



Phoenix

Falling

ELLA
SHERIDAN

PHOENIX FALLING

ARCHAI WARRIORS

BOOK TWO

ELLA SHERIDAN

CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)

[Also by Ella Sheridan](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

BLURB

Her name tells me everything I need to know about pursuing her. Risk. And yet my phoenix — and my heart — refuse to walk away.

Sun

I was raised in the shadow of the king, expected to perform but never expecting to ascend to the throne. The only thing I've cared about in my centuries-long life is protecting my people, even if it means going up against my own father.

The weight of so many lives in my hands is eased by only one thing: being with her. But I can never make her mine, no matter how much my animal and my soul cry out to possess her.

Risk

My life changed forever the night a monster followed me home. My family died, and I...well, I was never the same. I made it my mission to find others like me, to protect them, to help them find themselves when everything they knew disappeared like smoke.

And I failed. I can do my part, but only the inhuman Sun and his warriors can truly save them. Is it selfish to want a small piece of him for myself? Just for a little while. Just until my

secrets are set free, and the love I thought I saw in his rainbow-colored eyes turns to hate.

The race is on to find the women who, unbeknownst to them, have hidden inside them the key to winning the war against the Anigma. But it may be too little, too late.

Because the Archai — and their prince — are about to fall.

Archai Warriors: Phoenix Falling © 2023 Ella Sheridan

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this e-book or paperback ONLY. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from the author. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Cover Art Design by Sweet 'n' Spicy Designs.

Published in the United States.

ALSO BY ELLA SHERIDAN

Archai Warriors

[Griffin Undone](#)

[Phoenix Falling](#)

Dragon Deceived (coming Fall, 2024)

Silver Foxes of Black Wolf's Bluff

[40 and \(Tired of\) Faking It](#)

[40 and \(No Longer\) Fighting It](#)

[40 and \(Finally\) Fixing It](#)

Assassins

[Assassin's Mark](#)

[Assassin's Prey](#)

[Assassin's Heart](#)

[Assassin's Game](#)

Southern Nights

[Teach Me](#)

[Trust Me](#)

[Take Me](#)

Southern Nights: Enigma

[Come for Me](#)

[Deceive Me](#)

[Destroy Me](#)

[Deny Me](#)

[Desire Me](#)

If Only

[Only for the Weekend](#)

[Only for the Night](#)

[Only for the Moment](#)

[Only If You Stay](#)

Secrets

[Unavailable](#)

[Undisclosed](#)

[Unshakable](#)

For news on Ella's new releases, free book opportunities, and more, [sign up for her VIP Reader List](#).

Join [Ella's Escape Room on Facebook](#) for daily fun, games, and first dibs on all the news!

To Rissa.

I only wish I were as badass as you.

*This series, each and every book, is dedicated to Sheridan,
Noah, and Phil. I love each one of you so much, and always
will.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I don't think I could express strongly enough the tremendous appreciation I have for my beta reader extraordinaire, Linda, and my sweet friend Candice, both of whom were invaluable in helping me write this book. Linda, you encourage me every day with your love for my characters and worlds, and with your friendship. (And definitely your patience when I promise you chapters and they come far later than I intended, lol!) Because of you, I kept going when I never thought I'd actually "finish the damn book."

Candice, your advice and insight were worth their weight in gold. I'm so glad you became my friend. The way you see the world opens all kinds of doors for my imagination.

Thank you both so much. *mwah!*

And to my youngest sister, Hannah. With every year that passes, I feel more like we are friends than merely sisters, and that means more to me than I can ever express. Your creativity and love for writing have helped awaken my weary mind in so many ways. Without you this book would not have been written. Thank you for loving it and me, even when I'm bogged down in the "I'll never be able to do it" and "this book sucks soooooo much" stages. Love you, sis!

CHAPTER
ONE



SUN

The cacophony of music and laughter and humans on the hunt for their latest lay stirred the animal lurking restlessly within me. My phoenix was only a bird in the strictest sense—an integral part of my being, my alternate form, he was more mythical monster than modern-day member of any class of vertebrates. When I released him, his massive form was endowed with flesh-rending talons and unstoppable strength, not to mention near immortality.

And what he wanted right now, more than anything, was to pick the meat from the bones of the closest human body for daring to disturb his peace.

Only one thing saved them: the scent of the female we had come here to meet. *Risk*. Her essence mingled beneath the odor of human sweat and alcohol and sex, reaching my nose and my animal simultaneously. The creature stirred in my

chest now for a far different reason than anger. This was hunger of a different kind.

Need.

Lust.

My all-too-human cock stiffened immediately. I'd had the same reaction to Risk before I'd ever met her, the first time I'd caught her scent in a bar very much like this one several weeks ago. She'd been a possible source for the intel my clan needed, intel that had led us to the discovery of the enemy compound located right on our doorstep. The Anigma contingent had since been decimated, its remnants scattered, but I had no doubt that the threat was just beginning. And I needed Risk's help to prevent the war I feared would be coming all too soon.

"Sun." Risk leaned against a wall in the darkest corner of the club, head tilted back to meet my much taller gaze. My phoenix enhanced my eyesight, seeing every detail of her clearly. The thick blonde hair draping her shoulders, with its garish red and blue streaks. The silky-smooth skin gleaming in the dim light. And oh, that kick-ass body. Risk was high-octane sex appeal wrapped in an athletic form prepared to take down any comer, and with my phoenix's gifted sight, I couldn't miss a single curve of a single muscle that came together to make that gorgeous physique.

My animal took it all in, staring from my eyes, breathing in her intoxicating scent through my nose. I barely managed to suppress his avaricious growl as it rumbled up inside my chest. When it came to this woman, being both animal and man seriously sucked—there was no chance of ignoring her.

"Risk," I murmured, her name like gravel in my tight throat. The female had gone to ground not long after our battle with Maddox's Anigma soldiers, a fact I still found suspicious,

but since she'd also dropped Cale, my fellow warrior and her former lover, around the same time, Cale had convinced me it was no more than fickle female hormones rearing their ugly head. That didn't mean I wouldn't be watching her closely. My phoenix would ensure that, if nothing else.

One feminine brow arched above a deep blue eye.

I quirked my own. "What?"

Risk straightened away from the wall. "I should be the one asking you that. You requested this meeting, not me."

I had, hadn't I? And I was standing here dazed over the female's erotic appeal rather than getting down to business. "Of course. Perhaps we could sit."

She turned to lead the way. "Perhaps we could."

A frown tugged at my mouth at the same time that a hint of uncertainty tugged at my brain. And wasn't that a mind fuck in and of itself—the Archai prince unsure of himself around a human woman. My people survived because the strongest of us ruled, and I was first in line for the throne. As part of leading the largest Archai clan in the world, formality had been drilled into me for a thousand years. What did I care if Risk was amused by the precise way that I spoke? She had been drawn to Cale, after all, the playboy of the Archai Warrior's Council. Her type definitely wasn't tall, deadly, and decidedly stiff.

Her type didn't drink blood or change into a giant immortal bird either, I was certain.

Risk preceded me along the back wall of the club. I focused on not staring at her well-shaped ass outlined in a tight red dress, watching our surroundings instead until she came upon an empty booth, raised on a dais to overlook the writhing

figures on the dance floor. It was as private as things got in a place like this, but Risk insisted on setting the location of our meetups. Yet another thing I had no control over when it came to her.

My phoenix screeched his displeasure at the idea that we were not the ones in charge, particularly of *her*. I shook off his reaction and followed Risk into the booth.

The curved walls cut the chaos of our surroundings in half, insulating the two of us in a quasi-intimate atmosphere that did nothing for my current mood. I had never met Risk alone before; always Cale had accompanied me. Now, with Risk at the back of the circle, facing out toward the club, and me moving instinctively close to grant us a modicum of privacy, the draw of the female was impossible to ignore. I had never been close enough to feel the warmth radiating off her skin, to taste her blood with no more than a bending of my head toward her neck. I cursed under my breath at my body's instant reaction and scooted back a few inches, bringing my knee up onto the seat to give myself more space.

If she noticed, Risk didn't let on. This time when she arched a brow, I knew what she was thinking.

Time to talk.

"Your assistance with our previous problem proved to be invaluable, Risk."

She raised her hand. "There's no need to butter me up. I did a job, and I'm happy to do another one. For the right price."

Agreed. But first, follow-up. "We'd like to know if you've seen any indications that the group we discussed previously has returned to Nashville."

She tapped her red-tipped nails against the slick table. “Not as a group, no. Though there may be individuals out there—I’m not specifically hunting them anymore—I haven’t seen the kind of activity we tracked before.”

The word *hunting* on her full lips had certain parts of me throbbing harder than the bass line of the current song torturing everyone from the club’s speakers. I shifted in my seat. “Good.” I narrowed my eyes on her. “If you should happen to see—”

“You’d be the first to know, big boy. Again, for the right price.”

I tilted my head, finally putting my finger on what was bothering me about Risk’s words. She was saying the right things—the right Risk-sounding things—but her tone was flat, empty. No teasing, no laughing.

Had breaking up with Cale changed her this much, or was it something else? To say that I hated the idea of Cale affecting her like this was an understatement.

“You would be compensated generously, of course.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

Of course she wouldn’t. That much was pure Risk—business first.

I’d carefully considered the next order of business before bringing it to Risk’s attention. Not only could information about possible Archai females hidden in the wider human population be a priceless commodity, as seen by the fierceness with which the Anigma had sought such females out, but that same information held danger if outside forces ever learned of the person to have gained it. Giving Risk even a hint of this information made her as vulnerable to the Anigma as it did us.

Then there was the matter of trust. Risk had begun to earn ours, but with something this important, our need to be sure was high. And no matter how much my body wanted hers, I still wasn't a hundred percent certain of the female.

But I had no choice. We desperately needed her eyes and ears, and time was passing us by.

“The males you hunted... You are aware of their attacks on the local population.”

It wasn't a question. Risk couldn't have failed to see things that had made her suspicious during her surveillance, even if the Anigma had been careful to hide the actual acts of triggering from nearby cameras.

Risk's eyes narrowed on me. “You mean local women.”

Neon lights hanging over the dance floor glinted off the metallic hoop piercing her nose. Despite looking like someone who played fast and loose with everything, Risk's calculating brain made her dangerous. But also effective. And yet it wasn't her mind that made my animal stir inside me. Every time I looked at her, the creature that shared my body raised his head, eager to stare out of my rainbow-hued eyes at the gorgeous female.

Not that I allowed him to. A female like Risk—wild, independent, secretive—was not for me.

And yet I couldn't deny that her appeal had never waned. She was earthy, the air around her practically vibrating with energy, both carnal and emotional. A female made for sex. And a female who used that sexual energy often if Cale's stories were to be believed.

Definitely not for me.

We could have her for a time.

True. And I was tempted. So very tempted. My animal knew that. But...

“Local women,” I agreed.

“I’m aware,” Risk said tightly.

I looked down at the table, at Risk’s fisted hand. “A member of our”—*clan*—“family, a young female, was attacked by members of the group before we stopped them. It was...brutal. Vicious.” Kat had been lucky her throat wasn’t torn out when her psych power erupted from her body.

Risk ducked her head. Her knuckles turned white. “I’m sorry to hear that. I hope she recovered.”

“Eventually.”

Risk looked out at the crowd. “What does this have to do with me?”

“We would like to trace the other victims.”

“Why?”

Because if they aren’t dead, they might be Archai. But I couldn’t give her that much information. I couldn’t tell her we had no way to find the women hidden in the human population who might have Archai genes in their DNA. The only way to know was to bite them. Until we figured out how to differentiate them from human females, all we had to go on were the previous victims. Some of those females now lived with us, but there were others. Many, many others.

“We want to help them. Make amends. And we want to track any leads they could give us in regard to the group itself. Any victim, alive or dead or missing, could give us a clue. This is a time-critical mission, and we have no other place to start.”

It was the line we had decided to give Risk to earn her help. When I considered how close it was to the truth, something deep inside my chest felt broken. We were missing not one female but possibly thousands, the offspring of psychs who had been separated from the Archai for hundreds of years. Those daughters carried the genes that made them capable of conversion, and every one was infinitely valuable. My clan had only recently discovered that such psychs might be hidden, unknown and unknowing, in the human world. Unfortunately our enemy had figured it out long before the Archai had.

How many females were being tortured right now, like the women we had rescued from my old friend turned Anigma general, Maddox, and his nightmare army? How long would it take to find them? How many wouldn't survive long enough to be found?

Risk pushed the fall of her long blonde hair behind one ear. She was known in the underground as the best finder money could buy—you name it, and she could find it. I was praying that included people.

“I might be mercenary, Sun, but I won't put women in danger without a reason.”

“I assumed you wouldn't.”

She drilled me with that deep blue stare. “There's more to this than what you've told me. I'm not buying your story.”

I said she was smart, didn't I? “You don't have to.” She simply had to do as I requested.

“So you want information on every attack, not only the women who escaped.”

Kat was, as far as we knew, the only triggered female to have escaped. Lyris knew one other, but she had not been bitten. “Yes. If we could start locally and then expand outward?”

Risk leaned toward me. “If I find any reason to believe you would use that list to harm them—and I will be looking—you won’t be getting it. Once I’m sure they will be safe...” Risk shrugged. “It’s your money.” She named her figure.

The price was fair. I didn’t hesitate. The Archai had no worries about money, given we’d been accumulating wealth and investments for millennia. Not to mention that I was, in fact, a prince. I gave the female a silent nod.

“Will do.” Risk began to slide her way around the opposite side of the booth. “I’ll have an answer for you by next weekend.”

She paused at the opening, her stare on the dance floor. I waited.

She glanced back at me through the veil of her hair. “It was good to see you again, Sun.”

Her words startled me. Surely she didn’t mean them. And yet there was something almost...wistful in her tone. As if she truly had missed someone. Cale, more likely. Except she had been the one to break things off with the warrior, not the other way around. Why would she miss him?

That certain something underlying her words had me speaking without thought for the first time all night. “Risk, are you all right?”

I shouldn’t ask. Shouldn’t want to know. Shouldn’t care for anything more than having her body or her blood. And yet I was unable to hold the words back.

She seemed puzzled. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Why indeed. I gave her another nod.

She stood, preparing to leave.

“Risk...”

She hesitated, gaze still on her exit.

Whatever had been on the tip of my tongue, I swallowed it down. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

CHAPTER
TWO



RISK

I didn't dare say his name, nor did I look back as I headed for the rear exit of the club. The pull to do so was strong, much stronger after the nights I'd spent watching him roam Nashville on the cameras that kept an eagle eye on the city.

The man—and I used that term loosely—was more tempting than a box of the most expensive chocolates. The good kind, with caramel and nuts, fudge and coconut added in. But chocolates weren't dangerous to anything but your waistline. Sun was dangerous, period, and to far more than my libido.

We'd met a few months ago. Very long months during which my fascination with him had grown. And the pain from what had happened with Arik had started to fade. It had left an ugly scar, but I was no stranger to those. Arik had been the only man I'd ever felt love for. The only man I'd ever given

myself to. I might have given other men the illusion of myself, but that was all it had been. An illusion.

I was good at illusions.

Moving into the farthest shadows of the back alley, I drew the darkness around me. My cloak. My protection. If I wanted to be hidden, I was. If I wanted to look like someone else, I could. If I wanted you to believe you'd fucked me...well, I could do that too. It was my gift, bought at the worst price imaginable. But it had kept me alive for nearly sixty years.

Not that I looked it. Whatever I had become that horrible night so long ago, it had changed both my physiology and my psyche.

Those around me thought they knew me, but no one could ever truly know me. Not even Arik. And that should have been my clue that I didn't trust him as much as I'd wanted to. The fact that he'd never seen my true face. Hell, he hadn't even known my true hair color. Brown, by the way. Plain old coffee-colored brown. But redheads were so much more exotic, weren't they? Redheads like Sun. Or like the mate Arik had taken after that battle with the Anigma weeks ago.

Yes, I knew their name, even though no human alive should. I knew the Archai too. Arik. Cale. Sun. And others. The truth was, I was no longer human either. I was something else, something both sides would use for their own gain if they knew the truth about me.

Hidden in the darkest night, I let my glamour fall away. Blonde hair became thick brown curls. Piercings and tattoos disappeared. The voluptuously tough figure I'd presented to the Archai, to Sun, became softer, shorter. Five-eight became five-four. I could still kick ass if I needed to, but I would never naturally be the warrior Sun thought me to be. I'd learned a

long time ago that immortality or longevity or whatever this was that I had been “gifted” with didn’t come with a naturally perfect body. It sucked ass—who wanted to battle that last ten pounds for eternity?—but at least with my glamour, I could pretend to be the kind of woman Sun might desire.

Oh, did I mention immortality didn’t cure your self-esteem issues either? That *definitely* sucked ass.

The only thing that stayed the same were my eyes—a deep navy blue just like my mother’s. And the thick scars on the right side of my throat and upper shoulder, remnants of my change nearly five decades past, remained veiled. Those I showed to no one.

I waited as the tingles showering my body subsided. Instead of the tight dress and heels I’d presented to Sun, when I looked down, I saw the simple silk cami and tight jeans I’d put on before coming to the meeting. Boots protected my feet (and gave me a couple of inches in height). I flicked the curls off my sweaty nape, wishing my hair wasn’t so unsuitably thick for the humidity of the South, and returned to the front of the alley to slip back inside the club. The noise wasn’t ideal, but it was better than the empty silence of the dingy apartment I called home.

Beelining for the bar, I finally managed to find a bare spot. Snagging the bartender’s notice wasn’t so easy, but at my height, when I crossed my forearms on the bar top, they created a natural shelf for my D-cup breasts. The cleavage topping my cami finally caught his attention. Too bad for him that the rum and Coke he made me wasn’t getting him *my* attention. Instead I took my drink and snagged a high top near a side wall, hiking myself onto the barstool that wouldn’t allow my feet to touch the ground.

Did I mention that being short was one of life's biggest screw-overs?

And yes, I talked to myself. Half the time there was no one else to talk to. Certainly no one appreciated my sarcastic wit the way I did. After forty-five-plus years on my own, I'd come to accept it as a lovable quirk.

I refused to look toward the back, to the booth Sun and I had shared. He would be gone by now, though if he wasn't, it didn't matter. I no longer looked like the Risk he knew. Instead I let the bodies mingling on the dance floor become a soothing distraction to my whirling thoughts even as the alcohol in my drink soothed my tight nerves. Drawing the shadows around me was easy, a protection from the occasional guy or girl who might presume to interrupt my solitude. I didn't want interruptions. I wanted to wallow in my rum and Coke until it was late enough that I'd actually sleep when I fell into my bed back at home. Alone. Again.

Maybe another drink was a good idea.

I was about to slide off my barstool when an electric thrill of awareness skittered down my spine. A slow turn of my head brought a dark figure into my line of vision—a tall, brutally gorgeous figure with brilliant rainbow eyes. A figure that should have been long gone by the time I came back inside, not standing at the opening of that damn booth, staring toward me as if I wasn't wearing a cloak of darkness like a giant *Keep Away* sign, glaring at anyone who dared come too close. Sun didn't seem in the least bit intimidated. And as he started across the room, headed directly for me, he didn't look like he was going to heed the warning.

In fact, he was upon me almost as soon as I noticed him. I stared, silent, and yes, a little afraid. Because coming to this

creature's attention wasn't good, for me or for him. It had complications written all over it.

Maybe I was mistaken and he'd walk on by.

No such luck.

He stopped at my side, his gaze fixed on mine. Something so intense I almost couldn't bear it stared down at me, froze my tongue in my mouth—probably a good thing since his name was on the verge of spilling from my lips. A name I shouldn't know in my current form.

“Hello.”

The growl in his voice vibrated low in my belly. I managed to croak out a, “Hi.”

Wow, how sophisticated, Ri.

“May I sit?”

Before I could answer, he'd taken the barstool across the high top and dragged it to my side. Grabbed the side of my chair and angled it to face him. When he sat, his knees arched on either side of mine, caging me in. The urge to get away itched at me, warring with the all too feminine response to bask in the attention he had centered on me. I was frozen between the two, unable to move, unable to breathe, unable to speak. Sun had me captured as surely as if he'd wrapped me in chains. Or his arms.

I definitely shouldn't think about that possibility.

“I'm Sun.”

“Weird name.”

Would a facepalm make me even more awkward? Yes, yes, it would.

A breathtaking smile curved that sensuous mouth. Sun's fiery red hair was shaved close on either side of his head, the top kept long enough to be drawn into a ponytail at the base of his neck. The strong, sexy lines of his face were bare to me, those eyes that seemed first one color and then another exposed in all their brilliance. They were normally fascinating, but now they seemed to glow, a silver hue bleeding through the irises, intensifying what was already a powerful gaze. The man's natural sensuality combined with his massive physique to intimidate all who saw him, but for women it was a sexual threat that I imagined most would gladly surrender to. And in that, if nothing else, I was as normal as the next woman.

He didn't address my comment, simply asked, "And who are you?"

Shit. I couldn't tell him my name. He already knew my name, even if he didn't know this me, exactly. I opened my mouth to feed him some bullshit story, but what popped out was, "Rissa."

No. *No no no*. Please tell me I hadn't told him that. I hadn't told anyone that name in decades. I didn't even use it when I thought of myself. I sure as hell didn't give it to men I wanted to fuck. Not even Arik had been given the gift of my real name.

Rissa. Risk. Both were me, and yet neither was me. Sometimes I didn't know if a true me existed anymore. Rissa had died a long time ago, hadn't she?

"Rissa," he purred. Liquid heat gathered low in my pelvis, warming me from the inside out. When Sun's silver gaze slipped down over my face, my neck, my shoulders to my breasts, I could actually feel the nipples hardening as if reaching for his touch. Flutters started up in my belly. Tension

settled in my thighs, and I squeezed them together even as confusion filled my head. What the hell was this reaction? Sun had fascinated me, yes, but this was even more than that. This was as if something else was staring out of his eyes, drawing a response from me that I'd never experienced before, with anyone.

And it scared the shit out of me.

“Did you want something?”

Only after the question escaped me did I realize how many ways it could be taken. Sun registered the innuendo too, apparently, because he said, “Oh, definitely. More than one thing.”

The white of his teeth gleamed in the darkness—and the hint of fangs at the edge of his smile had the butterflies in my belly taking flight once more. Arik had bitten me more than once; it had been a uniquely sensual experience. I could only imagine what that experience might be like with Sun.

“But I’ll settle for talking right now,” Sun continued. “Tell me about yourself.”

I couldn’t help it; a snort broke through my nerves. *Fat chance, big boy.* “What did you want to know.”

“Everything.”

Everything... “That’s a pretty tall order.”

Sun relaxed against the back of the barstool, his legs still bracketing mine but giving me a bit of breathing space. “I have all night.”

“What if I don’t?”

“We’ll meet again tomorrow night.”

“We will, will we?”

Holy crap, was I seriously sitting here sparring—albeit verbally—with the almighty Sun? What had come over me? And an even better question: what had come over him? He should be doing this with the sensual Risk, not mundane Rissa.

And yet Sun wasn't looking at anyone else. His eyes weren't glowing for anyone but me. He held out one long-fingered hand imperiously. Without thought, I placed mine into his. The stroke of his thumb over my skin melted any resistance I'd thought I had.

“We will,” he assured me.

“I see.”

He raised a brow and waited. His thumb continued its caressing. My mouth opened, and I began to talk.

Sun was dangerous, I reminded myself. And yet I didn't stop. Trouble or not, I couldn't stop, not now that he wanted me.

For tonight, at least, I'd take what I could get.

CHAPTER
THREE



SUN
“**A**re you certain you are prepared for this?”

I wasn't prepared for anything after the havoc Rissa had wrought on my body, my thoughts. The reaction to her had put my unwilling attraction to Risk earlier last night to shame. I didn't understand it, but neither myself or my animal wished to ignore it.

Nevertheless I pulled my thoughts away from saying good night—or rather, good morning in the human world—to Rissa at dawn with a promise to text, and turned my attention to my second in command.

Basile was a massive basilisk shifter who always held a hint of a hiss in his words, even when in human form. That hiss had been even more pronounced since the death of his adopted son, Thomas, nine weeks ago. Our first casualty of this war. I had prayed at the time that he would be the last, but

that was a fantasy that had no hope of coming true. The Anigma were merciless. They had slaughtered thousands already in their quest to rule the world, and they would not spare us any more than they had innocent women and children.

“I am prepared.”

The question wasn't, was I prepared. It was, were my people? My answer to that was certain: no, they weren't ready, but we were better to face that sooner than later. It was time the Archai, both here and elsewhere, knew the full truth of what was going on in our world, not the tiny slivers our king had allowed us to give them so far.

Basile gestured toward the deep amethyst cloth hanging on one side of the mirror. “No robes?”

The royal robes were worn by those of my bloodline anytime they performed official duties. Like speaking before the clan in a public forum. Tonight that would be me. “No robes.” I would face our people as what I was, a warrior. Because only a warrior could lead us through what we were facing now.

Basile grunted, a response that could be positive or negative. It was impossible to tell with him. I stared at his reflection in my mirror. Like me, his hair was a vibrant red, and he topped out at almost seven feet tall, a handful of inches above my height. His eyes were yellow-green and contained the slitted pupils of his animal form at all times. Lately those eyes had been shadowed, and the presence of the jagged mourning cuts torn into his cheeks by his own claws told why. His grief could not have been deeper had Thomas been his own son.

“You look tired,” I told his reflection. “When's the last time you fed?”

He didn't answer, merely snarled my way.

"That won't get you out of it. I need you strong, especially now. Feed." When he remained silent, staring into the mirror, I hardened my voice. "That's an order."

He gave me a jerk of his chin in acknowledgment.

Turning my attention back to the mirror, I sighed. "This night will change everything."

"It will. It should." Basile squared his shoulders. "But we do not do this lightly. The people should be allowed to fight for their destiny, not be blindsided when fate puts them on their ass."

As he had been. As all of the Warrior's Council had been when Arik had first contacted us about the female he'd rescued from the Anigma general, Maddox.

"Will the king speak against you?" Basile asked.

"I do not believe so." My father was no longer the leader he'd once been. Since my defiance of him all those weeks ago, he had become quieter, looked older. I feared what would happen after tonight's meeting. How much further would he decline? It was unheard of for an Archai king to step down from the throne. Of course, Solomon had been king for fifteen hundred years; only a select few remembered a time before his reign, so what other kings did was irrelevant. At one time the thought of my father stepping down would never have entered my mind. Now, though...now I questioned what the future held in almost every area of my life, so speculating about my king was simply par for the course.

We didn't speak as I straightened my sword at my hip, then turned for the door. Basile shadowed me down the corridor toward what was known as the Arena, the biggest room in the

clan's lair. Built inside one of the largest undiscovered cave systems in the Deep South, the lair contained nearly 300 miles of passageways situated north of Nashville that had been modified to suit our needs. The acreage above us was owned by a private corporation established by the Archai, given over to a substantial nature preserve to guarantee the sanctity of the land. Near the heart of the lair was a massive chamber nearly five stories high and large enough to hold every member of the clan in one place.

Entering from one side, I could see the king standing on the stone dais in the center of the Arena. Purple robes flowed around his figure, and his eyes flashed silver when they trained on me and noticed my lack of color. I held his stare without wavering.

The crowds parted, murmurs tracking my progress across the room. Tension rose. If it had not been obvious from the fact that I and not my father had called this meeting, it was now becoming clear that something was seriously wrong, something my people would be told tonight.

On the dais I approached my king. I had not bowed to him since the day Arik had contacted us; I did not do so now. Standing before him, I lowered my head only. "Father."

Not *king*. I'd destroyed that construct months ago.

He refused to speak. I didn't wait. Turning to face the largest Archai clan in the world, I let my gaze trail over the thousand shifters and psychs standing before me, staring up at me, fear and trust bleeding into their eyes. "My people."

The warriors among the crowd slapped their fists against their hearts, a sign of solidarity, of respect. Of service, not to me but to our people. The rest waited, a hush falling over the room that even the rare child seemed subdued by.

“I come before you tonight with the weight of the future on my shoulders,” I began, my voice echoing over the multitudes in the room. “You know that our brother, Thomas, was killed recently by what you were told were rare Anigma shifters. I’m here to tell you that they were neither rare nor rogue; they were part of a contingent of the Anigma army, which has returned in full force to threaten our world.”

Whispers erupted around the room.

“Tonight you will learn the full story. Tonight we will face the magnitude of what lies before us, together, and decide as one how we will proceed.”

Standing at the front of the room, just below my feet, our eldest shifter, Roman, turned his faded gray eyes to Solomon. “Our king, what say you?”

Solomon did not meet the shifter’s wizened gaze. Instead he whipped around, amethyst robes rising in a flurry, and strode from the dais. No one spoke until the doors leading out of the chamber closed behind him.

And then a thousand pairs of eyes turned on me. Refusing to bend beneath the weight of my decisions, I began.

“Almost three months ago we were notified when a woman believed to be human was attacked by a squad of Anigma soldiers. She was, in fact, Archai, a psych, and the shifters intentionally triggered her to see if her gifts could be used by them. It has since been revealed that this has happened repeatedly, not only here but in other locations, as the Anigma attempt to discover psychs they then hold as weapons in the war they intend to launch against us.”

Horror flitted across the faces of those in front of me, quickly turning to anger. Our females were honored not only

for their psychic gifts but for their rarity. The idea of triggering a female by force, of imprisoning her was horrific. Archai tradition deemed that males never drank from a female not their own, and never an untriggered one—a protection against the abuse of our women and their revered powers.

“As you know, our female numbers were decimated during the Great War over 1200 years ago. To protect them, many of our psychs were hidden away in what was believed to be a secure location. That cavern, much like this one”—I raised my arms to encompass the Arena—“collapsed in what we believe was an act of sabotage, and our psych numbers were devastated. It appears that now, somehow, there are untriggered psychs hidden among humans, and the Anigma are finding them.”

“How?” Roman asked.

I bowed my head to the elder in respect. “We are uncertain, but the Warrior’s Council is pursuing various means to see how the females are being discovered and attempt to find them before the Anigma do.”

“What happened to the psych?”

The question came from my right. I turned to find a second elder, Cyra, the oldest female of all except Lyris in our clan. “She has mated a warrior who is not a member of our clan.” Of course, Arik wasn’t a member of any clan, but I refused to open that can of worms. No one would accept leaving a precious psych without the protection of a clan. “However, during a subsequent battle, we were able to recover a small group of psychs from the Anigma contingent located here in Nashville. They have been brought here, to our lair—”

Noise erupted as clan members reacted—wonder, anger, surprise, excitement. I raised my hands for calm. “The females

were in rough shape due to their treatment. One, a young girl of only ten years, was in a coma for many weeks but has since recovered with the assistance of our Aomai.”

Grim, clothed in his customary black robes, moved to the side of the dais. Raising his voice above the din, he spoke from behind the traditional hood that hid all but his mouth and chin. “Due to the mental and physical state of the psychs, we felt it best to keep them isolated for a time to aid in their recovery. They will soon be allowed to enter the clan if they desire.”

He said the words as if they were true. Unfortunately, whether the psychs desired to do so or not, joining our clan was their only option. Returning to the human world left them vulnerable to another Anigma attack, to further imprisonment. Here they would be safe. It had not been easy for them to accept—how could it be when they had been raised human, still thought of themselves as human?—but the human world believed them to be dead. Here, among the Archai, they could find a new life, learn to handle their gifts without damage to their bodies and minds, perhaps even find mates and build families of their own. It was the best we could offer them.

The news offered hope to our males, especially. Many went through life with the knowledge that they would never mate. Females were too rare; our people birthed many more males, for reasons we did not understand. I could see the tension enter the bodies of the shifters surrounding me. It was one of the reasons Grim and I had decided to keep the psychs secluded for a time. They had been traumatized enough; I refused to allow them to be watched, maybe even stalked by hopeful males now that they were finally safe. I had already discussed the issue with the Council, and we were putting a plan in place before the clan met the females.

As precious as these females were, there was more to discuss.

“In regard to the Anigma, we have been gathering intel. The group we fought here, led by what we’ve learned was the Anigma general for the Southeastern United States, has been scattered for now. But they are not the only contingent. And that will not be our only battle. The Anigma have slowly built their power over the past 1200 years in secret. We must know what their intentions are, who leads them. We know from the compound we discovered that they are converting males to become shifters in their army—”

More talking as that news registered among my people.

“How can they hide that many deaths?” Cyra asked, shock filtering through her words. All Archai knew that humans could be converted, but only at great risk. Eighty percent of those who attempted the complex blood ritual did not survive, and for those who did, there was no guarantee that they would possess an animal form or shifting ability. In fact, the ritual was so rare that Grim, our Aomai, had only attempted it once in his nine hundred years of practice.

“Cremation, more than likely. We believe they are conscripting primarily the homeless, those who are least likely to arouse notice with a disappearance.” There was certainly plenty of fodder in that area. “We are still gathering more intel, both for how the Anigma work and what their ultimate plans are. There is no doubt they will come after us. Whether their plans include overtaking humans as well, we are not yet certain.”

I gave my clan a few minutes to digest that news before proceeding. Raising my voice above the crowd, I continued. “My people, this has been a night of revelations, of shock and

surprises. It is not easy for any of us to accept.” *Our king included.* “But there are things that must be decided. Our future must be protected. Ignoring the enemy will not make them disappear, nor will it protect those whom the Anigma are targeting now, before their plans are fully in place.”

“And does our king agree?” Cato, another elder, was the one who asked. Known for his close alliance with Solomon, he looked less than happy that I was the one on the dais and not his leader.

I stared him down. “We have been blessed with many years to thrive, to enjoy our peace, to protect our species without threat to our survival. That time has passed. If we wish to ensure a similar future for our children, we must act now.”

I could tell the shifter wanted to argue, but now was not the time.

“We will take a day to allow our minds to accept this news, the shift in our reality,” I stated firmly. “Tomorrow we will meet again, and we will decide what must be done. What future we will choose—for each of us individually, for our people, and for the continuation of our species. Good night to you all.”

As our warriors had done earlier, I slapped my fist against my heart and bowed my head to the clan. Then, with a quick shift on my combat boots, I turned and made my way down from the dais and out of the room.

CHAPTER
FOUR



DEMETRI

The hallway was dotted with groups of Archai discussing the prince's meeting. And the king's refusal to speak. In whispered words they wondered if Solomon was declining, if their future was rocky for more reasons than simply the return of the Anigma.

They had plenty of reason to worry. In my opinion Solomon was on the downhill slide, and his refusal to face what was happening would only hasten the fall. But Sun was ready to step up; of that I had no doubt.

Beyond the main corridor lay a multitude of shadowy passages leading in all directions of the compass. I took one at random, then another, then another. After fifteen minutes and the assurance that no one followed me, I hastened north, to the section of the lair that had been blockaded against intrusion.

The section that was reserved for the new psychs rescued from Maddox's clutches.

Only members of the Warrior's Council had been privileged with the information about the new females. Waiting now at the entrance was Cale, his white-blond hair gleaming in the miniscule light inside the passage. Amber eyes watched me approach, and I felt Cale's griffin rise beneath his skin. The animal was strong, as was the male, which was why he'd been invited to join the council despite his relatively young age of 500 years. The fact that he was a renowned playboy was frequently overlooked, though it had come in handy a time or two.

"Cale."

"Demetri." He shifted to look behind me. "How did it go?"

"Not great, but then we hadn't expected much else."

"The clan will come around," Cale said confidently.

I wished I had his confidence. "But the king will not. He left the meeting after refusing to speak."

"Well, damn."

"Indeed." I gave my fellow warrior a congenial slap on the shoulder as I passed.

Down the passage a small way was a split, and I took the left fork. Shortly beyond, I turned into the cavern that housed the new females dorm-style. They'd preferred not to be separated after their rescue, a decision that spoke as much of their solidarity as it did their fear. We took turns guarding both the route here and inside, but horror like these psychs had experienced did not go away overnight. It had taken weeks for my own rage at what had been done to them to burn away, and still my animal stirred restlessly within me when memories of

those first few horrible days surfaced. Of females shrinking back from me in terror, accidentally unleashing psych power because they had not been taught to safely control their gifts. A child comatose and cold, refusing to return to the world. Gaunt hunger and stark anxiety staring out of faces meant to be at peace.

And then there were more recent memories that stirred my dragon for a far different reason.

My twin sister, Lyris, leaned against the wall just inside the room, her gaze watchful as the females mingled before her. Affection surged inside me, and my dragon chuffed behind my breastbone in greeting. “Evening, Sis.”

My beloved twin turned toward me, and I felt her mind reaching for mine, connecting in that way we’d had since we were children. And that was a long time ago—we nearly matched Solomon in age and had served the Warrior’s Council for as many years as he had been king. Our parents had been lost to us for several centuries now, and no other siblings existed. This long life had gifted neither of us with a mate. As the years had dragged on, it was my connection to my twin that had kept me alive, kept me sane. Nothing meant more to me than Lyris. I hadn’t thought anything could ever grow to rival her in my affections.

Not until recently.

“Back so soon, Dragon?” She gave me a lopsided grin and switched to telepathy. *“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you weren’t spending all this time down here just to be with me. I’d say there were other factors involved. But that couldn’t be true. You wouldn’t be using your precious sister as a front for keeping your eye on another female.”*

“Of course I’d never use you that way, Valkerie.” Only I was, and Lyris knew it. She only teased me occasionally, however.

“Are things quiet tonight?” I asked.

She nodded. “Catch me up on the meeting.”

While I told the story of what had happened in the Arena, I leaned against the wall beside Lyris and let my gaze wander around the room. We’d rescued fifteen psych females when we’d attacked Maddox’s compound two months ago. They varied in age, ethnicity, background. All were from within a 100-mile radius of Nashville. Several had been sexually assaulted, and the youngest, Clara, only ten, had been in a coma from her triggering for over a week before we’d found them. With Grim’s psychic healing abilities and Lyris’s ability to dim or remove memories, we’d managed to bring her back to life and a sound mind, but it had been a tough road, for all of them.

Now I watched with satisfaction as they sat together, undertaking crafts, reading books, scurrying around to prepare themselves for bedtime, or surfing the Internet on several phones we’d provided. This area of the lair was closer to the surface than most and received a fairly decent signal. Though these psychs were transitioning from being human to the reality of being Archai, the rending separation of their abductions had not left them with a way to let go of their past lives. One of our clan’s young females, Nala, had studied psychology and earned her doctorate in counseling before returning to the lair to share her skills with our people. Her assistance with the females had been invaluable. Lyris had softened memories for those who wished it, though she hadn’t removed anyone’s memories but Clara’s—the holes left behind

could be almost as difficult to grasp as the trauma. But the females were healing.

Unfortunately I had a feeling we would need both Nala's and Lyris's help even more as time went on.

In a far corner of the cavern, a hallway that led to the bathroom facilities for this section had been cut into the cave wall. From the dim passageway rushed a tiny Hispanic child with thick braids circled into a crown atop her head. Her thin white nightgown brushed the floor as she ran, giggling, throwing a mischievous grin that showcased several missing teeth over her shoulder even as she sought escape.

“You come back here, young lady!”

My breath cut off in my chest. I was reading her mouth more than hearing her voice—Imogen's voice—but that first sight of her every night did it to me every time. She was small compared to me, maybe five-six or so, her skin a soft, radiant brown that echoed the dark tones of her thick, long hair. Wide green eyes held amusement as she zeroed in on her charge for the night. White teeth gleamed between full, sensual lips as she smiled. She would have been helping Clara with her bath. The females took turns caring for the girl, each of them as loving as if she were their own. They'd bonded in a way even few born families could achieve, though through horrific circumstances. A family all their own now. Would they be able to integrate with the wider clan after all they'd been through? Inevitably some of them would mate; the sheer size of their group and the number of males without a partner guaranteed that, though Sun had assured the Council every care would be taken to protect our new clan members and allow them the freedom to choose who and what they wanted in their lives. Still, the transition would be rough, I had no doubt.

Cutting myself off in midsentence, I hurried forward, ignoring my sister's laughter as I moved to intercept the tiny missile shooting across the room, and scooped Clara up into the air, much to her delight.

"Demetri! Did you come to read me a bedtime story?"

"I did, little one." I settled her onto my broad forearm, her weight barely noticeable. My heart ached. She was gaining weight now, finally, but for many nights she had neither eaten nor communicated with those around her. When I'd begun coming at the end of each night to read to her, she'd ignored me at first, but eventually she'd stirred, and the first time she asked me a question about the story I'd been reading, I'd nearly burst from sheer relief.

"We're starting *Little Women*, right?"

Imogen joined us, her palm rising to rest on Clara's back. "I loved that book as a little girl."

My heartbeat set up a painful thump. "Lyris loved it too." She hadn't been a girl when it was published, but she had been educated just as the warriors had, and not only spoke but read several languages. "It's one of her favorites."

"But you haven't read it before?" Imogen's smile was mischievous, as if she knew my reading tastes probably leaned elsewhere. She wouldn't be wrong. I read as much as my twin, but usually mysteries and thrillers. Solving puzzles helped keep my brain occupied.

"I have not." I gently bumped Clara where she rested in my arms. "We'll discover the story together."

Lyris joined us in time to hear my final words. "I think such a special story needs a special narrator to share it." I

expected her to offer, but she looked to Imogen. “Why don’t you read it to them, Immy?”

Imogen startled, and I didn’t miss the way her gaze darted to me before returning to Lyris. “Um...”

“Yes, Imogen,” I said, my voice deepening despite myself. My dragon was as intrigued by the idea as I was, apparently. “Why don’t you read to us?”

Hours of listening to the sweet lilt of her voice, with no one to tell me I was spending too much time focused on the female? My dragon and I both purred our approval.

Clara giggled. “You’re making a funny noise, Demetri!” She patted my chest.

Lyris joined in the laughter. “That’s his dragon, little one. He’s saying he wants Imogen to read to you too.”

“Can I see your dragon someday?” the young one asked.

And now it was my turn to be surprised. Though Clara didn’t remember the horror of their attacks, and though we’d seeded the basics of Archai society in her mind, I had imagined a child so small would be terrified to meet a massive dragon. “Have you ever seen a dragon before?”

“Only in books.”

“I haven’t seen one either,” a shy voice added. Imogen.

I boldly met her eyes. “Maybe we can arrange something then.”

She smiled, and I felt my heart break into pieces before reshaping itself. Before, the organ had beat for only two things: Lyris and protecting my people. Now there was a third reason: Imogen.

“*She is worthy of you, Dragon,*” Lyris said in my head.

I turned to her, surprise lighting me up. “*Lyris?*”

Aloud she said, shooing us toward the sleeping area, “Go, read your book. I want to know if you like it, Clara.”

“I guess I’m reading then,” Imogen said. She held out her hand for Clara. “Ready?”

The tiny female wiggled in my arms until I rested her feet on the floor. “Ready!” Taking Imogen’s hand, Clara dragged her toward the bunk reserved just for her, the one in the far corner, farthest from the light that might keep her awake at night. Imogen followed but turned her head back to me.

“Coming, Demetri?”

I thought I might forever hold that image in my mind—Imogen laughing, calling me to follow her. Eyes warm with amusement and a hint of something else that flowed like warm honey through my insides.

“I’m definitely coming,” I told her, and ignored Lyris’s snicker in my head as I followed the two females across the room to read *Little Women*.

CHAPTER
FIVE



RISK

The drizzle outside my apartment window made me fantasize about crawling into bed and pulling the covers over my head, but that plan would have to wait. Unfortunately even staying dry would be impossible, because instead of reading or sleeping, I was going out. Few times were truly safe from the monsters that shared this earth with us, but daytime was slightly less risky, and I had things to do before the bed calling to me could take precedence.

Pulling on a raincoat against the spring chill and wetness falling from the sky, I took a last look around my apartment—an instinct more than a concern that something would need my attention—then headed out. I'd chosen a place near downtown, central enough that I could stalk the night easily in some of the more run-down parts of town but could also grab a ride to the outskirts when I needed to. It was currently just after dawn, so I decided a walk was better than a bus and

directed my feet toward the southwest. I had plenty of thinking to do anyway, and I did that best when my body was moving and my mind was free.

It had been nearly thirty-six hours since I'd met with Sun. Thirty-six hours of confusion, of exhilaration. Apprehension. And not only because he'd noticed the real me. That was certainly mind-blowing enough and the primary reason for any elation I might feel, but I couldn't focus there now. He'd hired me—the Risk me—to do a job, and I had to focus on what to tell him and what not to.

The truth was, I already knew most of what he wanted me to research. I'd been tracking the victims of the Anigma attacks in this area since they'd started. So yes, there was a lot I could tell him, but not without revealing that I was the one who'd dragged his clan into whatever it was the Anigma were planning.

There was a lot to that plan, I was certain. Far more than I was privy to. But the women—I'd known about those forever. Since I was fifteen, in fact. I was one of them, after all. After my attack, I'd spent years getting some semblance of a life back, figuring out what exactly had happened to me. Hiding the changes. Over a decade had passed before I'd realized I wasn't the only one, before meeting another woman like me.

That woman, Amanda, had died in my arms. Nothing I'd done had saved her.

“Miss you,” I whispered. And I did, every damn day.

I'd learned at a young age that monsters weren't figments of our imaginations, and when I'd lost Amanda, I became determined to find other victims and do what I could to save them, to do for them what no one had been able to do for me. Or her. But through the years I'd learned a hard truth: my gifts

didn't include healing. I couldn't put shattered minds or bodies back together, not even my own. Too many women had been found, only to be lost again, usually to death's hand. I never stopped looking, but I'd despaired of ever being able to save one.

Until I'd realized what the Archai were. That they weren't the same as the Anigma. Oh, they had the same mental and physical power, the same bloodsucking tendencies, but their agendas weren't the same. One side could be counted on to bring harm and destruction. The other had the ability to heal as well as destroy. That's when hope came alive in me for the first time since I was a teenager.

Hope had led me to Cale last year. Like with Sun, we'd run into each other at a nightclub, and I'd realized immediately what he was. I'd seduced him with my gift, praying I could gain information about the women—or females, as the Archai referred to them—that were being left to litter the streets by the Archai's enemies. Unlike Arik, who'd played everything close to his chest, Cale had been an open book. Maybe because he thought I was too dimwitted to pick up on the breadcrumbs he was dumping out without even realizing it.

And he'd led me to Sun.

I reached the farthest outskirts of the Gulch and the coffee shop I was heading for without figuring out what I was going to do about Sun. I pulled open the heavy wooden door leading inside All about That Bean and sucked in the heavenly aroma of caffeine and sugar permeating the atmosphere. Raine had worked here for a few weeks, since losing her previous job after her attack, but already she was taking over. I'd never told her I'd put in a good word for her with Jack, the owner. I'd done some work for him last year, looking for a cousin of his

that had run off with a hefty stack of bills from the store safe one night. His gratitude had paid my rent that month and left an opening for a trustworthy associate that could work her way up to manager over time. Raine was more than capable of that. And having her work at a location that wasn't open during the night was a huge relief to both of us.

It felt so normal, just a quick walk to the coffee shop to see a friend. Were it not for the fact that I only knew the friend through a vampire attack, it actually would be normal. But nothing about my life was normal, was it? I mean, I didn't even date normal men.

And what did that say about me?

As I moved inside, my gaze went immediately to the cash register. The one person still alive that I'd call a friend looked up and gave me a halfhearted smile. "Risk."

"Hey, girl." She reminded me of Robyn Wright, the actress who'd played Princess Buttercup in *The Princess Bride*, all long blonde hair and long, long legs. The epitome of the girl next door. What worried me was what I saw every time I looked my friend in the eyes—a growing darkness that deepened every single day. Unlike me, she hadn't been changed during her attack, thank God, but the change in her world wasn't doing her any favors either.

Raine held up a large paper cup. "Want one?"

"You know it."

I fingered the various packages displayed along the front counter while the whir and spin of the machines Raine knew intimately filled the air. My mouth watered at the thought of the caffeine jolt about to hit me. Nothing was better than

coffee in my opinion. Except maybe a good pizza. Or a funnel cake. Cheesecake. Any cake.

No one had ever called me a foodie, obviously. My tastes ran more along the junk-food staples line. And sweets. Definitely sweets.

“Here you go.” Raine passed my vanilla-bean latte over the counter. “Let me see if Jack can take over for a few minutes.”

I saluted her with my cup. Usually Raine tried to grab a break whenever I showed up. Luckily the coffee shop was mostly empty today save for a group of chatty women toward the back, their noise filling the room with a joy that was foreign to me. I couldn't remember a time when I wasn't on my guard, even when I came to see Raine. I waited for my friend and watched the group, trying to decipher the puzzle of their interactions with each other, what made them so happy. I was still short half the pieces by the time Raine returned, tugging her apron over her head with one hand while holding a coffee cup and small paper bag in the other. We took the couch situated below the front window. Raine set her cup on the small table at her elbow and delved into the bag.

“Cookies?” I asked, the word a touch greedy.

She snorted. “What else?”

A snickerdoodle was deposited into my hand. “I love you.”

“Only because I feed you sweets.”

“Well, not only because of that.”

The cinnamon from the cookie perfectly complemented my vanilla-flavored coffee. I savored the two as Raine sipped her coffee and stared out into the dripping dawn. Silence came easily to both of us. Until recently the only contacts I'd had in

my life were online. Oh, someone passed through every once in a while—they had to given how long I'd lived, right?—or I'd meet someone for business. But meaningful relationships? No.

I'd connected with Arik online many years before, but it wasn't until I'd met him in person almost a year ago that I'd realized exactly what he was. One meeting was all it took. By then I was too caught up in my one and only physical relationship with a man to care if he was human or not.

And then there was Sun. I didn't understand his specific role in the Archai, but he was definitely Cale's superior, and I'd gathered enough to know he was part of the brains leading their soldiers. He was certainly smart. And cagey. He'd treated Cale like a kid brother while hiding all emotion behind a steely facade I'd never been able to penetrate. Not that I'd tried too hard, not in person. After all, he'd thought I was fucking his buddy all that time. At least until the blowup with Arik and the rescue of the women in the Anigma compound. After that, I'd dropped out of sight for a while, licking my wounds and attempting to get my head on straight. There were too many enemies in this town for me to continue to play as fast and loose as I had been for far too many months.

So now, here I was. Sober, so to speak. Or at least no longer addicted to a particular silver-haired vampire while pretending to sleep with another one and ignoring a growing attraction to a third.

Unfortunately, with Sun's focus entirely on me—the real me—I was very much afraid that ignoring him was going to become impossible very, very quickly.

Guess my brain was still working through it all, huh?

A burst of laughter from the back of the room drew me out of my thoughts.

“What makes them so happy, do you think?”

I turned at Raine’s question. Her eyes were narrowed, staring at the group of women. Puzzled.

“What do you mean?” I didn’t have to ask; I already knew. But maybe talking would tell me what else was going on inside that head of hers. Maybe then I wouldn’t be afraid for her anymore.

Not likely, but one could hope.

“I was raised in foster care, then a group home.”

Unlike me. I’d had an actual family, though I hadn’t gotten to keep them long.

“We never laughed,” Raine said. “It was like the gray walls we were raised inside seeped through our skin and became our own personal prison. Walling us off. Keeping us apart.”

Time did the same thing.

Raine’s mouth twisted. “Maybe that’s why I’m like this.”

“Like what?”

She shrugged. “Only good for vampire bait.”

“Hey!”

The word came out sharper than I’d intended, throwing a sudden hush on the group we’d been watching. I ignored them. “Look at me, Raine. Look at me.”

She finally did. I tried hard to breathe through my anger.

“I lost my sister,” I said harshly. “Remember?”

“I remember.” Shame seeped into her expression. “When you were attacked.”

“When I was attacked.” I repeated the words, making sure she heard each syllable. “And now I have another one: you. Are you telling me my sister is only good for attracting vampires? Is that all you see me as, vampire bait?”

A wet sheen gathered in her eyes. “No.”

“That’s right. No.” Damn right. “So don’t let me hear you say that again.”

Raine nodded. In the quiet, the group of women began chatting once again. Wanting to take the sadness from my friend’s eyes, I said, “So...I had a date last night.”

Not truly a date, but Raine didn’t need to know that.

“A date?”

“Don’t say it like I said I kissed a crocodile. Jeez.” Was it that hard to believe I could actually interest a guy? Sure, she hadn’t known me back when I’d been with Arik, but still...

Her mouth actually quirked up on one side. “Did you?”

The reminder of just how non-reptilian Sun was made my voice a bit unstable. “Definitely not.”

Raine’s full attention was on me now, her eyes wide. “Wow, look at that. Must’ve been some date.”

“Look at what?”

“That look in your eyes. You’re practically salivating.”

“You would be too if you’d seen him.”

“Really.” Raine shifted, bringing her knee up onto the couch between us. Getting comfortable. The gray of her eyes lightened. “Tell me more.”

So I did. I told her about Sun—well, at least the part where he'd approached the real me. Raine knew me as Risk, and she knew I did some shady shit, but she didn't ask and she didn't judge. We did what we had to, to get by; that was her motto. But for now I could give her a little fantasy to do more than just "get by." We could both pretend a normal world existed, where friends chatted and laughed over coffee, good guys picked women up in bars without sinister motives, and monsters were fiction your parents used to keep you walking the straight and narrow.

They didn't come out of their stories and eat Red Riding Hood alive.

CHAPTER
SIX



SUN

The drizzle that had begun at dawn the day before and lasted throughout the night had turned into a low mist in the King's Garden, shrouding every tree and flower in mystery. I walked along the grassy path toward my king, my destiny. The people had spoken. Now the time had come for Solomon to answer.

In the center of the garden stood a golden phoenix statue that sprayed graceful arcs of water into the air. The flowing lines and majesty of the animal took my breath each time I saw it; now I prayed for the strength it represented, the strength I knew lay within me, inside my own animal. He rose to just below my skin, staring out into the world from behind my eyes, taking in the beauty of the garden, the sight of the male seated on a favored bench to one side. Another phoenix, full of power. Or had been. Now...I no longer knew.

“Father.”

Solomon could easily pass for his late fifties despite being close to two thousand years old. As long as my life had been, I couldn't fathom those kinds of years. Of carrying the burden of our people on his shoulders for fifteen centuries. Silver eyes flashed in my direction before returning to the fountain. I had not seen my father's rainbow eyes since the night of the clan meeting. His phoenix was ever-present now, perhaps lending him strength just as mine was doing. But his phoenix couldn't change the will of the people.

“The clan has voted,” I said. “We prepare for war.”

He did not move, did not respond.

“We need you, Father. You've been here before. You are our greatest asset in the upcoming fight.”

“You no longer need me.” His voice was rough, angry.

Despite my agreement, what I said was, “Yes, we do.” Better to be unified than to come to war fragmented.

Silver light blinked out as Solomon closed his eyes, then opened them again. His hair fell forward, hiding his expression from me. He sighed. “You brought this on our people. Remember that.” Standing, he refused to look in my direction. “Go now, and leave me to my peace.”

That desperate grasp on a so-called peace was what had brought us to this place, but I didn't argue. Solomon would come around or he wouldn't. That was up to him. I had more important things to focus on.

Turning on my heel, I made my way out of the garden and back through the dim corridors of the lair to the chamber that held the Warrior's Council. A long rectangular table held court in the center, around which my best warriors had gathered.

When I entered, they stood, each bringing their fist to their chest in acknowledgment. I strode to the head of the table and turned to look each one in the eyes: Basile, to my right, my second in command; James, our eldest warrior, and Cale, our youngest; Lyris and Demetri; Jacob, a normal with no shifting form; Vanessa, Lyris's assistant; Doran with his red-tinged eyes; and Sebastian, who had taken Thomas's place as our head of technology. Only one warrior was missing, but he would be along soon.

Ten warriors. So few when we faced so much.

"Our king will not join us," I said. "We proceed on our own."

The disappointment and resignation that filled the room reflected what was in my own gut. But it was fear that rose inside me as every eye turned my way in expectation. I'd trained my whole life to eventually become king. To take over the semblance of rule while my father still lived? There was no training for this, but I would earn their trust no matter the cost.

Time to get on with it. "Let the war council begin."

I sat, and the others followed suit.

"Basile."

My second grunted.

"You've met with Drake about supplies?"

"I have. We've been pulling in extras since this started, as we discussed, but Drake is under orders to triple-time it now."

"And what about tech supplies, weapons?"

Basile looked to Sebastian, who nodded. The male was from the same age range as Cale, as many of our more tech-savvy shifters were. A rare oni shifter, Sebastian's eyes

glowed blue against his dark olive skin, which turned the same color as his gaze when in his alternate form, and his fangs were particularly long, even now peeking from the corners of his mouth. He'd been Thomas's best friend.

"I've given him a list of ongoing supplies," Sebastian informed me. "I ran through it with Basile to be certain we had all the bases covered."

"What about the surveillance equipment?" We had relied on Risk far too much for things we needed to learn to do ourselves.

"The equipment is either coming or already installed. But"—he cleared his throat—"we don't have enough shifters trained to run it. I believe we have many clan members who can excel at tech, particularly the youngest generations, and we need all the backup we can get. I'd like to begin an official training class."

Tech had not been a focus of our education up to now; clan members pursued it if they had an interest, but on their own time. It wasn't until Thomas joined the Warrior's Council that the need to bring ourselves up to speed on modern-day technology had become clear.

"Good idea. I will leave that up to you to implement as you see fit, Sebastian. Get with Vanessa; she will facilitate communication with the education council and see that what you need is done."

Sebastian nodded his head respectfully while jotting notes on his tablet. "Yes, sir."

"And Sebastian?"

He met my eyes once more.

"We need some hackers."

His smile was the tiniest bit smug. “Already on it, sir.”

My nod of approval made the young male’s eyes light up.

“Speaking of training...” Lyris said from her position down the table.

I gestured for her to continue.

“Our males are already trained in combat, sir, but not our females.”

“Females receive basic training, and those who wish to be trained in combat are added to those classes,” I clarified.

“But it is not mandatory.” Her mouth tightened. “It needs to be. And our new females in particular need basic training ASAP.”

A general protest rose around the room.

“Oh, stop with the protective bullshit,” Lyris snarled. “Females are to be kept safe, blah blah blah. Fuck that.”

“Tell us how you really feel, Lyris,” James said, grinning. The modern words sounded peculiar on the shifter’s ancient lips.

“I am.” She stood up. “Can you imagine how it feels to have been attacked out of nowhere, your life completely changed, and to know that you are surrounded by males much like the ones who attacked you, with no way to even hope to defend yourself against their strength?”

Jacob growled as if offended. “They don’t need defense from us.”

Lyris narrowed blazing eyes on him. “You say that, but we also haven’t had an influx of new females in a long time. Rape is rare among our kind, yes, but it does happen.”

“We are doing our best to keep the females safe, Lyris,” I reminded her.

“It’s not the same thing as being able to defend themselves. To have some semblance of control.”

James’s response was gentle. “They cannot effectively defend themselves; you know that. They aren’t strong enough against our animals.”

“They cannot defeat you,” Lyris agreed, “but they can give themselves a chance to get away.” She straightened her shoulders. “However, fight training isn’t all I want to discuss.”

“Continue,” I encouraged her.

Lyris paused as if considering her words. Tension crept into my spine.

“First, I’d like to add the females to the current training classes or bring in a trainer specifically for them.”

“I agree,” Demetri said. “I will volunteer as trainer.”

I eyed the warrior and sensed the sincerity of his response. “That is acceptable.”

“And I want sexual harassment training for our males,” Lyris added.

A burst of laughter floated around the room.

I leaned forward in my seat, planting my elbows on the table. “Silence.”

Lyris stared her fellow warriors down. “We have long been taught that women should learn to defend themselves, be alert, be vigilant. In the human world, women are expected to carry weapons if they wish to remain safe.”

“We know this. But we are not human men that would savage a woman,” Basile pointed out.

“Again, Basile,” Lyris said, her voice going low with sorrow, “rape is not unheard of or we would not have a word for it.”

Silence settled. The males surrounding the table looked to me.

“Lyris is correct,” I said firmly. “We trust our men as if there has never been an exception. Maddox, for instance.” One of my closest childhood friends, who had been both a rapist and a murderer. “History has taught us that Anigma traitors even hide among us occasionally. Though this training will not change *their* minds, it will help us learn how to police our own.”

Someone snorted his opinion of that idea. Several others shifted uneasily. Vanessa stood.

“Sir, I’ve heard the arguments, but I have to agree with Lyris. Times are changing, even among the humans, and for the better. We have to stop laying the responsibility of rape and other sexual crimes on our females and begin to lay it on the males who would perpetrate them. Monitor your own kind, teach the males not only what constitutes rape but what constitutes harassment. What constitutes consent. No means no, always. This is especially important as we introduce females who may come to be mates of the males they meet. The males must be responsible for not scaring their mates, and however sincere, they may do so unknowingly. Training gives them the knowledge they need to properly approach a potential mate.”

Basile cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the others. “You are right, young Vanessa. I apologize for not

carefully thinking this through. We become complacent over time, assuming we know all we need to know with the passage of the years, but that needs to change.” He turned to me. “I agree with the females.”

I looked to Lyris. “Who would lead this training?”

“Nala has all the skills,” she said, “but would prefer that a male stand with her. Some males will only listen to one of their own.”

James lifted a hand. “I will do this, Lyris.”

James had the age and wisdom to speak with authority. “So be it. Lyris, set up both trainings.”

Lyris took her seat just as the door to the chamber opened and Azrael entered, pushing a chained shifter ahead of him. The tension curling inside me rose another notch. The difficult tasks continued to come. I had a fleeting thought of Rissa, her warm brown hair curling around her gentle face, and wished I was a simple male free to meet with the female of his choice. But I was not, nor would I ever be.

Pushing her from my mind, I gestured to the chair set to the left, some distance from the table. “Baer, please join us.”

The big, shaggy shifter shuffled his way to the chair. Azrael followed behind, my strongest warrior. His clan tattoo blazed from his bare biceps, declaring his loyalty, while his chilling black eyes could cow the most confident shifter. Baer had no need to be cowed; that had happened weeks ago.

“*He’s requesting time with Beckan again,*” Azrael told me silently. The shifter’s youngest brother was also a prisoner here. The two had served Maddox, though from what we could gather of their background, not willingly. The family of four werewolves had been captured as babes after Maddox had

killed their parents, and now only two survived. What to do with the two shifters was one of the hundreds of questions beating at my brain on a continual basis.

“Make it happen,” I replied, eyeing the defeated slump of the werewolf’s shoulders.

“Baer, we have brought you here to once more delve into your knowledge of the Anigma.”

The shaggy head rose, allowing dull hazel eyes to peer at me. “I will tell you all I can.”

We had been assured of that for weeks, but another questioning session might uncover details we hadn’t thought of before. I nodded to Basile, who stood.

“Who exactly did Maddox answer to?”

Baer did not look at his questioner. “There are four US generals, one in each quadrant. Maddox was head of the southeast quadrant. All of the generals answered to one Anigma: Helios.”

“Did he ever come here?”

Baer’s gaze went distant as if remembering. “Yes, a few months before...everything. I made sure we were away. Kept my brothers out of sight.”

He didn’t want them coming to anyone’s notice, or more likely Maddox didn’t. Baer and his brothers had been in charge of changing human males into shifter soldiers, which made them privy to Maddox’s plans—plans this Helios would not have been happy with.

“What do you know of him?”

Not much, apparently. After an hour of questioning, we had very little to go on except the general locations of the

other regional headquarters—cities, not lairs, which Baer had never seen—and the fact that this Helios was the one in charge of collecting psychs from each quadrant at specified times. That was why he'd come to Nashville, to inspect Maddox's efforts at gaining psychs for the Anigma. A small group of females had been sent to a specified location about a month later, to be picked up for the Anigma collection, but as we already knew, Maddox had not sent all of the psychs he'd had in his possession. Whether Helios realized that or not, Baer didn't know.

“Baer.” Lyris stood and walked around the table, moving right up to the seat that held the werewolf. “How did they find the females?”

“I was not involved—”

She waved him off. “I know you weren't involved with them. But you knew something, heard something, even if you didn't want to. Tell me how the Anigma found them.”

Baer hung his head. “The females needed mental treatments. They would not respond to normal human medicines because their depression was not human; it was a result of being untriggered.”

“Yes,” Lyris said, “that's true.”

“There is a chain of stores, holistic medicine and alternative treatments for mental disorders. They have a high rate of success, Maddox said, but not with Archai females. The stores have Anigma plants, doctors who try to identify likely candidates and provide their names to the Anigma. The rest of the employees are normal humans, but there is always one...”

“A traitor,” Basile said.

Baer raised his head, though he still didn't meet anyone's eyes. "Yes."

"Do you know the name of the chain?" Lyris asked.

"No." He shook his head. "Maddox never said a name, not that I heard."

Lyris put her hand on his shoulder. "Thank you, Baer."

Azrael removed Baer from his seat. On the way out the door, Baer pulled back from Azrael's grip to face me once more. "What do you plan to do with me? With us?"

He asked me this question at every opportunity. Unfortunately I still did not have an answer.

"I do not know, Baer," I said honestly. Prisoners of war were unheard of among the Archai since the Great War. "For now you are as safe as I can make you while still protecting my people from any harm you might have planned."

"I don't plan—"

"I know." I'd heard his declaration of peace repeatedly since he'd been brought here. "Consider this the sentence for the harm you perpetrated on the human world. Though you never took a female, you were not innocent, as you full well know. When I decide the best way to handle that, you will be informed."

The werewolf's powerful shoulders slumped as Azrael led him outside without a word. All eyes turned to me for final instructions.

"Sebastian, can you begin a search for these storefronts?"

He smirked. "Aye, aye, sir."

I shook my head but couldn't hold back a chuckle. Then, "Vanessa, contact the other lairs. I want a meeting with each clan leader in the next three days."

Vanessa jotted a note.

"Basile, we need men in each of those quadrants. Begin drafting a list of possibilities. Contact Arik as well." Our former nemesis was one of the savviest hunters I knew. Now that he was on our side, I wanted to make use of that if he'd allow me to do so. "We also need to amp up patrols in our own area. I want them doubled asap. The Anigma will return; it's just a matter of when."

"Yes, sir."

I stood, and the rest followed. I watched the warriors exit, my mind racing over all the threads we needed to cover, all the missing information we still needed. We'd been given a two-month reprieve, but that could end at any time. We needed every bit of help we could get. The question was, how did we get it?

CHAPTER
SEVEN



THE TRAITOR

I watched the prince prowl the night, the streets of Nashville his hunting ground. Hate burned in me at the sight—because of his privilege, because of his animal, because of everything he stood for. The pinnacle of our people; the perfect Archai. The male with all he could want at his fingertips.

My own fingers itched to grasp my knife and throw it, letting the sweet steel bury itself at the base of his fucking skull.

Not him, not yet. But the other. Soon.

As I followed, rooftop to rooftop, Sun parted company with his patrol partner, Sebastian—the arrogant little prick—and headed farther into downtown. One hand pushed into his back pocket and drew out a cell phone. The sight curled my lip with disgust. Our people, dependent on technology. It was

heresy. We owned the night. We were the most powerful beings on this planet, and yet we were reduced to depending on tiny electronic boxes to navigate our world. That's what Sun wanted, *us* reduced to the same level as humans.

No.

He was tapping at the screen now, sending a text message, probably. Who would the prince be texting? He finished, his feet moving as he stared at the screen, awaiting an answer. And then his animal flashed in his eyes, silver light obscuring the rainbow for the shortest moment before he clicked the cell off, returned it to his pocket, and strode forward, his pace picking up speed.

I knew that look, that tension in his body—hunger. And not only for blood. Did he have a regular donor now? But no, surely our pure prince would not be drinking from a female. To do so was not only against tradition, it was considered abhorrent. Especially after recent encounters with the Anigma. The horror among the Warrior's Council when it had been learned that Arik's now-mate had been triggered by Anigma soldiers had been genuine.

It didn't stop me from feasting wherever I pleased, but Sun? He wouldn't dare.

Which meant he had a fuck buddy.

Curious—and more than a little anxious to gain any and all knowledge that could be used against the prince—I followed.

Sun moved down 6th Avenue, walking past the Tennessee Performing Arts Center without wavering through the clusters of humans awaiting the next show. The crowds parted instinctually for the shifter, their hindbrains recognizing danger even if their eyes were unsure. Sun's gaze was trained

forward, and when he crossed Union Street, he jogged a few yards before he veered straight into traffic and beelined for the hotel across the street.

My instincts had been correct—there, waiting outside the brightly lit, creamy facade of the Hermitage sat a female on a wrought-iron bench. From the top level of the parking garage across the street, I took in the details: thick, curly brown hair, flawless skin, dark blue eyes. Pretty enough, I guessed, especially the full mouth, but nothing like our women. Good enough to sate a shifter’s hunger, but possibly too small to withstand it—standing to face the prince, she came no higher than the male’s massive chest.

Definitely not sturdy enough for my taste, but to each their own.

I had no interest in watching unless Sun planned on killing her. Probably not on tonight’s menu, at least for the prince. My own, however...

With a burst of speed I cut off pursuit and made my way to a less populated, more run-down area of Nashville. Homeless littered the sidewalks and alleyways, a smorgasbord of blood types, but I preferred my food fresh and smelling clean. Within a few minutes I’d zeroed in on a pair of young teenage boys walking their bikes back from the corner store. Much more my style—technically not forbidden, even barely into pubescence, though I did tend to drain them dry. That was definitely forbidden.

I let my fangs elongate with anticipation. Just as the teens approached an alleyway between two abandoned buildings, I raised my voice.

“Hello, boys.”

Bikes halted. Twin heads swiveled to see who had called to them. One look was all it took for two pairs of dirty sneakers to take off running. I put on a burst of inhuman speed and appeared abruptly in front of them.

“Now, that’s not nice. When someone says hello, you’re supposed to answer.”

“Fuck you, dude,” the taller boy yelled, voice trembling. His companion hefted his bike and shot into the alleyway. The mouthy one followed.

I grinned. Normally that alley was a pass-through, open at both ends. Too bad for my meal that I’d blocked the way a few days earlier. They made it halfway to the end before they realized two dumpsters had been pushed into the opening, then piled high with boxes and trash and broken furniture. Far too high for them to easily scramble over.

They did try, though, I’d give them an A for effort.

I stalked them slowly from behind, savoring their fear as they clawed desperately at the mess obstructing their escape. The boys began to whimper like frightened puppies as they threw terrified looks over their shoulders. The sound of their heartbeats drummed in my ears, faster and faster, as I let my fangs descend fully, the red light from my glowing eyes allowing them to see exactly what they were facing. Exactly how they were going to die.

Then one of them got smart. Cupping his hands together, he shouted, “Come on, Tommy! Come on!”

Tommy, delicious tears streaming down his face, saw the hands and quickly thrust his foot into them.

“One, two, three!” As the taller boy propelled him upward, Tommy vaulted to the top of the pile. Before he could reach

back for his friend, I was on top of him.

The taller boy's scream cut off abruptly when my hand slapped over his mouth. "Now you wouldn't want to be inviting anyone to join us, would you? No no no. Better be quiet," I murmured in his ear, shaking my head. The sound of the other boy falling down the opposite side of the dumpster reached us both, and my captive squealed—with gratitude for his friend's escape or despair at his own fate, I wasn't certain, but I savored both possibilities. "He's left us all alone, but don't worry, you won't miss him for long."

As I spoke, a tingle of awareness hit the back of my neck. Not from the boy or his companion, but from a presence behind me, tickling my senses. I continued whispering sweet nothings in the boy's ear, relishing his terror with half a mind while the rest of my awareness centered on the presence behind me, feeling it move closer, anticipating my chance. Holding my prey easily with one hand—really, sometimes it was almost pathetic how easy it was—I dropped the other to the short sword strapped to my thigh and flicked the strap open.

"Now, you're going to help me, aren't you?" I whispered. "In just a moment, I'm going to let you go. Are you going to run, or are you going to fall? Can you even hope for escape? There are more behind me. How would you like to feed them too?"

The words registered in the teen's mind a second after hearing them. He bucked in my arms, just as I'd anticipated, and at the same time I dropped him. The boy fell. Allowing his move to camouflage my own, I ducked into a crouch and swung my blade around and up, catching the beast behind me in the throat as I heard the boy's frantic attempt to scramble

over the debris in front of us. My knife sliced like butter through muscle and cartilage to hit bone—the spine. I more felt the crunch reverberate up my hand than heard it as the steel sliced straight through. A millisecond later a flash of light lit up the alleyway and ashes scattered across my body.

A chuckle rumbled through my chest. “Well, that was fun.”

“Was it?” a deep voice said at my back. The slide of a step on concrete reached my ears, then a blade pricked the skin at the base of my neck.

I froze. “How the hell—”

“Ah,” the voice said. “I’m just that good.” He chuckled. “How about we play round two?”

Shadows moved in the darkness surrounding us—more shifters—but the one at my back remained hidden.

“Who the hell are you?”

The steel sank slightly deeper. “No one you know. Yet.”

I let my hands dangle at my sides, the blade still in my grip. All I needed was one opening. “That’s unlikely.”

Someone snickered in the darkness. “Not if we’re new in town,” one of the shifters pointed out.

I growled, red light flashing from my eyes. “Do you know who the fuck you’re dealing with?”

“Considering you just axed one of my soldiers, yes.” The voice moved slightly closer, as if the male was leaning forward. “Do you want to know who you’re dealing with?”

But I already had a good idea. These guys had the stench of Anigma pouring out of their every cell.

I forced myself to relax, to let my tension drain away. To be ready when the chance came. “So, what do you want?”

A chuckle. “Information we can’t get anywhere else, of course.”

I shrugged. The tip dug deeper, and I felt a trickle of blood wind its way down the neck of my jacket. “Can’t help you there.”

“Oh, we think you can. We’ve been watching you.”

Have you? I scoffed. “And you think you can get me to betray my lair?”

From the alley entrance, another figure moved into my line of sight. Big. Broad. I watched him approach, and the air of menace that surrounded him had the spit drying up in my mouth. Holy shit, who was he?

“If the price is right,” the new male said, “we think it will.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” There weren’t many people that had the power to give me what I might ask for.

“Helios is my name. Ever heard of me?”

My heart rate picked up. Helios. Fuck.

White fangs gleamed as the shifter smiled. “I thought you might have.”

I took a deep, deep breath. “What kind of price are we talking?”

“The prince dead.”

I laughed; there was no holding it back. Even filled with terror, I couldn’t believe that was what he assumed would move me. “That’s kind of a given, is it not? I mean, if you’re wanting to take over...”

“We don’t want to take over, at least not the lair,” Helios said. “We want to decimate it.”

Another given, but whatever. “Again, what’s in it for me? I get to destroy my home, and, what, join you guys?”

A pause. Helios tipped his head as if considering me seriously for the first time. Then he grunted. “You name it.”

That’s right, prick. “First, that steel out of my neck.”

Another pause, and then the blade slowly retreated. I straightened my jacket, wiggled my neck, and turned my head for a little look-see. The shifter behind me was fierce. Red eyes gleaming gave no hint of his shifting form, but the other shifters circling us obviously respected him.

But it was Helios they feared. I could smell it. Facing the leader once more, I narrowed my eyes. “Now, what else should I ask for?” I tapped my chin thoughtfully.

Helios growled. “Don’t test my patience.”

That was okay; I knew exactly what I wanted. “There is a female on the Warrior’s Council. Lyris.”

“Females are valuable,” Helios said, his eyes flashing, “especially one old enough to be on the council. Your information would have to be very good indeed.”

“It is not only good, it’s not just information. I can get you inside the lair.” If it meant getting my hands on Lyris once and for all, I’d do anything.

Helios considered my proposal long enough that I began to sweat, but ultimately he saw it my way.

“Fine, traitor. You have a deal.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT



RISK

I hadn't thought Sun would contact me. When he'd texted fifteen minutes ago, it had taken me a ridiculously short time to tell him yes, but still, something inside me continued to shout that he couldn't actually be interested in me. The real me, not the Risk me.

And yet here he was, marching across the road toward me as if cars weren't slamming on their brakes and honking at the interruption of their late-night adventures to who knows where.

Sun didn't care. He just kept coming.

Watching him, I felt like reality was bending around me. Maybe because I knew what he was, what his people were, to me there was no mistaking that he wasn't human. And yet all these people just walked on by. Well, the men walked by, most of them side-eyeing Sun like he was dangerous—which he

was. The women had a totally different reaction; they stared, their tongues practically hanging out of their mouths. I got where they were coming from even if I wished my gift was something more powerful than glammers. Maybe laser eyes so I could zap them for staring at what was mine.

And that right there was a problem. Sun wasn't mine. He wasn't even a man, for fuck's sake. I had to stop thinking about him like one. Whatever we managed to have together, it was only ever going to be temporary. I could never reveal to him what I was, and he would never trust me again if I did.

So no, Sun was not *mine*. That did not mean, however, that I was happy about all the drooling.

Oblivious to my internal chaos, the big bad vampire strode right up to me where I sat on the bench outside of the Hermitage Hotel. Even the creamy lights I sat under didn't soften him, but in all honesty, he didn't need softening. That was part of what drew me, the cutting strength of him, the air of authority that told me no one was getting through him to get to me. I'd never had that before. It had always been me against the world, with no one to stand in front of me.

I couldn't let myself get used to that. I couldn't rely on it. Not now. Not ever.

Sun glared down at me. "Why are you frowning?"

I blinked. "What?"

"You look upset."

"I—" Shaking away the thoughts crowding my head, I forced myself to focus. "I'm sorry. I was lost in thought."

"Hmm." He stood, staring at me for the longest moment, so intense my mouth went dry.

“What?”

This time he was the one who shook his head. “It’s good to see you.”

And then he smiled. The lines of his face gentled the slightest bit, and the tension I could read around his eyes relaxed. His grin was almost boyish, doing weird things to my heart. It was as if whatever worries he’d had turning the corner of the street, they’d all fallen away when he saw me sitting here. Which was ridiculous. This was a practically immortal being. Who knew how many women he’d slept with, how many he’d drunk from. I was just Rissa, not someone important. I needed to remember that.

Yet I couldn’t help grinning back. “It’s good to see you too, Sun.”

“Good.”

We seemed to freeze, me sitting, him standing. I had no idea why Sun just stared at me, but I for one was scrambling for something—anything—to say. Typical first date, right?

This is not a date.

Oh, isn’t it?

Remembering his expression when he’d appeared at the corner, I asked, “Everything okay?”

“It is now.”

Was he soaking me in? I knew I was soaking him in.

That’s it, I was officially putty in his hands, damn it. I had to get myself together. The edge of the wrought-iron bench dug into my gripping fingers. Suddenly I blurted out, “Um... would you like to get something to eat?”

Yes, I was just that awkward, but suddenly I was starving. I'd been patrolling when Sun texted me, after going through my nightly review of city surveillance and the list of women I checked on regularly. I hadn't yet taken the time to think about food.

Did vampires eat? I knew they drank, since Cale had joined me for a drink at a club more than once, but food wasn't a question I'd ever had occasion to answer.

Sun held out a hand, demanding I give him mine. "I'd love to."

My palm met his, and an electric zing shot up my arm. Sun's eyes flashed silver for the briefest moment, almost too brief for me to catch. Had he felt that too?

He tugged me up from the bench. "Let's go."

As if we'd done so a thousand times, he tucked me beneath his arm and walked in sync with me down the sidewalk. I didn't feel short next to his foot-taller frame—I felt cuddled, protected. Wanted. Butterflies took flight in my belly.

A couple of blocks down, Sun turned into a dark alleyway. Were it not for the hours I'd spent exploring this city, I might have been afraid, but instead excitement sparked—I knew exactly where he was taking me. "The Diner?" I asked.

"Where else?"

A little hop in my step surprised me. "Awesome!"

Sun chuckled but didn't say anything else as we navigated the back way to the greasy spoon known for being open—and packed—all night long. My absolute favorite place to eat after hours of patrolling. I'd never have guessed a vampire would like it too. In fact, I kind of expected him to sit at the table and watch me eat, but the moment the waitress led us to our red-

vinyleed booth and handed us plastic-covered menus, he began eagerly looking it over. Guess that answered the question of whether or not blood was the only thing vampires ate.

“Come here often?”

Sun glanced up from the menu, and I swore his look was almost sheepish. “Not nearly often enough.”

Something about the normalcy of eating together and the familiarity of the Diner allowed my nerves to fade a little. “Me too. I’ve been eating here for years.”

A waitress approached our table, her blonde bouffant bigger than her boobs, fake eyelashes batting in Sun’s direction. “What can I get you to drink, sugar?”

She’d asked him, but Sun looked to me first.

“Sweet tea, please.”

He lifted two fingers to indicate he’d have one as well. The waitress actually winked at him. “I’ll have those right out.”

I barely managed not to growl in frustration. Between the women on the street, our server, and the fact that every woman in the room, it seemed, had given Sun the once-over, I had a feeling I better get used to the attention for now. Luckily he wasn’t looking at anyone but me.

“Are you getting dinner or breakfast?” he asked.

The Diner served both, all night. “I can’t come here without getting one of their burgers.” The thickest patties, perfectly grilled, with soft buns that melted in my mouth. The onion rings were equally to-die-for.

“Good choice.”

“You?”

“I think I’ll go with breakfast tonight.”

And he did. When our too-flirty waitress returned, he quickly ordered two stacks of buttermilk pancakes, bacon on the side, with extra ham *and* sausage, as well as half a dozen fried eggs and a side of biscuits.

My eyes got rounder with every item he listed. “What, are you secretly a horse?”

His laugh was low and sexy and rumbled through parts of me that had no business noticing. “Not exactly.”

Vampire metabolisms must be a hell of a lot higher than a human’s. Just another reason to hate them. No “last ten pounds” for them, I guessed.

“Right,” Blondie said. “A big appetite for a big boy.”

I narrowed my eyes at the woman, silently vowing to rip her poofy hair from her head if she didn’t shut the fuck up. “I’ll have the burger,” I gritted out.

Finally seeming to catch my drift, she kept her eyes on me and off Sun while I ordered, but let them drift over him as she turned back toward the kitchen. I barely refrained from following.

“So, how’s the writing going?”

The what? I yanked my gaze away from Blondie. Oh, right. I’d given Sun my usual cover, that I was an aspiring true crime author. Hey, it wasn’t even half a lie. I was constantly researching crime nationwide, looking for signs of the Anigma and other women like me. It also helped explain why I stalked the streets at night, alone. “Making progress.” That wasn’t a lie either. “Some of what I’ve gathered is starting to make sense.”

“What are you writing about?”

Wouldn't you like to know? And he would soon enough. We had a meeting scheduled in just a few days to discuss the data I was compiling. “Sorry.” I shrugged. “I don't discuss the story till it's written. Bad mojo.”

One auburn brow quirked up over his intense eyes. “Mojo?”

“Writers are superstition. You knew that, right?”

“No, I did not.” He grinned. “I'll get the story eventually.”

True. “You never did tell me what you do for a living.”

“Security.”

I eyed the width of his shoulders. “That makes sense.” Of course he didn't mean human security. Dancing around the truth like this was making me wish my tongue was more adept. “Guard any celebrities lately?”

His eyes sparkled with amusement. “We don't guard and tell.”

“Riiight.” I chuckled.

Silence fell as we stared at each other, the chatter of the restaurant swirling around us. “What is that look?” he finally asked me.

“I don't know.” I planted my elbow on the table and propped my chin on it, studying him and not trying to hide it for once. “You're not exactly forthcoming about yourself, but you're not unfriendly either. With the tough look you've got going, I keep expecting a 'me Tarzan, you Jane' approach and I'm not getting it, and it's throwing me off.”

Heat sharpened the intensity of his gaze. “I can be all the Tarzan you want when the time is right.”

“I’ll just bet you can, lover boy.”

I jerked my attention up to the waitress. “Excuse me?”

She blinked as if she hadn’t meant to say that. “Pardon me. Your food?” She set a full plate in front of me, then proceeded to silently load Sun’s side of the table with everything he’d ordered. My eyes met his across the Formica expanse, and I had to cover my mouth to keep from bursting into laughter until our server hurried away.

“Seriously, how often do you deal with that?” I asked, my voice shaky with amusement as I nodded toward the bouffant weaving through the crowd of tables across the room.

“You’d probably be surprised, but not that often.”

“I don’t think I believe that.”

Sun’s expression went serious. “I’m not usually as friendly with people as I am with you.”

I did believe *that*. I’d witnessed it, after all. “So why are you different with me?” I dared to ask.

He set down a pancake-laden fork and took his turn this time, seeming to really study me. “I don’t know why. I just know that I am.”

Heat rose in my cheeks. I lifted my burger to hide the lower half of my face. “Well, I appreciate it.”

“I do too.”

As if the honesty opened something up in both of us, conversation flowed more easily for the rest of the meal. And yes, Sun ate every bite. Just the thought of working off all that

food made me sweat, but then I considered how *Sun* might work it off and started to get warm for a whole different reason. Just being in his vicinity made me think about sex; I couldn't help it. I really wasn't any better than the women surrounding us who couldn't stop looking his way. He fascinated me, tempted me, and God, the longer we were together, made me pray for the night to never end.

Unfortunately reality said otherwise. No matter how much Sun had ordered, there was ultimately one last bite. And one last visit from Blondie, who brought our check. Sun refused to let me pay my half. Watching him pull a fifty out of an actual wallet and lay it on the table was surreal. It was something so...human. Would I ever get used to that?

I really didn't think so.

Walking out into the night, I felt loneliness creep in. The night was over, and who knew if it would ever be repeated. I certainly didn't.

How would it end?

Instinctively I headed back the way we had come, and Sun followed. It wasn't until we reached the shadows of the alley that I felt his hand on my arm, drawing me to a halt.

I turned to face him. The look in his eyes made me swallow hard.

“You know I'm going to kiss you, right?”

“Are you?” I croaked.

He smiled, white teeth gleaming in the dark. “I am.”

“Okay.”

The next thing I knew, I was in his arms. Like, fully in his arms. He lifted me from the ground, pulled my body hard

against his, and walked forward until my back hit the side of the building. The feeling of being trapped against him was so delicious I moaned.

“Sun.”

His name on my lips was barely a whisper. Sun didn't say anything, but I felt his broad hands settle beneath my ass, forcing my legs to part around his hips as he brought my core firmly against his pelvis, against a part of him that seemed far harder than the wall. I tilted instinctively, seeking an even closer fit.

He snarled deep in his throat. The sound brought my head up, my gaze to his.

His mouth met mine. If he hadn't been holding me up, I would've melted at his feet. The taste of him, hot and sweet in my mouth, firm against my lips. The feel of his body holding mine captive, forcing me close. Even his scent spicy with a hint of the maple syrup from his pancakes, was intoxicating. I couldn't get enough, could never get close enough. If only we weren't separated by two sets of clothes—

Shit. My palms found Sun's chest, and I pushed. “Sun...”

His breath gusted against my cheeks. “Yeah?”

I swear if I hadn't been so overwhelmed, I'd have probably laughed. Typical man, reduced to one-word responses by his penis. Of course, that same penis had reduced me to one-word responses too.

“Sun, I can't—”

Well, that was three words.

Sun arched against me, his groan rumbling through his chest and into my palms. I went from pushing him away to

gripping him tight.

No, that wasn't right. "Sun, put me down."

His forehead settled against my shoulder, and the groan turned to a strained chuckle. "Too much, too soon?"

"Too... something."

"Yeah, you make me feel that way too."

God, what was I going to do with this man?

CHAPTER
NINE



SUN

I managed to make it back to my rooms without being stopped by anyone, though the stares I caught more than once made me uneasy. That unease was confirmed when I opened the heavy door leading to my rooms and found Grim pacing the living area, a frown thick on the only part of his face I could see.

“Where the hell have you been?”

Of course Grim was waiting for me. “Hello to you too.”

“Where?” he growled, not taking my nonanswer for an answer.

“Out.” Where I wished I still was. Where my brain and significant parts of my body screamed to be, back with Rissa. But she’d put a halt on taking things farther, not that I blamed

her. She didn't truly know me from Adam. A female had to be cautious.

My dick was not so understanding.

“Well, while you've been out”—Grim threw his hood back, knowing he was secure inside my quarters—“things around here have been going to hell.”

“There is nothing new about that.” I strode across the room, stripping my gear as I went. At least I'd had a couple of free hours to be with Rissa before having to return. If not for the fact that my hard-on still had not waned, I'd probably be content.

As it was, I had blue balls from hell and I was not in the mood to put up with any shit.

Grim watched me, his gaze brooding. He was good at brooding, especially lately. I'd probably join him in a minute, but in the meantime I had no intention of asking what was going on. Unfortunately he was sure to tell me anyway.

I gave him my back as I entered the kitchen area. We had a communal dining hall where main meals were eaten, but most of us also kept food and backup blood in our rooms. As prince I could have a whole kitchen plus staff if I wanted, but why deal with all of that? I took my time at the fridge, debating whether or not to grab a bag from the blood stacked inside. I hadn't stopped to find a donor on my way home, too caught up in thoughts of Rissa. I didn't know if I could have drunk from anyone but her. I sure as hell didn't want to—the taste of her blood on my lips would be ambrosia. Everything else would be stale in comparison.

Plastic-wrapped stash it was.

After retrieving a couple of beers and a bag from the refrigerator, I sauntered my way back to Grim and joined him on the couch. “Here.” I passed him a cold one. Maybe it would help cool off his temper.

He grunted a thank-you, although his face didn’t look all that grateful. He looked like he had bitten into a lemon, actually. I leaned my head back on the sofa, tapped the bag with my fangs to open the flow, and closed my eyes as I drank the decidedly unsatisfying meal.

“You cannot afford any distractions right now, Sun.”

I sighed, refusing to open my eyes. “Who says I was distracted?”

“You’ve been gone for hours but you’re drinking bagged blood. That means you didn’t take the time to feed—and there has to be a distraction to blame for that. Besides”—he nudged my feet—“that smear of lipstick next to your mouth says I’m right.”

I opened my eyes in time to catch him gesturing toward my face with his beer, one eyebrow raised as if to say, *Told you so*.

Lowering the bag with one hand, I swiped at my skin instinctively with the other. “Damn it.”

Grim sat back, resting one ankle over his other knee. “I get it, things are rough right now. And blowing off a little steam is fine here and there. But you can’t be going off communication. I have to be able to get in touch with you.”

I didn’t want to fucking be in touch. I wanted a few minutes where it was just me, Sun, and the woman I wanted to be with. No one else. No interruptions. No shitstorm waiting for me to figure it out or control it. “I—”

Grim cut me off. “The king is moving to block our preparations.”

Aaaand there was that weight on my shoulders again. “How is that?”

“He has empowered those who opposed us at the community meeting to be his liaisons. They are making the rounds, threatening those who are doing our bidding. Telling people there’s no threat, no evidence the Anigma know where we are. No reason to get into a panic or have anything change.”

I rubbed a hand across my brow, trying to ease the stress building once more like a tight band around my head. “Of course not. That was what he wanted all along, for things to stay exactly the same. Except they can’t. We can’t risk the possibility of attack.” I exchanged the mostly empty bag of blood for the waiting beer. “And if we wait until the Anigma return, that possibility becomes a certainty.”

“The question is, how do we counter his moves?”

I met Grim’s eyes, the only being, as far as I was aware, that he allowed to do so. The male was a mystery to everyone in our clan except me. He’d accepted me, trusted me long before I’d been given the trust of leadership. I alone knew his secrets. His power. And yet here he was, looking to me. Looking for answers I didn’t have. “Grim—”

The sound of a fist pounding on my door cut me off. “What the hell?”

It was Grim who stood, pulling his hood back over his head and down until only his mouth was visible before walking over to the door to my suite. Standing so as to block anyone’s entrance, he opened it.

“Sun!”

The voice cut off abruptly. “Not Sun,” Grim said, his voice deceptively calm. “What can I do for you?”

“Get the fuck out of my way!” With those barked words, the male pushed past Grim and into the suite.

A low, threatening growl filled the room. Oh fuck.

“Grim...” But it was already too late. One hand raised toward the male—one of our supply coordinators, Jasper, I saw now—Grim slowly squeezed his fingers shut. Jasper’s back bowed and he howled in pain.

“You forget yourself, minotaur,” Grim said.

Barely able to breathe, the male clawed at his throat, desperation filling his eyes.

I drained the rest of my beer and set the bottle aside, not bothering to get up. I was simply too tired all of a sudden to bother. “Grim, you’ve made your point.”

“Have I?”

“You have,” the male stuttered. “You have.”

Grim’s hand dropped, and Jasper sagged in relief. While he was trying to catch his breath, several other males crowded into the room, each one careful to give the Aomai plenty of space. With a flick of his robe, Grim turned his back on them and came to stand guard behind me.

Leaning forward, I planted my elbows on my knees and eyed the group, but it was Grim who spoke. “Jasper, what are you doing here?”

I knew without my friend saying a word that he was aware of the identity of every male in the room. Many of our people

thought that Grim's hood was somehow see-through or that he could identify them by hearing their voice, by their gait or style of shoes. None of that was the truth. Part of Grim's gift was the ability to delve into minds, and whether the males in front of me realized it or not, he had delved into each one without them sensing it. If he'd wanted them to, he could've made them feel it and had them on their knees in an instant, writhing in agony.

Jasper was lucky Grim had simply given him a warning. I stared at the ringleader, but the male didn't speak.

"You needed something?" I asked again.

He cleared his throat, shrugged his shirt back into place. Before he could get words out, the male to his right spoke up. "You're damn right we do."

Grim stirred behind me. "What did you say to our prince, Derek?"

The words were low, menacing, the danger a physical vibration that reverberated across the room. I knew because I saw each shifter tense even more, fear reigniting in many of their stares. But not Derek. The idiot growled low, his animal flashing in his eyes—apparently he was too angry for common sense.

He did, however, soften his tongue. "I said...the king has spoken on the issue of the new females. He refuses to release them into the general population." He smacked his chest hard. "Our possible mates. By what right does he hide them away?"

I barely refrained from telling the group that those females might never mate, not given the trauma they'd been through. No need to add fuel to the fire. And despite the anger sparking inside me at the males' method of questioning me, I also

didn't speak the words that immediately jumped to the tip of my tongue, that the king no longer possessed the power to make the females off-limits. Only the Warriors Council and I knew how little Solomon's word mattered at this point.

No, angry or not, I needed to pick my battles right now. Fighting on two fronts, the king and my people, would only lead to failure.

Keeping my voice carefully even, I instead gave the males a half-truth. "The females are not ready to be introduced into our community yet."

One of the other males stepped forward. "And why not? You said they've been here for over four months already, hidden away."

"And I spoke the truth."

The male held his hands out. "Then what's the fucking problem?"

A chorus of agreement came from the Archai behind them. My muscles tensed, and deep in my chest, my anger turned slowly to fury as I pictured the state of those fourteen females, battered and bruised and starved, the day that we'd rescued them. I thought of everything they'd been through just to get themselves back to some semblance of normal, and that fury erupted like a flash fire. I surged to my feet.

"The problem is that you're a bunch of fucking assholes! That's the fucking problem!"

The group jerked back with a collective gasp.

I no longer cared about diplomacy. I'd sworn to protect these females, damn it, and that was exactly what I intended to do, greedy males or not. "Why would I introduce them to you? Look at yourselves." I let my phoenix rise, silver light flashing

before me as he stared out of my eyes, equally angry at the treatment these males seemed to expect from our most precious females. “No respect, no concern. Just ‘me, me, me’ and ‘what I want.’” I pounded on my chest, a mockery of the earlier male’s demand. “Not on my watch, I can fucking guarantee that. You’re in here arguing over these females like dogs locked in a pen with only one bone. They have been brutalized, many of them raped. Tortured. Do you get that? Do any of you?” I looked around, my rage expanding even more at the lack of comprehension on their blank faces. “Do you think there is any way they would approach you willingly like this? You would terrify them on sight.”

Mutinuous expressions stared back at me, unwilling to give an inch. And that was exactly how they would act with our females. Possibly had already acted with members of our clan in the past.

God, Lyris had been right.

I straightened my shoulders and brought my voice back to a more royal level. “There will be no introductions until I am assured that every male in this community will be treating these females with the upmost respect and patience.”

“And how do you intend to do that,” Derek sneered.

My smile made the male blanch. “For that, Derek, you will not have a chance at one of the females, period. Not”— I flashed him a look that would have felled a human— “one. Do you understand?”

The males around Derek began to slowly back away from him as if afraid his sentence would become their own. They had no idea how tempted I was to do just that. But I would abide by my word to Lyris.

“For the rest of you, get ready because I’m sending you back to school.”

CHAPTER
TEN



IMOGEN

Demetri was the sexiest man I'd ever seen. Not that he was a man; he was a shape-shifter. Even having months to get used to that idea and seeing some pretty shocking transformations in that time, I couldn't imagine him in another shape, another form. He seemed too confident, too centered in his own body.

And what a body it was. He had to be a good six-and-a-half-feet tall, with broad, powerful shoulders and muscles pronounced enough that I could outline them even through his T-shirts. His hair was a bit shaggy, thick, a range of blond tones that matched his twin's and complemented his suntanned skin perfectly. If he hadn't been so big, I'd have sworn he was some surfer from California, and I had no idea how a shape-shifter that lived underground was actually tan, but that was Demetri, a puzzle wrapped in a gorgeous package that I actually itched to open and explore.

I'd honestly thought, six months ago when I'd been... changed...that I'd never have a libido again. The devastation of losing my family, my life as I'd known it, the constant threat of rape and violence had killed the emotions inside me. It wasn't until the Archai had rescued us that I'd begun to wake up again, rediscovered warmth and even some semblance of happiness with the women I now called my sisters. But desire? Need? No. My memories were too horrific for that. I hadn't been raped, though I wasn't sure why, but my sisters—they'd endured more than anyone should ever be asked to endure.

Until one day, out of the blue, I'd walked into our dorm and met Demetri's green-gold gaze across the room. That was it. Just looking into his eyes had awakened the rest of me in an instant. I'd known him before then, but in that moment I finally saw him. And I was changed all over again, this time for good.

If the smile that lit up his face as he caught me watching him now was any indication, I wasn't the only one.

"What are we doing, Immy?" Clara asked silently, a tinge of worry underlining the telepathic question. Lyris had asked us to change into workout clothes, but she hadn't given us any information beyond that. Now Demetri was leading a small group of men and women into the room where we waited. I knew my sisters were nervous, but I had complete trust in Demetri and his twin, something else I'd thought would never return. I, of course, had the benefit of my gift—lie detecting, or truth detecting, as I preferred to think of it. My sisters often looked to me for reassurance, one positive consequence of my change.

Whatever was happening, it would be for our benefit, I was certain. “*Nothing to worry about, little one,*” I sent back, placing a calming hand atop her dark hair, braided to keep it out of her way. Then, to Demetri, “*You have everyone nervous.*”

We hadn’t been communicating telepathically for more than a couple of days, but the connection was so powerful. More than I’d ever experienced with another human being. We couldn’t walk through each other’s minds freely—not that I’d be comfortable with that—but the telepathic touch felt far different than it did with anyone else.

Demetri winked my way before addressing the group, his voice as gentle as it had been every time he’d spoken to one of us. Something else I admired about him.

“I apologize for the wait. I was gathering some help.” He gestured to the others behind him.

“For what?” Darcy asked, cocking a hip. Nineteen and fearless, she never failed to speak up.

“For training,” Demetri said. “I don’t have to tell you that there are threats in our world—you out of all of us know this full well.” Sadness flickered in his eyes. “The idea that even one of our females would experience such a threat...” Demetri looked to me, and I swore something moved behind his eyes.

His animal, I realized. Staring out at me. I shivered.

“These are trying times, and none of us can assume total safety. We want to give you a fighting chance should you ever face danger again.”

Amy stepped forward to the front of the group. “They’re back, aren’t they? The Anigma?”

Clara whimpered. Though her memories of the horror had been taken, she knew the basics of the society we now lived in. She knew the Anigma were a threat. On the other side of her, Darcy drew her close. The child wrapped her arms around Darcy's waist.

But Demetri was shaking his head. "Not that we are aware of, no. But I won't lie to you."

Someone in the crowd snorted. Tabby. She hadn't lost an ounce of her anger at what had happened to us, even with two months of peace. I didn't blame her.

Demetri gazed at her with sympathy. "I won't lie," he emphasized. "Though we defeated Maddox, his is not the only Anigma contingent out there. We wouldn't be so foolish as to assume we are impervious to danger."

"Training can't save us from one of them," Helen said, nodding her head toward the group behind Demetri. The practical one of our bunch. And she was right. They were too strong, as we all knew. Superhumanly strong.

"You may not realize that your brains aren't the only thing changed," Lyris said from the side wall where she leaned casually, watching us all. "Your bodies have the ability to be stronger, faster, heal quicker. Training can teach you to use what you've got, give you a fighting chance. Every self-defense instructor worth his salt will tell you the first rule of a fight: run. And if you can't run, only fight until you can. We want to make sure, should you ever need it, that you have that chance."

"Do you run, Lyris?" Tabby asked. We'd all come to trust the female Archai, to rely on her to give us insight and advice when it came to this strange new world we had been thrust into.

Lyris straightened away from the wall. “When I have to, yes. I wouldn’t be two millennia old if I hadn’t learned to recognize when I couldn’t win a fight.”

I waited, wondering who would say yes, who would say no. Finally Violet raised her hand. Demetri’s voice gentled even more. “What is it, Vi?”

She glanced uneasily his way, then fixed her gaze on Lyris. “I’m... I’m not comfortable with—”

Her words choked off as if strangled. Helen, standing beside her, wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

But she didn’t have to finish; Demetri understood. “We’ll never ask you to do something you aren’t comfortable with,” he assured her. “That’s why we’ve got some of our females as well, to work with you if or when you are ready. If you feel more comfortable watching, that is fine too.”

“What about me?” Clara called out. “I don’t have to fight one of them big guys, do I?”

“You get to play with me, girlie,” Lyris said. “How’s that?”

The little one gave a hop, her fear forgotten. “Good!”

“Great.” Demetri grinned. “Let’s warm up a little bit, then get started.”

Minutes later Tabby appeared beside me, grumbling under her breath. “If we’re some fancy new species, why do we have to run? It’s not like I’m dying of heart disease.”

I huffed out a laugh through my ragged breathing. “We might be harder to kill, but that doesn’t mean we can run fast.”

“Or very far,” Samantha wheezed, coming up beside us. She was the youngest aside from Clara; she’d turned seventeen

while in captivity with the Anigma. “How did I not figure on having to do gym class for the rest of my long friggin’ life?”

The three of us laughed as much as we were able before saving what breath we had left for the rest of our assigned laps.

The men and women waiting for us lined up in a row as we approached after our final circuit of the room. Aside from Nala, whom we were all familiar with, they were rigidly at attention, like soldiers on assignment. I couldn’t resist sending to Demetri, “*They’d be a lot less intimidating if they relaxed.*”

He frowned. Almost immediately every man in line dropped their arms and loosened their stances.

“*Better,*” I said.

Demetri smirked.

“Let me introduce you all. You know James, Jacob, and Cale. They’ve helped guard you all. And of course Lyris over there with Clara, and Nala.” The dark-haired, dark-skinned female nodded, giving us her usual warm smile.

Demetri pointed to the other women, standing on the opposite side of Nala. They were tall, beautiful, but also with compassionate eyes and understanding expressions that put me at ease instantly. “This is Esther, Lucia, and Rhiannon. I know they’d love to get to know you. With the announcement in the clan meeting, so many of our people have asked about meeting you, eager to welcome you to our community.”

“Was that safe, announcing our presence?” Tabby asked.

Demetri tilted his head, frowning. “We don’t want you to have to live in these confined spaces forever. The only way to integrate you is to let our people know that you exist. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Tabby shook her head. “It just doesn’t feel as secure as knowing we’re a secret.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t,” the one named Lucia said, raising a hand to get our attention. “At the same time, you have allies who are willing to always stand beside you, no matter how long it takes for you to feel safe. Our females are at the ready to volunteer. We want to welcome you as sisters.”

“And you’ve been trained to fight?” I asked. I assumed from their stances that they had but wanted to be sure.

“Every member of the clan has basic training,” Nala assured us. “We don’t all serve on the Warrior Council, but we know that our mere existence makes us a target. So yes, we participate in training along with the males from a set age. Those who wish to are even combat trained.”

I felt my shoulders relax. If their females could do this, could face Archai males in a fight, not just humans, then so could we. After all, we carried the same genes, right?

“So let’s pair up.” Demetri immediately began assigning partners. It felt a little bit like gym class since I was the last one standing, but I was also less traumatized than some of the others, so when he paired me with James, I was comfortable.

“Since most shape-shifters carry a knife—”

“Why?” Helen asked where she stood with one of the females.

“Because the only way to make sure you’re dead is to separate your spinal cord,” Rhiannon, her partner, stated matter-of-factly. “You can be severely injured and even disabled by severe injuries, but without the severing of your spinal cord, you won’t die.”

“Great,” Amy said a bit snarkily. “Eternity being damaged. Yippee.”

“It’s not as bad as the alternative,” Cale, who had been paired with her, said with a smirk.

“He’s not wrong,” Tabby agreed.

“All right,” Demetri said, calling us back to attention, “basic knife skills.”

James approached, pulling what looked like a standard KA-BAR from a sheath on his thigh. “Wicked-looking knife,” I said.

“Not my favorite”—he reached casually over his head, pulled a full-length sword up from a sheath strapped in the middle of his back, then slid it back down—“but it’ll do in a pinch.”

That much I knew. I found myself dropping into a fighting stance, my weight on my back leg, the front ready to move in any direction when necessary.

James’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve had some training?”

I shrugged. “Just some karate classes. It was a while ago.”

Not a lie. I should know—I was a living lie detector, right?

He nodded his approval. “Great. Show me what you can do.”

“What?” I squeaked.

There was no time for more preparation than that. James lunged forward, the knife held out in front of him. Probably not close enough to actually stab me, but close enough that he entered my personal space. Instinctively my hands came up, and I brought them around, avoiding the knife but slapping my

open palms hard against James's inner wrist and the outside of his fist. The knife leaped from his grip and fell to the floor.

A chuckle reached my ears above the drum of adrenaline. "Nice!"

That was Demetri. I sucked in a breath, trying to calm my racing heart. Instinct, but not one I wanted to admit to. I shrugged again. "Basic knife attack response, right? We practiced that one in class."

We'd done more than that, but I couldn't tell these males that much, not without revealing more about my family than I wanted to.

"It might not have worked if he'd been ready for you," Demetri said. "The pressure point for that move is easy to hit, but James's grip is loose because we're just practicing. A shape-shifter's firm grip and a human's firm grip are vastly different, but it's always worth a try. Even if you can manage to deflect a shape-shifter's aim, it's worth trying—if you have no other choice," he warned. "If you don't have to get that close, don't."

I nodded.

"Okay," James said. I noticed his gaze was more intense now, more serious. "Let's try again, shall we?"

I didn't really have a choice if I wanted to learn more, did I? I jerked my chin at him as if my heart wasn't still faster than normal and I didn't feel like I was about to jump out of my own skin. "Whatever you say. Let's go."

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



GRIM

I stalked down the corridor, my stomach churning with rage over the past few days—Sun’s disappearances, constant roadblocks by Solomon’s most loyal shifters, complaints from lustful males impatient to get their hands on new females. That most of all had me seething inside. That’s why I was heading for the prison cells holding our captives—because I needed to do something active to get rid of the anger I hadn’t been able to clear from not just my mind but what felt like a part of my soul. And because I needed to be with males who thought of others before themselves.

Yes, our prisoners were more honorable than some of the males we accepted into our community, it seemed.

Then there was that nagging *something* in the back of my mind. I couldn’t wipe it away any more than I could my reaction to everything else. It sat there like a malignant tumor,

pulsing with menace, growing and growing, and yet I couldn't see it clearly, couldn't delve inside to understand what it was trying to tell me. I only knew it was coming closer, and I needed to figure it out, sooner rather than later.

Franklin sat at the desk a good length down the hall from the cells, his nose buried in a book. He glanced up as I passed, his eyes dropping far short of mine. Tradition kept the Aomai shrouded in mystery, almost a holy leader that others dared not become too familiar with. Hence the god-awful robes.

Honestly I thought it was time for tradition to die a well-deserved death.

I passed by without speaking and continued down the hall. As I drew close, the murmur of voices in my head became louder: Baer and Beckan speaking telepathically to each other from their individual cells.

“You have to keep hope alive, brother. It's not over yet. Not for us.”

That was Baer, encouraging his youngest brother. Sometimes I thought listening to the werewolves talk was going to drive me insane, not because I had to hear it but because it was just so fucking sad. And I was tired of not being able to do anything about it.

Fuck that. I was the Aomai, not some fucking lackey doing the king's—or honestly, even Sun's—bidding. I was outside the power structure, untouchable, and by all that was holy, I was going to act on that.

Stepping through the door that led to our holding cells—rooms certainly never intended to hold anyone as long as they had held these two—I retrieved the keys from the pocket of

my cursed robe and moved to Baer's door. "How about a field trip?" I called, keeping my voice downright jaunty.

"A what?" I could feel Baer's confusion, his fear that something more than a simple walk would be taking place. I had to give it to him though—he wasn't afraid for himself. All he ever worried about was his brother. Once there had been four of them, strong, healthy werewolves. In the space of one night, Baer had lost two brothers and his freedom, along with Beckan's. He'd happily give his own life if it meant Beckan could be free.

"A field trip. You know, somewhere other than your cells." I unlocked his door. Pulled it open. Then turned to Beckan's cell and repeated the procedure. When I turned back, Baer still had not left his room. "Do you want to go or don't you?"

Leaving both doors open, I started back down the hall. I could still see Franklin sitting a few yards away, his back to me, oblivious to the release of our captives. A part of me wanted to comment about him getting soft. In my day...

God, I sounded so damn old. I guess, technically, I was old. They didn't call me the Grim Reaper for nothing.

But it was true. Back when I first trained, there was no sitting down. Quite suddenly I thought of those complaints all over the Internet about cashiers not being able to sit when they worked nowadays. Little did they know that argument had been around for millennia.

Now here Franklin was, sitting in a cushy seat with a pleasure read on guard duty. Part of me resented it, but part of me was glad that we had moved past stupid traditions and allowed a little bit of pleasure into our lives.

Those traditions, at least. The ones that benefited others. But heaven forbid we get rid of my fucking robes.

Franklin finally jerked his head up as the sounds of three sets of boots instead of one filled the hall. “What the heck is going on, Grim?”

I continued to walk, passing his desk. “Nothing for you to worry about. Go back to your book,” I said, waving him off. “Just going for a walk.”

He spluttered at the sight of Baer and Beckan following me down the hall, if warily. “They are not chained!”

I shrugged and kept walking. “Don’t think I’ll have to worry about that,” I called over my shoulder. “Come on, boys.”

Hesitating with every step, nevertheless the two werewolves followed me as I continued on. By the time I reached the end of the hall and turned left, they’d jogged up to be directly behind me.

“Aren’t you going to get in trouble for this?” Baer asked under his breath.

I scoffed. “I am the Aomai, lest you forget,” I pointed out. “I can read your mind. You’re not going anywhere.”

“*He’s not wrong,*” Beckan said, mind to mind, to Baer.

“*No,*” Baer returned cautiously, “*he’s not.*”

“See,” I said aloud. “Problem solved.”

There were several ways to exit the lair into the acreage we owned aboveground. I chose a back path, away from prying and judging eyes—I was just as tired of them as Baer and his brother. “Fresh air, anyone?” I asked them both.

The sudden surge of excitement was my answer. I tried not to delve too deeply into the minds of those near me, but telepathic communication and strong emotions were impossible for me to ignore, just an everyday part of my life flitting in and out of my mind constantly. And God, but the nonstop noise made me lonelier every single day.

Your late-night activities aren't helping that any, my other self dared to say. That's right, I had an *other*, just like everyone else. He wasn't an animal, though. I even let him out every once in a while, but not when he decided to judge me.

Isn't that kind of like judging yourself?

Shut the fuck up.

A chuckle echoed in my ears as I unlocked the massive steel door to the outside world and pulled it open. Cool spring air swept in to surround us. The sighs of relief that I heard in both of the shifters' minds behind me made my heart ache.

"Welcome back to the outside world," I said, sweeping an arm out to encourage the werewolves forward.

It was the first time I'd ever seen Baer smile.

The two males sprinted out the door and directly across the open field. Without my saying anything, they slowed as they neared the far edge of the clearing, far enough away that a human could not see it, but a mere minute for a shape-shifter to cross. Baer and Beckan had been locked up a long time without the ability to run, to soak in the night, to stretch their legs and give their stamina a good workout, so it took them two minutes, but another two saw them right back where I was. I settled on a limestone outcropping and watched the brothers run, circle the meadow, leap and play. Yes, play, like puppies too long denied their companion. The thing was, my

heart didn't just ache with sadness for these two; it ached with the need to do something for them, to help them find their path forward. At least they had a *forward*, unlike me. I was stuck in the now and probably always would be. But Baer and Beckan could change their lives. All they needed was someone on their side.

That someone was going to be me, I'd decided. If I could only leave one legacy, I was determined that it be this.

Baer eventually slowed. While Beckan continued to explore the clearing, Baer came to me and threw himself onto the grass, lying full-length to stare up at the brilliant stars so far away. I left him in peace to sleep if he desired, but his eyes stayed open, his gaze fixed on the heavens.

Finally I felt a stirring in his consciousness, and he asked quietly, "Why would you do this for us?"

I didn't fully know why. But that wasn't what he wanted to hear. "I told you, werewolf, I can read your mind. If I wanted to, there's nothing you could hide from me. I don't believe you're going anywhere. You want too much for your brother."

"I do." Baer's voice was always rough, but it became even more gravelly as he watched a comet shoot across the night sky. "I want something I didn't believe existed. Something I thought we could never have. That chance is gone for me, but not for Beckan."

I didn't agree. I thought the chance was there for both of them; it was just going to take time.

Baer wasn't ready to hear that yet.

"They're back, aren't they? Helios has come back."

"I don't know." It would make sense that this thing I perceived was somehow connected to the Anigma

commander's return to Nashville, but I felt no certainty of that. "Someone at some point will come here to find out what happened to Maddox, though up to now we have seen no one. Certainly one of his soldiers could have reported back—plenty of them scattered when we invaded their compound." That was the problem with inexperienced soldiers; they didn't tend to have the guts to stay put when faced with the possibility of death.

"If they knew what was good for them," Beckan said, walking past us, "they ran as far away as they could."

Baer sighed and sat up, scooting back to prop himself against the rock I sat on. The two of us watched as Beckan continued his circuit of the meadow.

"Why did you stay?" I finally asked Baer, waiting until his brother was well out of earshot.

"Can't you read that in my mind?" Baer asked, the words bitter.

"I can." I waited.

"So why don't you?"

"Because I want to hear it in your own words."

Baer pulled his knees up, propped his arms atop them, then dropped his forehead down. "There were originally five of us, you know."

I kept my surprise carefully concealed. No, I hadn't known. For all that I'd skimmed their minds, neither brother had revealed that fact. They must have buried it very, very deep. A critical piece of information they needed to keep safe, then.

“Four brothers...and one sister. When our parents died—” Baer paused, cleared his throat. “When Maddox killed them, he took all of us as his pack. What he wanted us for became evident pretty quickly. He taught us to hunt, to hurt, to kill. To be like him, though we were always careful to never reveal more power than he displayed.”

“He even taught your sister?”

“No.” Baer shook his head. “He separated her from us. She was the incentive, you see. If we performed well, we could see her. If we obeyed him, we could share a meal together.” The roughness of Baer’s voice increased. “For years he spaced the visits out more and more, making us wait longer and longer. Until he was certain he had us under his thumb.”

His words ground to a halt. I waited.

“Eventually the day arrived when we asked to see her, and he told us she was gone.”

“Gone?”

“Dead.” Baer shrugged, though his voice told me it wasn’t indifference he was displaying. “I didn’t believe him. None of us did. We stayed then because if our sibling was out there somewhere, if she ever got free, she would know where to find us. With Maddox.”

“But staying wasn’t all you did.” I knew that without him having to tell me or having to read his mind.

“No. We searched. Everywhere Maddox had ever been, everything he owned, every piece of paper we could find. For years we searched. But—”

His voice broke then, though he didn’t have to continue. I knew how the story ended.

“Do you think she’s still out there?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter, does it? Even if she was, Maddox is no longer here to be found. And neither are we.”

Beckan slowed his pace as he approached, then threw himself onto the grass just as Baer had done earlier. Gradually his breathing slowed, and as we all absorbed the night, he fell into an easy dose for what was probably the first time since his capture.

Baer stared at his brother for a long moment, then looked up at me. “What’s our future, Grim? What will happen to us?”

“That’s not any clearer than the future of the Archai,” I responded. I simply didn’t know what the future held, for any of us. All I knew was the feeling deep inside, the same feeling that had urged me to give Baer and Beckan one last taste of freedom.

Whether or not I could circumvent that destiny remained to be seen, but I’d do everything I could to try.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



RISK

I was in the habit of casually hacking the local police precincts on a regular basis, just to look for clues. Attacks. Reports of missing women. But tonight as I perused a virtual stack of reports, I cursed. Because I'd come upon one that definitely held a clue, and I'd missed it. It was my job to keep an eye on things, be the first person to spot signs of trouble, and somehow this had gotten past my radar for almost a week.

Why? Because I'd been mooning over a hot shape-shifter who probably only wanted to get in my pants.

I couldn't believe what the detective had typed in clear black-and-white for anyone to see. It wasn't only that the boys had escaped a stalker; it was how they both described him that had me worried. They'd managed to get away only because "men with glowing eyes and fangs" had interrupted their ordeal. Words like *glowing eyes and fangs* didn't come out of

victims' mouths often, and when they did, they were mostly chalked up to hysterical witnesses (if they weren't outright laughed at), but this guy had listened and actually typed the words into the report. I wasn't sure if he was incredibly smart or equally brainless.

Even if said cops could find the vampires, it wasn't like they could bring them in for questioning. They might try, but they'd never survive. I, on the other hand, knew that what the boys had seen was, in fact, real, and I knew it couldn't be Sun's men. Not only would the Archai not terrorize their victims, but they wouldn't go after them in a group. And they certainly wouldn't be fighting among themselves such that the victims could get away without any of them noticing.

No, this wasn't an Archai problem. I had a very bad feeling it was an Anigma problem.

Needing more details, I pulled out my phone and shot off a quick text before hurrying to get ready for patrol. Only there wouldn't be much time for patrol tonight. I had a business meeting with Sun tonight, and now this on top of it. Two meetings would take care of most of my time.

As I headed out the door, my phone pinged. When I brought up the text, I saw that Nick had replied. He was on duty. Good.

R2: Meet me for a quick chat? Usual place.

Chavis: Will do. Gimme 15.

Fifteen minutes later I was waiting around the corner from the bar Sun and I'd had our meeting at a few days ago. It took a couple more minutes for Nick to show up, but finally I heard his quick and heavy stride approaching from the city parking

lot down the road. I leaned against the brick wall at my back and stared into the darkness coating the sidewalk. “About time!”

Nick entered the shallow light a few feet from me. “Don’t give me shit. It hasn’t exactly been a good night.”

“No? Why not, Detective Chavis?”

“Because some sicko slashed up a prostitute down by the park and left the mess for us to clean up.” He stopped next to me, joined me in my wall leaning, and pulled a pack of Marlboros from his back pocket. If I looked at Nick Chavis objectively, I’d say he was handsome, in his late thirties but still in great shape, athletic, and with a shoulder-length, thick black hair that he hadn’t bothered to pull back tonight. Definitely handsome, though he didn’t hold a candle to Sun.

Not that that was fair. Humans came up short in every category compared to vampires.

The flare of Nick’s lighter highlighted the currently haggard cast of his face. I refrained from my usual comment on how those things would kill him, also bypassing his usual reply, *I’m betting on it*, and instead went with, “Slashed her up?”

“Him.” He took a long pull from the cig. “Throat was fucked up like you wouldn’t believe,” he said on the exhale. “Almost decapitated. Some people are animals.”

Some people were, but others weren’t people at all. And that was what had me worried.

“Any leads?”

He grunted. “No one saw anything, or so they say. We’ll see what we can get on CCTV, but it doesn’t hit as many areas near the park.”

I'd see what I could find too. Nothing like neck wounds to send my mind directly to a vampire as a suspect.

Nick smoked his cigarette in silence, and I gave him some peace for a little while. Only when he'd dropped the butt and crushed it out with his boot did I finally ask, "What can you tell me about this case with the teenage boys over in Antioch?"

"That's what you're interested in?" He gave a faint chuckle. "The kids were so terrified that they pissed their pants. Not a good night for them."

"So you don't believe they saw anything?"

"Oh, I believe they saw something." He stared across the street, watching a group of early twentysomethings give each other a hard time as they walked down the darkened road. "What they saw might have been influenced by a lot of things, including drugs, but there's no way to know for sure. We did find a blockade in that alley though."

"Just like the boys described?"

He nodded.

"So they might have been herded in there on purpose?"

Nick murmured something affirmative as a faint buzz reached my ears. He pulled his phone from his pocket. "Something hinky was going on," Nick said absently, "but hell if I know what." He swiped his phone and brought it to his ear. "Chavis."

I halfheartedly listened to another detective fill Nick in on a case I wasn't familiar with. Some burglary charge. The rest of my brain mulled over the details of the teen boys' stories that I'd read in the report.

“Uh-huh. Yeah, keep me posted.” Nick cut off the call without a goodbye. “Anyway, what else are you working on?” he asked me.

“Nothing definitive,” I said, deliberately vague. “Just poking around some stuff.”

He grunted. “Well don’t go with the glowing eyes story. That’s more like tabloid fodder.” He shoved his phone into his back pocket. “Hit me up if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

“I will.” I wouldn’t unless there was something I needed a detective’s personal insight on.

Nick straightened from the wall. “Hey, when are you gonna take me up on that dinner?”

“Wish I could, but you know”—I pushed myself upright and began a backwards walk in the opposite direction—“a girl’s got work to do.”

“A girl’s also gotta eat,” he called out as the distance increased between us. The problem was, Nick’s invitation was really more of a reflex than any true interest, a sort of masturbatory impulse. I got the feeling dates were more done out of routine than any actual pleasure in someone else’s company. Maybe it was hard to enjoy being with a woman when you saw so many bad things happening to them every night.

“I promise I’ll think about it.” I wouldn’t and likely neither would he.

“Yeah, yeah.” Nick pulled out his pack of cigarettes and turned to walk toward his car. “I’ll hear from you when I hear from you.”

“Take care, Nick.”

He waved a cigarette-holding hand in the air but kept walking. I quickly turned my back and headed into the club.

Time to meet Sun.

Tingles of anticipation shot through my belly. Half a week of not seeing the male—as Risk or Rissa—had dragged on what seemed like forever. Tonight was a business meeting, but I’d soak up every second I could get. Rounding the corner and entering the club was the work of mere minutes, each step making the nerves sharper, brighter. My breath shorter. As I approached “our booth” along the back wall, disappointment hit at the sight of three big male bodies. Two shifters sat on either side of Sun, neither of whom I’d seen before. One was Hollywood handsome with shaggy blonde hair, the other with dark skin and a hint of red to his eye color.

The two males looked decidedly unhappy with their environment, but Sun seemed distracted, staring off into space. Was he remembering meeting me here? Did he have Rissa on his mind right now?

“Who’s the company?” I asked as I slipped into the booth.

Both men frowned in my direction. Wow, tough crowd.

“Is it the tats or the nose ring?” I asked. “Maybe the hair?” I ran a hand through my streaked hair. “Although I’ve got to tell you, I don’t have the best news for you, so those frowns are going to be put to good use.”

“What do you mean,” Sun asked, “that you don’t have good news for us?”

I took a moment to eat him up with my eyes—surreptitiously, of course—while I hiked my hip to pull a thumb drive from my back pocket. “Well, not all bad news. I’ve got some names for you.”

“You do?” the darker vampire asked.

“I do.” I set the thumb drive on the table and pushed it across to Sun. He slapped a hand over the spinning drive and held it up between thumb and forefinger.

“You do know how to work that, right?”

This time it was Sun who frowned at me. I caught a quick grin from Hollywood, though.

“Of course I know how a thumb drive works.”

I held up my hands. “Just making sure. All the information is on there. Granted, it’s not a long list, but enough to start.” I tilted my head to the side, striving for inquisitive instead of nosy. “That is, unless you want me to do the background work on them? Where exactly do you plan to go from here?”

Sun palmed the thumb drive and slid it into his pocket. “That, we haven’t quite figured out, but I’ll let you know if I need help on that end.”

“Do you want me to continue to look?”

“Yes,” Hollywood growled.

I raised an eyebrow at that tone. “Good to know.”

Sun ignored the side exchange. “You said there was bad news as well?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed my thigh under the table, wondering exactly how to put this. “So...your friends from before, the ones you had me doing surveillance on? I’m pretty sure they’re back.”

“The A—” The distinct snap of teeth hitting each other sounded as the darker vampire quickly shut his mouth.

Sun cursed under his breath. “Why are you thinking that?”

“Just a couple of incidents that have caught my attention. If it is them, this set is definitely smarter—I haven’t found anything on any cameras. But the other night a couple of teenage boys were attacked by a group of big burly men that terrorized them kind of like the other guys.” I left out the “glowing eyes and fangs” part. “And tonight...”

When I paused, Hollywood asked impatiently, “What happened tonight?”

I met his gaze across the table. “Tonight a man was attacked over by the park. The police said his throat was cut so badly that it almost took his head off. I’m not sure if they are definite on a knife attack, but given how so many of those women were savaged...”

More curses. Sun rubbed his eyes as if stressed. It took everything I had not to get up from the table and move around to his side, put an arm around him, massage his temples to ease his tension. But I couldn’t do that, could I? I wasn’t the me that he knew. I wasn’t Rissa. At least not right now.

I’d never be the whole me in front of Sun.

“Did you want me to see what else I can dig up?” I asked, gripping the cracked vinyl of the seat to keep myself in place.

Sun drummed his fingers along the table. “Yes, Risk. That would be appreciated. Any...anomalies, please bring those to my attention.”

“Will do.” I moved to slide out of the booth. “You’ve got my account information for that transfer?”

Losing my mind over Sun or not, I still needed to pay my bills.

“I do.” Sun gave me a brisk smile that almost hurt after seeing him—the real him—up close and personal, without all

the trappings of whatever it was he did for the Archai. “And I have your contact for our next meeting.”

I gave him a nod and stood.

“Risk.”

Sun’s voice had me turning back to face him.

“Thank you for your help.”

I nodded again, hurrying out the back door before I could give myself away with a look back.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



THE TRAITOR

The triumph of a hundred-year wait burned in my veins as I stood at the edge of the King's Garden. The time had finally arrived, the moment I'd dreamed of, the first step in the Archai assent to become the true rulers of this world. Becoming all we were meant to be.

In order to facilitate Helios's plan, my own would finally be put into play. I closed my eyes, tucking away the satisfaction, hiding the years of useless rage. The king could rip through minds like water; calm was an absolute necessity if I wanted to succeed.

I opened my eyes and entered the garden just as the sun began to peek over the horizon. Solomon sat upon his favorite bench, watching the phoenix's golden sheen turn to fire as the light slowly illuminated it. It was a magnificent sight—one the king no longer deserved. He had failed our people, failed to

bring us into the fullness of our power after over a millennium of rule. He deserved what happened now.

Just as I deserved to deliver the blow. “Your tea, my king.”

“Ah.” Solomon gave me an absent smile. He never truly saw anyone around him except, perhaps, his son. Certainly he would never deign to show interest to one as low as me. “Thank you.”

I passed the steaming drink to Solomon’s hand, noting that the king trembled slightly. He had weakened significantly over the past week, progress I had watched with intense pleasure. We began this nightly ritual months ago, the king accepting my service as his due, allowing me to step in as his relationship with his son deteriorated. If only he had understood that he was accepting his death at the same time. My soul yearned for him to know what was happening, for his eyes to be opened to see that he was no longer the one in control of his fate, much less our people’s.

That revelation would have to wait a little while longer, unfortunately.

Minutes passed in silence, Solomon sipping his tea, his gaze fixated on the phoenix while I stood to one side, waiting. My heartbeat accelerated as the time ticked away, moving both of us closer and closer to our deliverance. Or doom. Anticipation quickened in my gut as I struggled to control it. But thoughts of the future swirled in my head. The Archai were the most powerful creatures to ever walk the Earth, and yet where were we? Holed up in caves, stuck belowground, hiding from mere humans as if they were any kind of threat. Solomon wanted us stuck here, more concerned about calm and quiet than fulfilling our destiny. He had guided us nowhere, to nothing. It was time to make way for a new future,

one that would see all of us elevated, not only those of the royal line or those that served the council. Every Archai would rise to rule over the world. All it would take was the destruction of our king.

As I watched, Solomon's grip became more and more lax on his cup, until finally his fingers released their hold and the cup fell to the grass at his feet. Solomon startled.

"Let me help you, my king." I moved to his side and picked up the fallen vessel, slipping it into the pouch slung across my chest. No need to leave evidence behind.

"Tired," Solomon murmured. The word slurred on his tongue.

"It has been a long day," I assured him. "Perhaps you would allow me to assist you to your chamber."

"Yes." He raised that shaking hand, and I gave him my own, used my strength to pull him from the bench. The body that had ruled us with an iron fist now felt fragile, and I realized that beneath his robes, the king's once undefeatable strength had diminished. I hid my smile at the knowledge.

"Let us go," I urged him, forcing my voice to remain gentle. Holding one hand in mine, I circled his waist with the other and guided Solomon slowly from the garden into the throne room. Fitting that the last two sights of Solomon's life would be his phoenix and his throne. Traversing the massive room took a long time, over which the king leaned more and more heavily against me, his body fading quickly. Finally we entered his suite, trailing with care through the rooms until we reached his bedchamber. Solomon remained silent.

At the side of his bed, I stilled. "We should undress you, King Solomon." In these final moments, with the poison he

had ingested incapacitating him, he should be at his most vulnerable, not wearing the royal robes he no longer deserved. The king did not argue, merely standing mute as I stripped the vibrant purple cloth from his body. What remained was a simple silk sheath, much like a nightgown, to cover his nakedness. Seated on the edge of the bed, he waited as I removed his slippers, then allowed me to assist him to lie in the center of the mattress. He folded his hands over his stomach with a deep sigh, as if relieved to settle into his rest, but I could not allow him to sleep.

“Solomon.”

Although his body did not move, the king’s eyes fluttered open.

I drew my sword. “It is time.”

“Time?” Confusion creased his weathered brow.

“For you to step down from your throne.”

“What?”

I turned my back without an answer. Imagining his aging eyes following me, I crossed to the long mirror at the wall opposite the foot of the bed. There, in its protective sheath, hung the king’s sword. As I removed it, the golden phoenix etched into the hilt reflected the candlelight shining in the room.

“Such a beautiful symbol, isn’t it?” I asked, holding the sword in the air for Solomon to see. “How long has it been since you’ve used it?”

The king tried—and failed—to shake his head.

“That is right.” Swinging the weapon sent a soft whoosh through the room. “You haven’t used this sword in years.

Decades, even. Most likely more than a century. Why?”

Gurgling came from the bed, louder the nearer I got.

“Because you were weak, Solomon.” I stood over the bed now, staring down at the impotent figurehead of the Archai. “You loved your pleasure more than you loved your people. And here we are, stuck in the dirt.” Holding up the sword, I shook my head. “No more.”

Solomon eyed the sword, trying desperately to move, to bring up his hand to protect himself. The hand flopped onto the mattress, dead, just as the king would soon be.

I brought the tip of Solomon’s sword to the hollow of his throat. “I have judged you for your crimes against our people, for failing in your duties as king to elevate the Archai above the rest of the world, to bring us into the fullness of our power. You have been found guilty, King Solomon. And for your inaction, you have been sentenced to death.”

The poison had crept through the king’s veins and into his muscles. Now, at the moment of his judgment, his tongue failed him. A gurgle of protest sounded in his throat, but no words escaped his slack mouth. Nothing he could say would save him. Even his mind had frozen, telepathy beyond him while I lifted his lifeless hands, placing his fingers carefully along the sharp blade. Blood dripped onto the steel.

There was no cry for help in the moment of his death. His eyes met mine, and what I saw there was resignation. He’d already given up like the coward he was.

Dropping his hands, I grasped the hilt and pierced his skin. Sliced through cartilage, through muscle. When the hardness of bone resisted the sword’s forward movement, I smiled in anticipation.

“May you spend eternity in hell, Solomon.”

I shoved forward. As his spinal cord split, a bright flash of light filled the room. Solomon’s body disintegrated in an instant, leaving nothing but ash behind to scatter the bedclothes that had once held a king.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



SUN

I dreamed of Rissa, her body against mine, her mouth warm and wet around my invasion. A moan filled the air—hers or mine, I couldn't tell. Moving restlessly against her, I savored the feel of her kiss, her breasts, her belly against my skin. Her hot core welcomed me. I could never be close enough to her, not even when I was inside her. My soul craved hers. My animal roared with the need to take her, to become one in spirit as well as in body. I reached for her, desperate, and just as our souls clicked together like two puzzle pieces fitting perfectly—

“Sun!”

A hard hand gripped my shoulder and shook me awake. I growled, shooting up to confront—

“Grim?”

My friend stood over me, one hand on my shoulder, the other up to ward off any attack he might earn. Good thing, too, because my fist was on a trajectory to make contact when I fully realized what was occurring and pulled back. “Shit!”

“Now you’re awake.” He stepped back, allowing me space to come fully aware, shaking off the haze of sleep.

I was breathing heavily, the abrupt shift from dream to reality throwing me off-kilter. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I need you awake, Sun.”

His tone warned me that whatever had brought him to my suite while I slept, it was bad. “Give me five,” I croaked.

He nodded and retreated to the living area. I made a quick trip to the bathroom, then dressed before joining him. When I walked into the living area, however, it wasn’t only Grim that awaited me. Basile stood beside him, James at the opposite shoulder. All three males’ faces were stark, their expressions unreadable.

I stopped just inside the door, taking a moment to assess them. Finally I asked, “What’s going on?” Had there been an attack?

Grim cleared his throat. It might be the only moment I’d ever known him to hesitate. “The king is dead.”

Shock shot through me, and I wavered on my feet. “What?”

“It is true, Sun,” Basile said. His body was rigid, his tension palpable. “His bed was discovered this evening, containing only his ashes. And his sword.”

And his sword. The words rang in my ears, echoing in a chamber of denial.

Without a word I crossed to the sofa on shaky legs and gingerly took a seat, afraid the furniture beneath me might disappear much as the foundation of my life had. I had considered many things as I'd prepared to speak with Grim, but this hadn't even been a thought. Now it was reality. I dropped my head into my hands. "Gone?"

My warriors did not speak. Perhaps they understood the complex swirl of emotions that suddenly rose within me. Grim could certainly read it, though hopefully not all of it. He wouldn't understand.

Or maybe he would. The male could read minds, after all. Perhaps he'd read mine long ago, mined the secrets of kings and princes and phoenixes. Secrets the royal family had kept hidden as long as we had been royal. Secrets like the phoenix that couldn't die, rising from the ashes of death by sheer force of will.

Will my father had chosen not to exercise.

Grief ached within me at the knowledge. After all, Solomon was my father before all else. He had sired me, and though he had never been loving, he had always *been*. But unlike when I'd lost my mother so long ago, grief was not my only emotion. No, mingled inside the grief was regret that our relationship had never been what I'd wanted it to be. Solomon had not been created to be a father; he'd been created to be king, and nothing else could interfere with that, even love.

As if the situation wasn't complicated enough, I also felt relief. Maybe I was more like my father than I wanted to admit, because his passing meant I no longer had to fight him for the rule of our people.

Maybe that had been his final gift to me.

I felt a smothering sense of weight as the mantle of kingship settled on my shoulders. Now there was no one to fall back on. There was no contingency. The ultimate responsibility was mine and mine alone. Though I'd anticipated it, prepared for it, sometimes longed for it during my long life, the moment was now upon me.

And that knowledge was suddenly, unexpectedly terrifying.

“Breathe, Sun.”

Grim's words filtered through the fog of emotion clouding my mind. I hadn't realized I wasn't, actually, but he was right. I sucked in a lungful of air and tried to blow away my panic as I released it back into the world.

“I'm not ready,” I admitted quietly. To no one else would I ever have uttered those words, but these were the males who would carry me forward, provide the support I needed to rule. These three males, above all others, I knew I could trust with the truth.

It was James, the oldest of us all, who responded.

“You are, my king.”

The title nearly sent me over the edge. I looked up, feeling wild all of a sudden, but James caught my eye, his firm gaze centering me.

“You are ready,” he said again. “You've been leading us for months now. The only thing that has changed is the title.”

“But—”

“You are not alone,” James said, his assurance gathering the scattered pieces of my psyche and pulling them back

together. “No matter how much it might feel like you are. Solomon was not alone either, though he accepted no one’s assistance or input. You will be a different type of king, and for our time, I dare say a better one.”

I took the words into my soul, turning them over, considering their rightness. Though the male in me still wondered, my animal rose beneath my skin, his confidence agreeing with Grim and James both. I closed my eyes and reached for him, a silent communion that I shared with no one but my phoenix, and let his certainty calm me.

My warriors waited until I opened my eyes to speak again.

“We must prepare,” Basile said.

“Yes.” I stood. “Just...give me a few minutes.” My mind spun with all that must be done. “I’ll address the clan first, then begin the pyre.”

“My king—”

I turned my shining eyes on my second in command. “I appreciate the respect, but as you said, I will be a different king than my father. Please just...don’t call me that, okay? I can handle it from my people, but I need you to be my friend and advisor still, Basile. Not my subject. All right?”

His faint smile approved. “All right, Sun.”

I nodded. “I will complete the pyre myself. I owe him that much.” I would not allow anyone else to construct my father’s memorial, no matter what tradition declared. “In just a moment.”

Nods followed me as I returned to my bedroom, moving automatically, trying not to think. I gathered fresh clothes, more formal clothes than the fatigues I now wore, moved into the bathroom again, and shut myself in. After a shower, I

dressed. With a damp towel I wiped the steam from the mirror, then spent a long moment staring into my reflection. My eyes swirled with color, and as I watched them, I replayed moments from my childhood, the few I could remember of my father. Memories from my training years when he'd finally taken an interest in my status. In fact, as I sifted through the years, all I found were times my father took me in hand—no personal interactions, no caring moments. The thought doubled my grief. No one's life should be bereft of love and intimacy, and yet as I looked to the past, I couldn't detect a single moment of true connection between my own father and myself.

Would my life be the same? Would I allow it to be?

It was that thought I held in my mind, the grief of wasted time that ached inside me as I took a dagger in hand and brought it to my face. With a firm pressure I pushed the knife into my cheek and dragged it down and across, carving a mourning cut into my skin. A second and a third followed on that cheek before I moved to the other side and repeated the action, engraving the pain of what could have been with blood and steel across my face.

After I cleaned up, I donned my royal robes and exited the bathroom. In the living area, I faced my males no longer as their prince, but as their king. "I want to see his room first."

Grim led the way. What I hoped to see, I did not know, but the sight of royal purple blankets scattered with gray ash did not bring me any closure, nor did the royal sword in their midst, blood staining the edges where my father's hands had last grasped. It only amplified my emptiness. Looking to Julius, my father's personal manservant for as long as I could remember, I bowed my head in respect. "Julius, please collect

his ashes personally and bring them to the King's Garden for me."

"Yes, sire."

I forced myself not to wince at the attribution. It had always struck me as medieval, even worse than the respectful *my king*. The latter I could tolerate, but I would see to it that the former died a quick and silent death as soon as possible. All I said now was a simple, "Thank you."

As we re-entered the hallway and began the long walk toward the Arena, I turned to James. "What preparations need to be made?"

He understood that I referred to the transfer of power, not the memorial. We'd had plenty of funerals, as the humans called them, through the centuries, but no rising kings since Solomon had become our leader.

"Very few right now," James replied. "A procession in the Arena will suffice, with an announcement of the king's loss and your rise. You will have a coronation, of course, but that will be a much bigger event and planned for a later time. That is all."

"It won't be all," I countered. "If my kingship is to be any different than Solomon's, it must begin from the get-go. We will hold court after the coronation. I want the people to have direct access to me on a monthly basis, to bring their concerns and opinions."

I could feel the warriors' agreement and pleasure surround me as we approached the Arena. In front of us, I saw crowds entering the room, many of the people looking my way as they became aware of my presence.

"Basile, James, could you give us a moment?"

The males nodded and moved forward, blocking the path to give Grim and me some privacy. I turned my back to the crowd, facing my best friend.

“I am proud to stand at your side today, Sun.”

Grim’s hood hid most of his expression, but his words held a faith in me that I took to heart.

“I did not wake this morning prepared for this, Grim.” I thought back to the dream he’d awakened me from, and an ache settled in my chest. It would be days before I could get away to see Rissa again. No matter what Grim or anyone else thought, I did need the distraction of her, if for no other reason than to give me respite from the pressure of my current position.

My phoenix raised his head inside me, huffing out a breath. His certainty in Rissa, his belief that she was important, that we needed her, communicated itself to me.

“None of us know what we’ll face in a day, my friend. But you knew it would eventually come to this. And I cannot think of anyone I would trust more to follow.”

“I don’t want to do this alone.”

He settled a hand on my arm. “You aren’t.”

But it wasn’t Grim or Basile or James in my mind just then. It was Rissa. A tremor rippled through me—shock, surprise? I wasn’t sure, but whatever the emotion, the vision was impossible. Rissa was human, not Archai. She could never walk beside me as queen.

My phoenix thundered in protest. The scent and taste of smoke filled my mouth.

Grim’s eyes narrowed on me. “What was that thought?”

Grim would never intentionally intrude on my mind without permission, a fact I was grateful for in that moment. A female on the mind of the king? And a human female, at that. She could be considered fair game for examination as a threat to our people. I would never put Rissa in that position. I needed her for me, not for my people.

“Nothing to be concerned about.” Rissa was separate from my life with the Archai. She belonged to me alone.

“I hope not,” Grim said. “But should you need to discuss it, I will keep your confidence, Sun.”

For the first time ever, I doubted Grim’s words, not because he didn’t believe them—I was a hundred percent certain he did—but because on waking this morning, my life and priorities had been forcibly changed whether either of us liked it or not. Some parts of my life must now be kept separate, safe, where before they would have been considered inconsequential. Grim might not have thought that far ahead, but eventually he would.

With that thought, the first panel of a wall between myself and my former world settled into place. I squared my shoulders, took a deep, calming breath. Then, with one last look to Grim, I turned to face my people. And the chant that rose as I walked a path through them into the Arena only added to that barrier:

“The King is dead; long live the King!”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN



DEMETRI

I entered the dorm a couple of nights after the crowning, my heart racing and my palms actually sweating. I should wait, I knew I should wait, but something inside me couldn't bear to, no matter how nervous I was. Nervous enough that Lyris took one look at me across the room and smirked.

"What's got you so nervous, Dragon?"

"You know what's got me nervous." I'd never thought I'd be nervous over a female, not like this. I'd had relationships before, but no one had drawn me like Imogen. No one had ever felt this important. Who wouldn't be nervous knowing they were taking the next step in a relationship like that, knowing they could mess it up?

Archai males were confident in most things, but when it came to females? Not so much.

“You’re not going to mess up,” Lyris said in my head, letting me know I’d been broadcasting her way without realizing it. *“Now get over there and ask her to dinner, for goodness’ sake.”*

I took a deep breath at my twin’s command, and when I let it out, I felt my body relax. Lyris knew me so well; she would know how important this was. If she had faith in me...

“Demetri,” she grumbled in my head.

“I’m going, I’m going!”

Imogen sat across the wide room on her bunk, a book in her hand, a slight smile playing across her lips. She looked so innocent like that, so young. And yet my soul cried out for hers, no matter how long a life I’d lived.

I reached the edge of the bed, and Imogen looked up.

“Demetri.”

Her voice in my head was like a touch, so intimate it made my body instantly hard. *“Imogen.”*

A frown curved that sweet mouth. *“What’s wrong?”*

I cleared my throat. “Nothing,” I said aloud, trying to give myself some breathing space. It had been a long while since I’d struggled to hide desire from a female.

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

She waved a hand in the air. “All...worried.”

I had to smile at myself then. Shake my head. *“You read me pretty well, you know?”* She’d proved that the past few days as we’d begun communicating telepathically. Touching her mind could be overwhelming, unlocking a vulnerability in

me that I hadn't experienced with anyone, including Lyris. But it also felt right. Perfect, actually. And as familiar as my communication with my twin. Odd how you could know someone a couple thousand years and know someone a handful of months, and yet you were completely at home with both of them.

"Demetri."

"I'm being ridiculous."

She patted the mattress in invitation. *"Really? How?"*

Clearing my throat one more time, I sat on the edge of the bed. "Imogen, would you join me for last meal?"

She was quiet so long I began to think she really was going to turn me down, but what she said was, "Is it allowed?"

Valid question. We were adults, but we weren't exactly free right now. There were restrictions where the women were concerned, for their safety and the peace of the clan. Imogen had not left the dorm since she'd arrived. "Well," I said slowly, "Sun is in another meeting right now, so I can't ask him, but I have Grim's permission and, probably more importantly, Lyris's."

Imogen glanced over at my twin, who wiggled her fingers at us.

"Now I just need yours. Only if you want to," I assured her quickly.

Please want to.

"I do." Her words were rushed as well; then a pretty blush darkened her cheeks. "I, um, definitely want to have dinner with you."

Relief had a tremor running down my spine. “Good.” I held my hand out. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“My quarters.”

Her hand fit perfectly in mine, as if her body had been made to be my counterpart. We had so many obstacles between us—my age, her status, the clan issues, the fact that she’d been terrorized. I had gathered from things Lyris had said (and not said) that Imogen had not been raped, but I wasn’t naive enough to believe nothing had happened to her in Maddox’s camp. I’d never asked her, nor would I ask Nala, but I hoped, someday, that Imogen would tell me herself.

The Warriors Council had suites in a particular part of the lair, not far from Sun’s and Solomon’s quarters. In the hallway outside the dorm, I laid a cloak over Imogen’s shoulders, put the hood over her head to obscure her identity, and led her to my rooms, ignoring the curiosity of clan members as we passed. Ignoring the angry glances from males who looked at the figure I guided through the halls, noted her smaller stature, and wanted her without even seeing her, as if she were a piece of meat to be handed around instead of a female who deserved to be treasured. I made note of those glances, though, knowing I would pass the names on to Grim. It was too much of a risk to expose any of our females to men with that kind of attitude, whether they’d been through Lyris’s proposed classes or not.

At my quarters, I opened the door and gestured for Imogen to precede me inside, then followed her, closing the door behind me. Imogen removed the cloak and dropped it onto a chair, her head turning to take in my home, seeming to catch every detail. I watched her, soaking in details myself. Her light brown skin spoke of her mixed heritage, creamy and smooth

across the delicate bone structure that screamed out for protection, though I knew from our training that she could stand on her own, at least against humans. Dark hair shone even in the dim light of the lair as it lay around her shoulders. Her body was petite but tall for a female, and I knew she would fit well against me. Just the thought of having her in my arms made my hands want to tremble, but I shook them out and strode toward the kitchen to distract myself.

“You have your own kitchen?”

I shrugged. “I know it’s unusual, but I enjoy making my own food. And honestly, sometimes there are just too many people in the food hall.”

“I can imagine. We haven’t eaten there yet, but being in the dorms can be similar. Sometimes I lock myself in one of the bathrooms and take a long soak in the tub just to be by myself for a little while.”

I pulled out a small stool at the end of the counter, and Imogen took a seat. “Do you resent being stuck in the dorms right now?” I asked.

“Sometimes. All of us do. I mean, if you’re the good guys, why do we have to be hidden away?”

“That’s a really good question.”

“Can you answer it?”

I grabbed food from the fridge and cabinets while I considered my answer. When there was nothing left to gather, I moved to the counter and planted my hands on it, facing her. “You know we have very long lives.”

“Yes.”

“And that there are few females born to the Archai.”

“Lyris did explain that.”

I nodded my head, hesitated. “Did you know I’m almost two millennia old?”

Her gasp said no. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” *And yes, that makes me feel like a lecher when I look at you and want you the way that I do.*

Imogen propped an elbow on the counter and leaned her chin on her hand. “What’s it like to be so old?”

I got busy preparing the chicken. “You mean practically decrepit?”

Her smile could light up the night. “You don’t look decrepit to me.”

The admiring way she was eyeing me literally had me puffing out my chest. If I wasn’t so proud of attracting her attention, I’d be laughing at myself hard right about now. “And you’re practically a babe in comparison.”

“Trust me, Demetri, I’m not a baby, no matter how young I am compared to you.”

I had a hard time imagining that. As I chopped and sliced, I considered my next words. “Knowing how many years I’ve been on this earth, how many years our males can live, can you imagine being alive that long and knowing that you likely will never have a mate?”

“But...” Imogen tipped her head up to meet my eyes, and I could read her curiosity mixed with confusion. “You guys date, don’t you? You don’t...um...go 2000 years without...”

Her blush was so damn sexy. “Without sex?”

“Yes.”

“No, not typically. We do date, or some of us do. We have relationships, some of them long-lasting. But it isn’t the same as the soul-deep connection of a matebond.”

Imogen dropped her gaze to her hands, tangled together on the counter. “Have you ever had a mate?”

I do now.

And just like that, the truth clicked into place. One part of my mind was screaming at me to answer her, to not just stand there, staring. The rest of me was mute, stunned into silence by the magnitude of the realization. Because I’d known Imogen was special, but somehow I hadn’t realized she was that special. Maybe it was simply the passing of the years, the slow realization that a relationship much like humans had, without the bonding of souls, was all I would ever attain, but I hadn’t truly recognized the change until this moment.

“Demetri? Demetri, what is it?”

I shook myself back to reality. “I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t mean to ask a difficult question.”

“It’s...not difficult.” More like a lightbulb had been turned on inside me, blazing behind my eyes, dazzling me with its intense glory. I simply wasn’t sure how to answer her.

When I continued to hesitate—or more likely, stare—Imogen cleared her throat. Stood. “Maybe I’d better...”

“No.” I reached out for her. “No, don’t go. Wait just a moment.” I hastily scrubbed my hands, then abandoned the food to round the counter, clasp her hand, and lead her to the couch. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to check out. I just... something struck me, and...”

Imogen sat next to me when I tugged her down. “What struck you?”

I hesitated once more, afraid I’d scare her. Afraid I’d say the wrong thing. Lyris’s words at the Warrior’s Council meeting came back to me.

“Please tell me, Demetri.”

“I will.” I had to; it was only fair. “But before I do that...I want you to know, if at any time you aren’t comfortable, all you have to do is walk out the door. You don’t have to worry —”

“I am not uncomfortable.” Her brown eyes gazed up at me, glistening with both appreciation and a touch of impatience. She wasn’t all sweetness and light—she had a strong core, and I needed to remember that.

I stared at the precious gift I had been given, praying that she was being as open and honest as she seemed. Without thought my hand came up to cup her cheek, my thumb stroking across her so-soft skin. “I’d never want to scare you.”

She smiled then. “I would never want you to scare me. But you don’t. You haven’t from the moment I saw you in Maddox’s compound. I’m a truth teller, remember? I know if you’re speaking the truth. I know if you’re lying to me. But I don’t need my gift to know you’ve never lied to me.”

“I haven’t.”

“So what are you not telling me?”

I gathered my courage in both my hands, ripped out my heart, and extended it in offering to her. “You’re my mate.”

Those beautiful eyes went wide. “H-how can you be sure of that?”

My thumb was still caressing her skin, and I focused on it, afraid of what I would see in her eyes. “I just know. My animal knows.”

She reached for my hand, drew it down from her face to twine her fingers between mine. For long moments she stared at our joined hands, not speaking. Then, “I don’t understand.”

I wasn’t certain I had the words to explain. Matebonds were instinctive to my people, so much so that it seemed the knowledge of them was embedded in our collective consciousness, but Imogen needed that knowledge now. “A matebond is not merely a physical connection; it is also a spiritual one. A couple may have sex, but it doesn’t connect their souls. A matebond does.”

A frown wrinkled her brow. “How?”

“Good question.” Very good. “The way it has been explained to me, it is a seeking or yearning of one soul for another. Your mind reaches for mine, your soul reaches for mine, and when I reciprocate, we come together like two puzzle pieces that make one whole. In that moment we know everything there is to know about one another, our entire selves exposed fully to the other. Complete understanding. A kind of connection that is both unique and permanent.”

“Sounds...wonderful, if a bit nebulous.”

I couldn’t help chuckling. “Since I’ve never experienced it before, I can only tell you what was told to me.”

“But you know I am the one you can form this connection with?”

I felt the certainty of it deep inside me. “I do.” Taking a deep breath, I risked it all. “I knew...have known...for a while that you were special, but... I guess I never thought it would

happen for me, not after so long. But it has. You are my mate, Imogen.”

Dropping my hands, she stood and began a walk around the room, running her palms up and down her jean-clad thighs. “That’s like, no pressure whatsoever, isn’t it?”

I hadn’t really thought about it that way, but I guessed she was right. “I didn’t mean to pressure you. It just...surprised me. I’ve waited so long.”

She glanced my way, and her gaze softened with empathy. “I’m sorry you’ve been alone, Demetri.”

I sensed that I wasn’t the one hesitating now. “But...”

Her head tipped to one side, considering. “Not really a but. But...” A smile curved her sweet lips. “This is like some paranormal romance novel, you know? Male sees female, knows she’s his mate, they kiss and ride off into the sunset together.”

“If you say so.” I was no expert on romance novels.

She snickered at that. “I do.” More walking. I watched her as she rubbed her palms and thought things through. “So does this mean I have no choice?” She stopped across the room. “Can you force me?”

“No, absolutely not. I would never force you to be my mate. You always have a choice. Always.” Something else occurred to me, and I rushed to share. “A matebond can only be initiated by the female, Imogen. I can’t force it on you. It is you who must reach for me, and then I may accept.”

The rubbing stopped. “Would...” She cleared her throat. “Would you accept?”

My hand went to my heart. “In a heartbeat.”

She raised her head, and we stared into each other's eyes. I wondered what she saw in mine. In hers I saw eternity—our eternity, together.

I took a deep breath. Let it out slowly. Gave her a gentle smile. “This is so much harder than I thought it would be.”

“What is?”

“Being with you. Going slow. I'm nearly 2000 years old, and I can't figure out what's okay to say and what's not. What might scare you off; what might make you happy.”

I swore I saw the spark of tears in her eyes. “Do you want to make me happy?”

“I want it more than I can say.”

“Then stop worrying.” Crossing the room, each step threatening to stop my breath, Imogen approached slowly, then sat on the couch again, her knees touching mine. When her hands came up to cup my face, to hold me still for her stare, I swear I lost my heart all over again. “You make me happy. You have from the moment you first spoke to me, when I thought nothing could make me happy ever again. I don't want you to walk on tiptoes. Just be you, and I'll be me.”

She leaned over, and her lips met mine, soft and seeking and so damn wonderful. I couldn't help but open my mouth, inviting her in, desperate for the intimacy of her kiss. Her tongue slid along my lips and inside, and I thought for a moment I would pass out with the rush of pleasure that hit my body. It was so good, so right. So much so that it made me dizzy. Then my hands were in her hair and I was taking her kiss instead of receiving it, desperate for every last touch and taste I could get. After nearly two thousand years, the dream I

hadn't dared to dream for so long had come true. She was here, in my arms.

And I was never letting her go.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



SUN
“**D**emetri did what?”

My words were more roar than question. Grim sighed where he stood across from my father’s desk. My desk now, but I still hadn’t quite wrapped my head around that yet. “I knew you were going to react like this.”

“Of course I’m going to react like this!” I stood, rounded the desk, and began to pace. “You know how careful we have to be with these women, with the whole situation here. Why is it that when I need things to be quiet and calm, you let them go and blow up in my face?”

“This is not going to blow up in your face.”

I scoffed at the blatant lie. “You know it sure as hell is.”

“Sun—”

“Grim!”

I stopped, forced myself back under control. The pressure cooker I'd been in for the past three days was threatening to explode, and I couldn't afford that, not as king. Taking a deep breath, I let it out and turned to face my Aomai.

Giving him a steely glance, I waved toward the door. "Just go get James and Nala."

Grim snarled in my direction, his animal—or whatever it was the male had hidden inside him; none of us knew, not even me—flashing in his eyes. "Are you commanding me?"

Because no one would dare command him, even the king. This time I was the one who snarled. "I am sending you out of my sight before I strangle you."

Grim considered that for a moment, then seemed to accept it. No commands, but wanting to murder him was fine. Figure the hell out of that one. He turned with a flourish of that damn cape, pulling the hood over his head as he walked through the door.

Jesus. One of my warriors dating a new female. I was never going to hear the end of this shit.

Needing something, anything to calm me, I jerked my phone out of my back pocket and sent a quick text to the only lifeline outside of this total craziness.

Sun: Hey, what's going on?

Keep it casual. Keep it casual.

Rissa: Nothing much. Hanging out with a friend.

Fuck. My grip tightened on the phone till it creaked. *Definitely keep it casual, dickhead. No unleashing your green-*

eyed phoenix to devour said friend, and no, you can't ask if the friend is male or female.

Too bad. I really wanted to know, and I was king, after all. I was entitled, even if she didn't know it.

Sun: Hanging out with who? Doing what?

That didn't sound like interrogating, did it?

Rissa: Watching a movie with a girlfriend.

She meant girlfriend in the "friend who's a girl" sense, right? I typed a quick text asking about the movie instead of demanding to know if she was seeing anyone but me, no matter the gender.

Rissa: Buffy the Vampire Slayer. She absolutely kicks ass.

I frowned. What was it with humans and their fascination with vampire movies? I didn't get it. Especially not that one.

Sun: Totally unbelievable. Like top ten worst, Rissa. What are you thinking?

Rissa: That it's hilarious. You do understand that the woman is usually the victim, but in this movie, despite it being a comedy, she's the one who overcomes the monster?

Yes, I got it. That didn't mean I liked it.

Rissa: Or maybe you just don't have any sense of humor.

Of course I had a sense of humor. And then I looked around the room—the king's study—and thought about my life and realized maybe she was right.

Sun: I'm not answering that.

And then I added several emojis just to prove I wasn't some old fogey. Did old fogeys add emojis to prove they weren't old fogeys?

Forget it. I probably was an old fogey. In fact, old fogeys were probably the only ones who used the phrase *old fogey*.

Sun: I wish you were hanging out with me.

I held my breath as the bouncy dots did their little dance.

Rissa: I do too.

More bouncy dots told me she was typing something else, or maybe typing and deleting something else, but what finally came through was:

Rissa: Any chance I can see you soon?

The sense of relief that washed through me was ridiculous. I was a king now, for God's sake. I was mooning over a human, and that was barely forgivable in my world. But the need to see her, to hold her, kiss her...

I reached down to adjust myself.

Sun: I really hope so. Soon. Some things have come up at...

What did I call it?

Sun: Work. But I'm hoping to get away soon.

Soon was as ambiguous as it got, but it was the best I had. It could be tomorrow, it could be a month from now, but if I had to keep the connection through text until I could actually

see Rissa face-to-face again, then I would do it. I would do anything to make sure she didn't forget me.

The door opened behind me. With my back turned, I typed a quick goodbye to Rissa and put my phone away. When I faced the door, James was coming in, his figure tall and strong despite the white hair on his head. Most shifters did not go white until their last few years, but James showed no sign of slowing down in the least.

A younger psych entered seconds later, escorted by Grim—average height, rounded figure, with dark eyes that seemed to take in everything around her and still hide the mysteries of the world in their depths. Nala was a gifted empath, the reason she had chosen to take on the task of living in the human world long enough to gain her doctorate. Though many scoffed at human education, she believed there was true value in learning to help her people work through emotional and mental issues when many of them valued only the physical.

Her insights could be effective in detecting trouble before it cropped up, as well, like it had been in this instance. I made a mental note to discuss with Grim where else Nala might help us as I watched James turn to the young psych and greet her.

He held out his hand. “Nala, it is a pleasure to formally meet you.”

Nala smiled, her rounded cheeks giving her a slightly cherubic look. Why did so many of our people look so damn young?

“And you, James. Thank you for volunteering.” She shook his hand, continuing to speak. “While males shouldn't need the validation of another male to do what's right, I have found that, in the long run, it saves a lot of time if I simply start with the assumption that they do.”

James laughed. “Of course. We are hardheaded.”

I cleared my throat, not because I had some insatiable need to be the center of attention, but so I could get this meeting going and over with. Maybe if it went fast enough, I could sneak a few hours with Rissa later. “I wanted to bring the two of you together to discuss what we need to do for the upcoming classes.” I shot Grim a sour look. “Apparently we need to start sooner than we thought, given a certain situation that has arisen.”

“Oh?” James’s eyebrows rose.

“You are referring to Imogen and Demetri,” Nala said in what seemed to be her usual calm voice.

“I am.” I continued to glare at Grim.

He held out his hands. “Hey, don’t get mad at me because one of your warriors has raging hormones.”

Nala laughed, seeming unconcerned over something I was very concerned about. “Males are not the only ones who can have raging hormones,” she put in before turning back to me. “But I do understand your concern. However, my king, I believe that this could also be a positive for our clan.”

I kept myself from wincing at the title and gestured for everyone to take a seat before rounding the desk to do the same. “How so?”

Nala folded her hands on top of her crossed legs, regarding me serenely. I wondered if anything ever ruffled her. “This is a time of uncertainty, a time when upheaval in our society could lead to severe disruption. But if our people have something to rally around, something to celebrate, that can pull them together instead of tear them apart.”

“Even the males?” James asked.

She nodded. “Even the males. It can give them hope. And if we start the classes immediately,” she added, “they can see actual progress instead of only knowing that they may meet a female at some undetermined time in the future.”

“Some of them definitely won’t be meeting up with females,” Grim said. “We’ve got a few hotheads that can’t seem to keep their—”

James cleared his throat, frowning in Grim’s direction.

Again, Nala laughed. “I get your drift. And that’s part of what this class will identify, is those we need to keep an extra eye on.”

“Nala,” I said, drawing her attention back to me. “Knowing what you know about the shifter mind, what are the chances of the Anigma returning? How long will they leave us alone?”

“Not long,” she said bluntly. “In fact I’d be surprised if they aren’t here already.”

I looked to James. Nala seemed to understand that look. “There have been signs, haven’t there?” she asked.

I sighed. “There have. Not definitive ones, but I’m not waiting for those to go on the offensive. We must keep the clan safe.”

She shifted in her seat. “This brings up something else I wanted to discuss with you.”

“Anything,” I assured her.

She paused as if considering her words. “We have some possible psychs under surveillance, mostly blood relatives that we’ve tracked down from the females we have already adopted.”

I kind of liked that term, *adopted*. We certainly would never have taken these females away from their natural families, but that we could provide one for them in their time of need felt good.

“I’m familiar,” I said. “What about them?”

She shifted again. Nervous, I realized. What could make this self-assured psych nervous?

“Most of them, as I said, are blood related and have no idea of what is going on. But there is one...”

“The female who was attacked a few months ago?” Lyris had made sure the female arrived safely at a hospital, but because she had not been bitten, we had not brought her in. Better to observe, we felt at the time.

“Yes.” Nala hesitated. “I’m concerned in particular, with the Anigma more than likely having access to the records that were available to Maddox’s contingent, that Raine might pop up on their radar again.”

“Raine is the female?”

“Yes.”

I could see her point. “And what would you like to do about that?”

Nala straightened her shoulders. “I’d like permission to approach her.”

“Not bring her in?” Grim asked.

“No.” She turned her head to answer him. “I understand that it adds to the danger to our people, but these women deserve to have things explained to them first, to have a chance to understand and choose before they are snatched out of their lives.”

“And if they don’t choose to join us?” James asked quietly. His ancient eyes swirled with understanding.

Nala spread her hands out to her sides. “I honestly don’t know. I’m not naive enough to believe they can protect themselves as lifelong targets of the Anigma. I only know that my heart and my gut tell me this is the way to proceed.”

Rissa popped into my head. What would it be like for her if she were approached, if she found out her entire life was changing with no choice in the matter? Not that she was a candidate, no matter how much I wished she were one of us and not fully human. “I understand your point, and your concern, Nala,” I told the psych. “I don’t want to rush into this decision. I would like a couple of days to think about it. Can you give me that?”

She seemed surprised that I would ask. “Of course, my king.”

I couldn’t hold back the frown then. I tried to minimize it but, if Grim’s expression was anything to go by, didn’t succeed. “Good. Now let’s get down to details about what we need to teach our males.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



RISK

I'd heard from Sun several times in the past week—as Rissa, not Risk—but given the news I'd delivered to him and his warriors Saturday at the club, I assumed he was busy putting out fires. But he'd texted tonight while I was watching a movie with Raine, and now I waited on what I was beginning to think of as my bench outside the Hermitage for him to arrive.

Eagerness rushed through my veins. I hadn't forgotten the feel of Sun's kiss, the sensation of his arms capturing me, holding me close, lifting me to meet him. Holding me off the ground like some he-man—and yes, I was female enough to go weak in the knees at the thought of some man literally sweeping me off my feet. When I thought about it, it was hard to describe how it felt to be so completely taken over, that not even my weight was my own anymore. Complete relief. Complete trust.

And that's what terrified me. Because I knew that sex would just make that emotion even stronger. I wasn't ready, not then and probably not now. Luckily Sun seemed to accept that.

Sun didn't approach from Sixth Avenue and Union Street this time. He came from my right, rounding the corner from Commerce and charging along the 6th Ave sidewalk as if on a mission. He never walked like a normal person at a normal pace, except when he was with me. That night, walking to the Diner, he'd taken my hand, and there had been no rush, no hurry. No sense that he had a mission to accomplish. Just the two of us spending time together.

What mission was he on now? To get to me?

Need shot through me, landing in spots that really shouldn't get any warmer. Just looking at Sun made me warm enough.

"Rissa."

Scratch that. Looking at him and the way he said my name warmed me up, lady parts definitely included. Let's face it: I was a goner. Might as well accept it now, because if Sun really pushed it, I wasn't sure there was anything I would deny him when he said my name that way. "Hey."

I stood, holding out my hand on instinct. Sun took it and drew me close, right into his arms for a kiss. His lips were warm, firm, taking. And oh, how I wanted him to take.

I missed you too, I said silently.

When I opened my eyes, it was to a silver swirl in Sun's irises. The color fascinated me. He fascinated me now that I'd let myself truly see him. "How have you been?"

Instead of sitting down, Sun tugged me beneath his arm, as natural as breathing, holding me hard up against him while he continued in the direction he'd originally been headed. "It's been a shitshow."

I could only imagine. I squeezed his waist, glorying in the heat of him against me. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

I hesitated, then decided to go for broke. "Would it help to tell me about it?"

I really shouldn't ask—something about it felt deceptive, as if asking Sun to reveal secrets the other me wasn't supposed to know. But that wasn't it at all. I wanted to share something of his life, if that was even possible.

In the light cast from the streetlamps and venues we passed, I saw his lips tighten. Probably nothing he wanted to risk sharing with an outsider. But in the next breath he said, "My father died."

I jerked to a stop in the center of the sidewalk, forcing him to stop with me. "What?"

His eyes were in shadow, hiding all emotion as he stared down at me. "My father died."

"God, Sun." Sliding my arms around his waist, I dragged him close, every thought pushed away except to offer him comfort. I couldn't imagine—I'd never known my own father, but the devastation I'd experienced when my foster family was murdered had nearly destroyed me, and I'd known them less than a year. How long had Sun's father been alive? "I'm so sorry."

"Not your—"

“Don’t tell me it’s not my fault.” I tipped my chin up, giving him a firm look. “I’m not apologizing for something I did. I’m offering sympathy for something I know hurt you.”

He closed his eyes, and his arms came around to urge me closer. If I cared enough for the people around me to consider it, it might’ve been funny—us standing there in the middle of the sidewalk, blocking the way, hugging each other, while people parted around us like the Red Sea. But what mattered most to me was that Sun understood that I cared about his pain.

Someone jostled us, muttering, “Get a room,” as they shuffled by. I jerked my head around and watched as the guy’s step hitched when Sun snarled in his direction. With a panicked look over his shoulder, the man’s shuffle became a jog.

I huffed out a laugh. Sun’s hand engulfed mine this time, and we restarted our walk, but when I saw an opportunity, I pulled Sun into an alley recess, away from the crowd. Words waited on the tip of my tongue, but I hesitated to ask them.

“What?”

Guess it was pretty obvious that I wanted something, huh? Not for me, but for him. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Sun shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Okay, I could understand that.

“But there is something else I want.”

“What?” The word was hoarse when I said it.

“You.”

And then he kissed me again. God, I wish he would kiss me forever. He didn't just kiss—he commandeered. His fingers threaded into the hair at my nape, guiding me by gripping the strands. His tongue invaded, took up space, took my breath as he dipped and rubbed and tasted as if he had a map to my personal preferences that even I had never read. He tasted dark and moody, and when his hands slid from my waist to my ribs, all I could think about was getting his fingers closer to bare skin and hardening nipples before I completely lost my mind.

And that was when I pushed him away. “Sun!”

My breath sounded like a runaway freight train and only got rougher when his mouth dropped down to my throat. My nails dug into his shoulders when I felt the scrape of his fangs along my skin.

“Sun, I can't—”

“Damn!” Tearing himself away, he immediately turned his back and began pacing. The rigid set of his shoulders told me I'd made a rough week worse.

“I'm sorry.”

I shouldn't be apologizing; part of me knew that, and part of me hated adding to the burden of his loss by not giving in. I didn't know how to explain to him—or if I even wanted to explain to him—the fear that filled me whenever I contemplated surrendering to him. I'd gone there once, with Arik, and now...well, now I was beginning to wonder if giving myself to Sun might mean even more than it had all those months ago with someone I'd been certain I was in love with.

Sun stopped at my words, bent his head back to stare up at the sky, and heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the depths of his soul. “No, it’s all right.” Turning around, he made his way back to me, though I could still see a hint of tension in his body. “You should never feel pushed beyond what you can handle or want, Rissa. Never.” He moved right into my arms, pulling me into a hug that warmed me where seconds ago I had felt cold. “I won’t push you. I want you,” he said, the laugh that followed sounding strained, “but only when you are ready.”

I was pretty sure mine sounded the same. “You’re pretty sure of yourself there, buddy.”

Sun pulled back to stare down at me in the dark. “It will happen, Rissa.” He brushed a curl back from my forehead. “When you’re ready, I know it will happen. Chemistry like ours can only end up one way.”

He was right. I knew it; he knew it. But...not yet.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet,” I said.

“No.” Sun stepped back, one hand holding mine. He brought the other hand up, fingers sifting through the curls above my ear. “I only have a few hours with you, Rissa. I wish I had more, but right now there is so much to take care of. I don’t want to spend this time thinking about death. I want to, I don’t know, go somewhere...fun.” He nodded as if he’d hit on the right idea. “I want to hear you laugh.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to scoff at his words, but I could see the sincerity in his eyes, feel it in the relaxing of his muscles. A human guy on a second date would be mad as hell that he hadn’t gotten into my pants yet. Sun waved away the idea of sex and said the only thing he wanted was to hear me laugh. Just another reminder that he definitely wasn’t human.

Although when our bodies brushed against each other, I could tell there was nothing wrong with his libido.

“Besides...” Sun squeezed my hand. “If we’re alone, somewhere quiet, I’ll be tempted to continue this conversation, though I know I shouldn’t. So crowds are probably a good idea.”

I took the time to read his face, to make absolutely sure before acquiescing. “Okay.” Then I bit my lip. So, where could we go with fun and crowds? Someplace interesting to a vampire.

What the hell would interest a vampire?

And then I had it. With sudden eagerness I tugged at the belly of Sun’s T-shirt. “Let’s go.”

I led the way, but Sun took my hand as if he needed that connection. Or maybe he just didn’t want to lose me in the crowd. Either way we made it to the nearest bus stop and took the next lift to a fair I’d visited more than once on the outskirts of town. It might have been a traveling carnival at one time, but they hadn’t moved anywhere in the several years since I’d discovered them. As I pulled Sun off the bus, butterflies took flight inside me. What would he think of my idea?

The look on his face said he was skeptical. “What did they put this together with, twine and bubble gum?”

“What, are you worried?” The fact that we were both unlikely to die no matter what happened sat on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t let it out. No talk about death tonight, he’d said. I could do that. “I’ve never had any problems. Come on!”

It was after nine, not late for us but later for most humans, so the crowds were a bit sparser than they would have been earlier. Just enough to add to the ambiance without constantly

getting jostled by too many people. We hit the food trucks first. After much more debate than carnival food probably warranted, I settled on a couple of corn dogs and some fries. Sun went with a double-bacon half-pound burger with all the fixings. “That’ll take you two bites to get down,” I teased, already feeling my heart lighten.

“You’re right.” Nodding to the server, he said, “Make that two.”

“So more like four bites?”

As the server went to fill our order, Sun leaned down and put his mouth to my ear. “It would take a lot more than four bites if I was eating *you*.”

I almost gave myself whiplash turning my head to look at him. “What?”

His grin was wolfish, and his eyes had silver strands blending through them. “You heard me.”

“Hmm.” I pretended to think about his words, fighting a blush at the same time. When was the last time I’d blushed? “I guess I’ll have to remember that then.”

“It’s a promise.”

I shivered.

I was about right on the bite count—and didn’t thinking that phrase make my nerves do weird things—though Sun said the burgers weren’t as good as the ones at the Diner. He shared my fries while I finished up the corn dogs. It was such a human thing to do, sharing salty crinkle-cut fries and chatting at a picnic table. When my corn-dog sticks were bare, we decided on deep-fried Twix bars for dessert. Or I decided on the Twix bars. Sun’s response was, “Some things shouldn’t be deep-fried.”

“Trust me, this isn’t one of them. You’ve got to try this.”

When he bit through the crispy outer shell, through the melty chocolate and caramel and hit the cookie inside, I could tell he agreed with me. Pulling back, he left a trail of gooey caramel that I dared to lick from the corner of his mouth.

“Delicious,” I said, grinning. “Right?”

“Damn right.”

Of course, the fact that he gripped my hair and pulled me in for a kiss right then made me think he didn’t actually mean the Twix bar.

Next up, rides. Since I was a kid—a long, long time ago—I’d loved rides at carnivals and fairs. Swings, roller coasters, pendulum rides. The Double Shot was one of my favorites, a drop tower with two passengers on either side. So much fun. Tonight we started with the Gravitron.

“Do they even make these anymore?” Sun asked as we strapped in. “How do they maintain them?”

I gave him a cheeky grin. “Twine and bubble gum.” The ride started up that very moment. “Keep your fingers crossed the bubble gum holds!” I teased.

Bumper cars. The Viking. The Tilt-a-Whirl. The classic wooden roller coaster. When I threw my hands into the air on the final drop, laughing like a loon, I noticed Sun staring at me, a funny look on his face.

“What?” I yelled above the racket as our car pulled into the station.

“You enjoy flying.”

I thought about that. “I guess it is a little like flying. We’ll have to do the swings next.” I loved being swung out on the

cables, my feet dangling as the breeze blew my hair away from my face.

“That’s nothing,” he said. “I’ll take you flying sometime. You’ll love it.”

My eyes went wide. “Are you a pilot?”

He smirked down at me. “Something like that.”

After we’d exhausted the rides, we played games long into the night. None of it had changed from when I was a kid in the ’80s. It was almost like going back to my childhood, to a time before evil had entered my world and I could no longer go home. Sun even won a two-foot-tall teddy bear with soft, curly hair and floppy arms.

“Here you go.” He handed the bear over.

I refrained from a simpering, *For me?* “Nice,” I said instead. “Cuddly.”

Sun wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “He can keep you company at night when I’m not there.”

I poked his firm chest muscles, the ones I daydreamed about constantly, imagining exactly what they looked like. “Hate to tell you, but those muscles aren’t nearly as cuddly as a teddy bear.”

He chuckled. “Maybe not, but they’re good for other things.”

I just bet they are.

It was nearing midnight when we found ourselves on the Ferris wheel, going round and round slowly. Up high in the sky, Sun’s body warm against me, the twinkling lights of the city—it was the perfect way to end the night. When the ride began emptying, we found ourselves stopped at the top for a

few minutes, and I snuggled under Sun's arm, my teddy bear cuddled against me. "It looks peaceful from up here, doesn't it?"

Sun's words rumbled in his chest. "Sometimes a bird's-eye view can give you a little perspective."

"How?"

"It reminds you that there is more to life than what's right in front of you." His arm tightened. "Death, trouble, pain. They are each a part of life, but they are not all life has to offer." He shifted me around to face him. "There is also this."

His lips were warm and hard as he took the kiss he wanted. I opened to let him in.

When he finally released me, he didn't go far. My lips brushed his when I murmured, "I don't think you can see that from a bird's-eye view."

"Don't bet on it."

He kissed me again.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN



RISK

Sun didn't push me beyond kisses. Not far, at least. As I stepped onto the bus, I found myself regretting that. I almost wished we'd found that quiet place to be together, just the two of us, and I'd given him the opportunity to talk me out of my reservations. I wished I had the memory of his body to keep me warm through the day instead of an empty bed and even emptier arms.

My head told me a hit-and-run, sex-only relationship was probably the best thing for my life, not to mention a vampire's. But with Sun? Talking to him about his dad, about his loss, I'd found myself yearning for something more. Yearning to know what his relationship with his dad had been like. What had happened when his father died. What he did for the Archai, why he hadn't tried to feed from me yet, what it would be like if I had him for more than just tonight—if I had him for always.

And I couldn't think that way. Whatever else he was, Sun was a vampire. I would never fit into his world, and he would never leave it for mine. Sex was all we could be about.

I knew that; I did. So why did the thought fill me with despair?

I stood on the top step of a bus I didn't need, holding the railing as I stared out at Sun standing on the sidewalk. He needed to go home, he'd said. He had stuff he needed to take care of, no matter how much he'd rather stay the night with me. I wanted him to stay the night with me. I also wanted to keep myself safe. I simply didn't know how to do that if I let him in any further.

I held his eyes until the bus began to move, rolling wheels taking me away from temptation. My intention was to get off at the next stop and patrol. Anything to ease the restlessness taking up residence in my stomach. Except when the bus stopped two blocks down, I found myself descending the steps and turning in the direction I'd last seen Sun, as if a magnet was attached to my chest and wouldn't allow me to go any other direction. So I turned, and I walked back the way I had come. And walking, I realized I wanted to follow. I wanted to know.

To be honest, I wasn't sure what it was I wanted to know, exactly. Maybe I was desperate to spend just a little more time with Sun. Maybe I was watching to see if he was going to pick up another woman. Would he drink from her as he hadn't from me? Maybe I just wanted to know something, anything more about the male who was dominating my every waking thought.

I had no idea; I only knew that the longer I followed his path down the sidewalk, the more the instinct that had kept me

alive all these years fired up inside me, and I was simply pulled along in its wake.

It was well after two in the morning. There were still plenty of bars open downtown, plenty of noise and people and distractions. I found myself hugging the exterior walls of each building I passed, avoiding the pools of light that spilled out of the occasional window or shone down from the even rarer streetlight as I moved slowly back the way I had come. The darkness was my friend, and I drew it around me, cloaking myself from prying eyes even as I changed my appearance to that of a typical prowling college guy like the dozens I passed on the street. One thing about Sun, he couldn't hide his height and bulk. Up ahead, I could see the gleam of light on his red hair as he passed beneath the streetlamp, head and shoulders above everyone around him. Even knowing he couldn't see the real me despite looking straight at me, I held my breath and stepped as lightly as possible as I followed him up the street.

When he turned into an alley, I stopped at the opening and carefully peeked around the corner. Shadows cloaked him, caressing his form almost as much as they caressed mine, but I caught a glimpse of him farther down. I entered the alley and hurried to catch up.

Sun made a dozen turns ahead of me, but each time I was able to follow until I found myself sandwiched between the dark, imposing walls of a more industrial area, bare of any crowds or noise except some light traffic several streets over. Up ahead, Sun stopped for a moment, looking around, before stepping through a break in a chain-link fence to enter what I assumed was an abandoned property.

I scurried forward, anxious to see where he went next.

When I reached the fence, I crouched down, taking myself out of Sun's line of sight should he look back, then peered around the edge of the brick building I knelt beside. Framed by the wire holes in the fence, I could see a dark cavity between several structures. The boundaries formed a small yard, scattered with trash and overgrown weeds, abandoned long ago, it seemed, to a dismal fate. In the center of the space, Sun stood, staring down at his cell phone. What he was seeing, I wasn't sure, maybe reading a text, but after a moment he slid the phone into the pocket of his shirt. Quick fingers began to unbutton the fabric over his chest.

I froze. He was...undressing? Why?

I knelt in the shadows and watched as inch after inch of bare skin was revealed. And what a glorious sight it was. Thick chest, broad shoulders, narrow waist. When his fingers went to his belt and began to undo it, my mouth went dry. He was the perfect specimen, a big, powerful male, and when his fatigues dropped to the ground, I saw exactly how perfect he was. Delectably perfect. His cock was at eye-level, thick and bold, bracketed by strong thighs that promised a no-holds-barred ride to heaven.

God.

And yet I couldn't fathom a reason for Sun to strip down to his skin, no matter how glorious it was. In the few minutes it took for him to bare himself, my mind scrambled to make sense of what it was seeing, but no answer came to me. Nothing logical, anyway.

When he stood, finally, magnificently nude, Sun moved to a pair of crumbling steps and bent over. As he straightened, I saw a black bag in his hand. Packing his clothes inside took no more than half a minute, and then he set it on the ground in

front of him. Stepping back, he raised powerful arms up to the sky as if stretching tension out of his muscles.

Muscles that suddenly began to transform.

Were it not for what sounded like a relieved groan that left his mouth as his body became something else, Sun surely would have heard my surprised yelp when I watched him change. I knew vampire legend, knew that some stories told of vampires shifting to other forms—wolves, bats. This was neither of those. Before my eyes, long feathers sprouted along his arms and spread across the rest of his skin. Sun's hair was a rich, red copper that gleamed in the light. So did the feathers, shimmering as if they were on fire from the inside. Along the tops of the massive wings, the breast and back of his shape as it slowly transformed into a birdlike creature, the feathers were short, but grew to several feet along the outer edges, giving the wings a rugged appearance. The tail feathers, appearing last, were easily yards long. Thick talons dug into the dirt, stretching from huge claws on which the animal balanced. Much of the detail was hidden in shadow, but the bird's neck was long, pushing high between its shoulder joints to hold up a huge head tipped by a wicked-looking beak that I could easily imagine was as sharp as a knife. The animal blinked, taking in its surroundings with a gaze that was both intelligent and intense. And as I studied it, I realized I'd seen that look before—the silver flash in Sun's eyes, the moments when something else stared out at me that was so penetrating that I could barely hold his gaze. It had been this that I had seen, this animal staring out from his eyes.

At the realization, I faltered, falling onto my hand before my ass hit the pavement. The Archai were vampires; I was a hundred percent certain of that. Arik had bitten me more than once. And yet Sun appeared to be something else as well—a

shape-shifter. And beyond all comprehension, all belief, what I was witnessing was a...a *phoenix* standing in an abandoned courtyard in the middle of Nashville, Tennessee, preparing to take flight.

Good God. Who had I gotten myself involved with?

A giant shiver took over the creature, shaking it from head to toe. It reminded me of other animals—smaller, domesticated animals, which this certainly was not—shaking themselves after a bath. The ruffled feathers smoothed back into place, and its head moved from one side to another, observing its space, looking for I knew not what. Without warning, a loud cry rose into the air, shaking me with its power. Who was it calling for? Or was this simply a call of freedom, of letting its form loose to the world instead of locked up wherever it had been before? I tried not to think about that too deeply, wonder how the mechanics of shape-shifting worked in reality—there was no way for me to comprehend it. No way to get my shell-shocked brain to understand what was definitely right before my eyes.

No, this was way beyond anything I'd ever experienced, no matter how weird my entire life had been. This was... incomprehensible.

Terrifying.

And yet, also, as I watched the animal spread its wings and begin to flap them hard, preparing to take flight, I found myself awed. A mythical creature, one no human realized was actually real, was right in front of me. Like, almost close enough to touch. The phoenix grasped the black bag in its beak, crouched, then launched itself into the sky, its massive wings pushing so much air it would have knocked me on my ass if I hadn't already been there. I watched until its gleaming

feathers blended into the dark night sky, watched until my eyes screamed for me to blink, until nothing could be seen of the thing I felt simply had to be a figment of my imagination.

Except as my gaze dropped back to the ground, there, fluttering gently amid the trash and dirt, lay a golden-red feather. Slowly I made it to my feet, then through the fence. I hesitated, my fingers tingling at the thought of touching the object, but nevertheless I finally reached for it.

Sure enough, the feather was real. It felt incredibly light in my hand, but it was real.

The phoenix was real.

Sun was really a shape-shifter, not—or and?—a vampire.

This was crazy even for me.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN



RAINE

I usually didn't see Risk two days in a row, so when my best—and only—friend walked into the coffee shop, I knew something wasn't right.

One look at her face and I was sure of it.

Sudden adrenaline energized my muscles, a surge my exhausted body hadn't felt in months. Passing the latte in my hand to my current customer, I gave them an absentminded smile. "Enjoy."

Risk was lingering near the door, her face white, eyes haunted. She didn't approach the cash register. I hurried to the back.

"Jack, can you watch the front real quick?"

Without waiting for an answer, I pulled my apron over my head and hung it on the hook by the door, then made my way

around the counter. “What’s up?”

Risk was rubbing her arms up and down, her eyes as jumpy as eggs cracked into hot grease. “Nothing.”

It wasn’t even a plausible lie. “Don’t tell me nothing. Something is wrong.” And being the mama bear that she was, Risk wouldn’t want to share it.

I’d shake it out of her if I had to.

Glancing around the room, Risk frowned. “Can we go outside for a minute?”

The air was spring fresh and cool as we walked silently across the street to the tiny park. Usually I loved being outside, feeling the warmth of the sun on my aching body, but today I was too disturbed to enjoy the feeling. I focused on pushing myself forward until we reached the path through the trees.

Our usual bench was empty—well, all of the park was empty—and Risk let her body collapse onto the wrought iron, wincing when her butt hit the hard surface. “Ow.”

The natural light hitting her troubled face had me even more alarmed than I’d been inside. Her skin was white, chalky, her eyes outlined with dark circles. “Tell me what’s going on, Risk. What happened?”

Back to rubbing her arms. I’d never in my life seen Risk nervous, much less this nervous. Tension began to form a hard knot in my stomach.

“So”—Risk pushed back the hair falling over her face, her hand trembling—“I told you about the guy I went on a date with.”

“Yeah.” I stiffened. Jesus, had she been attacked? “Did he do something, Risk? Did he hurt you?”

Her laugh was strained. “Oh, he did something, all right. Just not what you’re thinking.”

Okay, she hadn’t been raped, but there were about a hundred degrees leading up to that ultimate violation. My nerves didn’t relax. Fear and concern added an edge to my impatience. “Would you spit it out before I lose my mind?”

She gave me what she probably thought was a reassuring smile—it wasn’t—took a big breath, and heaved it out. “The guy isn’t—exactly—human.”

“What?” What did she mean, not exactly?

She shushed me, glancing around to be sure we hadn’t caught anyone’s attention. “It’s okay.”

“Risk.” On that, she was wrong. “It’s anything but okay.”

“It is.” She rubbed her fingers over her forehead. “Remember I told you that there are good vampires and bad vampires?”

I didn’t believe her, but that was beside the point. “Yes. What does that—”

“He’s a good vampire.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Or I thought he was a good vampire. Except last night...”

Flashes from the night I’d been attacked, the night Risk and I had first met, did a slideshow in my mind. “Did he hurt you?” I asked again.

“No. No, he didn’t.” Finally meeting my eyes, she reached for my hand. “But the thing is, I found out last night he’s not exactly a vampire.”

“Not a— What? What does that mean?”

“See...I might have tried to follow him home.”

Fear sent a chill skittering through my body. So, so many things could go wrong if she were discovered, sneaking around these...creatures. She said there were good ones, but were there? I'd never met one, that was for sure.

“Anyway, I was following him after our date last night—”

“You were knowingly dating a vampire? More than once?”

“Yes,” she said impatiently. “A good one.”

“What you thought was a good one,” I reminded her.

She dropped my hand, waving away my words. “The point is, I followed him through an alley.” Her palms landed on her thighs, and she began to rub them up and down her jeans. “God, I can’t even believe I’m about to say this, but...I saw him...”

“Saw him what?” Had he hurt someone else?

“I saw him...change.”

Change? “I don’t understand.” So much of this conversation, but for now, the word *change* in particular.

Risk took another deep breath, letting it out slowly this time. “I saw him change...from a human into a—God, am I really saying this?—into what I think was a phoenix.”

“A phoenix?” I said slowly. A...phoenix.

Risk shook her head. “I know it sounds crazy. Trust me, I know. I’ve said and seen some pretty damn crazy stuff in my life. But I swear to you, he took all his clothes off and stood naked in the moonlight and all of a sudden”—she chuckled, but the sound definitely wasn’t amused—“there were these huge flame-colored wings and a bird’s...head and silver eyes and...”

I had no idea what to say. I just sat there, stunned. I'd thought when Risk told me that vampires existed and that was what had attacked me, that it was the craziest shit I would ever hear. Up till then, it had been. But this...

I shook my head.

"I know," Risk said, her laugh getting louder, taking on a slightly hysterical edge as she glanced at my face. If she'd been worried about someone hearing us before, that concern seemed to go out the window. "That's exactly how I feel. Well, not exactly how I feel. Here I was admiring a guy I knew was not technically a guy, but man, can he kiss, and his naked body was..." She raised her brows. "Yeah, he was getting naked in an empty courtyard not far from downtown, which was weird, but that body..." The laugh came again. "Not anything to sneeze at, that's for sure. And then he sprouts wings. It was—" She shook her head, seeming almost as bemused as I was, and lapsed into silence.

"So..." I tried to think of something, anything to say. "Not a vampire, then."

"I know they drink blood," Risk said hesitantly. "I mean, everyone that I've observed has."

Something in the way she said *observed* made me wonder if she'd more than watched it. I didn't ask. I couldn't handle knowing any more than this.

"I just had no idea..."

"Do you think all of them are phoenixes?"

She seemed to consider that. It almost seemed like a relief as her mind turned to a more practical issue. "If they can all change their shape, I'd say no. One of the things I noticed about Sun—"

“His name is Sun? Like the fireball in the sky associated with fiery birds? It’s a little on the nose, isn’t it?”

She waved her hand impatiently. “I know, weird. Anyway... One of the things I’ve noticed about him is that he gets this flash in his eyes, almost like a bright light, but it doesn’t linger. Maybe it’s just strands in his irises or something. And it varies in intensity. But last night—”

“You said it had silver eyes.”

She nodded. “Right. It’s silver. But Arik—”

“You mean Former Dickhead?” She’d told me a good bit about Arik. She had not told me, however, that Former Dickhead was a vampire. I tried not to resent that, or at least just to ignore it for now.

“Yes, Former Dickhead.” Her voice sounded tired all of a sudden. “He got a similar flash when things got...heated, but it was gold. Maybe...”

“Do you think they may be different, I don’t know, forms, maybe?” What did you call it when men who looked like humans changed shapes? Like, completely. “How big was this bird anyway?”

She lifted her arms. “Big. So big.”

I thought about that. Not some weak animal form, then. “They are monsters.”

“Not all of them,” Risk protested.

“No,” I said, “that’s not what I mean. They are literally monsters. A phoenix is a mythological creature. If it’s huge, like you say...”

Risk seemed to follow my train of thought. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“If you really think about it,” I mused, trying to keep myself on the logical path—because, let’s face it, considering vampires as real was terrifying; considering the reality of shape-shifters was... “It sort of makes sense. I mean, you said that when you were bitten, your mind or something changed. Right? You all of a sudden had an ability you hadn’t had before, like a superpower. A psychic superpower. What if they have a physical superpower?”

And that was even more terrifying than facing them in human form.

“It makes sense,” Risk agreed. She rubbed her eyes. “I haven’t slept since...”

I glanced at my watch. Time to go back in. As much as I wanted to talk about this some more, make it make sense, work was more real than monsters, at least for now. “Come on.” I tugged her hand. “Let me fix you up.”

We went back inside. Risk took a seat on the couch under the front window, staring out blindly, while I returned to behind the counter and began work on her usual vanilla-bean latte. Decaf this time. I was hoping that the warmth would help her sleep, and caffeine would counteract that. What she didn’t know, wouldn’t hurt her.

While I was working, the front door opened, the bell sounding as a new customer walked through. The woman was young, short, with long, black hair and eyes that seemed to take in the whole room at a glance. I’d never seen her before, and for a moment I couldn’t stop staring. Not because she was remarkable—I mean, she was pretty, but there was nothing about her that was particularly attention seeking. And yet it took effort to drag my eyes away.

My gaze traveled to Risk on instinct—searching for what, I didn't know—and I noticed she was also staring at the new customer. A frown appeared, and her eyes narrowed.

I moved to Risk's side of the counter. "Risk?"

She jerked her gaze to me. From the corner of my eye, I noticed the woman hesitate.

Risk stood and crossed to grab her drink. "You okay?" I asked quietly.

"Honestly, I don't know."

I patted Risk's hand. "Stay for a while and rest."

Turning to the new woman, I smiled despite my brain still being half occupied with my friend. "Good morning." I moved to the cash register, busied my hands with pulling my notepad from my apron pocket. "Have you visited us before?"

I'd asked that question of every customer I hadn't met before. It was sort of my opener to get people talking, create a friendly atmosphere inside the coffee shop. Personalize the experience. And yet when I met the woman's eyes, it was almost as if she were the one making me feel at home. There was something about her, an aura—as panicked as the past hour had been, I immediately felt myself calm. Relax. I smiled.

"I haven't, actually," the woman said. Even her voice was serene.

"Well, welcome." I held out my hand. "I am Raine."

"Nice to meet you." She took my hand, and warmth seemed to travel up my arm from where we touched. "I'm Nala."

Risk was still staring. I could see it, sense it, the same way I'd sensed her from the moment we met in the hospital. Like a fragile tether connected us somehow. She'd been the one to explain what had happened to me, the things I had sworn I saw but also that I was crazy for seeing. I trusted her more than anyone I'd ever met—not that there had been many trustworthy people in my life. She was the sister I'd never had.

I realized I was still holding Nala's hand. I dropped it. "What can I get you?"

I went through the motions of getting Nala's order. As I began making her coffee, I saw her wander Risk's way.

My friend kept a wary eye on her. I watched them from under my eyelashes as I worked. What was it about this new woman? I didn't know, but there was something...

And then my breath started to quicken. My hands began to shake. Because I realized I was sensing this woman much like I sensed Risk. I'd never felt that with anyone else, but it was definitely there, running beneath my skin—an awareness, as if there was something special about the three of us and only we could feel it.

There *was* something special about the three of us. All three of us.

Heat seared the skin along the backs of my fingers. "Shit!"

I set down the cup I was holding and made a dash for the sink to thrust my burning skin under the faucet. Cool water eased the sting made by too-hot coffee but couldn't ease the jangle of shock in my gut. I stood there for a moment, trying to breathe, trying to appear normal, but there was no way for me to do that. I'd never met another female like Risk, but now one

had just walked into my coffee shop, and that couldn't be a coincidence, could it?

Forcing myself to dry my hands wasn't easy when they were shaking like leaves, but I managed it. I even managed to make Nala's coffee and not spill it on myself again. It took a couple of attempts before I could get my body under enough control to transfer the coffee to the counter, though. As I approached, I saw Nala standing on the other side, eyeing me.

"Are you all right?"

I jerked my head up to meet her eyes. "O-of course."

She smiled, that calm that she wore like a cloak seeming to reach out to me from her eyes. Holding me spellbound, she reached for her coffee, her hand landing on mine as I held the cup.

Peace traveled up my arm. "There's no reason to be afraid, Raine. I won't harm you."

"W-what?"

"Stop touching her."

Risk. I startled. Nala lifted her hand, carefully turning to take in the addition to our conversation.

"I don't know you," Risk said, studying the woman.

"No." Nala shook her head. "You don't. But nevertheless, neither of you have anything to fear."

Risk snorted. "There's plenty to fear out there, lady."

"I mean from me." That smile reappeared. "I can see I've startled you. I hadn't realized the awareness would be so strong in both of you. For some it is, and for some it isn't." She eyed Risk. "I hadn't reckoned on you at all."

“So you came here on purpose, to see me?” I swallowed hard.

“I did, but not to hurt or scare you. I’m sorry for that.” She lifted her coffee and took a small sip. “This is good, Raine. Thank you.” Holding her cup, she stepped back from the counter. “I wanted to introduce myself; that’s all. Get to know you.”

“How did you know I was here?” I asked.

She tipped her head, seeming to study us both before saying, “The good guys sent me.” She saluted us with her cup. “I’ll be back to visit again soon.”

With those words she turned and made her way back outside, her steps steady, no rush. I watched her, confused. I didn’t live in a world where you trusted people you’d just met, or their words, but somehow I believed Nala. And when I glanced at Risk, I saw the same confusion staring back at me.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked.

CHAPTER
TWENTY



SUN

“*W*hy can’t Arik just come to the lair?” Basile asked, his voice grumpy.

“Because he’s still as paranoid as fuck and that’s likely to never change.”

We were leaning against a couple of columns along one side of the Parthenon. Much more casual than the first time we’d met Arik here a few months ago. At the time I hadn’t seen him in nearly 900 years and had believed he’d murdered his own parents. Despite hating each and every one of us—and me especially—he’d led us back to Kat, his mate, and the discoveries that had changed the future of the Archai permanently: the secret psychs hidden among the human population, and the return of the Anigma.

Now here we were on the cusp of war and meeting Arik once again. At least now his aim wasn’t to kill me, although

we'd never be close like we'd been in our youth. But I hoped he could help with our plan to find the Anigma's regional strongholds in the US.

While we waited, I took advantage of the rare moment alone and glanced at Basile. "How are you doing, my friend?"

My second in command didn't respond with more than a scowl, wrinkling the long, jagged scars in his cheeks. I didn't know what to say. My own mourning cuts had healed quickly, leaving behind no trace of grief, but Basile's cuts had been dug into his skin by his own claws and had been too rough to heal cleanly. The damage was intentional, of course, forever evidence of a grief that would never disappear. What would that kind of love be like?

Then it was I who frowned. There had already been rumblings, mere days after my father's death, about the lack of an heir to the throne. It seemed the elders of our clan had nothing better to do than stick their noses in my sex life. But I knew, at some point, I would no longer be able to ignore their concerns. And that meant a queen.

Not a mate, a queen. Whether or not I was in love with the mother of my child didn't matter to anyone but me; what mattered was carrying on the royal line. Ensuring the future of the Archai by ensuring the occupant of the throne was the right one. My own mother had been treated with disdain at best, disgust at worst by my father, a male who had never mated his queen. Was that what I wanted for my future? My queen's? My child's? Personally I was beginning to believe the Americans were on the right track—why was it blood that got to choose our leader? Not all shifters were honorable or trustworthy, and though I hated to think that my child might be the one to falter, if they weren't strong—or hell, just didn't

want the responsibility—why could the Archai not choose another?

That wasn't something that would change in my lifetime, I didn't think, but maybe, when all this was over, I needed to consider what steps I could take to move us in a more modern direction when it came to leadership. And love. The idea of tying myself to someone I didn't love, just as my father had chosen my mother and discarded her after she had done her duty, held no appeal. Maybe it would fade with time, but if I was going to bind my life to another, I'd prefer it be someone like Rissa. No, I hadn't known her long, but what I felt for her, what she made me feel, was more real than anything I'd encountered in a thousand years. I wanted that with my mate and my queen, someone who excited me emotionally and mentally as well as sexually.

I held very little hope of that happening. In my long lifetime I'd met one female who'd made me feel the way Rissa did—that woman being Rissa—and she was human. The Archai would never accept her as mate to their king, mother of their prince or princess. It just...wouldn't happen.

So why couldn't my heart stop longing for her?

The scuff of a boot along concrete drew me out of my thoughts. At the end of the colonnade, two figures emerged from the shadows, one tall and strong, one smaller, delicately built. Arik and Kat. Watching them walk toward us, I couldn't help admiring Kat just as I had the first time I'd seen her. She'd been dying then, but that had only served to give her beauty an ethereal quality, like an angel visiting earth. Now, strong and coming into her power, she was more like the Valkyrie Demetri had labeled his sister. Flaming red curls fell

around her face, and her light eyes stared at us directly. No cowering for this psych.

That's what happened once you accepted that you could kill someone with no more than a word and your own will. Self-confidence began to ooze from your pores.

Arik was the same warrior I'd known since we were children together, though I noticed that in the months since he'd met Kat, he'd begun to allow his silver-white hair to grow a bit. Arik's bloodline wore their hair long, a sign of their lineage and power, but he'd cut his own to his scalp after his parents were murdered. It was good to see him coming alive again.

"I'm happy to see the two of you looking so well," I said, greeting the warrior with a traditional fist to my heart.

"Don't blow smoke up my ass, Prince."

Ah, that was the Arik we all knew and loved. I refrained from rolling my eyes. "Actually, you might be dismayed to learn I am no longer our prince."

Arik jerked to a stop mere feet away. "No?"

"No."

He dropped his gaze to the ground. "I am sorry."

Sensing Kat's confusion, I explained. "My father, the king, has passed."

"Oh. *Oh*... So...you're not..."

I bent my head to her in respect. "I am now the king."

"Don't count on us bowing or anything," Arik said. "You were already too big for your britches."

Kat frowned and gave Arik's belly a backhanded smack. "Behave." Abandoning her mate, she stepped forward. "I'm sorry for your loss, Sun. May I hug you?"

My heart melted for this new little sister we had not gotten to know yet. I held my arms up. Kat's hug was full of warmth and compassion, not sex, though I admit I held on longer than necessary when Arik growled his displeasure. As she eased back, I gave her a wink from the eye Arik couldn't see.

She shook her head, grinning.

"Thank you for the sympathy." I gave Arik a stern look.

He shrugged.

"We have things to discuss," Basile interjected, his angry glance centered on Arik.

Though Arik had not been directly responsible for Thomas's death, he'd been there that night, and it was Maddox's hatred of Arik that had led him to target our clan. Thomas had merely been disposable collateral to Maddox, though his death had ripped our hearts out. Basile had concentrated that emotion on the only person left to blame—Arik. I hoped by bringing them together, I could start a dialogue that would bring Basile around.

Didn't look like it would happen anytime soon.

"What kinds of things?" Arik asked. Seeming without concern, he drew a KA-BAR from his thigh holster and began to flip it over and over. The implied threat was obvious.

"Yes, Basile," Kat said, stepping to Arik's side and intercepting the knife midflip. "Please tell us what we need to discuss."

“You know I let you do that,” Arik muttered under his breath.

“Did you?” She kept her gaze on Basile.

Even Basile couldn't stop a faint grin at the way Kat put Arik in his place. “We've received additional intel on new Anigma locations. One in each region,” Basile said—to Kat.

Hoping to keep things civil, I took over. “You've tracked them longer than anyone, Arik.”

Arik frowned. “I tracked Maddox, not the entire Anigma army.”

“Still,” I said, “you must have some ideas on how to whittle down our options for these strongholds.”

Arik reached for Kat's hand, entwining their fingers. My gaze dropped to that clasp, an ache starting up behind my breastbone. I missed Rissa, I realized. I missed holding her hand, being surrounded by her scent, feeling the warmth of her body against my side. It was a low tide underneath every moment of my day. For the first time in my long existence, I wondered if I could lay down the burden of my people and take Rissa for my own. I could simply walk away from anything that didn't allow her to be the priority in my life. Anything that held me back from being with her.

And then I looked at Kat again, the psych who had started all of this. There were two reasons I couldn't walk away: she and others like her were one. And my people... They needed me now more than ever. They needed a king they could trust, who would honestly seek the best for them and not for himself.

No, there would be no walking away, no matter the black hole that would be left behind when I had to let Rissa go. That

didn't mean I didn't curse my father for leaving me in this position.

Arik finally spoke. "I don't know specific locations, but I would be willing to meet with your people and discuss what I've learned from tracking the Anigma through the years."

"We'd like for you to take on one of the regional searches," Basile said.

"No." Arik looked to Kat, then back to us. "I won't leave my mate, nor will I take her with me when she's still working on controlling her powers. Talk to me when a year has passed."

My eyebrows arched. Arik referred to Archai tradition; I was surprised he remembered. Any warrior who took a mate—with or without a matebond—was given a year off service to concentrate on his new family. The practice had since been applied to all sexes, and in all facets of Archai society. Pairs were the future of our species, and they deserved every chance we could give them.

"All right, Arik," Basile said, reluctant respect in his tone. He too knew the importance of this pairing. "If you could at least confer with us. I have warriors arriving from several different North American clans within the month."

"Are they rallying?" Arik asked, a touch bitterly. I understood the tone. The Archai had not rallied around him when he needed us, an act I profoundly regretted.

"They are," Basile said. "And with the passing of our king, they wish to solidify their status before the new king." He nodded in my direction.

I shrugged. Give me a battle debriefing any day; it was the formal shit that gave me hives.

“Fine.” Arik took out his phone. The next thing I knew, my own beeped. “Send me a message when you’re ready. That’s my new secure line.”

I pulled my phone out. “How did you get my number?”

He huffed. “Risk isn’t the only one with the ability to hack.”

Risk’s name made Kat wince. Like a dick, I was grateful—focusing on her reaction helped Arik miss my own. Since meeting Rissa, I’d barely thought about Risk. Still, I couldn’t forget the way I’d lusted after her since the moment we’d met. Even learning that she’d been Arik’s as well as Cale’s lover hadn’t stopped me.

Arik’s goodbye turned hasty as he focused on making up to Kat for his ill-conceived remark. Basile and I watched them go, and despite knowing my future would be nothing like the other warrior’s, seeing him going to his knees (metaphorically) for his mate made me feel the tiniest bit more hopeful for our species.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE



IMOGEN

I'd been dreaming about Demetri's kiss since the moment our lips had stopped touching the last time. We'd seen each other at training, hung out in the dorm reading to Clara and talking—with everyone's eyes drilling into our backs, it seemed—but there'd been no time alone. When he invited me back to his suite for another dinner, I couldn't wait to say yes.

It seemed Demetri felt the same way. The second the door was closed behind us, he took me into his arms and kissed me. His body was so powerful, his arms secure, his shoulders perfect for digging into. It was like a dream that a male this gorgeous, this intense could want me, but the evidence was there in the urgency of his kiss and of his body. I might be human—or had been human—but we had the same parts as the Archai, and Demetri's cock told me quite clearly that he desired me.

Before the urge to go further could take me over, I stepped back. Demetri followed, placing a quick peck, then two on my lips before fully releasing me. His reluctance set off bubbles of pleasure in my belly.

“Please tell me you like pasta,” he said, fingers twining with mine.

I let him lead me toward the kitchen. “If it’s a carb, I love it.”

He laughed. “Good to know. Let’s see what I can do for that.”

We spent an hour talking while he made chicken piccata, his ease in the kitchen filling me with envy. The conversation flowed naturally from one topic to the next, anything and everything seeming to be open for discussion. I tried to stick to neutral comments, topics, not wanting the evening to get too heavy too fast, but the more I delved into Demetri’s mind, the more I loved the way he thought. Let’s face it, not every two-thousand-year-old male was going to have modern thoughts about politics, justice, women and their role in the world, nor did I expect that Demetri had held those views for his full two millennia. That he’d seemed to change his opinions with the times impressed me.

“You’re a dragon shifter?” I asked as we sat with our plates at the tiny table nestled into a corner of the living area.

“Yes.” He poured ice water into our glasses. “How is the chicken?”

I chewed and swallowed. “It’s fantastic. Can you cook all my meals?”

“I’d love to.”

For a moment the air froze, the words registering in my mind, my response just as evident.

Demetri cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, you didn’t.” I couldn’t let him think that. Fiddling with my fork, I admitted, “I was worried that I had made you uncomfortable, actually. I wasn’t sure if I sent my response to your words over to you or managed to keep it in my own head.” I waved the fork in the air vaguely. “Telepathy... It’s still taking some getting used to.”

He propped his chin on his palm, his intent gaze seeming to drill deep into me. “What was your response?”

A blush heated my cheeks.

“Now I really want to know.” Demetri’s smile made me think of a stalking lion.

Be honest. “I was thinking I’d love that too.”

He couldn’t have shown more satisfaction if he had been that lion and finally caught his prey.

We finished dinner, Demetri telling me about his dragon, about what it felt like to fly, to share his body with another being. “I’ve read the myths of humans, their tales of shape-shifters and what they imagined it was like to have an alternate form. What I don’t think they can comprehend is the separateness—animal and male. Two independent beings relying on each other for life.”

“But in the same body?” I asked.

“Yes.” He wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin. “I know it seems strange, but my animal is my companion much as Lyris has been my companion my whole life, except he lives inside

me. When I change form, he becomes the primary being and I dwell inside him, sharing the form but allowing him to take the lead. To be free.”

He was right; it wasn't something I could understand. My gift was a product of my brain, not a separate being. The idea of someone else living inside me was completely foreign, but then, so was the idea of my body changing to a different shape and back again.

I began gathering our plates. “How often do you change?”

“Fairly often.” Demetri took the dishes from me and walked them to the sink. “If not, we both get antsy.”

I thought of something else and giggled.

“What?”

“It's silly.”

Demetri smirked. “Be silly then.”

“Okay. How do you keep from being seen by humans or picked up on radar?”

“Smart question, actually.” He started washing the dishes while I retrieved our glasses. “I tend to fly lower than most radar targets. But also, my dragon's belly is camouflaged. Humans looking up see a blur in the night sky, not a complete shift of color.”

“So the underside of his wings and his stomach are blue.”

“A deep midnight,” he agreed. “During the day it becomes lighter, matching its surroundings. It's not often we fly during sunlight, though.”

“I can't believe you have a reflective body.”

“Camouflage.” He chuckled. “And only parts of it.”

When the dishes were finished, I took the lead, pulling Demetri to the couch. I waited for him to settle into one corner, then sat beside him and snuggled into his side. The lair always felt a bit chilly to me, being underground. Demetri's body heat warmed me almost as much as his nearness comforted me.

"Can your dragon see me?"

Demetri shifted back a little so I could look into his eyes. "He can. He's eager to come forward and spend time with you." I watched as his eyes took on a silver-blue glow, casting shadows around the room as the shine grew brighter and brighter.

I gulped in air. "Oh my God. Is that him?"

"It is." Demetri's voice was rougher than before, gravelly. He brought a hand up to cup my cheek. "He's resting just beneath my skin, devouring the sight of our mate. You fill us both with so much joy, Imogen."

Goose bumps rose across my body. "He's amazing." I reached up, daring to caress the rough stubble that peppered Demetri's face. "You both are."

He blinked, hiding the light, but when his eyes opened, it was still shining down on me. "You'll meet him officially someday soon, I hope. If you're comfortable with that."

"I'd love to."

Demetri's hand dropped from my face to my hip. "I want to kiss you, Imogen." His other hand gripped the opposite side, and the next thing I knew, I was facing him, in his lap, my legs parted over his thick thighs. One thing I was learning: Demetri was a highly physical being. His strength, his self-confidence, his drive all combined into a male who had no qualms about

showing me what he wanted, and zero hesitation in going after it. It was incredibly sexy on the one hand, but also intimidating. This man had so many years of experience, and here I was, practically a virgin in comparison. I'd been with one man, my high school boyfriend, and I didn't think sex with an eighteen-year-old could come anywhere close to the mature desires of someone like Demetri.

I found myself gripping the shoulders of his shirt in my fists, my disquiet rising alongside my need. And yet when his big hands spanned the width of my back, their heat soaking into my skin as they eased up, up, up, then down, down, down, I arched instinctively, seeking more, wanting Demetri to soak into me as easily as that heat did.

"You're tense," he said in my mind.

"Uncertain, not tense."

"Why?" He pulled me forward, his strength inexorable, until my breasts met his pecs and a moan choked off in my throat.

"Demetri..." Instinctively I raised my chin as he pushed closer, allowing him access to my throat. The scrape of his teeth along the sensitive skin had me squirming in his lap.

Those big hands gripped my hips once again, moving me exactly where he wanted me. Demetri was big all over, and there was no closing my legs as I found myself centered over his thick erection, the valley between my thighs the perfect fit for the hardness that nestled within it. "Oh God."

He held me firm, the prick of his teeth sharper as a sound almost like a purr escaped against my throat. *"I haven't fed, Imogen. I can't. Anytime I try, all I see is you, all I want is you. The thought of taking from anyone else is abhorrent."*

My swallow was a dry click in my throat. This was what I instinctively feared—it wasn't simply that my mate was strong; it was that he had power and needs that were beyond anything I could comprehend. The amount of trust it took to sit here, knowing he could overpower me if he so desired...the knowledge that, if he wanted, he could take me and there would be nothing I could do to stop him...it was a distinctly feminine fear I didn't know what to do with. I didn't fear him—or at least, I didn't think I feared him—but there was an instinctive hesitation that rose anytime I considered giving myself to him. Allowing him to take.

“Demetri...”

“I won't hurt you,” he whispered roughly against my throat. “I promise, Imogen. I won't. But God, I need...”

That one word, so desperate, so hoarse, was my undoing. Without thought I tipped my head, allowing him in. Allowing him access. The tips of his fangs pressed harder.

“Are you sure?”

The laugh that rose inside me felt slightly hysterical. “*No. But I've never done this before either.*” Not voluntarily, though I didn't remember my attack, a fact for which I was grateful.

“It can feel so good. Like kissing.” Scrape. Scrape. *“Like sex.”*

“I barely have any experience at that, so you're not helping.” He was pushing, but I got the sense that he was as helpless as I was, caught in the throes of desire rather than intentionally trying to overcome my boundaries. And maybe that was what I needed, anyway. It wasn't lack of desire that was holding me back, but lack of confidence.

“You'll gain experience; don't worry.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, swallowing hard against my fear, and finally got out the words I'd been holding deep inside. *"I'm afraid of disappointing you."*

He chuckled inside my head. *"Not gonna happen, sweetheart. I'm about to come just thinking about drinking from your neck. When I get my mouth on other, much more important places, there isn't a chance in hell that I'll be disappointed."*

Without realizing it, a rhythm had begun with our bodies, a rocking that rubbed my nipples against his chest, my core against his cock. *"I don't think that's the only reason you're about to come."*

His teeth gripped a bit of my skin, and when he sucked lightly, I gasped. Rocked harder.

"Demetri, I...I want..."

"Me too." The hard ridge of his erection nudged against my clit. *"Let go, beautiful. Just let go."*

The urgency took me then, erasing doubt, erasing fear. I found myself surging against him, seeking more of that exquisite sensation rising between my legs. Demetri guided my hips, sucked at my neck. I couldn't stop, couldn't get enough, couldn't move just right—

The detonation, when it came, took over my whole world. A scream left my throat just as the sharp prick of Demetri's fangs puncturing my vein shot through me. I was caught between his greedy mouth, pulling hungrily at my flesh, and the hard press of his hand on the back of my head, even while I continued to rock over him, drawing out the spasms of delight that squeezed my empty channel.

“Demetri!” Without realizing it, I reached for him, not with my hands, still tangled in the cloth at his shoulders, but with my mind. *“Demetri!”*

He was there, inside me, it seemed, meeting me halfway. *“Feel that, Imogen? That’s it.”*

It took a moment for me to recognize the words, to sort them out from the movement of our bodies and the yearning of my soul. *“The matebond?”*

“Your soul is calling for mine.”

More caressing, more rocking. More drinking. *“Oh God. Demetri, please!”*

My cry seemed to wake him up from the daze of feeding. *“Shh.”* The urgency at my throat eased. Demetri’s hold on me tightened. *“Shh, beautiful. You’re all right. We’re all right. Just hold on to me.”*

I held on with everything I was. Slowly, slowly the world came back into focus. Demetri lapped lazily at my neck, allowing the punctures to close, I assumed. My mind quieted. My hips came back under my conscious control and stopped grinding, though my body had no desire to move away from his. Long moments later, my head buried in his neck this time, I murmured aloud, “You didn’t accept.” And why that opened a void in my heart, I wasn’t sure. “You said you would.”

A heavy sigh lifted his chest, lowered it. “And I will,” he said, the words still rough around the edges—probably due to the hardness still filling the space between my legs, “but not until we’ve discussed it. You were acting on instinct, not a willful choice. When the time is right, there will be no hesitation on my part.”

I tried to reason that out through the haze in my mind, the disappointment that mingled with the warmth of knowing my mate wouldn't make a choice he wasn't a hundred percent certain I was also ready for. "When will the time be right?"

He leaned his head back enough to meet my eyes, his own holding that beautiful silver-blue glow. Shaky hands dug into my hair, pushing it back from my face. "Are you sure, Imogen? Because I want you to be absolutely sure that this is what you want. A matebond is permanent. Once that bond is formed, it can never be broken."

I looked at him then, really looked—not at the beautiful facade, which was most certainly there. Demetri was model gorgeous. It made it hard to believe he wanted me, plain ol' Imogen, but I couldn't deny the evidence of his choice. Beyond that, deep inside him, I'd discovered a heart and a mind that I admired, a male worthy of honor and respect. A male who gave me the same.

A male I loved, I realized, the knowledge sparkling inside me like diamonds. When I looked inside my heart, there was no hesitation, not when it came to loving him. I might doubt myself, but not him. "I'm sure, Demetri."

He kissed me, the feel of his mouth hot and urgent. When he finally pulled back, he hesitated, then reached for my hands. "I'd like to ask you a favor."

The smile that took me over felt like it was lit with a thousand watts. "You don't have to ask. Just tell me what you want."

He raised a thumb to trace over my lips. "In Archai tradition, a pair will wait to create their matebond until a matebonding ceremony."

“In front of the clan?”

“Yes.”

I considered that. “I have questions.”

He chuckled, jostling me on his lap. “Of course you do. You always do. You have a sharp mind, Imogen. It’s one of the things I love about you.”

I sucked in my breath. “You—” I swallowed hard. “*You love me?*”

As if he understood why I couldn’t get the words past my lips, he kept my face in his hands and leaned his forehead against mine. “*I love you.*” And then aloud, “I love you.”

The tingle of tears gathered at the backs of my eyes. “I love you too.” We might not have known each other for long, but I knew this man’s mind, his heart, and I would choose him over anyone else, forever.

“Was that your question?”

I chuckled, the sound watery. “That was extra.”

“Ah.” He kissed me, then sat back, bringing his thumbs up to wipe at the moisture beneath my eyes. “Have at it.”

“Okay.” Deep breath. “I know how you explained about forming the matebond, but do we need to be doing anything in particular at the time?” This time I did hesitate. “Um...our bodies, I mean?”

A vee appeared between his brows. “Do we... No, we don’t have to—” I could see the moment he read my subtext by the widening of his eyes. “You mean sex?”

Obviously I didn’t need to beat around the bush with Demetri. “I don’t want to misunderstand.”

After a moment of sizzling tension, Demetri began to crack up, laughing loud and long. After watching him tip back on the couch, holding his belly, I crawled off his lap. When he continued to laugh, I swatted his knee. “It’s not that funny.”

“You’re right,” he said between laughter and struggles for breath, “it’s not funny. It’s hilarious!”

I bravely fought my own giggles, but my smile at hearing Demetri laugh couldn’t be denied. Finally he managed to pull himself together, although the occasional chuckle still escaped. When he righted himself, I tried to get us back on track. “So the ceremony doesn’t involve...sex.”

He put a hand over his mouth, unsuccessfully trying to hide a grin. “No.”

“So what does it involve?”

He explained the details, and my emotions quickly swung from amusement to sadness. I’d always thought my stepdad and siblings would be at my wedding ceremony, but to keep them safe, I couldn’t tell anyone the truth about them. To the Archai, my mother was dead and I’d left my stepfamily behind long ago. In truth, my stepdad had raised me after my mother committed suicide, and I’d helped raise his children with my stepmother. I missed them so much I could hardly bear it, and the thought that they had no idea I was still alive tore me up inside daily. But I’d never expose them to danger by trying to go back.

“Hey, where’d you go?”

I blinked. “Sorry, I got distracted.”

His hand rubbed back and forth along my knee. “By what?”

I hated to lie to him, but even for Demetri, I wouldn't give away my family. "Just thinking I won't have anyone on my side of the aisle."

He frowned. "This is a human thing?"

"Yes. All the groom's friends and family sit on one side of the aisle in the church, and the bride's sit on the opposite side." I shrugged. "My mother left me as a child, and anyone I knew in the human world thinks I'm dead."

He gathered me back into his lap, murmuring soothing sounds while he rocked me back and forth. I loved that he didn't try to wash away my feelings by offering his own family to share. I knew Lyris would support us, but she wasn't my family.

The family I missed so much.

A while later, his chin atop my head, Demetri asked, "What other questions did you have?"

In an effort to lighten the mood, I said, "My next question also involves sex."

"Public sex?"

I shook my head. "I'm pretty tolerant of other people's kinks, but that isn't one of mine."

Laughter rumbled in his chest, right below my ear. "Good to know."

The sexy growl rumbling through his voice sent warmth to my pelvis. Taking a deep breath for courage, I tipped myself back against his arm to look him in the face. "Do we also have to wait on sex until the matebond ceremony?"

His eyes flashed silver. "Do you want to?"

I wet suddenly dry lips. “No.”

“Then definitely not.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO



RISK

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I'd see Sun if I came back to the bar. Part of me was hoping that I would. The other part of me remained conflicted, but as I sat at my usual "Rissa" table with the darkness draped around me and a rum and Coke in front of me, I wasn't surprised to see Sun stalking across the club floor in my direction, determination and a hint of anger clear on his face.

I picked up my drink but didn't sip; it was more that I desperately needed something to do with my hands. "Fancy seeing you here."

Sun stopped directly across from me, and from his expression, he wasn't amused by my opening line. "I hadn't heard from you, so I took a chance."

He hadn't heard from me because I'd been avoiding him. I set my glass back on the table. "Things got busy."

“Sudden break in your latest story?”

“You could say that.”

Sun didn't ask, simply took the other seat. I dropped my gaze to my drink.

A long silence settled between us, broken only by the obnoxious club noise I was suddenly thankful for. Then, “I've missed seeing you.”

My heart turned to mush at the same time guilt surged inside me. He'd just lost his father, and I'd ghosted him. Permanently or not, I hadn't been sure. Now, seeing him again, I knew I'd been fooling myself in thinking I could stay away. I couldn't stop staring at him from just under my lashes, eating him up with my eyes, basking in the heat of his gaze. I felt like I hadn't been breathing in the days we'd been apart, and now my lungs could finally fill up again.

“Don't say you didn't miss me too, Rissa,” Sun growled, that hint of anger returning at my lack of response, “because I know that would be a lie.”

How?

“I just know.”

I jerked my gaze up to meet his. “Are you reading my mind?”

His eyes widened the tiniest bit. Anyone else would have missed it, but I knew his expressions so well after hours of study, knew that tell-tale surprise. Whether he'd done it on purpose or not, he'd picked up my question.

So shape-shifters could read minds? But no, he couldn't possibly. If he could, he'd know I was a fake.

So not mind-reading. But what else could it be?

“Your expression gave you away.”

That was a lie; even with Sun, I wouldn't slip up to the extent that someone else could read me, not if I didn't want them to. What I didn't know was, what other options were there?

“Rissa.” Sun sighed. Planting his elbows on the table, he leaned across to get closer to me. “Tell me what's going on.”

I honestly didn't know if I could explain it even to myself. It seemed ridiculous. Why would I be more scared of a shape-shifter than I was of a vampire? Or was it simply that seeing Sun change had made me realize just how little I knew about him?

Or just how much I cared about losing him.

“I think I got scared.”

There, that would make sense. And I didn't have to say what I was scared of, did I?

“Of what?”

Okay, nix that idea. “Everything. You, me...” I let that trail off.

One of Sun's hands clasped mine where it rested on the table, scratching at the surface with my nail. “You don't have to be afraid of me.”

“You say that, but...”

“But what?”

I braced myself, forced my eyes up to meet his. “Sun, I don't really know you, and you don't know me.”

He shrugged. “So get to know me.”

“I want to.” I really, really wanted to, badly. I could admit that much, at least. “I don’t know where this is going.”

Sun raised a red-gold brow. “You want to know where this is going? Want to know the real me?”

“Yes.”

He stood up, hauling me with him. “Fine. Let’s go.”

I should protest; I knew I should. But instead I let him pull me along as he crossed the dance floor, parting couples like Moses—only he didn’t need a raised staff; his glare did it for him—and made his way out the front door. On the broken sidewalk he took a right, and within minutes we’d arrived at a parking garage.

I hesitated.

“Come on.”

His voice was rough, and for a moment I bristled, that pre-Sun, no-one-tells-me-what-to-do Risk rising, but I tamped her down and followed him inside. Because I’d told him the truth—I wanted this, whether I could admit it aloud or not. I had no idea what he’d show me tonight, if anything, but I was willing to take a chance on whatever it was if it meant being with him for a little bit longer.

We took the elevator to the fourth floor, which was still packed at this time of night, this close to the downtown venues. Sun dragged me across the length of the garage to where a gleaming midnight-blue sports car waited in a dark corner, the surrounding spaces empty as if the beauty had a force field surrounding it, protecting it from harm. Sun dug into his fatigues pocket, withdrew a fob, and clicked to unlock the doors. On the passenger side, he pulled the handle up. “After you.”

His eyes flashed silver as they met mine. I choked on a gasp, fascinated and fearful of what I now knew was evidence of his other form. But when the door was fully open and Sun stood waiting, I slid onto the velvety leather seat and pulled my legs inside. It was Sun who tugged the seat belt across my body, clicked it firmly into place. Sun who closed the door behind me. He rounded the car while my heart began a heavy throb in my throat. When the driver's side door opened, I jumped.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Rissa." His voice was still that curious mix of anger and determination.

I shook my head. "A girl can't be too careful." Though it wasn't fear that had my pulse throbbing in my throat. I'd figured that much out before my ass hit the seat.

It was excitement.

Sun stared at me a moment, not starting the car, before he called my bluff. "If you were still afraid, you never would have walked out of the bar with me."

"No," I admitted, "I wouldn't have."

"Then what?"

I let my eyes answer him.

The silver glow brightened. Sun growled deep in his chest, more vibration than sound. He started the car, and with one hand on the wheel and one laying claim to my nearest thigh, he backed from the space and sped toward the exit.

"Where are we going?" I finally thought to ask. The scrape of Sun's fingers against my inner thigh was distracting—or at least that was my excuse.

"My place."

That time my startling was genuine. “Your place?” What kind of place belonged to a shape-shifter?

I guessed I was going to find out.

“My place,” he grunted. His pinky stretched to trace the crease of my thigh.

I squirmed. “Sun—”

He threw a glare in my direction. I shut my mouth. Let him feel me up, whatever. I wasn’t risking another word. By the time we passed the outer loop and moved out of Nashville, his entire hand was cupping my center. If I’d wondered what Sun intended when we got to *his place*, I got my answer about the time he started pressing the seam of my jeans against my clit. I tried hard to stay quiet, to not move, but the pressure was so exquisite... It had been so long since I’d gotten off. But did I really want it to be this way?

By the time we pulled into the driveway of a cabin in what felt like the middle of nowhere, I’d decided it didn’t really matter. I had no idea where we were; the past fifteen minutes had been focused on my crotch and Sun’s hand and desperately trying to breathe. The asshole had made sure, however, that I didn’t climax. If I had any doubts that he was still pissed about me avoiding him, they’d died the longer he edged me.

The car cut off, the headlights dying, and we sat in silence listening to the ticking of the hot engine. Sun’s hand had stopped moving.

I forced myself to sound like I wasn’t gasping for air. “This is a bad idea, Sun.”

“It is.”

So he agreed with me. Ironic.

“A really bad idea.”

“Yeah.”

With a firm squeeze of my thigh, he got out of the car. My skin felt chilled where he'd been touching me, but it warmed in anticipation as he rounded the hood. Stepped up to my door. Pulled it open.

“Coming?”

“I hope the hell so.” Apparently edging made me testy. Who knew?

Sun chuckled behind me as he followed me to the door.

We climbed the steps to the porch of what looked like a traditional log cabin. It even had a tin roof. A glance around told me we were firmly in the country, with woods as far as the eye could see. Clouds obscured what little light the moon and stars had provided before.

Sun inserted his key into the lock, twisted it, then paused with his hand on the doorknob.

“You don't have to do this if you don't want to, Rissa.”

But I did want to. I wanted sex with Sun, and I wanted it tonight. Was it really all that different to make love to a vampire or a shape-shifter? Both seemed to be an equally bad option. But then again, I wasn't exactly known for the best decisions. Look at Arik, my one and only lover.

Squaring my shoulders, I stared up into Sun's glowing eyes. “I want you.”

From the wolfish grin that appeared, I would have pegged him as a werewolf if I hadn't seen him change already. “I want you too.” He pushed open the door, inviting me inside.

“I’m thinking you already made that pretty clear,” I said.

“I hope the hell so.”

I chuckled as I walked inside. Sun followed me, the closing of the door cutting off any light. I stopped in the middle of whatever room I’d entered, waiting. With no more than a couple of warning steps, Sun scooped me off the floor, and by the time I got my arms around his neck, we were striding toward somewhere I couldn’t see. Hopefully somewhere with a bed.

When he set me down, it was next to a piece of furniture with a soft top, so I was guessing I’d gotten my wish. Sun disappeared, and a moment later a lamp across the room turned on, revealing a darkly masculine room, minimal furniture—and what looked like a California king or bigger, covered in a thick navy-blue velvet comforter. Thankful for the light, I ran a hand over the soft material. “Nice.”

“Take off your clothes, Rissa.”

I jerked my gaze up to meet Sun’s across the room, my own narrowing. “What?”

“Take off your clothes.”

Okay, I might be Rissa here and now, but even as Rissa, I wasn’t about to get bossed around. Nor was I going to settle for less than I deserved from Sun. I wasn’t his stripper, I was his—

I cut that thought off.

Planting my fist on my hip, I squared off with the man—vampire, phoenix, shape-shifter, or whatever the hell he was. “This isn’t a show.”

He chuckled, the sound strained. “No, it isn’t. But I’m afraid if I get my hands on your clothes, they might not survive the process of coming off.”

Oh. Well, when he put it that way...

My fingers went to the waist of my tee, but I couldn’t bring myself to pull it up. I tangled the material in my fists. “This would be a lot easier if you weren’t standing across the room staring at me like you’re still angry.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, hiding the silver light, and when they reopened, the look he gave me was much softer, easier. Maybe even a little amused. “My girl isn’t shy, is she?”

I watched as he started back across the room toward me. “Not shy,” I admitted, “but not into having sex with assholes either.”

“Then you definitely don’t want me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” His heat reached me, and I soaked it in like I was borrowing his strength somehow. My fists tightened, and I slowly pulled the material up and over my head. As it passed my breasts, I heard a sharp hiss.

Before I could even get my hair out of my eyes, I felt warm hands settle on my chest. “God, Rissa.”

That tone... Sun knew exactly how to make me melt. Or maybe he was just being genuine, I didn’t know. I only knew the way he looked at me right now, the way he touched me—it felt like nothing I’d experienced before, and in this moment I had a sneaking suspicion I’d never experience it again, from anyone else. Relaxing my arms, I arched into his palms. “Mmm. Feels good.”

“So good.” A finger flicked the front clasp of my bra, and then we were skin to skin.

This time it was my turn to hiss. “Sun...”

Firm fingers plucked at my engorged nipples. “You’re so beautiful. So...perfect.”

Yeah, this had to be genuine. No guy would think I’d believe I was perfect. But when I looked up into Sun’s narrowed eyes, focused intently on my nipples, I could see that he believed it.

My fingers went to the button of my jeans.

A rough sound left Sun. “Fuck it.” Five seconds later my jeans and shoes and underwear were God knew where. The sound of tearing material didn’t bode well for their survival, but I didn’t care. I was on my back on that beautiful dark velvet, and Sun was staring as if he’d never get enough of looking at me.

Except then he clasped my thighs and scooted me closer to where he stood, until my legs were forced to part around him and he had a clear view of the most intimate part of me. I tried to squeeze my legs together, to no avail.

“Uh-uh.” Sun shook his head. “*Mine.*”

The word was more than rough; it was otherworldly. As if the animal inside him had spoken the word instead of Sun. I almost asked if that was the case—what can I say; apparently sex makes me stupid—but he was already kneeling beside the bed. The rough stubble covering the lower half of his face scraped deliciously against my inner thighs.

“Sun?”

“*Mine,*” he said again, and then his tongue glided over my labia and I didn’t care what happened after that as long as it involved his mouth on me and not stopping.

“Sun!” Reaching down, I dug my fingers into the thick auburn hair at the top of his head. Instinct had me pulling, forcing him closer, forcing his mouth harder against me. Sun chuckled, his breath gusting against my clit, and I shivered. A whine of need escaped me.

“You taste so good,” he said, his lips whispering over my clit. “So good, Rissa. I’ve dreamed of this.” His tongue dipped inside me, scooping up my cream. “I’ve dreamed of taking you, fucking you, until I thought I’d go insane.”

I released his hair and grabbed my legs, pulling them back to give him greater access. “Then get on with it.”

He nipped me, the edges of his fangs distinct against my skin. I yelped.

“I’m not about to rush this, Rissa.”

“Who’s rushing things?” I squirmed, trying to get his tongue back where I needed it most. “You’ve been winding me up for a half hour already.”

His laugh was husky, full of satisfaction. “Primed and ready, baby. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to make it easy on you.”

Of course he wouldn’t. And he didn’t. He licked, sucked, thrust his tongue inside me as if he’d devour me whole, but never quite gave me enough of what I needed to get off. When I grew tired of waiting and sought out my clit with my fingers, he drew them into his mouth and nipped me again, only this time I got the feeling he drew blood if the way he suckled them afterward was any indication.

I was covered in sweat, begging, gasping by the time he took pity on me. Finally, finally, his fingers entered me instead of his tongue—thick, rough fingers that began a harsh rhythm

designed for one thing only: to bring me off. I arched my hips off the bed. “Sun, please!”

His lips surrounded my clit, a rough vibration accompanying them, almost as if his animal was growling or purring deep inside of him. The sensation was like a supercharged shock to the senses, and I found myself spiraling toward orgasm with barely any ability to breathe. When his lips closed, his teeth lightly gripped my clit, and a strong suck pulled that most sensitive spot against them. The spiral closed in, and everything disappeared but the sensation of Sun sucking at my body, teeth scraping over me, fingers pounding hard, hard, harder...

“Suuuun!”

The world exploded.

I had no idea how I got there, but the next thing I knew was the sensation of a pillow beneath my head, a cool sheet atop my overheated body. Sun lay next to me, one arm under my neck, one at my waist, one heavy leg wrapped over mine, all cuddling me against him.

I stirred in his arms.

“You back with me?” he asked, a wealth of satisfaction in his voice.

“Maybe,” I murmured. My voice came out a rasp, hoarse—probably from screaming his name and begging for mercy. No wonder he was satisfied.

Except something poking me in the belly didn’t feel like he’d been satisfied.

And that’s when I realized he was naked. I’d missed him getting naked.

I pouted against the sparse, rough hair dotting the center of his chest.

Sun stretched against me, the arch of his back pressing his erection harder against the softness of my lower belly.

“You didn’t come,” I said.

Pushing me onto my back, Sun moved over me, blocking out the light. One hand stroked up my side and began to play with my breast. “I was too busy watching you.”

I didn’t know about that. How could watching someone else come compare to coming yourself.

He pinched lightly at my nipple. I grunted, arching my back into his touch.

Sun’s lips brushed mine. He tasted like me, and I found myself opening my mouth, inviting him in. Sucking lightly at the tongue that had given me so much pleasure. This time it wasn’t me who grunted.

When he pulled back, it was to nuzzle down into my neck. I stiffened suddenly, wary, all too aware of the one thing I had hidden even in my most dazed moments—my scars. But Sun’s lips were tracing the opposite side of my throat.

“We don’t have to go any further, Rissa.”

He was actually offering not to take me? Really? “Why wouldn’t we?”

He pushed up until he could meet my gaze. “Because you may not be ready. I’m not going to assume you are until you’re able to tell me so.”

Christ, how could he treat me like this and still make me afraid?

He couldn't. When I'd allowed him access to my body, I'd known I was giving up my fear, no matter what the future held for us. And so I clasped his face in my hands and brought his mouth back to mine.

"I want you to take me."

His body shivered over mine. "You're sure?"

I licked along his lips. "I'm sure. And I'm on birth control, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I wasn't." He lifted his leg from mine, allowing me to open to him. When he centered himself over me, I expected him to push straight inside, but he didn't. Instead he turned his attention to my nipples, nipping and sucking and purring against me until I began to undulate beneath him. Only then did I feel the thick head of his cock nudge at the opening of my body. I reached down, gasping at the feel of him in my palm, the way my fingers could barely close around him. Sun arched, rising on his planted fists, his face clearly showing the agony of need as I touched him—and then I was guiding him inside me, feeling my own agony as he made room for himself where before there had been no room.

"Rissa." Sun panted. "God." He hilted.

"Sun—" I moaned.

"Rissa, I—" He gritted his teeth and pulled back, groaning as my body fought to hold him inside me. I gloried in his pleasure and mine, watching every second as he braced himself and pushed back in, hissing at the warm wetness waiting for him. It was as if I'd been made for this moment, made to fit him, made to take him inside me and give us both this exquisite pleasure. I arched my hips, surging up to meet

him, and felt him bottom out, the head of his cock hitting a place deep inside that sent sparks shooting through my body.

“Sun!”

“Rissa,” he gasped, repeating the thrust. “Fuck, Rissa.”

“Sun. Sun, oh God...”

The rhythm he set took me over. All I knew was the way his body filled me up, the way his breath became mine. There was no fear, no worry about the future. Nothing mattered except Sun inside me, around me, above me, driving me down into the mattress as the pleasure surged higher, higher, higher and finally shot us both over the edge into oblivion.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE



SUN

Holy shit.

Just...shit.

I was fucked. So fucked. Majorly fucked.

I lay with my body utterly lax, unable to hold myself up over Rissa's unconscious body, my muscles useless as I gasped for breath in the long moments after I came. Although coming didn't really describe exactly what I'd felt. I'd come before; this was something else entirely. This was like turning my body inside out, everything inside me determined and desperate to empty all that I was, all that I had into my mate.

My mate.

Our mate.

Shit.

I shouldn't be, but God, I was grateful Rissa had passed out. I'd come close, but I needed this moment. I needed to understand the way my world had fundamentally shifted the moment I'd realized I wasn't simply fucking some woman—I was taking my mate, giving her my body and taking hers in a way that would change me forever. I'd known Rissa was different, known I couldn't stop thinking about her, but even then I hadn't realized... And then I'd come, and it was like my consciousness had exploded with pleasure and I'd awakened on the other side as someone else entirely.

Not Sun. Not the prince and sure as hell not the king of the Archai.

I was Rissa's mate. Nothing else mattered.

I was definitely fucked.

I felt her stir beneath me. Before she could awaken, I tucked my mouth against her ear.

"I love you, mate."

"And I have to let you go."

But not yet. Coming up on my elbows, I stared down at the woman who held the other half of my soul. Her eyelashes fluttered. Despite my climax, I hadn't gone soft inside her. I didn't know if I could, not now that I'd had a taste of her. Without conscious thought I lifted my body up, pivoting at the hips, pushing inside her, retreating, slower and easier than before but deliberately, intent on waking up the pleasure once more.

Rissa opened her eyes. "Sun?"

"Hey, beautiful." Every ounce of love and wonder and despair I felt came out in those four syllables.

She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

She really could read me well. Her hand came up to my face, her thumb tracing the ridge of my cheekbone. I leaned into her. “Just regretting that I have to go soon,” I said, closing my eyes to hide my deception.

She stretched beneath me, forcing her body down on my shaft. I groaned. The sight of her when I looked down, all stretched out, her body open to me, accepting mine, nearly made me come.

“Probably me too. Although I’d rather stay here,” she said, her eyes closing as a little smile appeared on her full lips. Without disengaging, I pulled myself up on my knees, her ass on my thighs, her legs laid out along either side of me. Beginning a firm massage on her inner thighs, I suggested, “Maybe we have a little more time.”

She arched again, this time deliberately. My eyes crossed at the feel of her engulfing me. “Maybe so.”

A half hour later we were headed for the car. Longer than I should’ve taken, but far shorter than what I’d desired. On the threshold I paused to let Rissa pass me out the door. A glance back showed the bed, still messy, the sheets tangled at the end where we had thrown them to gain better access to each other’s bodies. Her ripped panties lay on the ground next to the bed. I knew, just looking, that I could never bear to come back here. It had been my secret retreat, but not anymore. Now it was laced with memories of Rissa, and it was best to leave those memories in the past.

Exactly where I was forced to leave her.

I drove us carefully back to town, holding tight to the reins of my emotions. It was around three in the morning when I

pulled up to the curb at her usual bus stop. I'd never questioned why Rissa didn't tell me where she lived, but that was probably for the best. It would be too easy to become a stalker if I had that little piece of information.

Maybe she'd guessed all along that at some point it would come to this.

I put the car in park, took a deep breath, and reached for her. She smelled of sweet woman and sex, and I inhaled deeply at her throat before pulling back to kiss her one long last time. "I'll text you?"

It came out a question when it wasn't. I wouldn't contact her again, but I couldn't bear to tell her that.

"Okay." She gave me another quick peck before reaching for the door handle. "I'll be around."

"Goodbye, Rissa." It was the first time I'd ever told her that. The first time I'd ever let *goodbye* touch my lips after they'd touched hers. I could at least leave her with that.

She paused, one foot on the street, one still in the car. When she looked back over her shoulder, her face in dark shadow, I couldn't read it. Or maybe I just didn't want to read it. But I knew she stared at me for a long, long moment before finally saying, "Bye, Sun."

And then she was gone.

I felt something savage rip through me as the door slammed closed. With a squeal of tires, I shot into traffic, my mind blank of everything but raging grief. If she hadn't been my mate, if she hadn't been human, it would never have come to this. I never would have had to rip my heart out and leave it lying on the curb. But if only's weren't going to get me anywhere. This was the hand I'd been dealt.

It didn't mean the desire to tear down the world was any less lethal.

I don't know how long I drove, only that I ended up back downtown at some point. Knowing I needed to do something, anything before my animal slipped my control and tore loose to share his pain with the world, I returned the car to the parking garage and pulled out my phone as I hurried up to the roof.

Basile answered on the first ring. "Sun?"

"Gather a few warriors. I want to search Maddox's compound before it gets too close to dawn."

"I thought we were planning to go this evening. That was the plan, wasn't it?"

I ignored his sarcasm. "Plans change. Meet me there."

He must've read the stubbornness in my tone—I certainly put it there. After a few silent seconds and a noncommittal grunt, I could hear his footsteps ringing through the phone. "Fine. Getting things together now."

I turned my phone off and shoved it into my back pocket. A rough jerk pulled my T-shirt over my head, and I shoved it through a belt loop, then let my wings release. My phoenix's cry as his wings expanded rang in my head—fury, savage and hot. And anguish. Longing for our mate.

I longed for our mate too, but I would do what was best for her, not for us. She deserved that much.

With a great wave of my wings, I shot into the sky.

I was circling the air above the compound we'd discovered just a few weeks ago when I saw two black Expeditions pull onto a road nearby. Not all Archai had wings. Though we

could travel at extraordinary speeds on foot, so fast humans detected no more than a breeze passing them by, it wasn't always feasible to travel that way in the light. Sometimes vehicles were an unwelcome necessity, especially when dark wings floating in the lightening sky could draw too much attention.

I watched as the two SUVs made their way along the darkened streets and through the half-hanging gate that had been damaged in the fight between my warriors and the army Maddox had built up in so short a time. The problem had been lack of experience—Maddox could control his mad shifters with the gift of power or, failing that, sheer terror, but he couldn't give them courage when they faced a seasoned cadre of Archai warriors. Many of them had scattered to save their own skin, leaving the compound unprotected and Maddox with little backup. He'd died that day, by Kat's hand, but the Anigma still existed. Hopefully we could find some hints of the connection between our enemy and the company providing them intel on their victims now that we had a hint of what we were actually looking for.

Folding my heavy wings against my body, I nosedived toward the ground, only pulling up at the very last second. My feet hit the ground with a teeth-rattling jolt directly in front of the SUV Basile was currently driving. He slammed on the brakes, his curses filtering through the opened window to reach my ears.

“Damn it, Sun!” Jerking the vehicle into park, he shoved open the door with his other hand. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Nothing like growing old with a male to ensure they wouldn't stand on ceremony once you became king.

Everything's wrong with me. "Nothing's wrong."

"For fuck's sake." He stepped out onto the broken concrete, pocketing the keys. "Something's crawled up your ass or you wouldn't be pulling that shit."

"Maybe I was hoping you wouldn't be so quick on the brakes."

He jerked to a stop. *"What?"*

I waved away his question, eyeing the other warriors joining us. Azrael led the way, his black eyes narrowed on me. Demetri followed close behind. They had to know something was up, if only because I had shoved our timeline forward by eighteen hours or so, but I wasn't prepared to talk about it. Not now, and maybe not ever.

Jacob, Doran, and Cale brought up the rear. When they were all lined up in front of me, I gave them a nod.

"I want to begin with those warehouses." I jerked my chin in the direction of the three massive buildings Maddox's contingent had used to store equipment and weapons. "We've gone through them before, but now that we know they're working with some kind of medical or homeopathic shit, maybe we'll see something we didn't before."

Azrael glanced up at the lightening sky. "Not a lot of time before dawn."

"I'm not worried about a little light," I snarled, taking my frustration out on my warrior, who didn't deserve it.

Azrael crossed his massive arms over his chest and stared me down, but even as my biggest and most accomplished warrior, he couldn't intimidate me. I'd lost half my soul; what did I care for threats anymore? Losing my head would be a

welcome respite from the pain clanging around inside me like a death knell.

“Let’s get to work.”

The first warehouse held no clues. We’d moved on to the second, knee-deep in empty crates we’d already cleared of their weapons and ammunition two months ago, when Jacob came running from the front of the building.

I jerked my head up at the sound of his racing footsteps. “What’s up?”

He stopped in front of me, his eyes a bit wild. “We’ve got company.”

“Company?” Basile asked beside me. “Who?”

Jacob shook his head. “Not for sure, but if I had to guess from the look of the guy who seems to be in charge, I’d say we’re about to meet Helios.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR



SUN

I could see why Helios headed the Anigma generals. The shifter was big, hard, and intimidating. But he couldn't rival the Archai king.

I watched from the rooftop as he divided his soldiers into groups and ordered them into the various buildings up and down the main street of the compound. One male at the front of the group had his fist tangled in the long hair of a female, probably there because of whatever talent she possessed. That male appeared to be Helios's second in command, and he was assigned last, along with a single guard, with a flick of Helios's fingers toward the end of the road. To Maddox's office, if I had to guess. It was the only thing I could think of that would be of value in that direction; the rest of the buildings down there were mostly empty dorms and domestic facilities. I watched with eyes narrowed as the dark shifter dragged the female along with him, unnecessarily rough

considering her hands were bound securely and she'd made no move to resist.

An almost soundless hiss left my lips. It was how I imagined Maddox had been with the females as well, and just the sight turned my stomach.

"Where do we start?" Basile asked.

I calculated the rewards versus the odds. The soldiers had been lined up in military formation, obviously trained well, disciplined, and as I watched, they entered each building in standard patterns. These males were superior to Maddox's inconsistent forces; I could tell that from simple observation. The question was, how much better?

"Too many of them to fight, even divided up," I told my second. *"We don't know their caliber or strength. Not to mention, with so many in close proximity, they could call each other in and we'd be outnumbered quick."*

"So we leave?"

I turned my head in the direction of the bound psych. *"No. We go wherever she goes."* I wouldn't leave a female in the Anigma's hands unless I was forced to.

Assigning Jacob and Cale to watch our flank, I hurried to the back end of the building and stepped off the roof into thin air without hesitation. My wings could have softened the landing, but my superhuman strength meant a three-story drop was nothing. The rest of my warriors followed, absorbing the impact with no more than a bend of their knees.

"What about Helios?" Jacob asked.

"I'll meet fucking Helios later." That was a guarantee. *"Right now, I'm not leaving that female here with them."*

Jacob and Cale stationed themselves at either edge of the alley between the warehouse and the next building, taking turns surveying the passageway and the backs of the surrounding buildings as the four of us continued on. Doran took the same position a couple of alleys down, and Demetri did the same outside the building that held Maddox's office.

Azrael and I approached the rear door carefully. We'd secured the compound buildings with locks after our initial takeover, but as I approached, I noticed the lock on this door had been pried open with bolt cutters. I fingered the mangled metal and shot Azrael a look. His black eyes narrowed as he pulled a short sword from the sheath strapped to his thigh.

The door opened easily, no more than a faint squeal scratching the air. I knew from past visits that this building held an array of offices on this side, with a long hall attaching it to the more enclosed section that contained Maddox's private office. Advancing with caution, I kept an eye out for movement as I made my way to the hall that led to the left. Dingy windows allowed in dirty light, but the hallway was completely enclosed, full dark. My phoenix rose beneath my skin, allowing me to see the tiniest speck of dust as we started the twenty-yard trek toward the opposite side of the building. It was he who first made out the silhouette that appeared behind the frosted glass door at the end of the hall, he who identified the shape as female.

It was I who realized that female was familiar. *Risk*.

A jolt went through me as she crossed in front of the glass, and I drew myself up short. What the hell was Risk doing here? The female was familiar with our fight, but not with this place. At least she shouldn't be. She'd helped us identify the

Anigma, but she hadn't followed them back to their compound; we had. Unless...

Risk jerked her head around to look behind her, then hurried toward the back of the building. The movement unglued my feet from the floor. The whole episode took no more than five seconds, but it was enough to catch Azrael's attention.

"What is it?"

"Risk is here." Though they hadn't formally met, Azrael was aware of the female's identity.

"Why is she here?"

"Hell if I know." But assuming she wasn't on the Anigma's side—and the fact that she was sneaking away from them instead of toward them seemed to speak loudly for where her allegiance lay—she was in danger.

I picked up the pace down the hall.

Just as I reached the door, Risk reappeared in the glass, looking down. The doorknob turned slowly, stealthily. Before she could open the door, I was there, holding the knob still.

She jerked her head up. I put my finger to my mouth.

Dark eyes went wide, the whites clear through the frosted glass.

I eased the door open. "Shhh."

The door and the word were nearly soundless. When there was enough space, I reached through and locked my grip around Risk's forearm. Awareness sparked, sizzling through my blood like it always did when Risk was near, but I ignored it and pulled.

She resisted. My narrowed eyes and grip urged her forward, but she stepped back instead, refusing to leave. Our silent tug of war ended when I heard voices coming through from the front room. Both of us froze.

“Touch it!”

“No!”

The first voice was harshly male, the other female. Helios’s second and the psych. My ears perked up.

“You know what you’re here for,” the male barked. “And you know it will go badly for you if you don’t follow through.”

“You don’t understand. It hurts.”

“Not as badly as it’ll hurt when we get back to camp if you don’t do your job.”

Risk’s dark blue eyes met mine, no glass between us this time, and I read the pain and worry there. She inched toward the front office.

I shook my head.

Risk tugged at her hand. I bared my teeth at her. At the same time I pushed through the doorway, backing her toward the shelves that bisected the room. Azrael followed me inside.

Risk’s eyes got even wider at the sight of the lethal warrior behind me.

A scream echoed from the front of the building, high and feminine. Every muscle in my body went tight.

A slap, then sobs. “Shut the hell up!”

“It hurts!”

Another slap. “Which is worse, bitch?”

More crying. I could hear fumbling around the room.

“Find me something quick before Helios decides you aren’t worth the food we waste on you.”

Whimpers rose and fell, presumably as the female touched object after object. Her gift. Psychometry. If my guess was correct, the soldier was forcing her to “read” items by touching them, presumably to search for more intel on Maddox and what he’d been doing here. From the sound of it, they were using her gift but hadn’t trained her in how to do so without hurting herself.

Shit.

Determination rose inside me. Turning back to Risk, I jabbed a finger at her, then at the floor. *Stay here.*

She shook her head.

I pointed again, this time allowing my animal to flash behind my eyes. She shrank back.

Good.

Azrael and I moved as one toward the front room. With a synchronized countdown in our heads, we surged forward at the same time, Azrael clearing the door first to throw his sword with unerring precision toward the male even as I rolled to the left toward the female. I didn’t glance up. Azrael knew how to fight; he didn’t need my backup. All of my focus was on getting the female out.

She crouched beside a pile of objects on the floor near a massive desk. Her eyes were rolled back in her head as she held a letter opener in her hands, obviously reading the past through the touch of the metal. I slapped it from her grip and caught her as she slumped to the floor. When her hand landed on my bare arm, she seized up again.

A noise behind me alerted me to Risk's presence. I jerked around, glaring at her. The move broke contact with the psych in my arms, and she slumped back, a wheeze of relief leaving her.

Azrael appeared on my other side. A glance showed me Helios's second pinned to the wall with Azrael's knife through one eye. The spinal cord must still be intact given he hadn't disintegrated to ash, but Azrael left him as he was, gaping like a fish caught on a hook.

My warrior's black eyes narrowed on the psych. "Can we get her out?"

"We can." I scooped her into my arms. To my surprise, she began to fight me.

"No, I can't go!"

"You're safe, little one. Don't be afraid. We're here to rescue you."

Azrael shared the words in my head as well as hers. I was supremely aware of time ticking away, of Risk watching us close by, of the female shaking in my arms. We needed to go.

"I can't go; you don't understand. They have my sisters."

Risk stiffened next to me.

"Your sisters?"

"If I leave with you, they'll kill them. I can't go."

I looked to Azrael, one brow quirked in question. He nodded. So the female spoke the truth.

"If we don't take you, they might kill you and them anyway," he said in her head.

"I won't take that chance, not with their lives."

A commotion out in the street said company was on its way. “We’ve got to go, Azrael.”

I stood, the female, still in my arms, coming with me. Her nails dug into my forearm. “You can’t take me. I’ve got to stay here.”

I let her feet slide to the floor, though I couldn’t force myself to release her completely. I looked to Azrael, torn.

“We can’t help you if we leave you here, little one,” he said aloud.

Risk let out a disbelieving whimper.

The psych shook her head. “You have to. I have to return to my sisters.”

That kind of loyalty I understood. Though it went against every grain of demand in my body, I understood the need to take care of others. I’d lived my life by that code, after all.

“What can you tell us about—”

The sound of the front door crashing open interrupted my question. The guard, probably, impatient by a lack of response from the dark warrior still pinned to the wall. Mere seconds stood between us and discovery.

Azrael flashed across the room, almost faster than my eyes could pick up, and jerked his knife from the shifter’s eye socket. “Better than you deserve, bastard,” he growled down at the slumping male.

The psych backed away from me. “Go, please!”

Azrael was already at the rear door to the office. I hesitated a second longer, watching as the psych slumped back down onto the floor. “Go!”

I ran for the exit. Suddenly realizing Risk wasn't behind me, I turned back at the same moment the front door to the office flew open. Shouts filled the room as soldiers piled in. I grabbed Risk and sped through the back door.

We'd almost made it to the hall when the sound of metal swishing through the air reached my ears. A sword. I looked over my shoulder just as the hilt struck the back of Risk's head. She hit the floor in the next second.

I threw my own knife with much better aim. It buried fully in the shifter's neck, deep enough to reach his spinal cord. A flash of light filled the room.

Scooping Risk up on the run, I made a mad dash for our escape.

Shouts followed us, but Azrael and I made it out to the back before anyone caught up. Running with shifter speed, we were at the SUVs in seconds and piling in. It wasn't until I settled Risk onto my lap that I noticed anything was wrong.

“Who the hell is that?”

I looked down. Instead of Risk's bright red hair and garish tattoos, I saw thick brown curls and clear, creamy skin. Skin I knew intimately. “What the—” I arched back, nearly dumping the female into the floorboard before getting a grip on myself. “Who—”

“Dude!” Cale gripped the back of my seat and stared over my shoulder. “Where'd you find her?”

Confusion choked me even as my heart soared at the sight of my mate. What was she doing here? “She's—” But what could I say? *She's Risk?* She obviously wasn't. She was *Rissa*, not Risk. But I'd been carrying Risk. Hadn't I?

“Azrael?”

He shot a quick glance over from the driver's seat as he steered wildly for the compound gates, then did a double take. Eyebrows hit his hairline. "That's not Risk."

"No shit, Sherlock," Cale said behind me.

We skidded, our tires fighting to grip the asphalt on the turn to the main road. I clutched Rissa's body tight to my chest. Azrael sputtered, maybe for the first time in his long life. "Don't look at me. I haven't got a clue who she is."

But I did. I knew—or thought I knew—every inch of the woman who lay unconscious in my arms, and she was definitely not Risk, despite looking exactly like her mere minutes ago.

So if she wasn't Risk, who was she?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE



RISK

“*Y*ou are an interesting one, aren't you?”

The voice tugged me up out of the depths. What depths, I wasn't exactly sure. I just knew I floated in a sea of quiet, perfect blackness until some jackass started talking in my ear. I tried batting him away, swatting at someone I refused to open my eyes to see, but the man merely chuckled.

In my head.

Tension seized my entire body. He wasn't talking in my ear. He was talking *in my head*. What the fuck?

“*Time to wake up,*” he said. In my mind, then laughed at the flash of alarm shooting through my brain. “*If you want me to stop talking to you this way, you've got to open your eyes. Which you have to do anyway. Someone here wants to talk to you.*”

No one ever said I wasn't stubborn. I kept my eyes closed, trying to sense what was around me, trying to figure out where I was, search my memory for what had happened, how I'd gotten here, wherever here was.

Nothing popped up.

"She's awake," I heard aloud. That same deep, unfamiliar, masculine voice. "It's a good thing we didn't bring you to the cells. We're going to need privacy for this discussion."

"Shut the fuck up, Grim."

Sun. Shit.

"Get up, Rissa. Or Risk. Whoever the fuck you are."

Oh shit.

I opened my eyes. The room was dim, the walls dark gray, curved, and slick-looking in a weird way my brain took a moment to translate. A cave, I finally realized. We were in a cave somewhere.

Standing in a semicircle in front of me were several huge males taking up all the cool air I desperately needed to breathe. A couple I recognized: Sun, Hollywood. We'd met in the club, along with the dark-skinned one on the other side of the room, his red-tinged eyes boring into me. And Cale.

Of course Cale was here; my luck was definitely in the toilet. They, along with a couple others, stared down at me on whatever I'd been placed on—a couch, I realized after a quick look—putting me at a distinct disadvantage. I jumped up, only to have the room do a crazy spin that almost had me falling on my ass before a strong hand gripped my bicep, steadying me. When I looked, I cringed. The male was as big as Sun but draped in a long black robe that covered him from head to toe,

the hood pulled down until only his full mouth was visible. I yelped.

“Easy there.”

That voice, the one in my head. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I think we’re the ones who should be asking that question.”

Sun. Only this wasn’t any Sun I’d faced before. Turning my eyes on him told me something was terribly, terribly wrong. What—

Wait. He’d called me Rissa. And Risk. Both of the names he knew me by.

I jerked a look down at my body. My Rissa body, not Risk. Not tall, athletic, confident Risk. This was...

“Well?”

The barked word jolted through my body, startling me out of my contemplation. “What?”

Heavy footsteps charged toward me—Sun, bearing down on me, his face hard, eyes even harder. I backed up quick, skirting the couch to put it between us.

“What did you say?” I asked to give myself time.

Sun stopped at the edge of the sofa, his narrowed gaze lit with silver fire. “Who. The hell. Are you?”

I tried to swallow. My dry mouth made it impossible. “I’m Rissa.”

“No!” Sun’s body was vibrating with rage. “Who are you really?”

“Sun.” The grim reaper appeared behind him. “Let me handle this.”

Sun's growl sounded rabid. I glanced around frantically, searching for escape. As if they could sense my intention, the rest of the men spread out slowly, forming a barrier that kept me in place.

"You saw her before, Sun," Cale said, sneering in my direction. "She's Risk. How she's Risk, I don't know, but she is. We all saw it."

At the compound. Of course they'd all seen it. And then something had happened—I'd hit my head.

My hand came up of its own volition, searching that spot on the back of my skull that felt like it had been smacked with a sledgehammer.

"How did you do it, Rissa?"

I looked into Sun's eyes, felt the searing glare as it swept over my body, and a matching heat began to flame in my gut. Deliberately ignoring him, I faced the hooded one. "Where am I?"

"Don't!" Sun took a threatening step in my direction. "You talk to me, got it?"

"I'm not a dog to be commanded, Sun. I'll talk to whomever I please."

The grim reaper shot a hand out and gripped Sun's arm. "*Don't tease the monster,*" he said in my head.

"I'm not teasing; I'm dead serious," I said aloud.

"Answer me!" Sun roared.

So I did. Squaring my shoulders, I swallowed down my fear and faced the creature that had been my lover head-on. "You want to know who I really am, Sun?"

“Yes, I sure as hell do.”

With a quick thought I pulled on my Risk glamour. A collective gasp filled the room.

“What makes you think this isn’t me? It’s who your warriors know me as. Cale.” I flicked a disdainful glance in the blond’s direction. “Arik. They know me very well.”

Murderous fury flashed across Sun’s face.

“I don’t think I’d remind him of that just now,” the hooded one said.

I’d remind him of a lot more than that. I let the glamour drop. “Or maybe this is me. Your Rissa.”

“You’re not mine!” Sun snarled.

Pain hit me like a load of bricks. *That’s not what you were saying last night.* “Of course I’m not. You don’t even know who I am.”

Sun broke free of the grip holding him then. Two steps forward and he had me. Another two and he slammed me into the wall. “Who. The fuck. Are. You?”

For the first time ever, in my entire history since I’d found my gift, I dropped my glamour completely. Even unconscious, I never bared everything—protecting myself was too ingrained, too automatic—but now I held nothing back. I let them see it all, see me as I truly was. I felt Sun recoil, his hands dropping from my arms.

“That got your attention, huh?” My voice was my own, full of gravel as if I’d smoked a pack a day for the past fifty years. I never let anyone hear that sound. Here and now, though, I was fully Rissa, more fully than I’d been since I’d been changed so long ago. Even the scars that savaged my

neck were on full display. “This is me,” I told him, then pointed at my scars. “This is what your kind made me. Is this what you wanted to see? Is it, Sun?”

His gaze was fixated on my neck.

“Ugly, isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

The voice wasn’t Sun’s; the reassurance hadn’t come from him. That voice was female. I tipped my head to look around his wide shoulders and caught sight of a blonde warrior at the door to the room. She was staring at me as if she’d seen a ghost.

“It is,” I assured her. Waved a hand at Sun. “Look at his face; it’ll tell you the truth.”

“We all bear scars,” she said as she moved into the room and shut the door.

“You need to leave, Lyris,” Sun said.

Without blinking, she barged toward us. “Get fucked, my king.”

It took a moment for her words to process through my brain; then I gasped. “King?”

The one I knew as Hollywood stepped forward warningly. To guard the woman or Sun, I wasn’t sure. “Lyris.”

She snapped a glare at him. “I have purview over the women, Demetri.” She jerked back to focus on Sun. “I should’ve been called immediately.”

“This doesn’t concern you,” Sun snarled.

“It sure as hell does. She’s an Archai female; that makes her my concern.”

An Archai female? No, no I was not.

Sun didn't give me time to protest. "She's *my* lo—"

He choked himself off. What had he been about to say? Love? Lover? But no, he wouldn't want to admit to either of those.

Just to throw fuel on the fire—because that's who I was—I volunteered, "Fuck buddy?"

"He's not the only one," Cale muttered from across the room.

It was my turn to sneer then. Anything to ignore the beast directly in front of me, heaving with rage. "You wish."

Cale frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Cale," the hooded one warned.

"Grim," Cale said back. The name definitely fit.

I couldn't hold back a satisfied grin. "It means my gift works in mysterious ways, jackass," refusing to admit to any more than that. I wasn't about to tell them I could make them imagine doing anything with me, seeing me do anything. They'd probably kill me on the spot.

"Spill it, Rissa," Grim said.

"Risk. My name is Risk," I told the room. That was the story I was choosing, here and now, and I refused to admit to another one.

"You are Archai, aren't you?" the woman, Lyris, asked.

I shrugged. The truth was, I still didn't know what I was. "I definitely don't turn into an animal." I could admit that much.

Sun jerked back. "You know we're shape-shifters?"

Again with the shrug. “You guys aren’t as good at hiding things as you seem to think. You or the other side.” I didn’t tell him Arik had bitten me, so I’d figured they were vampires until recently.

“Our women don’t change shape,” Lyris explained, moving closer, her voice softer. “They have psychic gifts, not physical ones.”

“Why?”

“Who can understand the wonders of evolution?” she said. “Maybe it is how our unique DNA interacted with the female chromosome. We don’t know for certain. Our males”—she jerked her head to indicate the rest of the room—“change physical shape, but our females create changes in their brains, giving them each a unique psychic gift.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “Your gift is glamours.”

I drew my Risk persona back around me, a familiar, comforting cloak. The place where I felt most comfortable, the place where I could hide. That was answer enough.

The room gasped again at the change, all except Lyris. She smiled. “Yes. You’re definitely one of us.”

“When were you triggered?” Sun asked. His voice was still more bark than anything, but I didn’t get the sense that he was going to kill me with his next breath anymore.

“Triggered?”

Lyris cut in. “Bitten.”

“The first time?”

Sun winced. “You’ve been bitten more than once? By whom?”

I shook my head. Not gonna admit that one. “About fifty years ago.”

“Who was it?” Lyris asked. When I hesitated, she pointed out, “We gave you information. Now you give us some. That’s how this stays friendly.”

“And if I don’t?”

Sun growled, the sound a mix of human and animal. His eyes flashed silver.

“Save it, Bird.”

“What?” Grim choked out.

Sun stayed silent, but for a minute I swore, from the returning rage on his face, that he was going to tear out my throat.

And of course I couldn’t help making it worse. “Here’s a piece of information: I followed you one night after you dropped me off and saw you change. Nice wings, by the way.”

Sun exploded. Surging forward, he slammed me back with a big hand gripping my throat, cutting off my air till I could barely breathe. Silver took over his eyes, drilling into me, and then I felt a presence, sharp as a knife, pierce my brain.

“Sun!”

I couldn’t identify the voice that time; all I knew was the agony taking over my head. I fought Sun’s invasion, fought to keep my mind safe, but Sun had no mercy, rifling through my memories, my thoughts like a deck of cards. I could feel him there, his fury, his disgust as he worked his way backward till he found my changing. I screamed in fury, felt something tear deep in my brain—

“Break it off!” Grim’s words. I could hear them above the rushing sound of white noise in my ears. “Break it off, Sun, or I’ll do it for you!”

Sun probed harder, stabbing deep—and then he was gone and I was alone again, my mind scarred, my heart ripped to pieces. If I’d had any doubts—and there’d been plenty—that Sun loved me, they were gone now. He couldn’t love me and do what he’d just done.

I sagged against the wall, trusting it to hold me up, unlike the creatures in this room. My hands slipped to my knees, then my knees hit the floor, and I slumped there, bent over, watching drops of blood gather into a puddle beneath me. When I brought my hand up, I felt the sticky trails leaking from my eyes. When I squeezed them shut tight, hoping to stop the incessant drip, drip, drip, my body began a long slide to one side.

Feminine hands gripped my arms. Instinct had me fighting the hold until Lyris whispered urgently in my ear, “Easy. It’s all right. I’ve got you.”

“No—” I choked off a sob as pain continued to surge through me in waves. “Stay away from me.”

“Shh.” She settled me fully on the cold floor. “I won’t let him hurt you again.”

I chuckled at that. “Sure. Whatever.”

“Get him the hell out of here.” Grim again. I didn’t look up. I didn’t want to know. I simply wanted out. Away.

“She goes in a cell, Grim. Nowhere else. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you fine, bastard. Now out!”

A door somewhere opened and closed. Light steps approached, and then a gentle hand on my shoulder. I tried my best to cram myself into the wall behind me.

“It’s all right,” Grim said gently.

“If it was all right, I wouldn’t be bleeding from my eyes, now would I?” I choked out.

A sigh of air teased my hair. “The ability to overpower someone’s mind is given only to the king,” he said. “As far as I know, Sun has never used it. Not even against prisoners.”

“Lucky me.”

Another sigh. “Risk...”

I opened my eyes to a hovering gray blur in front of me, and held up a hand to ward him off, my blood-covered eyes refusing to bring him into focus.

He took my hand. “Let me heal you.”

“Stay...away.” I was sobbing, I realized. Agony racked my brain. “Don’t...”

Warmth flooded my mind. I jerked back, smashing my head into the wall in my effort to get away, but Grim refused to relent. *“I’m not going to hurt you, I promise. I can heal you like this. Just let me help you.”*

“No! Stop!”

But the asshole refused. Lyris knelt beside me, her presence a hovering heat that seeped into my system despite my efforts to resist. Grim traveled through my head, though I could sense him only at the periphery, as if he was conscious of not entering my actual memories, invading my thoughts any more than he had to. I should probably be grateful for that, but

I wasn't in a grateful mood right now. I wanted the hell out of here; nothing else was going to satisfy me.

And apparently that wasn't happening anytime soon. When Grim withdrew from my mind, I stayed where I was, slumped on the floor, and listened as Lyris and Grim began to argue about what to do with me.

"She must stay," Grim finally said, his tone final.

No way in hell! "I want out of here." Wherever here was.

I could sense him staring down at me but refused to look up. "I'm afraid I can't do that," he told me. "I could defy him, but if I did, I'd be dead."

My mouth twisted in contempt. "Well, we wouldn't want to risk anyone's life but mine, now would we."

A long silence met my words. "Damn," he said. Then, "Let's just go."

I didn't have a choice, but that didn't mean I wouldn't be looking for every opportunity to escape.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX



BAER

I heard Grim's footsteps in the hall leading toward the cells. They were distinctive, easy to recognize, a heavy man, moving softly, almost as if wings kept him barely off the ground. I had no idea what his shifting form was, but he always made me think of wings for some reason. Maybe because he represented the only freedom my brother and I had right now. What little chance we had of it, anyway.

But Grim wasn't alone this time. Two separate sets of footsteps, one even, one shuffling, followed him.

I reached out, as had become my habit in the months since we'd been kept here. "*Grim?*"

"*Bringing you some company,*" he said in my head. He was the only one who respected me enough to use telepathy.

He didn't sound happy about it. Not to be a cliché, but his voice was the grimmest I'd ever heard it. "*Company?*"

"*Unfortunately, yes.*" And then the door leading to our hall opened. Grim hadn't acknowledged the guard on duty, Franklin. I could smell him, his sweat, the smell of his animal beneath the skin. Now, with the door opening, I smelled his shock, his surprise.

Sometimes being a werewolf was a curse.

I moved to the small window in my door, enclosed with bars that they somehow expected would keep me in. More likely they knew they wouldn't, and that's why the guard was there. It was the outside door that was the problem. I could get out of my cell, but to go where?

Grim approached, then passed me, moving to the next cell. Across the hall, Beckan stood at his window too, peering out. And then Lyris passed, her golden hair shining beneath the harsh lights. She had her arm around another female—red hair, blood on her face. What the hell?

I listened as they moved to the cell beyond mine and laid the female on the bed there. She was silent, but anger and pain filled the air as she passed, thick enough for me to choke on. I met Beckan's gaze across the hall, seeing the glow of his animal rising as he sensed exactly what I was sensing.

"*Why the fuck do they have a female here?*"

I gave a short shake of my head. Though we were prisoners, I never got the sense that our Archai captors were unjust. But a female...

"Easy," Lyris said quietly.

Then Grim, "Risk...let me try again to heal you. A second session should take care of that knock to the head."

A moment later, “Get the fuck out of my mind.”

“I’m just trying—”

“Don’t try. Just stay out.”

“He can’t help you if you don’t let him in, Risk,” Lyris said. “He’s not going to hurt you.”

“I said no. You guys know what no means, right? Or doesn’t that word mean anything here.” A strained laugh. “Of course it doesn’t.”

“Technically, you’re a prisoner,” Lyris said, the faintest hint of sarcasm in her tone.

“Why?”

“Why were you at the compound?” Grim asked.

“Is it off-limits for some reason? You guys hired me to look for clues; I went looking for clues. Why is that a problem?”

“I don’t think that’s totally it,” Grim said, “but I’m not gonna question you right now. I only want to heal your wounds.”

“Then get me a medic. And stay the fuck out of my head.”

Grim sighed and it sounded like it came all the way from his toes. “All right.”

I heard Lyris moving toward the door, and then she was walking down the hall. I watched, noted the grim line of her mouth as she passed. A few minutes later she returned with a first-aid kit. Patrick, the Archai “doctor,” followed behind. Even shifters sometimes needed a doctor; our bodies couldn’t heal everything immediately.

Motion came from the cell next door, then, “Get your fucking hands off me.”

Grim chuckled. “Is ‘fuck’ your favorite word?”

“If you’d met me before, you’d know the answer is yes.” More movement. “Does consent not matter here? The Geneva Convention?”

“Yeah,” I muttered before I’d realized the words were coming, “that doesn’t really apply here either.” It was true, though I probably shouldn’t have spoken and made the situation worse than it sounded.

She probably couldn’t hear me anyway.

“Nice to know.”

Okay, so she could hear me.

Grim came out into the hallway, followed by Lyris. I couldn’t see his eyes, but I could tell he was glaring at me. “Thanks.”

I shrugged. “It’s the truth.”

Another sigh.

“Doing that a lot today,” Lyris pointed out.

A hand disappeared under Grim’s hood as if he was rubbing his face. “And you’re surprised?”

“I’m surprised you have a female here,” I said.

Grim’s frown could be mistaken for agreement, but the Aomai’s emotions could sometimes be hard to interpret without seeing his eyes. I did better with scent even though he kept a tight lid on them. Frustration was all I could smell right now.

“Why *do* you have a female here?” Beckan asked.

“Yeah, Grim,” Lyris added, “why do we have a female here?”

“Because you’re all assholes,” came from the cell next to me.

Beckan snorted. “She’s not wrong.”

“Could the two of you stop making it worse?”

“What are we going to do about Sun?” Lyris asked.

What about Sun?

Grim shook his head. “I don’t know.”

It was Lyris’s turn to frown then. “You never don’t know.”

Grim’s frustration broke free. “Well now I don’t!”

If it was a situation Grim didn’t know what to do about, it was bad.

The door to the other cell opened, and Patrick stepped out.

“So?” Grim asked.

Patrick gave the Aomai a surprised look. “So she’ll be fine. Did you expect anything else?”

“No,” Grim barked at the smaller male.

Patrick seemed unfazed at the aggression. Probably used to it from testy shifters. “Give her time to heal. Her body knows what to do.”

“She was bleeding from her eyeballs,” Beckan pointed out.

Grim growled low in his throat. “You two are not part of this conversation.”

“Hey, it’s not like we can go anywhere else,” I pointed out.

When he frowned at me, I shot him a smile.

“I’ve got enough going on without you two crawling up my ass.”

And though I appreciated all he’d done to show us respect—about the only one who did—I wasn’t here to make things easier for him. I shrugged.

“And she *was* bleeding from her eyeballs,” Beckan said again.

Patrick frowned. “The invasion burst some capillaries in the flesh surrounding her eyes. They’re already closed.” He turned to Lyris. “She could use a bath, however. Maybe in a couple of hours when she calms down.”

“I’m already calm,” the female said. “I just want the hell out of here.”

“Don’t we all?” I asked. Rhetorically, of course.

Lyris closed her eyes and raised her chin toward the ceiling as if praying for guidance. “We’ll do what we can, Risk,” she called.

A kick rattled the door next to mine. “Do it faster.”

The trio in the hallway met each other’s eyes, then proceeded away from us as if by mutual agreement. I watched them go through the outer door, heard a *click* behind them, and looked across at Beckan’s.

“*A female,*” he said in my head. “*Why are they imprisoning a female?*”

“*I don’t know, Brother.*” But I didn’t think it boded well. Unfortunately for the two of us, all we could do was wait and see.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN



THE TRAITOR

The camera I'd mounted months ago in the far corner of the hall outside the jail cells allowed me to see the new female every time she came to her door, which was frequently. I could faintly make out the sound of her yelling as she flung abuse at the guard on the other side of the separating door, though reading her lips gave me the full, amusing story.

This was the female Sun had been spending time with? The self-important son of the king and this grubby whore?

Guess there was no accounting for taste. Too bad the wolves who shared her jail weren't as entertaining.

The faint buzz of the burner phone I kept in the inside pocket of my jacket alerted me to contact. It had gotten more frequent lately, a fact that was irritating as hell. I didn't like moving on someone else's timeline, particularly when I wasn't

in on deciding it. Helios, however, wasn't someone I could afford to piss off, not if I wanted to keep my head.

I pulled the cell out.

Text: need intel

Of course they did.

Response: Don't you have your own lackeys for that?

Text: you are the lackey

One thing about shifters, attitudes remained the same across the board, "good" guys or "bad" guys. Luckily I had years of keeping my rage under control. I wasn't certain who contacted me or if it was the same every time, but with the attitude that came with every word, I suspected that big bad asshole of a second who'd held the sword to my head. That one had no idea what I was capable of. I might not have a second form, but the one I did have worked just fine. He'd discover that fact soon enough.

Text: do you have this female in captivity

An image appeared on the screen, a female with dirty locks and blood on her face. Newly captured, maybe? Shock zinged through me as I looked beyond the dirt and realized who it was.

Excitement quickly followed.

Response: We do.

Text: need to track her whereabouts ahead of schedule

Response: What for?

Not that I needed to know, but I liked giving the Anigma jackass a hard time. What I really liked was the delicious thrill that went through me at the realization that Demetri's female was part of the target for the Anigma. What could they want with her? Sure, she was a truth detector, but that wasn't any great skill, not when you had females like Kat who could take your head off with a word. Or Lyris, who could make you forget your own existence.

What was truly important about her was her connection to Lyris's brother. I would be taking something infinitely precious from the male who had stood in my way all these years. And I'd have Lyris as well. Mine to torture. Mine to control.

Win-win.

Text: just follow

I didn't acknowledge that final command. I'd do it, but I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of telling them so. Not that they would doubt it. The stakes were just as high for me as they were for the Anigma.

My gaze trailed back to the computer screen and its view of the redhead whose hand was pushed through the bars of her door, allowing her to flip off the retreating guard. What would the Anigma think of that one? A female who could take on any persona, fool you with her outward appearance. I'd watched her change, been awed and alarmed at the idea that she could make you believe you'd done things with her that hadn't actually happened, as she'd suggested with Cale. A far more valuable gift than a truth detector.

Wonder what the Anigma would grant me for her.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT



DEMETRI

The dorm was silent as I slipped inside, save for the occasional shift of bedding or whimper in someone's sleep. Two thin privacy screens lined either side of the room in front of the rows of beds, cutting off the view of the females as they slept. Since there was no entry from outside into the back of the dorm area, there was no danger of intruders coming from that direction, and the screens gave the females some small sense of protection and privacy in their most vulnerable moments. That had been Lyris's suggestion.

My heavy heart softened at the thought of my twin. She cared so much for the psychs here, was tender and careful with each one of them, and yet she was tough as nails when it came to a fight. She'd stood up to Sun earlier without flinching because she'd been fighting for Risk's safety. Nothing the female had done, nothing Sun had done would have stood in her way. And my heart had been in my throat every second.

Sun had been out of control—we'd all known it; hell, anyone who could see him would've known it. He'd been dangerous, and my twin had been in the line of fire.

Unfortunately, I thought I knew why he'd lost his control at the evidence of the redhead's betrayal, and it didn't bode well for any of us.

“Long day?”

My hand lifted, seeking Imogen out, needing to touch her before I'd even had the chance to consciously recognize her voice. Fingers twining with mine gave me strength when all I felt was concern.

“Long enough that I didn't hear you walking over.” And that was saying something, because I didn't miss things like that. Especially when they involved my attention on my mate.

A crease appeared between Imogen's brows. “What's wrong?”

I tugged her with me to a nearby chair, curled my opposite hand around her hip, and pulled her into my lap. My favorite place for her to be. “A lot. So much...” Things I couldn't say. Things I was ashamed to say. This business with Sun and Risk was a disaster in the making for our people; I shouldn't allow my own selfish desires to rise when there were much more important things at stake.

And yet rise they did as Imogen curled herself against me. She tucked her head into my neck, and the scent of her, warm female and flowers, enveloped me. Blood rushed to my groin, the need for my mate rising—needing to feel her, needing to join with her. Sun didn't have this now. My heart, already tender over Lyris, ached for my king.

Lyris strode through the door, beelining for us. “You two get out of here.”

The bite of her voice told me exactly what her mood was. I rubbed my chin against the top of Imogen’s head, loving how her hair always caught in my stubble, connecting us. “I am on duty, Lyris,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, well, I’m not leaving my females tonight.” She frowned at the privacy screens as if angry that they prevented her from seeing her charges. “We don’t need both of us here. Go away.”

The pain in her voice started a tightening in my stomach. “Lyris—”

She didn’t say anything more, just shot me a look. Imogen seemed to interpret it as well as I did. Slipping from my lap, she stood and gave my hand a squeeze. “Let me get something real quick.”

“Imogen—”

Her smile was so gentle when her gaze shifted to Lyris, then back to me. *“I’ll be right back. You two take a moment.”*

I stood as well, watching as Imogen crossed to the screens and disappeared to the other side before turning toward my twin. Her scowl had me sighing. “Sun is—”

“I don’t want to talk about him right now.”

I knew she didn’t, but this was important and someone besides me needed to get some perspective. “Lyris, that female...I think she is his mate.”

Eyes the same green as mine went wide, startled. “No.”

“Yes.”

Lyris seemed to consider that a moment. “How sure are you?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Why?”

I threw a look over my shoulder in the direction my own mate had gone. “Because no man goes that insane over a female that means nothing to him. If she was a one-night stand, her betrayal would barely affect him. Finding out that your mate has been deceiving you...” I couldn’t imagine. And yet his actions today might have lost him that mate and damned my king to hell for the rest of his earthly life.

“He could have killed her, Dragon.”

Lyris’s fear for the female saturated her voice, stabbing at me. “But he didn’t. He couldn’t. She’s his mate; trust me.”

“God, what a mess.”

I leaned against the wall next to her. “Yeah.”

Her voice became even more troubled. “Risk’s gift... I’ve seen some pretty amazing things in my long life—like Kat—but this? I’ve never known a psych who could fashion glamours, much less make you believe in actions that never took place.”

“If it’s true,” I mused. “The glamours I understand—I’m a shape-shifter, after all—but how could Cale believe he’d had sex with her and not realize it hadn’t happened at all?”

Lyris rubbed at her forehead as if it ached. “I have no idea. I mean, the female could become anyone, make us believe anything, and we wouldn’t know the difference.”

“And yet,” I pointed out, “with a matebond, Sun would become the only one she can’t fool.”

“He could use the matebond to control her?”

I shrugged. It wasn't ideal, but it was a reassurance. “Not control, per se. Their minds would be one. He wouldn't have to invade to read her; he'd already be there.” With the two of them bonded, I didn't worry about Risk using her gift against us. As things stood right now, I had a feeling we were on borrowed time.

A sharp curse left my twin. “What are we gonna do?”

I gripped her shoulder and squeezed, steadying her and myself. “We do our best to make him see sense.” As Imogen crossed back toward us carrying a small bag, I lowered my voice. “And pray she can find a way to forgive him.”

“I'm not sure I could,” Lyris admitted. “What he did...”

Much as I sympathized with my king, the idea of hurting my mate like that, drilling into her deepest, darkest secrets and seeing blood drip from her eyes, stirred my dragon's and my protective instincts into a bubbling cauldron of tension. “I know.”

And then Imogen was beside me, taking my hand, and everything righted itself. I could breathe again. My anger stilled. I shared the feeling with Lyris, showing her what was possible.

Her shoulder relaxed beneath my hand. “Go on.” Her voice said she was tired, but I knew her well; she would watch over her charges as carefully as I would Imogen.

I bent to kiss her cheek. “*Reach out if you need me, Valkyrie.*”

She scoffed but patted my cheek with affection.

Imogen was quiet while we made our way through the deserted halls toward my suite of rooms. Only when we were locked inside, alone, did she speak. “Want to talk about it?”

I wasn’t certain if I did or not, but I found myself spilling the words anyway. I removed Imogen’s cloak, folded it, and led her to a seat. Got us drinks. And the whole time, I talked, maybe trying to make sense of it all myself while trying to make sense of it for my mate.

As I wound down, Imogen gasped. “His mate?”

I planted my elbows on my knees and stared into my glass, shifting the amber liquid back and forth. “I think so.”

“And what did he do to her?”

Her voice had gone hard, and I didn’t blame her. I rubbed at the ache taking up residence behind my breastbone. “The royal line has a particular gift.”

“A psychic gift, you mean. I thought males didn’t have psychic gifts.”

“We have basic psych skills like telepathy, but no, we don’t normally have gifts like you do,” I explained. “The royal line is different.”

“All of them or just Sun?”

“It is passed down from father to son.”

“So he...invaded her mind?”

That ache again. “He did.”

“Demetri...that’s like...”

I didn’t want to say it, but we were both thinking it. I nodded my confirmation. “It was against her will.”

The bright sheen of tears welled in Imogen's eyes. "How do you come back from that? How could he do that to his mate?"

Thankfully his mate was one of the few safe from the worst effect of his gift, though I wouldn't point that out to Imogen. Psychs—due to the way their minds were fashioned, perhaps—were usually not harmed. Solomon had used it repeatedly on his queen, though few outside the Warrior's Council were privy to that knowledge. He'd also subjected his son to the gift again and again throughout his long life. Sun, having the gift himself, had come out all right; males who did not, however? Their minds were inevitably damaged beyond healing.

Setting my glass down, I scooted closer and pulled Imogen into my lap, needing to touch her, needing to comfort her. "I don't know. I don't have an ability like that. I don't know what it's like to lose control like that."

She tucked herself closer to me. "You've never gotten that angry?"

"With males? Yes. But we just beat the hell out of each other and it was over." I brushed a kiss along the top of her head. "I would never hurt you like that, you know that, right?"

"I know. I trust you, Demetri."

We sat in the silence, snuggled up in the dim room, until Imogen stirred. When she sat upright, a glow shone in her eyes that dispelled the dark. "Maybe now isn't the best time, but...I brought you a gift."

Something like awe sparked in my heart. "You brought me a gift?" The Archai didn't have much need of gifts—we had whatever we needed.

“A gift. For you.” That glow brightened, took on a mischievous tone. “And for me.”

Putting everything else away for the night, I turned my complete focus on my mate. “Now I’m intrigued.”

She got up from the couch and crossed to her bag. “I’ll be right back.” She disappeared into the bathroom.

I laid my head back on the couch and savored the knowledge of her presence, the fact that she could stay as long as she wanted. That my mate wasn’t going to disappear into thin air. After so many years, it was hard to believe, but I knew deep in my gut that Imogen was it for me. The perfect fit. The other half of my soul. Nothing as insignificant as anger would destroy what was between us; I’d make sure of it.

When she exited the bath, I knew it even more. My heart stopped. “Imogen. God...” She was wearing a white lace nightgown that skimmed her body, hiding what I most wanted to see, highlighting all the parts of her that drove me crazy. I gulped hard.

Imogen fingered the lace as if nervous, taking a few steps closer. “I asked Lyris to help me get it. I know it’s not something from your culture, but in mine, a woman wears white on the night she gives herself to her husband.”

“But the mating ceremony—”

She shook her head. “Not for the mating ceremony. For our first night together.”

Holy— Desire flared, hot and bright in my gut. “Do you want to spend the whole night with me?”

She smoothed the fabric over her stomach. “I wanted to spend the night with you last time, remember?”

“I remember being a noble idiot.” I’d wanted to give her time, not rush. I’d been in agony taking her back to her room.

She trailed the hand down her hip, shifted. “Do you want me to stay?”

I couldn’t even get words out. In fact, forget words. I was on my feet and across the room faster than she could take her next breath.

Her laughter as I swept her off the floor and into my arms was an affirmation of everything I wanted from her, everything we could be together. I couldn’t wait to find out exactly what that would feel like. No more waiting, no more being noble. No more Archai problems.

Now it was time for my mate.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE



IMOGEN

Demetri wasn't jumping up to tackle me. Why wasn't he jumping up to tackle me? I was standing here in lace, obviously waiting, ready for sex, and... Maybe things were different with the Archai. Maybe I was being too forward?

Oh hell, here goes. "Do you want me to stay?"

And that was when he surged to his feet. Relief flooded me as he crossed the room—so fast, how could they go so fast—and scooped me into his arms. It felt surreal, being carried bridal style through the living room and into his bedroom, the one room I hadn't entered yet. His private sanctum. The last glimpse of his face in full light was almost feral, tight and intent on getting me where he wanted to go.

A thrill ran through me at the thought.

"Demetri."

His name was a sigh on my lips. I'd dreamed so many times of this moment, since the first time I'd seen him. As much as I loved his spirit, his body had always drawn me, and now it was all mine. Would be mine forever. I'd never been one of those girls who'd planned their wedding a hundred times before they'd turned eighteen, but the wedding night... I'd longed for that since I'd known what it entailed, giving myself to my soulmate, the one who would be mine always. Demetri was my always.

He slowed as he approached the bed. A massive bed, meant for a massive shifter. The thought made me gulp.

"I want to see you," he said, his voice guttural as he let my legs down, let me slide the length of his body until my feet touched the floor. The lace of my gown caught between us, igniting sensation even while it kept us apart. My fingers itched. I desperately wanted to feel his skin; I wanted him to feel mine.

"It's dark."

"Not for us." Gold striations in his eyes lit up. His voice went deep, the dual tone of his dragon joining in. "We want to see you."

I shivered. "I want to see you too."

Stepping back, Demetri reached for something on his bedside table. A rasp sounded, then a flame sparked in the darkened room, lighting the candle I finally saw there. The golden glow was a weaker form of Demetri's eyes, but it provided enough light for me to see his body.

And for him to see mine.

He positioned me to one side, allowing the light to caress every part of me. When he knelt, his broad shoulders and

blond head came to my ribs. My nipples ached, reaching for him, throbbing with the need to feel him, but he gave me no more than the touch of his gaze for the longest moment. That look of awe that I'd seen on his face earlier now glowed in his eyes.

“You amaze me, Imogen. The thought that I've been gifted with this”—one fingertip came up to trace the edges of the lace—“with you...”

I couldn't stop the instinct to arch my back. “Demetri.”

His name was a groan on my lips. Gold flashed even brighter in his eyes. “Your mate.” His fingernail extended, a sharp claw that gently raked across skin and fabric alike. “Say it.”

That claw scraped my nipple, choking off my breath. The sting mixed with my pleasure, doing things to me I didn't quite understand.

“Say it, Imogen.”

The words shuddered out of me. “My mate.”

A growl of pleasure rumbled through him. He opened his hand and cupped my breast, golden eyes burning like flames. Nothing was hidden from that light.

My hand rose on instinct, pressing his fingers harder against me even as I pressed my thighs together. “Please.” For so long now, my life had been bleak, my family lost to me, my home, my everything. But Demetri had replaced all that. He was a powerful being, sometimes too powerful, I feared, but with me, there was just love. Just giving. And I was hungry to feel everything he could offer me.

“My mate,” he breathed against my skin. Fingers stroked and circled, gripped and tugged, driving me insane. The lace

over my breasts stretched, caught at my nipples, until finally I could stand it no longer and reached up to yank the straps off my shoulders.

Demetri froze. Inch by inch, my skin was revealed, seeming stark white beneath the fire of his gaze—and my mate ate up every inch.

When the fabric reached my nipples, I stopped. It was Demetri who nudged it aside and took one aching nub between his lips.

The first suck nearly brought me to my knees.

If I'd thought his eyes were hot, his mouth felt even hotter. Firm lips, sharp teeth, rough tongue, as if he were a cat instead of a man—and maybe, with his dragon so close, he was more animal in that moment. I could sense his other half moving beneath his skin, the darkness of both their desires burning beneath my hands as I caressed him. That harsh rasping along my nipple should have hurt, like sandpaper, but instead it pulled my pleasure out of me with every stroke, arching my back, tightening my grip on Demetri's head, my fingers twisting in his hair. My breath sped up until I felt as if I'd been running a marathon, desperately trying to reach the end but never quite getting there.

When he switched sides, I could only moan. Demetri's eyes met mine, and the depth of desire there, the hunger, the sheer possession... My eyes slipped closed. The way he looked at me, the way he touched me, as if I was the most precious thing he'd ever seen, ever touched. No one had ever loved me like that. No one had ever held me as if they never wanted to let me go. But Demetri—

Tears welled behind my eyelids. As much as I missed my family, I never wanted to let go of him either.

His guttural groan pulled my eyes back open. He eased back, his sharp fang caressing the side of my nipple. “Imogen.”

He sounded almost tortured. I knew the feeling. Restless hands roamed my body, molding the lace to my skin, sensitizing every inch without actually touching where I needed it most. Bracing myself, I stepped back from him.

His rough growl sent a shiver through me. Ducking my chin to hide my blush, I grasped the fabric falling from my shoulders and tugged it down my arms. Slid the nightgown to my waist, my hips, my thighs. Let it fall softly to the ground.

Demetri stared at my naked body. “I lost hope that I’d ever find you,” he whispered, wonder touching his voice.

“I’m right here.”

“You are.” Standing, he grasped the back of his shirt and pulled it over his head one-handed. My heart stuttered at the sight of the heavy muscles banding his stomach and chest and shoulders. God, no one should be that powerful. His body tapered down to a vee that pointed the way to paradise—though paradise couldn’t get much better than what I could already see. But then he unzipped his fatigues, slid them down, and proved me wrong.

“Demetri.” Yes, that was silly feminine anxiety trembling in my voice. No matter what people might say, there *was* such a thing as too big—and if I had to guess, I’d say my mate was right on the cusp.

As if he knew exactly what I was thinking, he approached slowly, arousal leading the way. When his skin finally brushed mine, he nestled into my belly, ducked his head, and whispered in my ear, “I’ll fit.”

The thought weakened my knees even as I arched closer. “I certainly hope so.”

He chuckled, arms coming around me, pulling me tight against him. “I hope I can last long enough to prove it to you.” He lifted me against his chest, and my legs came up automatically to circle his waist.

“You feel so good against me, Imogen.” A sound almost like a purr vibrated through him. “It’ll feel even better when you’re surrounding me.”

My head fell back, all of my focus on that hard length sliding between my legs. “Yes.”

Demetri ducked his head to scrape his teeth delicately along my neck. “I want to taste you, mate. In more ways than one.”

“So taste me,” I begged. “Please.”

He laid me on the covers. The loss of his body heat left me chilled in the cool room, but soon his chest skimmed over my feet, my knees, my thighs. Hard hands gripped my legs and tugged them outward.

“Oh. Oh!”

Not the tasting I’d been thinking about, but Demetri knew what he wanted and took without hesitation. He tucked his nose against my mound, and a sharp inhale devoured my scent. When his head lifted, his eyes had changed, the pupils no longer human but slitted like a cat’s. His lips were parted, his tongue tasting my scent on the air. And then he dipped to run that tongue along my folds.

“Demetri!” I bucked up.

He growled, literally growled against my core. Teeth nipped at my skin. My knees fell open of their own accord, inviting him in, my pelvis tipping to encourage him deeper.

A wet tongue slipped inside me.

Oh God. I might not survive this.

Reaching up to grip the pillow on either side of my head, I held on tight as my mate consumed me. All I could think about, all I could focus on was his tongue, his fingers, the rough stubble along his cheeks and the soft brush of his hair and breath against my thighs—and the rising tension inside my body. When he took my clit between his lips and sucked hard, a thousand stars exploded behind my eyelids. I was lost in the brilliance until Demetri crawled up my body to lay at my side. His kiss tasted of the two of us together, wild and sensual, and I slipped my tongue into his mouth for the first time, searching out more, desperate to be one with this male who'd shown so much care and given me so much pleasure. I could feel his need in the way his body rocked against mine, in how wet his cock was as it brushed against my belly. He hungered, and I wanted to ease him. To ease myself as well.

“I need you,” I whispered into his mouth.

Fingers slid between my legs to find my opening. I kissed him again.

One finger slipped inside.

I groaned. Demetri purred. “So wet for me.”

Another finger joined the first, stretching me wide, thrusting in and out. Demetri flattened his palm against my clit, putting pressure exactly where I needed it. I started to pant.

His mouth trailed down to my jaw, my ear, along my throat. I arched into his fingers.

Almost there.

And then his hand disappeared and something much wider pushed against me. My fingers in his hair urged him closer. “Please, Demetri. Please.”

A sharp prick pinched my neck right at the throbbing vein. His fangs bit deep. At the same time, he tipped me onto my back beneath him and pressed into my body. I couldn’t stop myself; I cried out as he forged his way inch by inch, breath by breath, until he was buried deep inside me.

Demetri roared against my throat when he finally hilted.

Time stopped. My eyes were closed, but I swore I could see us together, Demetri’s beautiful body above mine, his tight back arched, hips thrusting forward. All I could do was clutch my mate to me and let him fill me to the brim. And fill me he did, over and over and over again until the tide rose, the sensation peaked, and the waves crashed down on top of me, drowning out everything but the pleasure racking my body. Another roar as Demetri took his pleasure as well, reawakening my own, shattering reality as I knew it. And in the long aftermath, when it all died away, only one thought remained:

Demetri’s love had changed something fundamental inside me. No matter what happened in the future, no matter where life took us, I would never, ever be the same.

CHAPTER
THIRTY



GRIM

Dawn was breaking over the wings of the golden phoenix as I walked out into the King's Garden. Now Sun's garden, except my mind still hadn't adjusted to that reality. Solomon had been king for as long as I'd been alive, and though I'd traveled alongside Sun on his journey to the throne, it was still difficult to comprehend that my closest friend was, indeed, king. I stood for a moment, letting my heart absorb the fire as the fountain lit up the sky. So much majesty and beauty in a split second. But being king wasn't like that. It was a constant demand, a constant drain, made a thousand times worse with the Anigma threat, and the stress of this situation with Risk was only going to add to the pressure Sun would have to endure.

When I turned, it was to see Sun sitting on the same bench his father had always occupied, directly across from the fountain. Not a good sign. If I needed any indication as to

where his mental state was, him seated in the same place where he'd been castigated on a near-daily basis told me everything I needed to know.

He didn't acknowledge me as I took the seat next to him. We contemplated our own thoughts in silence, watching the light rise, listening to the minute sounds of nature rising along with it. When the fiery dawn no longer burned across the phoenix, I spoke.

“Want to tell me how you know her?”

“I don't need your judgment, Grim.”

The monotone voice didn't fool me—Sun held a bubbling cauldron of emotions inside him, so strong they leaked out to me without any effort on my part. Uppermost in his mind was fear, though. He'd lost control and he knew it.

It might cost him the most important person in his life.

“No judgment,” I assured him. “Just trying to get a sense of the situation. I know we've had dealings with Risk—”

He made a choked-off sound deep in his throat. I ignored it.

“But I don't know how you know Rissa.”

“I've been seeing her.”

So she was the female he'd been disappearing for. The one I'd warned him wasn't important right now, with his father gone. It wasn't often I had to admit I was wrong, but major miscalculation there, definitely.

“And you didn't know...”

“Anything. Obviously.” He sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. “How could I not have known.”

“Risk has had decades to perfect her role, Sun.” Out of necessity—I wasn’t knocking her for that. She’d been forced to fend for herself, make it on her own, it seemed. How she’d managed to do that with her triggering, the manifestation of her gift, I didn’t know. The scars alone told the story of how hard it had been to survive. But she had.

That also told me she was as hard as steel when she needed to be. And likely just as unbending.

Not good. Not good at all.

“Her gift—” He shook his head. “I can’t even wrap my head around it.”

“I imagine not.” Her ability to glamour herself was cause for concern, but it wasn’t difficult for me to imagine. I’d spent my entire life living a dual existence. I recognized it in someone else, that fractured sense of self. Risk—or Rissa—and I were kindred spirits.

I doubted others would be so understanding.

“She’s not human.”

“No, she’s not,” I murmured.

“So which one is the real her, Risk or Rissa?”

That was a question that might keep a lover up at night. Unfortunately I didn’t have a good answer for him. “If I had to guess, she may not even know.”

He seemed to grapple with that for long moments. Then, “I don’t want to believe she’s a traitor.”

“But are you certain?”

Sun scoffed. “Despite the bastard everyone thinks I am, I didn’t look at everything in her mind. I got the gist on my way

to what I wanted to know—emotions, impressions. I didn't see evidence that she's betrayed us."

But he'd said himself, he hadn't looked at every memory, every moment. "There is nothing to make her loyal to the Archai."

"Except the other side," he pointed out. "It was a group of Anigma soldiers who destroyed her life as she knew it. She has every reason to hate them. We are their opposite. That's enough."

I bent forward, planting my elbows on my knees. "Or was."

More silence as our minds swept back to that moment in Sun's quarters. He rubbed his fingers over his eyes as if his head hurt. "I fucked up."

My snort was involuntary. "Badly."

"She's my mate, Grim."

"I gather that." And thank God for it, or we would be well and truly lost here.

He sighed. "I fucked up. Badly."

I reached out and slapped him on the shoulder. "One of the greatest truths about mates is this: there is only one. You can fuck up, but it's not like they can find another one." Not that I'd want to base my relationship on that, but Sun would have to take what he could get.

He was staring down at his hands. He didn't look happy to have a chance, although he should be damn grateful.

Or maybe the issue was something else. "What?"

He clenched his fists. "Her memories..."

When he didn't go on, I prompted him, "What about them?"

"Her gift works not by fooling your eyes but by fooling your mind." His words choked off, forcing him to clear his throat. "That's how she can make people believe..."

The trail-off was the key. "You aren't seriously jealous about men she *didn't* sleep with, are you?"

He shot me a look.

"Sun—"

"I know! I know, okay?" He shoved a hand through his hair. "It doesn't make any sense. But I didn't expect to see—"

I turned on the seat to fully face him. "You know that the matebond would allow you to see every bit of her, even men she *has* slept with, right? Just like she will see with you."

He winced.

"The thing is, it doesn't matter who she's been with—you are the only one that gets all the parts of her." If she—eventually—agreed to offer them to him, which was questionable given the current circumstances, and even more so if he hinted at being upset about her sexual history.

"I know that." He kicked at the grass under his foot. "I just need some time to come to terms with what I saw." More kicking, more thinking. Pain flashed across his face, floated to my senses on the air. "The thing is, it's not so much the males she fooled."

"Then what the hell is it?"

"It— She was in love, okay? Before me, she was in love. Just once, but..."

Ah. Damn. “But seeing that hurt.”

“It shouldn’t.” He squared his shoulders. “I’m king of the Archai; why would I feel intimidated by emotions she felt for my former best friend?”

Ouch. “Arik?”

He hesitated. Nodded. “Arik.”

The griffin shifter’s name came out rough, like Sun was forcing it out around gravel. I searched my mind to find something, anything that would make that an easier pill to swallow.

And came up with nothing.

“What if she can’t love me like that, not after what I...”

That was the rub, wasn’t it? The “after what I did” part. And unfortunately, there was zero guarantee. Only Risk could decide if she could forgive and maybe, possibly, forget. “Arik wasn’t her mate. You are,” I pointed out. “Besides, shouldn’t you be more upset by the pain she’s gone through?”

His head jerked up, eyes blazing at the accusation. “Damn it, of course. That’s there too.” He stood up and began to pace. “The thing is, that’s not what she thinks about. It’s not at the forefront of her mind.” His voice slowed as if he was feeling his way around the things he’d seen inside her. “Rissa is more warrior than I would ever understand if I hadn’t been in her mind. Females are softer, more sensitive; that’s what we’ve been taught. Weaker. But Rissa... She doesn’t acknowledge pain, doesn’t allow it to take up space inside her. That’s how she made it through.”

“She still feels it.” She had to. Everyone did. “She buried it because she was alone,” I reminded him. “She’s not anymore.”

Now she can finally rest and heal. Integrate the parts of herself that she's been forced to keep separate." If...

I left that part unsaid. Sun didn't need any more reminders; he knew what was at stake. We both contemplated that while he paced back and forth. The sun rose higher, but I waited, knowing there was more. The situation with Risk was complicated, and Sun needed to talk it out. Get his head on straight, especially before he saw her again.

"The people won't accept her."

As his queen? The Archai had their prejudices, but my guess was, if Sun was happy, they'd accept her despite her issues. If Sun fought for her, they would acquiesce. It was all contingent on his attitude.

"That is up to you, not them."

"Is it?"

"Your people followed you even when you defied their king. What do you think, Sun?"

He rubbed a hand down his face. "I think I don't deserve that kind of loyalty, not after what I've done to my own mate."

My patience evaporated in an instant. "For fuck's sake," I barked, "snap out of the self-pity. It doesn't suit you." Right now we needed the Sun who was an arrogant asshole, not the soft side. The emotional-mate side.

Sun laughed. Granted, the sound was a bit sickly, but I'd take what I could get here. "I mean it, Grim. I don't know how to fix this."

"You fix this by taking charge of Risk just like you have everything else in your life."

He shoved his fingers through his hair. “Something tells me she’s not going to just lie back and let me do that.”

“That’s why you’re king. You get the tough jobs.” And Risk was going to be a tough job, no doubt about it. She wasn’t a female to simply roll over and let Sun take charge. But that was exactly why she was perfect for him. “She’s your mate. Your entire life—and maybe your people’s lives—depends on the outcome of this battle. Do whatever you have to do to win it. To win her.”

“And don’t fuck it up too badly?”

“You said it, not me.”

The sound of footsteps hurrying across the cobblestone path from the throne room had us both turning in that direction. I flipped my hood back over my head a second before Nala’s petite figure appeared at the cave entrance.

“My king.”

Sun’s growl was more vibration than sound. I hoped Nala was too distracted to notice.

“Is something wrong, Nala?”

She acknowledged me with a nod. “I’m not certain, Aomai,” she said respectfully, “but possibly.”

“What is it?” Sun asked.

She fiddled absentmindedly with the bracelet encircling her wrist before responding. “I went to visit the new female, to check that she was all right.”

Sun groaned in my mind. I braced myself for a coming reprimand. Nala might appear timid to some, but I knew better. When it came to her charges, she wouldn’t hesitate to admonish a king.

“That female—” More fiddling. “Sir, I’ve seen her before.”

“You have?” I asked. “Where?”

“On my first visit to the coffee shop to meet with Raine. They are friends.”

Oh shit.

“Risk is friends with the female who escaped an Anigma attack?” Suspicion filled Sun’s words. “Why?”

Nala’s brow creased. “I don’t know. But I think it’s something we need to figure out.”

Sun strode toward the exit without another word, headed, no doubt, for his mate’s cell. I hurried after and prayed he remembered what I’d told him, but somehow I got the feeling that, when it came to Risk, the only way Sun operated was by instinct. Which likely meant fucking up all over again.

Badly.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE



RISK

Being in jail sucked big, fat, hairy donkey balls, let me tell ya. I'd had plenty of experience being isolated, but right now I needed a distraction, and I needed it bad.

"So what're you in for?" The question was aimed at either of the two shifters in the cells next to me, but since I couldn't see either of them directly, I simply threw it out into the hall. Hopefully one of them would answer.

"Working with the enemy," the one to my left said.

I shivered. "Guess it's a good thing you're behind bars."

He grunted, which I guess was answer enough. The guy across the hallway didn't take my point all that well, though.

"These bars can't really keep us in if we don't want to be."

"Do you want to be in jail?" 'Cause that was a new one on me. Nick had certainly never mentioned anyone wanting to be

arrested. Why would anyone want to be stuck in a cell going stir-crazy?

“Of course not,” he said, his tone implying that I was an idiot. “We’re just trying to be good.”

Again with the tone that said the opposite of what his words were. “Huh.”

“We’re not trying to be good,” the guy to my left said. “We are who we are, Beckan.”

So he wasn’t talking to me. Got it.

“Who are you then?” I asked. Maybe I should’ve started there and they’d be more friendly.

“I’m Beckan,” the one across the hall said.

“I gathered that.”

A big hand appeared in front of the window of my cell. “Baer.”

“I can see why they call you that,” I said, shaking the massive hand.

A quiet chuckle reached me. “And you are?”

“Risk.” It was my name, and I was sticking to it, no matter what I’d said to Sun. I’d told him a lot of things that weren’t true anymore, after all. This was just one more.

Footsteps sounded far down at the end of the hall leading to our cells, then voices on the other side of the main door a few yards away. I angled my head, trying to get an early glimpse of whomever the visitor was, refusing to acknowledge the sudden *thud thud thud* of my heart behind my breastbone. I didn’t give a shit if Sun came to see me. He could apologize

till the cows came home, but I'd never forget the look on his face as they led him away after ripping my mind apart.

Never, ever forget. He could go to hell if he thought forgiveness was even a remote possibility.

Instead of my not so favorite redhead, however, it was a blond who came through the main door. I groaned, realizing it was someone I actually knew.

Cale.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Cale," Baer acknowledged as the shifter walked by his cell.

Cale grunted. There seemed to be a lot of that going around today.

"Risk," he said when he reached my door. He got right up in the window as if he could intimidate me with an actual steel door between us. I hated to tell him, but I'd been intimidated by far more powerful shifters than him. Didn't think that would go over well, though.

"Cale."

The sour look on his face didn't bode well for this conversation, nor did his first words. "They might believe you about everything being fake, but you and I know better."

My desire for company took a swift nosedive. "For fuck's sake, can you all not just leave me alone?" I asked wearily. "Believe what you want, Cale."

"I know what happened," he insisted.

"You know what I planted in your head. I can make you believe anything you want to believe. You might not

understand that now, but you'll get it eventually."

"No one can do that."

"Oh really?" These silly shifters and their stupid-ass ideas. Fine.

Backing into the corner of my cell where he could no longer see me, I closed my eyes and pulled my gift around me. In my mind I reached for Cale's head and wrapped my gift around him as well. Reached into his brain, to the part connected to his eyes, his ears, every nerve in his skin.

And then I pushed.

Slinking across the length of the cell, I let him get a good look before I opened the door and walked into the hall. Cale yelped, backpedaling until his spine slammed into the wall. Giving him a wink, I proceeded down the hall to the main door, opened it despite the lock, and strolled through.

Cale rushed for the door, calling frantically for the guard. I listened, knowing exactly what he would see when he went through the main door. Of course, he had to wait for the guard to unlock it.

I chuckled to myself when I heard Cale curse. As he charged back to my cell, I heard Baer laugh. "Wow."

Cale banged a fist against the shifter's door as he passed. I jumped, losing the glamour. Allowing it to melt away. Moving to the wall opposite the door, I turned, leaned back against it, and let myself slide to the floor. Cale glared at me through my window.

"Believe me now?"

When he growled, his eyes lit with a fierce silver light, his fangs descending from either side of his jaw. Red flushed his

cheekbones.

“Open this fucking door,” he commanded the guard.

I heard the guard sputter, obviously not sure what to do. I had no idea where Cale rested in the hierarchy of the Archai, but I got the feeling he was higher up than that guy.

Beckan spoke up, bless him. “Leave her alone, Cale.”

“Shut the hell up before I have you executed, runt,” Cale snapped back.

“We won’t be executing anyone today.”

Grim’s voice, coming from the other end of the hall. But there was more than one set of footsteps headed this way; even my less-than-shifter hearing could detect that. I hurried toward my window, and when the main door opened, I wondered why Grim was nixing the idea of an execution: Sun came through first, and if Cale was angry, Sun was in a full-on rage.

I understood why when Nala walked through the door behind him. Guess another secret got out.

Oops.

Seeing Cale outside my cell didn’t make Sun’s mood any better. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Grim was shaking his head behind Sun’s back, his mouth a grim—pun intended—line beneath the edge of his hood. Cale might have gotten a little big for his britches, because he ignored the warning. “I have as much right to be here as you do.”

Sun bore down on the shifter like a freight train, not stopping until he was close enough to punch Cale in the face. I heard bone crunch and winced.

Everyone else did too.

Cale fell backward, struggling to keep his feet underneath him. Blood spurted from his nose.

“Is she your fucking mate too?” Sun asked.

His words went in my ears, but the meaning didn’t hit for a few seconds. It was like white noise poured in along with it, cluttering my mind until finally, long moments later, the word *mate* made it through. *Fucking* came shortly afterward.

“Am I what?”

Sun ignored me. All his focus was on Cale, who stared up at him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

“She’s not your mate.” He was shaking his head, his words muffled by the blood pouring out of his nose, but something about the look in his eyes left me wondering.

“She sure as hell is.”

I forced my tongue to work. “No, I’m not.”

Grim came up behind Sun. His head turned in my direction, and he slid a finger across his throat.

“Don’t tell me to be quiet!” I shouted. And okay, maybe my voice was a little hysterical. “I’m not his mate.”

Baer piped up from beside me, “I kind of think you might be. Look at his face.”

I did. He looked a bit like a bull about to chase down a matador. I had a feeling Cale might want to scoot out another door. But that didn’t make me Sun’s mate.

“I am not his mate.”

Sun looked at me then, his animal staring out of his eyes. A growl rumbled up in his throat that was anything but

birdlike. Plenty threatening, though.

I stiffened my spine.

“Cale,” Grim said, “you need to go. Don’t”—he interrupted when Cale would have argued—“make this any worse.”

Cale hesitated one more second, threw me a look, and then marched down the hall. The tension dropped about five degrees in the aftermath.

I turned away from the window, stalking back to the corner of my cell where no one could see me.

My door opened. Shit.

Sun, Nala, and Grim entered my room. I refused to turn around and face them.

Sun didn’t wait. “What do you know about Raine?”

Well *that* got me jerking around. “What about Raine?” I looked to Nala. “Is she all right?”

Nala shook her head, and my heart dropped. She glanced over at Sun. “I haven’t checked on her.”

Relief had me sagging back against the wall.

“We want to know why you know her,” Sun demanded.

I switched my attention to Grim, who gave me the slightest nod. Encouragement? “She’s a friend.”

“*You* are friends with the only female we know in this city who has escaped an Anigma attack? I don’t think so.”

Pain sparked in my chest. So first I wasn’t good enough for him—something he’d proved when he’d dropped me off after we had sex; he’d had no intention of seeing me again, I

could tell—and now I wasn't good enough to have friends?
“Believe whatever you want.”

Nala moved up beside Sun. “I know you are friends with her, Risk,” she said in that oh-so-gentle voice of hers.

“Rissa,” Sun growled.

Since I was wearing my Risk persona, that was a bit contrary. “Risk,” I told her.

She hurried on. “I don't think you would hurt her. We just want to understand the relationship here.”

“She's. My. Friend.”

“Risk—” Grim sounded disappointed.

Nala held up her hand, forestalling further argument. “It's not that unusual for Archai females to be drawn together. Risk experienced that when we first met, correct?” She smiled calmly at my acknowledgment. “Maybe it's the DNA, the abilities in our minds... Something makes us gravitate toward each other. We don't know enough about how it works to understand why.”

And they weren't learning from me. They didn't need to know that I'd sought Raine out after seeing her attack on CCTV.

“What have you told her?” Sun demanded.

Something was nudging at my brain, niggling for my attention. My glamour kept my expression neutral when I wanted it to, but up to now I hadn't worried about it. I'd been too overwhelmed with Sun's presence. Maybe that nudge was my own instincts telling me to protect myself.

Or maybe it was my heart dying inside me with every second that Sun watched me with suspicion in his eyes. Anger.

Loathing. No sign of the tenderness he'd shown me the last night we'd been together.

I tightened my glamour around me. "Nothing."

Sun snorted. "You really expect me to believe that?"

I shook my head. "I don't expect you to believe anything. You're obviously too dense to see the truth."

Grim wiped a hand down his face, and though I couldn't see his eyes, I could certainly imagine the look they held. It was almost funny, knowing the secretive shifter was exasperated.

"Out!" Sun barked.

"Sun—" Grim took a step forward.

"I said out!"

Nala hurried to the door. So much for female solidarity, am I right? She threw me a confused glance over her shoulder, looked to Sun, then dropped her gaze and exited the cell. He was her king, I remembered then. King of the Archai, king of all he surveyed, and that included me. Or so he might like to think. Nala might rush out of here with her tail between her legs, but I was made of sterner stuff.

Grim tried to argue, but when Sun started toward him, he, too, exited the cell. Within seconds Sun had me backed into the farthest corner from the door, looming with enough menace that I felt safer with the wall at my back than I did trying to stand up to him. He got as close as he could without actually touching me.

That hurt too, but I'd pull it out and examine it later.

"I want the truth from you," he said, his voice low and dark. Dangerous. To me? There was no way to tell. He *felt* like

he was dangerous to me, but some part of me, deep inside, couldn't admit to that truth. I wanted to believe he was still the Sun who had taken my body with such hunger and care. But that Sun had disappeared days ago. About the time he'd seen my true face.

“I've told you the truth.”

“Don't lie to me, Rissa.”

I sighed. “The truth is, Sun, if I lied”—I stared hard up at him, refusing to flinch, trying to drill my sincerity into him with the intensity of my look—“you would never know.”

He slammed his palms into the wall on either side of my shoulders. Cement block cracked beneath the impact. He hung his head, the soft fall of his hair brushing my cheek. Far softer than Sun actually was. “Tell me the truth. What do you want with Raine?”

Friendship? Caring? I wouldn't share any of that with this male. Only one thing was safe enough to let free.

“I wanted to protect her.”

His head jerked up, disbelief written plainly in his eyes. He reached as if to grab my throat, fisted his hand, and pulled it back. And that was when I knew—it didn't matter what I said; he was never going to believe me. That ability had died along with whatever tenderness he used to view me with.

I hid the agony of that realization behind my glamour, and though I swore I saw his nose twitch, I knew he couldn't see what I didn't want him to see. Could Archai smell emotions? I knew some animals could, but I prayed this one couldn't. Some parts of me needed to remain private.

The question was, would Sun allow it? Or would he rip through my brain like he had last time?

As if he could sense my fear, he closed those blazing eyes. “That will never happen again.”

“What won’t? Touching me?” I knew it wasn’t what he meant, but I also knew him well enough to get a rise out of him. “You’re damn right.”

He hissed between lengthening fangs. “You think I’m never going to touch you again?” He straightened up, shifting his feet closer. Thick arms caged me in.

“Not with my permission.”

Ah, Risk, what huge quantities of bravado you’re able to pull out of your ass.

A smile quirked one corner of Sun’s mouth, as if anything about this could be amusing. “That might be what you believe, but it doesn’t make it the truth.”

Rising on my tiptoes, I went nose to nose with the male I had, mere days ago, finally admitted that I loved. “Bet me.”

The next thing I knew, my head slammed back into the wall as Sun took my mouth with no mercy. His tongue delved deep, his hand gripping my jaw to hold me in place. I had no choice but to open for him, to surrender. And to admit, down deep where he’d never find it, that this was what I’d wanted all along.

The kiss seemed to go on and on, and I wasn’t fighting it. Not until someone at the door to my cell cleared their throat.

Nala. She was the only female nearby, so it had to be her. Sun jerked back.

If it had been Grim, I knew without a doubt that Sun would have dismissed the shifter and kept right on with whatever he

was doing. Me, specifically. But no matter how much I wanted it, I couldn't give in. My heart wouldn't survive another round.

“My king.”

Just that, his title. Nala didn't need to say anything else. Sun straightened, his gaze shuttered so that I couldn't read him. Without a word, he turned on his heel and headed for the door.

I didn't move.

Nala preceded him, but when Sun reached the door, he stopped. Tipped his head as if he would look back at me, but never quite met my eyes. His mouth opened, and I waited for his final words.

His lips closed. Without speaking, he walked through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO



RAINE

It always amused me to imagine Risk living in such a cookie-cutter, bland apartment complex. Risk was definitely not bland, and she was about as far from cookie-cutter as it was possible to get. Even now, worried as I was, thinking of her made me smile.

But not for long. I'd been trying to get ahold of my friend for two days, and for two days, nothing. Something was wrong, I knew it.

Mostly Risk came to my place, probably because, small and plain as it was, it was downright homey compared to the studio Risk maintained here. But she hadn't shown up last night after no answers to texts and, later, phone calls, all day. I didn't like being out this late in the evening, but I couldn't wait any longer. Now the cement stairs stretched up before me,

three flights of darkness, and I could barely breathe wondering what awaited me at the top.

The light on the third-floor landing was out again. Why the super couldn't keep the damn thing fixed, I didn't understand. The thought of Risk coming up here in the dark all the time made me want to heave. I angled my phone up at the nonfunctioning bulb and glared at it through the beam of my flashlight app before crossing to the door farthest from the stairway and pausing a moment. No light in the single window looking out onto the landing, no movement, no noise. Where the hell was she?

My knock on the door reverberated through the empty landing area like a gunshot, so loud it made me jump. Trying to ignore the thumping of my heart in my throat, I leaned an ear against the flimsy metal door, praying for the sound of footsteps or voices or even a radio on the other side.

Again, nothing.

Why hadn't I insisted Risk give me a key? What if she was in there right now, needing help, and couldn't call out to me? I had no idea how to jimmy a lock, and long minutes of yanking and fiddling produced no results. Another phone call went unanswered, and though I strained, I couldn't hear ringing inside the apartment.

Afraid the noise I was making might draw complaints, I finally sat on the stoop to wait. An hour passed, then two, but no Risk. If I waited much longer, I would miss the last bus. But I wanted answers. Waiting as late as possible, I stayed to the very last second before reversing my trip up the stairs, worry dragging at my footsteps. At this point I was out of places to look. She didn't own a car, so the shadowy parking lot was of no help. As far as I knew, Risk was either with me,

at her apartment—where she not only slept but worked—or at the club I visited with her on a rare Friday night out, and it wasn't Friday. The only other place I knew to look was at the hospitals.

Just the thought of calling around to see if she'd been injured and admitted to a hospital somewhere had me tearing up, which was why I didn't notice the group at the bus stop until I was almost on top of them.

Unfortunately they'd noticed me.

Four men, younger than me maybe, though not by much. They were clustered around the bench, ragging one another loudly as they jostled among themselves in a half-joking manner. Young men with nothing but bravado on the brain—and sex, probably, which definitely didn't bode well. I didn't want to be a target for that kind of boredom, but when I tried to pass behind the shelter, hoping to move on to the next stop before the bus showed up, the one facing my way through the plexiglass must have noticed me—or more likely, my gender—because he was at the other end of the bench, directly in my path, before I could get past.

I jerked to a stop.

“Hey, baby.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes, though I didn't drop them. Meet them head-on, that was always the advice, right? Looking at the ground meant weakness; staring them in the eye meant strength. “Move out of my way.”

Something tangled in my hair, and when I twisted my head in that direction, I saw it was a dirty finger attached to an equally dirty guy. He was leering down at me from one side, a friend/rival on the other, and a quick look back told me the

fourth was behind me, because of course he was. Part of me was relieved they were mere humans and not the kind of threat I'd faced once before—the kind there was no getting away from—but I was street smart enough to know a group like this could be big trouble if no one was around to witness it.

Reaching up, I caught my hair in a fist and yanked it back. “Leave me alone.”

The guy on my left grabbed my arm. I went with the pull, elbow leading the way, and jabbed it into his ribs. The night was cool, but his jacket was thin. The thrust had him stumbling back into the bus shelter. I beelined it for the gap he left behind.

Dude Number One stepped right back in front of me.

“Where you goin’ in such a hurry?”

“Leave me alone,” I said again.

He grinned down at me, flashing a grill like it was still 2005. That time I couldn't help the eye roll.

His expression turned dark. “You got a problem with me, bitch?”

“I have a problem with you getting in my way. Now let me by.”

Next thing I knew, he'd shoved me backward. Dude Number Three—or maybe it was Four; I wasn't certain which—caught me on the way down and tossed me back like I was in a full-body game of keep away. Before I made it back to Dude Number One, the guy on the receiving end of my elbow stopped me with his body.

I brought my hands up, warding him off. “Don't touch me.”

“Why not?” He leered down at me. “We’re just havin’ some fun.”

“Fun for who, dickhead?”

“Me, bitch.” He shoved me back. One of the dudes I couldn’t see kept the game up by pushing me forward again. This time Elbow Guy gripped my breast on my way past.

I swiped my nails across his face.

“Aah!”

Dude Number One had his hands up, grabbing for me, but reaching for his friend’s face had turned my body aside. When Elbow Guy retaliated by pushing me once more, there was no one there to catch me.

My tailbone did not appreciate the concrete. “Shit!”

“Ain’t that where you deserve to be, babe?” he sneered.

I’d love to tell you where you deserve to be. Unfortunately I wasn’t in a position to indulge that little wish. Scrambling to my feet, I tried to back away, but by now they’d closed in the circle again. More jostling commenced. I fought back, but it took a few turns before a gap appeared that I could bolt through.

Right out into the street. Without warning, something that felt like a brick wall slammed into my body.

Damn! Damn damn damn.

Even if I’d wanted to get up, my ass and spine and head said no way in hell. I didn’t attempt it. Being on the ground steadied me enough that it only took me a few minutes to figure out what had happened. In my disorientation I’d walked right in front of the arriving bus. Thank God it had been almost stopped. The four assholes had disappeared while the

bus driver jumped out to see if I was okay. Banged up and bruised, but overall I was fine—and even if I wasn't, I just wanted to be left alone to lick my wounds.

The kindly Mr. Henderson refused to take no for an answer, however, and with the cooperation of the other riders, he drove me straight to the ER before returning to his route.

When I was finally sitting in the ER waiting room, tucked into a corner as far from the other patients as I could get, I pulled my phone from my jacket pocket, saw the busted screen, and burst into tears.

This night had been a nightmare and a half and just kept right on giving, didn't it?

“Miss?”

I looked up, swiping my sleeve along my nose. A young nurse in purple scrubs stood in front of me. “Yeah?”

She nodded at my hand where the broken phone rested. “Is there someone I can call for you?”

It was a kind offer on a night where kindness was desperately needed. The problem was, even if I had someone I could call, their numbers were in my broken phone.

And then I remembered. Nala had given me her phone number the last time she'd come into the coffee shop. I'd only spoken to her twice, but if anyone had resources and could help me find Risk, it would be the Archai, wouldn't it? Risk said they were the good guys. If she'd been available, I would never go to someone else, but I desperately needed help to figure out what had happened to her.

And Nala had written her number on paper. Digging into my jacket pocket, I felt the tiny square crinkle between my fingers. Relief had me closing my eyes.

“Could you call this number?” I asked, holding it out to the nurse.

She glanced at the paper. “Sure. Nala?”

“Yes. Tell her Raine needs her, please.”

Half an hour later, the petite woman I’d met mere days ago strode through the door to the ER. Following behind was a massive redhead, his face scarred, his expression unreadable. I stared until the two spotted me, then forced my gaze to stick to Nala as they approached. The guys I’d fought with had been scary as a group, but it was the collective that had given them power; this male was a collective all his own. There was no doubt in my mind that he was a shifter, and that was too scary to even consider right now.

“Raine!” Nala squatted in front of me, taking in my torn jacket and bruised face, the hair that had fallen out of my ponytail and tangled in the bloody scratches from the bus grill. “What happened?”

I explained, grateful for the Tylenol I’d been granted when the young nurse had taken my vitals. The throbbing in my head was slowly lessening, but I was still waiting on a scan to see if I’d sustained a concussion from the impact with the bus or the ground, either one.

“Why were you out so late? Don’t you work early mornings?” Nala asked.

“That’s why I called you. Or asked the nurse to call.” I waved my broken cell in the air. “Risk is missing. I went to her apartment. I’ve called for two days, texted her... I can’t find her, and I’m afraid something awful might have happened. What if—” But I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Risk had told me the creatures who had attacked me were no longer here in

Nashville, but what if they'd returned? What if they had her somewhere and I never found her?

Nala glanced over her shoulder at the impassive male behind her. Whatever she was looking for, she must have gotten, though I didn't see him move or change expression. Nala, however, eased into the chair next to mine and took my hand. "Raine, it's okay. Risk is with us."

"What?"

"She is with us. She's safe."

"Then why hasn't she contacted me?"

Again with the look at the big shifter. I forced myself to focus on his scarred face. "Who are you?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "I am Basile," he said. His voice had an accent I couldn't place, a slight slurring almost. The name sounded French, the *a* short instead of long, but that wasn't quite it. At least he didn't sound pissed off despite how rough he looked. "I am an Archai warrior here to keep you both safe."

"Then why does she keep looking at you?"

Nala sighed. "Basile is in charge of our security, Raine."

I put two and two together. "So he gets to say if Risk can contact me?" I stared up at him. "Why hasn't she?" Then, when he took more than two seconds to answer, "You know what, never mind. Take me to her."

"I don't know that I can do that," Nala said. Basile shrugged, whatever that meant.

"I want to see her."

Basile spoke up. "We don't take just anyone to the lair."

I wasn't just anyone, was I? "I thought I was one of you; isn't that what you said, Nala?"

Her expression was a mixture of concern and consternation. "It's complicated."

Tears tingled behind my aching eyes. I was done getting the run-around. I was done with tonight altogether, actually. "Then uncomplicate it," I snapped. "I don't know you. Risk didn't know you, and now you want me to believe she's gone with you voluntarily and is fine? She would have contacted me if she were fine." My voice was rising and I didn't care. I wanted Risk. She was more my sister than my friend, and I needed her with me right now. I'd been attacked. Hit by a bus, for Christ's sake. And that was on top of worrying over her for two freaking days. I needed to know she really was safe. "I want to see her, so make it happen."

Nala stared at me for a long moment, then sighed. "You're right."

The nurse from before appeared behind Basile. "Is everything all right here?"

Was it? I didn't really know.

"It's fine," Nala said, giving the woman a calm smile.

The nurse didn't appear to agree, but she focused on me rather than arguing. "We're ready for your scan now."

I looked at Nala. "Well?"

She turned the smile on me. "I'll make it happen, I promise. You get that scan so we can make sure your head is all right, and then we'll go see Risk."

That had been easier than I'd thought it would be, which, conversely, made me suspicious. But getting worked up had

made my head throb again, so I decided to believe Nala for now. Taking a careful seat in the wheelchair the nurse had brought over, I watched from the corner of my eye as Nala walked a short ways away and pulled out her phone. As we started toward imaging, I heard her say, “Hey, we have a situation.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE



IMOGEN

Clara stood in front of me, one toe digging into the ground, her full bottom lip pulled between a gap in her teeth where she'd just lost a tooth. "Will they like us?"

I smoothed back the wisps of curly black hair that had escaped from her braids. Nerves were normal, especially when faced with meeting a whole clan of people all at once like we were about to do. It even had me nervous, and I'd have Demetri at my side. Sun planned to announce the planned coronation and our matebond ceremony, both of which would take place in a few short days, to the Archai tonight. We were being introduced at the same time, sort of a worse version, if one could call it that, of the "we have a visitor; raise your hand" moment everyone hated being put on the spot for. "Of course they'll like you. What's not to like?"

She seemed to consider that. "I don't share my chocolate."

“People aren’t going to not like you because you don’t share your chocolate.”

“Tabby doesn’t like for me not to share it,” she piped up, because of course she had an answer for that one.

“That’s because Tabby can be...cranky sometimes.” At certain times of the month, specifically. “That’s a problem with her, not you. Besides, we’re sisters. We stick together.”

She leaned against my side where I sat in my chair. “Are we going to have to move?”

“No, no moving. These people live in the caves too, in an area connected to ours, so we can easily go see them and vice versa.”

“Are there kids?”

My heart couldn’t take any more. “Come here.” I pulled the little girl onto my lap the same way Demetri did when he needed comfort, or I did, and wrapped her in a hug. “You know we love you, right? We’re your sisters, and we love you. But yes, there will be kids you can get to know and play with. There’s even a school.”

That perked Clara right up despite the nerves. “A school?”

I laughed. “Yes, a school, where you can check books out of a library and learn math and even other languages. And they will keep teaching you how to control your gift.”

“What about Lyris?”

“She’ll still help you, but the teachers at the school have a lot more experience with little girls like you.”

“Because there are lots of little girls like me there?”

“Yes.” I stuck my nose into the crook of Clara’s neck and made funny noises until the little-girl giggle that we all loved made an appearance. “Lots of little girls like you.”

Lyris came in, a female I hadn’t met before trailing behind her. Clara jumped from my lap to run up to Lyris. “Lyris, I’m going to school!”

“You are?” Lyris fawned over her while I eyed the female with her. When the woman’s navy-blue eyes met mine, I gave her a welcoming smile.

Clara ran off to share her exciting news with anyone who would listen. Lyris watched her, chuckling. “I’m glad we all share parenting duties. Sometimes that one has more energy than I can fathom.”

“Me too.”

Lyris turned to her companion. “Risk, this is Imogen, Demetri’s mate.”

So this was Risk. I could see why she’d captured Sun’s attention. Not only was she beautiful, but there was something in her eyes that told you she was more than just a pretty face. I wondered what she looked like without the glamour—Demetri had said she’d refused to drop it since she got here. I held out a hand. “So nice to meet you, Risk.”

Risk shook my hand, though somewhat reluctantly. I didn’t take offense. She’d been through a lot, something I could definitely relate to.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to be here.”

Demetri walked up in time to hear the words. “You’re definitely not supposed to be, at least according to Sun.”

“Yeah, well now we’ve got a trump card,” Lyris said, practically rubbing her hands together in glee.

Demetri narrowed his eyes on his twin. “How so?”

She tugged a cell from her pocket and wiggled it in the air. “Got a call from Nala.”

“Isn’t Nala’s supposed to be here?” I asked, glancing around.

“She got called away,” Lyris explained. “Turns out that Risk’s best friend is the female we’ve been keeping an eye on, if you can imagine that. Nothing like a coincidence to get things rolling.” She smirked. “She was attacked tonight by a group of human wannabes while searching Nashville for Risk, whom she hadn’t heard from in days. For her own safety, and because she insists on seeing that Risk is actually safe, Nala has decided to bring her into the lair.”

Demetri let out a low whistle. “And Risk is supposed to be in a jail cell.”

Yes, that was definitely a smirk. “Well, she won’t be when Raine gets here, not if we want Raine’s trust.”

And Lyris would get what she’d been fighting for since Risk had arrived at the lair. She’d vented to me during the day while the others slept.

Demetri was wiping a hand down his face as if he’d just heard the worst thing imaginable. “You’re pulling the king’s”—he dropped his voice to barely a whisper—“*mate* out of a jail cell without his permission?”

“I’m not his mate,” Risk said.

“Yeah, Grim said you were delusional,” Demetri shot back. “Keep telling yourself that, but I have to warn you, it

won't get you very far.”

The fiery look Risk gave him shouted *stubborn*, but she clamped her mouth shut.

Lyris ignored the sidebar. “Not only that, but I’m bringing Risk with us when we enter the dining hall. Once she’s been introduced to the clan just like the others, Sun won’t be able to take her back to jail.”

I considered that for a moment before bursting into laughter. “Good God, Lyris! I knew you were sneaky, but that... It’s diabolical.”

“I know.”

Demetri’s frown said he wasn’t as Team Lyris as I was. “This move also puts you in the line of fire, Valkyrie. You need to stay out of this. It’s between Sun and Risk.”

She stepped up and brushed a kiss across the edge of his jaw. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m a big girl, Dragon. Sun has handled this all wrong, and I’m not going to take the abuse of one of my females lying down. Besides, if he wants his mate to actually accept him, someone has to run interference.”

“I’m not his mate.”

Risk wasn’t a shifter, but she could definitely growl; she was doing it now. I sent her a sympathetic glance.

“Come on, Risk,” Lyris said, gathering her charge. “Let me introduce you to some of the other females.”

As the two walked off, Demetri eyed them, his gaze troubled. I sidled up to him and put an arm around his waist. He gathered me close, ignoring the looks we were getting from around the room.

“Sometimes Lyris scares me with her daring,” he admitted. “Sun is our king now, not just a prince, and not merely our friend.”

“I don’t know.” I eyed the two females as they talked to Tabby and Helen. “Something tells me she is more than up to challenging him. Challenging power is a healthy thing, you know; Sun shouldn’t get to dictate everyone’s lives, right or wrong, with no one speaking up.”

“I know you Americans believe that.” He tapped my nose. “But why does it have to be my twin doing the challenging?”

I chuckled. “Because she’s badass. Remind me never to get on your sister’s bad side,” I teased my mate.

He shook his head, looking resigned. “Don’t worry. I have a feeling if it came to a tossup between you and me, Lyris would be on your side all the way.”

I grinned up at him. “You think so?”

“Absolutely.”

I couldn’t help myself; I pushed up on tiptoe to brush a kiss along Demetri’s full lips. When I would have stepped back, he took the kiss deeper.

A throat clearing next to us broke the moment. Lyris. “Time to go!”

A couple of the Warrior’s Council shifters had arrived. They escorted us through the empty halls. All members of the clan had been called to the dining hall for the announcement, so there was no one to follow our progress along the way. Eventually we ended up near a set of double doors I assumed led into the chosen room given the number of voices beyond it. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

Demetri squeezed my hand. “Sure you are ready for this? Not going to change your mind, are you?”

He was joking, but even he couldn’t hide the trace of anxiety underlying his words. I was a truth seeker, after all. I could hear the slightest emotion underpinning his question. I took his face in my hands and brought him down to me. “Not a chance.”

His grin was lost in our kiss.

The introduction and announcement of the coronation and our matebond ceremony was all a blur. There were gasps—whether surprise or dismay, I wasn’t sure—when Sun talked about Demetri and me joining as a mated pair, but other than that, I didn’t register most of it until he released us to mingle. Demetri brought Clara and me over to the buffet to fix our plates. It seemed so silly, these intense beings with superhuman powers having something so mundane as a buffet, but the food smelled wonderful. And being served by the big warrior seemed to make Clara fall as much in love with him as I was.

“Dessert after dinner,” I warned the little girl as we approached that end of the table.

“Seems like Demetri didn’t take that rule to heart,” I heard on my other side as Demetri focused on Clara.

Jerking my head around, I saw a slightly older male, salt and pepper sprinkled in his hair and beard. His expression told me I had been right about the sour note I’d heard in his words.

Begin as you mean to go on, right? I couldn’t ignore this or I’d be ignoring a thousand more moments just like it.

“Excuse me?”

The male met my eyes after giving me a once-over. “I said, Demetri seemed to have jumped the gun a bit, didn’t he? The rest of us didn’t even know y’all existed.”

“What am I, a piece of meat?” *We wouldn’t have chosen you even had we met you, not with that attitude.* Aloud I said, “Demetri was a part of our rescue. That’s how we met.”

“He only got that job because of that sister of his. Any one of us could have volunteered.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

He looked taken aback. Not used to a woman speaking her mind, huh?

Turning fully to face him, I said. “You know, your people have been exposed to the value of women from your inception, it seems, whereas human males have had to be convinced of this fact. I would think, based on that, that the knowledge that women are no more than prizes to be handed out would be long gone from here. Apparently not. So let me point it out to you—you might consider us a scarce commodity, but *we* do not. Mating is mutual. It’s all about a woman’s right to choose. Or did y’all forget that somewhere along the way?”

The male sputtered. “But—”

A big hand landed on my shoulder—my mate. I could feel the warm approval of my words in his mind. And his amusement at the male’s serious miscalculation of his audience. But his voice was stern as he asked, “Evan, are you harassing my mate?”

Alarm flared in the shifter’s eyes. “No, of course not. I was just—was just—”

“That’s what I thought.” Demetri nudged me along the line toward the desserts where Clara stood, trying to make up her

mind. Another little girl about her age was doing the same while the two threw curious glances at each other as well as the table. But it was Demetri that held my attention.

“Do you need to take Nala’s class all over again?” he was asking Evan. “I’ve heard some of the males are having to repeat it due to their stubbornness.”

“No,” the male denied. “Not me.”

“Hmm.” Demetri glared down at him. “I don’t know; I think you might need to.”

More denial, this time a bit panicked. Finally Demetri nodded. “I’ll have to think on it, then. Keep an eye out for a little while just to be certain. Lyris is very protective of her charges, you know.”

“And repeating the class would ban him from contact with those charges,” Demetri said in my mind.

“That’s not nice.”

Demetri turned from the shifter toward the dessert table. *“Neither is his attitude, but he’ll learn. We won’t risk our precious ones with someone who thinks like that.”* He dropped a kiss onto the top of my head before lifting a piece of cheesecake to the stack of plates he already carried. *“He’ll learn eventually, even if he has to take Nala’s class a hundred times.”*

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR



RISK

I felt Sun's eyes land on me the minute I walked into the dining hall. It didn't matter that he never paused his speech, didn't stutter or even seem to take a breath—I could feel his gaze on me, feel his displeasure. Lyris seemed confident her plan would work, and for the chance to see Raine and make sure she was all right, I'd risk it, but a part of me was braced for judgment, for punishment.

Sun's attention just about guaranteed it.

One ear tuned to his speech, all about a coronation and some kind of ceremony, I focused the rest of my attention on the crowd. Most of them were smiling at the females who had entered with me, the females Sun and his warriors had rescued from the Anigma compound. I recognized some of them. They looked better than they had leaving their jail weeks ago, far better. Sun's people seem to have treated them well, at least

those who knew about them. Lyris had told me they kept the women a secret from the majority of the Archai until they were all healthy, even the little girl who'd been in a coma when they rescued her.

It started a funny feeling in my chest, seeing them here, watching them be accepted into the group. Or clan, Lyris had called them. The King's clan. Sun's clan. I saw the way his people looked up to him, admired him. Had he put two and two together yet? Did he understand that I was the one who'd led them to these females? It had been the one goal of my life to save as many of them as I could, and here, right before my eyes, was the fruit of my labor. The only time I'd succeeded.

No, those weren't tears in my eyes as I watched Clara wave at another child in the crowd. Definitely not. Tears were a waste of time.

When Sun finished speaking, he walked into the crowd. Despite so many big shifters around, it was impossible to lose sight of his red hair among the others, so I turned my back to watch the clan sidle up to the buffet—warriors, the elderly, females, families. Not as many children as I would have expected, but a few here and there. Mostly boys, I noticed. For some reason that fact left me uneasy.

Most of the males here appeared to be polite and seemed easy in the women's company. Not all, though. The bitter looks were noted, and not only by me, I was relieved to see. It gave me hope—that the females would not just be safe, but that they could be happy here. After what they'd been through, they deserved all the happy the universe could give them.

“Rissa.”

My eyes closed tight at the sound of his voice, the sound of my name. “Risk,” I choked out—barely.

“I can’t think of you that way, not anymore.”

The words were quiet enough they wouldn’t reach the nearest group of listeners, which made them even worse. “Don’t.”

Sun’s hand landed on my arm, pulled me around to face him. When I glanced up, none of the tenderness that his voice had held was present in his face. That held only anger. “What are you doing out of your room?”

“You mean my cell?” *Might as well call a spade a spade.*

“That’s exactly what I mean.” There was no apology; this male was a king, after all. He was used to having his orders obeyed and not apologizing for anything, I supposed. Or maybe assumed. His father had died only a week ago, and he had mentioned a coronation. Had he been treated like a king even while he’d been a prince? There was so much I didn’t know about him. So much I would never know, not now.

“I’m the one who let her out,” Lyris said, coming up behind me.

“Why?”

Just that, nothing else, but it was obvious he expected an answer—and a good one.

Lyris tightened her lips for a moment, then glanced around. “Let’s go over here.”

Sun gave me one last, long look before following Lyris to the door. Was it a warning? I didn’t know and didn’t want to care. Too bad I did.

I stuck close to the other women, forced myself to eat despite not wanting to. I was beginning to think Lyris had

forgotten me when I saw her hurrying across the room.
“Risk!”

I stood, abandoning my dessert. “Yeah?”

“Raine is here.”

My best friend had been given a space in the women’s dorm, apparently. When we entered the large room, I saw her halfway down the row of beds, her back to the headboard. A large square of white obscured her forehead, and cuts and bruises covered what skin I could see. I began to run. “Raine!”

She looked my way, the movement of her head slow, her eyes even slower to focus. “Risk.”

By the time I reached her, tears had dripped onto her cheeks. “I couldn’t find you,” she said, then kept saying as she leaned her forehead onto my shoulder when I sat on the bed. “I couldn’t find you, and then those guys... I got hit by a bus and called Nala. Because I couldn’t find you.”

I murmured apologies into her hair until the tears quieted. Then I laid her down on the pillow. “What did they give you?” I asked, carefully examining her eyes.

Nala stepped up beside me. “The hospital gave her something for pain. No major injuries, but the impact of the bus will make her sore for a few days. Luckily it was almost stopped before she was herded in front of it.”

“You’re sure they were human.” I’d get the CCTV coverage as soon as possible and send it to Nick.

“She was sure.”

Raine’s eyes were already closed, and the way her breath was deepening, I knew she’d be fully asleep soon. Good. Rest was the best thing for her.

“I want to stay here with her.”

“Of course—”

“No.” Sun strode across the room, the strike of his boots echoing off the walls. “She goes back to her cell.”

“Sun!” Lyris hurried to catch up to her king. “We need Risk to keep her calm.”

“No.”

I sighed. “Don’t be a colossal asshole, Sun.”

He narrowed those rainbow eyes at me. “That’s ‘king’ to you.”

“You’re not my fucking king, but fine. Don’t be a king colossal asshole, Sun.”

I swear I saw Lyris’s lips twitch. And that’s when I realized, this was what she’d wanted all along—me facing off with Sun. Maybe because no one else faced off with him and the male needed to be brought down a peg or two, at least in my opinion. Why Lyris wanted it, I had no idea, but I was a hundred percent Team Lyris. Anything that would keep me here with Raine.

Pissing off the king was just a bonus.

Sun stared down at me, that stone jaw unrelenting. Behind him I saw the women beginning to trickle in, including Imogen and the little girl. Demetri followed.

“I don’t think you’re going to win this fight, Sun,” Lyris said quietly. “Not against all of them.”

Sun glanced over his shoulder, then cursed under his breath. Turning back to me, he pointed an imperious finger. “You stay in this room, Rissa, you hear me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Get fucked, Bird.”

Lyris definitely snickered that time. I laid down on the bunk next to Raine, my back to Sun and everyone else, and studiously ignored him until he left.

I might have dozed after that, I wasn't certain, but at some point I became aware of someone sitting in a chair on the opposite side of the bed. Raising my head, I saw Imogen keeping vigil. She smiled. “I can never seem to sleep when someone new comes in,” she said quietly. “It started in the Anigma camp. They didn't watch over anyone with injuries unless they knew our talent was valuable. We were commodities, and cheap commodities didn't warrant the time or bother.” She shrugged. “So I would stay up with the new arrival, making sure they were comfortable, that they had what they needed, even sometimes just watching to make sure they were still breathing. Or holding their hand when they stopped.”

“Sounds lonely.”

Again with the shrug. “My sisters took up the slack during the day.”

“I'm glad you found each other, at least.” I'd never really had that kind of companionship until Raine, even though she wasn't changed.

“Me too. I don't think any of us would have made it without the others.”

I watched the shadows flicker over her face. “You are Demetri's mate.”

Her eyes lit up. “I am.”

I had so many questions. No, I didn't believe what any of these people were telling me about being Sun's mate. I would

know, after all, if something that important was happening, wouldn't I? That didn't stop me from being curious. And since no one else had bothered to explain... "How did you know?"

She gave me an astute look, as if she knew exactly why I was asking. "I didn't, not at first. I only knew he was special. Not all that different from the human world, huh?"

"So he told you that you were his mate, and you took his word for it?"

"No. I mean, yes, he told me he knew, but when he explained, it resonated deep inside me." She gave me a lopsided grin. "It helps that I am a literal polygraph machine wrapped in a human body. Demetri can't lie to me without me knowing."

Wouldn't that be a valuable skill to have. Especially right now. "So what did he tell you?"

I listened as she explained what she knew about mates, which by her own admission wasn't a lot. Because they hadn't established a matebond yet, most of what she'd been told about the practicalities of it was secondhand. Not until they had their ceremony over the weekend would she and Demetri establish their mental bond.

"Is that what you want?"

"More than anything. Demetri has given me back joy and love and so much more that the Anigma took away." A brief sadness flickered in her eyes. "Not everything, but a lot."

"So you trust him."

"I do."

"I guess it helps to know he's telling the truth."

“Truth isn’t the be all end all, you know. I see him with his twin, his friends. I can feel his honor and loyalty. Demetri is a good male.”

I hoped so, for her sake. Of course I’d thought that about Sun too, once. He’d proved me wrong.

As if she sensed my train of thought, Imogen said, “You know, Sun carries a lot of responsibility around here.”

“I assume kings do that.” I wanted to tell her I didn’t care, that what he was here didn’t matter in the face of what he’d done to me. But the truth was, I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to know. It was like there were two Suns in my mind: the one who’d made love to me and the one who’d revealed himself since. I could fool myself into thinking the Sun she talked about was the one who’d treated me with compassion, with kindness. In the end I knew the truth, but maybe it was okay to indulge in a little fantasy as long as I kept sight of the fact that that was all it was.

“Being responsible for so many lives wears on someone,” she was saying. “Even before his father died, Sun carried the weight of the Archai on his shoulders. It meant always being fully in control, never giving an inch. Never risking going after what he really wanted, or even thinking about it, really. Everything he was had to be sublimated to the cause.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because he’s a thousand years old, and my mate has walked beside him for every one of those years. He’s older than Sun, and those of his bloodline have always served the council. It was expected.”

A thousand years. My mind couldn’t fathom that length of time.

Imogen tipped her head to one side, studying me. “Demetri says Sun is definitely not constantly in control when it comes to you. Why do you think that is?”

“Because he’s a dickhead?”

She chuckled. “Or becomes one when you are around.”

“That’s what tends to happen when a man’s penis rules instead of his brain, I guess.”

“I don’t think it’s his penis in charge—at least, not completely. I’m sure there’s an element of that, for any man —”

I couldn’t stop a lopsided grin. “Right?”

“Right.” She sobered quickly. “But I think this loss of control is because of what’s going on in his heart, Risk, not his pants.”

“He doesn’t like me saying no to him.”

“Which I’m sure you do every chance you get.”

“You know it. Where would be the fun in saying yes?”

Imogen raised her brows, and I blushed. Sputtered, “You know what I mean.”

“Indeed I do.” Imogen gave me a Mona Lisa smile. “I just have to wonder—here’s a man who has lived by his iron control for hundreds of years. And yet, get the two of you in a room together and boom! All that well-earned control goes up in smoke. There has to be a reason for that.”

My heart set up a thump behind my breastbone. “Like what?”

She stood, stretched, even yawned, forcing me to wait. Finally she winked. “I think you know, but it might take a little

while for your stubborn mind to comprehend it. Good night, Risk.”

I watched her move to the bunk beside Raine’s and lie down, all the while considering her words. Anyone who’d ever known me knew I was stubborn. I could admit that much. It didn’t mean I was wrong about Sun. Imogen might know his past, but she hadn’t been there when he’d searched my mind. She hadn’t seen him betray my trust.

The minute Raine was better, I was getting us both out of here. Nothing could change what had happened, not even Sun on his knees groveling. Which would never happen, so why waste time thinking about it? We were from two different worlds, and even if he could accept me—which I knew was impossible—well, I wasn’t certain I could do the same.

Not anymore.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE



SUN
That could have gone better.

What was it about Rissa that drove me beyond any restraint I hoped to have? Granted, I hadn't expected to see her outside of her cell—which I could now admit she'd been in for my peace of mind more than anything else. If she was in a cell, I knew she'd stay put. I knew I wouldn't run into her unexpectedly, either, but thanks to Lyris, that assurance had been blown to bits.

And so had my hold on my temper. A thousand years I'd cultivated control, and one dark-haired spitfire could shatter it with a single word. Hell, even a look.

I glared at my desk—my father's desk. I really needed to fix that. Get my own shit. I hated this desk, his desk. Hated this room, for that matter. Every room I'd been in with my father held bad memories, but his office especially.

So why was I still here?

Why, indeed. I shoved my chair back and headed for the door. Outside it was day, and sunlight spilled through the hall that led to the King's Garden, leaving much of the throne room in shadow. I beelined for the double doors that would allow me to get away from the memories of his failures and mine.

“So...a new phoenix has taken the throne.”

Shit. I skidded to a stop and twisted around, my hand going automatically to my thigh where normally my short sword was holstered within easy reach. But not today, not in the throne room of my people's lair with no threat present.

Except, apparently, there was a threat, one I'd completely missed in my haste to escape. How the hell had that happened?

Moving cautiously, I stepped toward the throne, the only solid piece of furniture in the room. Was that where they— whoever *they* were—were hiding? “Who's there?”

“No one you know, obviously.” From the shadows near the entry to the garden, a massive form stepped into the room. Easily seven feet tall, one of the biggest shifters I'd ever seen—he had to be a shifter at that size, almost dwarfing the doorway he'd stepped in front of. His head was covered with a hoodie, seeming incongruous in someone so powerful, but it effectively hid much of his features where he stood, backlit with sunshine. What caught my attention most was the electric-green light shining from his eyes. Those eyes sparked something in the back of my mind, but for the life of me I couldn't grab hold of the thought with that stare searing me.

“How about you introduce yourself?” I moved closer to the middle of the room.

“Not sure that would help you much.”

“Try me.”

“I am the Source.”

I sighed, rolling my eyes. “Source of what? Good? Evil? Food? Bubble gum?”

The male chuckled. “Good point.”

“Glad I could amuse you.”

He moved into the room, his steps taking him closer to the throne. Waving a hand in that direction, he said, “You seem less volatile than your father was.” Green eyes narrowed on me. “I wonder if that’s true.”

I turned with him, keeping myself face-to-face with the stranger. “How did you know my father? And you still haven’t answered my question.”

“And here I was, hoping to distract you.” At the throne now, he slipped his hands into the pockets of his fatigues and propped a foot up on the dais. “I knew him because I made it my business to know him.”

“How?”

Without moving an inch, the male seemed suddenly to be looming over me. “Like this.”

Between one breath and the next, everything stopped. A presence slashed through my defenses, entering my mind with ease, and scoured me inside and out, reading everything I was, everything I had ever been or would ever be. No corner was overlooked, down to the minutest detail.

And then the presence was gone, faster than I could think to fight it, and I could breathe again. I sucked in a lungful of air, choking at the draw. “What the fuck?”

The male's lips tugged up in a barely-there smile. "Give yourself a minute. It can be hard to get used to."

Hard? It wasn't the mind scan that was hard—I'd lost track of the number of times my father had invaded my mind, taking what he chose without permission or concern for his victim. No, it wasn't the invasion that surprised me; it was the fact that it didn't hurt. My body had immediately seized up, but in anticipation of pain. There had been none.

"What are you— How can you do that?" Only the royal line had the ability to take someone else's mind with such ease. "Tell me who the hell you are."

The shifter sighed. "I think you know who I am. Arik told you about me, didn't he? He should have. He was working with you by then."

That nagging sense of knowing came back. He was right; Arik had told me that a shifter with bright green eyes had helped him save Kat in the fight against Maddox. None of us had known whom he referred to. It appeared the mysterious stranger had decided to introduce himself.

The question was, why?

"How did you know about Arik and Kat?" I asked.

The male seemed more concerned about the tip of his shoe than about the fact that he was standing before the king of the Archai. "I know a lot of things."

"So do I, but I don't know you. Before Arik, we'd never heard of you."

"Not me." He tipped his head in acknowledgment. "Maddox knew me, though, very well. Helios knows me too. Not that either one of those is a ringing endorsement."

“No, definitely not.” And the connections didn’t bode well for who this male was, nor what his intentions were. Besides, I was getting fed up with his fake bullshit. I’d try one more time though. “How did—do—you know them?”

“There are some things I simply can’t answer, King.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

He stepped down from the dais and began to pace. “You are unlike him in many ways, but you and your father are equally stubborn.”

As if I didn’t already know that.

“As I said, I know many things. Some of what I know, I hope to share with you.”

“Why?”

“It’s what I do.” His hands moved, and I swore I heard the jingle of keys or change in his pockets. The sound was incongruous on any shifter, but one of this power? I shook my head.

“About your father...”

His pause grated on my nerves. “What about him?”

“My apologies for your loss.” He gave me the slightest bow. “The phoenix chooses whether or not he will return to this life when he dies. Your father did not. Maybe that was for the best. His rule was often shortsighted. I’m glad to see you’ve been more proactive.”

He’d have done better not to remind me of his push into my mind, and yet his assessment of my father was spot on. It didn’t soften me toward him.

“I’m sure the women you’ve rescued are equally grateful, including the two new ones. Is your mate still in a cell?”

My teeth clenched so hard I was afraid they’d break. “How the hell do you know about my mate? Do you want to die, is that it? Why else would you come in here and throw around intel that’s likely to get you killed?”

He didn’t answer my question, simply continued pacing. My mind raced, trying to figure out the puzzle. So few knew Rissa was my mate. The Warrior’s Council only. And our prisoners, thanks to my spectacular loss of control yesternight. But they would not have had contact. How could he know?

And what did he plan to do with that knowledge?

“Relax,” he huffed. “I have no plans to harm your mate.”

Fucking hell. “Stop reading my mind.”

He waved a hand at me. “I wasn’t truly reading it. Sometimes thoughts just find their way to me. You should be more worried about your mate cutting your balls off for locking her in a cell.”

“She’s an unknown.”

“She’s the one who led you to the females you now hold.”

I did a double take. “What?”

“She tipped Arik off to Maddox’s location. She knew you were located somewhere nearby thanks to Cale— That warrior isn’t as careful with his tongue as he should be. She was trying to bring you together in hopes of getting the females out of Maddox’s camp.” He stopped moving, turned to stare at me. “You didn’t know this?”

“No.” Because I’d been too busy worrying about her intimate relationships to look at the rest of her life when I’d

been in her mind. And I'd hurt her far more than this shifter had hurt me when I'd done it, probably for the same reason.

Christ, I didn't deserve her. She was right; I was an asshole.

The shifter chuckled. "Keep working on her. She'll take you back in time. Risk is all bark and no bite when it comes to those she cares about." He resumed pacing. "Not that I know her firsthand. I've simply observed."

Something in my gut uncoiled, making me even more of a dick. And then his words registered and I grew more uneasy.

This male, if he was on the Anigma side—and his connection shouted that he was even as his presence here hinted that he wasn't—could be a far bigger threat than even Helios. How could I get the information I needed to find out where he stood?

Maybe the question I was asking was the wrong one.

"Why are you here?" I asked. Then, "And give me a name, because I am sure as hell not calling you 'the Source.'"

He laughed at that. "It is ridiculous, isn't it? Unfortunately I didn't give it to myself."

I made a note of that.

"I'm here because you're not asking the right questions."

Bingo. "What question should I be asking?"

"What kind of king are you?"

My fists tightened at my sides. Had I even had time to figure that out? Except as Basile and Grim had told me, I'd been acting as king for a long time, hadn't I? "One who cares about his people above all else."

“But what if your people don’t care about you?”

I jammed my fingers through my hair, already tangled from hours of doing exactly that. “What does that mean?”

“It means you might have a problem in your midst.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You have a traitor on your council.”

“What?” Shock and disbelief sharpened my tone. His statement wasn’t true; it couldn’t be. The warriors on my council were held in the highest regard. They’d spent years of service, each and every one of them, before they’d been considered for such a position. To think that one of them would betray us...

“You heard me. You’ve got a big problem, Sun. And it’s going to cost you, very soon.”

“How?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Then what the fuck are you good for?” I burst out. Every muscle in my body screamed to jump this stranger, beat answers out of him, force my way into his mind as he had done mine, but I couldn’t lose that control. My people couldn’t afford to lose their king. “Don’t come in here with all this cryptic shit. Give me some answers that I can work with.”

He jerked to a stop. His voice rose, filled with his own frustration. “I can’t tell you because I don’t know. I only know Helios is gearing up for something big, which means your male—or female—is about to strike. So you’d better get off your ass and figure out who they are, quick. Got me, King?”

“And how do I do that?”

“I wish I knew. But no one is as familiar with you or yours as you are. Use that knowledge to your advantage.”

Impotent anger rang in my head with no target nearby, or at least not one I dared use. I’d do anything to keep my people safe, but how could I keep them safe if I didn’t know what the threat was?

I felt the gears begin to turn. They needed me. I had no choice but to figure it out. So what did I know?

I might not know *who*, but I did know *what*. What did Helios want? He wanted to defeat us. He wanted to win this war and take over the world, for himself or the Anigma, either one, it didn’t matter. The objective was the same.

Where would that information get me?

“That’s right,” the stranger said. “You’ll figure it out. I have faith in you. Much more than I did your father.”

“At least one of us does,” I muttered under my breath.

“Don’t sell yourself short. Especially not now. Your people don’t have time for you to wallow in self-pity.”

It wasn’t self-pity, but whatever. What this stranger believed about me didn’t matter. I wasn’t even sure I could trust his information, but if there was even a possibility that someone on my council was a traitor, I had to find out.

My people’s lives, including that of my mate, frustrating as she was, would depend on it.

The stranger slid around to face the exit into the lair and tilted his head as if listening. He swore under his breath.

“What?”

He was in front of me faster than I could blink. Faster than even I could move. Leaning close, he lowered his voice to barely above a breath. “You’ve got company, King. Your mate. I can sense her right outside the door.”

I made to turn around, but he gripped my arm.

“Let her go. She belongs to you; the information she overheard is safe. But remember, she was ahead of all of you when it came to Maddox. Perhaps she has information that could help you.” He straightened. “If you’re brave enough to go after it.”

“Brave enough?”

He began backing slowly away, toward the garden. “Females have so many tender targets when they decide to stab us, don’t they? Be sure she doesn’t hit anything vital.”

“Stab— What—”

But he was gone. Just like that. Somehow I knew it would be futile to follow. Not that I would forget. The male had intel we needed—if we could get it out of him. In the meantime, I had a mate to track down.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX



RISK

I couldn't sleep. And it wasn't about Raine; it was about Sun. I couldn't stop thinking about the things that Imogen had told me. Not the mate things, although they circled the periphery of my mind, but the things about Sun. She meant well, I knew she did, but being his mate wasn't an excuse for doing the things he'd done. If he got so emotional that he lost control, that wasn't good for either of us, but especially me.

Like especially the blood-dripping-from-the-eyes me.

Which was why I was lying here arguing with her in my head. Arguing with Demetri and Grim and even Lyris. I couldn't argue with Sun because he never made the you're-my-mate case toward me, just declared it as if it was law. Others accepted it as such; I didn't.

But everyone else seemed to be forgetting that he'd torn into my mind without permission, then thrown me in a jail

cell. Being his mate didn't make up for that. If anything, I would expect more understanding than less, more tenderness, not less. There'd been no understanding or tenderness since I'd gotten here, and everyone, including Sun, seemed to think that was perfectly fine because I. Was. His. Mate.

Fuck. That.

Raine was still sleeping soundly, and Imogen didn't stir when I rose from the bed. I tucked Raine in carefully, checked her breathing, then marched toward the front of the dorm room. Lyris sat at a table there, reading by a small lamp, her shaggy blonde head bent over the book in a way that somehow reminded me of Demetri despite the fact that I'd never seen him reading. The tilt of her head, maybe? But it reminded me that this female was a warrior; she wasn't soft, despite what she might look like, and I needed her to cooperate with me if I was going to get what I wanted.

My say.

"Lyris."

She looked up. "Hey. Can't sleep?"

"No. I need to see Sun."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "Right now?"

"Right now." I hadn't realized it walking over, but I was fisting my hands at my sides. My body felt like I would shake out of my skin, but not with fear. With anger.

Lyris was shaking her head. "I can't leave everyone here unguarded."

"There's no secondary guard?"

She dog-eared the page she'd been reading, then closed her book. "Not inside, no."

“Then just point me in the right direction. I’ll find him myself.”

She was watching me, her gaze taking in my agitation. Finally she sighed. “I can’t leave you running through the halls with no idea where anything is. I’ll get Jacob to come in from the hall, and I’ll escort you over to Sun’s quarters real quick. He can bring you back.”

Relief softened my shoulders. “Thank you.”

I understood what she meant as she walked me over. Though I’d been through some of the halls and already knew the lair was massive, going into the personal quarters was literally a warren I might never find my way out of. And when we arrived at what she said was Sun’s suite, he wasn’t there.

When the third knock received no response, she blew out her breath. “Maybe the throne room? He often spends long hours in his father’s study.” She shook her head. “None of us have managed to call it Sun’s study yet. Guess it hasn’t been long enough since Solomon left us.”

Remembering that night with Sun, I had to agree with her.

More halls, more shadowy offshoots and confusing twists finally found us at one end of a long passageway. Probably a good thing, because it gave me time to calm down. Couldn’t let my anger reign supreme or I’d just find myself back with Baer and Beckan. The other end of the hall, slightly uphill and capped by a set of massive, elaborate double doors, was apparently our destination. Lyris gestured in that direction. “He should be in there. I’ve got to get back.” We’d been gone a good fifteen minutes, and though the shifter she’d left in her stead had seemed congenial enough, it was apparent Lyris wasn’t comfortable with anyone but herself watching over her

sleeping charges. “Go through those doors and turn right. The office is on that side of the throne room.”

I had images of great palaces with massive chairs decorated with jewels and gold and plush cushions dancing in my head—because who the hell had a *throne room* nowadays—but I waved them away along with Lyris and began the trek to the other end of the passageway. Only as I drew closer did I realize that one of the doors was cracked and I could hear voices inside.

“...harm your mate.”

That drew me up short. I didn’t recognize the voice—a male, no one I’d heard before, I didn’t think—but whose mate were they discussing harming?

“Stop reading my mind.”

That was Sun. Were they talking about me? Harming me or not harming me? If it was in Sun’s mind, could be either one.

I snuggled up to the crack in the door to listen, unashamedly eavesdropping.

“I wasn’t truly reading it. Sometimes thoughts just find their way to me. You should be more worried about your mate cutting your balls off for locking her in a cell.”

Whoever this male was, he was smart; I had to give him that.

“She’s an unknown.”

“She’s the one who led you to the females you now hold.”

Guess Sun knew now, didn’t he?

“What?”

Sun's shock did weird things to my insides. Did he not believe I would help the females? Why not? Or did he simply not believe I was capable? Yet he knew "Risk" was sought after for intel; the Archai had even sought me out. Why the skepticism?

And why did it hurt me so much?

"She tipped Arik off to Maddox's location," the stranger was saying. "She knew you were located somewhere nearby thanks to Cale— That warrior isn't as careful with his tongue as he should be."

Males tended to be less careful when they were getting their appetites satisfied. Not that I would explain that to Sun. He didn't need another reminder of my "duplicity."

"You didn't know this?"

Of course he hadn't. Why bother trying to know me when he could jail me instead?

"No."

The shifter chuckled. "Keep working on her. She'll take you back in time. Risk is all bark and no bite when it comes to those she cares about."

How the hell would he know that? And no, I wasn't taking Sun back, fuck you very much. Why did everyone keep assuming that?

"Not that I know her firsthand. I've simply observed."

Great. A stalker.

"Why are you here?" Sun again. "And give me a name, because I am sure as hell not calling you 'the Source.'"

My stomach tightened. Sun didn't seem to understand the significance of what he'd said, but I did. Or thought I did. In the underground, the Source had been a rumor for the past few years, a shadowy figure no one could quite pin down, dropping hints here and there about major events before they happened. He—or she, I'd always qualified, though I guess now I knew otherwise—had been the one to drop enough intel that I'd put two and two together and figured out the city Sun's clan was located in. Right on the doorstep of a major Anigma contingent, no less.

If this male was the Source, what was he doing here, in person? And why Sun? Because he was king?

“What if your people don't care about you?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you might have a problem in your midst.”

“Tell me something I don't know.”

“You have a traitor on your council.”

No. Oh no. I squeezed my temples. This was so not good.

“You've got a big problem, Sun. And it's going to cost you, very soon.”

“How?”

“I can't tell you that.”

“Then what the fuck are you good for?”

Yeah, what the fuck are you good for?

“Don't come in here with all this cryptic shit. Give me some answers that I can work with.”

The Source's voice rose as if he shared Sun's frustration. “I can't tell you because I don't know. I only know Helios is

gearing up for something big, which means your male—or female—is about to strike.”

I didn’t know who Helios was, but if someone in the Archai council was conspiring with him...shit.

How did you find a traitor in your midst? I didn’t know how the Archai found a traitor, but my brain was suddenly spinning with all the ways I would go about it. I’d found the Anigma for Sun and his warriors, hadn’t I? I’d found the females Maddox had been taking captive even before that. And how?

The same way I found everything else people hired me to find. Tech.

Except I didn’t have any of my tech here. It was all at my apartment. An apartment Sun would never allow me to return to of my own accord.

Backing carefully away from the door so as not to alert the occupants of the throne room to my presence, I eased my way to the end of the corridor, then turned and ran. On the way here from Sun’s rooms, we’d passed the dining hall, and I’d marked my way from there to here. Though we’d been running earlier, I remembered the path we’d taken to get to Raine. I managed to make it without running into anyone else.

When I came up the hall outside the dorm, a big shifter stepped from the shadows. “Halt!”

I was breathing heavily. Definitely should be spending more time in the gym. Fishing through my brain, I pulled out the guard’s name. “Jacob, it’s me, Risk!” When he made no move to let me by, I reminded him, “I went out with Lyris, remember?”

He hesitated, eyeing me, but slowly moved aside. “You shouldn’t be roaming the halls during the day.”

I’m gonna be doing more than roam. “Right. Just need to get back to Lyris.”

He jerked his head toward the dorm entrance. “Go ahead.”

Lyris was walking toward the door as I entered. Probably heard me talking to the guard. I hurried toward her. “Lyris, I need to leave.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s not happening.”

“No, you don’t understand. Listen to me, please.” I explained what I’d heard in the throne room. Lyris didn’t ask why I’d been eavesdropping, though the reason was likely obvious, but she also didn’t admonish me for it. “When I was helping find the Anigma base, I went through hours of CCTV and private cameras, isolating all the footage I could find of what I’d surmised were shifters and following them back to their original locations.”

She narrowed her eyes. “So you knew where our lair was.”

I shook my head. “No. There are no cameras out here,” I clarified. “I could follow you a certain distance, but without satellite footage, finding your lair would be impossible.”

She seemed to digest that, the suspicion slowly clearing from her eyes. “Good to know.”

Thanks for suspecting me. Yes, the voice in my head was sarcastic; it was mine, after all. “The thing is, if there’s a”—I dropped my voice just as I had when I’d first explained what I’d heard, ensuring the guard outside couldn’t hear—“traitor on the council, I might have something in the footage that could help us pinpoint him or her.”

Amusement appeared for the briefest moment. “I’m the only female officially on the council.”

“Oh.” So she could be the traitor? But the moment the thought entered my head, I shoved it away. That was impossible given how protective Lyris was of the women. She would never conspire with the Anigma to hand them over. “Him, then.”

Lyris pivoted on her heel and moved back to the table she’d been sitting at all night. I followed as she picked up a cell and dialed a number. My gut clenched, wondering if she was calling Sun.

“I need you here. No, everything’s all right, but I need to step out for a bit.”

The knot in my stomach eased. Lyris hung up, then turned to me. “Demetri is coming.”

Not Sun, thank God. “Not the guard?”

She shook her head. “Not if I’ll be gone that long. I don’t trust anyone but my twin.” She tilted her head, eyeing me. “What’s your plan after we get back to your apartment?”

“Go through the footage?”

“I mean as far as coming back here.”

I looked over my shoulder, down the room to where the foot of Raine’s bed was barely visible. “I’ll be back, I promise. And hopefully with something we can use to find our target.”

Which was how I ended up pulling into the parking lot of my apartment complex in the passenger seat of an Escalade, Lyris at the wheel. It felt weird, being with her in the daylight, though I knew now that there was no such thing as an allergy to the sun. Archai simply preferred to remain unseen as much

as possible—probably wise given the rise of technology and surveillance in the human world.

Lyris parked, and I led her upstairs to my third-floor apartment. “You know,” she said, waiting for me to unlock the door, “if the shifter we’re looking for is working with Helios, it’s likely their meetings were recent. Helios wasn’t a factor when we were first looking for the Anigma.”

She’d told me on the way here that Helios had come after Maddox. “My detective friend, Nick, has been following a couple of incidents that tipped me off to the Anigma coming back to the area. Maybe we start there, see what we can find? Work our way back.” The likelihood that we’d see an actual meeting of Helios and the traitor wasn’t high, but if we could put movements of various shifters together, proximity and timing might work to narrow our suspect list.

“Good idea.” Lyris stepped through the door to my apartment.

“Very good idea,” a deep male voice said behind me. I gasped, jerking around, only to find Sun at the top of the stairs.

“Sun!”

Lyris muttered curses under her breath.

“Yeah, Sun,” he said, his tone forbidding.

“What are you—”

He slashed a hand through the air. “Get inside.”

I really, *really* wanted to snap back at him, but his warning glance would’ve made me wet my pants a month ago, so I shut my mouth and hurried inside. Sun entered and closed the door behind him. In the dusky dimness of my tiny apartment, he seemed to suck up all the space and air.

“Sun—” Lyris began.

“We have to come to an understanding, you and I,” he said, turning to her. I backed toward the kitchenette, noticing that Lyris stood as if ready for battle, hands clenched at her sides, feet braced apart. She was in trouble, and it was because of me.

I wouldn't let her face him without support. “Sun, I—”

He raised an imperious hand at me. “I'll deal with you in a minute.”

Heat shot through me. “Fucking—”

“Don't!”

I didn't. Sun focused back on Lyris.

“We've known each other for several lifetimes, Lyris. Longer than most people can fathom.”

“Exactly.”

“You really need to be silent right now,” he warned her.

Lyris didn't blink.

“I value your protectiveness of the women, your fierce spirit, but I am no longer merely a friend. I am your king, and though I never planned to be, that does mean something.”

Something flickered in Lyris's eyes. She stood straighter.

“You cannot keep running roughshod over my authority whenever you please. Particularly when it comes to security, and”—he glanced at me—“my own mate.”

He kept calling me that, but he never took the discussion—or his actions—any further. What exactly did it mean to him that I might be his mate? Did it mean anything at all?

“Why do you keep doing this?”

His tone demanded an answer, and a good one. Lyris obliged.

“Because a male that would harm his own mate cannot be trusted with the safety of other females.”

Sun’s jaw clenched. I had to give it to Lyris; she wasn’t one to pull punches, even if her tone was a tad more respectful than it had been minutes before. Apparently the whole *king* thing really did mean something in Archai culture.

Ignoring the part about me being his mate—again—he asked, “And have I put your females in danger, now or in the past?”

Lyris hesitated. “No.”

“What is between my mate and me is just that, between us.”

“Sun, you can’t—”

“No!” Lyris’s protest cut off, and Sun bit out, “I will not allow you to use my mate as an excuse for insubordination and reckless actions—and that’s exactly what you’ve been doing.”

“I do what I believe is right.”

“Without thinking it through. Going off half-cocked is going to get someone killed, possibly even you.” When she started to protest, he made a sound deep in his throat that had her shutting her mouth. “One more incident and you are off the council.”

Lyris blanched. “You would take me away from the females?”

“You are no good to them if you’re running solo, Lyris. So yes, I would.”

She ducked her head, and I could see the tension in her body, the need to fight back. Sun waited, as did I. Finally, after long moments, she met Sun’s eyes again. “Yes, my king.”

“Now go back to the lair.”

“What?” No, she couldn’t leave me here alone with him.

Sun and Lyris both ignored me. They stared at one another, not speaking. My heartbeat began to speed up.

Lyris cleared her throat. “Risk—”

“Rissa is my responsibility, not yours. Go back to the lair.” When she hesitated, that rough rumble came from Sun once more. “Did you hear me?”

She shot me an apologetic glance. “I did.” Palming her keys, she moved to the door. “I’ll see you back at the lair, Risk.”

I had doubts about that, but the thrum of fear—surely it was fear; definitely not anticipation—in my throat wouldn’t allow me to speak. One last pause and then the door closed behind her.

Sun turned on me. “Now it’s your turn.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN



RISK

Trepidation beat like a drum in my head, especially after watching Lyris exit the apartment. “I don’t think so, Sun.”

He began a slow stalk in my direction. “You left me.”

“I left my prison, not you. I didn’t have to leave you because I don’t belong to you.” I backed toward the bedroom, the only exit left to me since Sun was blocking the front door.

“Keep telling yourself that, mate.”

Anger bloomed in my chest. “Don’t! Don’t call me that.” I stopped in the doorway. “I don’t even know if it’s true or not, but that’s beside the point. You lost the right to call me ‘mate’ when you left me with blood dripping out of my eyes and had me locked in a cell.”

Sun halted in the middle of the kitchenette. “I call you what you are.”

“So we’re really going to ignore the physical costs of you losing control, are we?” I gripped the doorjamb on either side of me, my knuckles turning white. “How about this then: If I’m your mate, why don’t you tell me what exactly that means? Why don’t you tell me why no one knows about it but a handful of people. Why didn’t you announce it at the meeting, Sun? I’m not delusional enough to believe it’s because I don’t agree with you—you’re arrogant enough to announce it anyway. So tell me, why didn’t you?”

He hesitated.

That hurt. It hurt bad, but I’d be damned if I let him see that. And there was plenty of anger to cover it. “That’s what I thought. Or maybe you just don’t want to admit that a ‘liar’ like me isn’t good enough for the Archai king.”

“You’re my mate. Of course you are good enough.”

“So my connection to you makes me acceptable? What about when people find out about my gift?” A flicker crossed Sun’s face, confirming my doubts. And just to make it worse, I had to add, “Cale isn’t likely to keep quiet, you know. Not after you punched him. What happens when it gets out that I used my gift to seduce one of your warriors?”

“You didn’t have sex with Cale.”

“Think they’ll actually believe that? Even you don’t truly believe it.”

“I believe it,” he ground out. “And if I accept you, my people will too. They’ll have to.”

My laugh sounded hollow even to me. What was it he’d said earlier? “Keep telling yourself that.”

Anger flashed, hot and bright, in Sun’s eyes. He was on me before I could take another breath. Scrambling backward, I

nearly fell on my ass before he caught me.

“Damn it!”

My first instinct was always to fight, no matter the circumstances—words, fists, whatever, I was going to make you regret coming up against me. I fought Sun now, adrenaline zinging through my veins. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to how fast they could move. How quick any situation could go from okay to full-blown FUBAR in an instant. But I had no intention of giving in, no matter what Sun wanted.

My breath was ragged and my muscles trembling with fatigue before I registered that Sun wasn’t moving at all. He stood there, holding me, just as he had when I fell, but he remained motionless otherwise. He wasn’t trying to fight. His body surrounded mine, his heat slowly seeping into me, his arms and chest a firm cage with no give, but that was as far as he took it. I held myself as still as possible, waiting, but Sun didn’t budge.

“What...what are you doing?” I finally asked.

He sighed, and I could feel his chin settle on my head. “I don’t know what to do with you, Rissa.”

I didn’t know I could growl, but the angry rumble that escaped me sure sounded like it. “How about just treating me like a human being for once.” *Like you used to*, I wanted to say but didn’t.

“You’re not a human being, and neither am I.” His arms squeezed down on me. “Every time you argue with me, every time you defy me, you spark this...need. To tame you, to control you. It’s not the animal in me, it’s...me. You push me beyond the restraint that has governed me for a thousand years in a single instant.”

Maybe he needed his ass pushed, but I wasn't going to mention that. "Defiance has always been my MO, so you'd best get used to it," I said grudgingly. "Just because you don't like me arguing doesn't give you an excuse to do whatever you want to me."

"You're my mate."

"And if that means I no longer have free will, that I'm now a slave to whatever your will is, with no say of my own, I don't want it."

Sun jerked back. Shock stared down at me when I met his eyes.

"I mean it, Sun. I won't have any part of a relationship like that, mate or not."

He rubbed at his face with his hands. Was I that hard to deal with, for fuck's sake?

"Archai don't reject their mates."

"If you don't get your act together, this one does." I crossed the room to sit on the edge of the bed. "Think about it, Sun. How would you want to be treated by the person who's supposed to lo— care about you?"

Those beautiful eyes narrowed on me. "My parents were adversaries, not lovers."

"All the more reason not to follow their example. No offense, but your dad sounds like he was a major asshole." I paused. "I kinda see where you get it."

I swore a smile tugged at one side of his lips. *Score one for the sarcastic mate.*

Sun stood there, larger than life in the middle of my tiny bedroom, his arms crossed over his chest as if holding himself

back. I waited to see what, if anything, he would let free.

“I’m sorry.” The words came out gruff, but they also sounded sincere. “I mean it, Rissa.” He raised his head, staring down at me, the silver shine of his phoenix coming through. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? There are so many things to list.” I couldn’t help it; he’d walked right into that one.

He laughed, actually laughed. “I guess I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t.”

The sound of his laughter did funny things to my insides. Things only the Sun I’d known in the past couple of weeks, before my secret came out, had made me feel. I shrugged innocently. “Whatever.”

“Fine.” One hand grabbed his shirt at the back of the neck and tugged, pulling it over his head. “Might as well take advantage of it.”

Holy cow. That bare chest... The room was suddenly ten degrees warmer, and Sun’s naked skin was all I could focus on. Really, I salivated more over Sun’s chest than any male model I’d seen on the cover of a romance novel. He was that perfect. Before I knew it, he was standing in front of me, that silver light even brighter, and I swore I wasn’t the only one salivating.

His words confirmed it. “I want you, mate.”

I winced. “I’m not—”

“You are, and I intend for every single soul in that lair to know it.”

“Why?” Why now and not before? Why me, with all of my problematic angles. Just...why?

He went to his knees in front of me. “Because you are mine, Rissa. But even more than that, since the moment I laid eyes on you from across the bar, sitting in that dark corner all alone, I realized that the only thing that truly matters to me is to be yours.”

An arrow through the heart couldn't have pierced me harder. Had anyone ever wanted to be mine? Arik hadn't. Cale hadn't, not really. And yet here was the most powerful shifter in the Archai saying that was exactly what he wanted. “I don't know if that's possible, Sun.”

“It is. And I'm going to prove it to you. Right now.”

By the time his mouth met mine, I was lost. He opened my lips with his and slid his tongue inside.

Need shot through me. I wrenched myself away. “I don't know if I want this,” I said. Which was totally wrong. I did want this. I wanted it more than I could remember ever wanting anything.

But I was afraid to take it.

Sun gave me a lazy lip curl of a grin. “When you decide, just let me know.” And kissed me again. This time my mouth met his already open and eager. When he pushed inside, I sucked lightly on my tongue.

His groan sounded like he was in agony.

Rising from his knees, Sun used his body to guide mine back onto the bed. He laid down next to me and took his time, kissing, nipping at my lips, tangling his tongue with mine. Exploring me like he had when we'd had sex instead of using his mouth to fight with me. This was the Sun I'd known as Rissa, not the male who'd become a stranger since I'd been at the lair.

Maybe if he kept this up, we could make better progress. It would sure as hell be more pleasurable. There was only one thing that could make it better.

We could be naked.

“Rissa.”

I struggled to open my eyes. “What?”

He nibbled at the edge of my jaw, my neck, the soft ridge of my shoulder. God, it felt so good.

“I want to see you. The real you.”

I ran my palms down the smooth divot of his spine. “What?”

“I want to see my Rissa, my mate.” He licked along my collarbone.

I was the one who hesitated this time. I hadn't dropped my Risk persona since that night in his suite. Like my sarcasm, Risk was a front I used to protect myself. Dropping that meant taking a step toward more than just sex—it meant trusting him with who I truly was. And I ached to share that with the Sun I'd fallen in love with.

But I was afraid.

He came up on his elbows. “I want to see my true mate. Please.”

Slowly, warily, I let my eyelids drop down, and then I felt it, that tingle running down my skin as I let go of the glamour. Between one blink and the next, I was me again, lying beneath Sun, my dark curls spread across the pillow, my soft body molding perfectly to the harder angles of his.

“That's it. That's my beautiful mate.”

When he called me *beautiful*, I felt beautiful.

He rolled on top of me, his weight heavy. Delicious. I couldn't hold back a shiver. "Sun..."

He nipped at the collar of my shirt. "I want this off."

"Yes..."

We were naked in moments. As soon as my body was bare to him, he seemed to give himself over to rising hunger, intent on arousing me to the point I couldn't concentrate on anything but him. My aching nipples were licked and sucked and bitten. My quivering belly and hips and thighs were explored with hands and lips and tongue. And when he reached the throbbing core at the junction of my thighs?

"Rissa," he groaned. "Pretty pink lips and the sweetest cream. I could stay right here forever."

I couldn't last forever; it wasn't long before the hunger rose to the tipping point and I was tugging at his hair, urging him to fill me with more than his tongue.

"I want to taste you, Rissa," I heard him say as he retraced his path up my body.

My laugh sounded choked. "I think you just did."

Sun's amusement was equally strained. "Not there, although I'll gladly go back to that if you want me to."

I didn't think I'd ever not want his mouth on me like that. Or his tongue. His teeth.

Right now his teeth were scraping my sensitive neck. His fangs had descended, I realized, a pang of nerves cutting through my pleasure.

"I can bite you there just as well as here."

A jolt went through me. Where had all my air gone? “You want to feed.”

The rumble of sound coming from his chest was part pleasure, part agony. “More than anything.”

His lips met the edge of my scars. Instinct had me ducking my head to that side, blocking his path.

“I can’t—”

Sun came up on his elbows to look at me. “What is it?”

“I don’t like...” I swallowed. I didn’t talk about my scars, ever. I’d never shown them to a lover like this. I felt exposed, vulnerable, to the point where it was too much. To have his mouth there... No, I couldn’t do it. “It’s so ugly.”

“Your scar?”

I shifted my gaze over his shoulder.

“Ah, mate.” A soft kiss to my lips, again, and another until I was opening for him, inviting more than a simple kiss. “Your scars aren’t ugly. They just tell me how hard you fought to survive.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Please, just not there.”

For a long moment he didn’t say anything. When he lowered his head, it was to the opposite side of my neck. Acquiescing to me. Accepting my no.

The careful scrape of his fangs came again. The sensation had me arching beneath him. “Yes.”

He took my skin between his teeth and sucked. “*Rissa.*” His voice throbbled with need inside my head.

I startled. “Sun?”

“No, like this,” he said, again in my head. It was so... intimate, his voice echoing inside me.

“How are you doing that? Are you reading my mind?”

“Not reading your mind. All Archai have the ability of basic telepathy. You have it too.”

“No I don’t.”

“Sure you do. Try it.”

I closed my eyes, trying to focus with the distraction of Sun surrounding me, touching me. “Like this.”

“Just like that.” Another suck, a gentle bite. “Fuck, Rissa. What you do to me.”

I gripped the back of his neck at the same time that my legs surrounded his hips. “What I want to know is what you can do to me.”

His thick cock slid between my wet lips. He traced my jugular with his tongue. “Right now?” he teased. “Are you sure?”

“Right now.”

My words were rough, hoarse. He angled his cock, and as his tip separated my lips and began the smooth slide inside, his fangs punctured my vein. I threw my head back, a cry escaping as I convulsed around his thick shaft. My heels dug into his ass, pulling him hard into me, grinding against him as he took that first long suck of my blood.

My nails dug into his skin. “Sun!”

Everything became a blur. Sun nursing at my neck; his body thrusting over and over; my body rising to meet him every time. I needed more of him, more of everything. It was a

roar in my head, a fire burning through my veins. I couldn't take him deep enough inside me, and I found myself longing to be inside him as well. Our bodies were bound together; I needed the same for my heart. It felt like my very soul was open, seeking his, needing his. I tried and tried, reaching for him, hungering for that connection.

And then he was there, reaching for me, as if everything he saw in me was everything he needed. Our souls met, clicked—

And a link snapped into place.

“Rissa!”

“Sun!”

My mate clutched me to him as pleasure hit like a tsunami. I choked, drowning in it, feeling my entire body implode in climax. I squeezed down around Sun, strangling his cock, and I felt that too, as if I were in his body as well as my own, both of us riding out that high, both of us in an agony of pleasure almost beyond enduring.

Blood filled his mouth—I could taste it. He swallowed instinctively, and I convulsed again, screaming out his name. The jumble of sensations—mine and his—jumbled my head and my body until finally, a long, long time later, I found myself limp beneath Sun's weight, his body slumped onto me as I struggled to breathe.

“Shit.” He pushed up onto his hands and knees. “Rissa, are you all right?”

I sucked in air, opened my eyes, and stared up at him. “What the hell was that?”

A grin burst over his face, and I thought, incongruously, that this must be what he'd looked like when he was younger,

carefree. Before the weight of the world settled on his shoulders.

“That, my Rissa, was the matebond.”

A matebond. *A freaking matebond?* I eased my claws from his shoulders, fighting to make sense of the words he'd used, trying to make sense of the past few moments.

And then brought my hands up to cover my face. “Holy hell. What have I done?”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT



RISK

“Why do I feel like a human shield?” Raine asked, lounging on the couch in the suite I’d been assigned to after returning with Sun. Probably because my mate wanted to keep an eye on me.

My mate. If that didn’t totally blow my mind...

“Probably because you are?” I tugged on the cord I was holding with frustration. The cable to plug in the computer just...wasn’t...long...enough. Ugh! I got off my knees, grabbed the edge of the table Sun had ordered to be moved in here for me, and pulled. A loud *screech* echoed as the table legs skidded across the floor.

Raine covered her ears. “Ouch!”

I eyed my friend, then plugged in the computer.

Ah, finally. Power.

“What I don’t understand is why.”

Because I formed a matebond with a king without meaning to, and now I’m running from him.

Or how about...

I’m stuck here with no way out and need a distraction.

Maybe...

There’s a traitor in our midst, and I don’t trust your safety to anyone but me, Sun, and Lyris.

So, answering Raine’s second question was much harder than the first. I decided to go with, “Because”—I wrangled the chair from the tiny dining table over to my makeshift desk—“I need some...” Space? Time? I had no idea. My brain and heart felt as scrambled as eggs in a skillet. I could reach out to Sun mentally anytime I wanted to, but right now I just...couldn’t. I needed to get myself together first.

“What you might need is your mate.”

“I’m not—” No, I couldn’t say that anymore. I was definitely Sun’s mate, no matter what other issues we had to contend with. Not that anyone else knew that. I’d accused Sun of hiding me because he was ashamed; what did that say about what I was doing? Specifically, I’d asked him not to mention the matebond to anyone. The look of hurt on his face...

I just had to wrap my head around it first. I needed...time. Okay, we’d go with time. If nothing else, whatever I needed would reveal itself if I just gave it time.

But my request had definitely hurt him.

And if I was being totally honest with myself—which I was trying to avoid—in that moment when the matebond had clicked into place, I’d felt such...relief. I didn’t have to fight it

anymore. I didn't have to wonder or worry. Was Sun going to reject me? Was he unhappy that he was stuck with me as a mate? Was he going to keep hurting me? So many of those questions were answered the second his mind opened to me: No, he wouldn't reject me. No, he wasn't unhappy, although he was worried his people would be. He didn't intend to hurt me, but he hadn't been lying when he'd said my defiance triggered something in him that was new and out of control.

But the bond was there, a given, no going around it.

That moment had given me a reprieve, but it had also been overwhelming. Because if I thought Sun had scoured my mind before, it was nothing compared to the sheer openness of my...everything...in the matebond. My mind. My heart. My very soul had been exposed as if a spotlight had been set up in every corner of my being. Sun could see every nook and cranny, every secret, every questionable thing I'd ever done, every longing I'd ever had. I didn't have to tell him I'd fallen in love—he could see it. I didn't have to tell him what our first night together had meant to me—he could see it.

I didn't have to tell him what his actions since my reveal had done to me—not only could he see it, but he could feel what I'd felt. He could relive every moment of my life, good or bad. It had been beautiful and terrifying all at once. Now I wasn't so much licking my wounds as trying to put my walls back up. I was too...exposed, too vulnerable. I didn't want to be vulnerable. Not to Sun, not to anyone.

And none of that even touched on the reality of Sun being completely exposed to me. I'd been so overwhelmed I wasn't even certain of what I'd seen.

Raine had an eyebrow raised in expectation, and I realized I'd wandered off without finishing my sentence. I shrugged.

What could I say? There was no single answer.

My friend refrained from further comment on the subject of Sun, thank goodness. Instead she waved a hand at my setup. “What’s all this?”

“This”—I flipped various buttons and switches until everything hummed to life—“is going to help us find the traitor.”

Sun had called for a ride after we’d both gotten dressed, and brought back everything I needed to review my footage. I’d caught Raine up that far, at least, when I’d come back from my apartment and pulled her into my orbit as a buffer.

“What exactly are you looking for? The Archai and Anigma in the same place?”

“Unlikely, but you never know. Maybe close proximity, especially more than once.” I pushed my hair off my sweaty forehead. “To be honest, I’m not sure what I’ll find. Anything that could be a clue.” Hopefully I’d know it when I saw it.

A knock on the door sounded, and when I called out, Imogen and Lyris came through. My place had sort of become female central since nightfall. Lyris had agreed—in a somewhat subdued manner for her—to provide a second set of eyes on the surveillance. She beelined for me. Imogen joined Raine on the couch.

“How’s the planning going?” Raine asked. The ceremony was rapidly approaching, only two days away now. Getting so much together in such a short time space of time seemed impossible, except the Archai were nothing if not traditional. The matebond ceremony was close enough to a wedding for me to imagine all the details, but though I’d expected wailing

and gnashing of teeth to precede it, everything seemed to be pretty much handled.

And Imogen? She was the calm in the middle of the storm. I definitely envied her.

“I have a dress,” Imogen told us. Excitement made her skin glow so bright it was hard to look at her. Or maybe that was the difference in our experiences. She was throwing herself wholeheartedly into the bond with her mate. I’d slipped into mine, unprepared for what I’d find there.

Not just the exposure, scratching like an itchy blanket, but also what I’d learned about Sun, that he had reservations about me, not as mate but queen. That was a tough one to swallow.

I pulled up the last set of video files. “We’ll work backward, okay?” I asked Lyris.

“Seems the most practical approach.”

I clicked on the latest files. My computer archived them automatically at the end of each twenty-four-hour period in a dated folder, allowing me to easily find anything I needed.

Lyris pulled up another chair and took a seat in front of my second monitor. I assigned her a file, accessed a new one for myself, and sat down to begin.

Raine and Imogen chatted all things matebonding and Archai culture behind us. I found myself listening with half an ear. Would Sun and I have some type of formal ceremony given we’d already established our matebond? Would his people require evidence that our bond was real? Like what? What about the rumors Cale might start? What would people think of my gift?

I realized I’d zoned out a bit and had to rewind a few minutes. Nothing came up on this video, so I marked it

complete and started a new one. An hour later, stiff and bleary-eyed, I stood to get myself a drink and try to process what movement I'd seen.

“When will you be going through your triggering, Raine?” Imogen asked as I walked by on my way back to the table.

“Triggering?” Raine looked as confused as I was until I remembered Sun using that term when he'd...when...

Never mind.

“It's the Archai's formal term for your first bite.” For some reason those words made Imogen blush. “When your gift is released, you know.”

“No,” Raine said, “I didn't know. At least that it was called that.” I'd told her the story of my own attack and what I'd gleaned from so many years of tracking females like us, which admittedly wasn't a lot. “I'm not sure that I will go through the triggering.”

Lyris turned from her screen at that. “Why not?”

“Because I'm not sure I want to.” Raine's comment held a “why do you think?” tone.

“Why wouldn't you?”

I stepped in. “It's her decision, Lyris. No one will be pressuring her.”

Lyris shook her head. “You don't understand.” She rubbed at her forehead. “Sometimes I forget how much you all don't know.”

“What don't we know?” Raine asked.

Abandoning the computer, she came over to take a seat on the couch. “Archai females are triggered on their fifteenth

birthday. It is a sacred ceremony, conducted with dignity and care, surrounded by family who can guide you through the discovery and accepting of your gift.”

A lump formed in my throat. No one here except Lyris had been given that kind of peaceful change. “Who performs the ceremony?”

“Our Aomai.”

My shoulders relaxed. Grim would be the perfect choice, of course.

“Why so young?” Raine asked. “You have the rest of your lives—”

“Because there’s a time limit.”

“What do you mean?” Imogen this time. Apparently she hadn’t gotten the full tutorial either.

Lyris sighed. “You have more in common than you might realize.” She paused as if unsure where to start. “You see, the longer an Archai female remains unchanged, the closer she walks to madness. The more she is swamped with the sense that she is alone, that she walks on the edge of darkness, the further she spirals into a depression she cannot pull out of. Most females, left unchanged, choose to commit suicide rather than continue in this life.”

“Oh my God.” Imogen covered her mouth with her hand, tears sparkling in her eyes. I didn’t need to look at Raine to know my best friend was likely on the verge of tears as well. We’d discussed our mothers’ suicides before.

“So you’re saying that, if I choose not to be triggered, I will fall into a depression and kill myself?” Raine asked.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Lyris frowned. “We do not know why, exactly, this happens; we only know that it does. So our females are triggered before they can enter this phase of their lives, for their safety and protection.”

This time it was Raine who frowned. “And has anyone ever said no?”

The idea seemed to surprise Lyris. “Of course not. Why would they?”

Raine gave a humph of a laugh. “Because they’ve believed all their lives that they are human and want to remain so? Because they have a life they don’t wish to leave? Because they don’t want to become some unknown something with a gift they have no way to foresee, that might very well make them the target of literal evil, if they aren’t already?”

I settled my hand on Raine’s shoulder and gave her a squeeze. I had no doubt of the truth of Lyris’s words—not only was she right about all our mothers, but I’d seen the darkness growing in Raine with my own eyes. Nevertheless, she would not be forced; I’d make certain of it.

“You would wish to live in the human world?” Lyris asked.

“I intend to do that either way,” Raine assured her. “I asked my boss for a week off to recover, but I’m going back to work. And to my apartment. I won’t be living here.” She glanced around the room. “Nice as it is.”

“We can’t protect you as well if you’re not here. You won’t have the benefit of the clan.”

“We’ll work something out,” I told Lyris.

“You think Sun will agree to not only let one of our precious females out of the lair, but allow her to go

untriggered as well?”

“It might seem ridiculous to you, but Raine has the right to determine her own future.” I had no idea what Sun would agree to, honestly. His mind was full of tradition and honor and *protecting the female*. But Raine was mine to protect, not his. “We’ll figure it out.”

One way or another, for Raine, we’d figure it out.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE



SUN

I hadn't seen her in three days. If there was one thing I could say about Rissa, it was that she knew how to avoid someone. Either that or I'd walked right past her a hundred times in another form. Who knew? Either way, I hadn't seen her. But it was now a half hour before one of the biggest moments of my life, and I'd be damned if it happened without my mate. Her absence had been like a hole inside me since the last time we'd made love.

Which was how I ended up outside the door to her suite, my palms sweating and breath held as I knocked.

Raine pulled the door open, again. She'd answered every time I came by. If Rissa wasn't actually hiding, she was hiding behind someone. I wasn't gonna let that deter me anymore either.

"Sun."

“Raine. Is she here?”

Raine hesitated. Unashamedly using my mass, I pushed my way forward. She backtracked automatically. By the time she realized what she was doing, it was too late and I was already inside.

“Raine, who— Oh, Sun.”

There she was. Everything inside me relaxed at the sight of her. Well, almost everything. My libido had been craving her for days, and there was no calming that without some serious time with my mate—not that I expected that to happen soon. Rissa was nothing if not stubborn.

I tried to keep the hurt out of my voice. “Were you going to come see me?”

Guilt flashed across her face. “I...uh...”

Disappointment spread through me, tainting the moment, flooding me with resentment. “That’s what I thought.”

She glanced at Raine. “I was going to see you at the coronation.”

“You’re my mate. Your place is beside me, not in a crowd.”

Red crept into her cheeks. “I—”

“Rissa, what the hell are we doing?”

Her eyes went wide. Guess she hadn’t expected me to bring things right out in the open, especially not in front of someone else, but she’d given me no choice. I refused to wait any longer.

“Uh, Raine, would you give us some privacy?” Rissa asked. Finally.

“Oh, sure.” Raine’s hands fluttered in the air before she tucked them behind her back. “I’ll just, um, go meet Lyris. She’ll need help with, um, something, I’m sure.”

I held Rissa’s eyes as the door opened and closed. I was tired of being without my mate. I needed her—or at least needed her to make a decision.

“Sun—”

Her tone didn’t sound promising.

“Sun—” She rubbed at her forehead. “I’m sorry.”

Not what I’d expected her to say. “What for? You haven’t done anything.”

“Exactly. I haven’t done anything because it was easier to leave us in stasis than to try to figure out how to handle this. Try to figure out how I felt. What I feel,” she corrected.

“How do you feel?” I could reach out and touch her mind, know what was inside her without asking. But Rissa had made it clear she didn’t want that. I could no longer, in good conscience, violate her will when there’d been too much of that between us already.

She began to pace. “I feel...vulnerable.”

That confused me. The Archai spent our lives looking for a mate. The idea that we could be completely open to someone, that they would know us inside and out...it was something we looked forward to. Craved.

Rissa hadn’t known it was possible. For someone that played things as close to the vest as my mate to now have to accept that there were no more secrets, ever again... Though I didn’t want to admit it, didn’t want to give an inch, I understood how that would feel uncomfortable.

Everything inside me screamed, *I'm your mate! You should want me!* Hearing that she didn't was almost more than I could bear.

Rissa went on. "I don't want to feel powerless, not after decades of taking care of myself. It takes a lot to lay down those walls willingly, and I didn't get that choice. Not only that, but you've done your best to reinforce that lack of power. It doesn't make me feel like I can trust you with being vulnerable."

This was my fault. I knew it, but hearing my mate say it aloud was a smack in the face. "I guess I can understand that," I conceded.

"I just—"

I straightened my spine. *Here it comes.*

"I just don't know how I can get past that."

My eyes closed. Pain knifed through me. I stood silent, waiting for her to finish me off, waiting for her to say she was refusing me.

Except she didn't say anything.

When I opened my eyes, she was staring down at her hands as they twisted in front of her. What did she want from me? I'd told her I was sorry, and I'd meant it. What else could I do?

"I love you, Rissa."

Her gaze jerked up to meet mine. "What?"

"I love you. And no matter what you decide, I always will."

She frowned.

“Don’t tell me it’s not true—you’ve been inside me. You know for a fact it is. And unless you tell me you’re done, I won’t stop trying to win you back. I can’t. I love you, and you love me.”

“I loved you,” she corrected me. “I don’t know if that’s true any longer.”

She was slicing me open and leaving me to bleed out.

“You say you love me, but you don’t treat me like you do. I may be your mate, and we may be bonded, but that doesn’t mean I have to allow you to abuse me.”

That word, *abuse*, hurt. It hurt because I didn’t want it to be true—I didn’t want to be the male who had abused his mate. But I knew it was true. I couldn’t deny it any more than she could deny what I’d said.

“You’re right.”

She hesitated as if surprised.

“You’re right,” I said again. “I haven’t treated you like I love you. I’ve let my control slip with you where I never would have with anyone else. I have no excuse for that. But it isn’t how I want us to continue. I don’t want that to be the mate you are tied to, Rissa.”

Taking a deep breath, she admitted, “I wish I could believe that was true.”

“It is. Hell, have Imogen test me if you want; I’d gladly submit.” I walked forward slowly, step by cautious step, because I couldn’t stand being apart from her another second. I needed to touch her, needed to convey with more than mere words how sincere I was. “It’s true; just give me the chance to show you. No matter how long it takes, no matter what I have to do, I will prove it to you.” Standing before her now, I

reached up and gently cupped the side of her throat, feeling her heartbeat beneath my palm. I tipped her chin up so I could see her dark eyes. “I’ll do anything for a chance with you, Rissa.”

Tears gathered as she stared at me, making my gut clench all over again. I couldn’t stand it anymore; I kissed her. Lightly, carefully, but I needed to comfort her somehow. “Please, at least think about it,” I whispered against her mouth. We had an eternity to get this right. I *wanted* to get it right.

Her hand came up to cover mine, holding it against her neck for a long moment before her fingers curled around mine. “I’ll think about it.”

My knees nearly gave out.

When Rissa stepped back from me, I could tell she was pulling herself together. Her fingers brushed at the shoulders of my robe. “Looking pretty regal there, huh? Purple is a good color for a redhead.”

At least my mate liked it. “Thank God I don’t have to wear them very often.”

“It’s not every day you get to be crowned an actual king.”

Technically I was already king and this was just for show, but she was right. And there was something I wanted more than anything else for this ceremony.

“Will you come in with me?”

She startled. “You mean, into the ceremony?”

“Yes.”

“Sun, I don’t know if—”

“I want my people to know, no matter what, that I’ve chosen you above all others.” I ran my thumb over her bottom lip. Some might see this as pressure, a form of coercion, but that wasn’t it at all. It was reassurance. Rissa had seen my doubts in my mind, my concern that the clan might not accept her after learning about her gift. I no longer cared whether they did or not. She was my choice, now and always, no matter what she decided. “You asked for time to think when we came back. Well, that gave me time to think too. And I realized, I want you as my queen. I can’t keep it a secret any longer.”

She closed her eyes tight. When no response came, I dared to reach out.

“Rissa?”

Raising her head, she met my eyes, her own shining with some emotion I couldn’t read. “Yes, I’ll go in with you. As long as I don’t have to get up on a stage.”

I fingered her red hair. “Like this?” I wanted my Rissa with me, if she was willing.

Tingling awareness crossed my skin, sparking in my mind, and then I held dark coffee-colored hair in my hands. I smiled.

A knock came at the door. “Sun!”

Basile. “Time to go.”

A flicker of panic crossed Rissa’s face, but I took her hand and refused to let go. I wouldn’t give her a chance to change her mind.

“I’m not really dressed appropriately to stand beside the king for a coronation.”

Females, always worried about their clothes. “That’s all right.” I opened the door, and Basile shoved a box my way. I passed it to Rissa. “Here. Go change.”

When she returned a few minutes later, she wore a red dress that hugged her curves on its way from her shoulders to the floor. The front split up the middle to just above her knees, leaving her free to walk, and velvet black boots covered her feet. My female wasn’t into heels, but the boots were practical and sexy. And though she hid her scars with the glamour, the rest of her was all my Rissa.

“Perfect.”

“Sun!” Basile again.

“Let’s go before your second has an aneurysm.”

Rissa gripped my hand tight as we passed through the halls until we reached a corridor just outside the Arena. We waited there until it was time to go in.

“Where is Imogen?” she asked me. Ahead of us, the members of the Warrior’s Council lingered in a large clump, ready to precede us. Demetri stood to one side, attired in his formal uniform, as they all were, ready for the ceremony that would make him one with his mate.

“She’s waiting in the king’s study off the throne room.”

“Alone?”

“No.” I shook my head. “She has a guard with her. And Lyris will escort her when the time comes.”

Rissa nodded but continued to scan the group as we waited.

“*What is it?*” I asked.

She met my eyes, her own troubled. *“I can’t believe any of these warriors is the traitor.”*

Because the Source had said the traitor was on the council. I stared at the males and female that had served me for centuries. Not one seemed capable of such a heinous act as turning on their own clan. Was the stranger wrong?

But when I voiced the question in Rissa’s head, she disagreed. *“The Source, if in fact that is who that was, is never wrong. Not in underground circles. If it’s the same guy, he had the correct intel.”*

“Anything definitive in your videos?”

“If there was, you would have known immediately.”

Basile signaled for the doors to be opened, and the council began their procession into the room. I took a breath. “Ready?”

“You know I don’t like being exposed,” she murmured.

I cupped her cheek. “I know.”

She sighed, rolling her eyes. “But I’ll do it for you.”

Despite her dramatics, her statement touched me deep inside. This was a big ask, especially without her glamour, but Rissa was doing it anyway.

I squeezed her hand in mine as we moved toward the door.

The crowd began whispering the minute I led Rissa inside. That was all right. I ignored them and moved on. I was king, and no one would harm my mate. That was one of the reasons I’d wanted her with me now—to declare, once and for all, that we were a pair. Whether she decided I was hers or not, I’d made my decision. There would be no other but her for me.

I led her beside me until we reached the dais in the middle of the room. The members of the council, all except Jacob, who was guarding Imogen, and Azrael, currently on a mission to another clan, stood at intervals all the way around, facing outward. In the center, my throne—though I still had trouble thinking of it as mine—sat, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Before I climbed the stairs, I brought Rissa’s hand to my mouth and kissed the back. She stared solemnly at me until I released her, then turned to sit along the front aisle with the other females.

I’d made it clear we weren’t here for a sermon. Grim, as Aomai, would complete the crowning, and I’d told him to make it quick. This was a mere formality; much better to get on with it and get to the good part, Demetri and Imogen’s matebond. As Grim spoke, I barely paid attention, most of my focus on my mate. But as minutes passed, I noticed her eyeing the warriors, a vee of concern dividing her brows. Her body was tensing, her knuckles going white on the arms of her chair.

“What is it?”

At first she shook her head, but then she said, *“I need to check on Imogen.”*

“Why? She’ll be here any minute.” Grim had to be almost finished by now. He was walking toward the crown waiting on a pillow—a freaking velvet pillow—on the dais.

“I can’t explain, Sun. I just know I need to go check.”

I didn’t understand anything except that my mate had excellent instincts. If she said she needed to go, she needed to go.

“Stay in contact with me,” I warned her.

She nodded, and I watched as she stealthily rose and made her way to a side door.

Grim placed the crown on my head. Bidding me to stand, he began to recite the king's vows, which I repeated. Half my brain was still on Rissa, though, and when I heard her in my mind, calling my name, my head turned instinctively in that direction.

“What is it, mate?”

“Oh God, Sun. We were wrong; it was someone on the council. Jacob. It's been Jacob all along. We're under attack!”

CHAPTER
FORTY



RISK

“**Y**ou fucking traitor!”

It had clicked the minute I saw Jacob crossing the throne room. He was in dark clothes, similar to what he’d worn in the video, and in profile I was seeing him almost exactly as I had on the CCTV coverage of the neighborhood where the boys had been attacked a couple of weeks ago. It had been video from the corner store, showing a male stalking down the road across the street as the boys rode off on their bicycles. Because of the shadow and the lack of detail, I hadn’t made the connection.

Until now.

The group of shifters waiting at the exit he was approaching, shifters I’d never seen before and who, if they belonged here, should be in the Arena, confirmed my

suspicion. Jacob was the one, and he was letting in the Anigma.

Oh God. I had to get to Imogen.

“Sun!”

“What is it, mate?”

“We were wrong; it was someone on the council. Jacob. It’s been Jacob all along. We’re under attack!”

“Show me!”

SUN

I wasn’t certain Rissa would understand what I was asking, but understand or not, she instinctively did what I asked: in my mind’s eye a scene in the throne room appeared, Jacob rushing to greet a group of males led by Helios himself, coming in through the entrance to the King’s Garden.

Son of a bitch.

“Where’s Imogen?”

“I’ve got to get her.”

“Hurry back, and tell me when you get here. The doors will be sealed by then. I’ll get Demetri to let you in.”

Then I was on my feet. “Seal the room. The Anigma are attacking!”

My warriors had been well trained for centuries. At the first call to action, they didn’t question, simply jumped to secure the room. Chaos erupted in the crowd. Lyris and

Vanessa began to round up the women and children near the back of the room, where they could funnel them to the nearest secret emergency exit if necessary. The rest of the men began the process of closing the heavy doors that would protect the room and its occupants.

Basile rushed up to me. “How do you know?”

“Rissa went to check on Imogen. She said Jacob is our traitor.”

“What?”

“What?” several of my council asked.

“And Imogen?” Demetri asked.

I glanced at the warrior sympathetically. “Rissa is trying to get to her. The Anigma are entering through the King’s Garden.”

Several warriors cursed. Demetri squared off before me. “My king, I request permission to lead the offensive.”

Were it my mate waiting, I would expect nothing less. “So granted. Gather your warriors.”

With a worried look thrown in his twin’s direction, Demetri marched in the opposite.

James approached. “What next?”

I eyed the heavy steel doors. “He’s privy to too many secrets, James.”

“Indeed he is, including the codes to open those doors, my king.”

I made the only decision I could. “Go to Lyris. Take the women and children to the dorms.” We couldn’t risk keeping them here. The dorms were farthest from the throne room,

with their own steel security doors to lock everyone securely inside. And only Lyris and I had that combination in our heads.

“Done.” James was off the dais and running toward the group that, even in the chaos, was clumped together well, the women holding the children, carrying them, ensuring their safety and, hopefully, a little calm despite the dire situation. I prayed James and Lyris got them to the dorms without incident. The Anigma had attacked at a time they knew everyone would be in a single location. Who knew what they were capable of.

IMOGEN

“You fucking traitor!”

The words came through the door to Sun’s study loud and clear. As I jerked my head toward the sound, the tiara I wore slid to one side. Damn it. I loved that it was a gift from Lyris, worn by Demetri’s mother at her matebond ceremony, but I couldn’t seem to keep it flat on my head. I tried my best to straighten it as I hurried toward the door.

“She’s the king’s mate!” I heard as I pulled it open. “She can communicate with him.”

That was Jacob. He’d been in the room with me until just a few moments ago, when he’d stepped out. What was he—

Risk was running straight for me across the long expanse of the throne room. A crowd of shifters gathered on the far end, led by a male of such obvious power that I felt myself

start to shake. Jacob had left the group to beeline for Risk as if trying to intercept her.

“Demetri!”

Could telepathy reach him this far away? Did he know what was going on?

“Get inside, Imogen,” Risk screamed.

I ducked back behind the door, but I didn’t close it. Not with my friend on the other side. As I watched, Risk slid to a stop and turned to face Jacob.

“No! Risk, no!”

The next moment, a gust of wind passed by me into the room. The thick wooden door jerked out of my hands and slammed shut. Risk appeared next to me, huffing to catch her breath.

“Oh my God, you scared me half to death,” I screeched. “I thought you were still out there.”

Risk winced. “Yeah, sorry. My gift, remember. I needed to slow Jacob down; I didn’t have time to explain.”

Loud banging shook the door.

“Grab something to wedge this?” Risk suggested.

I glanced frantically around the room. On one wall, a display of medieval battle axes hung. I hurried over to grab one, which dropped to the floor immediately, it’s weight too much for me to fully lift. So I dragged. When I made it to Risk, I wedged the blade into the wooden floor, shoved the handle into a ridge on the door, and prayed it held.

It did. For now.

“There are too many of them out there for this to last long,” Risk said over the shouts and banging coming from the other side. “We’ve got to find another way out of here.”

“I tried reaching out to Demetri. I can’t seem to connect from here.” Adrenaline and fear were making me lightheaded. I desperately wanted my mate. “*Demetri?*”

No answer. I had no idea if I could reach him from here. Most of the time I was pretty sure Demetri established the link between us, it was so easy.

“Yeah”—Risk was frantically searching the room—“I don’t know what the range on telepathy is. I’ve been able to reach Sun.”

I began removing the axes from the wall, hoping to find one light enough to actually use. “How did you manage that?” Maybe I was doing it wrong.

Risk hesitated. “Sun and I share a matebond.”

“You what?” I couldn’t stop to stare in shock, but I wanted to. “When did this happen?”

“At my apartment.” Risk cursed. “This is a fucking king’s study. No king in his right mind would have a room with only one exit. So where the hell is the other one?”

The axes weren’t helping. To hopefully reinforce the one holding the door, I abandoned them and instead threw my weight against the heavy desk, hoping I could get it across the room in time to help. “Try the walls?”

Risk began pushing at the walls at regular intervals. I groaned, pushing at the desk, and felt the tiara on my head do a slow slide to one side. Snatching it off, I swore as it tangled in my hair. “Damn it!”

“Ah-ha! Found it!”

Whirling around, I saw Risk pushing at a narrow opening in the wall. The door must not have been used much, because it was taking all her effort to move it inch by inch.

At the same time, a loud *crack* sounded at the door. The edge of a thick blade broke through.

“Risk!” I redoubled my efforts to get the heavy desk to the door.

“Shit!” Risk strained against the exit, forcing it open little by little.

We were never going to make it.

“I want that female!” I heard from the throne room. Another crack, and the blade sank farther through the door.

I abandoned the desk. “Risk, we’ve got to get out.” Joining in her efforts to open the exit forced the door a bit farther before it stuck again.

“I think I can fit,” Risk panted. She began trying to squeeze through.

I looked down at myself. Risk might fit, but with the skirt on this dress, I never would. I reached over my shoulder and began undoing the buttons I could reach. “Keep going.”

More chopping at the door. I winced at the image of *The Shining* that popped into my mind.

Risk was almost through.

The buttons weren’t cooperating, and no matter how hard I pulled, the fabric seemed to be made of steel—nothing was giving. A frantic glance at the door told me the Anigma would break it down any minute.

Both of us weren't going to make it.

Abandoning my dress, I placed both hands on Risk's side and shoved. She popped through, grabbing my hand on the way. "Come on, Imogen!"

"I can't fit. Go get help, Risk!"

"No, I can't—"

"You can! Hurry! If you get someone here quick enough, they won't be able to get me out of here. Go!"

Risk hesitated, but the sound of the door splitting down the middle got her moving. "I'll be right back!"

"Go!" I pulled the door shut behind her.

Facing away from Risk's exit, I waited for whatever would happen next. *"I love you, Demetri. I know you can't hear me, but I love you."*

DEMETRI

"I love you."

The words were a faint echo in my head. Imogen's words. I was almost to the throne room.

The Anigma poured from that direction into the halls, flooding us with bodies, making it almost impossible to get a killing strike. The best we could do was maim, hoping they stayed down long enough for us to finish the job on the return trip. But right now all that mattered was getting to my mate.

Imogen was in the epicenter, and Jacob knew her location. He'd been guarding her, for fuck's sake.

"I'm coming, mate!"

Could she hear me? Was she under attack? Would they harm her before I could get there?

Fucking Jacob! I thrust my sword upward into the neck of the next Anigma soldier I came too, pretending it was my fellow Warrior's Council member. The spark of electricity that flashed when I managed to sever his spinal cord filled me with satisfaction.

Now if only I could find the real thing.

Basile fought alongside me. The big basilisk had given up on his sword in such a narrow passage, resorting to breaking heads, spines, and limbs with his massively powerful hands as he plowed through the enemy. Our warriors backed us, streaming down the hall, but there was only so much room. Basile grunted as he took a strike to his beefy arm, then grasped the Anigma soldier's sword hand and snapped the wrist like kindling. Seeing an opportunity, I swung my sword in that direction and took the soldier's head as Basile held him in place. Ashes covered the both of us.

"Throne room just ahead," I shouted.

We squared off with the soldiers that had taken the dead ones' places.

When would I finally make it to my mate? *"Imogen!"*

SUN

“I’m almost there, Sun!”

My mate’s voice sounded ragged, as if she was breathing heavily, even though the words were only in her mind. “Which door?”

She sent me a mental image. I hurried to the far end of the room. “Open it!”

Doran didn’t hesitate. As soon as a gap appeared, Rissa rolled beneath the door. “Close it!”

An Anigma soldier managed to get his arm beneath the dropping door, grasping Rissa’s ankle as the heavy weight landed on his shoulder. The arm tore loose as my mate scrambled to stand. Unfortunately the hand was still attached to her leg, so she spent precious moments dancing around, kicking at the arm to get it away from her. “Gross! Gross! Gross!”

I grasped her arms and turned her around to face me. “It’s all right!”

Tears covered her reddened face. “It’s not! Imogen is still back there.”

My heart sank. “What happened?”

“They were coming through the door. She pushed me through and closed it.”

She’d sacrificed herself for my mate? I clutched Rissa’s shaking body to mine. “It’s going to be all right. Demetri’s almost to the throne room.”

She shook her head. “There are so many of them. Jacob—I just can’t believe—”

I was finding it difficult to wrap my head around as well, but there was no time for that now. “We’ve got to get you out.”

She raised her head, glanced around. “Where are the other women?”

“I’ve sent them ahead to the dorms. You’re going too.”

“No, I can be useful—”

A shout rose amid the crowd. One of the warriors stood toward the back of the room. He glanced around frantically, and when he spotted Rissa, he waved her toward him. “Help!”

We rushed in that direction. As we got closer, I saw a thick table against one wall. The male pointed in that direction. “There’s a little girl...”

No! I hurried forward.

Rissa was right beside me. “Clara!”

The little girl’s dress was torn, her face marred with tears. “Where’s Immy? I want Immy!”

“Imogen’s not here,” Rissa said, going to her knees. She held out a hand. “Let me help you, Clara.”

“No! No! I want Immy!”

I searched my mind frantically for a solution beyond crawling under the table and grabbing the girl myself. Force would only make her hysteria worse, though. Rissa stood up next to me, and the next thing I knew, Imogen knelt on the floor. Gasps filled the room near us. I did a double take before I realized what my mate had done.

“I’m right here, Clara.” She held out her hand. “Come to me, sweetheart.”

Clara hesitated, but then reached for Rissa's hand. "I'm scared, Immy!"

"I know you are," Rissa assured her. Claspng her close, she began to rub the little girl's back. "I know. I'm scared too. But we're going to be all right." She turned her eyes—Imogen's eyes—toward me, a question mark in them. I had no idea what would happen, but I gave her my answer anyway: I nodded. I'd do everything I could to keep them both safe.

"Come on," I said, taking Rissa's hand. "We've got to get you both out of here."

She carried Clara. The little girl was sobbing, her body tense as she clung to my mate like a monkey. Rissa murmured reassurances constantly while hurrying to keep up with me. At the far door, we came to a stop.

"They're already outside, my king," the soldier guarding that door said.

I nodded. "We will use the emergency exit."

"What if I can't find the dorms from there?" Rissa asked.

"You will." In my mind I formed a map of the path from the emergency exit to the dorms; then I sent it telepathically to my mate. "Got it?"

She closed her eyes as if reading internally, then shook her head. "What if I forget?"

"You won't forget. You've got the map in your head; it's not going anywhere."

"Sun—"

I clasped her cheeks, forcing her to meet my eyes. "You are going to make it, do you hear me? You won't forget. Clara's life depends on it."

I could see her fear plain as day, but she nodded all the same. “I won’t forget.”

I leaned in, kissing her quickly but thoroughly. “Come on.” Leading her over a few steps, I pressed the hidden latch for the secret passage, entered the code, and watched as it opened. Then I turned to her. “You go through this passage, and then you take on a warrior’s persona. You hear me? That’ll keep you safer.”

“I hear you.” She was breathing heavy, her fear palpable, but she met my eyes without faltering. Placing her hand on the back of Clara’s head, she told her, “Keep your eyes closed, sweetheart, okay? Just keep them closed and we’ll make it.”

I nodded my approval, gave her one last kiss, and pushed her into the dark passageway. “Go! I’ll find you when this is over.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE



IMOGEN

Jacob grabbed me by the hair and pulled me across the room. “There’s someone here who wants to meet you.”

“Let go of me, bastard!”

He stopped, turned to me to face him, and slapped me across the face. “Shut. Up.”

A disapproving growl came from our right. I didn’t dare turn in that direction. My guess was that the sound came from the shifter who’d led the Anigma inside. Just looking at him across the room had started me shaking; I really didn’t want to meet him up close.

“Bring her to me.”

I didn’t think I was going to get my wish.

Jacob dragged me over until we stood in front of the commander. I kept my eyes on the floor.

“Here she is. The one you were looking for.”

Why would he be looking for me? I assumed this was Helios, the male Demetri had said was in charge of the Anigma now. I’d never met him, although I had heard he’d been to Maddox’s compound. Why would his attention be on me?

The male reached out, taking my arm, and snatched me away from Jacob. “Indeed,” he said, confirming Jacob’s words and confusing me even more. “You’ve fulfilled your part of the bargain.”

“I assume that means I’m free to collect my own promised prize.”

The commander must have given him an affirmative answer, because Jacob hurried away. I hated that I wished he was still here. Anything familiar would ease this moment.

“Demetri?”

Helios grabbed my chin and forced it upward. “Who were you calling for?”

Being new to telepathy, I was probably spilling my messages all over the place. But I didn’t know how else to reach for my mate.

That hand tightened on my arm with bruising force. “Tell me who you were calling for.”

“My mate.”

Red light flashed from his eyes: anger. Why would this male be angry that I had a mate?

“You have no mate but me.”

Horror filled me. “The hell I don’t.”

The minute the words were out, I regretted them. The commander's fist came up, and without warning he punched me in the face. I reeled backward, held up only by the grip on my arm. The room faded in and out, but I managed to hear Helios's words.

"Let's get this clear. You are mine; no one else's. I'd better never hear the word 'mate' pass your lips again."

Even without the punch, I would have been confused, but with it I could barely stand. I didn't respond.

He shook me. "Do you understand?"

If he shook me again, I would throw up. "I understand."

"Good." Gathering me against his body, he put an arm around my waist and began the walk toward the garden exit. "Xer, take care of things here."

I had no idea who Xer was. I had no idea where we were going. I only knew, if I left this place, I would never see Demetri again. I let myself go limp, praying my deadweight would slow Helios down.

The male grunted, not at my weight but at his own annoyance, it seemed. Continuing to hold me tight, almost a lover's embrace, he dragged me toward the door, my useless feet dragging behind us. Just as we passed out of the throne room, I swore I heard Demetri screaming my name.

DEMETRI

“Imogen!” I glanced frantically around the throne room. Where was she? “Imogen!”

There! Passing into the hallway that led to the King’s Garden, I saw a massive shifter. Helios. On his other side, clasped tight against him, I caught a glimpse of Imogen’s back, her ceremony dress trailing behind her. “Imogen!”

“Dragon!”

Lyris’s frantic cry echoed in my head. I whipped my head around to look behind me. *“Lyris?”*

“It’s Jacob!”

In an instant my head filled with Lyris’s sight. She was glancing over her shoulder, watching Jacob run in her direction. When she turned her head around, she was at the dorms, the last of the women passing through the door. “Get inside!” she shouted. When the last female had passed through, she punched a code into the wall pad and drew her sword as she watched the door close. Then she turned to face our traitor.

Shit. I needed to get to my mate. And I needed to help my twin. She was facing danger alone.

Clearing my mind of Lyris’s vision, I glanced once more around the room. There was fighting in clusters as my warriors took on the Anigma. Most of the enemy had moved into the hall, headed for our people, but a few remained. No sign of Imogen or Helios. I ran toward the exit to the garden.

“You’re not going anywhere, Lyris.”

Jacob’s voice filled my head, but it wasn’t coming from him; it was coming from my twin. My heart twisted as if a fist had wrapped around it. *“Lyris.”*

She didn't answer. I could feel the weight of the sword in her hands, feel her heart beating double time, feel her resolve as she faced off with the enemy. And all the while I moved toward the garden.

"You're going to die, Jacob." Her heart thrummed with the adrenaline of a fight, but not with fear. Not because of Jacob. "I don't know what you intended by all of this, but you're going to die," Lyris assured him.

He laughed. "Why did I do all of this? I did it for you, of course."

"Then you were seriously delusional."

"No, I wasn't." He spread his arms wide. "I've succeeded. You see, I knew you'd never have me on your own. You've made that clear time and time again. But now I don't need your permission. Helios promised you to me; you'll be mine forever."

"Over my dead body."

I'd reached the garden. A quick glance around told me that wherever Imogen was, I wouldn't find her easily. The entire garden appeared serene, empty. In the distance I could see the blades of several helicopters, but the cabins were empty. Where was she?

"If that's the way it has to be...I guess we'll have to see which one of us is stronger," Jacob said.

Lyris scoffed in my head. "You really think you can beat me? You are definitely delusional."

Rage suffused Jacob's face—he never could handle an insult, the little prick. As I tried one more time, desperately, to find my mate, he brought his sword forward and clashed with my twin's.

The fight was on. And not just a physical fight. I had to make a choice—continue to search for my mate or rush to help my twin. I had no idea what to do.

Basile came up behind me. “Imogen is not in the study.”

“She’s out here somewhere. I saw her with Helios.” I turned to my friend. “Lyris needs me; Jacob has found her.”

Basile made the decision I was unable to make. “Go, get to Lyris.” He gestured to several males entering the garden. “We’ll find Imogen. I promise you, Demetri, we won’t stop looking until we succeed.”

I had no choice. I couldn’t be in two places at once.

Turning my back on the garden, I began to run.

RISK

Sun had given me a precise map. Unfortunately it led me right to Jacob. Ahead I could see the male, his sword swinging around to meet Lyris’s in the air. No way could I take Clara through there.

I glanced around frantically. There were so many passageways, so many options. I could get lost in any of them, but to keep Clara safe, I couldn’t choose anything on the way to the dorms. Turning blindly, I selected an offshoot and ran.

Multiple turns later, I found myself in an area that had not been developed. Rough walls led me nowhere. Openings held small caves with barely any space. I could hide Clara here, but was it far enough away from the fighting?

Oh, for fuck's sake. I could question my decisions forever, but it wouldn't get me anywhere—I didn't have answers. Choosing an opening at random, I slid Clara and myself inside the black space and tucked her behind me. Drawing my gift close, I took on Imogen's persona once more.

“We have to stay here, Clara. We will be safe here until the bad men go away.”

Clara whimpered but curled up at my side. We sat in silence for the longest time. All I could hear was the roughness of my breathing, the occasional snuffle from the little girl I held. I had no idea how long we remained there, but eventually I used the bond to reach out and touch Sun's mind.

He was fighting.

In the arena, scores of Anigma clashed with Archai warriors. Sun was surrounded, but I felt no fear in his head. I stayed quiet, praying I didn't distract him, watching as he took on soldier after soldier, cutting them down one by one. The room echoed with the sound of swords striking against each other, the cries of the wounded, the flash that sparked as someone died.

And then a new shifter with an evil gleam in his shining red eyes appeared before Sun. A sadistic smile broke out on his face. “I've wanted to meet you for a very long time.”

Sun's chest heaved as he fought for breath. “Who the fuck are you?”

Those eyes glowed with satisfaction. Dark skin, dark hair—I sensed in Sun's mind that the male's shifting form was a mystery. No clue as to who he was.

The shifter grinned, bringing up his sword diagonally across his body. Ready to strike. “My name isn't important.

You'll be dead, and you'll know who killed you. That's all that matters."

My heart rate sped up, thumping hard behind my ribs. A protest lodged in my throat.

"You are Helios's second," Sun said. "I remember you now. You like dragging women around by their hair."

"They come equipped with such a handy grip. Seems a shame not to use it."

Vomit rose. I tried to breathe through my mouth, praying I wouldn't lose it now.

Sun brought his own sword up, and I felt inside me his surety that he could best this male. I prayed he was right.

"You're about to die," he assured the shifter.

"I don't think so."

When Sun would have lunged for him, the male nodded to someone my mate couldn't see. Heavy hands grasped both arms. At the same time shackles wrapped around his ankles and pulled his feet out from under him. Sun landed with two sharp cracks on his knees.

He tried to swing his sword around, breaking the grip of the males who held him, but it was knocked from his hand with one strike from Helios's second. Sun growled, his animal shining from his eyes. His enormous wings released from his back, knocking the males behind him to the sides.

The shifter swung his sword as Sun flattened himself on the ground, reaching for his own. He grasped the hilt, swung it around as he flipped onto his back. The stranger's sword came down, stopped only by the guard on Sun's weapon. Someone

grasped the chains holding his legs, pulling him along, and the shifter's sword slipped away from his.

Before Sun could bring his weapon around, the male had the tip of his sword at Sun's throat.

"I've never killed a king," the male said. "This should be fun."

Sun let out an animal cry as his sword arced through the air. The shifter pushed forward before he could stop it.

A scream rose in my throat. "No!"

A flash, and the worst pain I'd ever felt exploded inside my body. Agony destroying every cell, every breath. Every thought. I wasn't sure how long it lasted; I must have passed out. But when I came to, the first thing I knew was that my connection to my mate was gone. I couldn't feel him, couldn't feel anything.

My mate was dead.

LYRIS

Demetri was coming. I cut my twin off from my sight and focused on Jacob, looking smug as he stared me down in the dark hall. This asshole really thought I was going to let him win? No way. No way in hell.

"When did you get so big for your britches, Jacob?"

He laughed sourly. "About the time you turned me down."

"For fuck's sake, that was two centuries ago."

“And I’ve been looking for a way to make you mine ever since. I finally found it.”

The arrogance was mind-blowing. “You think you’re strong enough to hold me prisoner?” Because that was what it would take to keep me.

“I think you won’t have a choice.” Jacob’s eyes lit as his emotions grew, glowing in the darkness. “Especially with the Anigma taking over.”

“If you think they’re going to win, you lost sight of who you live with a long time ago.”

Anger tightened his body. “I never lost sight of the fact that I was second best without a shifting form.”

“You were on the Warrior’s Council. You were on par with all of us. What else did you need?” He was right, he’d always been second best, not because he had no shifting form, which used to be looked down upon in Archai society. No, it was because he was always looking for a faster way up. It had been that way since we were children. Always reaching, never being satisfied with what he had. I’d think it was sad if the asshole wasn’t trying to gut me right now. Instead I was thinking he’d pretty much gotten way more than he deserved.

“You know Demetri will be here any minute.”

“No, he won’t. He’s too busy trying to find his mate.” Jacob circled me, keeping us moving, his sword catching hints of light as he looked for an opening. “Of course, she was the primary objective. Seems Helios caught sight of her on a tour of Maddox’s compound. Wanted her ever since. Now he’s got her. Sound familiar?”

“Sounds to me like you’ve got a screw loose.” I sighed as if he was the most tedious male I’d ever dealt with. “Are we

gonna fight or shoot the breeze until my twin gets here?”

His eyes flashed, lighting the tunnel as his sword swung my way. I danced backward.

“You can’t tell me that’s the best you’ve got.”

“Your mouth is always getting you into trouble, Lyris.”

“Not today, it’s not.”

He swung again, and we traded blows for a long while. I had just spun around to strike again when a shout echoed through the halls. “No!”

I jerked my head in that direction. Risk!

Pain shot through my side. Damn rookie mistake! “I—”

Without warning, a dagger slid between my ribs. Shit!

I fell back onto the hard floor. Blood rose in my throat. I choked.

“Demetri!”

Jacob knelt over me, satisfaction oozing from his pores. “What do you think, Lyris? Should I spare you?” His gaze ran over me. “You could recover. Would you be willing to be my mate if it meant you could live?”

Oddly enough, after that first strike, my body went numb. I couldn’t feel the pain, couldn’t seem to move myself away from Jacob, but I could feel my resolve. I focused there. “Go to hell!”

“I’m almost there, Lyris. Hold on for me, Valkyrie.”

“I don’t think he’ll let me.”

Jacob leaned closer. Grinning, he pulled the dagger from my side. When I choked again, I sprayed blood across his face.

He rubbed it into his skin. “I always knew I’d have you under my thumb one way or the other, Lyris.”

“You mean you always had delusions of grandeur,” I grated out. I should probably keep my mouth shut, but something in Jacob’s eyes told me he had no intention of letting me live. Maybe I’d convinced him I would never be with him willingly. Maybe his bloodlust was finally getting the better of him. I didn’t know, no longer cared. It was okay. I’d lived a long life. The only thing I regretted was leaving my twin behind. But he had Imogen now. He wouldn’t go on alone.

Jacob traced fingers down my cheek, along my bottom lip. Without warning, he shoved two fingers into my mouth. “I always wondered what it would be like to fuck you here.”

Narrowing my eyes up at him, I bit down on his fingers with everything I had, crunching through cartilage and even bone. When he pulled his hand back, screaming, two nubs stuck up from his knuckles.

I spit the useless fingers out of my mouth before I gagged on them. “That’s what it would have been like.”

It was getting harder to breathe.

Jacob’s screams filled me with satisfaction. I wondered if Demetri could hear them. I wondered if my females were on the other side of the door down the hall, frightened, listening. Jacob would go for them next. There was no way I could allow that to happen.

He flipped the dagger in his hand, brought it down hard, through the hollow of my shoulder, pinning me to the ground. “You’ll regret that,” he ground out.

“I...” Where was all the air? “Doubt it.” I wouldn’t have time. He’d make certain of it.

“Demetri.” Everything was turning black. *“I’m sorry.”*

“No, damn it! You’re not leaving me!”

“Keep safe. Imogen... He said...because of Imogen.”

“What?”

I didn’t answer. My energy was leaking from me like a sieve. Instead I concentrated on tightening my fist around the hilt of my sword. The arm closest to Jacob, the one he’d pinned, was barely movable, but he wasn’t the only one carrying a backup. Feeling around the belt at my waist, I found the hilt of another dagger.

“What are you doing?” He jerked back. The move tilted him off-balance, and he was forced to put a hand down to stabilize himself. Unfortunately for him, I already had the dagger in my hand. I stabbed upward with what range of motion I had.

Jacob screamed as the blade entered his inner thigh. “Fuck!” He wrangled the blade from my hand. “You’re not worth my time and effort.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” I spat out. As he flipped the dagger for a better hold, I tightened my grip on my sword once more.

“I love you, Dragon.”

“Lyris, no!”

Jacob lunged, the dagger headed straight for the middle of my throat. I brought my sword up at the same time. Before my life flashed out, I had the satisfaction of seeing steel cut through his windpipe on the way to his spine.

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO



RISSA

I had no idea how the battle ended. Basile attempted to explain all the loose ends, but I wasn't really paying attention. The Anigma, those who weren't dead, were finally run out or captured. Raine and Clara were safe. Imogen was not. Lyris was dead. And my mate...

I couldn't think about my mate right now. If I left my brain on autopilot, embraced the detachment, maybe I could make it through the night.

Basile left me in my room, and I curled up on the couch, waiting, knowing there was something I was required to do but having no idea what. Did it matter that Sun and I were matebonded? Did I need to act as his representative, his queen, some kind of something to pass the baton on to someone else? I assumed there was someone else. An uncle, a cousin, someone related. There had to be someone who could take

over so I could crawl back into bed and stay there for the rest of my life.

I hadn't told him I loved him. Those last few minutes ran through my head, over and over and over. I hadn't taken the time to tell him, minutes before he died, that I loved him. That I'd be his mate in truth. I hadn't walked inside his soul, touched his heart one last time while I had the chance.

I'd never imagined such emptiness. I couldn't fathom living this way for eternity.

Eternity without my mate.

It was Grim who eventually came for me. I heard a knock at my door, but I didn't bother to answer. When a few minutes had passed, Grim entered, with Raine following, without my permission.

I rolled over, putting my back to the door, and closed my eyes. Grim stood in front of the couch; I could feel him there, watching me. Expecting whatever it was they expected. I simply had nothing else to give.

“Risk.”

“My name is Rissa.” My voice sounded so tired. I was tired. So tired.

“Rissa,” Raine said quietly. “Sun would love that you've finally taken your name back.”

It was the name he'd given me. If I could do nothing else for him, I could honor that much.

“There are some things we need to discuss,” Grim said.

“Go away.” There was no anger in my voice, no emotion. I no longer possessed any. It was a request devoid of caring.

Raine sighed. "I understand that you're hurting, Rissa, but this is important. Really important."

"What could be more important than Sun being gone?"

"The fact that he can come back," Grim said.

It took seconds for the words to register in my head, even longer for them to make sense. I sat up, turning to face the black-clad Aomai. "What did you say?"

"Sun is a phoenix," Raine said. "What do our myths tell us about a phoenix?"

The most well-known thing about a phoenix is that it could rejuvenate itself. It didn't have to die. "He can come back?" I asked aloud.

"The phoenix has the power of life and death," Grim explained. "When they die, they may choose to come back."

I was confused. "But Sun's dad didn't come back."

"No, he didn't. There must be something here that the shifter wants to return for in order to garner the will to make it happen."

A shiver went through me. I stared up at the black void that was Grim's face, fear making my mouth go dry. "And if he doesn't return?" I managed to whisper.

Grim spread his hands at his sides. "Would you not return for your mate?"

Would he? No one knew what I'd said to him before the coronation. No one knew I'd pretty much rejected my mate. Oh, sure, I hadn't told him we were over, but as good as. What if the promise he'd given me, to prove he loved me and would treat me well, wasn't enough to pull him back to this life?

What if he believed I would never accept him back? Had I condemned my mate to death?

I didn't explain any of this to Grim or Raine. I couldn't. "Of course I would return for my mate."

Grim nodded. "Then we need to prepare."

Preparing for Sun's funeral, apparently. Archai tradition involved the building of a funeral pyre, a symbolic representation of the flash of energy that burned the body of any shifter or psych whose spinal cord was severed. There was no body to burn, but the fire was readied nonetheless and burned in the shifter's stead.

Sun would have a funeral pyre. And I was expected to stand in front of it, in front of his people, while they waited to see if the love he'd had for me was strong enough for him to return. They had no idea I might have killed that chance before Sun even died.

It was so tempting to use my glamour. To hide from all the people who would be watching me. But my mate deserved more than that. And so I donned the dress that was given to me, as well as the purple robe that Sun had left in the arena before he began the fight for his people. My hair was twined around my head, and the feminine version of Sun's crown was placed on top. There was no questioning of our matebond. Sun had informed his council of it, and therefore it was accepted. I was his widow. I would be the one to stand in front of his pyre.

I stood first in front of the mirror, alone in the bathroom of my suite. The woman in that mirror was a fraud. She didn't deserve to wear this robe or this crown. She didn't deserve to be coddled and cared for because her mate had died. She felt the deepest agony, and she deserved it, every single ounce of it. She didn't deserve the relief of tears or the comfort of

others. She should rot in her pain forever, her own personal hell.

Because she hadn't accepted him.

I glanced down. In my hands I held a bejeweled dagger, its weight heavier than I had expected. A ceremonial blade, Grim had told me. It was only used on one occasion, to create mourning cuts in the cheeks of those who had lost a loved one. Likely, since it had belonged to Sun, the dagger had last been used by him to slice wounds across his skin when Solomon died. He had held this knife, had used it on himself, and now I was expected to do the same for him.

I raised the blade, laying its sharp edge against my skin.

My breath shook. This was it. More than the dress, more than the crown, this would be the mark of my matehood. Bloody slices across my face. Because my mate...was dead.

I couldn't do it. I just...couldn't.

The mourning cuts would be a sign that Sun was gone forever. But I didn't want to believe that. As little hope as I had, as little as I deserved for it to be so, I wanted my mate to return. I wanted the chance to love him fully. I thought back to how it had felt before he knew who I truly was—the laughter, the kisses, the joy. How it had felt for him to take me that first time, so completely and overwhelmingly. I wanted that back. I wanted the chance for that to be us again, to be us forever. And if I did this, I was admitting that chance was dead. That Sun was permanently dead. And I couldn't do it.

I wasn't this woman I saw in the mirror. I was a fighter, and I would fight with everything in me to call my mate back to this life. No matter what it took, I would make it happen.

When Basile knocked at the door to my suite, I was ready. I opened it.

He surveyed my untouched face and sucked in a shocked breath. “Rissa, why—”

I faced him with my head held high. “I understand the tradition. I do.” Tears gathered in my eyes for the very first time since I’d felt Sun’s death. “But I cannot give in to defeat. And marking my skin with the evidence of his death would be admitting defeat. My mate is coming back,” I told him.

He stared for a long moment, looking deep into my eyes, and then nodded. “Your fight honors him.”

“I hope so.”

Basile swept a hand before him, inviting me into the hall. We walked together to the entry to the private quarters, where Raine and the rest of the council joined us. Several of them stared at my face, but I held my head high. It didn’t matter if they understood, though I thought I saw approval in several gazes.

Sun is coming back to me. That’s all that matters.

We began a slow procession through the halls of the lair. Down every corridor, clan members lined the walls. It had been barely twenty-four hours since the attack, and many of them were bandaged, damaged. They’d fought for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The women held still-weeping children, their eyes weary and worn. These were the people Sun had fought for. The people he’d died for. Seeing them, I felt again the wretched sting of tears. Would Sun return for them?

I pushed the tears back. I needed to honor my mate’s sacrifice, honor his people. I refused to give in to my own

pain.

In the King's Garden we walked toward a massive fountain in the center that held a soaring copper phoenix. Beside it, a neat assembly of logs rose toward the sky. Waiting.

"Sit here, Rissa," Basile said. I took a seat on the ground in front of the pyre.

Raine sat on one side of me. Vanessa, Lyris's assistant, took what should have been her place on the other. Women I'd met and gotten to know gathered around us, and circling the entire garden came the rest of the Archai. I could see more pyres in the distance, more funerals waiting to happen. To my right, beyond the fountain, I could see from the corner of my eye the stiff figure of Demetri, standing tall, his back straight, arms crossed over his chest. Face blank. The male had lost far more than I had—both his mate and his twin. I couldn't imagine...

Grim came forward, holding a lit torch. The flickering flames played light over his robe as he intoned some words I didn't really hear, and then, leaning down, he set the stack of logs alight. A gentle yellow glow began, turning slowly to orange and then to red. I had no idea what to expect, what it might look like if—when, please God, when—Sun did come back. How long it would take. Of course, none of those around me knew either. It had been two millennia since the king before Solomon had died. This was all a guessing game, and all we could do was wait.

As we sat beneath the night sky, one by one, the warriors and psychs around me lit their memorials as well. Somewhere behind me, a flute began to play. Haunting music, drifting over the field as we honored our dead.

My tears threatened to return. So much loss. So much pain. It was almost unbearable.

And so was the guilt. Because I was the only one in this field with the possibility of their loved one returning.

We sat for hours, just like that, the fires burning down to glowing coals. It wasn't until dawn began to break that Basile came over to me.

“We should take you inside.”

The tears I'd held back for so long finally escaped. “That's it?”

He looked unhappy. “I honestly don't know.”

“Then I'll wait.”

He hesitated, then nodded. Around the field, as the fires went out, the clan members gathered together and reentered the lair. And still I waited. When the sun finally peeked over the trees at the horizon, I turned to look at Raine.

She stared back at me, appearing miserable. Scooting closer, she put an arm around my shoulders. Leaned her head against mine. “Whenever you're ready,” she whispered.

I opened my mouth to respond. With what, I had no idea—I was numb, emptier even than I'd been before coming out here. But before words could escape, a sudden whoosh of flame erupted from Sun's pyre.

I gasped, shoving my body back from the surge of heat. “Oh my God.”

There wasn't nearly enough wood to cause such a flame. I searched for Grim and Basile, my heart feeling like it was beating for the first time in hours. And for the very first time

since we had exited the lair, I thought I saw a glimmer of hope in Basile's eyes as they met mine.

Raine squeezed down on my shoulders. "Is that—"

"I think it might be," Vanessa whispered reverently from my other side.

The flame rose, higher and higher, until we were forced to move away from it. I held my breath, waiting, waiting. Finally, long minutes later, a golden streak shot from the center of the fire into the sky. It grew bigger and bigger as it rose, the golden light expanding into feathers, then wings. A head emerged, raised regally toward the heavens, and the beak opened with a loud cry.

"A phoenix," I whispered in awe. My tears began to fall in earnest, my heart thumping rapidly in my throat. Would it be Sun? What if it wasn't?

The animal circled the garden several times, growing bigger each time, gaining power and presence. Archai rushed from the throne room as word spread. I held my breath in anticipation when the phoenix circled back and slowly came to land in front of the fire. I'd thought Sun's animal was big when I'd seen him change in the alley, but this close...this animal was massive, easily several heads taller than even Basile.

After observing his surroundings for a moment, the phoenix looked down at me, his silver eyes glowing, and tilted his head as if considering the being that waited in front of him. Wondering if it was worthy. He came forward a couple of steps, stopped.

I shifted on my feet.

Raine nudged me. "Go on."

I'd never met Sun's phoenix face-to-face. I'd stared into his eyes, felt his presence beneath Sun's skin. But now, for the first time, we were together without Sun between us.

I approached slowly. "You came back."

He raised his head toward the sky and let out a piercing cry.

I jerked back but forced myself to still. "I know," I assured him. I wasn't sure how I knew, but I understood what that cry was about. "I felt it too." I wanted so desperately to ask, but I was afraid. Finally I whispered, "Is he here with you?"

The big red-gold head dipped once. Relief nearly had me on my knees. I'd wanted to hope, had forced myself to feel it, but the pain had been so strong. Now, maybe...

The animal stepped closer. I held myself still. When he came within arm's reach, he leaned forward, his beak ruffling through my hair. He made small murmurs in his throat as if comforting me. It was a moment out of time, surreal, this mythical creature so close to me, his feathers brushing my face, absorbing my tears. I dared to reach out, resting my hand on his neck. Stroking the soft down.

More tears flowed.

Finally the phoenix pulled back, and his eyes met mine. I wasn't certain what he was looking for, but I let him, waiting, hoping. And then my hopes were rewarded when a sudden current of air blew between us and then it was Sun standing in front of me, Sun staring into my eyes.

"Rissa?"

A flutter in my chest. *"I love it when you call me that."*

"You wouldn't have fought it so hard if you didn't."

So true. *“You know me so well.”*

He didn't wait any longer; he swept forward and grabbed me tight up against him. “Oh my God, mate. I wasn't sure if that would work.”

My laugh was full of tears. *“You weren't sure?”*

He chuckled, the sound rumbling from his chest to mine. Squeezed me tighter. Wetness from his cheek transferred to mine. “I love you.”

The burst of joy was almost too much to hold in my body. I'd been given a second chance. My mate was here; he loved me. I'd been given another chance to say, “I love you too. I love you so much, Sun.”

The people gathered around us, slowly at first but then faster as they realized it truly was Sun standing here. Their king had returned. There were shouts of joy and relief and wonder, but none of them could possibly feel as much as we could as our hearts connected and the love we'd held inside us spilled out to the other.

Sun was home, and we were finally mates in full.

EPILOGUE



DEMETRI

I watched Sun's return with not a little bitterness. So many of us had lost so much, but our king and his gift of regeneration had allowed him to come back to his mate.

My twin would not return. And my mate?

I thought back through the last day, the last words I'd shared with my mate. The last words I'd shared with my twin. *Because of Imogen*, Lyris had said. *Because of Imogen*. What had she meant?

My world was gone. My twin and I had shared our minds for over two thousand years. Born together, grown together, and for some reason I'd always believed we would die together. But I was left behind. The hole ripped in my heart could not be healed, not now. Especially if what I suspected was true.

That my mate had been responsible for my twin's death.
For the attack on our lair.

Because of Imogen.

I'd seen her, hadn't I? Leaving the throne room at the side of Helios. No, I hadn't been able to see her face, but I knew her better than anyone alive. That had been my mate. Had she gone willingly? It had appeared so. If she had struggled, I saw no evidence of it.

I prayed that what I was thinking was wrong. It could be. It might not be. The only way to know would be to share Imogen's mind, and I couldn't do that, could I? Because I'd insisted—foolishly, I thought now—on the matebond ceremony. I knew her body, knew every reaction to pleasure that she had gifted me, but I hadn't yet known her mind.

That was my fault.

I'd allowed her betrayal. And my twin had paid the price.

Standing there over Lyriss's pyre, watching my king embrace his mate, I made a vow. I would find Imogen. I would bring her back. And when I joined her mind, if what I found there was betrayal...

I would take her head.

And then I would follow my twin to Valhalla.

Did you enjoy reading PHOENIX FALLING? Please [leave a review here](#) to help others learn about the book.

Don't miss news on all my books, including the next Archai Warriors installment! Sign up for my newsletter [here](#).

Book 3 in the ARCHAI WARRIORS series will release in Fall, 2024. Don't miss the continuing story of Demetri and Imogen and their fellow Archai in

DRAGON DECEIVED.

In the meantime, be sure to check out my book list at www.ellasheridanauthor.com for more yummy alpha heroes and heroines who are most definitely their match in every way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in the Deep South, Ella Sheridan spent years telling herself stories before finally writing her own. Romantic suspense, paranormal romance, sexy contemporaries—she can't seem to stick to just one. Her goal in life is to finish every series she begins (if only she'd stop adding new series so that would be possible!).

Now Ella calls North Alabama home. Spending time cuddling with her sweet tabby, Oliver, is her number one priority, followed closely by writing, working, and writing some more (though she's recently found a little time to learn a new craft: watercolor painting).

Connect with Ella at [her website](#) or at the social media options below. For news on Ella's new releases, free book opportunities, and more, [sign up for Ella's newsletter](#). Or [join Ella's Escape Room on Facebook](#) for daily fun, games, and first dibs on all the news!



Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Ella Sheridan publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

[https://books2read.com/
r/B-P-KNQB-KFDEC](https://books2read.com/r/B-P-KNQB-KFDEC)

Sign Me Up!

<https://books2read.com/r/B-P-KNQB-KFDEC>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.