"What is it?" Bryce asked, attention sharpening. He had never fully relaxed, just let his focus slip a little. Now he was back in warrior mode. Even as he had been standing next to her, part of his attention was on their surroundings, and Max had the feeling that he knew precisely where every member of the Marshals' science team and clean-up crew were around him, where every Marshal was, and where his fellow warriors were. He could probably give her the precise number of weapons around him, if she asked him.

“I can’t be sure, but I don’t think our work is done yet,” Max said.

Faddei came back to them, an unexpected glint of mischief in his eyes. “Raymund is as surprised by the egg racks as we were,” he told everyone else. Max wasn’t the only one who laughed. Raymund believed he knew more than anyone else, and normally he was right. He always seemed personally offended when someone else taught him a new piece of information, and it was a running joke among the Marshals. Faddei’s own humour faded as he looked around the group. “What’s up?”

Zoya explained about Max’s ill feeling and Faddei turned to Max with a serious expression. “Is it a general feeling, or does it have a direction?” he asked.

“It brought me here earlier,” Max said. “So, kind of a direction. It faded a bit as we went along the row,” she added, thinking aloud, “but it’s stronger now we’re back here. And it was strong around the back of the building, too.”

“Then let’s follow it. Everyone geared up?” Faddei asked.

Nods all round assured him that everyone was as well armed as possible, and Max noted that Killan was carrying the warriors’ heavy gun. He had the barrel slung over his shoulder as if it was a sack of flour, and it didn’t seem to be slowing him down in the least.

Everyone turned their attention to Max and colour rose in her face. They were placing a great deal of faith in her feelings. Then she looked at Cas and Pol again. She might

doubt her own reactions, but she didn't doubt her dogs. There was something else there that they hadn't found yet. After making sure her gun was fully loaded, she led the way around the science team and clean-up crew to the back of the building with the broken wall.

She paused as she rounded the corner, looking ahead. The old, empty tenement building sat not far away. It looked perfectly ordinary in the afternoon light, but trails of spider feet ran across her skin as she looked at it.

“We need to go that way,” Max said.

Bryce was beside her with Khari, Killan, Hop, and Osvaldo behind him. “Ready when you are,” he told Max.

Faddei looked from Max to the warriors and his lips twitched. “Seems I don't need to worry about you heading off alone, then,” the head Marshal said.

Swallowing a spike of irritation, Max nodded to the warriors and called her dogs over. There was work to do.

Chapter Nineteen

THE TENEMENT BLOCK SAT in its own space, surrounded by what had probably been neatly tended grass at one point, but which was now knee-high tangled grass and weeds. There were the remains of a paved path leading from the garages and workshops to what seemed to be the tenement's back door. The tenement was built of red brick and, as her group made their way towards it, Max realised it was in much worse condition than she'd first thought. The lower walls were covered in graffiti, all the windows long since broken or removed, leaving blank holes. There was what looked like a small garden growing out of the building's gutters, trails of plants hanging down across the top floor windows like a badly cut fringe. It was four storeys high, and did not look structurally sound to Max's critical eyes.

As they moved closer to it, the crawling sensation across her skin grew worse and she had to resist the urge to scratch at her arms. The badge under her jacket was cool, not reacting to any magic in the air. She might have wondered if there was

anything wrong if she hadn't had her shadow-hounds a few paces in front of her, in their attack forms.

In this part of town, the buildings were built onto the ground, so there were no raised ground levels or externally accessible basements. The path Max's group was on led to the back door of the tenement building. Or, rather, the empty doorway. The door itself was propped open beside the opening, the wood warped and cracked with age.

Oswaldo and Hop moved ahead, weapons ready. Max was about to call them back and offer to send her dogs in first, which was what she would normally do, when a trail of cold magic slid across her skin. Her dogs, a few paces ahead of her, stopped in their tracks, low growls coming from their throats.

"Hold up," Max said.

"Stop," Bryce said at the same time.

Oswaldo and Hop froze, their attention still ahead of them.

"There's magic in the building," Faddei said, "and from the look of the shadow-hounds, it's not the nice kind."

"No," Max agreed. "It's some kind of dark magic."

"Killan, bring the heavy gun forward," Bryce called over his shoulder.

"What, no rocket launcher?" Faddei asked, only partly joking.

"We can get it if we need to," Bryce answered, not joking at all.

Killan came to the front, the enormous barrel of the heavy gun over his shoulder and a large canvas bag slung across his body. Hop moved without being asked and pulled a tripod stand out of the bag, screwing it to the bottom of the gun. Ready for use. The gun was loaded, and Max assumed that the bag contained more ammunition. The heavy gun took far larger bullets than even the automatic weapons the warriors carried.

“Stay behind us,” Bryce told the Marshals. When Zoya lifted her brows, looking as if she wanted to argue, Bryce tilted his chin down, indicating his own chest. “We’ve got body armour. You don’t.”

“Fair point,” Zoya said, and took a deliberate step back. She had her gun in hand, like the other Marshals. None of them looked all that happy about following the warriors, but as Max had pointed out to Bryce before, the things the Marshals hunted didn’t generally fire back.

They moved forward in an awkward group. The warriors were perfectly coordinated among themselves, but the Marshals didn’t really know where to fit in, Max noted. And that included her. Most Marshals worked in pairs, and they could co-ordinate with each other quite well, but the warriors deliberately trained to work together and it showed. She also wasn’t used to following anyone else, and didn’t like it. It meant that the warriors would face whatever danger was inside before she did. And Joshua had already been seriously injured.

Then she crossed the threshold of the building and her focus snapped to her surroundings. The air was thick with the presence of dark magic, ice needles prickling into her exposed skin, the faintest trace of smoke in the air. And not just any smoke, but the grey smoke that had been everywhere in the underworld.

“I think the demons are here. Or have been here,” Max said. Her voice came out flat and strange, the air swallowing up the sound. She hesitated, taking a closer look around. She could still see the warriors and the Marshals. They were all around her, but none of them were looking at her or seemed to have heard what she had said. They were all focused on their surroundings. And as they all took another step forward, Max realised that she couldn’t hear them. She should be able to hear the soft sounds of footsteps, perhaps someone else’s breathing, and the creak of leather. There was nothing. The air that had swallowed up her words was deadening everything. As she noticed that, she realised she could no longer smell the trace of smoke in the air.

Apprehension slid over her skin along with the dark magic. She had experienced something like this before. In the Wild, when the demon Queran had somehow quieted the jungle around them and also created the illusion of a clearing.

She stopped, frowning, wondering if what she was seeing was even real. Cas and Pol crowded into her sides, their eyes gleaming as they looked around. She put her gun away. It hadn’t done any good when she’d emptied a full magazine into Queran in the Wild. And she wanted both hands free to touch

her dogs, to make sure that they were real, at least. The long hair of their attack forms was slightly rough against her fingers, and that sensation, along with the press of their weight and warmth against her, reassured her that they were not an illusion.

Anchored to what she knew she could trust, Max took another look around. The rest of the group were still moving forward in their awkward formation, the Marshals mixed in with the warriors, and almost close enough for Max to touch them. Or so it seemed. Their expressions hadn't changed. They still looked as focused as they had been when they stepped through the door. And that was wrong. While the warriors might not be able to feel the magic around them, they had extremely sharp senses and would have noticed the lack of sound and other sensory feedback. All the Marshals had some magical ability and would be feeling more or less the same things as Max. There was no possible way that her fellow Marshals would simply keep walking forward into dark magic with no change in pace or expression.

Heart thumping loudly enough to almost cover the sound of her rapid, harsh breathing, Max suddenly wondered if she was the only one trapped in the illusion. Powerful magicians could put a compulsion or an illusion on people, but she'd never heard of them managing more than one person at a time. It had happened to the police officer Ellie Randall, when a magician had used a spell on her to get her to break protocol and take her inexperienced cadet into an ambush. There was no blame on Ellie, as far as Max was concerned. But it did make her

wonder just what the purpose of the current illusion was. Ellie had been directed into an ambush, and now Max had been effectively separated from everyone else and couldn't be sure of anything she saw around her, apart from her dogs, who she was still touching.

She opened her mouth to speak again, to call out to the people who were apparently still around her, then one of the warriors - Osvaldo - stepped through a pile of bricks that was at least waist high on him. She snapped her mouth shut. Either they were trapped in an illusion, or she was. And from the weight of the air around her, she would guess she was the one trapped. She needed to find a way out. A way back to the real world.

She looked past the Marshals and warriors, trying to see if she could trace the edge of the illusion. The inside of the tenement block was almost entirely gone. There were no intact floors above her, and most of the roof had collapsed as well, leaving the inside of the building open to the sky. The sky overhead was a flat, pale grey that seemed too uniform to be natural. The inside of the building was made up of piles of rubble, with the occasional remaining bit of an internal wall poking up out of the debris. There were plants growing here and there, as there had been on the outside. Apart from her group, there didn't seem to be anyone else inside the building. Max didn't trust that. Not one bit. *Someone* had created the illusion.

“Queran, is this one of your tricks again?” she asked the still, dead air around her. Calling out a demon was not sensible. But

she didn't want to just stand there and wait. If this was Queran's doing, there would be a trap and more danger somewhere around. She'd rather face it and be done with it.

“Queran?” an unfamiliar voice said into the flat air around her. “There's a name I haven't heard for a while.”

Before she could work out where the speaker was, her dogs tensed and turned in the same direction. There. Past Bryce. Or, rather, where Bryce appeared to be. There was an odd flicker in the air. She took a step forward and Bryce's form shivered and then melted into nothing. The flicker she had spotted resolved into Oliver Forster. Or, rather, not-Oliver. There was still a demon looking back at her from behind Oliver's face.

Not-Oliver seemed to have appeared from nowhere. She could still see the warriors and Marshals moving slowly through the ruined building, but she knew that was a lie. There was solid ground under her feet, her dogs were with her, and there was a demon close by. Those were the only three things she could be sure of. Not the flat grey air, or the hint of a breeze that ruffled not-Oliver's hair. None of it.

So, the illusionist wasn't Queran. Her mouth was dry, heart speeding up again. She didn't think it was a good thing that she was facing not-Oliver rather than Queran. She'd faced Queran and survived a few times now. She wouldn't say that she had ever won against the demon, but at least she was still alive. Not-Oliver was something quite different from Queran, she knew.

As she faced the demon, another trace of the underworld smoke drifted past her, along with more spider feet across her skin. That crawling sensation was worse as she drew closer to the demon. Wrinkling her nose, she kept her focus on the demon.

He was watching her with equally close attention, and his brows lifted a fraction. He was getting better control over the body and its features, Max noticed with dismay. Settling into his stolen skin. The brow raise looked almost human.

“You recognise the smell of the smoke,” not-Oliver said.

“It’s unpleasant,” Max answered, a new panic filling her. The demon already knew that she had interfered with the ritual that Queran and Shivangi Raghavan and their co-conspirators had been preparing. That had annoyed him enough. She didn’t want to find out what he would do if he realised she had also been into the underworld and had closed the Grey Gates the last time Arkus had tried to escape His realm. Only someone who had been into the underworld could recognise that smoke for what it was. There was nothing else quite like it anywhere in the daylight world.

“No, it’s more than that,” not-Oliver said, taking a step towards her.

Max realised that the warriors and Marshals had all disappeared, leaving her alone with not-Oliver in the ruins of the building. If she could believe her eyes, there was a large pile of broken red bricks to one side, with plants growing out of the gaps. The floor underfoot looked like it had once been

polished concrete but was now cracked and dull. “What have you done with the others?” she asked, both because she wanted to know and also to try to distract the demon.

“Nothing much,” not-Oliver answered, an unpleasant smile pulling his mouth. “I wanted to talk to you alone, and they were in the way.”

“Where are they?” Max asked. There was more smoke in the air. Was it possible that the demon had someone opened a Gate to the underworld? She still had her hands on her dogs’ backs and curled her fingers through their long hair, holding on tight. It must have hurt her dogs, but they didn’t protest, their attention still on the demon in front of them.

“Here and there,” not-Oliver said, with a careless wave of his hand. “I set up some little games for them,” he said, another one of those unpleasant smiles crossing his mouth. Max was quite sure that whatever the demon thought of as *games* would not be fun at all, and would be deadly. The warriors and other Marshals might be in serious danger. And now the demon had them wrapped in one of his games, he wasn’t going to just let them go. She needed to find a way out of the illusion he had created for her, and then she might be able to help the others. Assuming they hadn’t already got themselves out of danger.

With him so close, it took a considerable effort to stand still. Her body was humming with discomfort, an odd resonance burrowing through her skin and down into her bones. The

demon's presence, she realised. It was him she had felt earlier on the drive and around the cuchara nest.

“More cuchara?” she asked the demon, not really expecting a reply. “That was you, wasn't it? Setting up frames for the eggs and then blowing out the back of the building?” She almost accused him of running away. But that didn't seem to be something he knew how to do. There had been another reason he'd created the hole at the back of the building.

“What a clever little thing,” the demon said, his eyes unblinking as they focused on her face. He bared his teeth, although she wasn't sure what the gesture was meant to convey. It looked menacing even with the blunt, human teeth. “I do hope my pets kept you entertained.”

Max wanted to be sick, remembering the swarm of cuchara, the screams they had made, and the stench of their bodies. “They've been dealt with,” she told the demon.

His face snapped into an expression of pure fury, the change so abrupt she wanted to take a step back even though he hadn't done anything obviously threatening. Not yet. “A pity. Still, there are more.”

Max started to get an even worse feeling about what *games* the demon had set up for the warriors and Marshals. The building with the hole in the back had been empty. Because the demon had already taken the cuchara out. Bringing them here.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Max asked, hoping to get the demon talking and distracted while she tried

to work out what spells were being used around her, and how she might break them.

The demon went unnaturally still, his entire focus on her. She wanted to move away from the scrutiny, locking her knees to stay where she was.

“There’s something different about you. I noticed it before. What is it?” the demon demanded.

“What do you mean?” Max asked, playing for time. She emphatically did not want to tell this demon what Kitris, Emmeline and the Lady had told her.

“You’re not afraid of me,” the demon said.

Max tried not to let her relief show. He didn’t seem to have guessed her secret. Then she remembered who and what she was talking to. He hadn’t given her a straight answer yet. Her supposed lack of fear couldn’t be all the reason she was here, separated from the others. Still, she would play along. For now. She shook her head. “You don’t understand people very well, do you?”

“Tasty little things,” not-Oliver said, taking a step towards her.

He and not-Hemang had said something like that about Shivangi, Max remembered. *Tasty little morsel*. That was it. A trail of ice and dark magic slithered across her senses. Demon magic. He was up to something. She tightened her grip on her dogs. Cas and Pol pressed back against her in response.

“I wonder what you would taste like?” not-Oliver said, tilting his head. The grim words were at odds with the light, almost playful tone.

“I’d give you indigestion,” Max promised. She held her ground as he took another step closer. There. Just past his shoulder. He was focusing on her and had forgotten to keep up the spell around them. She could see a slant of what looked like sunlight, and movement that might be one of the other Marshals or warriors.

“It might be worth it,” not-Oliver said, baring his teeth. Perhaps he had different shaped teeth in his demon form, but in the human form, she simply had a good look at a row of blunt, white human teeth.

“If you’re going to try and eat me, the least you can do is tell me your name,” Max said.

Not-Oliver’s expression changed to a grin, full of mischief. It was not an improvement as far as she was concerned. He seemed amused, and that was not a good thing. Her mouth dried. She’d seen what he was capable of.

“You can call me Donal, if you want to call me something,” the demon told her.

“And what about the other one?” Max asked, surprised he had given her that information and wondering how much more he would tell her as she edged sideways, trying to get a look at the break in the spell without being too obvious about it.

“You can call him Finn,” Donal told her. “Not our true names, of course. But you wouldn’t be able to pronounce those.” There was a smug certainty in his voice that spiked her irritation before she realised she was letting a demon annoy her over something as trivial as a name. Names might have power and meaning in the underworld, but they didn’t really hold significance in the daylight world apart from giving other people something to call each other. At least she could stop calling the demons not-Oliver and not-Hemang in her mind. Donal and Finn. That was easier. And also separated them from the men who had previously occupied those bodies. Oliver and Hemang had not been good people, in Max’s view, but they also had not been actual demons.

“Donal and Finn,” she repeated. “Brothers?” she asked, edging a little further sideways. It was a guess. And something to keep him talking.

“We are all brothers and cousins. All of His children,” Donal said. There was no humanity left in his eyes any longer. They were dark hollows filled with smoke and dark magic and the promise of pain. “Ah, yes, you did not know, did you?” he asked, reading the surprise she didn’t try to hide. “All of us are His children. Even that little runt Queran. A very distant cousin, I assure you. Now, tell me, where did you come across him?”

Demons were the dark lord’s children. That was news to Max. It made a certain sort of sense. She could still feel that odd resonance in her bones and wondered if he could feel something similar. They were distantly connected. The dark

lord and the Lady were brother and sister, after all. Donal had Arkus' dark magic, and she had the Lady's light magic in her. It seemed entirely possible he might have sensed a bit of the Lady in her, and that was why she had drawn his attention. Her heart was loud in her ears, fear sliding through her. Neither Donal nor Finn had seen her as a threat before. But if they thought she had part of the Lady in her, that would change, she was quite sure. And she was quite sure she was no match for the old demon in front of her.

“He's somewhere in the city, as far as I know,” Max answered, dragging her attention back to Donal and his questions about Queran. It was dangerous to be distracted. She was almost around the demon. He'd been adjusting his position to follow her movements, but the hole in his illusion hadn't moved. Even as she risked a quick, sideways glance, she saw a body in dark clothing flying through the air. One of the Marshals, she thought, the movement too fast for her to be able to tell who it was. There was some kind of fight going on, she realised, although she couldn't see whatever it was that the Marshals were fighting. The gap might show her a sliver of what was happening outside Donal's spell, but it didn't let her hear anything.

Underneath her hands, her dogs growled in unison, the vibration as much as the noise alerting Max.

Donal had moved closer. A full step, so that she could see the fine lines around his eyes and the trace of darkness in the veins at his temples. Oliver Forster hadn't been entirely

human, but his body still hadn't been meant to hold a full demon. The body was beginning to fail.

The signs of stress reminded Max of Xavier, whose old, frail body had definitely not been fit to hold the entire weight of the Lady. And yet, Queran had been in this world for quite some time, and his outward body still looked human. Max's curiosity spiked.

"Do you like the little show?" Donal asked, tilting his head to the break in the illusion spell.

Not an accident, Max realised, freezing in place, mouth going dry again. He had deliberately left that little gap, and while she thought she had been clever and subtle in edging towards it, he'd been following her every move.

"No," she said honestly. "What are you doing to them?" she asked.

"Oh, not me. My friends," Donal said, lips peeling back in a feral smile. "A little older than the ones you destroyed. They should give *your* friends quite some trouble." There was smug satisfaction in his tone.

Remembering the cuchara they had encountered, a chill ran over Max. If Donal had gathered older cuchara, and he'd been breeding them, they could be immensely powerful. It had taken a terrible amount of firepower to deal with the other ones, and all she'd been able to do was hold them steady with her magic.

The demon was playing with her. Trying to keep her tangled up in some mischief that he found amusing. He wasn't answering any of the questions she had, and as she stayed here with him, the others were potentially under attack from *cuchara*. She needed to find a way to get out. To help them, if she could. Even though she'd used all her magic earlier. There had to be something she could do.

She gave up pretending not to look through the gap in his spell and saw another body flying past. Her eyes narrowed. That looked like the same body. Was Donal still trying to trick her? Was the gap she could see just another illusion?

There was only one way to find out. She took another step forward, past Donal, towards the gap. There was no noise coming through and when she let go of Cas to put her hand out, the air didn't feel any different. Another trick. She wondered just how many layers his spell had, and how she was going to break free of it.

Turning back to the demon, she saw an expression of glee on his face that echoed expressions she'd seen on Queran before now. Demons seemed to take great pleasure in their *games*.

"So, how do I get out of here?" Max asked. She didn't think Donal would tell her the truth, but perhaps she could get something from his answer that might help.

He stepped aside, clearing a path for her to reach the opening in his spell, and waved his hand, indicating the gap she'd been looking through. "This way."

“No, it’s not that way,” Max said, narrowing her eyes. He’d wanted her to go that way. It was a trap. And yet, there was something in the way he had said it. As if there might just be a way out. She took a pace away from the gap, away from the path he’d indicated, and saw a flash of irritation cross his face before he smoothed out his expression. Her dogs were keeping close to her, moving when she did. She risked taking her hand off Pol as well, and put her hands behind her, palms out flat, feeling the air. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Oh, wait. That was something. A slice across her palm. Something hot and cold and not magical at all. She backed up another pace, keeping her eyes on the demon. Another slice of hot and cold across her palm and this time an object flew past her. A bullet casing. She’d found a gap that Donal hadn’t wanted her to reach. She took another step back and her elbow collided with something hard. Before she could pull away, a hand wrapped around her arm and pulled.

“Cas, Pol, with me,” she called as she was dragged backwards.

The spell shattered around her as more bullet casings rained down around her and the world exploded into a cacophony of gunfire and shouting.

“There you are,” Faddei said. He was still holding her arm, and now that she was out of Donal’s spell, she could sense his magic along with the other Marshals’. They were providing a rudimentary barrier, protecting themselves and the warriors. The ground was littered with spent bullets, and as Max tried to

get her bearings, she heard the deep staccato beat of the heavy gun that Killan had been carrying.

The warriors and the Marshals had moved into the only defensible position in the inside of the building, Max saw. The warriors and Marshals were backed into a corner so they had solid walls on both sides, meaning the only approach the creatures had was straight ahead or above. Their surroundings were the same as Donal's illusion, with most of the interior destroyed and the roof gone. Max saw familiar-looking piles of broken bricks with plants growing out of them, and dull, cracked concrete underfoot.

The gunfire was punctuated a moment later by high-pitched shrieks, and she ducked as something enormous and dark flew over head.

“Wait, they can fly?” she yelled over the noise.

“Apparently,” Faddei said, voice grim.

She crouched down as something else soared overhead. Another giant creature. This one was hit squarely in the mid-section by at least one of the Order warriors using their automatic weapons. The creature shrieked and spun in the air so that Max could see that its hard shell had split to reveal paper-thin dirty brown wings.

“When did they get wings?” she yelled at Faddei.

“No idea,” he answered.

She realised that the other Marshals were crowded together, all of their shoulders touching, and could feel a hint of magic

in the air. The Marshals had combined their magic to provide a barrier of sorts. It wasn't going to be powerful enough to stop the cuchara, but it was holding them off for now. At least long enough to let the warriors shoot at them.

The warriors were standing around the Marshals, all of them firing rapidly. The heavy gun was doing some serious damage, Max noted, but even the automatic weapons weren't helping all that much.

At Max's sides, Cas and Pol growled, the deep sound cutting through the chaos and confusion. They were tensed, poised to spring forward. Max shook her head at them, telling them to stay where they were. If her dogs broke through the Marshals' magical barrier, they could bring it down. And, worse, her dogs would be at risk of being hit by the warriors' bullets.

"These are a lot harder to kill," Bryce commented, voice carrying over the gunfire and shrieks. He was standing near Faddei, firing into the mass of creatures.

"Rocket launcher?" Max asked.

"Our way out is blocked," Faddei told her. He let go of her arm, putting his hands together palm to palm, and she felt his magic rise around them. Her boss was a strong magician, but his gift was healing, not protection or battle.

Max looked around, seeing all the other Marshals in similar poses to Faddei, all of them pale, expressions tight as they drew on all their power, trying to hold the swarm of creatures back and let the warriors have the best chance of protecting their group. It wasn't going to be enough, Max knew. The

cuchara were far stronger than the ones they'd encountered earlier.

Even as she realised that, a slender antenna whipped through the air near Sofiya, slicing through the thin magical barrier and into the Marshal. Sofiya screamed, dropping to her knees, one hand going to her shoulder. The antenna continued on, digging in to the nearest warrior. Hop. The warrior grunted and kept firing, but Max saw a river of blood wash down his arm.

No one else moved to help the Marshal or warrior. No one could spare the attention. There were too many attackers.

The barrier that the Marshals had thrown up was a simpler version of the wards used to hold back the Wild. It was working, but only just. Even as Max looked at the spell, Pavla gave a low moan and sank to her knees. She was still using her magic, but her nose was bleeding and her face was twisted in pain. With Sofiya down, whimpering in pain, and Pavla almost at the end of her strength, the barrier was going to fail. Any moment now. And the cuchara would be on them.

Max clenched her fists in frustration. She couldn't use the ward spell that the Marshals had woven together. She couldn't form that magic. She'd used everything she had earlier. And if she tried to help the other Marshals, she risked pulling their work apart.

A cuchara ahead of her seemed to freeze, its antenna swinging in Max's direction. She frowned, wondering what it had seen in her to make it hesitate, then glanced down to find that there was light around her hands. The Lady's light. Now

she was aware of it, she could feel the magic burning through her, ready to be used. She'd thought she was completely drained. It seemed not. She took another step forward and found Faddei and Bryce moving with her.

“No, stay where you were,” Max told them. “I’ll be alright,” she added, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt.

Somewhat to her surprise, they did as she asked. She pulled her hands up from her sides, her fingers trailing through magic, light sparking along her hands and arms, and put her hands together, palm to palm, in front of her. She drew on more magic and gasped in shock at the amount that surged up to meet her. There had been absolutely nothing left in her after the earlier fight. And yet it was all there, all ready to be used. When the light between her palms was too bright to look at, she turned her palms away from her, and poured the light out, setting her will to it, willing her magic to hold the cuchara in place as she had done earlier.

As Faddei and Bryce had noted, these cuchara were stronger. Older, Donal had said. And they could fly. She held her ground, jaw clenched, as a pair of them spread their wings and tried to rise into the air in front of her, trying to escape the magic she was holding. She could feel every single one of them resisting her, pulling against her magic, trying to find a way out. The sensation was worse than it had been earlier, jagged tears of dark magic digging in to her senses, setting like hooks in the bright magic she was using. They were trying to stop her. Trying to tear her down.

The guns kept firing all around her. She sank to her knees under the pressure of the dark magic, her vision narrowing, sight blurring, pouring everything she could into holding the creatures. She heard another scream from nearby. Another one of her people had been hurt. She could only hope they weren't too badly injured. She had no energy to spare to even look around.

The pressure on her lessened and she drew a long, shuddering breath, drawing in the foul stench of dead cuchara. She could feel them dying. One by one. There were far more of them than she had thought.

Behind her, she heard the sounds of weapons fire change. The heavy gun was silent and one by one the automatic weapons died, replaced by lighter fire. The warriors had run out of ammunition. They were resorting to their handguns.

And when those failed, they would have their knives, Max knew, feeling damp on her face. But to use those knives, they needed to get close enough to the cuchara to strike, and just one blow from those antenna could kill.

The guns fell silent. She was on her knees, whole body shaking, almost blind, hands trembling as she stared down at them, the light fading. She had nothing more to give.

“It's done.”

She didn't recognise the voice or know what the words meant, but she managed to lift her head to find a shape crouched in front of her. Someone familiar and safe. Bryce. He moved, slowly, and put a hand on her wrist, his skin

shockingly warm. She knew the sensation of his slightly rough fingers on her skin and blinked, clearing her eyes. Her mind caught up with the words.

“Done?” she echoed.

“Done,” he confirmed. “They’re all dead.”

“Injured? Worse?” she asked, voice cracking.

“Injuries only. We didn’t lose anyone, thanks to you.” Another familiar voice. Zoya. The Marshal crouched beside Bryce, frowning as she looked at Max. “You look terrible.”

“I feel it,” Max said. Her stomach turned with the memory of all the dark magic pulling against her own senses. “Truly, injuries only?” she asked.

“Yes. Faddei’s looking at them, and Yev has called for medical,” Zoya said. She put a hand out and brushed Max’s wrist with her fingers. “Good job,” the Marshal said.

Max responded by sitting back on the ground with a thump that jarred her teeth, Cas and Pol surging close to her, their warmth almost too much to bear. She was so very cold, her teeth chattering.

“Here,” Bryce said. A familiar flask appeared in front of her. The metal was almost burning hot to her touch, the scorch of Order brandy going down her throat letting her know that she truly was still alive and it wasn’t some dream.

With some brandy in her, and the help of her dogs, she got back to her feet and stared around. As well as Sofiya and Hop, the cuchara had also injured Killan and Yevhen. The Marshal

was on his phone, scowling, while he held a field dressing to his side. Marshals didn't wear body armour. Or they hadn't done so. Max wondered if Faddei might be considering that again soon.

Her boss straightened from Sofiya's side and glanced around, as if making sure everyone was accounted for.

Max brushed a still-trembling hand over her face and took a look around as well. There were dead cuchara everywhere.

"Raymund needs to see them," she said.

"Cuchara with wings? He's going to be beside himself," Zoya agreed, with a wry smile.

"What happened?" Faddei asked. He looked as exhausted as everyone else. "You disappeared," he said, frowning at Max.

"Illusion and manipulation," Max said, voice harsh. "It was Donal," she told the others.

"Who?" Bryce asked, frowning.

"Donal. Oh. Sorry." Max shoved her hands through her hair, trying to remember when they had last been in the same place without the illusion spell. "While you were fighting the cuchara, one of the demons pulled me into an illusion to talk. It was the one wearing Oliver Forster's body. He said I could call him Donal. The other one is Finn. They are brothers, or cousins, or something," Max said, shaking her head in frustration. She looked around the empty interior of the ruined building. "I hope the clean-up team get paid overtime."

"And hazard pay," Faddei agreed.

“He said that these were older,” Max said to Faddei, her throat tight. “He was trying to breed them. I don’t think he’s happy that we interfered.”

“He’ll need to get used to it,” Faddei said. “Is he still here?”

Max was about to say that she didn’t know, when she realised that the crawling sensation across her skin and the odd resonance in her bones had gone. She shook her head. “I can’t sense anything,” she told him.

“I am beginning to really, truly dislike these demons,” Faddei said. “Did he say what he was doing here?”

“No, he didn’t. But it can’t have been random,” Max said.

“What did he want with you?” Bryce asked.

Because it was Bryce, and she trusted that he did not mean her any harm, she didn’t flinch away from the question. “I am not sure,” she said honestly. “I hate talking to demons,” she added, “they never give a straight answer. He seemed to think there was something different about me and I suspect wanted to know more.” She pressed her lips closed. The warriors around her all knew about the revelations of the Lady, Kitris, and Emmeline. But she hadn’t found time to let her boss or any of the other Marshals know. And really didn’t want to tell them. Not now. Not yet. Not while the information was still new and fresh and rattling around inside her body, ricocheting off her bones and spinning through her mind.

“I don’t suppose he told you where the other demon is, and what they are up to?” Faddei asked.

“No, sorry,” Max said.

“Thought not,” Faddei said, and muttered a curse against demons that Max heartily agreed with. “Well, it looks like he’s gone from here.”

“But he was breeding cuchara, and had a collection of adults in here. Why?” Bryce asked.

Max paused, considering the question. “I have no idea,” she said honestly. “But we should clear the building. They might be liars, but I don’t believe he was here without any reason at all.”

She saw grim agreement on the faces around her. Even battered and wounded, the warriors weren’t prepared to give up. Instead, Bryce sent Osvaldo back to the Order vehicles at a flat sprint to bring back whatever additional ammunition he could find. Faddei and Max got Sofiya, Yevhen and Pavla out of the building, ignoring the injured Marshals’ protests. By the time they’d done that, the warriors had refilled their weapons and were ready to move, even the injured ones. Faddei, Max and Zoya went with them, heading out to carry out a careful search of the building, looking for whatever the demon might have been working on.

Chapter Twenty

IT WAS FULLY DARK by the time they had completed their search of the building. There were odd pockets of cold air through the building that felt to Max like the remnants or after-effects of dark magic, but the spells were too degraded for her to be able to tell what they might have been. None of the other Marshals had been able to tell, either. She could tell they were as frustrated as she was to have no good explanation as to why the demon had been there, or why he'd left adult cuchara in the building.

At least they had made sure that there was nothing dangerous in the building. Faddei had asked the police to tape off the whole site to try to stop any city residents from wandering in, and had called in another team of Marshals to watch over the clean-up crew that now had the unenviable task of picking up more dead cuchara.

The Marshals' medical team arrived, this time in the form of a pair of ambulances and a quartet of paramedics who treated

the injured Marshals and warriors with the same cheerful competence.

As she was standing to one side, wondering if she had enough energy to make it back to her pick-up, Bryce stopped beside her.

“They’ll be alright,” he told her, tilting his head at the injured who were being treated by the paramedics.

“I know,” Max said. She didn’t sound sure, even in her own ears. She scrubbed a hand across her face, feeling the remnants of earlier tears, and wanted nothing more than to sink into a warm bed and sleep for twelve hours straight.

“The cookout is back on,” Bryce told her, surprising her. “And we’re invited.”

“Everyone is still there? After the cuchara?” Max asked, astonished. She’d fully expected the people to want to go home and lock their doors after being faced with the terrifying creatures.

“Not even a swarm of cuchara can stop a cookout,” Osvaldo said from Bryce’s other side. He grinned at Max’s obvious surprise. “We live in a city with monsters. If we let every little thing scare us into our homes, we might as well give up now.”

Max shook her head slightly, amazed by the resilience of the residents. “Will there be any food left?” she asked. It was late in the day, and in her experience, a fright often made people hungry when they calmed down.

Both Bryce and Osvaldo grinned at that. “More food than you can imagine. Shall we go?” Bryce asked. He glanced around the others, including the Marshals. “We’re all invited.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Faddei said.

Max was hollowed-out and exhausted by the time she got back to her pick-up and drove it the short distance to the car park next to the community garden. The other Marshals had already left their pick-ups there, and got seats in the Order vehicles, so no one needed to walk the short distance.

As well as exhaustion, Max was sure she was not the only one feeling frustrated by the lack of progress. They had spent a day fighting and looking and had next to nothing to show for it, apart from a mountain of spent ammunition. She’d overheard Osvaldo making a call to someone instructing them to come and collect the spent shell cases. It had surprised her. Although the Marshals routinely gathered up their casings and equipment they used, she’d always had the impression that the Order was better resourced and supplied. The Marshals relied on the ingenuity and genius of their science teams to keep them running. She wasn’t sure how they did it, but somehow the Marshals’ armourer, Leonda Parras, and her team took the used ammunition and turned out fresh bullets. Even so, the Marshals’ resources were limited and dwindling, like the rest of the city’s supply. And it seemed that the lack of resources was affecting the Order, too.

Max also had a head full of questions. She had barely got any information out of Donal, and had no idea where he and

Finn were in the city, or what they were planning. She found it interesting that he hadn't seemed to have met up with Queran yet. But then, he was a full demon from the underworld court. And they were not known for being truthful. If he had told her where the others were, she would not have believed him, even if she would have felt obliged to check it out.

At least the chaos had been contained, she reminded herself. The reports that had come back to Faddei and Bryce had been that everyone who had been injured was still alive. Some would be in hospital for longer than others. No one was dead. That was something of a miracle, she knew, particularly as the cuchara had attacked unarmed city residents. The cuchara had been hidden and contained until she and the warriors had arrived, though. Which made her mind spin out again into speculating about what Donal was up to, not only in breeding the cuchara but also in dragging her away from the others to speak to her. There had been nothing special about that building. Frustration and tiredness weighed on her and she once again longed to go home, wrap herself in a blanket on her sofa, and sleep.

She wasn't going to get her wish. Not just yet.

The parking lot was dark when she got out of her vehicle and reached into the lock-box in the back, bringing out a large bag. Bryce had mentioned much earlier in the day that it was customary for people to bring food to a cookout, and Max had stopped at the Sickle Bakery on their way across the city. It felt like half a lifetime ago that she'd joined the queue at the ever-popular bakery. The lock-box had preservation spells in it

which would have kept the food fresh for several days longer, if need be. As it was, taking the bag out of the box released the unmistakable and wonderful scent of fresh bread. Cas and Pol, who had been dozing lightly in the back of the pick-up, were wide awake, their attention focused on the bag.

“No,” Max told them firmly. She’d given them some food when they’d got back to the vehicles. Premium dog food, but clearly they were still looking for more things to eat. She couldn’t blame them for their interest in the bakery bag. The scent was making her mouth water and her stomach rumble.

The other warriors and Marshals gathered around. She was momentarily surprised to see Khari. She had thought that the warrior might want to go and visit her husband, but Khari was looking ahead into the gardens with a small smile pulling her mouth. All the warriors looked happy to be here, looking out of the dark parking lot and across to the pleasure gardens that were lit here and there by lanterns. There was no actual magic in the air, just the low hum of conversation interspersed with laughter, and some aromas drifting on the light breeze that made her stomach rumble more than the bread had.

“Good, no one’s gone home yet,” Osvaldo said, a smile crossing his face. “And I smell barbecue.”

“Me, too,” Hop said, grinning.

The warriors began walking forward, towards the lights and the people. Max hesitated, the rest of the Marshals pausing with her. Bryce stopped and turned, the soft lights from the garden highlighting one side of his face.

“You are all welcome,” Bryce told them, a smile pulling his mouth. “In fact, the community would be insulted if you just left now. They’ll want to say thank you. And there will be more food than even we can possibly eat.”

Still Max hesitated. She didn’t really like crowds, and was uncomfortable with people wanting to thank her.

“I could use a beer,” Faddei said, taking a step forward. “And I think we’re all due a break,” he added, looking around the other Marshals.

“Oh, is that grilled pineapple I can smell?” Pavla asked, grabbing Yevhen’s hand and pulling him forward. “Come on, let’s see if we can get some before it’s all gone.”

“Only you could smell grilled pineapple out of everything else,” Yevhen said with a fond smile as he followed his wife.

Max let the others go ahead, seeing and feeling the tension leave them as they were absorbed into the light and laughter of the groups around the garden. Her dogs lay down on either side of her. They were back in their normal forms, eyes bright as they looked around, noses working as they caught the different scents of food drifting towards them.

Bryce had stayed with her, and steered her gently around the edge of the crowds, as if he somehow knew she didn’t want to be in the middle of them. She found herself heading for a series of long tables and benches set out near the grills and other tables laden with food. Most of the benches and dining tables were empty - nearly everyone here seemed to prefer to eat standing up and talking.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like to eat?” Bryce asked.

“Something with no legs or meat in it,” Max said at once, the memory of the cuchara too fresh in her mind.

“No problem. Can you look after my gun while I get us some food?” he asked.

“Of course,” Max said, and sat at the end of a bench, Bryce’s automatic weapon on the table in front of her, her dogs settling on the grass to one side. She didn’t think anyone would really take his gun. More likely, he’d wanted to give her a task and make sure she didn’t leave. But now that she was sitting, she didn’t want to move. She propped her elbows on the table, resting her chin on her hands and looked around, taking in the crowd.

She caught a glimpse of Faddei and Zoya standing not far away, in close conversation with an older couple that looked faintly familiar. Zoya and Faddei were standing close enough to touch each other. Max hid a smile. The pair were professional and discreet, but she’d long suspected they had grown closer over the last few months. Not far away, Pavla and Yevhen were introducing Sofiya to the delights of grilled pineapple. Max had tried it a few times and liked it, but it was Pavla’s favourite food in the entire world.

“I’m glad to see you’re alright.”

The new voice startled Max. She’d not heard anyone approach, and her dogs hadn’t alerted her. She dropped her hands to the table, covering Bryce’s gun just in case she’d also

missed a curious child approaching the table. Max turned to find a medium-height woman with brown hair standing there. The woman was holding a plate and a glass.

“I’m Bryce’s sister. Susan. Well, one of his sisters, I should say,” the woman said, with a warm smile.

“I’m Max,” Max answered, not sure what else to say.

“I know. Do you mind if I join you?” Susan asked.

“No, not at all,” Max said. “Bryce is getting some food, I think.”

“I saw him by the grills.” The other woman settled on the bench opposite Max and gave her a long, hard look. “You’re in one piece, but you’re not alright, are you?” Susan asked.

Startled again by the direct approach, and annoyed with herself for letting so much of what she was feeling show on her face, Max drew her hands back under the table, opened her mouth to answer, then closed it again. She wasn’t sure to say. Or how much she wanted to reveal to this woman who was a stranger.

“Sorry,” Susan said, surprising Max again. She grinned, the bit of mischief in her face reminding Max strongly of Bryce and making the otherwise ordinary-looking woman quite beautiful. “I keep being told I’m too direct,” Susan said.

“It’s alright,” Max said, realising that it was true. “Being direct is much better than being dishonest.”

Susan grinned again, her eyes on Max. “I can see why he likes you,” she said.

Max felt heat surge up her face, abruptly uncomfortable and wishing to be elsewhere. As little as she wanted to talk about her feelings on the day's events, she wanted to talk about Bryce even less. And certainly not with Bryce's sister.

"Susan, what did you say to Max?" Bryce asked. He was suddenly standing at the end of the table, a tray with plates and glasses in his hands. He was scowling at his sister.

"Nothing," Susan said, that spark of mischief still in her eyes. "Oh, are you joining us, dear brother?"

Bryce put a plate and glass in front of Max along with cutlery, and took a seat on the bench next to Max. He was almost an arm's length away, but Max was abruptly conscious of him beside her. He lifted his gun from the table top and propped it on the ground between them, the muzzle dug into the grass. He didn't look at his own food, instead frowning at his sister. There was some undercurrent or tension between them that Max could not guess at. She'd never had siblings.

"This looks good," Max said, her voice too high, hoping to distract them and to ease the atmosphere between the brother and sister. And it was true. The plate of food Bryce had put in front of her held skewers of grilled vegetables and a pile of noodles that were sending a delicious scent to her nose, reminding her that it had been a long, long time since Joshua's survival stew. Which reminded her of the injured warrior. "How's Joshua? Have you heard?" she asked Bryce.

"Forty eight stitches," Bryce answered, an unexpected gleam of humour in his face as he turned to her. "It's almost a new

record, we think. Those antenna were as sharp as you said they were. He's doped up on painkillers and back at the Order sleeping. We'll check in on him later when we go and resupply," Bryce added.

Max couldn't think of anything to say. The first time she'd seen one of the Order vehicles packed for warriors, she'd thought that the contents of a single vehicle could hold off an army. It turned out that all the ammunition had been just enough to hold off modified cuchara. A trail of ice wound its way along her spine as she wondered what might happen if Donal ever turned his attention to even more deadly creatures. Cuchara had been hardy enough before his interference.

"There you are." The new voice was female, pitched low and full of a warmth that made Max turn at once to see who it was. The speaker was an older woman with the same dark eyes as Bryce and the same mid-brown hair as Susan. She smiled at Max, the charm on her face reminding Max of Susan. "You must be Max," the woman said. "I'm Ursula. I'm pleased to meet you. May I join you?"

"Of course," Max said, realising that the woman was waiting for her permission.

"This is delicious, mama," Bryce said, a forkful of the noodles held in front of him.

"Oh, thank you, son," Ursula said, settling next to Susan. "Please, don't let me stop you," she said, waving at the plate in front of Max. Ursula didn't have any food, but instead a tall glass of what looked like fruit juice.

Max took a forkful of the noodles and couldn't speak for a moment. "This is as good as Joshua's stew," she said, when she could speak.

"Thank you, my dear," Ursula said. The smile that crossed her face contained so much warmth Max wanted to lean forward into its orbit.

"You had some of Joshua's stew?" Susan asked, brows lifting. "I'm jealous," she said candidly. "I've never been around when he's making it. Is it really as good as Bryce says?"

"It was the best meal I've ever had. Until now," Max said. The second mouthful of noodles was as good as the first. She couldn't identify all the flavours, but it was earthy and salty and rich all at the same time and just what she needed.

"Are you a vegetarian, Max?" Ursula asked.

"No," Max said, shaking her head. "But after today, I didn't want any meat."

Susan paused, her fork hovering mid-air. Her plate looked to be mostly steak, with a token side of vegetables. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," Bryce's sister said.

"You aren't," Max said, more heat surging into her face. This was why she avoided normal people. She had no idea how to have an ordinary conversation without stepping into verbal land mines.

"So, how long have you been a Marshal, Max?" Ursula asked.

“Mama, what’s with the twenty questions?” Bryce asked, before Max could clear her mouth to answer.

“I’m just making conversation,” Ursula said, widening her eyes in an expression of mock-innocence.

It seemed that neither of her children believed her as they both snorted in disbelief. Ursula laughed and shook her head.

“I’m curious,” Ursula admitted, eyes travelling between her son and Max. “Ever since you mentioned Max at family dinner the other week.”

Max almost choked on her food, not sure what surprised her the most. That Bryce made it to family dinners, or that he’d mentioned her to his family. She glanced at him and saw a hint of colour in his face. His mother was embarrassing him. She found it as endearing as his habit of understatement.

“And now that I’ve met you,” Ursula said, turning to Max, “you must come to dinner.”

Max took a careful sip of the liquid in her glass, finding it to be a tart fruit juice that perfectly complemented the noodles. “Thank you for the invitation,” she said carefully.

“More like a command,” Susan said, and frowned at her mother. “Leave the poor girl alone. She’s only just met us.” Susan turned to Max. “Family dinners tend to be very loud and very busy. We have a lot of opinions. And there’s usually about twenty of us.”

Max’s eyes widened, trying to imagine a family that big, or what it might be like to be surrounded by that many people

who were all related to you. Dinners at the orphanage had held more people, but the atmosphere had never been loud or busy. The orphans had sat at long, plain tables on benches very like the one she was on just now. Conversation had been muted and carried out under the watchful eyes of whatever teachers, priests or priestesses were on dinner duty that day. Anything too loud - whether voices or laughter - would be quickly shut down by the adults in charge.

“Well, she could bring her own family,” Ursula said, and turned to Max. “Are your parents around?” she asked.

Max hesitated. “I grew up in one of the orphanages,” she told Ursula. The woman’s warmth made Max want to answer, but she was fast learning that the outer layer of warmth concealed a steely determination and a sharp intelligence.

“Oh, I’m sorry. So your parents are no longer with us?” Ursula asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” Max said. Her plate was almost empty, but she couldn’t stay still any longer. Bryce’s mother’s questions were picking at the raw edges of the new information she hadn’t had time to absorb. She wasn’t ready to talk with anyone about what she’d learned. “I don’t wish to be rude, but it’s been a long day, and I suspect tomorrow will be longer still. If you’ll excuse me,” Max said, getting up from the table.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Ursula said. The teasing warmth had vanished into sincerity.

“I am not offended,” Max said, realising that Susan had inherited a lot of her directness from her mother. “But I do have to go. Thank you for making me welcome. And for the food,” she added, and turned away from the table, heading in the direction her inner compass told her led to her pick-up and escape.

She had made it out of the crowd of people, noticing that the other Marshals were still there, all of them seeming to be engaged in lively conversations, before Bryce caught up to her.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” she answered, and scrubbed a hand across her face, shoving her hair back. “I’m not used to crowds of people. I want to go home,” she said. Her earlier wish to curl up on her sofa with her old, familiar blanket returned and her whole body tensed with the wish to move.

“Let me get the others,” he said.

“No.” The word came out too hard and too sharp. “Sorry,” she said, drawing in a breath. “I’m sorry,” she repeated, stuck on that word. “I need to go home,” she said, and shook her head. She wasn’t making sense, even in her own mind.

“Alright,” Bryce said, surprising her into looking up at him. His mouth lifted in a smile. “I grew up surrounded by a lot of noisy, opinionated people, and even I find them too much at times. I get the need for some peace and quiet.”

Max stared up at him, noticing he’d remembered to pick up his main weapon before he followed her. Of course he had.

This was Bryce. Who had never let her down. And he was staring down at her now, the smile fading from his face, bright sparks in his dark eyes.

She took a step forward, lifted up on her toes, and kissed him. Briefly. That was all the contact she could manage right now, and she had no way of explaining that to him. He lifted a hand, brushed her cheek and nodded, as if she'd said something profound.

“Head home. We’ll regroup in the morning,” he said.

Head and heart too full to find even a simple goodbye, she nodded in turn and headed for her pick-up, Cas and Pol her shadows. Walking away from Bryce was surprisingly difficult, but her breathing eased the further she got from the crowds and she knew that by the time she got home, she would be almost back to an even temper. Enough to rest and get ready for whatever tomorrow might bring.

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Chapter Twenty-One

MAX ATE THE LAST of Joshua's survival stew straight from the pot, standing up and looking out of her kitchen window at the long line of the Wild that stretched as far as she could see in either direction. She told herself that it was just her imagination that the tree line looked closer this morning than it had a few days before.

Despite a night full of nightmares about giant insects with shadow-hound heads, her mind was calmer that morning. Nightmares were nothing new. And the little bit of distance and space from the crowds of the day before had helped calm her temper.

She looked at the Wild as she swallowed the last bite of stew. It definitely looked closer. Dread was a leaden weight in her stomach. She valued her solitude out here, at the edges of the city. If the Wild took over her house and garden, she'd be forced to find somewhere closer to the heart of the city. Closer to the mass of people that lived there. She hoped it wouldn't come to that, but she didn't control the Wild. No one did.

A low sound, almost a whine, from her dogs drew her attention back from the Wild. They were both lying beside her, their eyes on the pot as she ate, probably hopeful she might share some of it with them. They hadn't yet touched the dog food she'd set out for them. She wondered what they had seen or sensed in her expression to draw that sound from them. Although they would bark an alert when needed, they rarely whined.

"I know," she said to them, "I'm not very calm right now, am I?" It wasn't the nightmares that had made her too restless to sit down and eat. It was the knowledge rattling around in her brain. Kitris and Emmeline had created her at the Lady's order, and the Lady Herself had put some of Her essence into Max. There hadn't been much time to think about the implications of that since her visit to the temple, but left alone in her own house, it was all she could think about. Anger and hurt and betrayal were sharp knives inside her. There had never been one hint from Kitris or Emmeline that they had had anything to do with her creation. Not until Emmeline's visit the other day. Not until she and Kitris had simply announced that they were her parents. Or at least, they had thought they were. The Lady's news had shocked them all. But until then, Kitris and Emmeline had hidden what they knew from Max. Even when she had asked Emmeline directly, wanting to investigate her family. Max had wanted to know where she had come from. And Emmeline had said that information would be impossible to find.

More than that, Emmeline and Kitris had handed her off to the orphanage. A child that they had believed the Lady Herself had wanted. And the pair of them had decided that the best place for Max had been, not with one of them to be raised in their household, but rather to be raised in one of the temple orphanages. Max had always had what she needed in terms of shelter and food. But she'd never had a family. Had never understood where she had come from. Until now. And with the knowledge rattling around in her brain, she almost wished she could go back in time and unlearn it.

Her dogs made another low sound, drawing her attention back to her kitchen. The tiled floor was cold under her feet, even through her socks. Cas and Pol were both looking at her with their ears partly lifted. They looked concerned, even though Max knew that they didn't feel emotions the same way as she did. Her eyes stung and she crouched between them, the cooking pot still in her hand, giving each of her hounds a one-armed hug. The familiar feel and scent of them settled some of the hurt and anger, letting her breathe. She straightened, and saw her dogs' eyes tracking the movement of the stew. They didn't look concerned any longer, just focused on the pot and its contents.

"No chance," she told them, laughing. She checked to make sure she had, in fact, got all of the stew. It was almost as good cold as it had been hot and freshly made. "Go eat your food," she told them. "I've a feeling we're going to need all the energy we can get today."

There had been no new messages or updates from Faddei overnight, and the news headlines didn't indicate any major incidents in the city, so Max could only assume that the demons had found somewhere else to hide while they worked up to whatever it was that they were planning.

Just as she was wondering where to start looking, her phone rang. The number was faintly familiar, and she answered.

"Max, honey, I need you at the mortuary again," Audhilde's warm voice curled through the faint hiss on the phone line.

"Audhilde. Are you alright?" Max asked, guilt stabbing her as she realised she'd barely given the ancient vampire a second thought over the past day or so. She had assumed that Audhilde would make a full recovery, but she should have checked.

"Quite alright, thank you," the vampire said. Max believed her.

"Alright. I'll get to the mortuary as soon as I can," Max said.

The line went dead before she could ask why Audhilde wanted her there. It was a safe bet there was another body the vampire wanted to show her, but with everything going on in the city, Max couldn't be more definite than that.

Cas and Pol had taken her advice and wolfed down their breakfast, and were now standing at the back door, ready to head out into the day. Max put on her boots and leather jacket, holstered her gun and left the house with her dogs, wondering what horrors she would have to face this day.



It was still early morning when Max parked her pick-up outside the mortuary. Early enough that her breath clouded the air in front of her as she got out of the vehicle. She left Cas and Pol in the back, snuggled in blankets. She'd called Bryce on the way over, trying not to be worried or offended when he didn't answer his phone. He wasn't at her beck and call, after all, and there might be things happening in the Order that she didn't know about. So she'd left a message for him, letting him know where she was going, and then called Faddei. Her boss had answered, sounding half-awake, but had confirmed that he had no news to share with her.

She headed into the mortuary building with a growing sense of frustration and impatience and worry. Donal, Finn, Queran and Evan were all somewhere in the city. Possibly along with the remnants of the Syndicate. The group had been too well-organised and well-armed to simply have disappeared.

The double doors to the autopsy suite were in front of her before she knew it and she went through, finding the room almost deserted. Audhilde was there, in blue coveralls, doing something with test tubes and other laboratory equipment set out on a workbench at the other side of the room.

Only one of the three tables in the middle of the room was occupied, a white sheet drawn over the corpse. Max gave it a wary look, wondering if that was what Audhilde had wanted her to see.

“Give me a moment, will you?” Audhilde said, not taking her eyes off whatever experiment she was running.

“Of course,” Max said, and stopped where she was, not far from the doors.

With the vampire’s attention on her experiment, Max took a moment to assess her. Audhilde seemed just the same as ever. There was no sign of the large lump on her head or that she had faced down and destroyed two dark dogs only a couple of days before.

As if sensing Max’s scrutiny, Audhilde glanced up and smiled, mischief on her face.

“Not dead yet, honey,” she said.

“I’m glad of it,” Max said honestly.

Audhilde turned off the burner under the test tube she was holding and frowned at the contents. “As I thought,” she muttered, mostly to herself. She half-turned, holding the tube up to the light so that Max could see the pale violet liquid inside.

“Ugh, is that dream weed?” Max asked. It might have a pretty name, but the synthetic drug could have vicious side-effects and more than one person had died from it.

“The very same,” Audhilde said, nose wrinkling in distaste. “I swear young people don’t want to grow old these days.”

“They do seem to keep trying to find new ways to kill themselves,” Max agreed.

“This was from a seventeen-year-old,” Audhilde said, anger in her voice. “Seventeen years. What a waste.”

“Is that him?” Max asked, tilting her chin to the occupied table.

“No. That’s someone else. I was just running this test while I waited.” Audhilde set the test tube on a rack and carefully added a stopper before turning away, heading for the covered body. “Look familiar?” she asked, pulling the sheet back from the body’s head and shoulders.

Max checked in her stride across the room, then made her way to stand near the body. It did look familiar. The corpse on the table looked shrivelled and ancient, as though it had been the oldest living person immediately before death. Paper-thin skin hung from the prominent bones of the skull, the eyes sunk in. The great age of the corpse was at sharp odds with the full head of mid-brown hair.

“Another one,” Max said, with a sigh. “Same ritual markings?” she asked. Audhilde had called her to the mortuary a little over a week ago to view a body that had looked very similar to this one. Only the man had not been old at all. He’d had his life force sucked out of him by a dark magic ritual performed by Queran.

“I’m waiting for Kolbyr,” Audhilde said, expression tightening for a fraction of a second. If Max hadn’t been watching for her reaction, she would have missed it. She didn’t really know what there was between the two ancient vampires. Some kind of power struggle. But also mutual

respect. They had lived in the city for a very long time, after all. Perhaps longer than almost anyone else. “I heard you called him to the dark dog,” the medical examiner said, lifting her chin to meet Max’s eyes across the corpse.

“I did, yes,” Max said. “The cursed thing came back to life on us.”

“A bad business.” Audhilde also had a capacity for understatement, but Max didn’t find it nearly as endearing as Bryce’s.

“Do you know who he is?” Max asked, looking back down at the corpse.

“Not yet. I’ve taken dental x-rays, and just hope he’s kept up with his visits,” Audhilde said. “Do you know him?”

Max was about to say no, but then took a longer, closer look. The last shrivelled corpse had been almost unrecognisable at first. As she stared down at the hollowed-out face, a tug of familiarity pulled her.

“I do know him,” Max said slowly. “I can’t place him just now. Someone I’ve met. Possibly worked with.”

“Not another Marshal?” Audhilde asked, voice sharp.

“No. I’d definitely recognise a Marshal,” Max said with confidence. Even the ones she didn’t know that well, she knew by sight, and she was sure she would know them, even in this state. “Not a police officer, either. But ...” Her voice trailed off as she moved to get a better look at the face. “Sirius,” she breathed, shock coursing through her. “He was one of the

shadow-hound handlers that went into the Wild. Aurora and Ben know him,” she said. Last she had heard, Sirius had been staying with Aurora and Ben while he worked on some advanced training with his hounds. If someone had gotten to Sirius, were Aurora and Ben safe? Panic closed Max’s throat and she pulled her phone out, fingers shaking as she hunted for Aurora’s number.

“Hey, Max, what’s up?” Aurora answered the phone in her normal, cheerful voice. Max almost cried in relief.

“You’re alright. Is Ben with you?” Max asked, her voice too high and shaky.

“He’s right here, yes, he’s fine. What’s wrong?” Aurora asked, concern sharpening her voice.

“There’s a body at the mortuary,” Max said slowly. “And it looks like it might be Sirius.”

“Sirius? No. Can’t be. He’s here with us,” Aurora said.

“You mean, he’s in the room with you right now?” Max asked, fear coiling with panic in her chest. Could a demon have taken Sirius’ form and be standing next to two of her friends? Could she have been mistaken about the identity of the body?

“No, not right here. I mean, he’s been staying with us. He’s in the cottage. You know the one,” Aurora said. The background noise on the end of the line changed. It sounded as if she’d gone outside.

Max nodded, even though Aurora couldn't see her. She did indeed know the cottage. She'd stayed there herself, when she'd first met Cas and Pol. All three of them had crammed into the two-room cottage while Aurora and Ben passed on their expertise.

She could hear footsteps and Ben saying something in the background. She could picture the scene. Aurora walking from the main house, along the gravel path towards the cottage, Ben with her, and probably their shadow-hounds, too.

"That's strange," Aurora said. "The cottage is empty. His hounds aren't here. And his car is gone. You think the body is Sirius?" she asked, a quaver in her voice.

"I do. I'm so sorry," Max said. When she'd called Aurora, she'd been in a blind panic, worried about her friends, but now realised that she was delivering devastating news to them.

"But you don't sound certain," Aurora said, and her voice cracked.

There was a short pause, and then Ben's voice sounded in Max's ear. "Sirius is dead?" he asked.

"I believe so, yes," Max said.

"You can't tell?" Ben asked.

"There's been magic used on him," Max said, trying to find the right words. The doors of the mortuary opened and a cool wash of dark magic further chilled the room and her skin. Lord Kolbyr had arrived.

Max listened to Ben breathe for a moment. “What about his shadow-hounds?” he asked.

“I don’t know, sorry. I haven’t had time to ask. I was worried about you and Aurora,” Max said, feeling helpless.

“We’re fine,” Ben reassured her. “Can you find out about his hounds?”

“I will. Hold on a moment,” Max said, and lifted the phone away from her ear, inclining her head to Kolbyr in a mark of respect before turning to Audhilde. “Do you know if his shadow-hounds were found with him?” she asked.

“No. There was just his body,” Audhilde said.

“Where was he found?” Max asked.

“Outside an abandoned building,” Audhilde said, frowning slightly as she opened the paper file that had been sitting on the instrument tray next to the dead man. She read off the address and Max felt ice steal over her body.

“We were there yesterday,” she said, forcing the words out through stiff lips. “There was a demon in that building.”

“And you didn’t call me?” Lord Kolbyr asked. His voice was cool, but Max couldn’t tell if that was from annoyance or just his normal manner.

“By the time I realised there was a demon, he had me in an illusion spell,” Max told Kolbyr. “We need to go back there,” she said to Audhilde. A sound from her phone reminded her that she was still connected to Aurora and Ben. She lifted the phone back to her ear. “Sorry, Ben,” she said. “There’s no

word on Sirius' shadow-hounds. I'm going back to where he was found just now, and I'll call you if I find anything."

"We'll meet you there," Ben said, voice grim. "Text me the address."

He hung up before Max could protest and she hesitated, looking at the phone screen. If she didn't text him the address, he or Aurora had enough contacts across the city's police force that they would be able to find it out quickly enough. So Max sent both Ben and Aurora's phone a text with the building address on it.

"I'm sorry, will you excuse me? I need to go and see if we can find Sirius' hounds," Max said to the two vampires.

"I will meet you there," Kolbyr said. He lifted a brow as Max stared at him in surprise. "There may be more to learn from the scene itself," he told her, his tone flat and not allowing for argument.

Max nodded, and left. It was only when she was getting back into her pick-up that she realised Kolbyr had not been so interested in the scene of the last ritual. She wondered what had changed, or if he was just annoyed that she hadn't called him the day before. There was no time to go back and ask him now. If she didn't hurry, there was a chance that Ben and Aurora might get to the scene before she did. And she didn't want to lose anyone else she knew.

Chapter Twenty-Two

MAX WAS A BLOCK away from the mortuary when her phone rang. She glanced at the screen, in its cradle on her dashboard and her heart skipped. Bryce.

“Are you still at the mortuary?” he asked, without any greeting.

“No. I’m heading back to the empty tenement building we were at yesterday,” Max said, frowning. “Why? What’s up?”

“Someone called in a sighting of what sounds like Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan dragging another person through the streets not far from there. We’ve been asked to investigate,” Bryce said. From the echo in his voice, Max realised he was on speaker phone and probably driving.

“A body was found there last night. Victim of a demon ritual. It looked like one of the shadow-hound handlers. Sirius,” Max said, the words strange and unreal in her mouth. “His body is at the mortuary. When was the sighting called in?”

“About an hour ago,” Bryce said.

“So there might be another possible victim,” Max said, her heart rate picking up. She pressed harder on the accelerator.

“We’ll meet you at the tenement,” Bryce said, and the line went dead.

Max glared at the phone. That was the second time within an hour that someone had hung up on her so she couldn’t argue with them. Not that she wanted to argue with Bryce. He had far better weaponry than she did, and the skills to use it. And, apart from her dogs, there was no one she’d rather have with her right now.

As she went through another crossroads, the community garden appeared to one side and she realised she hadn’t updated Faddei. The traffic lights ahead of her turned red, forcing her to a stop. Unlike the police, Marshals didn’t get lights and sirens on their vehicles to allow them to break traffic rules. She scrolled through her phone contacts and dialled Faddei.

“Twice in one morning. This must be bad. What’s up?” Faddei asked.

“The body in the mortuary looked like Sirius,” she told him, pulling away from the lights as fast as possible when they turned to green.

“What? The shadow-hound handler? What happened?” Faddei asked.

“It looks like another demon ritual. I’m on my way to where his body was found. No one has seen his hounds. And I spoke to Bryce. Apparently, there’s been a sighting of Oliver and Hemang dragging someone else through the streets.”

“Where are you?” Faddei asked, voice grim.

“The tenement where we were yesterday,” Max said, turning the pick-up off the road and onto what looked like it had once been a paved area in front of the tenement. She was pleased to see that the police had followed Faddei’s request, and marked off the entire building, surrounding it with bright yellow tape. She was less pleased to see that the tape had been snapped in a few places, flapping loose in the slight breeze. She reversed the vehicle, making sure its nose was pointed out, and switched off the engine, leaving the keys in the ignition. All Marshals left their vehicles ready to jump into and get away if needed. She glanced in the rear view mirror and paused. It looked like there was someone standing next to the building, tucked into the shelter of the walls. She turned around to get a better look, but the figure had vanished. She scowled at the empty space. She could have sworn there was someone there. And someone she knew.

“Max? Are you still there?” Faddei’s voice drew her attention back to the phone.

“Yes. Sorry. I thought I saw someone. Where was I? Oh. Right. I called Aurora and Ben. I was worried about them, when I realised the body at the mortuary was Sirius. They’re on their way here, too,” she told Faddei, picking the phone out

of the cradle as she got out, the cold air sending ice across her face. She frowned at the bulk of the building. She couldn't see anyone, but Cas and Pol leapt out of the vehicle, both of them sliding into their attack forms as she watched. Perhaps she hadn't imagined the man. "Cas and Pol have scented something. I need to go," she said, and hung up on her boss before he could say anything else, like trying to order her to wait for back-up.

She grabbed her shotgun and ammunition for it from the lock box in the back, then forced herself to stand still for a moment and take a proper look around. Cas and Pol had already reacted to something, and it would be foolish to just forge ahead without taking a moment to work out what was happening.

The tenement looked just as it had the day before, with its empty windows and plants growing out of its faded red brick walls. There was nowhere on the outside she could see that was big enough to hide a man. The air was cold enough that her breath clouded in front of her as she took a cautious step forward.

Magic slid across her skin, jagged and cloying at the same time, raising pin pricks on her forearms, making her fingers twitch towards her gun. She stowed the shotgun in the loop on her thigh holster and drew her gun. She had a feeling that tranquillisers weren't going to do any good.

There wasn't any particular direction to the magic, it was just in the air around her. And Cas and Pol weren't staring in

any fixed direction. They had far more acute senses than she did, and doubtless had picked up on the magic long before she'd sensed it.

She looked at the open doorway not far away and remembered being drawn in to the demon's trap the moment she'd stepped inside while the others around her had been attacked by cuchara. It wasn't likely that Donal would try that twice. But then, he was a demon. And Audhilde had said that the body had been found outside. There was no need for her to go inside just now.

"Let's look around," she said to her hounds, and headed away from the doorway, along the outer wall of the building. Cas and Pol strode ahead of her, criss crossing in front of her, sniffing the air. They might be in their attack forms, but their bodies were loose and flowing. Whatever they had sensed wasn't life-threatening. At least not right now. Max followed them at a steady pace, her eyes constantly moving from the ground in front of her to her surroundings.

As she rounded the corner of the building, she spotted more of the bright yellow police tape fluttering in the breeze. A smaller rectangle of ground had been cordoned off, separate from the tape surrounding the building. This must be where Sirius' body had been found. She stopped, looking around again. They were out of sight of the road, and the nearest other buildings. At night there would be no street lights to chase away the shadows from the building. So how had Sirius' body been found?

Moving forward with more caution, she stopped again when she got to the newer police tape. There was nothing there to tell her precisely where the body had been. The police who had taped up the scene should have taken anything they considered to be evidence. It wasn't likely she'd find anything. She still had to look, though.

Cas gave a soft whine, a sound of distress she hadn't heard from him before. Pol crowded into Max's other side, pressing his great body against her. She patted her dog on reflex, and called Cas to her, not wanting him to be alone with whatever was bothering him. Cas pressed himself tightly against her other side so she was held up by her dogs.

Both of them were trembling, she realised, and a new fear gripped her. They had been to plenty of scenes of violent death before, including of people who they had known in life. But she'd never been to a site where a shadow-hound might have died. Her throat closed, wondering if Cas and Pol were sensing the loss of one or more of their own kind.

"Sirius was here," Max said, her voice harsh. "With his hounds. Can you find them?" she asked her dogs. She didn't want to make them follow a trail that might lead to a dead hound. But she also needed to know what had happened here, and what had happened to Sirius' hounds.

Pol made a low sound in his throat, somewhere between a whine and a growl, and moved away, nose down. He wasn't sniffing the ground, but some scent trail in the air. And he wasn't moving far from her. He took a few paces, then stopped

and glanced over his shoulder at her. Cas was still pressed against Max's side.

“Alright, we'll all go,” Max said, and followed Pol. Her dogs could move lightning-fast when they wanted to, but they were moving even more slowly than her normal walking pace just now. The dogs ducked under a strand of police tape and Max followed them as Pol led them to a gaping hole in the back wall of the tenement building, another whine escaping his throat as he put his front paws onto the pile of rubble, staring into the building.

It might be daylight outside, but the interior of the empty tenement was shadowed, wisps of darkness trailing in the air as Max peered inside. She couldn't see or sense any movement, or smell the distinctive scent of cuchara. Hopefully, all of the ones Donal had created were now dead. But she could feel the chill of dark magic against her skin along with the bite of the coming winter. Her fingers tightened around her handgun. She didn't want to walk into another illusion spell set by a demon. But she also didn't want anyone else walking into it, either. Aurora and Ben were on their way. They had counted Sirius as a friend, and Aurora would do anything for her friends.

So Max climbed up the rubble and through the gap, finding a short drop on the other side into the building. She landed lightly, Cas and Pol beside her. The sense of dark magic was stronger, along with the faintest trace of smoke in the air. Not the smoke of the underworld, she was relieved to note, but the simple aftermath of something burning.

Despite the shadows around her, she could see through the empty interior to the other walls and openings to the outside. Sending her senses out, she couldn't find any active magic. No illusion spells, as far as she could tell.

In the middle of the building was a charred area that hadn't been there the day before. As she moved closer, the sensation of dark magic crawling over her skin grew stronger until it was all she could do to keep moving. Something foul had happened in the middle of this building.

The charred area formed what looked like a perfect circle, despite the uneven surface, and she stopped before she reached the edge, crouching down to get a better look at the material on what had been the building's concrete floor. It looked like there was a thick layer of flakes of ash covering the surface, but she didn't know enough about forensics to be able to tell what had been burned. There were no bones that she could see, which was something. And the aftermath smelled more like wood smoke than anything else, even though there were no trees around here to burn.

Cas and Pol pressed close to her again, both of them whining low in their throats as they stared into the circle. Whatever was bothering them had happened here, Max realised, and hoped again that she hadn't led them to a place where other shadow-hounds had died.

Movement on the other side of the circle drew her head and her gun up. She straightened, trying to see through the shadows.

Her dogs gave a much happier sounding bark, and left her side, running around the edge of the circle to a deep blot of shadow that resolved itself into two familiar shapes. Another pair of shadow-hounds. Cas and Pol touched noses with the new pair, all of them making low sounds that made Max's throat tighten. They sounded like they were grieving. She'd found Sirius' shadow-hounds, and knew beyond a doubt that the body in the mortuary did belong to the shadow-hound handler. And knew, too, that he had died here, in this empty building. His faithful hounds hadn't been able to protect him, and were mourning the loss of their person. Shadow-hounds chose their people. Always. It had been one of the first things Max had learned when Cas and Pol had chosen her. It didn't matter what her plans had been, they had decided she was their person, and that was the end of the matter.

She put her gun away as she walked slowly after her hounds. The four shadow-hounds were pressed together, Cas and Pol on the outside, as if giving each other comfort, and her eyes stung. The hounds weren't people. She knew that. But they still felt things.

"Hello, girls," she said to the new pair of hounds, keeping her voice soft. "I'm so sorry about what happened to your person."

The pair looked up at her from within Cas and Pol's embrace and tilted their heads, as if accepting her condolences.

"They've taken his body to the mortuary, but you didn't want to go with him, did you? Because that body wasn't him,

and you wanted to stay in the last place he was alive,” Max continued softly. She wanted to reach out and pat the unfamiliar hounds, but held her hands back. They were upset and unsettled and she didn’t want to startle them. “I promise you I’m going to find who did this to Sirius. And I’m going to stop them from doing it to anyone else.” The promise rang through her with utter conviction, even though she wasn’t sure how she was going to get it done.

All the dogs tensed, attention going behind her.

“Coming up behind you.”

She recognised Bryce’s voice before she heard the quiet footsteps. She turned to find Bryce, and four other warriors she was becoming familiar with. Osvaldo, Khari, Killan and Hop. No Joshua. She was not surprised, given the injuries he’d suffered. Behind the warriors were Aurora and Ben, who had four shadow-hounds with them. Aurora and Ben’s hounds were also in their attack forms, pressed into their handlers’ sides.

“Something really bad happened here,” Aurora said. As far as Max knew, Aurora was not a formally trained magician, but it was no surprise that the shadow-hound trainer was sensitive to foul magic. She was wide-eyed, paler than Max had ever seen her, but her jaw set in a firm, determined line as she stopped a short distance away. “Oh, no,” she said, her eyes travelling past Max to the huddle of four shadow-hounds. Even as Aurora noticed the group, her hounds, and Ben’s,

moved away from their handlers, going to join the group, all of them making low, sad sounds.

“I think this is where Sirius died,” Max said, her voice harsh as she tried to hold back tears. “His hounds were here.”

“The police tape is all outside,” Bryce pointed out, a slight frown on his face.

“I know. I think whoever killed him must have moved him outside,” Max said. That felt right. Even though she wasn’t sure why the killer or killers would have moved the corpse. They hadn’t attempted to hide the ritual circle, after all.

“Do we have any more information?” Bryce asked. He looked around. “The site outside isn’t visible from the road,” he added. Max wasn’t surprised that he’d noticed that as well.

“No. I didn’t think to ask for the detective’s information,” Max said. “I wanted to get here first.”

“Alright,” Bryce said. “Have you searched the building?”

“No. I just came in through there,” Max pointed back to the gap in the wall, “and crossed to the circle. That’s it.” She hesitated, and Bryce raised a brow, prompting her to speak. “When I pulled up, I thought I saw someone outside the building. A man. But I haven’t seen him again.”

“A man,” Bryce repeated, frowning. “Someone you knew?”

“I thought so. It looked like-” Max’s words stopped as if they had been cut off. She shook her head, struggling to remember the name. She’d recognised the man, she was sure, but couldn’t remember his name. Why couldn’t she remember

his name? “A warrior. Kitris’ second in command,” she managed to say, the words heavy and reluctant.

“Here?” Khari asked, her brows shooting up. “Why would he be here?”

“I don’t know,” Max said. “And I can’t remember his name,” she added, frustrated. She could never remember his name.

Bryce opened his mouth, then frowned more deeply. “I can’t, either,” he said, and turned to the other warriors. They all shook their heads, similar frowns on their faces.

A chill ran over Max’s skin. She’d never spoken to anyone else about her inability to fully remember Kitris’ second in command when he wasn’t present. She’d assumed it was some quirk of her brain. But it seemed that the other warriors shared it.

“I can never remember him when we’re out of the Order,” Osvaldo said. “That’s weird, isn’t it?”

“Very,” Bryce said. He looked back at Max, expression stern enough to make her blink. “Wait here. We’ll clear the area,” Bryce said.

He and the other warriors were moving away before Max could form any response to that.

Aurora approached the group of shadow hounds, her hands held out, and let the hounds all sniff her. “There, there, my poor darlings,” she said, making her way through the press of large, furred bodies to reach the two in the middle. She put a hand on the head of each of Sirius’ hounds. “I’m so sorry,”

Aurora said, her rich, warm voice full of grief. The other woman had a true gift with animals of all sorts, and from the way all the hounds were pressing around her, they welcomed her presence. Ben moved slowly through the crowd of dogs as well, putting an arm around his wife's waist, the two of them comforting Sirius' hounds.

Max blinked to clear her eyes and turned away to see another figure approaching from the gap in the wall. Kolbyr looked as comfortable in the abandoned building as he had in the city mortuary. He stopped a few paces from the edge of the burned circle and looked down at it. His expression tightened, a hint of his other nature showing through.

"This was a dark ritual site," he said. He glanced up at Max. "But you will know that already."

"Yes," Max said. "I think this is where Sirius was killed. The body in the mortuary," she added, just in case Kolbyr hadn't made the connection. From the slight quirk of his lips, he hadn't missed that detail and was almost amused that she had felt the need to tell him. "From the police tape outside, I think that's where the body was found."

"It was moved, then," Kolbyr said. He started a slow walk around the outside of the circle, moving away from Max and the cluster of shadow-hounds nearby. "This was a different magician from the last time," the vampire said when he was about a quarter of the way around the circle from Max.

"Probably one of the new demons, then," Max said. She wasn't all that surprised. "Donal or Finn."

Kolbyr stopped moving and stared at her, the intensity of his expression making Max want to reach for her gun.

“What did you say?” he hissed.

“Donal or Finn,” Max answered, her mouth dry. “Donal pulled me into an illusion spell yesterday. He’s the one in Oliver Forster’s body. Finn is in Hemang Raghavan’s body.”

“He gave you his name?” Kolbyr asked.

“He said I couldn’t pronounce his true name, but I could call him Donal,” Max answered. “Does the name mean something to you?”

“You will recall that there was a time when the dark lord Himself walked this world,” Kolbyr said, still staring at Max. He didn’t seem to be blinking, and Max found her hand gripping her gun. It was still holstered and she carefully moved her hand away. The vampire wasn’t threatening her. Not yet. In fact, although he was looking at her, he didn’t seem to be seeing her at all, lost in the old legends he was talking about. When Arkus Himself had walked in the daylight world and all but destroyed it before His sister, the Lady, had managed to contain Him behind the Grey Gates.

Kolbyr blinked, focusing on Max’s face, as if making sure she was listening. He needn’t have worried. She was absolutely focused on him as the greatest threat nearby, and a source of information. “We don’t have many records of that time, but the names Donal and Finn do feature. Donal is one of the dark lord’s most senior lieutenants. He was said to possess an extraordinary skill with magic.” Kolbyr looked away from

Max, finally, and down at the charred circle. “It seems that the legends are true.”

“The pair of demons are mentioned by name?” Max asked, chills running across her skin. That was not a good sign. Not good at all. Whoever had recorded the histories of the time had missed out most of the names of the people involved. If the writers had taken the time to set down a name, it generally meant the person - or demon in this case - had done something truly memorable.

“Oh, yes,” Kolbyr said, a humourless smile on his face. “They were quite famous. Or perhaps infamous is more accurate. The pair of them seemed closer than brothers, and left a trail of destruction behind them.” Kolbyr frowned at the circle. “Although I cannot imagine why they would need to drain life force. They are powerful demons. They should possess enough energy of their own.”

Max wasn't sure if Kolbyr realised he had spoken aloud. He didn't seem pleased by the presence of the two powerful demons in this world. She turned his words over in her mind.

“So Sirius was used as a battery?” Aurora asked, sounding outraged.

Max had been so focused on the vampire she hadn't noticed that Aurora and Ben had left the group of dogs and were standing nearby, both of them staring at Kolbyr.

“Dear lady,” Kolbyr said, putting his hand on his heart. “In essence, that is the truth of it. I just don't understand why the demons needed the energy.”

“When I spoke to Donal yesterday, he seemed strained,” Max said slowly. She was about to go on and say that it had seemed like Oliver Forster’s body had been struggling to hold the demon’s essence, but bit her lip, falling silent. If she said something like that, Kolbyr might want to know how she had come to that conclusion. And Max didn’t want to talk about her extraordinary encounter with the Lady. Not with this vampire, at least.

“An interesting observation,” Kolbyr said, staring at her again. “An influx of energy may have been needed to help the host body accommodate the demon. Even though Oliver Forster was not entirely human, Donal was likely too powerful for the body to hold without some intervention,” he said. “I am speculating, of course.”

Max nodded, not sure what she could say that wouldn’t give away the extra knowledge she had. She looked around the site, and felt the chill of foul magic brush across her skin. The whole interior of the building seemed to have been affected by the ritual and Sirius’ death.

The warriors came back, walking through the remnants of dark magic. Only Khari seemed to notice. The others didn’t have any magic sensitivity.

“The building is clear,” Bryce reported. The warriors were still on alert, though, spaced out around the shadow-hounds and people, their eyes watching their surroundings.

Max nodded to let Bryce know she’d heard him, and looked around again. “Why here?” she asked, not realising she’d

spoken aloud until Kolbyr lifted a brow at her. “Donal was here yesterday before we arrived. He’d gathered cuchara to this place, and was breeding more in the buildings over there,” she said, pointing in the general direction of her and the warriors’ first encounter with the enhanced creatures the day before. “So he was here for a reason, not just a whim.”

“It’s an abandoned building, so less chance of being disturbed,” Bryce pointed out. It was a fair point, and a warrior’s way of looking at things.

“There has to be more to it,” Max said, frowning as she looked around. For the first time, she realised that the placement of the ritual, and the place where Sirius had died, wasn’t in the centre of the building, but slightly off to one side and hemmed in with a few piles of broken bricks and other rubble from the building’s ruined interior. There was a much more open space, with fewer obstacles on the ground, not far away. So Donal had deliberately chosen this spot.

She forced herself to move to the side of the circle, but couldn’t quite get over the edge of it, the tips of her boots almost brushing the edge of the charred area. She crouched down, and opened up her senses. Just a little bit. She dared not open her mind completely. Not here. Not with so many people around her. And not with Sirius’ death still hanging in the air. She drew a long, slow breath, and looked around, trying to see past the immediate layers of the dark ritual and the echoes of terror and pain she could feel. Sirius had not died easily.

There. Almost beyond her senses. A slow, deep current running under the ground. Like a warm thread. It was a soothing balm after the foulness of the ritual.

“Ley line,” she said aloud. “That’s why he was here. He tapped into one of the ley lines.”

“Ley lines? My dear, how terribly old-fashioned of you,” Kolbyr said, sounding almost amused. He was still standing a quarter of the way around the circle, which was a bit of a relief.

“Remember the killer who was cutting up people and using their blood to mark out his spell?” Max asked, straightening to her feet and looking across at the vampire. It had been the first time she had met the dark magic master, consulting with him about blood rituals. “The death sites were all mapped onto intersections of ley lines across the city.”

To her surprise, Kolbyr didn’t laugh at her. Any one of her teachers at the Order would have laughed. Ley lines were superstitious nonsense, as far as they were concerned. In pursuing the killer, she had discovered that ley lines were quite real. And she had since learned that a lot of other things her teachers had tried to tell her were not true, either. Discovering that there was more than one way to use magic was just one example.

“What’s the effect of the ritual being done on a ley line?” Bryce asked, frowning slightly. It was a good question.

“I think it would have given the spell more power,” Max said slowly, looking around.

“Yes,” Kolbyr agreed. He was quite serious. “Modern magicians like to scoff at the idea of ley lines, but the modern world does not know everything. The power in the land can be a potent force, if you know how to use it. And a demon as old as Donal would certainly know.”

“So, that’s why he was here,” Bryce concluded. “Is there just one line, or is it another intersection?”

“I don’t want to look,” Max said honestly, “but I would guess there is a crossing here, yes.”

Bryce nodded his acceptance. Max felt a prickle of shame across her skin. She was quite sure that he had never shied away from doing anything difficult. But she could not bring herself to open her senses enough to look fully beyond the echoes of Sirius’ death to what lay underneath.

“What did Donal want with you?” Kolbyr asked her, sounding genuinely curious.

“He didn’t say. Not outright,” Max said, hearing the frustration in her own voice. “It’s impossible to get a straight answer from a demon,” she complained.

Kolbyr’s mouth curved up into a smile full of sharp humour. “You are perhaps the only person alive who has spoken to more than one demon and lived to talk about it,” he told her, “so you are uniquely qualified to make that statement.”

“I would happily have never spoken to a single demon,” Max told him, hearing a snap in her voice. She hoped that the ancient vampire would realise her anger wasn’t directed at

him, but at the demons. She truly didn't want to offend Kolbyr. If she angered him, there was no telling what he might do. And as an expert in dark magic, she was quite sure he had a wide range of ugly and painful spells at his disposal.

"I am sure." He inclined his head, seeming to take no offence at her tone. "But, as you have far more, what's the expression, ah, yes, hands on experience, than anyone else, perhaps you would give me an account of your meeting yesterday?"

Kolbyr had somehow moved from around the circle to be standing only a few feet away from her. She hadn't noticed him move.

"How is this going to help find Sirius' killer?" Aurora asked, her voice high. Her face was streaked with tears and she was still pressed against Sirius' two shadow-hounds.

"All the indications are that one of the new demons killed your friend," Kolbyr said to Aurora, surprising Max with the gentleness in his tone. "The more information we can gather about the demon, the better chance we will have of stopping them from doing this again."

"We were sent here to chase down a possible sighting of Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan. They may have another potential victim," Bryce said. Max could tell he wanted to follow that lead. She agreed. The bit of information might lead them to the demons.

"It will still be helpful to know what Marshal Ortis and the demon Donal discussed yesterday," Kolbyr said, not moving.

He looked at Max and lifted a brow. It wasn't an idle question, Max realised. The vampire truly did want to know.

Max scrubbed a hand across her face, trying to put herself back inside the illusion of the day before. She gave her audience a quick summary of what had happened, trying to stick to the facts and Donal's words as best she could remember them, and not colour the tale with her own impressions or feelings. No one interrupted her. When she reached the end, Kolbyr's brows were almost at his hairline.

"That was a most illuminating conversation, Marshal Ortis," he said.

"How?" Max asked, frustration breaking through despite her best efforts to remain calm. "He didn't tell me what he wanted, and there's nothing there that will help me find him."

"On the contrary, you learned a lot," Kolbyr said. "The demons Donal and Finn did not know that it was Queran who helped bring them through. So they did not come here to meet with Queran. The sophistication of the spell work he used confirms that it is indeed the Donal of legends that we are dealing with."

Max suppressed the first few hasty things she wanted to say and instead paused before she said anything, letting what Kolbyr had said sink in. "Orshiasa said that he thought Queran and Evan were attempting to bring through lesser beings from the underworld," she said slowly, hairs on her body lifting as the implications of that sank in. "So, whatever plan Queran

and Evan might have had when they were using the Arkus Codex, it wasn't specific to Donal and Finn.”

“That is so,” Kolbyr agreed, a pleased smile on his face, as if she was a favourite pupil who had just solved a difficult puzzle. “I speculate that Donal saw an opportunity and took advantage, and Finn followed as there was another body available. The two have a long history of working together.”

There was a strong current of fascination in his voice that made Max want to take a very large step back. Just when she could almost forget what he was, Kolbyr reminded her of his true nature. He had dedicated his very long life to the study of dark magic. For him, a demon taking over a dead body was a matter of interest rather than horror.

“How does this help us find them?” Bryce asked.

“Well, it means that the demon pair are here for their own reasons, and not to fulfil whatever errand Queran and Evan might have had in mind,” Kolbyr said.

“Which is all well and good, but we don't actually know for certain what Evan and Queran were up to with the Codex,” Max said. Bringing lesser beings through sounded more like mischief-making than any grand plan, at least in her mind. Which made her believe she was missing something. Queran might be content to meddle without any definite purpose, but she was quite certain that Evan Yarwood had greater ambitions. “We're not going to find out hanging around here. We should see if we can find the trail, and the place where your informant spotted Donal and Finn,” she said to Bryce. “If

the two demons were there, then my hounds should be able to pick up their trail.” She glanced back at the group of shadow-hounds, reluctant to pull Cas and Pol away when Sirius’ pair were still in such obvious distress. But she knew she needed her dogs with her. She needed as many allies as possible if she was going to track down the demons.

Aurora must have read the hesitation on Max’s face. “Take your hounds with you,” the older woman said, tone firm and allowing for no argument. “Sirius’ pair will want to go with you, too. They’ll want to catch whoever killed their person.”

“It’s going to be dangerous,” Max said. She didn’t want the hounds put in any more danger. They’d already lost Sirius.

“They’re shadow-hounds,” Ben said. “Danger is what they were bred for. Besides, I don’t think you’re going to have a choice.”

Max looked at the pack of hounds. Cas and Pol had sensed something was up and had moved away from the group, coming closer to Max. The others were watching her with dark, intent eyes.

“They all want to come with me?” Max asked.

“They know something awful happened to one of their people. You know what, we’ll come, too,” Aurora said. “No, don’t argue. We’re not stupid. We’ll stay back and out of the way, but more shadow-hounds is never a bad thing and we can help you co-ordinate if necessary.”

Max couldn't find any reasonable argument against that. Aurora and Ben were the most experienced handlers in the whole city. If anyone could manage a pack of unsettled, grieving shadow-hounds, it was them. She looked at Bryce, as the person in charge of the guns. He nodded, agreeing with Aurora and Ben. Having extra people around her - particularly Aurora and Ben, who weren't trained to deal with whatever it was they might find - made Max uneasy, but she realised she was not going to win the argument. They were all going to come with her, one way or another.

As she headed for the nearest exit of the building, the shadow-hounds moved past her, all of them in their attack forms, spreading out so that her immediate view was a sea of tall backs covered in long fur, tails held loosely behind the dogs as they paced ahead. For a moment she was disoriented, wondering where Cas and Pol were, then she spotted them in the mix and her world settled again.

As awful as the day had been, with Sirius' death, for the first time Max felt a little bit of hope ease the hard lump in her chest. The demons so far had been able to resist her and her single pair of hounds. She was almost looking forward to seeing how they managed to deal with eight angry shadow-hounds.

Chapter Twenty-Three

CAS AND POL HAD their noses down the moment they left the empty tenement building, following an invisible scent trail that led across the small patch of open ground to a warren of small houses with long, thin gardens separated by narrow roads. Max had never been there before, but Bryce identified it as the area where the Order informant had spotted the demons and their potential victim.

The shadow-hounds didn't stop there. They kept moving past the small houses to a wider street with slightly larger houses set back from the roadside, and then kept going.

As they passed the smaller houses, Bryce sent Hop and Killan back for the Order vehicles, and Max wished she'd realised that it was going to be a long hike. Her pick-up was getting further and further away. Even though Orshiasa had healed her broken bones, she was still dealing with a lack of fitness from her previous injuries. She would not be able to keep up the pace with the shadow-hounds and warriors for long.

She was trying to work out what in the world the demons were up to, and where they were going, when her phone rang. It was Faddei, wanting an update. She told him what she knew, and where they were, not surprised when her boss said that he would be with her soon, with more Marshals. Sirius had not been one of their own, but he had been part of the extended law enforcement family in the city, and no one in that family was going to rest easily until his killer was found.

The shadow-hounds were all still in a group ahead of her, Aurora and Ben just behind her, with the Order warriors bringing up the rear. She'd glanced over her shoulder a couple of times to see that Lord Kolbyr was still with them. She was surprised that the vampire hadn't retreated to his very comfortable luxury vehicle and simply asked her to call him when the demons were found. Perhaps he didn't want to miss anything. Or he didn't trust her to call him. Or any number of other reasons she couldn't guess at.

His presence was making her uneasy. At least, that was what she thought was happening, until she realised that the spider-feet sensation across her skin was similar to the feeling she'd had the day before, when she'd followed the demon's trail. She drew in a breath, shock coursing through her. She could sense the demon's presence. Donal's, at least. She remembered the odd resonance she'd felt when she'd been forced into closer proximity with him. The crawling sensation was less intense today, but she could still feel it. Perhaps even strongly enough to follow his trail if the shadow-hounds lost the scent.

At length they came to the perimeter of a school. With the city's limited resources, the schools in outlying areas like this one catered for all children, from the very young to the nearly adult. This school had a few, single storey buildings around a main, four storey, red brick building. Max guessed that the single storey buildings were newer. The buildings sat in a large area with sports grounds and playgrounds carefully separated.

The shadow-hounds paused at the open gates in the head-high chain-link perimeter fence. Cas glanced back at Max. He and Pol had stopped just outside the perimeter.

"Wait a moment," she said to her dogs. The other shadow-hounds had also stopped outside the fence.

"They've sensed something," Aurora said from behind Max.

"Let me have a look," Max said, and moved ahead, not surprised to find Bryce with her. As she lengthened her stride, she heard the rumbling of engines. Hop and Killan had caught up to them, with the Order vehicles. The sound of voices made her glance over her shoulder to see that it wasn't just Hop and Killan and the two Order vehicles, but also a group of battered-looking vehicles that belonged to Marshals. She saw Faddei and a few other Marshals get out of their vehicles before she turned back to the hounds and the fence. None of the Marshals would be insulted by her doing her job rather than greeting them.

She stopped at Cas' shoulder and put her hand on her dog's back. He was tense under the long fur, body almost vibrating,

and she frowned as she looked ahead, seeing immediately why the hounds had stopped.

“There’s a magic trap in the gateway,” she told the others. She hadn’t needed to open her senses to see it. The jagged outline of dark magic was clear and vivid in the daylight.

“Dark magic,” Kolbyr said, appearing beside Cas. Max managed not to jump or pull her gun on him, but only just. “I can dismantle it, but it will take some time.”

“There’s no magic on the fence itself that I can see,” Max said, and lifted a brow at Kolbyr.

“I concur.”

“So, we can get through the fence, then,” Bryce said, shouldering his weapon. “Os, Killan, get the bolt cutters.”

While Max waited for the Order warriors to cut through the fence, Faddei joined her along with Vanko and Zoya. What had started as a small group was growing to a sizeable force. Some people might be comforted by having more people around. Max wasn’t one of them. She felt the presence of every person around her as an obligation. Someone else to keep safe. Someone else who could be hurt, or worse. She’d seen what a demon was capable of, and the loss of nine Order warriors from eight years before was never far from her thoughts. Naomi and the others had died screaming and Max hadn’t been able to do anything to protect them. She didn’t want to lose anyone else.

“We brought your pick-up, and Aurora and Ben’s truck,” Faddei said.

“Oh, thank you,” Max said, grateful that she wasn’t going to have to hike back to retrieve her vehicle.

“What led you here?” Vanko asked, eyes sharp as he watched the warriors making light work of cutting through the fence.

“The hounds followed the scent trail from the tenement building to here,” Max said. She wasn’t ready to tell anyone that she might also be able to track the demons. Not just yet.

“So the demons are inside the school?” Faddei asked, face and voice grim.

“It’s possible,” Max answered, her mind giving her full colour images of what the demons were capable of doing and had left behind in the house a few doors down from where Oliver Forster had lived. She couldn’t imagine that anyone would want to live in that building again, even if it was in one of the better neighbourhoods.

Faddei cursed under his breath and dialled a preset number on his phone. “There, we’re at the Holleran School. The demons may be inside. Alert the Order and the police and request back-up immediately. Make sure they know that there’s dark magic blocking the gate and they need to go through the fence instead.” He hung up the phone without waiting for a response as Bryce and Osvaldo peeled back a large section of the fence.

The shadow-hounds went through the gap in the fence as soon as it was opened, flowing forward in a sea of dark hair, their movements smooth and focused, predators on the hunt. Max followed, striding out across the smooth concrete of the car park, following the hounds.

The hounds were heading around the main building, not into it, aiming for one of the larger single-storey buildings.

“The indoor gym,” Faddei said, keeping pace with Max.

“Is it big enough to hold all the teachers and students?” Max asked, apprehension curling through her. If the demons had thought that Shivangi Raghavan had been a *tasty little morsel*, she wondered how they would look upon children and their teachers.

“I think so. Most of them, anyway. Vanko?” Faddei asked.

“From what I remember, yes. It was built after my time, but my niece and nephew go to school here,” Vanko said, his voice full of tension.

As they rounded the corner of the main building, Max glanced up and saw a multitude of faces pressed against the glass, staring down at them. Mostly children, but a few adults as well. She paused in her stride, pointing upwards in case the others hadn't spotted their audience.

“Looks like most of the children and teachers are there,” Faddei said, the relief in his voice clear.

Max silently agreed and kept moving, heading for the large stand alone building. The shadow-hounds had reached the

doorway and were sniffing around it. As she watched, a pair of shadow-hounds peeled off to the left and right, circling around the building, leaving four hounds with the group. Max wasn't surprised to see Cas and Pol waiting for her at the door. They didn't look around as she joined them, their attention on the double doors ahead.

The doors were solid wood at the bottom half then clear glass at the top. There were no lights on inside the building, the interior shadowed, but enough daylight was getting in so that she could see that the building was not full of children. More relief coursed through her. Hurting the children had not been the demons' purpose in coming to the school. That was a small piece of good news, at least.

She put her hand on the door, feeling the chill of dark magic. It wasn't dangerous, just a residue from some other spell. She pushed the door inward, Cas and Pol gliding past her, and heard the sharp click as the door mechanism set to open. Bryce had pushed the other one open, too, and walked forward with her, the automatic weapon up and ready.

"Nothing here," he said after a moment, sounding surprised.

The shadows inside the building reminded Max of the empty tenement building, and as she took another step forward, she caught the smell of smoke. Something had burned in here.

"Can we have some light?" she asked over her shoulder. She thought she'd seen Pavla and Yevhen among the Marshals, and that pair had a strong talent for producing light.

No one spoke but soft, diffuse light flowed past her, letting her see the whole inside of the building. There was nothing else moving in the building. She could see racks of sports equipment up against one wall, the overhead lights dark. There was a pitch-black opening to one side, which she assumed led to changing rooms. But the space they were in was empty of other life.

It had recently been occupied, though. The once-polished wooden floor, with the neatly marked lines for games courts, was now littered with ash that drifted in the slight breeze travelling through the open doorway. At the centre of the building was a large, dark circle with a too-still form in the middle.

Even knowing what she would most likely find, Max forced herself to walk forward to the edge of the burned circle and stare at the shrivelled corpse in the centre. It looked like a woman this time, her gleaming blonde hair a stark contrast to the tissue-thin skin covering her bones.

“They did it again,” Max said, hearing anger and disgust in her voice.

“This is far more recent,” Kolbyr said from beside her. When she looked at him, he was staring at the corpse with an expression she couldn’t read on his face. Not quite envy. Not quite disgust. Not quite longing. Some mix of the three, perhaps, as if even the renowned master of dark magic didn’t know how to feel when confronted by the evidence of one of the darkest of demon rituals.

“I don’t know the victim,” Max said. She glanced at Faddei and lifted a brow.

“Me neither,” he said, shaking his head. “You said someone called in a sighting of the two demons and a possible victim. Is this the same person?” he asked Bryce.

“I don’t think so. I’m sure the information we had suggested that they were dragging another man,” Bryce said, and pulled out his phone, frowning at the screen. “Yes. Oliver Forster and Hemang Raghavan spotted with another male, identity unknown. Looked like the three were in some kind of struggle.”

“This is the same magician as before,” Kolbyr said. He had moved a little distance away around the circle.

“Another ley line?” Bryce asked.

Max forced herself to open her senses a little, flinching away from the pain and terror that still hung in the air. The woman had not died easily. She caught the briefest glimpse of the warm, deep current of a ley line under the building and nodded, shutting her senses as tightly as she could. “Ley line,” she confirmed to Bryce. “It would have been much easier to sense before ...” Her voice trailed off, her mind unable to come up with any description of the scene in front of them that didn’t hurt. The words weren’t needed, though. She saw Bryce nod.

Aurora and Ben stopped a few paces away from the edge of the burned material. They both looked as if they wanted to be sick.

“Is this what Sirius looked like?” Ben asked Max, his voice hoarse.

Max nodded, not trusting her own voice.

“No wonder you couldn’t be sure it was him,” Ben commented. He put his arm around Aurora, pulling her close.

“We should clear the rest of the building,” Bryce said, “even though they almost certainly aren’t here.”

Max agreed, numbness spreading over her. The demons had killed two people in similar rituals, and perhaps terrorised an entire school’s worth of children. They needed to be stopped before they did any more damage.

About to move away from the circle and its awful centrepiece, she paused, mind turning on the scene before her. As much as she wanted to move, to get on with the search, she wanted to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. The demons had now killed two people in spells designed to provide the demons with extra energy. So Donal and Finn would now be even more dangerous than they had been before. It was possible that they had gone to all this trouble just to boost their own energy, and to settle more comfortably into their borrowed bodies, but the two rituals, so close together, and this one in such a public place, suggested something else was going on.

“What is it?” Bryce asked.

“I’m just thinking,” Max said, and paused. He waited, no impatience showing. “They killed Sirius last night, and this

woman not that long ago. The empty building was one thing, but this is really public. Really messy.”

“They’re not hiding anymore,” Bryce agreed, brows drawn together.

“Which makes me wonder why and what they’re up to,” Max said.

“The rituals will have given them additional energy and power,” Kolbyr said. He was standing so still she’d almost forgotten he was there. “You have some idea of what they are about?” he asked, looking at Max.

She opened her mouth to deny it, then stilled as a realisation crept over her. “You said that Donal is an exceptionally powerful and skilled dark magician. He and Finn have now been in the city for a few days. Long enough to settle in, at least a bit. What in this city could he possibly want?” she asked, lips going numb as she spoke. There was only one thing that she could think of. One treasure that a demon might long to possess.

“The Arkus Codex,” Kolbyr said, mouth in a flat line.

“The Codex,” Max agreed, and turned to Bryce. “You need to warn the Order.”



Max was fidgeting with impatience to move and follow the demons. Bryce assured her that the Order was on full alert

after his warning. But before they could do anything else, they had to clear the building, to make sure that the demons hadn't left any terrible surprises or traps for an unsuspecting human.

There was no one else in the sports building. The shadow-hounds who had been working around the perimeter of the building had found another trail which led to a secondary car park at the school and an empty parking space. The demons seemed to be accomplished at stealing cars when they needed transport. The shadow-hounds kept going, though, following the trail until they reached a busy street a few blocks away. Max could feel the disappointment and frustration rolling off the hounds as they stopped, sniffing here and there, holding up lunchtime traffic. A few irate motorists shouted from their vehicles. A couple of braver ones started to get out of their cars, but slid back inside when they caught a glimpse of the whole group. They kept shouting, though. Max gave the motorists credit for blind stupidity. There was a large group of Order warriors, eight shadow-hounds and at least a half dozen Marshals, all of them armed, holding up traffic. Even the most unobservant of city dwellers should realise that something bad had happened. She could hardly believe that motorists were complaining about the delay to their journeys. But they were.

She tuned out the shouting and the anger, listening to her own senses, waiting for the crawling sensation to return to her skin. Nothing. It was possible that the demons had somehow masked their presence when they got into a vehicle. Or some other reason. She didn't know enough about her sensitivity to demons to work it out. She turned to her dogs.

“We’re not giving up,” she told them. “How about getting the vehicles and trying to drive in the direction they took?” she suggested to the others. “We might be able to find somewhere else they went, or where they stopped.” She would back her hounds’ sense of smell even against the fumes of city traffic, and was sure that Aurora and Ben would do the same.

“Alright,” Faddei said, sounding as frustrated as she was. “I just wish we knew for certain what the demons were up to or what they were planning.”

“I agree with Marshal Ortis. They will be seeking the Codex,” Kolbyr said.

The vampire had stayed with them, even through the tedious task of following the demons’ trail through the city. Max wasn’t quite sure why, but there didn’t seem to be a polite way of asking him, or turning him away. Besides, if the demons unleashed any more dark dogs into the world, the vampire might be the only one who could stop them.

“The Codex, which is in the Order?” Faddei asked, lifting a brow to Max. He’d been organising a search of the building, Max remembered, so he’d missed her earlier realisation with Kolbyr and Bryce.

“The same,” Max confirmed. The impatience she’d managed to curb earlier was back, making her feet want to move.

“The Order was put on alert,” Bryce said.

“It won’t take the demons long to find out where the Order is,” Kolbyr pointed out. “And your walls won’t stop them.”

Bryce looked like he wanted to argue, but his phone started beeping in a loud, urgent tone. Around them, the other warriors' phones were also making the same noise. He looked at the screen and his brows lifted. "Emergency at the Order. We have to go," he said. He gave Hop and Killan a hand signal which had the two of them sprinting back along the direction they'd come from. Going for the vehicles, Max would guess. The Order was a few miles from where they were standing and even the warriors couldn't outrun a car. Bryce didn't move, though, eyes travelling around the group and the hounds and the angry motorists. "I don't want to leave you unprotected," he said.

"What kind of emergency?" Max asked.

"I don't have any more information. Why?" Bryce asked.

"Well, if the demons kept going that way, they would end up near the Order," Max said, pointing in the general direction that the demons had been travelling when the shadow-hounds had lost the scent. "And the Codex," she added.

"We should waste no time," Kolbyr said.

"The Order is fortified and guarded," Bryce said, sounding as if he was trying to convince himself more than the others.

"Evan and Queran broke into the Vault to get the Codex," Max pointed out. Not arguing with him, just pointing out the lengths which the demon and descendant had gone to in their search for the Codex the first time. "And both demons have now boosted their energies with the death rituals. They're

more powerful than they were,” Max added grimly. “We need to get to the Order. Now.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

RATHER THAN TAKING THE time for all of them to go get their vehicles, Faddei had sent a few Marshals back to collect their battered vehicles, then gone up to one of the less annoyed motorists and commandeered his truck. It was a panel van with more than enough room for the remaining Marshals, two handlers, and eight shadow-hounds in the back, even with the presence of an ancient vampire. The driver had been so intimidated by the sight of the shadow-hounds swarming into his vehicle he hadn't protested at it being taken over. Faddei had graciously let him drive, though.

In the back of the van, despite the limited space, it seemed that none of the people wanted to be next to Lord Kolbyr. There was a clear arm's length between him and the next person. He was wearing an expression as if he was regarding everything around him as an entirely novel experience. Max both was and was not surprised that Kolbyr had simply come with them. The vampire had not yet had a chance to get a

proper look at the Arkus Codex and doubtless was hoping that he'd have an opportunity if he stayed with the group.

With the hounds, people and vampire jostling around in the back of the truck, they followed the Order vehicles through the city, the Marshals at the front peering through the narrow window set between the truck's storage area and the driver's cab. Max wasn't sure what Bryce and the other warriors had done, but the Order vehicles hit a succession of green lights and made it across the city to the Order in half the time it would normally take, the panel van's engines straining to keep up with the powerful engines ahead of it.

Far more quickly than Max would have believed possible, the truck stopped in the wide road outside the Order. Vanko and Zoya moved to open up the doors at the back. The shadow-hounds surged out, Aurora, Ben, Kolbyr, and the Marshals following.

As soon as Max set foot on the road surface, she wanted to turn around and get back into the truck again. A wave of memories assaulted her at the sight of the great gatehouse in front of them. The grey stone building was built into the wall that surrounded the Order's property, the walls stretching off as far as she could see to one side and ending a mere half block away to the other side. The Order occupied the largest single area of ground in the inner city apart from the city green, its high walls and the magic built into them preventing passers-by from getting a look inside.

The gatehouse looked absolutely out of place and yet absolutely fitting for the middle of a modern city. There were two entrances here. One great, two storey high archway that was used for vehicles, and a narrower doorway used by people. A single glance and Max vividly remembered the first time she'd come to stand in front of the gatehouse. The door had opened and Kitris himself had come out to greet her. She had been told that he personally greeted all new apprentices but with her new knowledge, she now wondered if that was true or if he had given her special treatment. The thought almost made her laugh. There had been nothing special about the way she had been treated in the Order.

The archway was normally occupied by a heavy gate made of metal and wood and magic, with Order warriors standing sentry. The gate was open or missing just now, which was the first sign to Max that something was wrong. That gate was never just open. And certainly never unguarded. The tension and unease she'd been trying to keep under control during the drive across the city rose up, her whole body tensing.

Even as she noticed that, what sounded like an explosion echoed inside the walls, the ground under her feet vibrating with the impact. Gunfire followed.

She exchanged worried glances with Faddei, Vanko and Zoya, then headed for the gates. The shadow-hounds spilled past her, all of them in their attack forms. They didn't hesitate at the gates, continuing underneath the stone roof of the archway onto the Order property.

Max's breath clouded the air in front of her as she followed the hounds. It shouldn't be this cold. She glanced up on reflex, as she always did when she went through this archway, and saw that there were scorch marks on the stones over her head.

"There's been magic used here," she said. She almost drew her gun, but they were inside the Order now, and the Order had the best-trained warriors in the entire city. If the Order was under attack, the warriors were likely to shoot on sight any armed people within the walls.

"Dark magic," Faddei agreed.

"The dogs have got something." Max walked faster, emerging from the archway onto the Order's grounds. To one side, where the outer wall had been shorter, was a fanciful garden laid out with gravel paths and flowers that grew nowhere else. Past the garden were the main buildings of the Order. To her other side, the Order's grounds stretched so far that she couldn't see the outer wall and she had to swallow a moment of unexpected nostalgia. She had not been here for eight years, and she'd managed to forget the green and fresh scent that hung in the air. The vast swathe of land contained an orchard, training grounds for the warriors, a small farmstead, and the vegetable and kitchen gardens where Max had often sought refuge during her apprenticeship.

She turned her attention away from the open grounds, continuing to walk forward towards the buildings. There was one main building, made of the same grey stone as the gatehouse. It rose above them, several storeys high, and

stretched on almost as far as she could see. The building housed almost everything that the Order required from the kitchens to the sleeping quarters for apprentices, Guardians and warriors alike, to the teaching rooms, library and the Lady's temple. It was built with several wings spreading out from a central hub, pale grey stone shimmering with magic as she looked at it. The outside of the building had never seemed big enough to hold everything, but somehow it did.

There was a pair of Order vehicles in front of the building, all the doors open, and she wondered if those were the ones that Bryce and his team had used. Beyond the vehicles, the building's main entrance was also open, one of the great metal and wooden doors hanging by one hinge, swaying slightly.

The shadow-hounds were heading for the open doors in front of the building and as she stretched her legs to follow them, another explosion rocked the ground. The already damaged door fell onto the stone steps, another vibration ringing through Max's feet.

"That was magic. Not ordinance," Faddei said. He glanced back. "We should hold here for a moment. The others are almost with us." Max followed his line of sight and saw the Marshals from the panel van had surrounded Aurora, Ben and Lord Kolbyr, with a handful of other Marshals - the ones who had been sent back for the vehicles - running to catch up.

Max was about to agree with Faddei. It was sensible for them all to move forward as a group. The shadow-hounds had other ideas. All eight of them swarmed into the building.

“I need to follow them,” she told him, and ran after the dogs, ignoring whatever Faddei shouted after her.

Max went through the building’s front doors to find the grand entrance hallway empty of people. The colourful, ornately patterned, handwoven rugs that normally covered the stone floor had been tossed aside, leaving the space in shades of grey from the floors and walls. There were scorch marks on the pale stone walls. Three great doorways led from the main entrance hall. She caught sight of the shadow-hounds through the central doorway and followed them.

Beyond the entrance hall was the main corridor that led through the central wing of the building. This wing divided again, but she hadn’t reached that part yet. This first part of the corridor was as wide as a main road, with rooms on either side, the ceiling a full two storeys over her head. The stone floor was normally covered with another long, handwoven rug. This rug had also been tossed aside and Max couldn’t help wonder just how much strength or force had been used to do that.

Ahead of her this first part of the corridor ended in a wooden wall and set of double doors that separated the public or general rooms of the Order from the business side. Like the gates and the main entrance, those doors were normally closed. They were made of carved wood and filled the whole width and height of the corridor. Someone or something had smashed through the wood.

And Max saw the first sign of life. There was an Order warrior propped up against the wall near the wooden doors, one hand pressed to her side, blood seeping through her fingers. The warrior looked up as Max approached, her eyes widening.

“Miscellandreax?” The whisper sounded harsh and loud in the stifling silence of the hallway.

“Gemma,” Max said, her voice flat. The warrior had made it very clear how she felt about Max. Still, she was injured, and she might have information to share. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” the warrior answered. She was naturally pale, but she looked ill, as if will alone was keeping her talking.

“What do you remember?” Max asked, forcing herself to be patient. She pulled a field dressing out of a pocket and offered it to the warrior.

Gemma took the dressing, her fingers trembling as she applied it to her wound. She hissed in pain and shook her head. “I don’t remember much. One minute I was on patrol. Outside. The next thing, there was an explosion and I was running in here. Must have got hit by something.”

“Where’s everyone else?” Max asked. The Order was usually full. It housed apprentices, Guardians, warriors, and an army of staff. The emptiness around them was making her skin crawl.

“Emergency protocol,” Gemma whispered.

“Everyone who can’t fight goes into lockdown,” Max said, nodding. She’d forgotten that in her time away, but it all came flooding back as she looked around her. She hoped that all the staff and apprentices had made it to the safe rooms and were unharmed. “Have you seen Bryce?”

“He went that way,” Gemma said, tilting her chin to point through the shattered doors. “The explosions are coming from there.”

“Of course they are,” Max muttered. “Get yourself somewhere safe,” she told Gemma, and headed forward, through the shattered doors, memories crowding her as she moved from the formal rooms into the business side of the Order. The first time she’d walked down this corridor had been her first day in the Order and she had been overwhelmed by the thought of where she was, and that she, of all people, had been chosen for training as an apprentice. Everyone around her had seemed far more grown up than she felt she would ever be, all of them moving as if they had a clear purpose and understanding of what they were doing and where they fitted into the world. She had envied that certainty all those years before. She’d found some purpose to her life since then and it kept her moving forward now.

The building split again after the wooden wall and doorway, this time into two. One wing was full of living quarters and the other contained the teaching rooms, offices, and indoor practice rooms of the Order. Both wings curved around and ended at what had been Max’s favourite places inside the building - the Order’s own temple and library. The end of the

building was a great half circle, rising five storeys above the ground, the curved outside wall made of glass. The library took up the bottom three floors, with the temple forming one open space above it. It had always seemed fitting to Max that everyone had to go through the library to get to the temple. The first time she had climbed up the spiral steps into the brilliant light of the temple area, she had gasped aloud. All the other temples she had ever come across had been formed of solid, closed walls. The Order's temple was made of glass, letting in whatever light was available.

She had loved the Order's temple, and had spent hours there, lying on her back on the floor, looking up through the glass ceiling at the sky overhead, wondering whether the Lady's realm was like that. She'd always imagined that it would be bright and warm and full of life and laughter.

A low sound nearby snapped her out of the memories. Her chest was tight, anger and grief mixed up together. The library and the temple had been the only places inside the Order buildings that she had ever felt welcome.

The noise had come from Cas. He and the other shadow-hounds were waiting for her, just outside the doorway that led to the offices.

"You're right," she told her dog. "We need to keep moving."

The shadow-hounds flowed forward, spreading across the narrower corridor ahead, moving forward with steady purpose, following a trail Max couldn't see or sense.

They passed more evidence of fighting as they went. More scorch marks on the walls. And every single door that they passed had been opened, often with violence. Glancing inside one of the practice rooms, Max saw that the rack of practice weapons had been torn down from the wall, wooden swords and staff weapons scattered across the heavy mats on the floor.

Going past another open door, she recognised what had been one of the Guardian's offices. It was so disrupted that she couldn't tell whose space it had been. The filing cabinets had been opened, all their contents spilled onto the floor, the desk overturned and the desk drawers opened with force. As she had guessed, the demons weren't just invading the Order. They were definitely searching for something specific.

The Order had plenty of things that were valuable, and some things that were all but priceless. But the demons had swept past art treasures and sculptures and they had, as far as she could tell, left everything they had found behind. They hadn't found what they were looking for. Not yet.

If she and Kolbyr were right, then the demons were after the Codex. And that would most likely be in the Order's library. At the far end of the building. She wondered just how much more chaos she'd find before she got there. And where everyone else was. There should be warriors defending the Order, and Guardians trying to repel the intruders. And yet she'd seen no one apart from Gemma.

Another explosion shook the ground under her feet, sending her staggering sideways before she caught her balance. The

lights all around her went out, leaving her in shadows and gloom in this part of the building, streaks of daylight from the rooms to either side not strong enough to light the whole corridor.

As the noise died down, she heard different sounds. Gunfire. The air around her thickened with dust and smoke. Not the smoke of the underworld, but the kind that might be produced by a lot of guns firing and things blowing up.

The shadow-hounds were still with her. They hadn't surged ahead, but waited patiently for her to catch up. The group had arranged themselves so that they were facing in all directions, alert for possible threats.

She saw shapes moving in the gloom ahead of her and tensed, putting her hand on her gun. The shapes were crouched behind what looked like a makeshift barrier made of doors, firing ahead, away from Max. She paused, blinking to clear her eyes as she tried to make out individual shapes, wondering if the people ahead of her were Order or Syndicate.

It didn't take long to identify Bryce as one of the men crouched behind the barrier. Finally, she had found the Order warriors.

"Marshals service on approach," she called ahead, pitching her voice low. Bryce and the warriors with him would all be able to hear her, but she didn't want to alert whoever they were firing at.

"Max? Get down." Bryce's voice cut through the air.

She moved forward as quickly as she could, crouching behind the makeshift barrier between Bryce and one of the other warriors. Osvaldo.

“How many more are coming?” Bryce asked. He’d glanced at her when she stopped beside him, but then turned his attention back to the ground in front of the barrier.

“Not sure. I’ve got the shadow-hounds with me. What’s the situation?” Max asked. She looked around, realising that the only warriors were the ones who had been with her earlier in the day. Just five of them. There weren’t any other warriors, and not a single Guardian, in sight.

“Looks like over a dozen, perhaps twenty, armed intruders, plus three or four who aren’t armed but are using magic,” Bryce told her, voice tense.

“Where are the other warriors?” Max asked. Twenty armed intruders shouldn’t pose any problems for the Order warriors. They trained their whole lives for this sort of thing, however unlikely it might be.

“Don’t know,” Osvaldo answered, sounding even more tense than Bryce. “Apart from Gemma, we haven’t seen anyone else.”

“Gemma said the building’s in lockdown,” Max commented.

“That only applies to non-combatants.” Bryce shifted a fraction and sent off a volley of shots to something he had seen in the gloom ahead of them.

“There should be at least another fifty warriors,” Osvaldo said.

More than enough to deal with twenty intruders, Max thought. In fact, the Order warriors and the Guardians should have stopped the intruders long before they got to this point. And also before the intruders had a chance to thoroughly investigate the offices and training rooms that she’d passed.

“Are those the library doors up ahead?” she asked. The overall building layout was familiar, but she hadn’t been here for eight years. It was possible that some things had changed.

“Yes. The doors are locked and seem to have some kind of protective ward on them,” Bryce answered. “The intruders have created a barrier against us and are trying to get through the doors.”

“The library is the most likely place where they’ll find the Codex. Is it in there?” Max asked.

“I don’t know,” Bryce answered, as one or two of the warriors around them swore. “Its exact location was being kept secret.”

“Do you know where Orshiasa is?” Max asked.

“No,” Bryce said, voice clipped. He wasn’t pleased at all that he and his team were the only warriors around, Max guessed.

“Have you got his number?” Max pulled out her phone as it vibrated. The phone network was still working in the building, at least. Faddei was letting her know that the Marshals were on their way.

Bryce glanced at her, one eyebrow lifting. “You’re going to call him?” he asked. His tone might be sceptical, but he pulled out his own phone and handed it across.

“Worth a try. If he answers, we might find out where the others are. Or at least he might be able to tell us where the Codex is. Oh, Faddei says the other Marshals are on their way,” Max added. She scrolled through the contacts on Bryce’s phone until she reached Orshiasa, her heart skipping a foolish beat when she saw her own name in his contacts.

The dial tone in her ear sounded faint as more gunfire was flung overhead.

“What?” Orshiasa’s tone was sharp and harried.

“It’s Max. Where is the Codex?” she asked.

“What? How have you got Bryce’s phone? Why do you want to know about the Codex?” the Guardian demanded.

“There’s no time for twenty questions. We’re in the corridor outside the library. Intruders are trying to get in, and I think they are after the Codex. So, where is it?” Max asked, her own voice sharp.

“Look in one of the secure vaults under the library,” Orshiasa said, words clipped. “Tell Bryce he needs to come and let us out.”

“Where are you?” Max asked.

“Locked in the training labyrinth under the main practice room,” Orshiasa answered, his irritation clear. “The other warriors and Guardians are here. We’ve been trying to find a

way out.” He sounded as annoyed as Max had ever heard him. She had never been into the training labyrinth, but it had been designed to test the Order warriors and Guardians to their limit, and it seemed that the builders had succeeded too well if Orshiasa and the others could not escape. She couldn’t help wonder just how the intruders had managed to get all the Guardians and warriors into the training labyrinth, and made a note to ask Orshiasa when the danger had lessened and there was time for questions.

“I’ll send someone to see if they can get you out,” Max promised, and ended the call, handing the phone back to Bryce. “Did you hear all that?” she asked, knowing his hearing was far more acute than hers.

“Yes.” Bryce’s jaw tightened. “I don’t want to leave this position to let the others out.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll ask Faddei to do that,” Max said, opening up Faddei’s latest text and typing a brief message in reply. *Guardians and warriors locked in under practice room - third door on right hand corridor. Trap door in back corner. Can you let them out?*

She didn’t wait for Faddei’s reply, tucking her phone away and risking a glance over the barrier. A hail of bullets was her reward. She ducked back down behind the doors, wondering how the thick planks of wood were stopping bullets. Then she remembered where she was. All the walls and windows and doors in the Order buildings were fortified with magic. The doors made effective shields both against bullets and magic.

The protections would not last forever, though. She glanced back at the shadow-hounds, who had huddled down in the shelter of the doors as well, and an idea formed.

“Can we push this barrier forward?” she asked. “Get closer to the intruders?”

“We thought about that, but they’re using magic,” Bryce said.

“We have eight shadow-hounds,” Max answered. Magic didn’t work the same around shadow-hounds. “And I can probably hold some kind of a shield for us, too.”

“Good,” Bryce said, a brighter light in his eyes. He made a series of hand gestures to the other warriors around them. The warriors lost no time in shouldering their main weapons and setting their strength against the doors, pushing them forward along the corridor floor. Max scrambled to keep up with them, realising that the light had faded even in the short time that she had been crouched next to Bryce.

She called on her magic, finding the bright light ready and waiting, and formed an image of an invisible shield, just in front of the doors, protecting her and the warriors and the shadow-hounds. Sparks of light cascaded down her arms and across the backs of her hands. She lifted both arms, pushing the magic out in front of her. The drain on her energy was greater than she’d been expecting, sending her to her knees, but the barrier slid across the front of the doors, the faintest shimmer in the air showing where the magic was. She forced herself to move, to keep pace with Bryce and the others as

they closed the gap between them and the intruders. The shadow-hounds were keeping up with them, too, all eight pairs of eyes gleaming with eagerness for a fight.

“Cas, Pol, wait for my signal,” she told her dogs. She didn’t have the right to command the others, but she hoped they would take their cue from her pair. They were still too far away. There was still too big a gap between her barrier and the intruders. More than enough space for the intruders to fire on the hounds and injure them. Or worse.

She risked another glance over the top of the doors and was startled to see the great doors of the library not far away, about two lengths of her pick-up. There were armed men and women standing with their backs against the wall to either side of the doors, and a group of people in the middle of the doors, apparently trying to open the library.

“Now,” she told her dogs.

Cas and Pol soared over her head, the other six shadow-hounds with them, and fell on the armed attackers, dragging weapons out of hands and pulling the armed men and women down to the ground amid startled cries and a few screams as the hounds’ teeth closed down hard.

The warriors around Max rose up, letting their make-shift shields fall to the ground, moving forward in two co-ordinated groups, one to either side of the library doors, ready to deal with the armed intruders.

Which left Max in the middle, facing the group in front of the doors as she rose to her feet, pinpoints of light still flowing

over her hands.

The group at the library entrance turned almost as one. She knew them all. Evan, Queran, Donal, and Finn.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Miscellandreax,” Queran said, lips peeling back from his teeth. His face looked wrong. He still wore the semblance of an ageing, human man, the hair at his temples greying, his skin an unnatural tan shade that had to have come from some cosmetics. The disguise was slipping, though, as if the bones under his skin had been subtly rearranged to match another person’s features, but his human face was still in place.

“Quiet,” Donal ordered. His voice was soft, barely audible to Max, but Queran flinched and took a step back, away from the other demon. The watcher demon was afraid of Donal, Max realised. Which made sense, given Donal’s reputation. If other demons were frightened, Max should be terrified.

The four of them were all looking at her. Not at anyone else. They didn’t seem to notice or mind as the Order warriors tied up the armed intruders, dragging them out of the way until it was just the three demons and Evan facing the five Order warriors and Max. And eight shadow-hounds, who had crept far closer to the demons than Max was comfortable with.

The demons were making no effort to stop the warriors or to otherwise defend themselves, she realised, apprehension sliding through her. They had been relying on the armed men and women to keep the warriors at bay, but weren’t now making any effort to protect themselves. That didn’t sit right

with Max. Something was wrong. Very wrong. Worry threaded through her, wondering just what the demons had planned.

The warriors moved back, forming a loose semi-circle around her, all of them with their weapons trained on the demons and Evan. No one was firing. Glancing aside, she saw frowns on Khari's and Bryce's faces. It seemed that they had come to the same conclusion she had. This wasn't right.

She took a step forward, trying to get between the demons and the Order warriors. The automatic weapons almost certainly wouldn't do any good against the demons, and she wasn't sure about Evan. The former chief of detectives looked entirely human, from his short red hair to stocky build. She knew he wasn't, though. And the demons were full of magic. Donal in particular. She could sense a darkness about him, the weight of it drawing in energy and light from around him. And the awful spider-feet sensation she'd felt before discovering the cuchara was back, her body reacting to the demon's closeness. He didn't move.

He seemed to be waiting, Max realised. She risked taking her attention off the demons for a moment and looking past them to the library doors, which were still closed and locked at the demons' backs.

The doors bore similar scorch marks to the ones Max had noticed on her way through the Order. The magic hadn't done any damage, though. The spells on the doors were still intact, the doors unbroken.

Which made Max wonder just why the demons were simply standing there. The spell work on the doors was ancient, as old as the building itself, and regularly renewed by the Guardians. The precautions had seemed overly cautious to Max when she had been an apprentice. After all, no one had ever got past the Order's walls, let alone into the building.

Now, standing in front of three demons and a descendant of Arkus, Max was grateful that Kitris' paranoia had ensured that every single protection spell in the building and on the walls outside were regularly renewed and improved upon where possible.

She had no doubt that Donal could break through the door's spells. Given enough time. But he didn't have time. Not right now. He was faced with shadow-hounds and Order warriors, and there were more warriors and some Guardians on the way, if Faddei and the other Marshals had managed to find the labyrinth. He didn't seem worried, though. He was watching Max with an intent expression, as if examining an interesting specimen he'd come across.

It was unnaturally quiet in the corridor. The gun fire and explosions had long since died down, and the warriors weren't talking, leaving Max with her too-fast pulse to listen to. And a growing sense of unease.

"What are you waiting for?" Max asked, tension across her shoulders and in her voice. They weren't just standing there for nothing. There was a plan of some kind at work.

Behind the demons there was a scraping sound. Metal against metal. A key being inserted into a lock, and then the soft click as it was turned. The great library doors opened inward.

Donal bared his teeth at Max in a smile.

“So good to see you again,” he said, and turned with the others, heading into the library.

“No, stop!” Max was moving forward, racing for the narrow gap between the doors, a sense of urgency pushing her on. She couldn’t let the demons loose in the library. Couldn’t let them find the Codex, and whatever other treasures the Order might have buried in its secure vaults. She almost tripped over the shadow-hounds as they forced their way through the doors as well, ducking aside from a blast of dark magic that Donal threw over his shoulder. The blast hit something, or someone, and as the library doors swung shut behind her, Max heard a low sound of pain from the warriors she had been standing beside.

Max’s evasion of the dark magic had sent her off balance and she staggered a few paces into the room, away from the doors, trying not to think about who might have been hit by Donal’s magic. She couldn’t help the warriors. Not right now. She needed to help herself.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE SOUND OF THE library doors thudding shut rang in Max's ears, louder even than her own heartbeat. Trapped. With three demons and a descendant of Arkus Himself. Not a place any sane person would want to be. Max realised she was very far from sane as her first emotion was relief that the demons were away from the people she cared about.

“Not so bold now, are you?” Finn asked. He didn't have quite the same level of control over his body that Donal had, but he managed a sneer nonetheless. “All alone. No friends left.”

“Friends?” Max asked scornfully, hoping to distract the demon from the shadow-hounds that were slinking along the floor, the natural magic in their attack forms making them almost invisible to anyone who wasn't looking. “What do you know of friends? Does such a concept even exist in the underworld?”

To her surprise, the demon laughed. It was a deep, full laugh that sounded genuine. She held herself still. She had an idea that whatever the demon found funny would be dangerous for the daylight world.

“Such a little concept,” the demon told her, smiling, the smoke in his eyes swirling as he stared at her. “You cannot possibly hope to comprehend our world.”

“Not yet, anyway,” Donal added, the words sounding like a throwaway comment. Except that there was nothing casual about the tension in his body as the demon looked around the library. “We’re getting closer. Finally.”

“I told you that the Order would keep it here,” Evan said. He sounded sulky. Far from the powerful, dominant man that Max remembered. When he and Queran had been using the Arkus Codex in the middle of the old temple, Evan Yarwood had been self-assured, completely in charge of everyone around him. Now, he sounded more like a child denied the chance to play with his favourite toy. Perhaps being a distant descendant of the dark lord Himself wasn’t quite as impressive for demons like Donal and Finn as it had been for Queran.

Donal ignored Evan, turning instead back to the doors. No, Max realised, not the doors. There was someone standing inside the doors. Someone she had not expected to see. The bland and immediately forgettable features of the senior warrior of the Order came into focus as he casually twisted and snapped the end of the key from the lock before moving away from the doors. The library had been unlocked from the

inside, Max remembered, her heart thudding. That man had opened the doors. And had now made sure that no one else could use the lock and key to get inside. Kitris' second in command. Whose name she could never remember more than a few paces outside his presence. She'd last seen him on that memorable morning when Emmeline and Kitris had come to tell her what they believed to be the truth about her origins.

No, that wasn't right, she realised. She'd seen him since then. The figure she'd spotted at least twice in the city, where he had no business being. Keeping an eye on her. Samuel. That was it. Samuel. Even as she focused on his name, it threatened to slip away in her mind.

The name wasn't important. What was important was what he had done. He'd let the demons inside.

"Where is it?" Donal asked Samuel. His tone was similar to the dismissive one he'd used on Queran. The tone of a master to a servant. And not just any servant, but one he was familiar with.

Samuel made a shallow bow in Donal's direction, then to Finn.

Max's breath stopped in her throat. Samuel had been expecting them. He'd been waiting and had opened the library for them.

"They're demons, you know," she said to Samuel, her voice too high.

His mouth lifted in a cold, unpleasant smile and he ran his eyes over her, from her head to her toes and back again. She wanted a shower. More than one. She'd liked it much better when he had ignored her existence.

“Well, if it isn't the worst apprentice we've ever had,” Samuel said. His voice had a strange resonance that Max had never heard before, and seemed too large for his slender, athletic body. “And we've had a few disasters over the years,” he added.

Max had the strangest impulse to laugh. He was trying to insult her. But she'd heard all the criticism for years, and after the events and revelations of the past few days, she realised she didn't care. Whatever power she had, whatever she'd inherited from the Lady, none of it fit within Kitris' use of magic. The complex and elaborate formulas that she'd been taught made no sense to her. But the power sitting inside her, waiting to be used, was becoming more and more a part of her as she used it and learned how it could be shaped. That power made sense.

“You swore an oath to uphold the Lady's laws, to combat dark magic and the dark lord's creatures,” Max said. She had sworn a similar oath. Everyone who joined the Order did, from the kitchen staff to Kitris himself.

“I broke it,” Samuel said, still smiling. “Oaths. Meaningless words.”

Max stared at him, open-mouthed. *Meaningless words*. The phrase was shocking in its own right, but more so coming

from a warrior. The Order warriors were famous for being loyal and disciplined. It was one of the foundational truths of life. That loyalty and discipline had led nine warriors to their deaths when they had been sent with her to close the Grey Gates. She had wished more than once over the years that they hadn't been quite so unquestioning or obedient in their service. A bit of rebellion might have saved their lives. But at the same time, she'd known that it was a core part of the warriors' code. If a Guardian or Kitris gave them an order, the warriors would follow it.

And here was Samuel, the most senior of all the Order warriors, shrugging off the oaths that he and the others had taken as if they were nothing. Not just the senior warrior, Max remembered, narrowing her eyes at him. He was also Kitris' closest confidant and trusted right hand within the Order.

"You were waiting to let the demons in," she said, a slight tremor in her voice. "You betrayed everyone. You betrayed *Kitris*." And that was truly shocking. The two of them had worked together for far longer than Max had been alive.

Samuel's mouth was still curved in that humourless smile. He didn't even flinch at Kitris' name. His eyes gleamed with something *other* in their depths. Max had always known that a lot of the Order warriors weren't human. It had never bothered her. But seeing that trace of something else in Samuel's eyes sent a chill through her.

"You're part demon," she said, the flat tone making it a statement, not a question. A lot of Order warriors were partly

non-human. It didn't mean anything. They were still outstanding warriors, and loyal to the Order. With the exception of Samuel, she realised, and wondered just how many more betrayals there were within the Order's ranks.

"This is boring," Finn announced. "She's boring."

"She's not human," Queran muttered, his eyes glittering with what looked like suppressed rage as he stared at Max. Her own personal watcher demon. Apprehension chased away some of the shock and anger at Samuel's betrayal. Evan and Queran knew she wasn't human. They didn't know what she really was, or at least, she didn't think so. If they found out, if Donal and Finn found out, Max would be dead very quickly. And she wouldn't be able to stop the demons from harming anyone else.

"Don't be ridiculous. We've wasted enough time," Finn said, dismissing Queran's comment. Finn reached out and, before Max quite knew what he intended, he shoved her, hard, so that she staggered back several paces, away from the group of demons. Finn turned to Samuel. "Where is the Codex?" he demanded.

"It's this way." The smile had gone from Samuel's face, replaced by an almost eager expression. He wanted to please the other demons, Max realised, stomach turning.

"Where is Kitris?" she asked instead, hoping to delay him. She had eight shadow-hounds, and a good dose of the Lady's magic inside her. That should count for something in the face of three demons, a descendant and a traitor.

“Doubtless praying for his soul,” Samuel said, an unpleasant smile pulling his mouth. “I managed to convince him that he wanted the power that’s in the Codex. I think he’s taken a dozen showers so far,” the warrior said, the glee in his voice turning Max’s stomach again. She didn’t like Kitris, but he had always done what he believed was right and she had never doubted that he was committed to the Order and to serving the Lady and Her wishes. She had also never suspected that one of the most powerful and influential people in the Order was working for the dark lord, and couldn’t help but wonder just how many poisonous thoughts Samuel had whispered into Kitris’ ears over the decades that the warrior had served as Kitris’ closest confidant.

“You know perfectly well that Kitris would never crave dark magic,” Max said, scorn in her voice.

“You have more faith in him than he does in himself,” Samuel commented. “Perhaps you should go and tell him that.”

Max was about to answer when the air behind her changed. Somehow she’d ended up standing with her back to the rest of the library, facing the group that was arranged in front of the library doors. She suddenly realised she couldn’t see anything apart from the group, not even the shadow-hounds. The light in the library seemed to have faded, been sucked out, leaving nothing but trails of blackness that swirled in the air reminding Max of smoke. Except she couldn’t smell any smoke, just sense the trace of dark magic on her skin.

The demons had done something to the library.

More illusion? Something else? Something worse? Her mind whirled, turning over possibilities as her mouth went dry. She didn't know enough about magic, or what the demons were capable of, to understand what was happening. And she didn't like that at all.

She put her hand on her gun, half-turning so she could keep the group in sight and also glance over her shoulder to peer into the expanse of the library behind her. She should have been able to see all the way across the floor, past the rows of shelves and study desks placed here and there for apprentices to use. She could make out the outline of one set of shelves, but nothing else solid. Then the trail of darkness moved and she tensed. There was something else in the shadows.

"I've called up some friends for you to play with," Donal said, teeth gleaming in a feral smile as Max glanced back at him. "They are eager to meet you."

A wave of magic slammed into Max, sending her staggering across the floor, further into the trails of blackness and closer to whatever-it-was that was hiding there. As she righted herself, she realised that the group had disappeared. She had a moment of disorientation, trying to stare into the depths of the library, before she realised that she was not alone. There were familiar shapes gathered around her. Shadow-hounds. They had chosen to stay with her rather than follow the demons. That was almost more worrying than Donal's threat, as it

meant the shadow-hounds didn't think she could deal with whatever the demon had left for her.

She drew her gun, putting her back to the nearest set of shelves and trying to see into the darkness. Nothing. Just swirls of black. Then the merest suggestion of a shape. A body held off the ground by too-long legs that didn't move the way they should. A dark dog.

There would be more than one, Max thought, panic closing her throat. There was never just one, from what she had learned, and from what Donal had said.

Loud thudding distracted her, took her attention from the dark dog for a moment. She thought the new noises came from the direction of the doors. Samuel had shut them behind her and the others, closing Bryce and the others outside. It seemed as if they were trying to break down the doors. That wouldn't work, Max knew. The doors were formed of wood over hardened metal frames and infused with powerful magic. If the demons hadn't managed to get through, until Samuel had let them in, she didn't think that the Order warriors would be able to break in. Still, they were trying. She couldn't help them. The Order warrior, the traitor, had broken the key off in the lock. She found she couldn't remember his name again, which was frustrating, but she did remember his betrayal.

The thudding noises came again. Warmth bloomed in her chest. She wasn't completely alone. She had the shadow-hounds, and a group of warriors trying to get to her. Not to mention that there were Marshals somewhere in the building,

too. Even if the demons hadn't managed it, if anyone could break through the library doors or find a way around them, it was that group.

They might be on the way, but she was still facing a dark dog in the Order library. She turned back to face forward and found the shadow-hounds were all in front of her, low growls beginning to emerge from their throats. They had recognised a predator. And Cas and Pol had tackled the other dark dogs. The ones that had been left guarding the house where the demons had taken up residence. Max had never been sure whether or how shadow-hounds could communicate with each other, but they were all absolutely focused on the creature in front of them.

“There's going to be more of them,” she told the hounds, her voice a little breathless and too high. She was still holding her gun. It was going to be useless. She wasn't carrying enough ammunition to take down the creature. But she had something else that might work. Magic. She'd held a dark dog with magic before, so she knew that her magic would work on them. She shoved her gun into its holster and braced herself, palms together, drawing a deep breath, trying to calm her racing mind and heart long enough to call up some magic.

Vivid light seeped out from the spaces between her fingers, blinding in the gloom of the library. It was getting easier to call her magic each time she did it. She could feel more of it inside her, waiting to be used. The depth of magic seemed to grow each time she used it. Or perhaps she was just growing

more confident, beginning to believe what the Lady had told her. *Daughter.*

As the light spread out around Max and the shadow-hounds, she saw more shapes moving in the dark trails that had filled the library. More dark dogs. Three. Four. Four of them, at least. And those were just the ones she could see.

The closest one was still standing not that far away, as if it was watching her. The stillness of it made her skin crawl. It almost looked like it was waiting for something. It hadn't attacked her, or the shadow-hounds.

Another shape moved just behind the dark dog. Another one of the creatures. They didn't look at each other, but took a step forward, lowering their bodies slightly on those awful legs.

Max didn't wait for them to attack, gathering a fist full of the blinding light and flinging it into the air, willing it to travel far enough to strike the nearest dark dog.

The light hit the creature, cascading over its dark skin, and it shrieked, the unearthly sound raising every hair on her body. It stumbled back, hitting one of the library shelves, spilling the light across the books and wooden shelves. Panic rose in Max at the idea that her magic might destroy the books and she turned her hand, calling the magic away from the books. To her surprise, the light obeyed, peeling back from the shelves and across the dark dog. Smoke bloomed across the creature's skin as Max's power bit into it. Audhilde had used fire on the creatures, Max remembered, and threw another handful of

magic at the second dark dog, willing the light to become flames as it hit home.

The light burst into blinding white flames and consumed the dark dog. The creature screamed, the sound of its death throes making Max's stomach churn. She pressed herself back against the library shelves, mouth dry, heart thudding, watching as the dark dog fell into ashes. It took mere moments.

She'd killed one of them.

The other one, with lightning still spiralling across its body, screamed in anger and surged forward, heading straight for her, only to be brought to the ground by eight shadow-hounds working in concert. Max wanted to turn away, to not look at the punishment the shadow-hounds brought on the dark dog, but she forced herself to watch. The hounds were protecting her, after all, and if she hadn't been able to defend herself, and the hounds hadn't been there, the creature would have killed her without hesitation.

When the dark dog was nothing more than bits and pieces of gore on the library's polished wooden floor, a loud crash sounded behind her. She turned, hands raised, more magic ready, to find that someone had managed to force open the library doors. The metal-and-wooden structures slammed back against the walls to either side and a mass of people spilled into the dark of the library, Bryce in the lead.

Orshiasa was with him, and Faddei, with Kolbyr in the mix, too, Max saw, lowering her hands. Daylight spilled into the

library from the corridor, chasing away some of the shadows and revealing the awful extent of the shadow-hounds' destruction of the dark dog. Max took one look and had to turn away. The thing looked dead, and she could only hope it stayed that way. There were other, more immediate dangers to deal with.

“Dark dogs?” Orshiasa said, sounding outraged.

“There are more of them,” Max said. “At least two. Perhaps more.”

The warriors shoved to the front, automatic weapons held ready, eyes travelling past Max and the shadow-hounds into the depths of the library.

“The demons have gone for the Codex,” Max said, pushing herself away from the shelves, and turning in the direction the demons had gone. “We need to stop them.” She hesitated. “And the senior warrior is with them,” she added, searching for and holding Bryce's gaze. She saw the astonishment on his face, but he didn't question her, face tightening.

“Senior warrior?” Orshiasa said, frowning as if he was trying to remember something. He was still frowning as he asked, in a tentative voice, as if not sure he believed himself, “Samuel?”

“Yes, that's his name,” Max answered. “He let them into the library,” she told her former apprentice master. “And he's showing them where the Codex is.”

Urgency took hold of her and she didn't wait for any more questions or challenges, heading for the other side of the

library and the door into the underground vaults. She didn't look back to see who might be following her. She trusted that the warriors, and the Guardians with them, could hold off the dark dogs. She had to get to the demons. She'd managed to get the Codex out of Evan and Queran's hands once before, and she was determined to do that again.

The door to the underground vault was open, showing a set of stone steps descending into darkness. Max hesitated, checking the opening for magic traps, before she moved through it, the shadow-hounds spilling past her, their paws silent on the steps. She followed them, feeling clumsy and loud by comparison. There was still magic in her hands, the light tracing up the arms of her leather jacket. She left her gun in its holster.

At the bottom of the steps someone had turned on the lights so she could clearly see the corridor ahead of her. There were at least a half dozen rooms down here, all of them heavily protected with magic and reinforced with steel and stone to prevent more mundane thefts.

She didn't have to wonder which one the Codex was in. The warrior - Samuel, she reminded herself - was kneeling in front of the second door on the right, looking as if he was trying to pick the lock. She might have laughed if it hadn't been so serious. He'd managed to get the key to the library and let the demons in, but he hadn't managed to get the key for the underground vault?

The demons, and Evan, were standing in a loose group around Samuel, all of them looking tense and angry. Doubtless, none of them were pleased at having to wait to get their hands on the prize.

“What’s the matter? Lost the key?” Max asked.

“They changed the lock,” Samuel said, voice low and tense. He glared at her.

“Or maybe the Guardians didn’t trust you as much as you thought,” Max said, her mind racing. Samuel was a traitor to the Order. He was also a servant in the eyes of the demons around him, particularly Donal. “Are you sure the Codex is even here?” she asked in a conversational tone. She could hear soft footsteps on the steps behind and above her. The shadow-hounds hadn’t reacted, so Max didn’t need to look around to know that back-up was on its way. She dared not take a look over her shoulder to see who it was, and risk drawing the demons’ attention, but as the person drew closer, she became certain it was Bryce.

“Shut up,” Samuel said, lips peeling back in a snarl.

“She makes a good point,” Donal said. He was standing with his arms folded across his chest, a scowl on his face as he stared down at Samuel. “You assured us that the book was here, and you could get to it.”

“It is here,” Samuel said, in the same tone he’d used for Max.

Finn reached out and dealt what looked like a casual slap to the back of the traitor's head. He'd clearly put some power behind the move as Samuel's whole body tipped sideways, the traitor forced to right himself with his hand on the wall next to the door.

"Remember who you're talking to," Finn said.

"Can't you sense the Codex?" Samuel asked, in a more moderate tone.

"We can, yes," Donal agreed. He was still wearing the scowl. "All that tells us is that it's somewhere close. Not necessarily that it's in this room." Along with the grim expression on his face, Max could hear the doubt and speculation in his voice. After all, he had trusted someone who had already betrayed his oaths once. What was to stop the traitor from turning again?

"Or it's a fake," Max said, as if trying to be helpful. She heard a muffled choking noise from behind her, as if Bryce was stifling a laugh.

Donal turned that scowl on her. She stared back at him, unimpressed with the expression. He wasn't using any magic just now and simply looked sulky.

"The Guardians could do that, you know," Max added. Orshiasa had been particularly fond of that trick when she'd been his apprentice, and she'd never learned enough Order magic to be able to tell the difference between his false magic signatures and the real things.

Now Finn, Queran and Evan were all glaring at her, too. She bit her lip to hide an unexpected and inappropriate smile. Two exceptionally powerful demons, one slightly less powerful demon and a descendant of Arkus, and they all looked like school children denied a favourite treat.

“It’s not fake,” Samuel said. He was still kneeling in front of the door, fiddling with the lock.

“But you wouldn’t know that,” Max pointed out. Every moment she could keep them away from the Codex was a win in her view. They were too close for comfort as it was.

“So, then, tell us where it is, little Miscellandreax?” Queran’s voice was silky smooth. He might be standing a pace or two behind the two more powerful demons, but he was still dangerous. And at the frayed edge of his temper, if the tight jaw and lines on his face were anything to go by.

“Why would I know?” Max asked in return. “I wasn’t here when they put the Codex away.”

“And you wouldn’t tell us even if you did know, would you?” Queran asked, still in that smooth, soft voice. It sent a chill down her spine. The demon was up to something.

“She’s annoying. Get rid of her,” Donal said over his shoulder to Queran.

“It will be my pleasure,” Queran said, sidestepping Donal and moving along the corridor towards Max. Dark magic swelled, sending a crackle of static into the air, lifting the hair around Max’s head. A few days before, the sight of Queran

bearing down on her with that much magic around him would have terrified Max. Now, she couldn't help but compare him to Donal, who was far more powerful and skilled.

It didn't stop Queran from being lethal, she reminded herself, bringing her hands up and calling more power into her palms. Blinding light answered her, lightning sparking across her skin in reaction to the dark magic static charge.

Queran didn't pause. He flung his hands forward, sending the full force of the magic he held into Max's body. She stumbled back, held up by Bryce's body on the step behind and above her. The demon hadn't stopped, reaching for her, trying to grab her with his outstretched hands.

She twisted, spinning away from his grasp, the lightning cascading across her body and sending sparks across Queran's hands. The demon hissed in fury and pain, flinching away, but only for a moment. He was back before she could do more than take a step aside, hand balled into a fist aimed for her head.

Max kicked out, aiming for the demon's knees, even as the shadow-hounds surged around the demon, grabbing hold of his clothing and dragging him down to the ground, the hounds' snarls filling the corridor. Queran snarled back at them, trying to wriggle free, and then crying out when one of the dogs - Cas, Max thought - took hold of his neck, teeth bared. The shadow-hound gave one firm shake of his head and body. There was an awful snapping sound that would haunt Max for

weeks, and Queran went still, his eyes open and unseeing. Dead. At least for now.

She had a moment of grim satisfaction. She might not like killing, but sometimes it was necessary and the world would be a far better and far safer place with one less demon in it.

Cas let go of the demon, his lips curling back as if he'd tasted something foul, and turned his attention away from Max along the corridor to the other demons.

Donal's eyes widened, the scowl gone into what looked like it might be fear as the eight shadow-hounds turned to face him. He raised his fists and the air crackled with more dark magic.

Max flung all the power she had available along the corridor, not caring who she hit. Everyone there was an enemy.

Blinding light filled the space, the air snapping with more static. Max couldn't see, but she felt the shadow-hounds moving and heard them snarling, then cries of alarm from the demons punctuated by rapid gunfire from somewhere overhead. The library. The warriors and the dark dogs. Max tensed, having an impulse to go and help. The sounds of shadow-hounds fighting with the demons held her where she was, blinking rapidly to try to clear her sight.

The harsh sound of a weapon sounded just behind her, bullets lifting her hair as they flew past her into the corridor. She stayed perfectly still. Bryce's aim was more than good enough to get past her if she didn't move.

She felt more magic gathering in front of her and a hard hand landed on her shoulder, pushing her down. She gave in to the pressure. Not a moment too soon as dark magic surged over her head, slamming into the stone steps above her, splinters of stone raining down on her head. She flung a hand out, sending more magic into the corridor, her eyes clearing enough to see vague shapes that seemed to be shadow-hounds and more than one body on the ground.

More dark magic swelled and she braced herself, holding her palm up in front of her, forming a shield with the magic she had left. It wasn't needed. The dark magic was sent away from her, the ground and walls shaking, more stone tumbling down along with the scent of freshly turned soil and a glimmer of natural daylight. Somehow, the demons had blasted a hole in the ceiling of the corridor and out to the surface.

They were getting away. Max moved away from the wall, almost tripping over Queran's body, heading for the scent of soil and the glimmer of daylight. She could feel Bryce with her, carrying with him the odour of spent ammunition.

The door that Samuel had been working at was open, a small, dark room revealed. There was nothing in it that Max could see, not the Codex or Samuel. She stumbled past, almost tripping over another body on the ground. Evan. He looked to be unconscious rather than dead, his eyes closed, tears in his clothing suggesting that one or more of the shadow-hounds had brought him down.

Max kept going, stumbling again as she reached the pile of rubble and earth that the demons had created. Even as she tried to climb up to the daylight, more magic gathered and she stopped, before scrambling backward.

“Back!” she called to Bryce and the shadow-hounds around them, taking her own advice and running away from the pile of earth and stone, heading for the steps.

A wave of magic, loose dirt and bits of stone caught her, sending her off her feet, flying forward into the wall at the end of the corridor. She managed to fling up her hand, still coated in magic, before she got there and avoided hitting the stone head-first, sliding to the floor and huddling down as earth and stone poured down on her.

It seemed to take an age for the rubble to settle around her, and she pushed up, coughing against the dirt trying to invade her mouth and nose.

Bryce peeled himself away from the wall nearby, a wide gash across his forehead suggesting he hadn't managed to avoid all the stones. He looked annoyed more than hurt, which she took to be a good sign.

She looked back along the corridor and gasped, then had to cough again as more dust got into her throat.

The corridor had been completely destroyed. The walls in front of her had caved in, the way forward blocked entirely by a mound of earth and roots and stone that she knew she would not be able to work her way through. There was the smallest glimmer of daylight creeping through the pile, and one of the

artificial lights was still working near her head, giving her just enough light to see the extent of the destruction.

“Cas, Pol!” she called, panic tightening her chest. Shadow-hounds were tough, but the roof caving in would hurt even them.

She heard a low, whimpering sound nearby and knelt in the soil, using her hands to push aside damp earth and bits of tree root until she could see a familiar face poking out of the destruction.

“Pol,” she said, weak with relief. “You’re alive.”

He licked her hand as she stroked his muzzle, and then wriggled, moving aside to let another familiar face poke out beside him.

“And Cas. Oh, it’s so good to see you both,” Max said, patting her dogs. “Can you get out?” she asked them.

There were times when she wished her dogs could speak, and others when she was glad they couldn’t. Like now. They gave her looks so full of scorn that she wanted to laugh, and then pushed and pulled themselves out of the rubble.

More movement across the width of what had been the corridor told her that the rest of the shadow-hounds were making their own ways out as well.

Max turned to Bryce. He was holding a field dressing across his forehead, stopping the blood from pouring into his eyes. He was grim-faced as he looked at her.

“We’re alive, at least,” he said.

“But the demons got away,” Max finished for him.

As the shadow-hounds pressed around her, all of them wanting pats and reassurance, she tried not to feel defeated.

“Is anyone alive down there?” a voice called from the top of the steps.

“Faddei? Yes. It’s Max and Bryce. And the shadow-hounds,” Max called back up, then had to stop and cough again.

“We’re coming up,” Bryce said, and waved for Max to go ahead up the stairs.

Despite the damage done by the demon magic, the stairs were still usable. Max made her way up, discovering that although she was in one piece and with no broken bones, she hurt from where various bits and pieces of stones had pelted her.

She reached the floor of the library and stared around in amazement. The whole interior of the library had been destroyed. The great shelves that had provided worlds of knowledge when she had been an apprentice here had been turned over. There were scorch marks on the walls and on the high ceiling overhead. The air was full of the stench of burning and heavy with what looked like particles of ash.

In the midst of the destruction, she saw Aurora and Ben by the library doors, both of them in one piece. A familiar figure in a black suit was making his way through the devastation with an escort of Order warriors. Max stared. It looked like the Order warriors were protecting Lord Kolbyr.

“He’s making sure that none of the dark dogs are going to come back to life,” Faddei told her. “We don’t want a repeat of the autopsy incident.”

“No,” Max agreed, and coughed again. “Is everyone alright?”

“A few scrapes and bruises. No serious injuries,” Faddei reported, and cast a critical eye over her. “Did you decide to build a mine down there?”

“The demons got away,” she told him, shoulders slumping. “They blew a hole in the roof and climbed out, then brought the roof down on all of us.”

“All of them?” Faddei asked, eyes intent.

“No, actually. Last I saw, the shadow-hounds had snapped Queran’s neck and Evan was unconscious. They should still be down there,” Max said, and glanced at Bryce. “Did I miss anyone?”

“No. Just those two were left behind,” Bryce agreed. He’d managed to stick the dressing to his forehead. It was vivid white against the dirt clinging to his skin.

“We need to find them,” Orshiasa said. He was leaning heavily on a cane, his yellow-toned skin paler than Max could ever remember seeing him. He looked absolutely exhausted, deep shadows under his eyes. “I haven’t had a fight like that in quite some time,” he said to Max, attempting to smile. “I’m getting old,” he added, in a complaining tone.

“If it hadn’t been for the Guardians, we’d all be dead right now,” Faddei said frankly. “There were another five dark dogs besides the two you’d killed.”

The mention of other Guardians made Max take another look around. She spotted Radrean, who was paler than normal, standing near a wall with his arms folded across his chest, glaring at anyone who got close to him. And there was another pair of Guardians, a man and woman almost as old as Orshiasa, who she didn’t know well. There had never been all that many Guardians. It was possible that the ones in the library were all the Guardians alive.

A shiver took hold of Max. Four Guardians to stand against five dark dogs, along with the Marshals and Order warriors. And from the way Faddei was talking, it had been a close battle. It looked as if the entire Order had turned out to help. With one notable exception.

“Where’s Kitris?” she asked.

“No one has seen him,” Orshiasa answered, his face tight, more shadows in his eyes. “At least, one of the junior warriors reported that he was last seen heading for his office, but that’s the last anyone saw him.”

“He still has his office upstairs?” Max asked. She glanced at Bryce who nodded, once. “We’ll go and find him,” she said, and headed out of the library, past the ash remains of dead dark dogs, the sounds of their screams echoing in her ears.

Chapter Twenty-Six

MAX AND BRYCE STALKED along the lush, hand made rug that covered the polished wooden floor in the upper level corridor that led to Kitris' office. They hadn't spoken once since leaving the library, Cas and Pol following them. The other shadow-hounds had stayed in the library, so it was just the four of them heading along the corridor to the door that Max remembered well from her years at the Order. She'd been summoned to see Kitris a few times, and she'd last faced that door on her return from the Grey Gates, huddled inside borrowed clothes, her skin still healing.

On every previous occasion, she had knocked and waited before entering.

Today, she turned the handle and went into the room without any warning.

After the chaos and destruction she'd seen in the library and the underground corridor, Kitris' neat office was shocking. The ornate rug that almost entirely covered the floor was perfectly smooth, the surface of the polished wooden desk

completely bare. Behind the desk, Kitris was sitting in his large, dark leather chair, looking somehow smaller than Max had ever seen him. In stark contrast to the neat and tidy room, Kitris looked haunted, skin pale with dark smudges under his eyes, his short hair standing up as if he'd been up half the night dragging his hands through it. She remembered Samuel's taunts about convincing Kitris that he wanted the power of the Codex. She hadn't believed Samuel. Not really. But looking at Kitris now, it seemed that the part-demon had been telling the truth.

Kitris had been staring at a point in the middle of his desk when Max came into the room, but looked up as she stopped at the other side of his desk. He stared at her for a long moment as if he had no idea who she was, then blinked.

"Miscellandreax. Did I send for you?" he asked.

"Send for me? No, you did not. What in the Lady's name are you doing?" Max asked, anger taking hold of her. The entire Order was in chaos around him, and the building itself had been invaded by demons, and he'd just been sitting here in his office.

There was a long pause, and Max had to hold on to her temper. Kitris had heard her, and he hadn't dismissed her, so there was a good chance he would answer.

"I've been thinking." The words sounded distant, and were faintly slurred.

"About what? And have you been drinking?" Max demanded.

“Not drinking. At least, I don’t think so,” Kitris said, frowning a little. He turned and sent a vague, unfocused look at the drinks cabinet in the corner behind his desk. The doors were closed, but that didn’t mean much. Max glanced at Bryce, lifting a brow. Bryce nodded and stalked across the rug to the cabinet, opening it. The click of the latch was loud in the quiet of the room.

“It doesn’t look like much is gone,” Bryce said after a moment. “I know the staff keeps the bottles topped up, so he’s not had much today, at least.”

“Alright,” Max said, and turned back to Kitris. “Now, for the other question. What could possibly be more important that you have sat here thinking while the Order is under attack?” she demanded.

“Attack? What?” Kitris sat up a little straighter, expression tightening into something more like his normal focus. “What are you talking about?”

“There were demons in the Order,” Max told him, with forced patience. “Three demons and one descendant of Arkus, to be precise. They’ve gone through all the offices downstairs, and released dark dogs in the library. How could you not know this?” she asked, frustration getting the better of her.

“I don’t ... I didn’t ... Samuel didn’t come to tell me,” Kitris said.

“Samuel let the demons into the library,” Max hissed, putting her hands on his desk and leaning across it to stare into his

face. “Yes. Your precious Samuel. He was working with the demons. Trying to get them the Arkus Codex.”

“That’s not possible,” Kitris said, all colour leaving his face. “He’s been a loyal and true friend. My only loyal and true friend.”

“I saw it myself,” Bryce said, voice flat and uncompromising, “He was trying to pick the lock of the underground vault where the Codex was stored. He was working with Donal and Finn.”

Kitris’ eyes travelled between Max and Bryce, but he didn’t say anything, his mouth half-open, as if there might be words there, but none were coming out. Max frowned. There was something badly wrong. She’d always respected and appreciated Kitris’ intelligence and attention to detail. He’d worked as hard as, if not harder than, anyone else in the Order. When she had first arrived in the Order, she had thought he embodied some of the highest values of the Order. Service to the Lady. Humility. Dedication. He’d set an example for the rest of them to follow. Of course, her initial impressions had soured over the years. But now he seemed a shadow of his former self, as if more than half his mind was elsewhere or absent entirely.

“What happened to you?” Max asked in a softer voice, concern threading through her as Kitris lifted his chin to meet her gaze. His eyes weren’t focusing properly. She remembered the last time she had seen him, in the temple where the Lady had spoken to them. The Lady had sensed a darkness around

Kitris, and Max could see it again here in his office. Something foul had taken root in the head of the Order. Nothing as developed or sinister as a demon settling into a new host, but something far wrong.

“You’re Miscellandreax,” he said, his voice soft, words slightly slurred. “You’re here and Samuel has gone. That’s not right. Samuel should be here. He never failed me. Never lied.”

“I never lied to you,” Max said through a hot, hard lump in her throat. Even now, Kitris was insisting that she had lied. “I did what you asked of me.”

“Impossible. You came back,” Kitris said. His eyes were unfocused, but they sharpened on her face for a moment. “You aren’t strong enough to survive the Grey Gates,” he told her.

He believed it, Max realised. He and Emmeline had expected her to die when they sent her to face the Grey Gates. They had thought that they were creating a weapon. A tool to be used. As far as they were concerned, she should not have lived beyond her first encounter with Arkus’ magic.

“Is that why you think I lied?” Max asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “Because I didn’t die?”

“Of course you lied. You could not have done what you said. The Gates must have closed on their own,” Kitris said. There was the slightest frown creasing his forehead, as if he was trying very hard to focus and to speak through his confusion. “I said I did it. Kept everyone quiet. Kept them happy. No more worries.”

Max sucked in a breath. It made sense. In a twisted sort of way. Kitris had never seen any potential in her. So he had not been able to believe she had faced the Grey Gates, let alone been into the underworld, and survived. Something else must have happened, as far as he was concerned.

“So, you lied,” she said, her voice hard. He’d done the very thing he’d accused her of. And he’d spread his lies far and wide, accepting the credit for closing the Grey Gates and keeping Arkus trapped in the underworld for a bit longer. It shouldn’t have made her so blazingly angry.

“Samuel thought it was a good idea,” Kitris said. He wasn’t really looking at her again.

Max’s anger spiked. She wondered just how long Samuel had been encouraging Kitris to lie, and what else the former warrior might have encouraged the head of the Order to do. “Samuel is working with the demons. He’s working for Arkus,” Max said, trying to hold Kitris’ gaze. His eyes kept sliding away from her as if he couldn’t maintain focus for long.

“You didn’t lie,” Kitris said slowly. “He betrayed us,” Kitris said, his voice small, full of emotion for the first time. He sounded grief-stricken. He blinked and tears fell down his cheeks. “Gone,” he said, in that same broken voice.

“He did something to you,” Max said. “What did he do?”

“He was my friend,” Kitris said, still in that small voice full of pain. He moved, reaching into a drawer next to him and pulling out a handgun.

Max took a step back, hand going to her own weapon. She'd never thought she would need to defend herself against Kitris with weapons.

Before she could do anything more, Kitris put the muzzle of the gun to his own forehead and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was obscenely loud in the otherwise quiet room, the echoes of it seeming to reverberate around Max's head. She watched, horrified, as Kitris' body slumped sideways, sliding out of the chair, hitting the floor with a soft thump.



Max stared at the body on the floor, absently noting the blood seeping into the ornately patterned, handwoven rug. The eyes were wide open, staring at nothing, all life gone from them. Kitris was gone. It was just his shell that was left.

A harsh cry lodged in her throat, and she tried to swallow it, then muffled it with her hand. Kitris was dead. The manner and the speed of his dead were shocking. As was the pain she felt. Her chest felt as if something large and heavy had landed on her, agony radiating all the way through her. She hadn't thought she even liked Kitris.

Cas and Pol made soft sounds of distress, reacting to her pain, and came to lean their weight against her, holding her up.

Their bodies were warm and real and solid, anchoring her to the here and now.

“Are you alright?” Bryce’s quiet voice was deafening in her ears.

“Why? Why did he do it?” she asked, knowing Bryce was as unlikely as she was to have a good answer.

Running footsteps from the corridor outside had them both turning, weapons drawn on instinct.

Faddei stopped in the doorway, hands lifting as he saw the guns. Orshiasa was a few paces behind him, the Guardian out of breath.

Max and Bryce lowered their weapons.

“We heard a gun shot. Are you-” Faddei’s voice broke off as he saw the body lying beside the desk.

“Kitris is dead,” Max said, her face feeling numb.

“How?” Orshiasa demanded, moving into the room.

“He shot himself,” Bryce said, his voice calm and matter-of-fact. Max was quite sure that he was not feeling calm or matter-of-fact about what had happened, but he had tucked everything away, keeping his warrior’s focus.

Orshiasa knelt on the carpet near the body and murmured a soft prayer, touching two fingers to his forehead in a mark of respect. Max recognised the words. A call for the Lady to bless Kitris. Max felt she should do the same, but couldn’t

form the words. She still felt both frozen and in pain, not sure what to think or feel.

“I’m sorry,” Faddei said sincerely, his eyes on Orshiasa.

“He cannot stay here,” Orshiasa said. He got to his feet, and Max wasn’t surprised to see his face wet with tears. He and Kitris had known each other for a very long time, and while they may not always have agreed, they had always respected each other. The Guardian brushed his hands across his face and headed to the door, sending out a call for a stretcher. To some it might seem a too hasty response, seeking to remove Kitris’ body, but Max understood. There was something profoundly unsettling about seeing the body lying on the floor of what had been his office. And there was no mystery about the cause of his death. Nothing to investigate that might require leaving Kitris where he lay.

While they waited for the call to be answered, Max, Bryce, Faddei and Orshiasa stood in awkward silence. Max, for one, was trying not to look at the body. She had seen that he was dead. That was enough. When the stretcher arrived, carried by four junior warriors that Max did not know, she stepped back and watched in silence as Orshiasa directed the warriors to wrap Kitris in the sheets that had been on the stretcher, and to carry the former head of the Order to the room next to the infirmary. The room set aside to prepare the dead.

Max had to turn away when the stretcher was carried out, all four of the warriors looking as shocked as she still felt. She had a moment wondering if she should follow them. After all,

Kitris had claimed to be her father. But she couldn't make her feet move. Didn't want to watch the faces of the others in the building as they realised what had happened. Didn't want to hear or feel the shock and grief as the news spread.

As Kitris' body left the room, the air around her shimmered. Powerful magic she hadn't been aware of, subtle and layered, began disappearing before her eyes. She recognised the magic as being Kitris' own, and as the spells began to unravel, realised he had placed illusion spells around his office, presenting a pristine and organised face to anyone who came in. The surface of the desk shimmered, the perfectly polished and smooth wooden surface becoming scratched and marked. The wall behind Kitris' chair became marked with random scrawls in what looked like a felt-tip marker pen.

Max turned, tracing the peeling away of the illusion spells as the magic faded in a ripple around the room. The wall opposite the drinks cabinet had held what looked like a series of landscape paintings. As the spell unravelled, the paintings faded to nothing, replaced instead by an enormous map that took up almost the entire wall. One she had never seen before, showing landscapes and oceans she'd never imagined. It was beautifully drawn, made in vivid colours. She took a step towards it, then another, as if pulled forward, and traced the coastline of a continent she'd never seen, breath stopping when she reached the name of the continent. Argana. There were cities marked on the coast, with names she didn't know, but the continent's name rang through her. She'd heard that

name before. When she and Bryce had been pulled into the Vault.

Her eyes travelled up to the corner of the map where ornate script declared: *Map of Lumina, created by Sylvester Mancone*. She didn't know the mapmaker's name, but Lumina was another name she recognised from the Vault.

She turned to find Bryce beside her, also staring at the map.

"He knew," she said, her voice cracking. "Kitris knew. He had this map here all the time. He knew our city wasn't the whole world. He knew there were other places." And when she and Bryce had got back from the Vault, Kitris had stayed silent, keeping up the lie that the city was the whole of the world. The city and the Wild and the fog. Nothing else. It was a truth all city residents knew. Max had thought that she and Bryce were the only two people in the city to know it was a lie. But Kitris had known, too.

"He kept it hidden." Bryce nodded. His eyes were scanning the map. He lifted a hand and pointed, his finger trembling slightly. "Here. I think that's where we are," he said.

Max followed his pointing finger and saw an island, set apart from the nearest landmass, far from Argana. The map showed that the island had several population centres, including one city at the tip closest to the nearest continent. She peered at the shape of the city and the tip of the island and shivered. Bryce had recognised the shape of it before she had. It looked like the area occupied by the city. There was a name next to the city. Haven. She knew the word, but it didn't match the city

she knew. In the middle of the landmass was a name denoting the whole island. Haven Island. She shook her head. None of it made sense. The map showed an island with several towns, and interconnecting roads. The world she lived in had the city and the Wild and the fog. And that was it. There were no other towns near the city, no connecting roads.

She wrapped her arms around her middle and looked across the vast expanse of the map. The world shown was huge. Far bigger than anything she could have imagined.

“It doesn’t seem real,” she said, voice low and harsh.

“What is this?” Faddei asked. She jumped. Shocked by the map, she’d forgotten that Faddei and Orshiasa were there.

“Illusion spells,” Orshiasa said. He was looking around the room, still, his expression troubled. “We all knew he used them in this office, but I never imagined he was hiding this.” He waved a hand, indicating the mess. “How did he hide this from us? Why? If he was in trouble, we would have helped.”

“The Lady said that there was darkness in him,” Max said, turning so that she could see everyone else in the room. Cas and Pol pressed into her again, their warmth and weight keeping her steady. “I think Samuel was manipulating him somehow.”

“Who?” Faddei asked, brow creasing in confusion.

Max exchanged a glance with Bryce, wondering how it was that she could now remember who Samuel was and others

couldn't. "The warrior who let the demons into the library," she answered Faddei.

"Oh." Faddei's confusion cleared, and then he frowned. "Why can't I remember his name?"

"No one could remember his name," Bryce said. "The warriors have worked with him for years and yet every time we left the Order, we could not remember his name. We knew who he was if someone talked about him, but not his name." He shook his head. "I don't know why I can remember him all of a sudden."

"Perhaps it was part of Kitris' illusion spells, and when they died, we could remember?" Max speculated. It didn't seem right to her, as she couldn't imagine why Kitris would want to hide the identity of his second in command.

"More likely, seeing and hearing the warrior's betrayal cut through whatever confusion spell had been created around the warrior. Samuel, you said." Orshiasa was frowning as he spoke, as if puzzling through the problem while also trying to keep it in mind.

That made sense to Max. But then, Orshiasa was a far more knowledgeable and skilled magician than Max was. And he'd lived within the Order for a long time. There was one gap in his theory, though. "Samuel was a warrior. I didn't think any warriors were able to create spells?" she asked, looking between Bryce and Orshiasa for confirmation.

"We don't get any magical training, certainly," Bryce agreed. "A few warriors do have some magic sensitivity."

“It’s never been measured as high enough to warrant teaching,” Orshiasa said. In his words and his manner, Max heard a Guardian’s confidence in their own place in the world, and the Order in particular. The Guardians - and Kitris - were at the top. The warriors were some way below them, with the warriors’ primary purpose being to provide protection for the Guardians to work.

She pushed down the spike of irritation she always felt at the Guardians’ casual assumption of superiority, and instead focused on the puzzle in front of them. “Well, either Samuel learned enough magic to craft a confusion spell strong enough to work on everyone around him, or someone else did.”

“I don’t like either possibility,” Orshiasa said. “That level of magical skill is dangerous in the wrong hands.”

Max held back a rude sound that would have been part disbelief and part amusement. The Order trusted its warriors with enough fire power to level the entire city, if the warriors chose to do so, but didn’t want them working magic?

Some of her feelings must have shown on her face as she caught Faddei hiding a grin as he looked Bryce up and down. The warrior was still carrying his main weapon, but he also had at least two knives and a handgun.

“If Samuel had magic of his own, he’s been with the Order long enough to pick up a few things,” Bryce commented. He didn’t direct his comments to the Guardian, and half-turned from him to Max. “I wonder if Samuel knew about the map.”

Both Orshiasa and Faddei turned to the map, staring as if they were just seeing it for the first time. It had held Max's attention almost completely as soon as she'd seen it, but it didn't seem to have affected Faddei or Orshiasa in the same way. Max could see the confusion on Faddei's face as his eyes scanned over the flat surface.

"What is this?" Faddei asked. He sounded shaken, and that was an incredibly rare event in Max's experience.

"A fanciful drawing," Orshiasa said, sounding scornful. "I do not understand why Kitris would have used such complicated magic to hide it."

"It's the world. Our world," Max said. She saw frowns from both men. "Bryce thinks that we're here," she added, and pointed to the apparently small island surrounded by sea.

"Haven." Faddei said the word slowly, as if coming across it for the first time. "I don't understand. I don't remember the city ever having a name."

"We should see what Kolbyr has to say," Max suggested. She received three almost identical looks of surprise. "He's older than all of us," she pointed out.

"Did I hear my name?" The vampire in question appeared in the doorway. "Don't worry, the dark dogs are all quite dead," he said, looking around the room with the scratched desk and written-upon walls. "Well, this is unexpected. We thought Kitris was behaving strangely, but this is something else entirely. Where is he? No, don't tell me. I can smell the

blood.” The vampire looked unerringly across the room to where Kitris had lain on the rug. “Dead, I take it?” he asked

“Yes,” Max confirmed. The vampire’s almost matter-of-fact tone made it easier to speak. “By his own hand.”

It was impossible to tell Kolbyr’s feelings from his expression or posture, but Max had the impression that he was surprised. And not entirely saddened by the death. “Self-inflicted,” Kolbyr murmured, almost to himself. “He must have been more troubled than we thought possible.”

“Who is we?” Max asked bluntly.

The vampire looked up at her and she squared her shoulders against the weight of his gaze landing on her and the long stretch of his life that she could see reflected in his eyes.

“Those with an interest in the smooth running of the city,” Kolbyr answered her.

The fact he’d given her an answer at all surprised her. She narrowed her eyes. “The Five Families, you mean?”

“My dear Marshal, those amateurs?” Kolbyr said, apparently amused. His eyes, and his attention, travelled past her. “Now, where did that come from?” he asked, again seeming to speak to himself, as he moved forward to stand closer to the map.

“Kitris had it hidden behind an illusion spell,” Max told the vampire. He was standing too close to her for comfort, but she held her ground. “Do you recognise it?”

“The map? No, I’ve never seen it before.”

“What about the world?” Max asked, with forced patience.
“Lumina.”

Kolbyr was perfectly still beside her, and when she turned to get a better look at him, he was frowning, displeasure pinching his mouth. “You know, that name is faintly familiar. Like an ancient echo I haven’t heard for a very long time.”

“What about Haven?” Faddei asked, pointing to the island on the map.

Kolbyr’s gaze traced Faddei’s movement and landed on the island. “Haven,” he repeated slowly. “It’s possible.” He took a step away, apparently to get a better look at the map as a whole, and shook his head. “I don’t remember,” he said.

He was angry and unsettled, Max saw, and those were dangerous emotions for anyone around him. She would lay money on the fact that Kolbyr was rarely unsettled.

“Magic,” Orshiasa said. “Powerful enough to affect all of us. Even Lord Kolbyr and me. And we are no lightweights.” His voice had darkened by the end, a frown gathering. Max glanced at Faddei to see how he felt at being left out of Orshiasa’s calculations, but her boss was just frowning, as confused as the others.

“Who is powerful enough to do that?” Max asked, trails of ice crawling over her skin.

“I can’t think of a single magician powerful enough to put a forgetting spell on one person for this length of time, let alone

a whole city,” Orshiasa said. “And forgetting spells are difficult magic, to be used sparingly.”

“I have only performed a few in my lifetime,” Kolbyr said, his tone agreeing with Orshiasa. Max felt her spine stiffen, trying not to think about the sorts of things that a dark magic practitioner might want his victims to forget. Kolbyr’s mouth tilted into a smile, clearly reading her expression. “No, my dear Marshal, not what you are thinking. Occasionally a young vampire will forget themselves. And then it is often kinder to the human donor to help them forget the incident rather than have them live with it.”

“And what happens to the vampire?” Max asked. Kolbyr was not motivated by kindness, she was quite sure.

“Our laws are clear. The vampires did not see the next sunrise,” Kolbyr said, his voice allowing no doubts as to what he was saying.

“Good,” Max said. As she had suspected, it wasn’t kindness, but compliance with vampire laws. Which Kolbyr had followed. Somehow, she suspected he bent and twisted the laws when it suited his purposes, even as he enforced them against others.

All at once she’d had enough of vampires and forgetting spells and the chaos of Kitris’ office. The head of the Order was dead. The shock of it still hadn’t settled into her, even as her mind kept replaying Kitris’ smooth movement as he drew the gun out of his desk drawer and put it against his head. There had been no hesitation in him. Not even a flinch as he

had pulled the trigger. He had been disoriented and confused when she had walked into his office. The others seemed to think he hadn't been in his right mind, but in that moment, as he ended his own life, it had seemed to her that he had been clear-headed and determined.

She wasn't sure what she felt, her mind and feelings turning on one another in spirals. Sadness that someone she had once respected was dead. A sharp pain that she'd never get to ask him more about their odd relationship. And anger. She had questions. Dozens and dozens of questions. And there was a crisis in the Order around her. The senior warrior had betrayed his oaths. Demons had made it inside the Order's perimeter and into the heart of the Order's building.

"Was anyone else killed?" she asked Faddei.

"Not as far as I know," he told her. He was watching her closely. "Did you say that the Lady told you Kitris had darkness in him?" he asked.

She met his eyes, another shock coursing through her. He didn't know. She hadn't found time to tell him what she'd learned, or about the meeting between her, Emmeline, Kitris and the Lady.

Rapid footsteps outside the office cut through whatever answer she would have given her boss. Osvaldo appeared in the doorway, out of breath and covered in dirt.

"Evan and Queran's bodies are gone," he said. "And we haven't been able to follow the demons' trail. Aurora and Ben took their hounds outside, but they couldn't find anything."

The warrior blinked and looked around the chaos of the room. “What in the Lady’s name happened here?”

Max’s hands curled into fists in frustration. She’d thought Queran had been dead. She should have checked. And although there was no way that a human could have survived being buried under the rubble in the corridor, Evan Yarwood was not human. They had both survived, and were doubtless even now catching up with Donal, Finn and Samuel, plotting who knew what for the city.

“Nothing good,” Bryce said.

“Did the demons get the Codex?” Max asked, turning to Orshiasa. “Samuel thought it was in the underground, but was it?” Orshiasa had told her to look in the underground vault. Her former mentor did not lie, but he could evade with consummate skill.

Orshiasa lifted his chin, face tight as he looked back at her and for a moment Max thought he wasn’t going to answer. She was getting ready to press him further when he tipped his chin. “No,” he said. “The Codex was not there. We coated an old dictionary with the same magic and put it there as a decoy.” He glanced at Kitris’ desk, as if expecting the head of the Order to still be there, his eyes overly bright. “I thought he was being paranoid. But perhaps he wasn’t paranoid enough.”

“So, where is it?” Faddei demanded, with an edge to his voice that suggested he had better get answers soon.

“Kitris and I put layers of nullification spells on it. Then he gave it to me to hide,” Orshiasa said. His face tightened,

perhaps seeing Kitris' handing over the Codex in a new light. "When it was not being studied, I kept it here, in the last place he would think to look." He made his way around the desk and opened a panel at the side of the desk, revealing a hidden compartment. As soon as the panel came away, Max could feel dark magic seeping into the room. Orshiasa lifted out a bundled wrapped in black velvet. "The nullification spells are wearing off," the Guardian said, frowning. "If the demons had come here in a day or two, they might have been able to find this."

Even with Orshiasa's warning, relief coursed through Max. The demons didn't have the Codex. That particular disaster had been avoided. Again.

But the demons were still out in the city somewhere, and Donal was a master magician in his own right. They wouldn't need the Codex to cause trouble. That thought alone would be more than enough to keep her up at night.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE FIRST LIGHT OF dawn was creeping over the horizon. After a long, long night of helping the Order warriors search their buildings and grounds for any trace of the demons, and to make sure that there were no injured or dying people requiring help, Max was so tired her bones ached. She wasn't ready to sleep just yet, though.

While everyone else was lingering over the meal that had been served in the Order's refectory, she'd slipped away, leaving her hounds with the others. The shadow-hounds were all lying in a great pile at one side of the room, seeming to find comfort in each other's presence. Sirius' pair hadn't got the revenge they were looking for. Not yet, anyway. But they were all alive, and Max was happy about that.

She headed through the ruined library and up the stairs to the Order's temple.

The Lady's altar was set in the middle of the round room, almost all the walls and ceiling made of glass that had been reinforced with magic. The altar was a deceptively simple

block of stone, with a metal dish set on top of it, the dish full of still, clear water. A flame burned in the air over the dish. The apprentices had dared each other to stare into the flames, to see if they could catch the Lady's eye. Max had looked and seen nothing but a flame powered by magic.

Like all of the Lady's temples, she'd always found this a place of peace. She'd felt the tension in her body release as she walked across the stone floor. But it wasn't the same as before. Before the Lady Herself had spoken to Max, before she'd been claimed by the Lady as part of Her. Nothing was the same. And yet she didn't feel all that different. She was still Max. She still *felt* human, especially right now with exhaustion weighing on her and sore points across her skin that promised to develop into bruising, courtesy of the encounter with the demons only a few hours before.

The only thing that had really, truly changed was her magic. The potential she'd always sensed but had never been able to use. The bright light inside her. It was there, waiting to be used, and she was discovering that she could bend it to her will. It was pliant, far more responsive than any of the complicated formulas she'd been taught by the Order. She was looking forward to finding out what more the magic could do.

She stood near the wall of glass, staring out at the city as the sky lightened and details began to emerge, the soft morning light catching the rooftops of the taller buildings. At the very edges of the city was the ever-present fog. There was the city, the fog and the Wild. It had always been that way.

Except it hadn't always been like that. And she knew it wasn't the truth. The city was on an island, and it had a name. Haven. It was part of a much larger world called Lumina.

The words were strange and heavy even in her mind, but she held onto them. Whoever had decided that the city should be cut off from the rest of the world had created spells powerful enough that the entire population had accepted the reality of the city and the Wild and the fog. No one had openly questioned it.

But someone had known. Kitris. He'd kept a map of the world hidden by illusion spells in his office. Along with mad writing on the walls.

A soft footstep behind her let her know that someone else was there. She glanced over her shoulder to find Bryce approaching. He'd left his automatic weapon somewhere, although he was still wearing his body armour and other weapons.

"Orshiasa is offering beds for anyone who wants them," Bryce said.

At some point during the long night of searching and talking and speculating, the Order had decided amongst its people that Orshiasa was the sensible choice for its new head. The Order would never have accepted a warrior as its leader, Max knew, and Orshiasa was the best possible choice of all the Guardians. He had grumbled and protested, but had accepted the position. And it seemed he was now making use of his new authority.

“I want to go home,” Max said, longing suddenly taking hold of her. She wanted her own space, her own furniture, the view from her kitchen looking out onto the Wild. She wanted to fall into her bed and sleep for a week and not dream. And when she woke up she wanted there to be no demons, and for Kitris to be alive, and for the conversations with Emmeline, Kitris and the Lady to be undone. For her to just be Max. A not very good magician by the Order’s reckoning of things, but a good Marshal, with a small group of friends and a pair of shadow-hounds.

“Your pick-up is out front,” Bryce told her. He seemed on the brink of saying something else.

Max took a step forward and slid her arms around his waist, leaning against the solid bulk of muscle and warmth, feeling the last little bit of tension ease out of her body. His arms came around her so she was wrapped in him, completely at peace.

“You could come with me,” she said, tilting her head up to look at him.

Surprise lit his face, and he smiled, then the smile faded and he shook his head.

“Can’t leave?” she guessed.

“No,” he said, voice harsh. “Once things are back in place here, Orshiasa wants us out looking for Samuel. Even though half the warriors still can’t remember him at all.”

“They’ll remember him quickly enough when they spot him,” Max said, utterly confident in her prediction. That

seemed to be how the spells around Samuel worked. “Has Kolbyr tried to steal the Codex yet?”

She put her head down in time to hear and feel laughter rumble in Bryce’s chest. “He’s been seen near Kitris’ office a few times. Just checking, he said.”

Max laughed. It felt good. As it also felt good to be held, warm and safe for the first time in what felt like weeks.

The city might be going to ruin around them, with demons and a traitor on the loose, but those were problems for another day. Right now, she was exactly where she wanted and needed to be.

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THANK YOU

Thank you very much for reading *Forged*, The Grey Gates – Book 4. I hope that you've enjoyed continuing Max's story, and getting to see her fabulous hounds in action again.

It would be great, if you have five minutes, if you could leave an honest review at the store you got it from. Reviews are really helpful for other readers to decide whether the book is for them, and also help me get visibility for my books - thank you.

Max's story concludes in *Chosen*, The Grey Gates – Book 5, which I expect to release in late January 2024. It's available for pre-order here: <https://books2read.com/u/bzBR09>

If you want to know what I'm working on and when the next book will be available, you can contact me and sign up for my newsletter at the website: <https://www.taellaneth.com/>.

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CHARACTER LIST

Alexey T'Or Radrean - human, male, twin to Sandrine and apprentice to Radrean

Alonso Ortis - human, male, married to Elicia

Arkus - dark lord, lord of the underworld

Audhilde (Hilda) - vampire, female, medical examiner

Aurora - human, female, shadow-hound trainer and handler, wife to Ben

Ben - human, male, shadow-hound trainer and handler, husband to Aurora

Bethell - lady of light

Bryce - partly human, male, one of the warriors of the Order

Cas - one of Max's dogs

Cira Caballero - female, Armourer at the Vault

Connor Declan Walsh - human, male, head of one of the city's most powerful families

Donal - male, demon

Ellie Randall - human, female, senior police officer in the city

Elicia Ortiz - human, female, married to Alonso

Emmeline - human, female, High Priestess

Evan Yarwood - human, male, chief of detectives in the city

Faddei Lobanov - human, male, head of Marshal's service

Finn - male, demon

Forster - family name of one of the powerful families in the city

Gemma - female, one of the warriors of the Order

Grayson Forster - human, male, owner of Sorcerer's Mistress and member of Forster family

Hemang Raghavan - human, male, Shivangi's sister

Hop - partly human, male, one of the warriors of the Order

Huntsman - clan name for one of the Five Families

Ivor Costen - male, member of Huntsman clan

Joshua - male, one of the warriors of the Order, married to Khari

Killan - partly human, male, one of the warriors of the Order

Kitris - male, magician, head of the Order of the Lady of the Light

Khari - female, one of the warriors of the Order, married to Joshua

Kolbyr - vampire, male, master of dark magic

Leonda Parras - human, female, chief armourer for the Marshals

Lizzie (Elizabeth) - human, female, part of Audhilde's household

Lukas - vampire, male, part of Audhilde's household

Malik - male, owns the Hunter's Tooth

Max Ortis - female, Marshal (Miscellandreax T'Or Orshiasa)

Naomi - female, one of the warriors of the Order

Nati - human, female, Elicia and Alonso's daughter

Oliver Forster - male, magician, member of the Forster Family

Orshiasa - human, male, Guardian in the Order

Osvaldo Martinez - male, one of the warriors of the Order

Pavla Bilak - human, female, one of the Marshals, wife to Yevhen

Pol - one of Max's dogs

Queran - outwardly a human male

Radrean - human, male, Guardian in the Order

Raymund Robart - human, male, lead researcher and scientist for the Marshals

Ruutti Passila - female, detective

Sandrine T'Or Radrean - human, female, Alexey's twin and apprentice to Radrean

Sofiya Pavelko - human, female, Marshal

Shivangi Raghavan - human, female, Hemang's sister

Simmons - human, male, member of police specialist unit

Sirius - human, male, shadow-hound handler

Susan Brown - female, one of Bryce's sisters

Therese - human, female, dispatcher for the Marshals' service

Ursula - female, Bryce and Susan's mother

Vanko Tokar - human, male, one of the Marshals

Walsh - family name of one of the powerful families in the city

Yevhen Bilak - human, male, one of the Marshals, husband to Pavla

Ynes - human, female, Nati's daughter, Alonso and Elicia's granddaughter

Zoya Lipka - human, female, one of the Marshals

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vanessa Nelson is a fantasy author who lives in Scotland, United Kingdom and spends her days juggling the demands of two spoiled cats, two giant dogs and her fictional characters.

As far as the cats are concerned, they should always come first. The older dog lets her know when he isn't getting enough attention by chewing up the house. The younger dog's favourite method of getting her attention is a gentle nudge with his head. At least, he would say it's gentle.

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