

J.C. DIEM



NEXUS

SAIGE STERLING: BADASS BOUNTY HUNTER: BOOK 1

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CHAPTER ONE



IT WAS GOING TO BE a big night for me, I could just feel it. I was about to start a brand-new job and nerves fluttered in my stomach. They felt more like a flock of deranged birds than delicate butterflies. My hands were sweaty, so I wiped them on my black leather pants, then winced when I realized what I'd done. They'd cost me a fortune and deserved better treatment.

“Are you ready yet, Saige?” mom shouted from upstairs.

“Almost!” I called back, then took a final look at myself in my mirror. My sheer, sleeveless black shirt had thin gold chains holding it up rather than fabric straps. It showed off my abundance of colorful tattoos on my shoulders, arms and torso. The leather cups that acted as a bra weren't quite big enough to contain my boobs. As a curvy woman, it wasn't easy to find clothes to fit me. Especially since I was just under six-feet-tall. My black boots had a three-inch heel, which would make me tower over most people.

While my tats drew a lot of stares, my purple hair and eyes tended to stand out just as much. Everyone thought they were fake, but I'd been born with them. My mom's hair and eyes were a mixture of bright yellow and pale green. Neither of us could exactly blend into a crowd with our height and general stature.

I looked the part for the new career I was about to embark on tonight, but something was missing. Crossing to the scuffed

brown trunk at the foot of my bed, I opened it and grabbed a few items. I stuffed them into my big black leather purse and slung it over my shoulder.

I'd moved my bedroom down to the basement several years ago, so I'd have more space. I'd hung a sheet up to hide my makeshift bedroom from view and to give me some privacy when mom did our washing. I had a ratty old armchair, a TV, coffee table, gaming console and my all-important collection of videogames. Not to mention my trunk full of goodies, of course. Everything inside it was designed to aid me in my job.

My heels clicked on the bare concrete floor as I walked over to the stairs. Mom was waiting for me in the hallway with her phone in her hand. She took a bunch of photos of me in my full regalia and I posed for her. "How do I look?" I asked, nerves increasing as I waited for her response.

"You look gorgeous," she said with tears of pride glinting in her eyes. A couple of inches shorter than me, she'd stacked on a bit of extra weight after she'd fallen pregnant with me and had retired from her job. "I've been training you for this night for the past decade. I know you're ready to carry on the Sterling family tradition. Happy twenty-first birthday, Lil Bish."

We snickered at the nickname she'd given me back when she'd first started my training. I'd been difficult to work with to say the least. That had been years before my growth spurt and when I'd been a lot shorter. "Thanks, Big Momma," I

replied. “Will you be gaming tonight while I’m out walking the streets?”

“Of course,” she replied with an eyeroll. Addicted to gaming, she’d taught me how to play videogames while homeschooling me. We used the nicknames we’d given each other as our gamer handles. “If you run into any trouble, call me and I’ll talk you through it,” she added, following me to the door. She was trying to hide her concern, but I saw straight through her.

“I’ll be fine,” I said to reassure us both as she escorted me down the hall to the front door of our small bungalow.

“Make sure you park your car a couple of blocks away from your work zone,” she reminded me. “You don’t want any weirdos following you home from work.”

My car was a bright orange hatchback that was covered in small dents from a hailstorm. I’d gotten it cheap due to how hideous it was and the fact that no one else had wanted to buy it. “I’ll keep an eye out to make sure no one tries to tail me,” I promised. She took one final photo of me, then I sauntered down the path to my car. We only had a single car garage, so I always had to park it on the street.

A car drove past me and the driver whistled loudly. I smirked at the compliment as I climbed into my car. My purse went onto the passenger seat, then I waved at my mother and drove off to meet my destiny.

Nexus was a large city and we lived on the fringes of the burbs. It took me twenty minutes to reach the heart of the city. I drove to the area mom had suggested and started looking for

a parking space. It was a Saturday night and the streets were crowded. I ended up driving around the block a few times before I nabbed an empty spot.

Further away from my target area than I liked, I locked my car, hefted my purse over my shoulder and strutted down the sidewalk.

A pair of young dudes not much older than me were leaning against a building up ahead. Their jeans were so big they were practically falling off their asses. They'd torn the sleeves off their t-shirts to make them look tough. Their conversation came to a halt and they stared at me in awe. I knew I looked good and their reaction wasn't unexpected.

"Hey, hot mamma," one of them said. "How much do you charge?"

"For what?" I asked with a frown.

"I'm kind of broke, so I can probably only afford a handy," he replied.

"What will you give me for twenty bucks?" his friend asked, reaching for his wallet. "How much does a blow job cost?"

"I'm not a ho!" I said, face going red with embarrassment and anger.

"You're dressed like a ho," the first guy pointed out.

"Do you want twenty bucks or not?" his friend asked, holding up a tattered note. "I don't care if you're a trannie. A blow job is a blow job."

“I’m not a trannie and you couldn’t pay me enough to have any kind of sex with you two creeps!” I exclaimed and kept walking. This wasn’t the first time I’d been mistaken for being a transgender woman. My mom had dealt with misconceptions all her life just because she wasn’t a dainty little female who was acceptable to society’s standards. Now it was my turn to shoulder the same burden. Actual transgender men and women must go through hell.

“It’s your loss!” the first guy shouted angrily. “You could have made forty bucks tonight!”

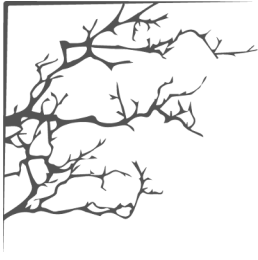
I snorted out a laugh at his pathetic jab. Thanks to my frugal nature, I’d saved up a small nest egg from my previous parttime jobs. I didn’t need to sell my body and I wasn’t strolling around trolling for clients to have sex with. My task was far more important than that. My job was to keep creeps like them safe from the monsters that infested Nexus.

“If they only knew,” I muttered, keeping my senses alert for danger. All kinds of supernatural creatures lived in this city. How did I know? Because I was one of them. I came from a long line of monster hunters and my mother had taught me everything she knew. It was a Sterling family tradition to go on our first hunt alone on our twenty-first birthdays. Now that mom had completed my training, it was up to me to land a job.

Not all supernatural beings were bad, of course. Plenty of them easily blended in with the clueless humans. I was supposed to eradicate the ones who’d gone rogue and had

murdered humans. They needed to be put down before they could expose our kind.

Mom had worked for an agency who'd hired bounty hunters back in her day. The owner had been drained by a crazed rogue vampire. Mom had fallen pregnant had decided to retire, but her colleagues had started working for someone else. Word had it that the mysterious being who'd taken over the agency only hired the best hunters. Tonight, I was going to make a name for myself as a badass bounty hunter. First, I had to find something to kill to get the ball rolling.



CHAPTER TWO



I SENSED SOMETHING on the edges of my internal monster radar after walking for a few blocks. Changing direction, I picked up speed as I went on the hunt. Mom didn't have this talent and it was hard for me to explain it to her. I always knew when supernatural creatures were close and I could also tell how dangerous they were. While this one wasn't particularly strong, I had a feeling it was up to no good.

Hearing a muffled scream of terror, I cursed myself for wearing high heels. They clattered on the sidewalk when I took off, making enough noise to wake the dead. I was panting for air by the time I reached the area where I'd heard the scream.

A man dressed in a black suit was hunkered over a body in an alley. "Vampire," I whispered beneath my breath, taking in his too pale olive skin, lank black shoulder-length hair and bared fangs. He didn't even notice me as I closed in on him. He was too busy drooling over the woman he'd just murdered. His eyes were dark pools of utter emptiness as they gazed at the drained human. Her throat had been torn open and blood was splattered on her dark skin. From her short shorts, lacy bra and six-inch heels, she'd been a ho.

"I've caught you red-handed, leech!" I said in triumph, pulling an item out of my purse that I'd nicknamed my kill-bag.

The vamp didn't even seem to register my presence. His elbows rested on his thighs and his hands were clenched into fists. He wasn't handsome, or ugly, but somewhere in between. For a monster, he was fairly ordinary looking. His cheeks were hollow and his face looked gaunt, as if he hadn't been getting enough blood lately. He was strangely clean for someone who'd just made such a mess of their meal. He wore a black button up shirt beneath his jacket and shiny black shoes. If not for his fangs, he could have passed for a businessman out for a drink after work.

"Hey, you!" I exclaimed and he finally dragged his attention to me. There was something strange about him, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"Huh?" he asked in a dazed tone, focusing on the item in my hand. It looked like an ordinary can of pepper spray, but it was full of holy water.

"This is what you get for feeding on helpless humans," I told him, then I pressed the button.

My target gaped at me as the spray came towards his face. His skin sizzled in reaction when it hit him and he recoiled in pain. On his feet in a flash, he sprinted away far too quickly for me to be able to keep up with him.

"You poor thing," I said to the corpse in pity as I reached for my phone. "You didn't deserve to become vampire chow."

I called mom and she answered after a few rings. "Have you run into trouble already?"

“I just busted a vamp feeding on someone and sprayed him with holy water,” I replied.

“Is the victim dead?”

“Very,” I said wryly. I’d seen plenty of bodies during my decade of training. I’d puked a lot during my first year, but had toughened up pretty quickly after that. “Can you call someone from the body disposal team to come and clean this up before the humans find her?” I asked.

“Give me your location,” she requested. I gave her the address, knowing she still had contacts in the industry. She hadn’t been an official bounty hunter for a couple of decades, but a few people knew she was training me to be her replacement. “Someone will be there soon,” she told me.

“Do I need to wait around for them?”

“It’s probably best if you leave before anyone sees you,” she suggested.

“Okay. I’m going after the vamp.”

“Good luck, honey. Don’t try to take him down if he’s fled to his coven. It’ll be too dangerous to take them all on by yourself.”

“Justice needs to be served,” I reminded her. “I’ll follow his trail and see what I’m up against. I’ll call you if I need your help.”

We hung up and I skirted around the body. Vampires didn’t have strong scents, so it would be impossible for me to track him by smell. One of the side effects of being sprayed with holy water was that it left a faint silver trail in the air. It would

only last about an hour before the divine traces would fade, so I had to get moving. Humans couldn't see the trail I diligently followed. I wasn't sure if anyone else could. Mom couldn't. It was one of my special talents no one else in our line possessed. We all had our own gifts, but I seemed to have more of them than usual.

The trail led me directly to a nightclub after hoofing it for a good fifteen minutes or so. Three stories tall, the club was nestled between a liquor store and a café. The bricks were painted black. A subtle sign above the door spelled out Den of Iniquity in gold letters. Pedestrians barely even glanced at the place as they hurried past it. I knew why when I drew closer. Magic was subtly shooing them away from the premises.

I'd heard about this club, but this was my first time seeing it. Mom used to come here back before I'd been born. Power emanated from behind the door. All kinds of monsters were inside, ranging in strength from low to mid-range. Some of them might even be bothersome if they rushed me at once.

A huge bouncer stood guard at the door. I sensed he was a werebear even before I approached him. A couple of inches taller than me in my heels, he had a luxurious brown beard and a barrel chest. Although he was physically large, he wasn't strong when it came to power levels. "Did you see a panicked vampire come this way?" I asked, knowing full well my target had entered the building.

He looked me up and down in amusement. "What are you supposed to be?" he asked in a deep voice. He wore black

jeans and a red t-shirt with the name of the club on the front in gold letters.

“I’m a bounty hunter.”

The bear’s grin widened at my confident claim. “I take it you dosed the leech with something that didn’t agree with him? He looked a bit worse for wear when he arrived.”

“I caught him feeding on a human in an alley. She’s dead.”

His amusement vanished and was replaced with concern. “Did anyone else see the body?”

“It’s been taken care of,” I said, trusting my mom to have had it cleaned up by now. “Are you going to let me in so I can claim my bounty, or what?”

“You can go in, but the Den is a safe zone. No fights are allowed. You’ll have to try to get the vamp to leave peacefully, or risk banishment.”

“Is dragging him out by the hair acceptable?”

He thought it over, then shrugged. “That’s up to Lenny to decide.”

“Who’s Lenny?”

“He’s the zombie who manages the club.”

Mom hadn’t mentioned a zombie was in charge. The only zombies I’d seen were the shambling ones that fed on flesh. It would be interesting to meet one that still had the capacity to think.

“Thanks for your help,” I said and slipped him a twenty.

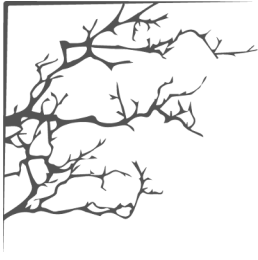
He saluted me and tucked it into his pocket, before opening the door like a gentleman. “Welcome to the Den of Iniquity,” he said, sweeping his hand theatrically for me to enter.

Smirking at his exaggerated manners, I stepped into the foyer and noise washed over me. It was loud, crowded and humid inside the bar. The floor was covered in black carpet, except for the wooden dancefloor in the middle of the room. Tall metal tables without chairs were scattered to the left and right. The bar was at the back of the room. It stretched all the way from one side to the other. Three bartenders were working at various stations. The dancefloor was packed with swaying couples who were groping and kissing each other as if they didn't care who watched them. To the right were the bathrooms and a set of stairs leading upwards.

I paused just inside the door to evaluate the crowd. A lot of the werereatures were sporting tattoos of their pack, pride or whatever group they came from. At a glance, you could tell if they were canines, felines, bears, reptiles, rodents, birds or whatever other type of animal they shifted into. I didn't need their ink to tell me. I could always sense what manner of monster I was dealing with.

A lot of the patrons were vamps and shifters, but there were plenty of other species from the underworld as well. They all looked like normal humans at the moment, thanks to the magic that made them transform once they reached our dimension. Only a few of them felt like they could be a possible threat to me. With luck, I could grab the vamp, drag

him out to the back of the building and stake him to death without anyone making a fuss.



CHAPTER THREE



THE ETHEREAL TRAIL of holy water guided me over to the stairs that led to the upper floor. A bouncer was guarding it. He didn't seem as friendly as the guy on the door. "VIPs only tonight," he told me when I approached him.

"My bounty is hiding up there," I said, pointing over his shoulder. "Let me pass so I can claim him."

"Who are you hunting?" he asked skeptically.

"I didn't exactly catch his name when I busted him draining a human to death," I said sarcastically. "I followed him here and I know he's cowering upstairs, hoping I won't find him."

Crossing his arms, he shook his head. "You must be mistaken. A private party is going on up there. Only important guests have been invited."

"I'm not mistaken," I denied, starting to get annoyed. "I squirted him with holy water, so he's wounded." His eyes flickered, giving him away. "He *is* here!" I declared in triumph. "Get out of my way, so I can stake that freak through the heart before he murders anyone else."

A hush went through the crowd as everyone with enhanced hearing turned to face me. Every vampire in the club stared at me in either fear or hatred.

“That was really subtle,” the bouncer said with heavy sarcasm. “You should leave before you get yourself into trouble.”

“You’re harboring a murderer,” I insisted and stepped closer until we were practically nose to nose. He was even bigger than the bouncer on the door, but I wasn’t intimidated by him. “I’m not leaving without my target. Either get out of my way, or I’ll move you myself.”

Derisive laughter broke out from the crowd. The werebear sneered down at me, clearly underestimating me. “Leave the premises immediately, or I’ll make you leave,” he said in a threatening tone.

“It’s going to be like that, is it?” I asked, glancing over my shoulder to see a mob forming. Most of them were hostile. Either they didn’t like bounty hunters, or they didn’t like me personally. I didn’t really give a crap either way.

“It’s going to be like that,” the bouncer confirmed and made the mistake of reaching out to grab me.

I let his fingers close around my wrist, then I grabbed hold of his beard. He had enough time to let out a squawk of indignation, then I spun in a circle. Lifted clear off his feet, he shouted in alarm when I released him. He crashed into the crowd, bowling most of them down.

Snickering beneath my breath at their surprise, I began climbing the stairs. A vampire leaped onto the staircase to block my path. She was short and plump and I sensed she was one of the strongest leeches in the building. “Leave this

place,” she said in a commanding tone. She wore the same uniform as the bouncers, which meant she was an employee.

“I will, just as soon as I’ve killed my target,” I said and brushed her aside.

Her astonished expression at being ignored was priceless. “You must do as I say!” she insisted, leaping in front of me again.

“Clearly, I don’t,” I refuted and kept going. She’d tried to compel me with her vampire mojo, but mind control never worked on me. She grabbed my arm and tried to stop me with sheer force. Flicking her off like lint, I sensed a mob of supernatural creatures swarming towards me from behind.

Turning to face them, I kicked a wereboar in the gut when he lunged at me. His breath whooshed out and he knocked half of the group down as he flew backwards. Another leech leaped over the mob and I caught him by the face and tossed him over the railing onto the dancefloor below. A few people screamed when he landed on them.

“What *is* she?” someone asked in frustration that none of them could stop me.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I muttered, holding my fists up threateningly. “Does anyone else want to try to stop me from doing my job?” I asked.

“Get her out of here!” a man with a raspy voice called out from the bottom of the stairs. He wore a bright yellow shirt with ugly brown patterns on it and brown trousers. He had short messy brown hair, one brown eye and one milky eye. His

left ear and a couple of his fingers were missing, but he was otherwise well preserved. I assumed he was Lenny, the zombie in charge of the Den.

“We’re trying!” one of the shifters said.

A fresh group came towards me. I spent a few minutes kicking and punching them away until the wave ebbed. A final vamp landed on my back when I turned to resume my climb. He futilely tried to bite me on the neck, but his fangs couldn’t penetrate my skin. I peeled him off like the scab he was and threw him down the stairs, shaking my head at their pathetic attempts to impede me.

“A crazy woman is on her way upstairs, boss,” I heard Lenny say loudly into his phone. “We can’t stop her. I don’t know what she is, but she’s strong and she can ignore vampires’ commands.”

I couldn’t hear the response, but no one tried to stop me from completing my mission. Once the boss of the bounty hunters heard about the lengths I’d gone to tonight, he was bound to offer me a position on his team.

Anticipation fueled me as I followed the vaporous trail up to the third floor. Bouncers let me pass without a word when I reached the top floor. Their expressions were wary as they stepped aside to let me pass.

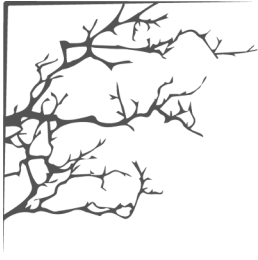
“The boss is waiting for you in the first room on the left,” one of the employees said. Another bloodsucker, he eyed me in puzzlement, probably trying to figure out what sort of creature I was.

The trail stopped at the first door on the left of the hallway. I took the can of holy water out of my purse, along with a metal stake. The silver burned my skin slightly, but it wasn't deadly to me like it was to shifters and vampires. I paused with my hand on the doorknob when I realized I couldn't sense anything in the room. "A spell must be masking them," I murmured and hesitated in indecision.

For all I knew, the room beyond the door could be jam packed with the deadliest beings in Nexus. I was strong and tough, but I wasn't invincible, or so I assumed. I'd never really been hurt before. Mom was almost as strong as I was and she'd bruised me during training a few times by accident. I'd never suffered a broken bone or a serious cut. So far, I hadn't been shot, so I didn't know if bullets could penetrate my skin.

It was tempting to call mom and ask for her advice. The glory of becoming the best bounty hunter in the city won out over my momentary concern. Staking a rogue vampire in a club full of supernatural beings would be the perfect way to make a name for myself.

"Here goes nothing," I said to encourage myself, then I turned the doorhandle.



CHAPTER FOUR



BARGING THROUGH THE door brandishing holy water and a metal stake, it took me a second to register the scene. I skidded to a stop on the polished wooden floor and realized I'd just gatecrashed a swanky party of some kind.

The room took up half of the third floor and was large enough to contain hundreds of guests. Classical music was playing from hidden speakers. Uniformed waiters carried trays of champagne around. A table full of delectable finger food sat against one wall. The men all wore tuxedos and the women wore cocktail dresses. From their classy clothes and jewelry, they were the elite of the supernatural world in Nexus. All eyes turned to me with varying degrees of amusement and disdain.

“Is this part of the entertainment, Lord Gilden?” a snobby looking vampire asked. Skeletally thin, her dress was an ugly eggplant color and was short enough to show her bony thighs. Her hair was done in an elegant chignon and she looked like she'd been turned in her late forties or so. I felt like a grubby, badly dressed child standing among these sophisticated people.

The crowd parted and the hottest man I'd ever seen strode towards me. Six-foot four, his wide shoulders filled out his tux impressively. More than merely handsome, he was flawless. His eyes were a deep, burnished gold that would be easy to become lost in. His hair was dark brown, but lightened to

golden blond on the top. Short on the sides and back, the top was gelled so it stood straight upwards in the latest trend the humans wore. He had a meticulously trimmed beard that gave him a debonair appearance.

“I’m Drake Gilden,” he said, voice silky smooth and with a hint of amusement in his tone. “You are?”

“Hunting a rogue vamp who murdered a woman in cold blood,” I said. “I followed him here and I’m not leaving until he’s a pile of ashes.” Gasps of outrage sounded from the bloodsuckers in the crowd. “That’s the price leeches pay for killing humans in Nexus,” I reminded them.

“Who appointed you judge, jury and executioner?” someone muttered.

“I’m a bounty hunter. Hunting rogue monsters is my job,” I retorted.

“I know all of the bounty hunters in Nexus,” Lord Gilden said, studying me like I was a puzzle that needed to be solved. “I don’t recall meeting you before.”

“I’m working freelance right now,” I said, craning my head to peer through the crowd. “There he is!” I said in triumph when I spotted a haze of holy water hovering over a man standing with his back to me. “Excuse me for a second. I need to off that bloodsucker before he makes another run for it.”

“You will do no such thing,” Drake Gilden said in a commanding voice.

“It’ll just take a second,” I assured him and stepped around him when he didn’t move.

His eyes widened in shock that his command hadn't instantly halted me in my tracks. Murmurs of alarm sounded as I strode towards my target. He peeked over his shoulder, saw me coming for him and bolted.

"Oh, no you don't!" I snarled and threw my stake at him. He slammed into someone who didn't move out of his way fast enough and lost his balance. The stake became lodged in his shoulder rather than spearing through his back and into his heart. He tripped over his own feet and sprawled to the floor.

Shouldering my way through the throng, I planted a boot on the middle of his back as he sluggishly tried to crawl away. I yanked the stake out and he gasped in pain.

"I forbid you from killing my servant!" Lord Gilde thundered as I raised my arm to administer the final blow.

"Sorry, but he's a rogue and he needs to be put down," I said with a shrug.

"How can she defy him?" someone murmured as my arm descended.

A big, strong hand caught my arm as the vampire cringed in dread. I looked into Drake's now furious gold eyes and heaved a sigh. "I can take him into a private room to finish the job if it upsets you this much to see me turn him to ash," I offered.

"I didn't kill that human!" the leech moaned. He had a faint accent, so he hadn't been born here.

"I know you didn't, Ruen," the lord said without letting go of my arm. "It's impossible for him to have committed this

crime,” he told me.

“I heard the woman scream and he was hunched over her when I found her body,” I said, yanking my arm free from his tight grip.

“Ruen couldn’t have murdered the human, because he’s not capable of killing anyone,” he insisted.

“Why not?” I asked as he helped his injured lackey to his feet. I knew Drake was a shifter, but I wasn’t sure what kind. I couldn’t feel any power coming from him, so he almost felt like a human. I’d never met anything quite like him before.

“Because I ordered him not to,” he said arrogantly.

“Few beings can refuse Lord Gilden’s commands,” his minion said, grimacing in pain. His face had healed from being sprayed with holy water, but his shoulder was still knitting back together. “How did you manage to resist his power?” he asked.

“What power?” I asked in mystification.

“This power,” Drake replied and dropped a spell he’d been using to conceal what he was.

I took an involuntary step back and automatically moved into a defensive stance. My first impression was of strength. Lord Gilden was the most powerful shifter I’d ever encountered. Most shapeshifters didn’t possess the ability to use magic. All they could do was transform into either a partial, or full animal. There was only one type of shifter who could use magic, but they were supposedly rare and usually lived in Europe.

“You’re a weredragon,” I said, suddenly wary. My monster radar told me this guy was dangerous and way out of my league. He could snuff me out as easily as blowing out a match if he wanted to.

“That I am,” he agreed, then sent out a wave of magic. “Forget this interruption to the party,” he ordered everyone. “Continue with what you were doing before my unexpected guest arrived.”

Everyone except Ruen and I were ensnared by his spell, since it wasn’t directed at us. Conversations started up again as the crowd turned away. The vampire had healed and was glaring at me in distaste. He didn’t have a drop of blood on him from massacring the human. Now that I was standing so close to him, the oddity I’d sensed before returned. I could tell that he was a vampire, but he didn’t show up on my radar as being dangerous. The dragon must have put a spell on him like the one that had cloaked his power from me.

“Let’s take this discussion somewhere private, shall we?” Lord Gilden suggested politely. He didn’t wait for me to answer and strode towards the door. Ruen followed in his wake and I had no choice but to trail after them. No one even seemed to notice us now as we made our way through the crowd. I was used to being stared at rather than being ignored as if I didn’t exist. Stuffing my can of holy water and the stake back into my kill-bag, I felt horribly out of my depth.

The spell the sexy dragon had cast had flowed throughout the building. The bouncers looked surprised to see me when I

exited from the party. Drake motioned that I was with him and they relaxed again.

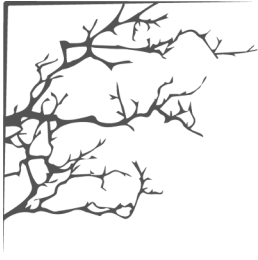
Ruen kept casting glances over his shoulder at me, probably making sure I wasn't going to try to stake him in the back again. The stake had torn holes in his jacket and shirt. I was subjected to glimpses of his pale, bony shoulder with each step he took.

Drake led us down the stairs to the second floor and entered one of the rooms. Ruen scurried in after him and I paused in the doorway. Instead of a ballroom, it was just a small meeting room. A table and half a dozen chairs stood in the middle of the room. Over to the right was a sideboard with bottles of alcohol and glasses. I stepped inside and closed the door and all of the noise instantly cut off. "This room is soundproofed?" I asked.

"Most of the private rooms are," Lord Gilden said as he took a seat at the head of the table. "Please, take a seat." He indicated the chair at the far end of the table from him. His lackey sat to his right.

Lord Gilden hadn't hidden his power yet. It filled the room, making the air feel charged. While he looked like he was in his early twenties, I had a feeling he was much older than he seemed. Dragons lived for a very long time, or so mom had told me. He could be ancient for all I knew. He had an American accent, but he had a foreign title, which was confusing. The only way I'd get the answers that were piling up was to take a seat as he'd requested.

Casting a glance at the door, I weighed up my options, then decided to take the risk. My night hadn't gone as planned, but I still had a job to do. I would listen to whatever the shifter had to say, then stake his minion to death when he was done.



CHAPTER FIVE



“AS I SAID, I’M DRAKE Gilden,” the mysterious lord repeated as I sank down onto the chair across from him. “May I know your name?”

“I’m Saige Sterling.”

“What are you?” Ruen asked, squinting at me as if he could see beneath my human guise to the monster that lay beneath my skin.

“That’s private,” I replied coolly. “All you need to know is that I’ll hunt down any creature that steps over the line.”

“On who’s authority, Ms. Sterling?” the dragon asked.

“I don’t need a license to be a bounty hunter,” I pointed out. “I just need to witness a monster breaking the law and I’m allowed to off them.” I drew my thumb across my throat for emphasis and looked pointedly at his undead henchman. Ruen hunched his shoulders and shrank down in his chair slightly.

“Perhaps you’d better explain why you were discovered next to a freshly dead body, Ruen,” Lord Gilden said.

His servant looked embarrassed rather than guilty, which was a strange reaction. “I heard a woman scream and went to investigate. She was already dead when I found her.”

“If you didn’t kill her, then who did?” I asked, then continued before he could reply. “I sensed a leech nearby and you were drooling over the corpse when I got there.”

The dragon lifted an eyebrow, inviting Ruen to explain himself. “I was hungry and she was covered in fresh blood,” the vamp said defensively. “I haven’t fed in a couple of days, which made it difficult for me to restrain myself.”

“It would appear the culprit fled from the crime scene moments before you both arrived,” Drake mused, stroking his bearded chin thoughtfully. “How did you track Ruen to this club?”

“I followed the trail of holy water I sprayed on him.”

“How is that even possible?” Ruen asked skeptically. “Holy water doesn’t leave a discernable trail.”

“The trail is discernable to me,” I said smugly. “I can see the mist hovering over your head right now.” It was slowly dissipating and would soon be gone entirely.

“I’ll need to send the body disposal team to get rid of the corpse before someone stumbles across it,” Drake said and took his phone out of his pocket.

“It’s already been taken care of,” I informed him.

“By whom?”

“My mom has connections and she called it in.”

He snapped his fingers in recognition. “That’s why your surname seemed so familiar. Your mother must be Pearl Sterling.”

“That’s right,” I confirmed.

“Should I know her name?” the vampire asked sullenly.

“She’s a former bounty hunter,” his boss explained. “She worked for the agency before its owner was killed by a rogue vampire two decades ago.”

“Mom trained me to take her place,” I said proudly. “I’m hoping whoever hired the bounty hunters will hear about me taking down a rogue vamp tonight and offer me a job.”

“Good plan, except you caught the wrong man,” Ruen said with a sneer.

“I’ll consider hiring you if you manage to find the culprit and end his life,” Lord Gilden said.

“No offense, but I don’t want to work in an office job, or whatever position you’re offering me,” I said with my upper lip lifted in distaste.

He smiled, which upgraded him from being gorgeous to godlike in the hotness department. “The bounty hunters in Nexus all work for me,” he informed me. Most of the old crew mom had worked with had retired by now. He’d hired new hunters over the years and had a full team on his payroll.

A flush worked its way from my tattooed chest up to my hairline at that news. Now it was my turn to shrink down in my chair while Ruen smirked at me. Instead of impressing the man I’d hoped would become my boss, I’d fought his employees, had gatecrashed a swanky party and had tried to murder one of his minions right in front of him. “I guess I must have made a memorable first impression on everyone,” I said in a weak attempt at a joke.

“No one will remember it, except for we three,” he said. “Ruen, assist Ms. Sterling to find her target.” We both scowled at that idea and he heaved a sigh. “Vampires have an acute sense of smell. He can track the rogue for miles. Do you possess that ability?”

“No,” I replied sullenly. If I was going to find the real target, I was going to need help. It would suck to have to rely on the leech I’d staked. I doubted he was my number one fan after I’d tried to kill him.

“Assist Ms. Sterling to find the rogue, then bring her to my office before dawn,” Drake ordered.

Ruen nodded obediently, while grimacing in annoyance. “We should leave before the trail fades,” he said grumpily and stood up.

“Try not to accost any innocent vampires during your hunt,” the dragon requested wryly, standing politely when I rose to my feet.

“If your pet bloodhound leads me to the right guy, my target will be the only one I’ll be turning to ash tonight,” I vowed. “Unless any other rogues try to munch on me, that is,” I amended.

“See Lenny before you leave,” Lord Gilden said as he escorted us to the door. I glanced back to see he was talking to Ruen. The vamp nodded, mood lifting slightly at the new order. “Tell him to put your meal on my tab.”

“Yes, my lord,” Ruen said and quickened his pace to brush past me.

“Good luck, Ms. Sterling,” Drake said, putting his hand on my lower back to guide me through the door. My skin heated at his touch, but it wasn’t because of a spell. He was just so freaking gorgeous that my body instantly reacted to him. “Although something tells me you won’t need it,” he added in a low, sexy voice.

I inhaled his scent that was a mixture of expensive cologne and what had to be dragon pheromones. It was almost intoxicating, but I managed not to drool over him like Ruen had drooled over the freshly dead body. “I’ll see you later, Lord Gilden,” I said confidently, then sauntered off down the hall after his henchman.

People turned to look at me when I reached the ground floor, but their stares were curious rather than hostile now. They showed no signs that they remembered our brawl. I received appreciative looks from a lot of the male shifters. They loved full-figured women, it seemed. Some of them were fairly good looking, but none of them could hold a candle to Drake Gilden.

I worked my way over to the bar where Ruen was talking to the zombie. The other bartenders working to the left and right were a werejaguar and a vampire. “One glass of blood, coming right up,” Lenny said after the leech had placed his order.

“Can I have a beer?” I asked before he could turn away.

“Can I see some ID?” he retorted, milky eye staring off over my shoulder while the brown one became fixed on me.

Grinning, I took my license out and held it up. “Happy twenty-first birthday!” he said after scanning it.

“Thanks. The dragon will pay for my drink.”

Lenny’s eyebrows rose and he looked at Ruen for confirmation. “Is she working for the boss?” he asked.

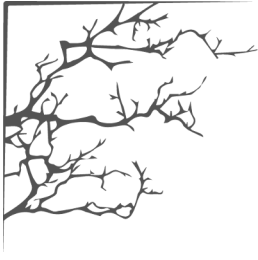
“Ms. Sterling is auditioning for a position as a bounty hunter,” the leech said dourly.

Lenny’s gaze returned to me. “That’s why you look familiar! Your mom is Pearl, right?”

“Yep,” I confirmed. “She said she used to hang out here before I was born. I’m surprised you remember her.”

“Your mom is kind of hard to forget,” he replied with a grin that showed me his black gums and a few missing teeth. “I’ll get you that beer. Make sure you say hi to your mom for me. Tell her we miss her here at the Den.”

“I will,” I promised, making a mental note to ask her why she’d never mentioned that a dead guy ran the place.



CHAPTER SIX



NODDING IN TIME WITH the music, I realized I felt almost comfortable among the monsters. Some of them were dressed similarly to me and others wore practically nothing. I saw shaved heads, punk styles, piercings everywhere and more tattoos than I could count. Instead of standing out like I usually did, I blended in with the crowd.

Lenny poured beer from the tap for me. Then he ambled over to a fridge that was being guarded by a werewolf. He poured blood from a bottle into a tall glass, then heated it up in a microwave. “Bottoms up!” he said with a grin and handed the glasses over.

“Thanks,” I said as Ruen reverently lifted the glass to his nose to take a deep whiff. I took a sip of my first alcoholic beverage and savored the taste for a few moments. Expecting the vamp to do the same, I was shocked when he scarfed the entire glass down within seconds.

Every leech in the club watched him longingly as he licked the glass clean so he didn’t waste a single drop. My upper lip wrinkled back when he even managed to lick the bottom of the glass. “Ew,” I complained as he attempted to compose himself.

“It’s a bit disconcerting to watch them feed at first,” Lenny said with a grin. “But you get used to it after a while.”

“Why aren’t they all drinking blood?” I asked when I saw most of the vamps were drinking alcohol. It wouldn’t quench

their unholy thirst, but it was apparently better than nothing.

“It’s too expensive,” the zombie replied, taking the vamp’s glass back as I took a gulp of beer. “Not many of them can afford to pay two hundred bucks per glass.”

I almost sprayed my beer all over the bar at the extravagant cost. “Why is blood so expensive?”

“I can’t exactly order a barrel of it whenever I’m running low,” he replied. “I bribe someone at the blood bank to keep me in supply, but he can only smuggle out a small amount at a time.”

That made sense, so I downed the rest of my beer, eager to continue my hunt. “Thanks for the drink. I’ll pass your message on to mom,” I said as I put my empty glass down. The zombie saluted me, then turned to another patron to take her order.

Ruen’s back was stiff as he led the way to the door. He was probably waiting for me to crack a joke about his lack of decorum. I felt the same way about chocolate milkshakes, so it would be a bit hypocritical to make a snarky comment.

The werebear looked surprised when I marched out behind my companion. “I didn’t think you’d be able to convince him to leave with you,” he said. The spell to forget about me hadn’t extended outside the building.

“It was a misunderstanding,” I explained. “He’s a witness to the murder and he’s going to help me find the real culprit.”

“I’m sure Lord Gilden is relieved you didn’t need to whack his pet leech,” he said with a smirk, eliciting a scowl

from Ruen.

I glared at him for not divulging who my target was and not warning me about how powerful Ruen's boss was. The vampire stalked off and I hurried to catch up to him, wishing I hadn't tipped the bouncer twenty bucks.

Ruen kept up a brisk pace that soon had me winded and gasping for air. We retraced our steps to the alley where the woman had been murdered. The body was gone and the blood had been cleaned away. Her family and friends would never know what had happened to her. She would be just another human who'd vanished from the streets of Nexus.

"Can you still detect the scent?" I asked, puffing from my exertion.

"Of course," Ruen said with a faint sneer. "Follow me," he ordered, then backtracked to the sidewalk. Turning left, he walked in the opposite direction from the Den. It was a struggle to keep up with him even though I was taller than him. We drew stares from pedestrians and people having a late meal in the restaurants and cafés we passed.

A group of young women leaned forward to whisper together as we passed them, then burst into shrill giggles.

Ruen glanced back at them with a glower and I ran a few steps to catch up to him. "What did they say?" I asked, knowing he'd overheard them.

"One of them inferred that I'm your pimp and that we're searching for a corner for you to set up shop on," he said indignantly.

“Humans can be so catty and stupid,” I muttered. “Do I look like I’m dressed like a ho?”

He looked me up and down before replying. “I’ve seen street walkers wearing almost that exact same outfit, in colder times of the year anyway. Aren’t you hot in those leather pants?” It was summer, but Nexus had a temperate climate for the most part.

“The weather doesn’t affect me much,” I said with a shrug. “How long have you been working for Drake?”

“I’ve been employed by Lord Gilden for several centuries,” he said. “He usually only hires people who don’t shame him. I can’t imagine why he’s giving you this chance.”

“Why would I shame him?” I asked in puzzlement.

“You’re dressed like a prostitute and you made a spectacle of yourself in front of the elite supernatural beings of the city when you attempted to murder me in front of them all,” he reminded me.

“Oh, yeah,” I said sheepishly. “I guess that would be embarrassing, if any of them could remember it.”

“Why on earth would you wear that ridiculous outfit while hunting for rogues?” he asked, raking his gaze over me scornfully.

“I look cool and hot,” I said defensively. “That probably sounds like a temperature conundrum to a dead guy like you, but both traits are highly desirable in most species.” He ignored my sarcasm and didn’t bother to reply. “Why did the

dragon order you not to kill anyone?" I asked to change the topic.

"That's private," he said mockingly, turning my own words against me. "All you need to know is that I obey Lord Gilden's orders, no matter what they might be."

That sounded ominous, but he clearly wasn't going to elaborate. He quickened his pace to pull ahead of me and I didn't try to keep up with him. The holy water trail had faded, so I had to keep him in sight so I didn't lose him as we continued our hunt.

Ruen led me away from the center of Nexus to a residential area that had seen better days. There were a lot of empty apartment buildings in dire need of repairs. We came to a stop at one of them and the vampire pointed at a boarded over door. "He's in there," he informed me in a whisper.

"So are half a dozen other vamps," I murmured quietly. I could sense them all in the basement. "How am I going to tell which one killed the human?"

"He'll be the one who looks like he just fed," the vamp said sardonically.

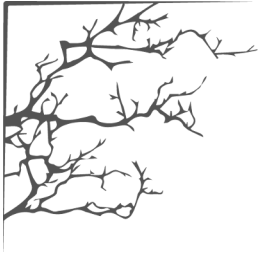
Now that we'd come to a stop, I got a better look at him. His cheeks had filled out a bit and his hair had more luster to it. One glass of blood wasn't enough to fill the hole in his stomach, but it had definitely made a difference. "I guess you're not going in there with me," I figured when he leaned against the wall of a nearby building and crossed his arms.

“I was ordered to help you locate the culprit and I’ve done so,” he said smugly, then gestured at the decrepit building. “The night won’t last forever, Ms. Sterling. Lord Gilden wants to see you in his office before dawn. You can’t wait for the sun to come up and render your target sluggish.”

That had been my intention, but he’d just shot that plan down. Bloodsuckers were nocturnal, but they could stay awake during the day if they needed to. They could still pass for human, as long as they stayed out of the sun. Melting skin was a dead giveaway that they weren’t normal. The ones that chose to stay awake tended to look stoned and sleepy.

“I’ll be back soon,” I said, mustering my confidence. Mom and I had cleared out a coven of vamps a couple of years ago without too much trouble. Sure, it had been daytime and most of them had been asleep, but we’d gotten the job done.

Ignoring the fact that they would be alert and would hear me coming, I delved into my kill-bag. Sliding silver stakes through my belt for easy access, I carried a can of holy water in one hand and a stake in the other. I took a deep breath, then crossed the road.



CHAPTER SEVEN



“MOM IS GOING TO FREAK out when I tell her about this,” I predicted quietly as I circled around the building where my prey was hiding. She’d told me not to be reckless and not to take on more than I could chew. Yet here I was, about to enter a lair where seven vampires were holed up. One of them was guilty of murder and I had to figure out which one it was.

All of the doors and windows were heavily boarded, denying me entry to the building. It was obvious the vampires weren’t breaking into the place through any of them. I spotted a fire escape that had clumps of dried mud clinging to the rungs. “Bingo,” I whispered in triumph. The leeches must be entering through a door on the roof.

I could hear music thumping from below the building, which meant the bloodsuckers were having a party. Hoping it would mask the noise I was about to make, I put my weapons back into my kill-bag. Rust flaked from the ladder as I noisily climbed upwards to the roof. I quickly pulled out a stake and watched the door, waiting for the monsters to investigate. My senses told me they were all still in the basement, so I armed myself again.

Six silver stakes rested in my belt and I kept hold of the final one. I held the can of holy water up, ready to spray the crap out of anything with fangs as I entered the dark stairwell. My night vision was barely good enough for me to make my way down to the ground floor. Dozens of footprints in the dust

led the way to the door to the basement. It stood open a couple of inches, so I wouldn't have to kick it down.

I put my ear to the gap and heard music, laughter and a muffled noise of pain. "Please, let me go!" someone called out and I realized the leeches had a victim down there. He sounded weak and he probably didn't have much time left.

"You can do this, Saige," I whispered to pump myself up, then I slipped through the door and into the stairwell.

Wan light flickered from candles as I descended on my tippytoes to reduce my noise. A door had once barred the way at the bottom of the stairs, but it had been removed. The basement was a large, open area with concrete columns supporting the building above it. The coven had been living here for at least a few months, going by the blankets, piles of empty alcohol bottles and other junk scattered around.

A glance at the coven of seven vampires told me my job had just expanded. They were all feeding on the rapidly fading human. He was naked and was lying on his back on the cold concrete floor. His already pale skin had turned ghostly white from blood loss. He turned and saw me, then opened his mouth to plead for help, but it was too late. The last drops of blood were drained from his veins and he let out a final breath before expiring.

"He tasted sooo good," one of the bloodsuckers said, half-drunk from her meal. I could barely hear her over the loud music. They all wore black, which seemed to be the unofficial vampire uniform. Their clothing was cheap and filthy, which

meant they were one of the many poverty-stricken covens in the city.

“I love it when they’ve just fed on something fatty,” another one said. “It gives their blood extra flavor.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed your meal,” I said grimly, striding forward to step into the light. “Because it’s the last one you’ll ever have.”

They turned to gape at me, then became a blur of motion. Anger gave me the fuel I needed to take on all seven psychotic monsters. One of them leaped at me and I sprayed her with holy water. She shrieked, clawing at her bubbling eyes and stumbled away. While running wasn’t my strong suit, I had lightning reflexes that I could call on at will. I rammed my stake into a vamp’s chest, instantly killing him. He froze in momentary agony, then fell to the floor in a clump of ash and clothing. Hands moving so fast that a human wouldn’t be able to track me, I staked three more foes before they realized how dangerous I was.

The female I’d sprayed leaped on my back and tried to sink her fangs into my shoulder. I retaliated by blasting her with holy water again. Screaming in fresh pain, she fell off me and landed on her back, rolling around on the ground as smoke rose from her scalded skin.

One of the vampires felt stronger than the other two remaining fledglings, which made her the master of the coven. Her gaze flicked to the doorway and I knew she was going to make a run for it. I couldn’t let her escape to create more murderous fiends and threw a stake at her. It hit her in the

heart before she could dodge it. She had enough time to wail in dread before the silver extinguished her unnatural life.

Both minions screeched in loss and rage when their master turned to ash before their eyes. The male rushed at me and wrapped his arms around my middle. I didn't budge as he unsuccessfully tried to pick me up. The female was beyond reason and once again jumped at me. I sprayed her with holy water for a third time, then staked her companion in the back as he futilely tried to lift me off my feet and slam me to the ground.

"No! Please!" the female begged when I rounded on her. Her eyes were red and swollen from being repeatedly doused with holy water. "Our master made us kill the humans! We were powerless to resist her!"

"Sorry, this isn't personal," I said, grabbing hold of her when she lurched to her feet to try to run. "It's my job to hunt down rogues," I explained, then stabbed her with my last stake.

She turned to ash and I stepped back before her remains could land on my boots. Crossing to the battery-operated radio that was blasting out music, I silenced it, then examined the basement. The dead guy had evacuated his bowels, but there was hardly any blood staining the ground.

The bloodsucker who had killed the woman must have kidnapped this guy on their way back to the lair. They'd murdered two people in one night and I'd just saved countless lives by taking them down. I took photos to show mom when I got home, knowing she'd be proud of me. Collecting my

stakes, I wiped them clean on a shirt that had belonged to one of the vamps.

“You can come in now, Ruen,” I said without bothering to raise my voice.

He appeared in the doorway a moment later. “Lord Gilden will be pleased that you’ve eradicated this rogue coven,” he said, eyeing the remains. “I’ll advise him that you’ve accomplished your task and ask for a car to be sent to pick us up.”

Hitching a ride would be quicker than hoofing it all the way back to the nightclub, so I nodded in agreement. “Will he send a team to clean up this mess?” I asked, gesturing at the body and the ashes.

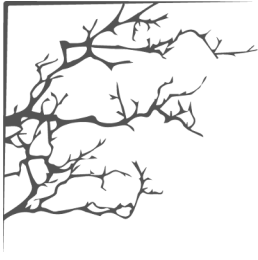
“Of course,” he replied and took his phone out of his pocket to make the call. He spoke too quietly for me to make out what he was saying, then slipped the phone back into his jacket. “A car will be arriving soon,” he said, then headed for the exit.

There was no need for me to stick around now that my job was done. I cast a final pitying look at the dead human, wishing I’d gotten here sooner so I could have saved his life. Anger churned inside me that so many supernatural creatures felt they could commit murder whenever they wanted to. Originating from the underworld must have instilled them with the instinct to kill.

Mom hadn’t told me much about the nine dimensions that ran parallel to ours. All I knew was that there were portals to the underworld on every continent and on most large islands.

They were all guarded now and few were allowed to pass through them without good reason. Monsters had become myth and that was how we preferred it. Panic would erupt and war would break out between us and the humans if our presence became known. Even the dumbest monster was aware of that, so most of them took pains to hide their crimes.

Bounty hunters like me had sprung up over the centuries to hunt down the rogues who defied our laws. Most of them were supernatural, but a few were humans who'd discovered our existence. I sneered as I climbed the stairs in Ruen's wake. Humans were pathetically weak compared to my kind. Most would die within seconds going after the rogues. Lord Gilden apparently had a couple of humans on his payroll. I hoped I'd get to meet them so I could try to figure out why he'd bothered to hire them.



CHAPTER EIGHT



MY HUNT HADN'T TAKEN as long as I'd expected, even with the extra fiends I'd eradicated. Dawn was still hours away, which would give me plenty of time to meet with Lord Gilden. Ruen was standing on the sidewalk when I joined him. "I've never seen anyone decimate an entire vampire coven so quickly on their own before," he said. His tone was neutral, but I could tell he was impressed.

"Did you sneak inside and watch me?" I asked. I hadn't felt him, then remembered he didn't show up on my radar as being dangerous. I had to be close to him before I could even sense that he wasn't human.

"I didn't need to be inside the room, Ms. Sterling," he said and almost rolled his eyes. "I heard everything and deduced what had happened. Lord Gilden will expect a full report. Try to make it short and coherent," he advised me.

Since my goal was to impress his boss, I took his advice to heart. A dark gray SUV pulled up a couple of minutes later with a werelion behind the wheel. He nodded in greeting when we climbed into the back. We nodded back, then I returned to composing my report in my head.

I was pretty sure my mom hadn't ever had to give a formal report of her bounty hunting jobs before. Then again, her boss hadn't been a weredragon. He'd been a werebear who'd had a more laidback style of leadership.

Our driver headed to the center of Nexus and drove to the tallest building in the city. Windows on nearly every floor glittered with lights like bright jewels flashing in the moonlight as we approached the twenty-story building. The next tallest structure was only ten stories high and was dwarfed by the silver edifice.

The werelion drove into an underground parking area and chose a spot that was reserved for employees. The building was a no-go zone for humans. Spells prevented them from trying to enter the premises. Most of the places where the non-humans lived and worked had spells to repel them. Drake wasn't the only one in town who could cast magic. He'd either done it himself, or had paid someone else to cast it.

Cameras watched our every move, with security guards letting only approved people in and out of the building. Ruen had already notified his boss that the job was completed, so they were expecting us.

We took the elevator up to the nineteenth floor and stepped out into an opulent foyer of an office. Potted plants stood on either side of the elevator. More were strategically placed around the gigantic room. Heavy, dark, masculine furniture was clustered in groups to the left and right. Couches and armchairs surrounded coffee tables and could be used for small, intimate meetings.

Lord Gilden's desk faced the elevator on the far side of the room. Massive in size, it had been stained a deep, burnished gold the same color as its owner's eyes. The surface had been lacquered so it would reflect the faces of anyone who glanced

down at it. Two leather chairs were lined up in front of the desk. Drake's chair was a larger, more expensive version of them. Twin French doors stood behind the desk, leading to a huge balcony that offered a magnificent view of the city. Other furniture graced the office, holding books, knickknacks and other items that didn't interest me much.

Speaking of the dragon, he was seated over to the left on a plush black leather armchair, talking to several people. I sensed two of them were shifters, two were vampires and the final pair didn't show up on my radar at all. All were fit, older than me by at least a decade and most wore casual, yet expensive clothing. One wore a tailored suit and pants that fit her perfectly. They looked more suitable for working in an office than as a bounty hunter.

"Here they are now," Drake said when we came to a stop a few yards away from the group. His spell to mask his power was back in place. "Ruen informed me you took down a coven of seven vampires on your own," he said, lifting an eyebrow for confirmation.

I hadn't expected an audience when I gave him my report and I was thrown. I knew they were his team of bounty hunters without needing to be told. The knives and stakes that were strapped to their arms, legs and belts were a dead giveaway. "That's right," I replied, eyeing my competition. I'd figured I would be the youngest bounty hunter on the team, but I hadn't expected their condescending expressions. They examined me like I was a bug, just like the elite guests had at the party I'd crashed earlier.

“What weapons did you use?” the woman who didn’t show up on my radar asked. A head shorter than me, she was slender and beautiful, with red hair and an excellent figure. Her expression and tone were highly skeptical.

“Holy water and silver stakes,” I replied.

“There’s no way a human like you could have killed seven of my brethren on your own,” the male vamp said with a frown in a heavy accent. His partner smiled coldly in agreement and rested her hand on his shoulder possessively.

“Ms. Sterling isn’t human,” Drake said.

“What is she?” one of the shifters asked. They were both male and I sensed they were werelions. Lions loved to hunt, but they sometimes got a bit carried away, or so mom had told me.

“That’s privileged information,” I said. “Ruen witnessed the job. He’ll back me up.”

Ruen reluctantly nodded in agreement. “Ms. Sterling slew the coven on her own. She accomplished the task without sustaining any injuries.”

“I don’t believe it,” the redhead said in disdain. “You must have had help that Ruen wasn’t aware of.” He glared at her for basically calling him a liar.

“I can give you a demonstration of my skills, if you like,” I offered, annoyed by their disbelief. Crossing to the group, I examined her, then snorted when I realized what she was. “You’re just a puny human. I’d probably break you in half by accident.”

“Show *me* what you can do, then,” one of the werelions said and surged to his feet. He leaped over the coffee table that held empty glasses of alcohol and landed directly in front of me. My training kicked in when he threw a roundhouse punch at my face. Catching his fist, I grinned when his jaw dropped in surprise. He let out a yelp when I reached down to grab him by the crotch. Hoisting him into the air, I spun around and threw him towards the elevator. Landing with a thud, he rolled several times before coming to a stop. “Ow,” he complained ruefully, rubbing the back of his head when he climbed to his feet.

“Impressive,” the redhead said, then flicked something towards me. My reflexes were so acute that I caught the small silver dagger before it could pierce my shoulder.

“Saige,” Lord Gilden said warningly and shook his head when I shifted my stance. He’d read my body language and had known I was going to throw it right back at her.

“I wasn’t going to kill her,” I said sullenly. “I was just going to wound her a bit.”

The redhead’s eyes were bugging out, as were her partner’s. He was as human as she was. I had no idea why the weredragon had hired them. Any of the rest of the team could snap their necks like twigs with our pinky fingers.

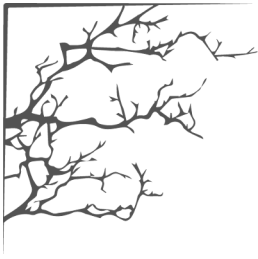
“I’ll take that,” the lion said. He loped past me and snatched the dagger from my hand. He hissed in pain when smoke rose from his skin and tossed it to his colleague. She caught it deftly and tucked it into a sheath beneath the sleeve of her jacket.

“I need to speak to Ms. Sterling in private,” Drake said to conclude their meeting. “Keep me updated about anything I need to know about,” he added as they all rose to their feet. None of the bounty hunters bothered to introduce themselves to me as they headed for the elevator.

Ruen made no move to leave, since he hadn't been dismissed. The small amount of joy he'd shown while drinking his glass of blood had evaporated. He was back to being morose again. I had a feeling it was his usual state of being.

Lord Gilden crossed to his desk to take his seat, then elegantly gestured at us to sit down. “I'd like a full report of your mission,” he said.

It sounded like a request, but I knew it was an order. Hopefully, it would be the first of many commands from the hottie I was counting on to become my boss.



CHAPTER NINE



GLAD I'D REHEARSED my speech in my head, I was able to give Drake a succinct report of what had transpired. "I didn't have any choice but to wipe the entire vampire coven out, since they killed their latest victim right in front of me," I said in conclusion.

Lord Gilden glanced at his minion for confirmation that I'd told him the truth without embellishment. "Ms. Sterling's report is accurate," Ruen said reluctantly. "As far as I could discern, everything happened just as she described."

"I don't need to lie about my skills," I boasted. "I really am that good."

"I've heard your mother was a highly skilled bounty hunter back in her day," Drake said. "It appears you've inherited her talents."

He had no idea exactly what her talents were and neither did any of her former coworkers. Mom had always hunted alone and I intended to follow in her footsteps. The more people who witnessed us in action, the more questions we would have to answer about our heritage. "Does this mean you'll give me a job on your team?" I asked, glad my interview with the weredragon had gone so well.

"If you agree to two conditions," he replied.

If I'd seen even a hint of slyness in his gold eyes, I would have been highly suspicious. I'd heard dragons could be

dangerous to bargain with. “What conditions?” I asked warily.

“You’ll need to work with a partner.”

“Nope,” I refuted, shaking my head in denial. “I work alone.”

“Ruen had to guide you to your target, since you lack the ability to follow scent trails,” he reminded me. “As you were able to work together tonight, I propose you continue to be partners. At least until I’m satisfied that you’ll be a suitable addition to my team.”

I looked at Ruen, to see his upper lip was lifted. “Sir!” he protested. “Surely, you aren’t going to relegate me to babysitting Ms. Sterling!”

Seeing the uptight, snobby vampire so put out was surprisingly satisfying. He couldn’t kill anyone, thanks to the invisible leash his master had put on him. I’d have to take them down myself, which meant I would be working alone during the action. “I agree to the first condition,” I said, to their surprise. It was only temporary, so it was a rule I could live with.

Ruen threw his hands in the air in disgust, then crossed his arms sullenly. “I want it on record that I object to this arrangement.”

“So noted,” Drake said with a hint of amusement. “The second condition is that you will live in an apartment in a building I own. It’s in the center of Nexus and it’s inhabited by beings who work for me. None of them are human, so you’ll fit right in.”

“Do I have to share the apartment with anyone?” I asked, cutting a wary look at the pouting bloodsucker. Working with Ruen would be bad enough. Living with him would be unbearable.

“You’ll have the place to yourself,” the weredragon replied. “Two of my bounty hunters used to share it, but they no longer have need of it.”

“Why not?” I assumed they’d moved to another place, but his reply was like a cold dash of water in my face.

“They were killed during a mission recently.”

I blinked at that news. “Who killed them?”

“A more accurate question would be *what* killed them,” he corrected me. “Unfortunately, I don’t have the answer. The trail had gone cold by the time their bodies were discovered.”

“What species were they?” I asked next.

“Werewolves. They were so badly torn apart that a cause of death couldn’t be determined. Most of their remains had been eaten. We were only able to identify them by their weapons.”

A shiver wracked me at the mental image his description evoked. “How much will it cost to rent the apartment?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I don’t charge my bounty hunters rent. Having a safe place to live is one of the perks, since your job is highly dangerous. The rest of the team reside in different buildings to yours.”

I tried hard not to allow my glee to show openly. Not only did I now have a job, I was also being given free accommodation. “How much do you pay your bounty hunters?” I probably should have asked that question first, but at least I’d remembered to bring it up.

His face tightened slightly at my question. “It depends on the jobs you’ve been given,” he hedged.

“How much do I get for killing an entire coven of rogue vamps?”

Drake’s lips pressed into a thin line, proving he wasn’t happy about discussing money. “You’re entitled to one gold coin for each rogue vampire you slay. The payment varies according to what sort of creatures you’ve eradicated.”

“Is that all?” I asked incredulously.

“The coins are rare and expensive,” Ruen informed me snottily. “Most bounty hunters sell them to the same fence. Pierre has buyers all over the world who eagerly seek out the coins.”

“Oh. I guess that’s a decent payment, then,” I conceded. “Where did you get the coins from?” I queried.

“Dragons hoard gold, gems and other precious items,” my new boss said stiffly. “We find it rather difficult to part with our belongings.”

Our gazes caught and we became engaged in a battle of wills. He almost seemed to be trying to force me to accept a smaller payment. “So, you’ll be handing over seven gold coins before I leave here?” I asked to break the stalemate.

Ruen stared at me in something close to awe as his boss slumped slightly in his seat. “I suppose I should pay you now,” Drake muttered, then gracefully rose to his feet.

I stared at the lord’s muscular thighs and butt as he crossed to a painting of a fantastical landscape. The artist must have visited one of the regions of the underworld to have come up with the weirdly shaped black trees. The sky was green and the grass was red. It was like looking at a landscape of an alien planet.

A safe was hidden behind the painting. It was blocked from my sight by the artwork when Lord Gilden swung it open. He unlocked the safe and I heard the clink of coins as he counted out my payment. Locking the safe and closing the painting, he strode over to me. He held his fist out, clutching the coins in a white-knuckled grip.

I held my hands out, waiting for the payment to drop into my palms. A pained expression crossed Drake’s face, then he forced himself to let go of his property. Seven shiny gold coins fell into my hands. “Thank you, Lord Gilden,” I said, quickly tucking them into my wallet so they were out of his sight, since letting them go had distressed him so much.

“I’ll escort Ms. Sterling home and arrange for her to receive a key to her new apartment,” Ruen said. He shot to his feet and lifted me out of my chair with a hand beneath my elbow. Bowing submissively, he kept his eyes on his boss as he backed us towards the door. Drake’s gaze remained fixed on my handbag. He stood stock still with his fists clenched. Smoke began to waft from his nostrils and Ruen picked up his

pace. He stopped at the elevator and pressed the button to call it. Once the door opened, we backed inside it.

My heart started hammering in fear as the cloak his boss wore began to slip more and more. When his spell was in place, I couldn't sense much about him. Once the veil was lifted, I could feel his power. It was enough to warn me never to go up against him. I might be far stronger than most supernatural creatures I'd killed, but I wasn't stupid enough to fight a weredragon.



CHAPTER TEN



“IS THAT DRAKE’S USUAL reaction when he pays his employees?” I asked as the elevator began to descend.

Ruen let go of my elbow and slumped against the wall. “Like he said, dragons have difficulty parting with their property,” he reminded me. “The more they have to hand over, the harder it is for them to control themselves.”

“He looked ready to shift and roast me to death with his fiery breath,” I joked.

“Lord Gilden is honor bound to uphold his end of the bargains he makes,” the leech said in defense of his master. “He would never harm his employees. Not unless they did something stupid, like attempt to steal from him.”

I made a mental note not to take anything from the lord without his permission as the elevator reached the parking level. Ruen led me to the same SUV that had brought us here. “Where do you live?” he asked as we climbed in the back again.

“You’ll have to drop me off at my car,” I said.

“I’ll need to know where to pick you up from tomorrow night,” he insisted.

Mom liked her privacy and I wasn’t about to divulge her address to these strangers. If Ruen was going to be my partner, I would have to learn to trust him. That didn’t mean I had to

trust everyone else who worked for Drake. “I’ll drive you there, then take you home,” I decided. I could write her address down for him, but I would get a kick out of torturing him by making him remain in my presence. He’d made no secret of his disdain for me.

Our driver glanced at me in the rearview mirror and shook his head slightly, annoyed that I didn’t trust him. I told him where I’d parked my car and he drove us back to where my night had first begun.

Ruen and I climbed out when the SUV came to a stop, then the shifter drove away. I crossed to the hatchback and unlocked the doors. The vamp made no move to climb inside. His expression was horrified when I looked at him to see what the holdup was. “Please tell me you don’t expect me to ride around in that orange abomination?” he said in disbelief.

“I can strap you to the roof, if you’d prefer,” I said in annoyance. “Or you can run behind me, I guess. It’s only a twenty-minute drive home.”

Muttering beneath his breath, he opened the door and gingerly slid inside. I had to put my kill-bag on the floor behind my seat this time. I hoped I wouldn’t have to slay anything on my way home. If we ran into any trouble, I could always throw the bloodsucker at my attackers. Snickering silently at my joke, I buckled in and drove home.

Ruen’s expression remained sour throughout the drive to mom’s place. He didn’t utter a word, so I sang along to the radio. My sullen companion winced whenever I tried to hit a

high note. Singing wasn't one of my best skills. What I lacked in talent, I made up for with enthusiasm and volume.

It was late and most of the houses were dark when I coasted to a stop. Mom was a night owl, so she was still up. She opened the door when she heard me arrive. Ruen sneered at the small bungalow, but was wise enough not to disrespect our house.

"I'll just let mom know I'll be dropping you home," I said.

"I'd like to be home before the sun comes up," he said with a frown of annoyance at the delay.

"I won't take long," I said airily, then climbed out.

Mom was squinting at the car, trying to make out who my passenger was. "Who's the vamp?" she asked when I reached the tiny porch, accurately identifying his species.

"His name is Ruen. He'll be my partner for a while, until I've learned the ropes."

"You got a job as a bounty hunter already?" she asked in delight.

"Yep," I said proudly. "I'll tell you all about it when I get home. I have to drop the dead guy off before the sun comes up and he turns into a scorched Sleeping Beauty."

We both knew he could hear every word we'd uttered and snickered together. "Hurry back," she urged me. "I want to hear every detail."

"I'll see you soon," I replied, then gave her a quick hug and hurried back to the car. I assumed Ruen had made note of

the address, because he didn't ask me for it when I took off. "Where do you want me to take you?" I asked.

"Back to Lord Gilden's building."

"Do you have a coffin in the basement?" I joked.

"The building has residential apartments as well as offices. As one of Lord Gilden's most trusted employees, I live in close proximity to him."

"Drake lives in that silver tower?" I asked in surprise.

"His apartment takes up the top floor."

"Of course he has a penthouse," I said in complete lack of surprise. "Have you been inside it? What does it look like? Is everything made of gold?"

From the way his eyebrows pinched together, he found my barrage of questions to be annoying. "Few are invited into Lord Gilden's private dwelling place. I have no idea what it looks like, or how it's been furnished."

"I'm sticking with my gold theme," I said, trying to picture an apartment filled with lavish stuff and failing miserably. I didn't have much experience with luxury. Drake's office was the swankiest room I'd ever seen in my life.

Ruen subsided into silence again, so I sang along to the radio. Crossing his arms, he resolutely ignored my terrible voice, keeping his face stony and devoid of expression. I could tell being partnered with him was going to be a barrel of laughs.

“I have a question,” I said when we were a few blocks away from our destination. Ruen tilted his head towards me fractionally. “Why did your boss use the Den of Iniquity to have a fancy party rather than holding it in his tower?”

“The Den is one of many properties that belong to our employer,” he advised me, emphasizing ‘our’ to remind me the dragon was my boss as well now. “He prefers to keep his social and business lives apart.”

“Yeah, but there has to be nicer places to hold a party than a nightclub,” I argued. “Everyone at that party looked rich and snobby. It seems like a bit of an insult to host it at a nightclub.”

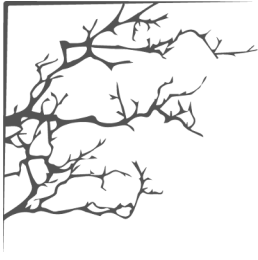
“The Den has a private back entrance where the guests can enter without being seen by humans,” he said as I pulled up out front of the silver tower. “Most of our kind prefer to keep a low profile.” He scanned my hair, bright tattoos and sexy outfit, as if I was the antithesis of his idea of keeping a low profile.

“What can I say? I like to stand out,” I said with a smirk. It wasn’t like I could blend in with humans considering my height, hair and eye coloring anyway. “What happens now?” I asked when he put his hand on the doorhandle. “Who’ll be giving us our jobs?”

“We’ll discuss everything tomorrow night when I pick you up,” he replied, then flashed away before I could ask him any further questions.

“Damned vampire speed,” I muttered as my hair fluttered around my face from the force of him slamming the door shut.

I texted mom that I was on my way home and asked her to have coffee ready for me. It would take a while to fill her in on my exploits. I took off, ignoring the security guard's smirk at my brightly colored, horribly dented car. It stood out just as much as I did, which was kind of fitting, I guessed.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



NOW THAT THE ACTION was over, I was feeling a bit tired by the time I parked in front of our bungalow. My adrenalin rush could only last so long and I always felt wrung out after a hunt. Coffee and a meal would perk me up again. Mom had both waiting for me when I joined her in the dining room.

“Park your butt and tell me everything,” she ordered.

I sat down and scarfed down the sandwiches she’d made, while drinking coffee and filling her in. “You told me dragon shifters were dangerous, but I didn’t know they were that powerful,” I finished up after telling her about the smoke that had wafted from Lord Gilden’s nostrils when he’d paid me my due. She’d viewed the photos I’d taken of the vampires’ ash piles before handing my phone back to me.

“I’d had my suspicions that a weredragon was in charge of Nexus,” she said. “It was all hush-hush back in my day, but I guess things have changed since I retired. Everyone seems to know this Drake Gilden guy is the boss now.”

“You’ve really never heard of him before?”

She shook her head, chewing the last bite of her sandwich, then washed it down with the dregs of her second mug of coffee. “Bounty hunters like me didn’t exactly mix with the elite back then. We did our jobs, got paid by our boss and did our best to keep the rogues under control.”

“Lenny says hi, by the way,” I told her. “He remembers you fondly.”

“Good old Lenny,” she said with a grin. “I miss him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me he was a zombie?”

“Didn’t I?” she asked in surprise. “I suppose I got so used to him that I stopped thinking of him as the living dead.”

“He’s missing an ear, a couple of fingers and he has a milky eye,” I reminded her. “If you looked up zombie in the dictionary, his picture would be beside it.”

“Does he still wear ugly shirts?” she asked when we stopped snickering.

“The one he was wearing tonight was pretty horrible,” I confirmed.

“Tell him I said hi in return the next time you run into him,” she requested.

“I will. Do you want to see the gold coins the dragon paid me with?”

“Hand them over,” she replied, holding her hand out.

I picked my kill-bag up and pulled my wallet out. Taking the seven gold coins out, I dropped them onto her palm. “Do you think they’re authentic?”

She hefted them to judge their weight them with a musing look. “They’re far heavier than modern coins, which means they’re probably made from pure gold.” We leaned down together to examine them closely. “The words are foreign and the date is too faded to make out,” she said. “Dragons can’t

renege on their bargains, so I'd say they're definitely rare and expensive."

"What do you think about me being paired up with a leech?" I asked as she handed the coins back to me.

"Ruen's bound to ask you questions about our heritage," she said, watching me drop the coins back into my wallet. "What are you going to say when he insists on knowing what you are?"

"I usually just tell nosy parkers that the information is private, like you told me to. I'm not sure how to handle someone who won't stop pestering me about it, if he turns out to be like that."

"He's going to be your partner, so you'll have to learn to trust each other," she pointed out pensively. "You might have to tell him the truth, that we have no idea what sort of monsters we are."

"It might help if I could at least tell him what sort of creature my dad is," I said in a slightly disapproving tone.

"You know I can't answer that question, Saige," she said chidingly.

"Because you had an orgy with dozens of supernatural creatures!" I reminded her. "Any one of them could be my father."

"It wasn't my fault a witch cast a lust spell on everyone in the room," she said defensively. "Everything from that night is lost in a haze. All I remember is penises, vaginas and breasts everywhere."

“Tell me you didn’t sleep with all of them,” I said, half horrified at that prospect.

“Only the men,” she said defensively. “You know I’m not into women.”

“And you can’t remember what sort of beings the men were?”

“They were all different kinds, I think,” she said with a shrug. “I don’t have your ability to sense what sort of species they are.”

The sad fact was that I would probably never know who or what my dad was. Our family history was sketchy at best. It seemed all of the Sterling women had trouble identifying exactly what type of being impregnated them. All we knew was that the females of our line only gave birth to a single daughter and we all had a variety of talents. None of us could be classed as human, even if we couldn’t change forms or use magic.

Something we all had in common was that we were tall, full figured and were far stronger than human women. We also tended to have strange colored hair and eyes. A final trait was one that we kept strictly secret and was one of the reasons why mom had retired; we didn’t age like normal. Mom could pass as my older sister, even though she was well over eighty years old. My great-grandmother was still alive, although she was now a recluse. She was living in Europe with my grandmother.

Mom had moved to Nexus forty years ago and had passed herself off as a young, up and coming bounty hunter. In reality, she’d already possessed far more experience at hunting

monsters than any of her rivals. People would have talked once they realized she didn't seem to age. She'd pretended to retire when she'd fallen pregnant, but in reality, she hadn't stopped hunting at all. She just did it in secret while teaching me the trade. Frugal like me, she'd saved a lot of money over the decades and was in no danger of running out of funds.

Now that I'd taken over her job as a bounty hunter, she would eventually head to Europe to join our relatives. I would live here for a couple of decades until it became obvious I wasn't aging, then I'd have to move on. One day, I would end up in an orgy or some other strange event and would end up falling pregnant. I would give birth to a daughter and continue the cycle of life.

"I'm proud of you, kiddo," mom said with a grin. "Your first official hunt was far from conventional, but you achieved your goal. You now have a job as a bounty hunter and a place of your own to live. It isn't ideal that you'll have a partner for a while, but refusing would have been a bad idea. You need to blend in with the other hunters until they get used to you."

"I can always stake Ruen and blame one of our targets if he learns about too many of my secrets," I figured, only half joking.

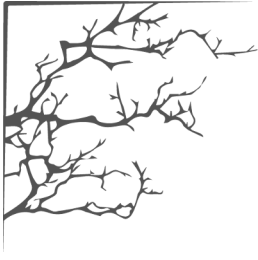
"That might prove to be a bad idea," she said shrewdly. "Lord Gilden most likely thinks of the vampire as his property. I doubt he'd take it well if his servant was murdered."

"You're probably right," I conceded. "I'll only off the leech if I really have to."

“You’ve had a big night, Lil Bish. Why don’t you get some sleep? We have a horde of zombies to kill when we get up and you’ll need to be fresh and alert.”

“I could definitely use a nap,” I agreed, covering a yawn with my hand. One trait both mom and I shared was that we only needed a few hours of sleep to get by. Dawn had arrived and sunlight was peeking through gaps in the curtains.

Helping her clean up the table, I headed downstairs to grab a change of clothes. After taking a quick shower, I descended to my bedroom in the basement to sleep.



CHAPTER TWELVE



MY DREAMS WERE FULL of action as I replayed everything that had happened last night. Things changed when Ruen took me to Drake to report in and receive my payment. The weredragon dismissed his servant and waited until we were alone before he spoke. “I could pay you with gold coins like the rest of my bounty hunters, or I could offer you a different form of payment,” he proposed.

His golden eyes gleamed in the light as they dropped to my breasts. I’d sensed he was attracted to me from the moment we’d met. We shared an animal magnetism that drew us towards each other. “What did you have in mind, my lord?” I asked coyly.

“I was thinking of tearing your clothes off, bending you over my desk and making you scream in ecstasy.”

His blunt answer brought my desire raging to life. “Okay,” I croaked and shot to my feet before he could change his mind. My hands went to the button of my tight leather pants, then we were both suddenly naked. I was lying face down on his desk, wearing only my boots. My breasts were squashed against the polished top of his desk and his hands were on my hips.

“Brace yourself, Ms. Sterling,” he warned me as he nudged my thighs apart.

“I’m ready for you, Drake,” I said breathlessly, turning my head to stare at him.

Adonis-like in his hotness, his body was muscular and as flawless as his face. His wide shoulders, bulging biceps, powerful pecs and washboard abs were mouthwatering. My butt was in the way, so I couldn't see how big his package was. The answer came when he speared himself into me. "Can you take all of me, Saige?" he asked, voice sounding strained as he held back.

My eyes bulged a bit from his girth, but I was far from small and dainty. "I can take anything you give me," I boasted.

"We're about to find out if that's true," he murmured, then thrust his hips forward. I'd been with a few men, but they'd all been human. None of them had been able to fill me like this. They'd been small and pathetic in comparison. Drake was strong, powerful and masterful. He knew exactly how much force to use as he tested my limits.

Already, my body was reacting to his smooth strokes. "Holy crap, that feels so good," I moaned, pressing myself backwards each time he thrust into me.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to hold back for much longer," he said, voice now sounding raspy with need.

My eyes had slid shut from the pleasure that was building. They popped open at that statement. I'd thought he was already giving me everything he had. "You've got more?" I asked, not sure if I'd be able to take it.

His eyes met mine and our gazes locked. "I've never gone harder than this with anyone," he said, hips still rhythmically moving backwards and forwards. "I've never been able to let go of my control before."

I could see his longing and felt exactly the same way. “Do it,” I ordered. “Lose control. Take me the way you’ve always wanted to take a woman, but never could.”

His hands tightened on my hips and need filled his face. A hint of smoke wafted from his nostrils, then he shoved himself into me hard enough to shake his heavy desk.

My body jolted at the impact, waking me from the most vivid, erotic dream of my life. My heart was racing and for a moment, I could almost feel the dragon still inside me. Then the sensation faded, leaving me feeling empty and alone. “Why the hell did I have to wake up?” I complained, flopping back down onto my bed. Too awake to try to go back to sleep, I ran the dream back through my mind. It was the best sex I’d ever had, even though it hadn’t been real and had ended before I could climax.

Mom was awake and I could faintly hear her moving around in the kitchen. My stomach rumbled, so I rolled out of bed and got dressed. It was almost eleven and I was starving.

“Morning,” mom said when I joined her. “Did you sleep well?”

“I had a vivid sex dream about Lord Gilden,” I told her. “It was so lifelike it felt like it was really happening.”

“Someone’s got a crush on the weredragon,” she teased me as I started helping her make breakfast.

“You’d have a crush on him, too, if you saw him,” I retorted. “The man is freakishly hot.”

“Maybe I’ll get to meet him one day,” she mused. She didn’t ask me the details about my dream, which was a relief. While we didn’t shy away from the topic of sex, neither of us were interested in discussing the full details of our exploits.

We retreated to the living room to game after breakfast. Both of us loved killing zombies and we often teamed up to eradicate our electronic foes. The rest of the time, I gamed in the basement on my own console.

“You should probably get ready before Ruen arrives,” mom said when the light eventually began to fade from the sky. “He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who likes to be kept waiting.”

“I haven’t seen him smile once,” I said as we ended our current gaming session. “I’m not sure he even has a sense of humor.”

“You won’t be partnered with him forever,” she said consolingly. “It’s just for a short time until you’ve proven your worth.”

“That might take longer than I’d planned, considering the disastrous first impression I made on Drake,” I said ruefully.

“He’ll soon see that you’re a better bounty hunter than the rest of the crew,” mom said confidently. “You should be, since I taught you everything you know,” she added with a complete lack of modesty.

Pouring us both a mug of coffee, I gave her a kiss on the cheek for being so awesome, then retreated to my bedroom. This time, I chose a hot pink, skintight shirt with thin straps

and a lowcut V-neck and a short black leather skirt. My legs were ultra-white where they weren't covered in tats, so I pulled black fishnet stockings on. I paired them up with black ankle boots with a two-inch heel.

“Looking good,” I said in admiration to my reflection. The belt buckle was shaped like a serpent. I put a leather choker around my neck with a matching snake in the center of it. Most of my tattoos were on display in this outfit. I'd spent an absolute fortune on them, but I loved them all and wouldn't change any of them.

Mom whistled when I entered the kitchen to wash my mug. “Wow,” she said, taking in my outfit. “The rogues will drop dead from a heart attack when they see you coming for them in that sexy outfit.”

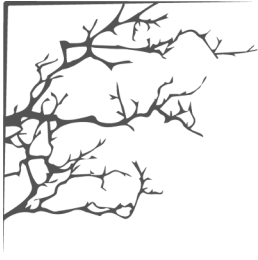
“It would save me from having to chase after them,” I said with a smirk. People were certain to ridicule me for wearing such a revealing ensemble, but they could go to hell. Women didn't need to be stick thin to be sexy. We just needed the confidence to pull off the look we were going for.

True darkness was still half an hour or so away, so we made a meal together and ate it in the dining room. We could see the TV from here and watched the news. Mom always wanted to know what was going on both at home and internationally. I suffered through it without pretending to pay attention to the boring bits.

Cleaning up after our meal, I had enough time to drink another mug of coffee, then a car pulled up outside. “Ruen's here,” I figured, excited that I would get to see my new home.

“Have fun checking out your new apartment, Lil Bish,” mom said, pulling me in for a quick hug.

“I hope it isn’t going to be a complete hovel,” I joked, then grabbed my kill-bag. I never went anywhere without at least a few weapons. Now that I was officially a bounty hunter, I needed to be ready for a mission at any moment.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



RUEN DIDN'T BOTHER to come to the door. He waited for me in a drab, nondescript black sedan that seemed to suit his personality perfectly. Waving goodbye to my mother, I shut the door and hurried down the path. My new sidekick didn't seem like the patient type. He might drive off if I took too long.

"Howdy, partner," I said brightly when I climbed into the passenger seat. He flicked a look at me, then heaved a silent sigh. Instead of taking off like a rocket as I'd expected, he drove away at a sedate speed. "Our ninety-year-old next-door-neighbor drives faster than this," I complained when he maintained a slow and steady pace.

"Need I remind you that our goal is to remain under the radar?" he said with a sneer and without taking his eyes off the road.

"What sort of name is Ruen, anyway?" I queried. "Did your parents hate you?"

"It's *Ruen*, not *Ruin*," he said, emphasizing the subtle difference in pronunciation. "My master gave me this name after he turned me."

He didn't offer any further details and he didn't seem in the mood for chitchat. I turned the radio on, switched it to a pop station, then began singing along with the song that was

playing. Ruen hunched his shoulders and did his best to pretend I wasn't sitting beside him.

It took half an hour to reach my new apartment building driving at his glacial pace. He pulled into a parking lot of a four-story brick building with two identical ones on either side. They were old, the fire escapes were decrepit and the bricks looked cheap and nasty. My excitement at having my own place waned now that I was facing reality.

“It looks better on the inside than it does on the outside,” Ruen said, picking up on my unhappiness. “All of the apartments are in good condition. The exterior hasn't been updated or repaired to make it less appealing for humans who are seeking accommodation.”

We climbed out of his car, then he led the way in through the back door. A short hallway led us past stairs leading up to the apartments and down to the basement. I could hear a washing machine spinning downstairs and figured we had in-house laundry facilities.

The elevator was in the tiny foyer at the front of the building. We rode it up to the fourth floor before getting out. My senses had picked up on several beings during the journey upwards. Most of my neighbors were out. None of the people who were home felt particularly dangerous. The distinct smell of old pee told me werecats had once lived on this floor. Cats had a habit of marking their territory.

“Your apartment is at the end of the hall,” Ruen informed me and handed over a couple of keys. I picked up my pace, eager to see the place. The vampire leaned against the wall

while I unlocked the door. "I'll wait for you here," he said. "I doubt your tour will take very long."

I saw what he meant when I pushed the door open. My apartment was just one big room, with a combined toilet and bathroom over to the right. The closet was pathetically small and wouldn't contain all of my clothing. I'd have to get a chest of drawers to store my excess gear in. The kitchenette next to the bathroom was adequate for my needs, since I was far from a gourmet cook. Knowing me, I'd mostly live on microwave meals. As for the bathroom, it was dated, but serviceable. Too small to have a tub, the shower was just big enough for me to turn around in without bumping my elbows on the walls.

All of the furniture had been removed and the place was empty. Only the appliances remained. "I'm going to have to furnish the place," I mused, turning in a circle and imagining what would go where. The floor was bare wood and I would need to get a couple of rugs.

"Are you done?" Ruen asked.

"I'm done," I confirmed, stepping back into the hall and locking the heavy metal door. I was impressed with how sturdy it was. It even had a metal bar that could be drawn across it for added security, just in case the enemies I was bound to make ever came after me. "Where are we going now?" I queried as we headed for the elevator. "Do we have a job lined up?"

"I'm taking you to see the fence your colleagues sell their coins and other valuable items to," he said.

“And after that? Will we be hunting someone down and bringing them to justice?”

He cut a look at me before returning his attention to the road. “Lord Gilden wants you to settle into your new home first. We’ll be given tasks that are appropriate for your level of skills as they come up.”

I scowled that the human hunters would no doubt be getting more missions than me, at least until I’d proven myself. I could outhunt them both with my hands tied behind my back. Subsiding into sullen silence, I crossed my arms and slouched down in my seat.

Glad to have peace and quiet for a change, my partner slowly made his way to a seedier area of Nexus. He found a parking spot on the street across from the store we’d come to visit. I climbed out and smirked at the title. “Pierre’s Paraphernalia? That’s a fancy name for a pawn shop.”

“Pierre thinks very highly of himself,” Ruen said as he opened his door. “Most shifters do,” he added dourly. Obviously, there was no love lost between the pair.

The lights were on and a sign proclaimed the store was open twenty-four-seven. Ruen entered and I followed on his heels. The smell of dust, stale food and rodent hit me when I stepped inside. Everywhere I turned, I saw shelves and racks full of junk. There was everything from furniture, lamps, vintage clothing, toys, jewelry and hundreds of other items.

A wereweasel was lying on the counter at the back of the room. His body was long and slinky and his fur was slightly matted. He grinned at us, then the shifter transformed into his

human guise. “Long time no see, Ruen,” he said in greeting, unbothered that his junk was on display. And I wasn’t talking about his wares.

“Ugh, put some pants on, will you, Pierre?” the vamp said in disgust.

“Who’s this?” Pierre asked, eyeing me like I was a tasty treat.

I’d expected him to have a French accent, but he was a local. It wasn’t easy to tear my gaze away from his genitals and up to his face. In his forties, he was slender, had scraggly brown hair, squinty eyes and a pointed nose. He might be a wereweasel, but he was hung like a werehorse. “I’m Saige Sterling,” I said as he propped his head on his hand, making no move to get up. “I’m Lord Gilden’s newest bounty hunter.”

“Ahh, another brave huntress has been brought into the fold,” he said with a smirk. “I suppose the bloodsucker has brought you here to exchange the dragon’s precious gold coins for cash?”

“Yep,” I said, eyes drawn back to his hardening member.

“Either put pants on, or I’ll put them on you myself,” Ruen said threateningly.

Pierre rolled his eyes, then sat up. He hopped off the counter to pull on the clothes he’d left on the floor. “He has no sense of humor,” the weasel told me when he turned around again.

“I’ve noticed,” I replied with a bland expression, trying to pretend he wasn’t sporting a huge woody. Clearly, the shifter

was an exhibitionist and liked showing off his manhood. “What if we’d been humans?” I asked. “They would have freaked out if they’d seen you in your weasel form.”

“I would have smelled their scents as they’d entered and ducked into the back room to change,” he said, hiking his thumb at the door behind him. “May I see the coins?” he asked, holding his hand out.

Glad I’d brought them with me, I took my wallet out and dug around for the heavy gold pieces. “That’s all of them,” I said, dropping them onto his palm.

“You’ve already completed several jobs for Lord Gilden?” he asked as he examined them.

“Nope. They’re all from the same job last night,” I boasted.

The weasel looked at the vamp for confirmation. He whistled, impressed when Ruen nodded. “You killed seven rogues in one night? What species were they?”

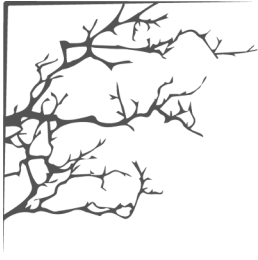
“His kind,” I replied, pointing at my partner.

“I thought your master wouldn’t allow you to kill anything,” Pierre said with a frown.

“My restrictions are still in place,” Ruen told him.

Pierre looked at me as if he was seeing me for the first time. Looking past my outfit, hair and tattoos, he stared into my eyes as if searching my very soul. “I have a feeling you’re going to be an interesting addition to the team.”

“I aim to be the best bounty hunter in Nexus,” I declared. Instead of snorting in amusement, both men exchanged glances. I’d taken down seven vampires on my own without sustaining any injuries. I’d only been on the team for one night and I was already becoming a legend.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



PIERRE SHOOK OFF HIS surprise that I was more than just a pretty face with a voluptuous body. “I pay the bounty hunters electronically, since they’re regular customers with specialized items to trade,” he said, turning professional. “You’ll need to give me your account details the next time you come in.”

“Get with the times, grandpa,” I said, holding up my phone. “Everyone does internet banking on these newfangled devices now.”

He smirked at my sarcasm. “Not all supernatural beings trust modern technology. Most wouldn’t trust me with their bank account details.”

“Why should *I* trust you with them?” I asked, realizing it was stupid to hand my account numbers over without knowing more about him.

“Pierre has been working with Lord Gilden for two decades,” Ruen said. “He knows better than to cross any of our employer’s people.”

“I like my head where it is,” the wereweasel shrugged, implying he’d lose it if he screwed up. “Give me your details and I’ll transfer the payment to you.”

I didn’t know the numbers off the top of my head, so I brought them up on my phone and rattled them off. He used his own phone to transfer me the funds. I goggled when five

thousand dollars appeared in my account. “Ruen said the coins were rare and expensive, but I didn’t know they were worth that much!” I exclaimed.

“Hunting rogues is dangerous work,” he said. “Just wait until your boss sends you after something truly perilous. You’ll faint when he rewards you.” He grinned widely, showing me slightly turned in teeth that needed a good scrubbing.

“I can’t wait,” I said in anticipation.

“May I suggest purchasing a safe to store your valuables in until you can bring them here and exchange them for money?” Pierre said.

“Is that really necessary?” I asked skeptically.

“Most bounty hunters have safes,” Ruen told me. “Everyone who knows them is aware of what they do for a living. Some idiots are tempted to steal from them.”

“In that case, let me see what you’ve got,” I agreed.

“Right this way, pretty lady,” the rodent said, stepping over to the door to the second room. Ruen surprised me by accompanying me behind the counter. He preceded me into the room, then stepped aside to let me enter.

The back room was almost as large as the front one. Stairs led to the upper floor and a doorway led to a bathroom. Rows of metal shelves were neatly lined up, marching to the back of the room. Most items were in boxes rather than being out in the open. I sensed a spell on the door that would repel humans. Clearly, this merchandise was strictly for non-humans.

Pierre crossed to a shelf that held safes in varying sizes. “Does anything catch your eye?”

I examined them to find they were all pretty much the same. Made of dense metal, some had electronic locks and others had dials. None had price tags. “I’ll take that one,” I said, choosing a small silver one that was about twelve inches square. It had an electronic lock.

“It’s heavy,” he warned me when I reached for it.

“Not to me,” I said with a shrug when I picked it up. One of Ruen’s eyebrows lifted in surprise before he could control it. Pierre gaped at me, no doubt wondering exactly what I was. “How much does it cost?” I asked.

“A grand,” the wereweasel replied, then smirked when my eyes bulged. “I’ll knock a couple of hundred bucks off the price, since you’re a newbie.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“I’ll deduct it from your payment the next time you come in,” he said magnanimously.

This was apparently the only place where I could exchange my bounties for money, so I didn’t have much choice. He escorted us from the room and pulled the door shut. “I’ll see you next time,” I said as Ruen slouched towards the exit.

“You know where I am if you’re ever looking for a hookup,” the rodent said with a lecherous wink.

I found his slim, almost boneless looking body to be slightly repellant and had to suppress a shudder. Ruen opened

the trunk for me to deposit my new safe into it. "I'll take you home now," he said.

"Is that it?" I asked. "Aren't you going to show me the ropes and teach me the usual process of bounty hunting?" I didn't know what Lord Gildden's rules were and he was going to have to train me.

"The process is so simple, even a newbie like you should be able to grasp it," he told me when we were seated in his car. "A job comes up, a team is chosen to undertake the task, then they visit Lord Gildden for payment once they've accomplished their mission. That's it."

"Who chooses a team for each job?" I asked.

"Lord Gildden has a small team who makes those decisions. Jobs are handed out according to skill levels and abilities."

"So, I just sit around, waiting to be called in to kill something?"

"Exactly," he confirmed, pleased that I understood. "You should spend your free time searching for suitable furnishings for your new apartment," he suggested.

"What if a job comes up while I'm in the middle of shopping for a new bed?"

He heaved another silent sigh at my persistence. "I highly doubt anything will come up that will require your skills immediately, Ms. Sterling."

Clearly, the team who handed out the jobs weren't even going to consider me if anything came up. If I hadn't needed to furnish my new place and transfer my belongings to it, I

would have taken offense. “Fine. Drop me off at home so I can move my stuff to my apartment,” I said grudgingly.

He was already heading back to my mother’s house anyway and didn’t need to alter his route. “I’ll need your phone number,” Ruen said when he glided to a stop at the bungalow. We exchanged numbers and I climbed out. I took my safe out of his trunk, then he drove off without even bothering to wave.

“What a fanghole,” I muttered, then transferred the safe to my own car.

Mom hadn’t expected me back so soon. She leaned sideways to turn and look at me when I opened the door. She was in the middle of gaming and had hit the pause button. “What happened? You didn’t get fired already, did you?”

“Of course not,” I said in amusement, trudging down the hall to sit on my recliner. I told her about my night so far. “I’ll leave most of my furniture here, but I’ll take whatever will fit into my car,” I finished up.

“We can put some of your stuff in my car and I’ll follow you over there,” mom offered. “We might as well get started now. It’ll go a lot faster if we work together.”

I’d hoped she would help me and I made coffee while she ended her gaming session. Fortified with caffeine, we trudged down to the basement to pack my stuff.

We used every suitcase we owned to pack my clothes into, then shoved them into our cars. I managed to squeeze my TV, gaming console and collection of videogames into my ride.

Mom was able to fit my trunk full of weapons in her yellow sedan. None of my furniture would fit into our vehicles, so I decided to leave them all behind, just in case I ever needed to return.

Mom followed me to my building and helped me haul some suitcases up to my apartment. “It’s not bad,” she said, assessing the empty room. “Your bed can go there,” she added, pointing at a spot directly across from the door beneath the only window. “If you put a screen up, you’ll feel like you’ve got a bedroom rather than a studio apartment.”

“Good idea,” I agreed. “I was thinking of putting my TV there, with a coffee table and a couch,” I said, pointing to the left of the door. The plugs for a TV were already in place, dictating where it would have to go.

We carried the rest of my gear upstairs in several trips. I’d have to go shopping at a secondhand store in the daytime and have everything I needed delivered.

“You can’t sleep on the floor, so you’ll have to come home for tonight,” mom said when we were done.

I packed a bag to take with me, then locked my door. “I finally feel like an actual adult now,” I said as we headed to the elevator for a final time. We both carried her now empty suitcases to return to her bungalow. I’d left my clothes piled up on my suitcases.

“My Lil Bish is all grown up,” she said with a fond smile just as the elevator arrived.

One of my neighbors stepped out and stared at us like we were aliens. “Who are you?” she asked us warily.

I sensed she was a werepig and wasn't particularly strong. “I just moved into the apartment at the end of the hall,” I said without introducing myself or my mother. I wasn't sure if I wanted to get to know my neighbors yet.

“Did you hear about the last tenants who lived there?” the sow asked. “They were torn apart and their bodies had to be picked up with shovels.”

“I heard,” I confirmed.

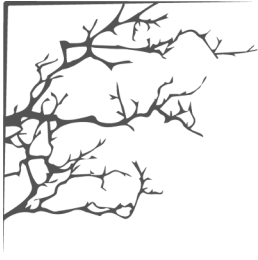
“That's what happens to idiot bounty hunters who think they can police Nexus,” she said with a sneer. “I pity the poor moron they get to replace them.”

“That would be me,” I told her coolly.

Her face reddened at her faux par. “Oh. I'm sure you won't end up like the werewolves did,” she said, sidling past us to edge towards her apartment. “It was really nice to meet you. Good luck with your new job and welcome to the building.” She slipped through the door that another werepig opened for her, then vanished from sight.

“I can hear them laughing in there,” mom said darkly as we stepped into the elevator. Her hearing was far sharper than mine.

“Just ignore them,” I said. “I'll prove I've got what it takes to become the most badass bounty hunter in the city.” Or I'd die trying, I added mentally. I tried to conjure up a mental laugh at my silent joke, but couldn't quite manage it.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



IT TOOK ME A FEW DAYS to buy all the furniture I needed and to have it delivered to my apartment. I bought a bamboo screen and placed it at the foot of my bed to act as a wall. A huge chest of drawers contained everything that wasn't hanging up in the closet. My couch was black, faux leather and a bit lumpy, but comfortable enough. The coffee table was stained with rings from generations of spillages. I'd managed to nab a queen size bed and brand-new mattress for a good price. I even had a couple of colorful rugs. The only thing I didn't have was a dining table. There wasn't enough room for one anyway, so I just used the coffee table to eat my meals on instead.

I was happy with my new lodgings by the end of my first week in my new place. I was slowly getting to know my neighbors by sight, if not by name. None of them were particularly friendly, which was fine by me. I didn't want them hanging out at my place anyway.

My trunk full of weapons stood next to the door for quick and easy access. The safe I'd bought from the weasel sat on a small shelf in my closet. I was pretty sure the previous residents had installed it to put their own safe on. Once I filled the closet with clothes, the safe was pretty well hidden. Anyone with half a braincell would be able to find it, but at least it wasn't sitting out in the open, begging to be stolen.

Feeling restless and not in the mood to game for once, I decided to visit the Den of Iniquity. So far, Ruen hadn't called me and neither had Lord Gilden's team who handed out our jobs. I chose a short black velvet dress and paired it up with knee-high black boots and fishnet stockings.

"Damn, girl!" I said to my reflection, ogling my boobs that bulged from the pushup bra I was wearing. "You look as sexy as hell!"

Feeling confident and sophisticated now that I was fully independent and had an awesome job, I grabbed my kill-bag and headed for my car. The orange hatchback didn't exactly enhance my reputation of a dangerous bounty hunter. I parked it a block away from the club and went the rest of the way on foot.

One of the best things about the Den was that there wasn't a long line of desperate customers to contend with. A different bouncer was on the door. Attractive, in a harsh kind of way, she had short blonde hair and a muscular body. The werewolf looked me up and down in amusement when I approached her. "Solicitation isn't allowed in the Den," she told me.

"I'm not a ho," I said with an eyeroll.

"You're dressed like a ho," she retorted. Her gaze dropped to my fishnet stockings and three-inch boots. I towered over her by a few inches, but she wasn't intimidated by my height. She probably thought she could toss me across the street without any effort. Little did she know that the opposite was true.

"Are you going to let me in, or what?" I demanded.

“Lenny will throw you out if you try to pick up any clients in here,” she warned me.

“I’m a bounty hunter, not a prostitute,” I insisted in annoyance.

She smirked in recognition. “You must be the newbie I’ve heard so much about. In that case, you can go right in.”

This time, I didn’t bother to hand over a tip as I sauntered past her. Heads turned when I stepped into the club. Some swung away again, but a lot of men stared at me hungrily. Swinging my hips like the sexy woman I knew I was, I strode over to the bar.

Lenny was wearing a hideous electric blue shirt with disturbing red splotches all over it. It looked like someone had bled out on him before dying at his feet. Vampires kept stealing longing glances at him, as if they wanted to suck the nonexistent blood from his shirt.

Spying me, the zombie’s face lit up in recognition. “Welcome back, Saige!” he said and poured me a beer before I could ask.

“Hey, Lenny,” I said and took a seat at the bar. “Mom says hi, by the way.”

“Pearl remembers me?” he asked in apparent surprise and happiness. “Tell her she can drop by anytime. I still remember her favorite drink.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, interest and curiosity picking up. Alcohol didn’t affect mom, so she rarely bothered to drink it.

I'd only had one beer so far and I didn't know what my limits were. "What is it?" I queried.

He tapped his nose and I winced in dread that it might fall off and land in my drink. It held firm, thank the stars. "It's a secret," he said in a loud whisper.

"I wouldn't want you to break a sacred oath not to tell," I said solemnly, then paid for my drink.

The zombie had other customers to serve, so I swiveled around on my stool to watch the crowd. I recognized a few people from my first visit here and wondered how often they came to the club. It seemed to be busy every night, rather than just on the weekends like human clubs.

Laughter from a corner of the room caught my attention. I glanced over, then did a doubletake when I saw my colleagues gathered around a table. Seeing two werelions, two vamps and two humans together should have been a curiosity to most of the patrons. No one was giving them a second glance, which meant they had to be regulars.

Annoyance, jealousy and a sense of ostracism mixed inside me as I watched them chatting away. Ruen and I should have been with them, but neither of us had been invited. Speaking of my partner, I hadn't seen or heard from him since he'd given me the keys to my apartment, then dropped me at mom's place. So far, he was a lousy sidekick.

One of the werelions glanced over at the bar and spotted me. He leaned in to say something to the other bounty hunters. Their heads all swung towards me. I raised my glass in a sarcastic salute, then took a gulp of beer as if I didn't care that

I hadn't been invited to their gathering. "Snobby a-holes," I muttered beneath my breath.

They conferred for a few seconds and the skinny redhead shook her head in denial. Both lions gestured at me, then looked at the vamps. The male nodded and his partner shrugged. The redhead's partner shrugged as well when the shifters looked at him. She scowled, then snatched up a shot glass of amber liquid and tossed it back.

Smiling in victory, the werelion I'd thrown across Drake's office gestured at me to join them. I was tempted to flip them the bird, but I put my pride aside for once. This was the opportunity I needed to get on their good sides. I might have to work with them on some of the more dangerous missions. We didn't need to be friends, but we needed to at least be civil to each other.

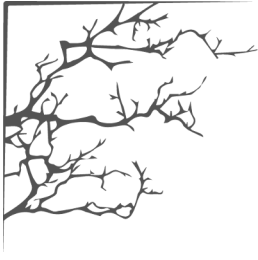
A finger tapped me on the shoulder before I could stand up. I turned to see Lenny placing a fresh glass of beer on a tray full of drinks. "Take this to your fellow hunters, will you?" he requested. "That one's on the house," he added, pointing at the beer he'd just poured for me.

"Thanks, Lenny," I said, now seeing why my mom was so fond of him. He was a good guy, for a walking corpse.

Lifting the tray with practiced expertise, I easily held it over my head with one hand. I'd worked as a waitress parttime for a couple of years and had been damn good at it. Fingers pinched my butt as I worked my way through the crowd. I turned to glare at the shifter, who winked in invitation. He wasn't bad looking, so I smirked instead of punching his lights

out. I gave him a nod that I'd see him later. He grinned and nodded back, content to wait until I was ready for him.

Fresh confidence in my sex appeal and general hotness put a spring in my step as I crossed to my colleagues. The redhead's scowl deepened, but not even her disapproval was going to ruin my night. I was about to talk shop with my fellow bounty hunters, then make a man out of the werecougar who'd pinched my butt. Things were definitely looking up for me.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“YOU’RE SAIGE, RIGHT?” the werelion who’d called me over asked. “I’m Hugh and my partner is Theo.” Both werecats were around six feet tall, had muscular bodies and shaggy blond hair. From the way they were leaning against each other, they were partners in every sense of the word. They wore t-shirts and jeans and weren’t sporting any weapons at the moment.

“Hey,” I said in greeting as they picked up their empty glasses so I could put the tray down. “It’s nice to meet you all.”

“I’m Otis,” the human guy told me, then gestured at the pouting redhead. “This is Felicity.” Again, I had the sense that the hunters were a couple. Otis was average height, handsome and had brown hair. He had a muscular body beneath his polo shirt and trousers. Felicity wore a tailored navy-blue suit that didn’t suit this kind of environment. I could see the outline of daggers strapped to her wrists beneath her jacket. She didn’t bother to acknowledge me and grabbed a shot glass from the tray. Her red hair was in a ponytail and her neck looked ridiculously slender.

“I’m Zahir,” the male vampire said, then bowed. He had swarthy skin, black hair and dark eyes. His shirt was dark gray, with long sleeves and his trousers were black. Both looked expensive. Short and slightly built, he would be fast and agile. “My wife is Yareli,” he added. His wife was a

couple of inches taller than him and kept her hair cropped close to her head. She wore a long, flowing black dress that probably hid a multitude of weapons.

“Where’s your partner, Saige?” Otis asked, looking around for Ruen and not seeing him anywhere.

“Probably locked away in a coffin somewhere,” I joked. Otis snickered and Felicity glared at him. Clearly, she hated my guts. Probably because I’d embarrassed her in front of our hot weredragon boss when I’d caught the dagger she’d thrown at me.

“You should spend more time with Ruen to get to know him,” Hugh advised me, putting his arm around Theo’s waist. “You two need to become a cohesive unit if you’re going to work well together.”

“Ruen isn’t my partner the same way you’re all partners,” I pointed out.

“Vampires would never lower themselves to pair up with whatever type of creature you are,” Felicity said with a fake smile. “Lord Gilde must have ordered Ruen to work with you.”

“I’m not a frail little human who needs backup like you do,” I said with a fake smile of my own. “Ruen’s only going to be my partner until I’ve learned the ropes. I’ll be a solo hunter after that.”

“Lord Gilde doesn’t allow us to hunt alone,” Yareli said. Her accent was stronger than her husband’s. I was pretty sure

they were Egyptian. While she didn't hate me like Felicity did, her manner was distantly cool.

"Why not?" I asked, then took a sip of beer. So far, alcohol wasn't affecting me. I probably had my mom's imperviousness to it.

"Our work is too dangerous," Theo said. "Sometimes, the things we hunt are too powerful for one person to handle. You heard about what happened to the werewolves you and Ruen are replacing?"

"They were torn apart by an unknown monster and their remains had to be picked up with shovels," I replied before anyone could beat me to it.

"Exactly," Hugh said, tightening his hold on his partner in dread. "We don't know what killed them, which is a perfect example of why Lord Gilden won't let us hunt alone. There were no clues for us to follow when we examined the bodies."

"Not even Yareli or I could detect the scents of the attackers," Zahir said.

"Where were they killed?" I asked, feeling a bit spooked by their unease.

"Near one of the entrances to the sewers that lead to Sector G," Otis said. "The only scents these guys could pick up was sewage."

"We think it was smeared on their remains deliberately, to cover the killers' trail," Theo said.

"My mom told me Sector G was the most dangerous place in Nexus back when she was a bounty hunter," I said, trying to

hide a shiver.

“Nothing has changed since your mother’s time,” Hugh said. “If anything, Sector G is probably worse now.”

“Why doesn’t Drake send us all in to clean it out?”

“No one knows who or what is living down there,” Felicity said in annoyance at my lack of knowledge. “There could be a pack of demons hiding out in there for all we know. None of us are stupid enough to take on demons. Even one can be highly dangerous. An entire pack could wipe out half the city if they’re riled up.”

Otis looked like he was going to roll his eyes, then thought better of it when she glanced at him. “It’s only a rumor that demons are hiding out in the sewers,” he said. I noticed they were both wearing necklaces with the same teardrop shaped green stones. I could feel magic coming from them and figured they allowed them to enter places that normally kept their kind out.

“Even if they are, they’ll be low-level hell spawn,” Zahir figured. “If a powerful demon was residing in Nexus, they would have made their presence known by now.”

“Which realm of the underworld do demons come from?” I asked, hating my lack of knowledge. Mom had always been a loner, but she’d picked up some information along the way. This was something she didn’t have an answer for.

“They reside in all realms,” Yareli said. “The worst ones come from the ninth realm. I’ve heard their overlord is supposed to be a powerful demon.” Each realm was run by an

overlord. All of the realms were linked to each other and to our world.

We were talking quietly, but glances were thrown our way by beings with enhanced hearing. From their haunted expressions, some of them had had dealings with demons.

“This isn’t the place for this discussion,” Felicity said bossily. “We shouldn’t be talking about our business in public.”

The werelions gave her almost identical sardonic looks, as if they discussed their jobs in public all the time. Otis changed the topic to make her happy. He began talking about a new restaurant they intended to visit for dinner.

Hugh’s cell phone rang a few minutes later. Theo went on full alert as he listened in. “We’ll be there soon,” Hugh said, then the call ended. “Duty calls,” he said with a grin, pleased that he and his mate had a job to do. They both downed their drinks, then linked fingers and headed for the door.

“We should go, too,” Felicity said, seizing her chance to distance herself from me. “We wouldn’t want to be late for our reservation.”

Otis nodded amiably, then they finished their drinks. “It was good to meet you, Saige,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll get a chance to work with you soon.”

I had my doubts about that, but nodded in agreement. “I’ll see you later,” I said, then turned to the vamps. “Are you heading off, too?” I asked.

“We don’t want to be rude and leave you here by yourself,” Yareli said with stark honesty.

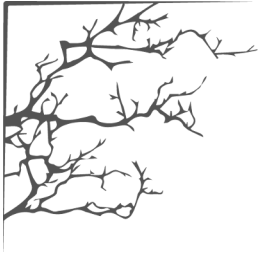
“I’ve got a date lined up,” I told her. “I won’t be alone for long.”

“In that case, let’s take a stroll outside and see if we can find a snack,” Zahir said to his wife with a grin. Vampires could easily ensnare humans, drink a small amount of their blood and force them to forget about it. Most bloodsuckers were careful not to leave their bites in obvious places.

My colleagues vanished into the crowd and I picked up my glass of beer to skull it. When I put the empty glass down on the table, I turned to find the cute shifter standing directly in front of me. He had sandy blond hair and was already getting hard at the prospect of seeing me naked. “Are we going to do this, or what?” he asked.

“Your place or mine?” I retorted.

“I don’t want to wait that long. Let’s get a room upstairs,” he suggested, then took my hand to tug me towards the stairs.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THE BOUNCER WHO WAS guarding the staircase put his hand up to stop us when we reached him. He was another huge, bearded werebear. “Solicitation isn’t allowed in this establishment,” he said in a deep voice.

“I’m not a ho,” I said with an eyeroll.

“We want to hire a room for an hour,” my companion said, then turned to me. “Do you have a couple of hundred bucks on you?”

“We have to pay to use the rooms?” I asked in surprise.

“This is a classy place,” the werebear said. “It costs money to keep the rooms clean. We don’t let just anyone use our equipment.”

His tone was affronted, as if I’d insulted his personal hygiene. “Okay, fine, I’ll pay for a room for an hour,” I said. If I hadn’t been so horny, I’d have stalked out of the club in annoyance. But I had a cute guy who was a sure thing right in front of me. I wasn’t about to turn down the chance to have sex with a shifter. I’d been wondering what it would be like to be with a non-human. It was time to satisfy my curiosity, so I handed over my credit card.

The werebear scanned it on his work phone, then handed it back. “Have a pleasant time,” he said suggestively, then stepped aside to let us up the stairs.

Another bouncer met us on the second floor. “The second room on the right is available,” she said, pointing the way. Whores weren’t allowed to work in the establishment, but they had no problem with couples renting their rooms, it seemed.

My date impatiently tugged on my hand and I hurried to keep up with him. I had no idea what to expect when he pushed the door open. Whips, chains and manacles flashed through my mind. Reality turned out to be far less kinky. A king size bed sat against the far wall. Instead of sheets, a plastic cover protected the mattress. A chest of drawers stood next to the bed. The drawers were open to display a wide variety of sex toys. A heavy scent of disinfectant hung in the air, making it smell like a hospital room. As far as romance went, I’d give it zero out of five stars.

“I’m Clay,” the cougar said, closing the door and locking it.

“I’m Saige,” I replied, wishing I’d downed a few more beers to make this less awkward.

“I love big women,” Clay said, stepping forward to cup my breasts.

“I wouldn’t call myself big,” I denied as he buried his face between my boobs. “I’m voluptuous,” I added, finding it suddenly getting harder to breathe as he yanked my strapless bra and dress down.

Clay’s mouth latched onto my nipple and his hands went to the hem of my short dress. He pulled it up as he maneuvered me towards the bed. “You have the biggest butt I’ve seen in ages,” he said in approval and sank his fingers into my flesh.

I knew I should have been offended, but desire was rising inside me. Usually, I gave anyone who described me in a bad way a verbal smackdown. Clay seemed to worship bigger girls, so who was I to deny him his fantasy. “Make sure you wear a condom,” I reminded him as he pulled back to strip his shirt off. He had a nice body, if not quite as muscular as I liked.

Leaving me long enough to search the chest of drawers, he held up a condom in triumph. “This is going to be hard and fast,” he warned me, then took his jeans off. While he wasn’t huge in the downstairs area, he was big enough to get the job done, or so I hoped.

The werecougar donned protection, then moved me back until I sat down on the bed. He grabbed hold of my legs before I could scoot backwards, then pulled my thong aside and shoved himself into me. “Oh, yeah,” he moaned, then leaned down to squish his face between my boobs again.

Hooking my calves around his thighs, I tried to get into the mood as Clay thrustled into me wildly. The desire he’d coaxed to life was waning at the muffled snorts and snuffles that came from between my breasts. I closed my eyes and an image of Drake Gilden came to mind. I pictured him standing above me, sliding his shaft in and out of me while he sucked hard on my nipple.

“That’s it, baby,” Clay crooned when I clenched around him. “I’m gonna make you feel so good,” he vowed.

Ignoring him as best I could, I locked eyes with Drake’s golden orbs in my mind. He pinned my hands against the

mattress and bent to nuzzle my neck. His teeth scraped against my skin and hot air wafted from his mouth. He was losing control of himself and his inner dragon was coming out.

In my imagination, Lord Gilden's powerful thighs drove him into me over and over. I could feel an orgasm building and knew it was going to be epic. Then Clay grunted in ecstasy and slumped over me, spent. "I'm not done, yet!" I exclaimed in dismay.

"Sorry," he mumbled, then pulled out and shoved two fingers inside me. I was close enough to the edge for him to push me over it as his fingers took over from his shaft. While I climaxed, it felt lame in comparison to what I'd been on the brink of in my fantasy. "Was it good for you?" he asked, tone smug like he thought he was a sex god.

"Sure," I replied, feeling strangely disappointed, despite my orgasm.

"We've still got plenty of time left. Do you want to go for another round?" he suggested.

"Why not?" I said with a shrug. Maybe I'd be able to conjure up the fantasy of Drake again and have a mind-blowing climax this time.

Clay couldn't evoke the same desire that I felt when I pictured Lord Gilden. I had to bring up the image of the weredragon again when the cougar donned a condom for our second round. This time, I lay on my stomach with Clay behind me. It was so similar to my sex dream about Drake that I moaned when he slid into me. He was nowhere near as well-

endowed as the man of my fantasies, but my imagination made up for it.

“I’ll last longer this time,” Clay promised and began to thrust into me rhythmically.

My fingers clenched the plastic that covered the mattress and I heard it tear. The shifter slapped my butt and I jerked in reaction. “Do that again!” I ordered and he complied. Imagining it was Drake behind me, pumping hard and fast and spanking my butt cheeks made my lust flare to life.

“Mmm, that’s it, baby,” Clay said, slapping me hard enough to leave welts if I’d been human. It didn’t even sting a little bit, but he didn’t know that. I drowned out his voice and shoved myself backwards each time he thrust forward. This time, he held on long enough for my orgasm to crash over me. Waves of ecstasy pulsed through me as I pictured Lord Gilden’s magnificent body standing behind me. He pumped a few more times, then collapsed onto the bed next to me. “I always please the ladies,” Clay said smugly.

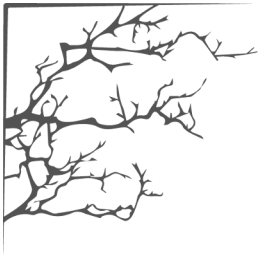
“You sure do,” I agreed, standing up to tug my clothes back into place. I wasn’t about to burst his bubble and tell him I’d been picturing another man inside me. “Well, it was nice to meet you, but I’ve got to go,” I added.

“I hope I’ll see you again sometime,” Clay said without bothering to ask me for my number. Neither of us wanted a relationship. We’d only been after a one-night stand and now it was time for us to part ways.

“I’m sure you will,” I said, then headed for the door.

The bouncers' noses twitched, no doubt smelling the cougar on me as I sauntered back downstairs without waiting for Clay to follow me. I waved at Lenny, who lifted his hand that was missing a couple of fingers in return, then headed for the exit. All I wanted to do after that epic orgasm was take a shower, make a hot cup of coffee and chill out while playing videogames for a few hours.

While I hadn't been given a job to hunt down and kill a rogue, I'd still had a good night. I'd met my colleagues and had chatted with them like I was one of them and I'd gotten laid. What else could an elite bounty hunter like me ask for?



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I RECEIVED A CALL FROM Ruen a couple of nights after meeting my colleagues at the Den. “What’s up, partner?” I asked, lounging on my couch and pausing my videogame. It was after one in the morning, but I didn’t intend to sleep for a few hours yet.

“We’ve just been allocated a job,” the vamp said.

“Really?” I asked in shock.

“Why else would I be calling you?” he retorted. “I’m not the type to make inane phone calls.”

“What’s the job?” I asked instead of making a snarky comeback.

“I’ll fill you in when I pick you up,” he said, then hung up before I could ask him how long he would be.

Looking down at my hot pink leggings and ratty white t-shirt, I knew I’d never live it down if I was seen in public wearing this outfit. I ended my game, then hurried over to my closet to get changed. It only took a few minutes to pull on something appropriate and gather my weapons.

A horn honked in the parking lot and I crossed to my window to peer downwards. Ruen’s bland black car was parked next to my orange hatchback. I waved and he deigned to nod in return.

“He’s so warm and friendly,” I murmured sarcastically, shouldering my kill-bag and hurrying to the door before he could lose his patience and drive away. Ruen’s engine was running when I reached his car. I climbed in and he began backing out even before I closed the door. “What’s the rush?” I asked.

“I want to get this job finished before dawn,” he replied, yet drove just below the speed limit when he hit the road.

“What are we hunting this time?” I queried.

“Demons,” was his succinct answer. “Several of them, from what I was told.”

I gaped at him in horror. “*What?* I thought demons were too dangerous for a newb like me to handle and I’m supposed to hunt down several of them?”

“These targets are the lowest on the demon hierarchy,” the vamp said, enjoying my momentary fright. “I’m sure you won’t have any trouble dealing with them. They have no power in their human forms. Felicity and Otis have wiped out plenty of rogue demons like them without suffering any damage.”

He slid a look at me and I knew I’d just been issued a challenge. “Fine,” I grumbled. “Mom and I took down a few weak demons last year. I’m sure this pack won’t be a problem for me.” We rode in silence for a few blocks, but he didn’t offer me any further information. “What do you know about them?” I asked.

“The location where they’re hiding and not much more.” He was surlier than usual, so I subsided back into silence.

Ruen drove to a neighborhood where people walked with one hand on their wallets and didn’t make eye contact with anyone.

“Are you sure this is the place?” I asked doubtfully, eyeing the decrepit building as my pallid vampiric partner assistant drove past it. It looked like it was about to fall down. Only desperate people would live in a crap hole like this.

“I’m quite sure,” he replied. “I can hear the perpetrators discussing their latest victim,” he informed me. “Believe me, you don’t want to hear the details.” Turning the corner, he drove around the block, then pulled into an empty parking space a hundred yards away from where my targets were lurking.

“It still freaks me out how sharp vamps’ hearing is,” I said with a small scowl.

“Shh!” Ruen admonished me, squinting at the building across the road and several doors down. He listened intently, probably filtering out all the other noises from the apartment buildings that surrounded us. “You need to get in there now,” he urged me. “They’re planning to leave soon to search for their next conquest.”

“Boy, will they be in for a surprise when I knock on their door,” I said as I opened my door to climb out. “The last thing they’ll expect is to have a helpless little woman like me begging for help.”

Moving with spooky silence and speed, Ruen joined me at the back of his black sedan. He rolled his eyes at my description of myself, upper lip lifted high enough to show a hint of fang. “How are you possibly going to conceal any weapons beneath that outfit?” he asked as I delved into my kill-bag that I’d placed on his trunk.

I glanced down at my slinky, lowcut red top that barely covered my bra. “I guess I’ll have to stick a machete down the back of my pants,” I said with a shrug.

“Your leather trousers are far too tight to stick anything down them,” he told me prissily. “How are you supposed to run after your targets if they escape?” he added in a nagging tone.

Heaving a sigh, I studied my black suede ankle-high boots. They only had two-inch heels, but he had a point. “I won’t give them a chance to run,” I figured with a shrug.

Thin lips pinched shut in disapproval, Ruen watched me pull a short, compact machete from my bag. I’d added more weapons to my arsenal, so I’d be ready for anything. I had a small crossbow, holy water, a bunch of silver stakes, knives and other stabbing implements to choose from. My sawn-off shotgun wouldn’t fit, so I might need to think about getting a bigger bag.

Only an idiot would stick a bare blade down their pants. I tried to shove the sheath down the back of my trousers, but was having trouble without a mirror to help me position it correctly.

“Give it here!” my unwilling accomplice snapped and snatched the weapon from me.

I turned my back to him to hide my smug smile. I had a feeling it would become a petty pleasure to make Ruen assist me with duties that he hadn't signed up for. My smile turned into a grimace when he rammed about six inches of the sheath into my pants. “Ow! Did you have to jam it in so hard?” I complained. It had barely stung when it had scraped my skin, but he didn't know that.

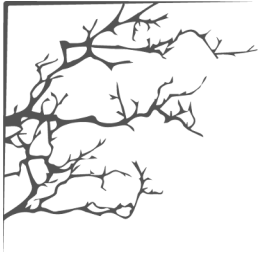
He lifted his hand and sternly pointed at the apartment building. “Hurry up and get in there before they get away!” he hissed.

Rolling my eyes at his theatrics, I jogged across the road. Only having one weapon ready when facing multiple foes wasn't a smart move, but I needed the advantage of surprise. There was no way they'd open the door if they saw I was armed. The door might be reinforced like mine was and would be hard to kick down. Besides, I didn't think I'd need more than one blade, since I was dealing with such low-level adversaries.

The elevator was out of order when I entered the foyer. “Figures,” I said sourly, then began hoofing it up the stairs. While I didn't have enhanced hearing, one of my talents kicked in. I could feel my enemies four floors above me. There were eight lesser demons and one weapon would be plenty to eradicate them.

I was breathing hard by the time I reached the top floor. Bending over to rest my hands on my knees, I waited for my

heart to stop racing. I was glad Ruen wasn't here to witness this embarrassing scene. He would no doubt get on my case about not being fit enough to keep up with the bad guys. So what if I couldn't run them down like an Olympic athlete? I had my ways of dealing with scumbags and none of them involved sprinting.



CHAPTER NINETEEN



MY MONSTER RADAR LED me to a door halfway along the hall. Hushed voices came from inside. They seemed to be arguing about something. The timing couldn't have been more perfect, since they were distracted. I tried the handle to find it was locked, so I couldn't barge in and start swinging my machete around.

“Time for plan B,” I murmured, then knocked on the door.

The voices went silent, then I sensed one of the demons approaching the door. Yanking it open, he looked like a normal, if scruffy human. His hair was short, greasy and matted. It made my skin crawl just to look at it. “Yeah? What do you want?” he asked with a scowl. Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt that hadn't been washed in recent weeks, I could smell the foul stench of hell spawn beneath his grime.

“I need help,” I said, faking a distressed tone. “I had a fight with my boyfriend and he kicked me out of our apartment. I need to borrow your phone. Can I come in for a minute?”

Looking me up and down, he shook his head. “Get lost, tubby. Find someone else to mooch off.”

Snickers sounded from his cohorts as he tried to swing the door shut. My hand shot out to stop it. “What did you just call me?” I asked, tone going glacial at his rudeness.

The other demons joined him, crowding around him to examine me as the door was opened wide. “You're fat,” one of

them said with a sneer.

“You’re so big your boobs don’t even fit into your bra,” another one added.

“Your face is okay, but you’re too big for even us to want to screw,” one at the back told me.

My blood had begun to boil at the first insult and my rage grew at the slew of insults. “I’m not fat!” I snapped. “I’m curvy!”

“Your pants are so tight you probably needed three people to help you pull them on, tubby,” the creep who’d opened the door said nastily.

“That’s it,” I said ominously. “You’re the first one who’s going to die tonight.”

Laughter broke out at my pronouncement. “What are you going to do, sit on us and suffocate us with your blubber?” he retorted.

“My name is Saige Sterling and I hunt scumbags like you for a living,” I said. Instead of fleeing in terror, they burst into laughter. “You’re all so weak that this is going to be one of my easiest jobs ever,” I said and reached behind me for the machete. It was only my second official job, but they didn’t know that.

“You’re delusional as well as fat,” the scruffy demon said.

“Normally, low-level demons like you would rate about pimple level on my monster radar. You guys are so pathetic you’re more like a rash,” I taunted him, still trying to reach the handle of my machete.

In retaliation, the hell spawn drew his hand back to punch me in the face. Unlike me, he couldn't sense other monsters and he thought I was just a helpless human. Catching his fist with my free hand, I finally grabbed the handle of my weapon. Drawing it in triumph, the entire sheath came with it. "Damn it!" I grumbled when the demons roared with fresh laughter. "I'll do this the hard way, then," I added, then rammed the end of the sheath into my quarry's throat.

Gagging and doubling over with a crushed larynx, he let out a pitiful squeak when I snapped his wrist with a sharp twist of my hand. Kneeing him in the face as he fell, I knocked him out cold.

I pulled the sheath off my weapon and tossed it behind me into the hallway. "This is the part where you all start screaming," I said with a smirk, then stepped through the door.

We were too high up for my quarry to leap through the windows to safety. There was only one exit and I was blocking it. The room would have been bathed in blood from my wild swings back when my mom had first started training me how to hunt. With a decade of experience behind me, I'd honed my skills to be far more precise.

One of my talents was being able to sense my foes' weaknesses. Being on earth meant the demons were in human forms. If we'd been in the underworld, things would have been very different. Since they were so pathetic and vulnerable, a simple stab to the throat was enough to end their lives.

The screaming began after I killed the scruffy creep who'd opened the door. Shock made them slow to react. I was able to

wipe out three more of them with neat stabs before they could run. Closing the door behind me, I locked it and engaged the safety chain, then I went hunting.

Cleaning clearly wasn't high on their to do list. Rubbish lay all over the floor of the living room and kitchen. Most of it was discarded fast-food containers. Empty bottles of alcohol were scattered among the trash. The couch and armchairs were a grungy grey color and stank almost as badly as the demons. There was only one bedroom, so a few sleeping bags acted as bedding. They lay on top of the trash, as if their owners didn't care that they were literally sleeping on rubbish.

My targets had split into two groups. Two were hiding in the bathroom to my right. The other two were in the bedroom to the left. I headed to the bedroom and they lunged at me from both sides when I entered. A lamp smashed into the back of my head, showering ceramic shards all over the place. I shrugged off the blow, then stabbed the offending demon in the throat.

"What are you?" the second one wailed when his punch to my jaw had no effect on me.

"You'll die with that mystery hanging over you," I replied with a smirk, then jammed my machete into his neck. Going down with a gurgle, he was dead before I'd even left the room.

The remaining two demons had fled to the door. They were stupidly fighting each other to be the first to escape. One of them got the door open, but he forgot to disengage the safety chain.

“Idiots,” I said scornfully, then stabbed them both with two quick lunges. Closing the door, I relocked it just in case any neighbors came to investigate the noise. Next, I inspected the corpses. None of them had a heartbeat and they couldn’t regenerate like some species could. With my job done, I paid a quick visit to the bathroom to freshen up.

I examined my skin and clothes carefully in the mirror above the sink to make sure I didn’t have any blood on me. Ruen might turn weird again if he smelled any gore, so I was careful to clean my machete thoroughly. Turning to leave the bathroom, I caught sight of my reflection in the shower door and paused to study it.

“I’m not fat,” I denied. “I’m healthy, happy and I don’t give a crap what anyone else says.”

Feeling far calmer now that I’d killed the cretins who’d insulted me, I let myself out of the apartment. The sheath was still sitting on the floor, so I picked it up and slid the machete into it. Ruen would have overheard the fight and the body disposal team would be on their way.

The vampire’s nostrils flared when I reached him. “You have blood on the soles of your boots,” he informed me.

“I’ll clean them with disposable wipes,” I said crankily, annoyed that he hadn’t even acknowledged my success before ragging on me.

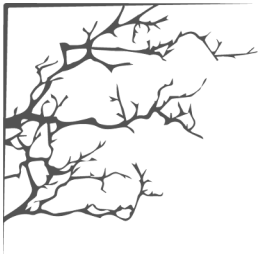
He glanced almost longingly at my boots before slinking over to the driver’s door and climbing inside. I carefully wiped my shoes clean with disposable wipes from my kill-bag, then stuffed the dirty wipes into a nearby trashcan.

A black van pulled over across the road. The driver scanned the street before opening his door. He and his partner climbed out and walked to the back of the vehicle to grab their gear.

“Are we going to get my payment from Drake now?” I asked as I slid into the passenger seat, trying to hide my eagerness at the thought of seeing our boss again.

“He’s expecting us,” Ruen replied. “I’m sure Lord Gilden will be pleased with your success.”

“Of course he will. I’m awesome,” I boasted and received a sardonic glance in return.



CHAPTER TWENTY



ONCE AGAIN, LIGHTS shone brightly through most of the windows on the dragon's twenty-story edifice when we arrived. His employees tended to work at night, but some of them must work during the day. Ruen drove to the underground parking garage and pulled into a spot that was reserved for him.

We took the elevator to the nineteenth floor and stepped out into the foyer. I couldn't sense Drake, which meant he was masking his power again. The gold tips of his hair rose over the top of his chair like a mini crown. He had his back to us and was talking on his cell phone. His voice was too low for me to hear him, but Ruen could hear every word. I looked at him and he ignored me, making no move to cross to the desk.

Ruen gave me a dire frown when I fidgeted restlessly. His boss knew we were there. I had to be patient while we waited for him to acknowledge us. After a couple of minutes, Lord Gilden ended his call and swiveled his chair around to face us. Tonight, he wore a navy suit with thin white pinstripes and a white shirt. "Ms. Sterling. Ruen," he said in greeting, voice velvety smooth and sensual.

"Lord Gilden," my partner said respectfully and nudged me in the side to get me moving.

"Hi," I said, mouth going a bit dry from instant lust. Memories of my fantasies about the dragon flashed through

my mind. I had to force them away so I could concentrate.

“Ruen informed me you were successful in your hunt tonight,” he said, gesturing for us to take a seat.

“I scragged all eight lesser demons,” I confirmed. “They didn’t put up much of a fight,” I added with my upper lip lifted in derision.

“Why do you have ceramic shards in your hair?” Drake asked.

“One of them smashed a lamp over my head. It was no big deal.”

“You would have been seriously injured if you’d been a full human,” he pointed out.

“I guess it’s lucky I’m not a pathetic, fragile, skinny little woman then,” I said with a hint of ire.

Drake looked at his lackey for an explanation. “The demon pack insulted Ms. Sterling’s weight,” the vampire said in a low voice, as if I somehow wouldn’t be able to hear him even though he was sitting right next to me.

“Ah,” his boss said in understanding. “How much mess will the body disposal team need to clean up?”

“I know better than to bathe the apartment in blood,” I said with a scowl. “They’ll just need to shampoo the carpets where the bodies fell and wipe a few spots from the walls.”

Ruen’s eyes became glazed at the mention of blood, but at least he didn’t start drooling. Lord Gilden kept him on a tight

leash. I had the feeling his minion's appetites were never fully satisfied.

Drake's phone rang and he held his finger up to pause our conversation. Answering it, he turned his chair around to face the French doors again. "Yes?" he asked. I glanced at Ruen, knowing he could hear every word the caller was making. He mouthed 'body disposal team' at me and I nodded. "Very good," the lord said. "Thank you for keeping me informed." He hung up and turned his chair around to face us. "The corpses have been removed and all signs of your battle have been eradicated."

"They work fast," I said in approval that the humans would never know what had happened in the apartment.

"Our sources said five women were abducted by the demons during the past few months," Lord Gilde said. "Once they'd had their fun with them, they dumped the bodies in the river rather than disposing of them properly. It was only a matter of time before the police would have discovered what was going on. You've successfully avoided disaster from breaking out in Nexus."

"It's my job to kill the rogues who break our laws," I said with a modest shrug. "That's what you pay me for."

Drake couldn't quite hide his reaction to the subtle mention of payment he owed me. A faint look of pain crossed his face and he tried to delay the inevitable. "May I offer you a drink?" Ruen sucked in a breath and his fangs lengthened. "I was talking to Ms. Sterling," our boss said wryly.

“Of course you were,” the vamp muttered sulkily and retracted his fangs.

“Sure,” I said in acceptance, taking pity on my boss. It was probably always going to be a struggle for him to pay me my due.

Rising to his feet with his usual grace, Lord Gilde crossed to the armoire where he kept his alcohol. He poured us both a shot of whiskey and returned to his desk. “Here you are,” he said and handed me my glass.

“Thanks,” I replied, then downed the shot in one swallow. My eyes immediately began to water and I struggled not to cough. “It’s real smooth,” I rasped, hoping the burning sensation would fade away soon. This stuff was a lot stronger than beer.

Leaning against his desk, Drake sipped his whiskey slowly. I knew better than to try to hurry him along. Patience wasn’t my strong suit, but I’d have to develop some now that I was on his team. Prolonging his drink for as long as possible, he sighed dismally once the last drop was gone. “I’m sure you have things to do,” he said. “I’d best gather your payment.”

Like the last time, he crossed to a painting of a fantastical landscape and I admired his butt. He unlocked the safe and I heard the clink of coins. Closing the safe and the painting, he sauntered over to me.

I held my hands out, waiting for him to drop my payment onto my palms. After a brief internal struggle, he opened his fingers and four gold coins landed on my palms. “The bounty

for killing low-level demons isn't as high as destroying an entire vampire coven," he said when I frowned.

I glanced at Ruen to see he was nodding surreptitiously. The dragon wasn't trying to stiff me. "Thank you, Lord Gilden," I said, tucking them into my wallet.

"You may both go," Drake said, turning away so he didn't have to watch me leave with his property.

Ruen stood up and I rose with him, knowing it would be stupid to ask any questions right now. While smoke wasn't coming from the weredragon's nostrils, his posture was tense as he stood at the twin French doors.

"That was easy this time," I mused once we were safely ensconced in the elevator and it began to descend. "I thought he was going to lose it the last time."

"Lord Gilden has better control than that," Ruen argued.

"Really?" I said skeptically. "Then why did you hold onto my elbow in a death grip and drag me out of his office?"

"I may have been slightly uneasy," he admitted.

"Have you ever seen your boss lose it completely?"

He shook his head and shuddered. "No, thankfully and I never want to."

"Dragons have to be the weirdest shifters," I figured as the elevator came to a stop.

Ruen politely allowed me to exit first. "In what way?" he queried.

“All shapeshifters share traits with their animals when they’re in their human forms, but dragons seem to be the worst of the lot. They can’t stand to let go of any of their hoard, even if it’s just a few coins.”

“It’s in their nature to gather as much wealth as possible,” the vampire said as we climbed into his car.

“Why is it so hard for them to spend it?” I asked in bewilderment. “He has more wealth than he can spend in his lengthy lifetime. He only handed over four gold coins and he couldn’t stand to watch me leave with them.”

“Those coins are worth several hundred dollars each,” he reminded me.

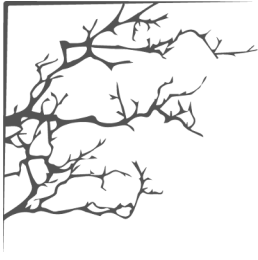
“Yeah, I know,” I said smugly. “Pierre will be pleased with my haul when I trade them.”

“As for why dragons find it so difficult to part with their hoard, I’m afraid I don’t have an answer,” he went on. “It’s instinct, like werewolves baying at the moon and werebears marking their territory by scratching their claws on trees.”

“And male werecats peeing on their doors,” I said, remembering the acrid stench I’d detected in my building. “Do male werewolves do that as well?”

“Only the less cultured ones,” he replied, lips thinning in distaste at the turn our conversation had taken. “The practice has become frowned on in recent decades.”

It was nice to know it wasn’t just me he disapproved of. He seemed to hate most beings he came into contact with.



CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE



I CHECKED MY WATCH as Ruen started the car. Dawn wasn't too far away, so he'd want to be safely ensconced in his apartment in the silver tower soon. He'd lived in Nexus for far longer than I'd been alive. He knew the streets like the backs of his pale hands. We didn't have far to go to get to my building, since it was only five minutes away from Drake's place.

"It was good to finally be given a job," I said as we neared my home. "Do you think we'll be sent out again soon?"

"How could I possibly know that?" he said acerbically. "I'm not psychic."

"You're in a cheerful mood," I muttered and received no response. He pulled into my lot and didn't bother to park in a vacant slot. "Thanks for the ride. I guess I'll see you next time," I said. I climbed out and he took off as soon as I closed the door. "Bye, Saige," I said, mimicking his voice. "It was so lovely to see you again. You did a great job tonight, keep up the good work."

One of my neighbors walked past me and gave me a strange look as he unlocked his car.

"What?" I asked belligerently, as if it was normal to be standing there talking to myself.

“Nothing,” he replied. Almost leaping into his vehicle, he pulled the door shut and locked it. Barely registering on my monster radar, I sensed he was a weak warlock. Only his ability to use magic set him apart from normal humans.

The elevator carried me to the fourth floor and I trudged to my apartment. Closing my door, I made sure to engage the lock, then slid the metal bar into place. Made of reinforced steel, even the strongest shifter would have trouble kicking the door down. Vamps would probably be able to punch their way through it, but by the time they did, I’d have a hundred stakes ready to skewer them with.

Speaking of my weapons, I took my machete out of my bag to clean it properly. Once it was pristine, I put it in its sheath and stuck it back in my kill-bag. I had a few shorter than normal machetes just like it. They could be strapped to my thighs, or shoved down the back of my pants or skirts when necessary. I left my bag on my trunk full of weapons, then took my wallet out of it.

“Time to test my new safe,” I said and crossed to my closet. I deposited the four gold coins inside, then locked it again. I was going to be in danger of running out of money eventually, unless I started getting a lot more jobs. “It’s a good thing Drake isn’t charging me rent,” I murmured, then sat down on my bed.

Pulling my boots off, I tossed them into the pile of footwear that was jumbled inside my closet. Contrary to the lesser demon’s insult, I didn’t need help to dress or undress myself. I easily peeled my leather pants off, then hung them up

so they wouldn't get creased. My shirt went into my laundry hamper in the bathroom, along with my underwear.

I stepped into the shower and the hot water helped me to relax and unwind. While I only needed a few hours of sleep, even I needed to recharge. After pulling on fresh undies and a t-shirt, I lay down on my bed and waited to sink into oblivion.

My new life of a bounty hunter didn't involve much actual hunting during the next two weeks. I visited my mom regularly so we could game together. Ruen called me a couple of times and drove me to where my targets were located. Both jobs were less challenging than the missions mom had taken me on as a teenager.

When I had a collection of coins, I took them to Pierre's Paraphernalia. The weasel was with a human customer when I walked in. He glanced up, did a doubletake, then grinned in recognition. "I'll be right with you, lovely lady," he said. Nodding, I turned to peruse the junk that filled his store.

His customer was young, twitchy and was giving off nervous vibes. "How much will you give me for this watch?" he asked.

I moved away from the door to take a look at a lamp that caught my eye. The base was pale green and the lampshade was light gold. It was pretty, delicate and would look good on my nightstand, once I bought one.

Hearing the door open stealthily, I glanced into a mirror to see another young guy enter. Pierre was hunched over, examining the watch with a magnifying glass that I doubted he really needed. "It's an antique," the wereweasel said,

seemingly unaware of the second guy who'd entered. "I can give you fifty dollars for it."

"Only fifty bucks?" his customer said, waving his arms around and moving around the counter so Pierre would turn to face him.

Pretending I couldn't see the second guy as he began stuffing items into what looked like a pillowcase, I casually picked up an ugly ceramic frog. The knickknack fitted into my palm perfectly and I hefted it to judge its weight.

The thief kept sending surreptitious looks at Pierre until he'd filled his sack. He turned to sneak away and I spun around to hurl the frog at him. Whistling through the air, it smashed into the back of his head and shattered. Both Pierre and his customer whirled around as the thief crash to the floor.

"You killed him!" the robber's accomplice wailed in horror.

"Nah, I just knocked him out," I said as I sauntered over to him. "He'll be fine."

"You're stealing from me?" the weasel said incredulously when he saw the pillowcase full of his property lying next to the prone burglar.

"I don't even know that guy," the customer lied, then bolted for the door.

"Let him go," Pierre said when I reached for another knickknack to take him down with. "I've got their scents now. I'll know it if they come back and they won't be able to repeat

this trick.” He tapped his nose to indicate he’d stored their scents.

The robber groaned, then rolled over. “What happened?” he asked groggily.

“You tried to steal from Pierre and paid the price for it,” I said ominously. “If either you or your friend come back, I’ll kick both of your asses.”

Seeing me looming over him, holding up my fist in warning was enough to scare him into compliance. “We won’t be back,” he squeaked, then shakily stood up and staggered to the door.

“I would have chased them down without any problem, but you saved me the hassle,” Pierre said in gratitude as he picked up the pillowcase. “Pick anything you want from the store, no charge.”

“Great. I’ll take that lamp,” I said, pointing at it.

“That’s only worth thirty bucks,” he said with a frown, picking it up.

“I’ll take this nightstand, too,” I said with a shrug and grabbed one that stood nearby.

“Deal,” he said, carrying the lamp over to the counter. “I assume you have gold coins to exchange for cash?”

“Yep,” I replied and dug them out of my wallet after putting the nightstand down.

I handed them over and he transferred money into my account, minus the eight hundred bucks I owed him for the

safe he'd sold me the last time I'd been here. "You have amazing aim and skill," he complimented me as he wrapped my new lamp in paper. "I thought you'd killed that schmuck."

"It's easy to knock people out if you hit them in exactly the right spot," I said modestly.

"Most of us monsters would have used too much force and caved the back of his head in," he said in admiration. "You used just enough power to knock him out."

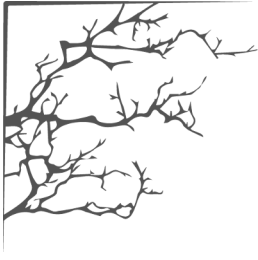
"It's a skill I was born with," I said honestly. Mom hadn't needed to teach me how much force to use when fighting my enemies. Just like I could sense how strong they were, I always knew how much strength I needed to use to take them down.

"I've got some spare time, if you want to have a quick shag," he offered.

"Sorry, but I have plans," I replied, ignoring the rapidly growing bulge in his pants. "Thanks for the lamp and nightstand," I added, picking them up and turning away.

"See you next time," Pierre said and winked when I glanced at him.

Snickering beneath my breath, I left before the leech could proposition me again. He was kind of gross, but at least he was amusing. He hadn't even charged me for breaking the ugly ceramic frog.



CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO



I HAD THE WEIRDEST dream of my life a few months after officially becoming a bounty hunter. It started out normally enough, featuring Drake Gilden as usual. “You look ravishing tonight, Ms. Sterling,” the dragon said in admiration as he lifted my hand to place a kiss on my knuckles. We were in his office and he’d just paid me for my latest job. For some strange reason, he was wearing the tuxedo I’d seen him in the night we’d met.

“What, this old thing?” I said coyly, glancing down at my sheer purple gown that had replaced my work clothing. “Why are you dressed like you’re going to a ball?” I asked.

“I was waiting for you to arrive, so we could do this,” he replied as music started. He pulled me into his arms and began to waltz me around the room.

We danced to the hauntingly beautiful music, gazing deeply into each other’s eyes, lost in mutual desire. Drake bent his head to kiss me, then turned to mist right before my eyes. “What the hell?” I complained as the dream suddenly changed.

I was now standing in a strange office, with a table sitting on the far side of the room. All of the windows were covered in blinds, which were closed. I turned in a circle to see the room was devoid of other furnishings. The floor was covered

in an industrial, cheap looking beige carpet. The walls and ceiling were painted white. I couldn't see any doors anywhere.

When I came to a stop, three chairs had appeared at the table. The two that were facing me were occupied by possibly the strangest couple I'd ever seen.

“Who the hell are you?” I asked, studying them curiously.

The man was short, slender and had white-blond hair and pale green eyes. For some bizarre reason, he was wearing a jester suit. Red on one side and green on the other, it conformed to his puny body. He wore a red and green hat with spikes that had bells on the ends. “I'm Crowmon,” he replied, then hiked his thumb at his companion. “This lovely lady is Fate.”

I turned my attention to the being my mind had instinctively shied away from. Dressed in a black hooded robe, her face was hidden in shadow. I was pleased to see she wasn't a skinny bag of bones beneath her robe. About my size, she had a curvy figure. Her hair was long and black and tendrils moved as if there was a breeze that I couldn't feel. Several strands reached towards Crowmon. He lifted his hand without looking at them and the locks wrapped around his fingers as if they were sentient.

Fate inclined her head in greeting, then gestured at the vacant seat across the table from her. “Please, take a seat, Saige.” Her voice sounded slightly hollow, as if she was talking from the far end of a long tunnel. My entire body shuddered in reaction and I began to feel uneasy.

“This doesn’t feel like a normal dream,” I said, suddenly realizing my sheer dress was gone as I took a seat. I was now wearing one of my leather and lace hunting outfits.

“That’s because it isn’t a normal dream, girly,” Crowmon said.

“Are you Irish?” I asked, picking up on his foreign accent.

“Something like that,” he hedged.

Even with a table between us, my unease grew. I could sense these beings were far more powerful than anyone I’d ever met before. Not even Drake Gilden could compare to them when his cloak slipped to reveal his inner dragon. “What are you?” I queried.

“I’m a trickster god,” Crowmon replied. “Or I was, before I transitioned to what I am now.”

“Yeah, that’s really helpful,” I said sarcastically. “Why are you dressed like a clown?”

He looked down at his outfit in surprise, then smiled sheepishly. “Force of habit,” he said, then clicked his fingers. His shirt changed to a red t-shirt. Craning my head, I saw he was now wearing green trousers. His hat had turned into a red and green baseball cap, but a couple of bells adorned the top of it.

“We are both agents of Order,” Fate told me. “Our task is to choose suitable champions to save their worlds from the agents of Chaos.”

“What do you want with me?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” the ex-trickster god asked. “We’re interviewing you for the role of becoming your world’s champion.”

I stared at him for a couple of seconds before bursting into laughter. “I hope I remember this dream. My mom will die laughing if I tell her I’ve been chosen to save our world.”

Waiting for my snorts and giggles to die down, Fate held her hand out and a clipboard appeared. “We will now study your credentials,” she said as she read the document that was attached to it. “Your mother trained you to hunt monsters for a full decade and you have been a bounty hunter for Drake Gilden for the past four months. Is that correct?”

“What’s that?” I asked with a frown.

“It’s your resume, dearie,” Crowmon said, leaning over to read it. “It says here that your father’s identity is unknown, but he’s presumed to be a supernatural creature?”

“My mom was involved in an orgy and I was conceived that night,” I said, with a shrug. “All of the beings were supernatural in some way,” I added.

Fate leaned against her weird little partner’s shoulder and he toyed with her hair lovingly. “The Sterling women pass their traits on to their daughters,” she read from the resume that I hadn’t compiled. “You all have various talents that are unique to you. Your main ones appear to be heightened strength, imperviousness to injuries and quick reflexes.”

“I can turn any object around me into a weapon, too,” I boasted proudly.

“Would you be able to give us a demonstration of your abilities?” Crowmon asked.

“I guess so,” I replied, suddenly feeling nervous again. I’d never had to attend an interview like this before. I hadn’t even asked for the job they were interviewing me for and I was way out of my comfort zone.

Crowmon pointed behind me. “You’ll find a selection of objects you can use to defend yourself with during the attack you’re about to be subjected to.”

Feeling several vampires appear behind me, I surged to my feet and spun around. The room had grown larger while my back had been turned. Five vamps were spread out from each other and were staring at me hungrily. They were dressed in jeans and t-shirts and could almost pass for normal humans. Only their pallid skin, empty eyes and fangs gave them away. Even the ones with dark skin looked pale and washed out. The objects the god had mentioned were scattered all over the floor, which was now bare concrete.

“Mmm, I love chubby women,” one of the leeches said and licked his lips. “They always taste saltier than the skinny ones.” My eyes narrowed as I marked him for death first.

“She’s not chubby,” another vampire scoffed. “She’s fat.”

“You’re number two, fanghole,” I said menacingly as they began to advance on me.

“Did you just call me a turd?” he asked incredulously.

“I was talking about the order I’m going to kill you in, but I guess it fits,” I taunted him.

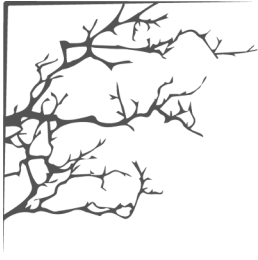
The other three bloodsuckers had remained silent, sizing me up to see if I was dangerous. None of them seemed to notice Fate and Crowmon watching from their seats at the table.

Crowmon had taken my boast of being able to turn any object into a weapon as a challenge. He hadn't provided me with anything a normal bounty hunter would use to kill their foes with. Instead, I had a variety of items usually found in a kitchen to choose from. One of the leeches leaped at me and I sprang into action.

Ducking down, I rolled inelegantly beneath him and he landed where I'd been standing. Scooping up a toaster by the cord, I spun it in a circle and smashed it into the vamp's face when he landed and turned to grab me. Teeth and blood flew from his ruined mouth and he screamed in agony. He couldn't bite me without fangs, so I let him stagger away, holding his bleeding face.

Whirling the toaster around above my head, I bent down to snatch up a wooden spoon. Using the heightened strength Fate had mentioned, I snapped the tip of it off with my thumb. It was now sharp on one end and I speared it at the first unholy fiend on my kill list. It pierced his heart before he could avoid it. Mouth opening in agony, he turned to a pile of ash and clothing before he could scream.

"Get her!" the second leech on my kill list screeched, then the three uninjured foes rushed at me together.



CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE



WITH THREE ENEMIES coming at me and a fourth one still lurking around, I didn't have time to pick and choose my weapons carefully. Spying a nearby spatula, I stomped on it to flip it into the air. I caught it, then smashed the toaster into the closest vamp's head, knocking him into one of his cohorts. Number two on my kill list lunged at me and I rammed the handle of the spatula into his chest. He looked down in disbelief before transforming into ash.

The poor toaster was now in pieces, so I let it fall to the floor. I snatched up some tongs just as the pair of leeches untangled themselves and came at me again. Hands reached for my throat and fingers sank into my neck in a chokehold that had no effect on me. Up this close, it was easy to skewer them with my kitchen utensils. The tongs made a far larger entry wound than the handle of the spatula, but both crude weapons were deadly.

Sensing the injured and toothless bloodsucker behind me, I spun around just as his arm was descending. He'd picked up a rolling pin and was about to club me with it. I managed to cross my arms and halt the rolling pin before it could smash into my face.

While beheading or staking leeches through the heart was the easiest way to kill them, they were vulnerable in other

areas as well. I raised my knee sharply and it connected with my enemy's gonads. His eyes bulged in fresh agony and he staggered backwards. Ramming the handle of the spatula into his chest, I watched him die, then looked around wildly to see if any new foes were going to appear.

Clapping came from the table and I turned to see Crowmon was on his feet. The bells on his cap jingled merrily as he applauded me. "Well done, lass! I've never seen anyone use a spatula to kill vampires before. I must say I'm impressed with your skills."

Fate remained silent as I trudged back to the table. The utensils vanished from my hands before I reached my chair. I glanced backwards to see the room had been restored to its original size and the carpet had returned. All signs of the battle and my opponents were gone. "Did I pass your test?" I asked sourly.

"How is your throat?" Fate asked, gesturing at my neck where the vamp had tried to strangle me and had failed miserably.

"It's fine," I shrugged. "It takes a lot to hurt me. My mom is the same. All of the Sterling women are built tough. We have to be in our line of work."

"Your ancestors have been hunting monsters for over two millennia," Crowmon noted, taking his seat to read my resume again.

"Have they?" I asked in surprise. I knew we lived for a long time, but mom didn't know much about our early history.

“Indeed,” Fate confirmed, then read more of the document. “Your line was originally human, until one of your distant relatives mated with a creature from the underworld.”

“Did she know what she was sleeping with?” I asked, intrigued by the history I hadn’t known about.

“She found out soon after her baby was born,” Crowmon replied. “Her daughter wasn’t normal and the villagers wanted to kill them both. She fled and raised her child in secret, hiding her from the world. Eventually, her daughter also mated with a denizen of the underworld. This practice has been repeated over and over again, mixing your DNA until each new generation of daughters became a jumble of species.”

“Why do we keep mating with monsters if we all hunt them?” I asked in puzzlement.

“You only kill the ones that deserve death,” Fate told me. “You could say it is in your genes, along with finding a suitable male to father your only child.”

A horrible thought occurred to me. “Is that why I feel the need to sleep with supernatural men lately?” After shagging Clay the werewolf, I’d sought out a few other shifters to get naked with.

“It isn’t your time to procreate yet,” Crowmon denied. “But your body is gearing up for the event. You’re searching for a male who can provide you with what you need.”

“Getting back to my mixed heritage,” I said. “Why are the women in my family compelled to find supernatural sperm donors?”

“Their directive is to eventually produce a child who will possess the necessary talents to save this world,” she said.

Suspicion raised its ugly head. “And *I’m* the result of all that monster humping?” I said incredulously, then burst into snickers. “I hate to break it to you, but I’m no hero. I’m not the sort of person who can save an entire world from Chaos, or whatever the hell it is you expect me to do.”

“We wouldn’t be here if you weren’t the right candidate,” Crowmon said solemnly. “My lovely wife was careful to set events into being. She’s guided your ancestors to choose the beings they mated with in order to produce you.”

I stared at him blankly, then anger stirred. “Are you saying she’s been manipulating the women in my family for two thousand years?” I asked, voice rising in volume as I pointed at the hooded being sitting beside him. “What the hell gives you the right to mess with us like that?”

“It is my job,” Fate said with a slight shrug. “My purpose is to keep as many worlds safe from Chaos as I can. Unfortunately, I am not always successful. Sometimes, my champions fail.”

This was a lot to take in, quite frankly. “What’s your purpose?” I asked Crowmon. “Are you going to pop up every now and then and throw a rubber chicken at me?”

Instead of being insulted, the deity chuckled in amusement. “I would if I were allowed to, lass. I’m afraid this is the only contact we’ll be able to have with you. In the past, Fate’s champions were given no warning at all of what their

purpose was. My beloved has learned it's best to appear to them in a dream and advise them of the tasks ahead."

"Why?" I dreaded the answer, but I had to know.

"I have found that showing my champions the price of failure gives them the incentive they need to succeed," she told me. "Your case is slightly different."

"In what way?"

"The other champions all had partners, family or close friends to save from the coming disasters," Crowmon said. "The thought of losing their loved ones was enough to spur them to win."

"So, because I'm single and friendless, I only have my mom to save," I figured dourly. "I guess it's lucky I have her, or I wouldn't have any incentive to stop Chaos at all, would I?"

Exchanging a look at my snarky tone, Fate and Crowmon decided to get on with their pitch. "Perhaps you will realize the seriousness of this task if we show you what lies ahead," Fate said.

Suddenly, the room was gone and we were standing at the top of a hill. Long grass rustled as wind rippled through the air. The tips of the grass were just long enough to brush against my fingertips. They felt solid, as if I was really here. Turning around, I stumbled back with a gasp when I saw I was standing mere inches away from the edge of a cliff.

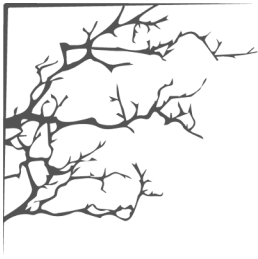
Crowmon reached up to put his hand on my shoulder to steady me. He was a lot shorter than Fate and me. She was

exactly the same height as I was. “You’re safe here, lass,” he reassured me. “No harm will come to you in this place.”

My heart was hammering, but I inched forward to peer downward. An ocean roiled restlessly far below. Waves tossed themselves on the rocks with suicidal abandon. Falling from this height would kill even someone as impervious to injuries as I was. “Where are we?” I asked.

“This is a construct of my mind,” Fate said. Her voice sounded even more hollow as she stood on the edge of the cliff. With a wave of her hand, a door appeared. Plain and unremarkable, it hung in midair. “Behold the destiny that your world faces if you fail to stop the coming apocalypse,” she intoned.

“Did you just say *apocalypse*?” I asked in trepidation, but she didn’t reply. At Crowmon’s grim nod towards the door, I turned to face it as it swung open.



CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR



IT WAS OBVIOUS FROM the first glance that the world we were seeing wasn't earth. The sky was the color of old rust, but the rocky ground was normal shades of brown. Strange buildings made from crude brown bricks stood in the distance, surrounded by tall cliffs. A flying creature swooped past the doorway. I caught a glimpse of mangy fur, beady yellow eyes and leathery wings before it was gone from my sight.

“What the hell was that thing?” I asked in a disturbed tone.

“This realm of the underworld's version of a bird,” Crowmon figured.

The image suddenly zoomed in closer to the buildings, making my stomach flip over. It was like watching a virtual reality game, but without the goggles.

I put a hand on my roiling stomach as the scene shifted to an overhead view. A compound of buildings surrounded an open area where strange creatures had gathered. They were wearing metal armor and were holding long spears and shields.

Once again, the image moved, this time swooping downward to come to a stop near the group of soldiers.

“I'm going to puke if this keeps up,” I warned the duo.

“Watch,” Fate admonished me. Heaving a silent sigh, I turned my attention back to the disturbing doorway.

Most of the soldiers were humanoid in appearance, if far larger than normal people. Their average height was nearly seven feet tall and they all had robust builds. They had to be strong to be able to support the weight of their armor. Most disturbingly, their heads weren't where they were supposed to be. Their faces were situated in their torsos and were protected by their armor.

A trio of beings stood with their backs to the doorway. A weird red mist emanated from them, giving them an otherworldly appearance. Their helmets had horns and their armor was far more ornate than the ones their soldiers wore. Spikes stuck out on their shoulders and looked sharp enough to gore their foes to death. The trio wore ostentatious red capes.

“Who are these bozos?” I asked.

The tallest soldier spun around as if he'd heard me. Red eyes glowed behind his hideous helmet. Razor-sharp metallic teeth were fixed in a malevolent grin. A second face identical to his helmet was embedded in his chest plate. His eyes seemed to look straight through me, then he turned back around to face the army before him.

It was a shock when he spoke and I understood his words. “Soon, we will take possession of the spell to unlock the axis-gate that leads to Nexus,” he said. His voice was deep and filled with so much malevolence that a shiver wracked me. “We will be able to retain our natural forms when we use it to

invade the humans' world," he went on. "They will fall beneath our might and we will rule their entire planet!"

Cheers sounded from the army, then the image faded away. Fate and Crowmon turned to face me to judge my reaction. Contemplating what I'd just seen, I shrugged. "So what if a ragtag bunch of creepy underworld weirdos invade Nexus? Lord Gilden's goons will wipe them out."

The dragon lord employed thousands of supernatural beings. A lot of them were dangerous and acted as his guards. I was pretty sure they could handle one small army.

"How much do you know about the underworld?" Crowmon asked.

"Not much," I said honestly. "Most of the earliest supernatural creatures and beings on my world originated from there. They made more of their kind over the millennia and have increased in number. Only a small number of beings are allowed to pass through the gates from the underworld now."

"There are nine realms in your version of the underworld," Fate said. "Each one is governed by an overlord. They are conspiring to find a spell that will unlock the axis-gate so that they can come and go freely from your world."

"What's an axis-gate?"

"It's the only gate that will allow the creatures to retain their natural forms once they enter your world, lass," the trickster god said.

"I have seen something like it in another dimension," Fate said. "The gates on that world were sentient, but this one is

not. The axis-gate was created by a powerful being five thousand years ago. There is only one spell that will unlock it.”

“Did you create it?” I asked suspiciously. “Or did you manipulate someone into doing it for you?”

Crowmon frowned at my harsh tone, but Fate put a calming hand on his arm. “An agent of Chaos created the gate after the battle between good and evil was over,” she said. “They hid the spell and its whereabouts was lost over time. I believe it lies within one of the nine realms. You must prevent the overlords from gaining possession of it. If they find it, they will band together to wipe out all life on your world.”

I was highly skeptical about her claim and couldn’t quite muffle my noise of disbelief. “That sounds really dire,” I said lamely when I sensed her disapproval at my reaction.

“Show her the rest, love,” Crowmon suggested. “Saige needs to see the ultimate result if she fails in her duty to save her world.”

Fate waved her hand again and eight more doors materialized to form an arc in front of us. Images from all nine realms of the underworld appeared within the doors. They changed too quickly for me to take everything in. I saw armies gathering and the overlords of each realm rallying their soldiers for war. Instead of just the one compound I’d been shown, there were hundreds in each realm. The overlords in each doorway all held a short, raggedy scroll and took turns reading from them. A spectral looking glowing blue gate appeared in front of them all simultaneously. The doors swung

open and a shockwave almost blew the armies over when the spell kicked in.

I felt like I was watching a movie about an alien invasion as creatures from the nine realms poured through the axis-gate into Nexus. The city couldn't stand against the monsters in their true forms. Once the citizens were all wiped out, the overlords spread out to conquer the rest of the world.

My unease grew and so did the roiling in my stomach as scenes of devastation appeared in each doorway. City after city and country after country fell beneath the might of the invaders. Modern technology and weapons couldn't stand up to the magic that was used to disable them. Once their guns and missiles failed, humans had to rely on knives and makeshift clubs. Their pitiful defense wasn't enough and humanity was utterly wiped out.

Most humans I'd dealt with had been horrible to me, but I still felt some pity for them. As if reading my mind, eight of the doors vanished, leaving the original one behind. Nexus appeared, but it was now a shattered ruin. I saw the charred remains of the Den of Iniquity. Lenny was a broken, badly burned and now unanimated corpse. The patrons I knew on sight were all dead, including a few of the men I'd used for sex during the past few months.

The image shifted to Lord Gilden's silver tower and it had been blasted apart. Drake's body was sprawled in the wreckage, lying on a pile of gold coins. Smoke wafted from his nostrils, then petered out. I sucked in a breath at seeing his handsome face battered almost beyond recognition.

A pile of ash and black clothing lay near him and I instinctively knew it was Ruen. The vampire had tried to guard his master and had died as a result. Those two deaths hit me harder than all the rest, but the last body I saw took me to my knees.

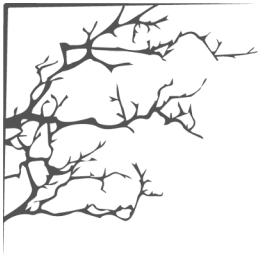
My mom lay on the floor in her living room, eyes glazed and unseeing. Something had torn her apart, leaving a bloody ruin behind. Tears welled in my eyes even though I knew this was just a dream. A sob escaped from me, but the nightmare wasn't over yet.

A final image appeared on the screen. It was almost as horrible as seeing my mom's lifeless body. "No!" I wailed in horror, broken at last by the consequences of what would happen if I failed my duty.

I struggled to my feet and turned to confront Fate and her consort. "You have seen the price you will pay if you fail your duty," Fate said ominously.

"You won't recall much of this dream, lass," Crowmon said. "But you'll remember enough to know you have an important destiny that you dare not shirk."

I opened my mouth to scream at them to make this abomination stop, but an invisible hand pushed me backwards. My heels tottered on the edge of the cliff and I pinwheeled my arms. A second shove was enough to push me off balance. I fell screaming and closed my eyes, so I didn't have to see the rocks that were rushing towards me.



CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE



JERKING AWAKE, MY STOMACH flopped over from the sensation of falling for what had felt like a thousand years. Lurching off the bed, I raced for the bathroom. I managed to reach the toilet and puked until my nausea subsided. When I was done, I sank down onto the tiled floor with a groan, clutching my aching head.

“I feel like I drank an entire bottle of Drake’s horrible whiskey,” I complained in a raspy voice, then flushed the toilet. The dragon always delayed paying me by offering me the strong alcohol. One shot wouldn’t make me drunk, but a whole bottle might.

After a few minutes, my illness passed and I heaved myself to my feet. Brushing my teeth, I ambled over to my closet to choose an outfit. It was just after eleven am, so it was about time I got up anyway. My stomach had settled down enough to eat a bowl of sugary cereal. I washed it down with strong coffee, then returned to the bathroom to grab my hamper full of dirty clothing.

Although our building had laundry facilities, I took my clothes to my mom’s house instead. I’d be spending the day with her anyway, so it made sense to do my washing at her place.

After stashing my hamper in the back of my car, I slid behind the wheel and dumped my kill-bag on the passenger seat. Twenty minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of her bungalow. My head was still thumping from my phantom hangover when I used my key to unlock the front door. “Hi, mom!” I called out after stepping into the hallway. “I’m going to put my washing on! I’ll be right back!”

“Hurry up!” she called back. “We’ve got a lot of monsters that need killing!”

Snickering at her impatient tone, I opened the first door on the left to reveal the stairs that led to the basement. I put my clothes on to wash, then headed upstairs. Pausing in the kitchen, I poured two mugs of coffee and walked to the living room. Mom grinned at me when I entered the room. A variety of snack food was sitting close to hand. “Are you ready for the challenge, Lil Bish?” she asked.

“You bet your butt, Big Momma,” I retorted, placing our mugs on the coffee table that sat between the identical recliners. Taking my seat, I reached for the gaming handset that was charged up and waiting for me. “Let’s do this,” I said with a smirk and we resumed the latest videogame we’d been playing.

“These zombies aren’t going to know what hit them,” mom said, then we proceeded to slaughter our electronic enemies.

Drinking coffee and snacking on junk food, we killed a horde of undead before taking a break. We took turns using the bathroom, then mom made us a gigantic plate of sandwiches.

“You look like you have something on your mind, honey,” she said when we sat down at the dining table to eat.

I took a sip of my fresh cup of coffee before replying. “I had a really weird dream last night.”

Quirking an eyebrow, she gestured at me to go on. I’d always had vivid dreams, so this wasn’t exactly startling news. “What was it about?”

“Us,” I told her. “Part of it was about our heritage, anyway.” Now intrigued, mom waited for me to continue. “A hooded woman who called herself Fate and a weird little dude called Crowmon interviewed me for a job.”

“What sort of job?”

“To become their champion and save our world from an apocalypse.”

Instead of laughing, mom almost choked on her sandwich. “It’s finally happening,” she said in awe.

“What’s happening? It was just a stupid dream, wasn’t it?”

“It wasn’t a normal dream, Saige. You were given a glimpse of your destiny.”

“It was more than just a glimpse. They flat out told me I need to visit the nine realms of the underworld and stop the overlords from getting their hands on a spell that will unlock something called an axis-gate.”

Mom’s face went dead white and she gaped at me. “I always knew you were destined for greatness, but holy crap!” She took a fortifying gulp of coffee while I tried to figure out

how she'd known I was destined for greatness. "Tell me everything you remember," she ordered.

"Crowmon told me I'd forget most of it, but I guess they didn't read my resume properly," I said with a hint of smugness. "I remember everything that happened."

"They don't know about your immunity to mind control and memory wipes?" mom said.

"Nope. It's all still in here," I said, tapping my head. I relayed everything that had happened and described the second last scene.

"That sounds horrible," mom said sympathetically. "It couldn't have been easy to see my body lying on the floor like that."

"They really twisted the knife, because the dream didn't end there," I told her.

"What else did they threaten you with?"

"The final image was of my gaming console," I said uneasily. "It was sitting on my coffee table, covered in dust. It didn't look like it had been used in years."

We both shuddered at the thought of never being able to game again. "That was a low blow," mom agreed darkly. "They're obviously trying to manipulate you into doing what they want."

"It kind of worked," I admitted. "If the dream isn't just my imagination, we could really be facing an apocalypse soon."

“Surely, Drake Gilden would have heard about this,” she said in a disturbed tone. “You should ask him about it the next time you see him.”

“I might ask around at the Den,” I mused. “Lenny knows all sorts of weirdos. One of them might have heard rumors about a widespread conspiracy in the underworld to invade Nexus.” We fell into an uneasy silence as we continued eating our lunch. “What did you mean when you said you always knew I was destined for greatness?” I asked when the silence dragged on for too long.

“I’ve never told you this, but I saw an omen just after you were born,” she replied. She’d given birth to me right here in this house, since she couldn’t exactly have me at a hospital. Humans might have run tests on me and the results would have freaked them out.

“What sort of omen?” I queried, goosebumps rising on my arms in anticipation.

“Right after I pushed you out, I glanced at the window to see the full moon was rising. An owl flew past the window and a werewolf howled at the same time.”

I stared at her, waiting for more. “Is that it?” I asked in disappointment. “No offense, but that’s a pretty lame omen.”

Mom scowled and threw her butterknife at me. I caught it before it could become lodged in my forehead and placed it out of her reach. “Your reflexes are uncanny,” she said in satisfaction.

“I know,” I replied, but I wasn’t about to let her sidetrack me. “What made you think me being born on a full moon and seeing an owl and hearing a werewolf howling was an omen?”

“One of our ancestors used to have prophetic dreams,” she said. “She wrote them down in a journal. One of her dreams was about a distant descendent who she predicted ‘would be born in a new country far from her origins’.”

“We’ve been living here for several generations now,” I reminded her. “That could have applied to any of us who’ve been born here, including you.”

“I haven’t finished telling you the story,” she scolded me and I rolled my eyes. “In her dream, the child was ‘born beneath the watchful eye of the full moon, with an owl and wolf as witnesses’.” Her expression became triumphant at that news.

“You said the owl just flew past the window and you heard a werewolf howl in the distance,” I pointed out. “It’s not like they were in the room with us.”

Huffing out a sigh, mom shook her head at my stubborn refusal to believe in the omen. “Prophecies don’t have to be literal,” she said in a lecturing tone. “Just the fact that it was a full moon and an owl and a wolf were in the area is probably good enough.”

“What else did she see in her dream?”

“She saw the child grow into a strong, dangerous woman. She would be tasked with an important event that would impact our entire world.”

I shivered at her hushed tone. “How come you’ve never told me about the journal before?”

“You don’t enjoy reading, so I didn’t bother to tell you about them.”

“Them?” I repeated. “How many journals did she write?”

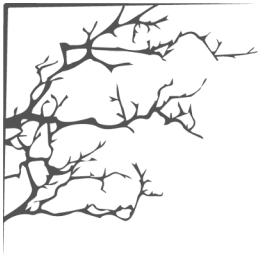
“All of our ancestors wrote about their lives, Saige. So do I. You should, too. I told you to keep a record once Lord Gilden offered you a job as a bounty hunter.”

I made a face at the thought of writing down every detail of my life. “It’s not my fault I can’t concentrate on books long enough to finish them,” I whined. “They’re always so boring.”

“You never even gave reading a chance,” mom reminded me.

“You shouldn’t have gotten me hooked on videogames,” I said to deflect her from my faults. “Why would I want to spend all day reading, when I can kill zombies instead?”

“Good point,” she conceded in capitulation. “Still, I think you should read the journal that predicted your birth. You might learn something that could help you save our world from annihilation.”



CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX



“DO YOU REALLY THINK an apocalypse is coming?” I asked skeptically, still torn about the idea that my dream might have been real.

“If it is, there will be signs,” mom figured.

“You mean omens?” I said with a smirk.

“Omens and portents are real, Saige,” she said in a prissy tone. “Finish your food while I get the journal.”

“I can get it,” I said, waving at her to stay seated so she could power her way through the rest of her sandwiches. “Tell me where it is and I’ll grab it now.”

“It’s under my bed. You’ll find it in the third box in the second row. It has a tattered red leather cover.”

Nodding, I gulped down the dregs of my coffee and stuffed a sandwich into my mouth, then headed for her bedroom. The room was neat and tidy, just like the rest of her house.

Dropping to my knees, I saw a bunch of cardboard boxes stashed underneath the bed. I grabbed the third one on the left and dragged it out, then had to lie down on my stomach to reach for the box behind it. Dust motes burst around me in a frenzy when I opened the box. It was full of leatherbound books that looked ancient. Finding one with a red cover, I opened it to see it was written in a foreign language.

“Great,” I muttered. “How the hell am I supposed to read this?”

“You’ll find an English translation in the box behind the one that had the original journal in it!” mom shouted. “It has a dark blue cover!” Her hearing wasn’t as good as Ruen’s, but it was good enough for her to have heard me.

Putting the red diary on the floor, I slithered beneath the bed to grab the next box. It was filled with translations of the original journals my ancestors had written. Finding the correct one, I pushed the boxes back beneath her bed, then carried the two journals to the kitchen. “Who translated them?” I asked.

“My grandmother,” she replied. “It took her several years to make copies. She knew future generations probably wouldn’t be bilingual like she is.”

“That was smart,” I conceded, intrigued despite my usual aversion to reading. “Why did you want me to take the original journal instead of just the translation?”

“You’ll see once you look through it,” she said mysteriously. “That can wait for now,” she added. “We still have a horde of zombies to slaughter.”

“I’ll toss my laundry into the dryer and meet you in the living room,” I replied with a grin. Leaving her to clean off the table, I veered into the living room to stash the books in my kill-bag. Then I headed down to the basement to take care of my clothing. By the time I returned to the living room, mom was waiting in her recliner. We resumed our game, but our mood had become somber.

Mom had a warning for me when we finally ended our game for the day and she escorted me to the door. “Be careful who you discuss your dream with,” she said. “Only tell people you trust about it. If there really is an evil force that works for Chaos or whatever, they might have spies looking for you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, uneasy at that thought.

“Fate and Crowmon appeared in your dream to warn you about your destiny. Maybe the agents of Chaos also received a warning. It’s possible they know a champion has been chosen to face them. If they find out it’s you, they’ll try to kill you before you can stop the apocalypse.”

“Thanks for putting that possibility in my head,” I complained. “But you’re probably right. I’ll be careful who I talk to about this. They’ll most likely think I’m crazy anyway,” I added sullenly. Working my way up to being the best bounty hunter in Nexus came with a price. Felicity was jealous of me and was spiteful whenever I ran into her at the Den. I knew she would be far worse behind my back. Felicity had probably been one of the mean kids at high school who’d made fun of the less popular students.

“Don’t ever let anyone make you think less of yourself, Saige,” mom said in a hard tone. “You’re a strong, beautiful, capable young woman and you can kick their butts with one hand tied behind your back.”

Her fierce support always perked me up, even when I was feeling at my lowest. “Thanks, mom,” I said in gratitude, then shifted my hamper to my hip so I could give her a hug.

We weren't particularly demonstrative, but we both needed a bit of comfort. She hugged me back, then gave me a light shove to get me moving. It would be dark soon and nighttime was when the monsters came out to play. I could be called on to hunt a rogue creature down at any time and I needed to be ready for it.

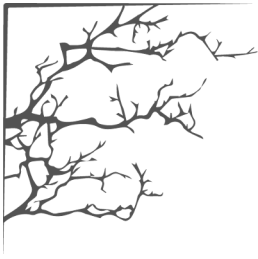
Stopping for fast-food on my way home, I scoffed it down during the drive, then tossed my trash in the dumpster in the parking lot of my apartment building. Most of the inhabitants had night jobs, so they were heading out to work. Exchanging polite nods with my neighbors, I carried my hamper to the elevator and rode it up to my floor. I smelled like hamburger and fries, so I took a quick shower, just in case I ran into any hungry shifters. Strong smells of meat could trigger them to change, especially this close to the full moon, which was only a few nights away.

My job was unpredictable and I never knew when I'd be required to go after the next target. It was fine to lounge around in jeans and a t-shirt during the day, but I needed to look the part of a bounty hunter at night. Choosing a short red skirt, I paired it up with fishnet stockings. They did little to cover the tats that covered me from my thighs down to my ankles. Choosing a black bustier top, I added a leather choker and my favorite black belt with a snake on the buckle.

"You look gorgeous," I told my reflection in admiration when I examined myself. My curves filled out my clothes perfectly. I tugged on a pair of knee-high black boots with three-inch heels, then grabbed my kill-bag. Lenny had apparently always had a no-fighting policy in place in his bar.

Anyone who broke the rules was tossed out and was banned for a while. Committing murder resulted in permanent banning, so it was rare for fights to escalate that far. The Den of Iniquity was the most popular place for monsters to hang out, so no one wanted to be kicked out of it. That didn't mean we couldn't take weapons inside, though. I never went anywhere without something I could stab my enemies with.

As Ruen had pointed out on too many occasions for me to count, my car was an embarrassment to be seen in, so I parked it a block away from the Den as usual. My surly sidekick refused to ride in my car, which was why we always took his vehicle on our jobs. Besides, my orange hatchback couldn't exactly blend in when we were hunting the bad guys.



CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN



LOCKING MY CAR DESPITE the fact that only an extremely desperate fool would try to steal it, I briskly took off on foot. A car slowed down, then rolled along beside me. A guy stuck his head out through the back window. “Hey, sexy,” the skinny wannabe gangster said suggestively. “How much do you charge?” The radio was turned up so loudly that I could barely hear him.

My upper lip lifted that they thought I was a prostitute. “You couldn’t afford me,” I said in a bored tone and kept walking.

“We’ll all chip in,” the driver called out as the front passenger window rolled down. “How much to do us all?”

“I love big women,” another guy in the back said, peering past his buddy at me. “I love squishing my face between their gigantic titties.”

“Ugh,” I said in disgust as they began telling me what they wanted me to do to them and what they wanted to do to me. Getting sick of their badgering, I came to a stop. The car continued to roll for a few seconds, then the driver reversed back a few feet.

“So? How much?” the passenger in the front asked.

All four were in their mid-twenties. I could smell cigarette smoke, traces of illicit drugs and arousal wafting from them. I

was used to men falling for my charms, but it could be annoying at times. “You’ve got the wrong idea about me,” I told them pityingly. “I’m not a ho and I’m not interested in having sex with any of you losers.”

Their mood instantly darkened at my insult. “We’re not losers,” one of the guys in the back denied. “*You’re* a loser! You dress like a ho, then get mad when dudes try to hire you.”

“I’m not dressed like a ho,” I denied.

“Yeah, you are!” the driver said. “You look like a big, fat ho!”

“Listen, you skinny little runt!” I snarled. “I’m not fat, I’m curvy! I’m also way out of your league. You all have small or average size junk at best, which automatically scrubs you from the list of men I’d sleep with.”

“We don’t have small dicks!” the front passenger exclaimed hotly, but his eyes shifted to the side at his lie.

“I always know a dude’s size,” I said with a smirk. “It’s one of my talents.” My special gift was how I knew Drake Gilden would be just as big as I’d dreamed about.

“Is eating your own body weight in junk food one of your talents, too, fatty?” the driver asked sarcastically.

My eyes narrowed and I leaned down so I could get a good look at him. All four pairs of eyes became riveted by my cleavage. “Call me fat one more time,” I dared him ominously.

“Fat, fat, fatty!” he responded with a nasty smirk without taking his eyes off my boobs.

The temper I'd always had trouble controlling flared up again. Lunging forward, I wedged myself into the window, squashing the passenger against the seat as I reached for his runty friend.

Shouts of alarm and maniacal laughter rang out from within the vehicle. The laughter was mine and the screams came from the douchebags. The driver wasn't wearing his seatbelt, of course. That would damage his image of being a tough gangster. I hauled him out of his seat and the engine stalled.

"Help!" he shrieked, batting at me as ineffectually as a helpless little girl. "Someone help me! Call the police! This crazy bitch is trying to kill me!"

Snickering at the stench of fear that emanated from him, I pulled him out of his car. His friends spilled out, coming to his aid. One of them pulled a switchblade and flicked it open. "Let him go, or I'll gut you!" he said, voice quavering with fear.

"Put that away before you hurt yourself, little boy, I said scornfully as the driver weakly tried to extricate himself from the grip I had on his t-shirt.

Flushing in anger, the guy with the knife snarled and took a step towards me. His friends gathered their courage and they all attacked me at once. An audience of humans were gathering, which meant I couldn't smack them down as hard as I wanted to. I had to make it look like I wasn't gifted with heightened strength and reflexes. Shoving the driver at his friends, I waded in with my fists when they caught him before he could bowl them down.

The switchblade was jammed into my side during the melee. My body absorbed it rather than blood spurting all over the place. The thug looked at the clean blade incredulously, then I smashed my fist into his face. Careful to punch him just hard enough to knock him out, I repeated the act with his buddies. Blood was splattered on my hands and arms by now. I'd only broken a couple of noses and split their lips, but they would be sore for the next couple of weeks.

“You go, momma!” a woman called out from the crowd. “Show them little boys what us females are made of!”

While I wasn't actually a mother, I appreciated her sentiment and nodded in thanks. Most of the crowd were filming me. I hoped the footage would be grainy and hard to make out, since we were in between streetlights. A siren sounded and we instinctively scattered before the cops could arrive to question us.

I was puffing from my quick pace by the time I reached the Den. Slowing down to catch my breath, I nodded at the bouncer. Big, blond and musclebound, he nodded back. “How's it going, Saige?” A weretiger, he was well over six feet tall and sported a short beard. All of the bouncers knew me by now.

“I can't complain,” I replied with a smirk, then he returned to watching the street.

As always, the dancefloor was packed with people when I stepped inside. Couples would be utilizing the rooms upstairs for sex, if they could afford to rent one. Every vampire in the room flared their nostrils, then I was suddenly surrounded by

the undead. I didn't have any disposable wipes in my kill-bag tonight and I was still splattered with blood.

“Can we lick you?” a pathetic leech begged me. Almost my height, she had pale blonde hair and sad brown eyes. She was wearing a short black dress and her legs were fish belly white. “We haven't fed in a few days and we're starving.” The blood that had splattered on me was still warm from my exertion for them to be desperate enough to want to devour it.

The other three bloodsuckers implored me speechlessly. Their master must be strict to deny them from feeding. “Okay, but be quick,” I said in resignation. Blood was sacred to them. It would be an insult if I ducked into the restroom to wash it off. “No biting!” I added before they could get carried away and try to sink their fangs into me.

Four tongues began lapping the blood from my hands and arms, twisting and turning them so they could reach every drop. The blonde gave me a sweet smile, then leaned down to lick the top of my boob. “There, we've got it all,” she said in satisfaction.

“Great,” I said in a disgruntled tone at having a female's tongue on my breast. “Thanks for cleaning it all off me.” Drifting away with dreamy looks in their eyes, they returned to the table they'd abandoned.

Feeling sticky from vampire saliva, I nodded at the people I knew by face, if not by name as I made my way to the restroom. Two women were kissing passionately in a corner when I pushed the door open. They didn't pay any attention to me as I washed my hands, arms and boob. “That'll teach me

not to fight with humans,” I muttered wryly, then returned to the main room.



CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT



I'D HIRED A ROOM ON the second floor to have sex with my infrequent conquests a few times by now. Lenny's private quarters were somewhere on the top floor. Bouncers patrolled all three floors, making sure trouble didn't break out.

Not in the mood to find someone to have a quickie with tonight, I wended my way over to the bar. Three bartenders were working as usual. Lenny hired a few lackeys from different species. As always, the zombie was in the middle where he could be the center of the action.

Lenny had his one remaining ear to the ground and knew everything that happened in the supernatural community. If anyone would know about a possible plan from the overlords to invade earth, it would be him. I reached the bar and a patron vacated his seat at a nod from Lenny. "It's good to see you, Saige," the zombie said.

"Hey, Lenny," I said. "How's things?"

"Mostly intact. One of my toes almost fell off the other day, but I got a doc to stitch it back on for me," he replied with a wink of his milky eye. "What'll it be?" he asked.

"I'll have the usual."

Knowing my preferred brand of beer, he expertly poured a glass for me from the tap. "Where's your undead sidekick?" he asked, plonking the beer on the bar.

“Ruen’s probably lurking outside Lord Gilden’s office, waiting for his next order,” I joked. In truth, we never hung out socially. I had no idea what the vamp did when he wasn’t with me.

“Guess again, Ms. Sterling,” the vampire said from right behind me just as I took a sip of my drink.

Swallowing the beer down the wrong tube, I pounded my chest and hacked out a cough. “Nice one, Ruen,” I scolded him. “You get a kick out of trying to scare my pants off, don’t you?”

“You’re wearing a skirt,” the leech pointed out irritably. Just to be different, he was wearing a black suit.

Lenny grinned at our antics, finding us both highly amusing. “Can I heat up a glass of blood for you?” he asked.

Ruen’s fangs descended before he could control himself. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” he said, mustering his dignity.

Lenny glanced at the customer sitting next to me and she reluctantly gave up her stool for the vampire. The zombie ambled over to the fridge and bloodsuckers in the room began to salivate as soon as the door opened and they saw the bottles of blood. Ruen had to be nearly starving to fork over a couple of hundred bucks for one drink.

I watched in amusement as Lenny poured the thick red liquid into a tall glass, then heated it in a microwave. He carried it back to Ruen and handed it over with a flourish. “Our finest vintage, my good sir.”

Ruen inclined his head in thanks, then hissed at a fellow leech when she suddenly appeared beside him. Hunching over the glass, he quickly gulped it down before any of his kin could try to steal it from him.

It was always hilarious to see the usually tightly controlled minion lose his cool like that. Sighs of disappointment sounded from the vamps once the glass was empty.

“Can I lick the glass?” the leech begged him. Far too thin, her dark skin was almost gray from malnourishment.

Ruen fought with his instincts and dignity won this time. “Enjoy,” he said and handed it to her.

My nose wrinkled as she snatched it from him and began swirling her tongue around inside it, searching for every last drop. Ruen paid for his drink and I sipped my far cheaper beer, glad I didn’t have an unholy thirst like he did. “What brings you here tonight?” I asked. My undead assistant wasn’t the partying type. I wasn’t even sure Ruen knew how to have fun.

“A job has come up and Lord Gilden wants us to look into it immediately,” he informed me.

“Why didn’t you call me so you could pick me up from home?”

“We require information in order to locate our quarry. I was going to call you once I’d obtained it.”

Our heads swung towards Lenny, who attempted to look coy. “This job wouldn’t be in relation to a certain wererat who beheaded a human convenience store owner this afternoon, would it?”

“It would,” Ruen confirmed. “Rumor has it he’s gone underground. You wouldn’t happen to know where his lair is, would you?”

“I might know something,” the bartender said slyly.

“Ruen, give Lenny some incentive to talk,” I ordered.

“Why do I have to bribe him?” the vampire whined. “You’re the bounty hunter. I’m just your ‘assistant’.” He held both hands up to do an air quote.

“If Drake hadn’t forbidden you from killing anyone, you could be my partner instead of just my errand boy,” I told him. He could gather intel, drive me around and do other helpful tasks, but he couldn’t lift a finger to kill the bad guys.

“I have no wish to be your partner in any sense of the word,” Ruen said, upper lip lifting again.

I rolled my eyes and reached for my wallet. “Fine! I’ll bribe him, then,” I said and handed over a hundred bucks.

Lenny grinned widely enough to show me his black gums. “I might have heard that there’s a rogue wererat hiding out in the sewers,” he said.

Nexus had an extensive sewer system and catacombs had apparently been created by the monsters over the past two hundred years. The rat could be hiding anywhere down there.

“Can you be a bit more specific?” I requested. He glanced at my wallet and waited for me to slip him another fifty bucks.

Lenny tucked the money away before speaking. “He was seen near an entrance that leads to Sector G.”

I grimaced at that news. Sector G was the last place any sane person would want to go, which made it the perfect hideout. Sewage was backed up so badly in that area that it had formed small mountains. I'd heard several rumors now that demons had moved in and were responsible for killing the werewolf bounty hunters Ruen and I had replaced. "Thanks, Lenny. You're the best."

"No, doll face, *you're* the best," he said with another wink.

"That's why Lord Gilden hired me," I boasted. "Let's roll," I said and blew the zombie a kiss. "I'm going to have to go home and get changed," I said as Ruen led the way to the door.

"You stored a change of clothes in my trunk," he reminded me.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about that." I'd put some ratty old clothes in his trunk a couple of months ago, just in case I ever needed them. It seemed I was finally going to be able to use the outfit.

Ruen's car was parked in the shadows a short walk down the street. He opened the trunk and reached for the clothes that were tucked into the back. "I'm sure these will be far more appropriate than what you're currently wearing," he said with a faint sneer.

Giving him a sour look, I examined the outfit. It was a faded pair of old black jeans and a gray t-shirt with holes in it. "I must be psychic," I joked. "This is the perfect outfit for slogging around in a sewer. I wish I'd added sneakers, though."

He reached into the car again and pulled out a raggedy pair of my old sneakers. “You mean like these?” he said sardonically.

“Okay, now I really am psychic,” I said, a bit spooked that I’d predicted I’d need the ratty old clothing one day. Maybe I had more in common with the ancestor who’d written the journal I had yet to read than I’d realized.

“You’ve obviously forgotten it was my suggestion for you to store spare clothing in my trunk,” Ruen said grumpily.

“Was it?” I asked with a frown, casting my mind back and coming up blank.

Shaking his head at my faulty memory, my assistant primly turned his back while I took my boots and stockings off. I tugged the jeans on, then removed my skirt. I swapped my boots and sexy top for the grungy sneakers and t-shirt, then placed my good clothes in the trunk.

“Are you decent?” the leech asked.

“Not even close,” I joked. “But I’m clothed now, so you can turn around.”

Cautiously peering over his shoulder to make sure I wasn’t going to flash him, Ruen joined me at his trunk. “It will be dangerous hunting in Sector G. You need to be properly prepared,” he said.

“How am I going to figure out which wererat is the murderer?”

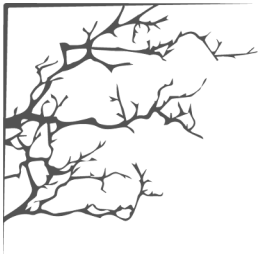
“I stopped by the convenience store on my way here,” he said with great reluctance. “I’ll be able to lead you to him.”

“Even if we have to wade through piles of crap?” I asked incredulously. Vampires had uncanny senses of smell. They were almost as good at tracking as shifters. My sense of smell was acute, but only when I was up close and personal with the monsters. I didn’t have the ability to track my prey like a bloodhound.

“He’ll have left traces of himself that I can follow, no matter how much excrement we’ll be encountering.”

I snickered at his gloomy expression when he looked down at his expensive shoes. “I bet you wish you’d stashed some crappy old clothing in your trunk right about now.”

He nodded dismally and waited for me to gear up.



CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE



SINCE WE ALWAYS USED Ruen's car, I'd stashed a variety of weapons in his trunk. First, I strapped four knives with five-inch blades to my wrists. They were good for either stabbing or throwing. Next, I strapped machetes to both thighs. Thanks to how compact they were, I could still kneel if I had to. All of my knives were in leather sheaths.

Next were my new handguns. I clipped a pair of black leather holsters to my belt. Lord Gilden had commissioned the pistols for me two months ago. As black as the night sky, the weapons blended in with my clothing and didn't have any shiny bits to give me away. The magazines could hold fifteen bullets and the pistols didn't have a safety. Both mom and I were crack shots and hadn't needed to be taught how to shoot. It was one of our natural talents.

Last was my mini crossbow. Made of black lightweight metal, it almost looked like a toy, but it was just as deadly as my other weapons. It hung from a strap over my back and I could swing it around to fire it at will. The quiver full of black bolts went over my left shoulder. I'd never been to Sector G before and I intended to be prepared for anything.

Lord Gilden had also commissioned special ammo for me. The bullets were silver and had been blessed by a priest. They were equally deadly to vamps and shifters. The crossbow bolts

had silver tips and had also been blessed. I was lucky most of the creatures I hunted were shifters and bloodsuckers. So far, my bullets and knives had been effective against everything I'd faced, but there were plenty of supernatural creatures out there that I'd never come up against.

“Are you done, or are you planning to strap a bazooka to your person next?” Ruen asked.

“Do you think your boss would buy me a bazooka?” I asked eagerly.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he pinched his lips shut. “Get in the car,” he said, then turned on his heel and stalked away.

“I'm the hunter,” I said to his back. “I'm the one who gives the orders!” I had to raise my voice over the sound of him slamming his door shut. I debated about whether I should take my sawn-off shotgun with me, then decided against it. Instead, I reached for a flashlight. Unlike the monsters I hunted, I couldn't see in the dark perfectly.

Now that I was loaded for bear, I slammed the trunk shut and climbed into the car. I moved the crossbow and quiver so I wasn't leaning back against them, then circled my finger in the air to signal for him to roll.

Ruen took off with maddening slowness and drove towards the river where we would find an entrance to Sector G of the sewers. “I've lived in Nexus for over two hundred years and I've managed to avoid visiting the sewers,” he said. “Why am I not surprised that teaming up with you would lead me here?”

“You can blame our boss for lumping us together,” I reminded him. “I don’t need an undead babysitter. Drake is punishing me as much as you by ordering you to follow me around.”

Even after working together for four months, the bloodsucker still hadn’t warmed up to me. Sometimes, I wondered if he hated my guts. I had no idea why he didn’t like me, since I was such good company. To prove it, I turned the radio up and sang along to the latest pop song.

Hunching his shoulders as if he wished he could make himself disappear, Ruen increased his speed slightly. He was almost going at the posted limit this time, which meant he really must want to get this over and done with.

I stopped singing as we closed in on the river that lay to the east of the city. Ruen muttered something beneath his breath that I didn’t quite catch and straightened up from his hunch. “I’ve heard access to Sector G can be found inside a culvert somewhere around here,” he said as he coasted to a stop in an empty parking lot.

Glancing around at the dark buildings that surrounded us, I couldn’t sense any supernatural creatures at all. We were in a human zone that had once been a thriving industrial area. It seemed business hadn’t been great for the past decade or so, going by the boarded-up windows and chained up gates to several of the properties.

We climbed out and Ruen took a deep breath. “Can you smell the target’s scent?” I asked.

“Not yet, but I can detect many other wererats’ scents,” he replied.

That made sense. Most shifters ran in packs and few were loners. It could get complicated entering their territory, since I was here to kill one of their kind. We’d just have to wing it and see how this played out.

The grass was overgrown and the ground was slightly marshy from being so close to the river. The water moved sluggishly and the smell was far from pleasant. It was going to be far worse in the sewers. The moon was edging closer to being full, so it cast plenty of light for me to see where I was going.

Following the invisible trail, Ruen gave me an update as we drew closer to the river. “I can smell our target’s scent. He came this way last night.”

“Lenny’s intel was solid,” I said in approval that the zombie hadn’t led us astray.

Ruen followed his nose to a rusty old culvert that fed stormwater into the river. It hadn’t rained for a few days, so a bare trickle of water was flowing through it. A hole large enough for people to pass through had been cut through the thick metal. It was concealed by a dense bush. The shifters had been smart enough to cut the opening a couple of feet high, so water wouldn’t gush out of it during storms and alert the humans.

Turning my flashlight on, I shone it through the opening, but I knew the drain was empty. My senses weren’t picking up on anyone nearby. I awkwardly climbed through the hole and

my assistant gracefully joined me a moment later. “After you,” Ruen said, gesturing for me to go first.

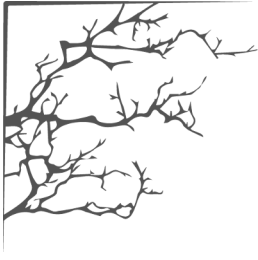
Since I was the only one who could actually fight, I didn’t bother to argue with him. He would guide me from the rear and trust me to take down anyone stupid enough to attack us.

The flashlight was too feeble to pierce very far into the darkness. My footsteps echoed around us as we hunched over to walk along the slightly sloped drainpipe. The vampire was almost noiseless as he followed me. We soon came to a convergence of pipes and my guide pointed straight ahead. I kept going, remaining alert and unhappy about being in such cramped quarters.

I knew we were getting close to the sewers when the stench of human waste wafted to my nostrils. It had to be a thousand times worse for Ruen. Turning my head, I could just make out his disgusted expression in the gloom. “You should have plugged your nostrils with Vaseline,” I joked.

“That would have made it rather difficult to track our quarry,” he pointed out snidely.

“You have no sense of humor at all, do you?” I complained, then turned away to continue our journey.



CHAPTER THIRTY



THE PIPE LED US TO a concrete network of passageways. The storm drains were soon replaced by sewerage tunnels. Words couldn't describe the overwhelming stench when we reached the first infamous pile of crap I'd heard of, but hadn't previously witnessed.

"I'm guessing we're close to Sector G," I said, trying not to gag when I tasted the turds as I spoke.

Ruen pointed at a sign that had been painted on the wall up ahead. I shone my flashlight on it to see Sector G in huge yellow letters. Without speaking, the leech shifted his finger to point to the left fork. I was pretty sure he wasn't going to open his mouth until we'd finished our task and were back on the surface again.

I grew suspicious about the increasingly large mounds of crap we encountered as we traversed deeper into Sector G. "Is it just me, or do these piles look like they were placed here on purpose?" I whispered. Sound carried in the tunnels and shifters had uncanny hearing.

Ruen examined the next mound as we skirted around it. He nodded, confirming my hunch. They were all strategically placed near the openings to the tunnels our quarry had taken. It felt like they'd been constructed to deter supernatural law keepers like me from hunting the bad guys who fled here to escape justice.

The mounds of excrement grew larger the closer we came to our foe's lair. Finally, our way was almost barred completely by a wall of excrement. Standing three feet high, it stretched for several feet, creating an effective blockage.

"That's disgusting," I said, pinching my nose shut so I didn't have to smell it. "I'm not wading through that."

Ruen pointed dead ahead, insisting our target had come this way. Most shifters were nimble. Wererats were even more agile than most. They could easily leap over the wall and land on the other side without stepping in the muck. I didn't share their ability. It would be impossible for me to jump that far without bashing my head on the ceiling.

"Nope. No way," I denied. "We'll have to find another way around."

Throwing his hands up in silent exasperation, the vamp grabbed hold of me before I could start backtracking. I had enough time to suck in an alarmed breath, then he lifted me off my feet and I was sent flying through the air. The top of my head scraped the concrete ceiling and I ducked before I could be scalped. It was lucky my breath had caught in my throat, so I couldn't voice the scream that tried to escape from me.

I landed on my stomach a couple of yards away from the wall of turds. Ruen neatly landed beside me even before I managed to clamber to my feet. "Thanks for the assist," I said sarcastically. His response was to bow and flourish a non-existent cape.

With only one direction to take, I scowled at his smug grin, then marched along the tunnel. My shirt and pants were

soaked with noisome fluid and clumps of crap. I shook it to dislodge the clumps, but the smell wasn't going anywhere.

A few openings to other culverts branched off here and there. The trail led dead ahead, so I didn't bother to shine my flashlight into any of them. I picked up on the presence of shifters. They were all wererats and they were congregated a short distance away. My senses told me they were fairly low in power. "Pimples," I murmured. They were only slightly more dangerous than the lesser demons I'd eradicated a few months ago, but there were a lot more of them.

Slowing down to muffle my approach, I paused at the next intersection. Ruen pointed to the right, but I already knew our target was nearby. I could sense over a dozen rodents. From their squeaking noises and scampering feet, they were in their animal forms.

I looked at my sidekick, who'd come to the same conclusion that I had. It was going to be impossible for him to identify our quarry if the rat wasn't in his human form. Their scents changed completely once they shifted. I grimaced, knowing my job had just become far more complicated.

Mud and worse substances squelched beneath my sneakers, giving my presence away as I stepped around the corner into the new tunnel. Squeaks of warning came from a wererat who was guarding the entrance to their lair. In seconds, fifteen rodents moved into a group in the center of a large open area. They'd blocked off the other tunnels to form a nest. From the looks of it, they lived in their animal forms when they were here. Piles of refuse, food scraps and a

collection of bones were heaped in one corner. Clothes they would wear in their human forms were over to the left.

Ruen hung back and I turned to gesture at him to follow me. He shook his head, but I made a menacing face and held my fist up threateningly. With a morose expression, he reluctantly trailed after me. I needed him to verify who the culprit was, if I could get the target to stand out from the others.

We walked to the entrance of the lair, then came to a stop when the rats squealed in warning. "I'm just here for the shifter who killed the human," I said, knowing they could understand me. About the size of large dogs, one alone wouldn't be very dangerous. A pack this size could tear a normal bounty hunter apart. Luckily for me, I wasn't normal. I was tough, fast and was wearing enough weapons to take them all down, if I had to.

The pack exchanged looks and squeaked at each other, talking in their animal language. It became obvious I needed to give them more details.

"I'm looking for the wererat who killed a human convenience store owner yesterday afternoon," I said. I knew they were aware of who I was talking about, because they shifted into an even tighter group to hide the culprit. "I work for Lord Gilden and he's paying me to put the rogue shifter down. I'm not leaving until I have my man. If you rat him out, I'll leave the rest of you alone. No pun intended."

This time, their squeaking was different. I was pretty sure they were laughing at me.

“Maybe you don’t know who I am,” I said menacingly and pulled my mini crossbow over my shoulder to show it to them. My guns would draw too much attention if I fired them. I’d only use them as a last resort. “I’m Saige Sterling, the premier bounty hunter in Nexus.” More rodent laughter sounded, which pissed me off. I hadn’t reached that level yet, but I was working my way up to it. “Fine. We’ll do this the hard way then. I’m going to assume you’ve all killed innocent humans and need to be eradicated. Drake will probably give me a bonus if I wipe out your entire pack for harboring criminals.”

One of the rats stepped forward and bared her teeth at me. I shot her in the leg and she squealed in agony. “The next bolt goes through the eye of any idiot who threatens me,” I warned them as I quickly reloaded my weapon. I slipped my flashlight into my waistband, since I was going to need both hands free. Although the light was now shining upwards, it cast enough of a glow for me to see.

Now their squeaks sounded worried, as if they were starting to believe I might actually be as dangerous as I knew I looked. I pointed my crossbow at the wounded rat for emphasis and she flinched away. In silent agreement, the pack parted. A lone rodent stood on his own as they moved to the far edges of their lair.

“Wise decision,” I said smugly, then pointed my weapon at the target. “Shift into your human form,” I ordered him. He hissed at me and held up a paw to flip me the bird. In retaliation, I shot him in the offending paw. “I’ll keep shooting until you do what I say,” I said and aimed at his other paw.

Just as I'd figured, he shifted form. Now naked and in his scruffy, unwashed human guise, he yanked the bolt out of his hand. "You're crazy!" he accused me, completely unfazed at having his privates swinging out in the wind, so to speak.

"I'm not the one going around murdering humans," I retorted. "Why did you off him, anyway?" It wasn't my job to question the perpetrators, but I was curious.

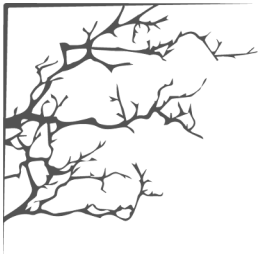
"I didn't kill anyone," he denied, eyes shifting guiltily at the obvious lie.

"Is he the target?" I asked Ruen. He took a shallow breath, then nodded in confirmation. "His nose never lies," I said. "He picked up your scent at the store, so we know it was you who killed the human."

"He caught me stealing and was going to call the cops," the shifter said in desperation. "I had no choice!"

"You could have run," I pointed out. "It was stupid to kill him, but it was complete idiocy to behead the guy. That's the sort of thing that makes the cops suspicious. You know we can't let the humans find out about our kind. Now I have to kill you to set an example for the other supernatural creatures."

I didn't get any joy out of hunting down losers like this. Sure, he'd torn the human's head off in panic after getting caught, but he wasn't downright evil. He was just a moron and now he was going to have to die for his stupidity.



CHAPTER THIRTY- ONE



MY TARGET BENT TO SCOOP up a handful of sludge before I could pull the trigger. He tossed it at me and I sidestepped it. The next handful wasn't as easy to avoid. He hit me directly in the eye with the third one. Half blind from mud and crap, he was on me before I could shoot him. Grabbing my wrist, he pushed my crossbow out of the way, then tried to bury his teeth in my throat.

I grabbed a fistful of his shaggy hair and pried him off me. He hadn't even broken my skin and his eyes were wild and terrified. Slobber was on my neck and was dribbling between my boobs. He clawed at my eyes, so I let go of my crossbow to catch hold of his wrists.

"I won't let you take me alive!" he screeched and lunged forward, snapping at my face with his teeth.

"I'm not planning to, you dunce cap," I said in exasperation, easily holding him at bay. Ruen had drifted backwards to pretend to guard the exit. I knew he would be useless to stop my quarry from escaping, but it wasn't necessary. I had him right where I wanted him.

The rat lifted his leg and clumsily kicked me in the stomach. I absorbed the blow without flinching, then headbutted him. His knees buckled and I let go of one of his wrists to pull a knife. I swiped the blade across his throat

before he could recover. Blood sprayed all over me as I shoved him away.

Wiping blood, sweat and crap out of my eyes, I sensed Ruen hovering directly behind me. I turned to see his attention was fixed on the dead wererat. His pupils were fully dilated and his mouth was open slightly. His fangs were fully extended and he looked ravenously hungry.

“We should go,” I whispered as the rodents all began to move towards their fallen pack member. “We should go *now*,” I hissed as the rodents pounced and began to feed. Even pimples like them could prove to be a bother when they were enraged.

Ruen didn't seem to hear me. He took a step forward, bumping into me as if he didn't see me at all. He'd gone into some weird kind of vampire trance. Bones crunched and gobbling noises came from the swarm of wererats as they devoured their fallen pack member.

I put my hand on Ruen's arm when he stepped around me and he snarled at me furiously. I knew he couldn't hurt me, but I still recoiled a little at his vehemence.

One of the wererats heard him and squeaked shrilly, taking his presence as a threat.

“Uh, oh,” I said when the entire pack turned on us. All that was left of the dead guy were a few splinters of bone and clumps of hair. One lone body wasn't enough to satisfy their appetites. Frenzied from feeding, they'd gained the courage to ignore my weapons and surged forward.

I grabbed hold of Ruen and yanked on his arm, pulling him after me as I ran from the wererats' lair. A roar from the tunnel ahead blasted my ears. I sensed something huge and powerful rushing towards us and ducked into a smaller culvert. I put my hand over my flashlight to plunge us into darkness.

The shifters that had been chasing us squealed in terror, then reversed direction. I glanced over my shoulder to dimly see the pipe was blocked behind us, then turned back just as a monster rushed past. It had a long snout filled with snaggleteeth, a greenish-gray scaly hide and was over thirty feet long.

"Did you see that?" I gasped, but Ruen was still in his trance.

Hearing squeals of pain and crunching noises, I figured the monster would be busy while it fed on the rats. They'd instinctively fled to their lair only to become trapped. I yanked Ruen into motion and raced back down the main tunnel. My flashlight bobbed and swayed madly with each step I took. I left it in my waistband, since we weren't out of the woods yet.

Another roar sounded, then a second scaly creature lunged at me from one of the larger side tunnels. Teeth latched onto my leg and bit deeply. Even with my skin's natural toughness, I felt a twinge of pain. Panic tried to win, but I forced myself to keep my cool and pulled one of the twins. My senses identified the creatures as weregators rather than normal alligators. I sensed that its hide would protect it from most damage, but its eyes were vulnerable.

The gator worried at my leg, but it wasn't able to penetrate my skin. I shot it in the eye and it flinched, but didn't let go. It took a few bullets in both eyes before I penetrated its brain. It went limp and its mouth relaxed enough for me to pull my leg free. My jeans were shredded, but at least I wasn't bleeding.

Speaking of blood, more had splashed on me from my rapid series of gunshots. Ruen swayed towards me, lured by the scent of the liquid he craved so badly. The other gator finished eating its prey, then roared in rage when it saw its dead companion. More bellows from other weregators came from deeper within Sector G. They would converge on us and rip us both to shreds if we didn't get the hell out of there.

"Run!" I shouted at Ruen, but he was in no shape to hear me. Still holding him by the wrist, I took off running. Turning left at the intersection, I ran as fast as I could.

Ruen suddenly leaped onto my back and wrapped himself around me, causing me to stumble in surprise. I thought he was trying to bite me when his head came over my shoulder. Then I realized he was licking the blood off my cheek. It wasn't easy to run with him clinging to my back like a gigantic tick.

Even with the gators hot on my heels, I began to laugh. Ruen's tongue rapidly bathed my face and neck clean. His tongue was probing my ear when I barreled through the wall of excrement. That was enough to snap him out of his daze. I'd caught the brunt of it, but my assistant was also splattered with crap.

“What happened?” Ruen asked, then glanced backwards as I did my best to follow our trail. Seeing the weregators rapidly gaining on us, he leaped off me, grabbed my hand and used his vampiric speed to race to the closest exit.

“I guess it’s lucky you licked all that blood off me,” I teased him when we climbed out of a manhole onto a street. “It gave you enough energy to outrun the shifters.” The glass of blood he’d ingested before we’d left the Den had helped far more than the snack he’d just gotten from me.

His lips pinched shut and he took off again without a word. The gators could easily follow our stinky trail, so I ran in his wake. My minion slowed his pace enough for me to keep up with him as he followed the street that ran alongside the river. I heard the roars of the weregators again just as we spotted his car.

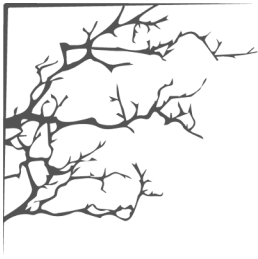
With a final burst of speed, we reached the sedan and jumped inside it. Ruen took off with a squeal of tires. He made it all the way to the speed limit as we exited from the area. It wouldn’t be easy for anyone to follow our trail now that we were inside a vehicle, so I relaxed a bit. “What the hell happened to you back there?” I asked. “You went into some kind of weird trance.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said irritably. “We can’t visit Lord Gilden to get your payment while we’re in this disgusting state. I’ll take you to see him tomorrow night.”

“Your car is going to smell like crap for months,” I predicted in amusement, thankful that I could shower the stench away.

“I’ll have to have it cleaned with strong disinfectant,” the bloodsucker said in annoyance. “The smell will make my eyes water, but at least it will be preferable to excrement.”

His dour tone was enough to make me descend into snickers again.



CHAPTER THIRTY- TWO



“HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT any conspiracies cropping up in the underworld?” I asked as casually as I could, once I had my amusement under control.

“There are always conspiracies in the nine realms. Are you talking about anything specific?”

“I heard a rumor that the overlords are planning to attack Nexus.”

He snorted out a laugh. “The gates are too heavily warded with magic for an army to come through them,” he told me. “How could they possibly invade our world in large numbers?”

I shrugged, feigning a lack of interest in the topic. “I heard something about an axis-gate and them being able to use it at will.”

His head whipped towards me and his gaze sharpened. “Where did you hear that?”

“At the Den a while ago,” I lied.

“Who did you hear it from?”

“I can’t remember. It was just someone in the crowd. Why? Is there really such a thing as an axis-gate?”

He pressed his lips together, clamming up again. It was obvious he’d heard of this secret gate and that he wasn’t going

to tell me anything about it. My unease that my dream might have been more than just my imagination deepened.

“I left my car parked near the Den,” I said before Ruen could veer towards my apartment. “Could you drop me off at it?”

“I suppose so,” he said in annoyance, as if it was a huge inconvenience to him.

Directing him to where I’d left my orange hatchback, I climbed out and removed my weapons. He stayed in the car as I stashed my weapons in the trunk and retrieved my clean clothes and boots. The moment I slammed the trunk shut, he took off.

It was close to midnight on a weekday, so most of the humans had dispersed from the street. A few cars passed me, but none of the occupants saw me as I hid in the shadows. My raggedy clothes were ruined, so I stripped down to my undies and tossed them in a nearby dumpster. Clad only in my bra and thong, I climbed into my car to drive home.

It was a good thing I was proud of my body and my tattoos, because several of my neighbors joined me in the elevator before it could close. Pressing their backs against the wall, they kept their distance from me. Their eyes crawled all over my body, taking in my magnificence. I assumed they were stunned to silence until one of them spoke.

“Do you realize you smell like rats, reptiles, crap and blood?” All shifters, they could detect the scents that clung to me.

“I had to hunt down a bounty in Sector G,” I said as we reached the third floor.

“Did you wade through a pile of turds to get to him?” one of the others asked.

“Pretty much,” I confirmed glumly.

“I like your tats,” the final guy said in admiration when we reached their floor and the door opened. “If you lost about sixty pounds, you’d be gorgeous.”

In response, I put my hand on his face and shoved him out through the door. Then I stabbed the button to make the door close again.

“What did I say?” he whined as it slid shut.

I didn’t dignify him with a response and rode the lift to the fourth floor, fuming in silence.

Showering for a good half an hour, I managed to get rid of the smells that clung to my skin and hair. It was still early for a night owl like me. I heated some leftover pizza in the microwave, then sat down to game.

Gaming was my form of therapy. I went into a Zenlike state when I was mauling and killing my electronic enemies. They never threw poo in my eyes, or licked blood off my boobs. In a perfect world, I could spend all of my time playing videogames. Unfortunately, I needed money in order to survive and hunting monsters was what I did best. Receiving my payment in person from the hottest shifter in Nexus was a welcome bonus.

I played one of my favorite games where I got to drive a variety of cars around doing various tasks. The best part was killing zombies by opening the car door as I drove past them. It never failed to bring me joy when I splattered their bodies all over the road. Eventually growing tired enough to go to bed, I hoped I wasn't going to have another weird dream.

Bright daylight speared through my dingy window and woke me up a few hours later. "I should clean that window one day," I muttered as I rolled out of bed. That would just make the sun brighter, so I immediately abandoned the idea. My curtain was thin and too small, hence the gap the sunlight filtered through. Shopping for a new one would require too much effort, so I was stuck with it.

Mom was busy with friends today, so I had the day to myself. We only gamed three times a week, sometimes four if her plans changed. It was pathetic, but my mother had a far more active social life than I did. Unlike me, she wasn't a total loner.

After breakfast, curiosity had me picking up the journal my ancestor had written and the translated copy of it. I'd left them sitting on my coffee table, but hadn't bothered to look at them yet. Sinking onto my couch, I opened the red leatherbound book and flicked through the pages. I couldn't read the words that had been written in black ink, so I examined the drawings instead.

"She was a pretty good artist," I said, slightly jealous of my ancestor. A monster hunter like all of the women in our line, she'd sketched the creatures she'd killed. Most were

rogue vampires, shifters and demons. Others came from various realms of the underworld, but appeared to be normal humans most of the time. We had to be careful when we were tracking our quarry. Humans wouldn't understand that we were saving them from supernatural creatures unless they witnessed our targets transforming into monsters.

A drawing towards the end of the book caught my attention. An extremely pregnant woman was in the throes of giving birth. She was sitting in a clearing in the woods, with a ring of trees around her. The full moon was high overhead, brightly illuminating the scene. I spied an owl sitting on a low branch of a nearby tree. Then I saw a wolf lurking in the shadows. Its head was back, howling at the moon as it witnessed the birth of the baby.

“Ew, I can see its head coming out!” I complained when I saw a bulge between the woman's thighs.

It was surreal to think the baby that disgusted me so much might actually be me. For a second or two, my mind spun dizzily. The dream I'd had about Fate and Crowmon returned in vivid detail. If it had been real, then Fate had set all this into motion two thousand years ago. She'd guided my ancestors to find supernatural sperm donors time and time again. Her actions had led to me being born at the right time to save our world from destruction.

My gaze went to my gaming console that was waiting for me to resume mowing down zombies. I was tempted to toss the journals aside and do what I loved best, but a niggling sense of unease kept me flicking through the book. That sketch

was the only picture that related to either my mother or myself as far as I could tell.

Getting up long enough to make coffee, I sat back down and started reading the translation of the journal. It took me a couple of hours to skim through it. Once I finally reached the dream she'd had about the birth in the woods, I slowed down to read it thoroughly.

According to her dream, one of her distant descendants would be born beneath the omens she'd drawn. The child would grow up to be a highly skilled hunter, with unusually strong talents. She would be chosen by a strange entity to save our world from an epic disaster that would result in the loss of all life.

“Could she have been vaguer?” I said in annoyance. “What if the disaster is a gigantic meteor? Am I supposed to reach up and smack it out of the sky with my bare hands?”

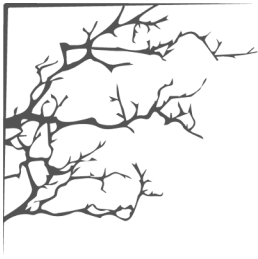
As far as prophecies went, it was pretty lame. I had to concede that my birth was eerily similar to the drawing, minus being born in the woods surrounded by trees. Mom had said the bird that had flown past the window had been an owl. There were always werewolves howling at the moon when it was full. A pack lived just a couple of blocks from her house.

“I guess I could be the one she dreamed about,” I mused. “I am an awesome hunter with unusually strong skills.” I'd also dreamed I'd been chosen to be Fate's champion for our world.

Even if the prophecy was true and I was the heroine that had been predicted, it wasn't like I could just stroll up to a gate

to the underworld and pass through it. They were heavily guarded by magic and Lord Gilden's lackeys. Hardly anyone ever passed from our world to the underworld. The few who did rarely made it back. Special envoys from the overlords were the only ones who came and went without dying horribly. I'd heard they had dozens of guards with them, although they had to pass through the gates alone.

“I guess I'll just have to wait and see what happens,” I said and got up to put the journals back on the coffee table. “Maybe I'll see a sign that will tell me what I have to do.” Chuckling at that unlikelihood, I switched my console and TV on and got stuck into annihilating zombies.



CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE



RUEN WAS GOING TO PICK me up to take me to our boss to get my payment tonight. I made sure to be ready when the sun went down. Sensing a vampire outside shortly after nightfall, I crossed to my bedroom window that overlooked the parking lot. Ruen flashed his headlights at me and I waved to indicate I'd seen him.

“That dinosaur really needs to start using his cell phone more often,” I said with an eyeroll at my assistant’s method of communication.

Grabbing my kill-bag, I trotted over to the door. I was dressed in a short black skirt and a sexy see-through red top. It was sleeveless and low-cut to show off my tats. My bra was purple to match my hair, but looked black beneath the shirt.

Ruen was waiting with the patience of the dead when I climbed into his car. “You smell like reheated pizza,” he said without turning his head.

“A girl’s gotta eat,” I said with a shrug, slamming the door shut and buckling myself in. “Sorry I don’t have any blood splatters on me for you to lick off this time,” I added with a smirk.

“You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?” he asked with a grimace as he drove out of the lot.

“Nope. I’m going to bring it up as often as possible,” I said smugly. “You clung to my back like a tick, licking the shifters’ blood off me like I was a tasty popsicle.”

Ruen shuddered, either from the enticing mention of blood, or from the horror of his tongue becoming more familiar with my body than most of the men I’d slept with had. “How much will it take to bribe you into never mentioning this again?” he asked.

“Hmm,” I pondered, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. “A thousand bucks should do it.”

“Open the glovebox,” he ordered. “You’ll find the money in an envelope.”

“You’re kidding,” I said incredulously. He stared ahead without responding, which meant he was serious. I opened the glovebox, spied a white envelope and took it out. “How much money is in here?” I asked, thumbing through the bills.

“That’s irrelevant,” he said stiffly. “You’re entitled to one thousand dollars and not a penny more.”

“How high would you have gone?” I asked, kicking myself for not asking for more.

He slid a look at me before returning his attention to the road.

I counted out a thousand bucks, then put the envelope back in the glovebox. Shoving the cash into my wallet, I now wouldn’t need to visit my fence in a hurry. “It was nice doing business with you, Ruen,” I said.

“Just stick to your end of the deal,” he said sourly.

“I will,” I vowed, already feeling nostalgic that I couldn’t remind him about licking me clean. It would be a very bad idea to break deals with supernatural creatures. It usually ended in death for the one who’d broken their end of the bargain. They took their vows seriously, especially the ancient creatures who’d been around back when honor had meant something. “Your car smells nice,” I said to change the topic. “I can’t smell crap at all now. Did the cleaners use lemon scented disinfectant?”

“How can you tell?” he said sarcastically. “Could it be the overwhelming smell of lemons that gave it away?”

“Sheesh, I guess you got out of the wrong side of your coffin tonight,” I joked. He was usually in a crappy mood, but he was even worse this time.

Ruen hunched his shoulders and tried to ignore me. We reached Drake’s building a couple of minutes later. Parking in his usual spot, we took the elevator up to Lord Gilden’s office.

The dragon was standing at a window next to the French doors, staring out at the city he probably thought belonged to him. He’d been in charge of the supernatural community ever since the city had been a tiny village. It had grown into a thriving metropolis and his wealth had grown along with it.

Drake turned to face us and I saw he was wearing a red tie with his charcoal gray suit. “Twinsies!” I declared, pointing at his tie, then at my shirt. “Great minds think alike.”

He smiled slightly, then gestured for us to take a seat. “Ruen informed me you delivered justice to the wererat who beheaded the human,” the dragon lord said.

“Yep. Blood sprayed all over me when I slit his throat,” I said and slid a sly look at my assistant. Ruen shrank down into his seat and refused to look at me.

“I see,” Lord Gilden said gravely, eyeing his minion in slight disapproval, as if he somehow knew Ruen had momentarily lost his ability to think. “He also told me you ran into a pack of werigators and killed one of them. It was wise to run from them. You could both have been killed if they’d swarmed over you.”

That reminded me of what had happened after I’d killed the target. “It was pretty gross to see the rats turning into cannibals. I know rats will eat anything, but I didn’t expect them to chow down on one of their own like that.”

“Hunger will drive even the most rational beings to sink to unthinkable depths,” he said, staring at the vampire rather than me.

Ruen slid further down his chair, trying to make himself invisible and failing miserably.

“Neither of us were hurt, apart from our dignity,” I said to break the tension. “We had to blast through a wall of crap that was three feet high. It wasn’t pretty, but we made it out alive.”

A grimace passed over Drake’s gorgeous face at the image I’d just described. “I believe the gators might have been responsible for the deaths of your predecessors.”

“Yeah, I figured they’d eaten the werewolves,” I agreed. “They seem to think they own Sector G and attack anyone

who encroaches on their territory. The rats tried to hide behind piles of excrement, but they were discovered in the end.”

“I’ll send Hugh, Theo, Zahir and Yareli to eradicate them,” he decided. We all knew Felicity and Otis would be too slow and fragile to take on the gigantic monsters.

“Ruen and I will be glad to help them out, if they need us,” I offered, knowing full well my partner wouldn’t be able to lift a finger to assist us.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Lord Gilden said. “Ruen mentioned a rumor you asked him about,” he said in a tone that was slightly too casual.

“What rumor might that be?” I knew exactly what he was talking about and instantly became nervous. Just the fact that he was bringing it up made me uneasy. He never chatted with me about inconsequential things. I reported in, he reluctantly paid me, then I left. That had been our ritual for the past four months.

“You said you overheard someone talking about an axis-gate and a conspiracy in the nine realms to attack Nexus,” Drake said, now watching me intently.

“What about it?” I kept my tone as casual as his and my expression bland.

“I want to know who you heard that rumor from.”

“I can’t remember,” I said with a shrug.

“Was it a shifter, a vampire, or something else? Did you see who they were talking to?”

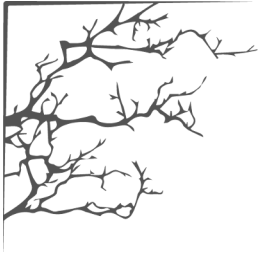
“I didn’t see who it was,” I lied. “I just heard them in passing and thought I’d ask Ruen if he’d heard about it.”

“I don’t believe you,” Lord Gildea said flatly. “I think you know exactly who told you about the gate and you’re protecting them. You will tell me the truth immediately.”

He leaned forward and we became locked in a staring match. I felt like I was falling into his eyes, but it was because of their beauty rather than from compulsion. “If you’re trying to use your dragon mind power on me, it won’t work,” I said after the silence had dragged on for over a minute.

“Not even my kind can ensnare Ms. Sterling’s mind,” Ruen muttered in annoyance.

I was wise enough not to smirk at their failure to control me.



CHAPTER THIRTY- FOUR



DRAKE SAT BACK IN HIS chair with a disgruntled expression. “I’d very much like to know exactly what sort of creature you are, Saige.”

“Why is it so important for you to know who I overheard that rumor from?” I queried, unable to tell him about my true heritage, since I didn’t know it myself.

“Only a handful of people in this world are aware that the axis-gate exists,” he replied. “The possibility that someone was gossiping about it in a nightclub is ludicrous.”

“What’s so secret about the gate?” I asked. “Is it because it needs a spell to open it?”

His gaze sharpened even more and I felt like I’d been pinned to my chair. I wished I’d kept my mouth shut, but it was too late now. “I might not be able to bend your mind to my will, but you will not leave this room until you’ve told me everything you know about the axis-gate,” he said ominously.

“Is this something Ruen has the clearance to know about?” I asked, hiking my thumb at my assistant.

“Ruen is forbidden from divulging confidential information to anyone without my permission,” he confirmed.

“I don’t know much,” I said, resigning myself to spilling my guts. “I’ve heard the overlords of the nine realms are

searching for a spell that will unlock the axis-gate. They'll supposedly be able to retain their natural forms if they use that particular gate. They apparently plan to invade Nexus and wipe us all out, then move on to conquer the rest of the world."

Drake tented his hands beneath his chin and stared past me rather than at me. He was deeply lost in thought. "Will you divulge your source to me?" he asked eventually.

"I saw it in a dream," I admitted.

Ruen huffed out an irritated sigh. "I might have known," he snapped. "You fabricated this idiotic story to gain attention."

"I did not!" I denied hotly. "If I wanted to gain attention, I'd wear a short skirt and a see-through top."

"Like the clothes you're wearing right now?" he said pointedly and lowered his eyes to my boobs that were barely contained by my bra.

"Hush, Ruen," Lord Gilden said mildly and the vampire's mouth snapped shut. "What else did you see in this dream?" he asked.

"You're going to laugh at me," I said nervously.

"I promise I won't," he vowed. "Tell me everything you can remember."

I cut a look at the bloodsucker to see he was glaring at the floor. Now that he'd been ordered to be silent, he wouldn't be able to speak until he'd been given permission to. "Keep in mind that I play a lot of videogames and I have an overactive

imagination,” I warned the dragon, then I told him most of what had happened in my vision. The only bits I left out was my sense of loss at seeing his and Ruen’s remains and the gaming console at the end. “My mom’s body was the last corpse I saw,” I finished up, voice cracking slightly in remembered pain.

Ruen was now looking at me and his expression was disturbed rather than mocking. He glanced at his boss and did a doubletake. Drake’s face had paled a bit and he looked almost haunted. “No one knows about the spell that will open the axis-gate,” Drake said in a low voice. “Even I barely remembered its existence before you mentioned it just now.”

Shock at that revelation rendered me speechless for a moment. “Are you saying you’re over five thousand years old?” I asked when I managed to shake off my astonishment. I knew he was ancient, but not *that* freaking ancient.

He shook his head, which was a relief. “My grandmother told me stories about the last time our world faced ruination,” he said. “Her own grandmother lived through it and barely survived. The overlords back then formed an alliance. They swarmed through the gates on several continents. Although they changed to human guises during their invasion, they were still highly dangerous. They slaughtered everyone they encountered, but their numbers were too small to wipe out humanity utterly. The humans formed hunting parties and managed to drive their foes back through the portals. Strong magic users were able to seal the gates.

“A couple of thousand years passed before the overlords’ sorcerers were able to weaken the spells. Now the magic will allow only one or two beings at a time to pass through the gates. By then, the population of this world had grown. So had the supernatural community. Leaders have been chosen to set soldiers to guard each gate ever since then. We’ve successfully managed to thwart further attempts to invade this world.”

“I take it you’re one of the leaders who was chosen to guard the gates?” I asked.

He inclined his head in confirmation. “I’ve been guarding the gates for several centuries, ever since my predecessor died. There are ten gates clustered in or near Nexus, hence where its name comes from. They’re usually far more spread out than that.”

I’d looked up the definition of what a nexus was and discovered it was a link or a connection. The name made far more sense the information he’d just given me.

“I thought we only had nine gates, one that leads to each realm,” I said in surprise. He lifted an eyebrow meaningfully and it took me a second to figure it out. “Are you saying the axis-gate is *here*, in this city?” I’d looked up what an axis was as well. It meant an alliance or partnership. I wasn’t sure why the gate had been given that name.

“Indeed,” he confirmed. “Only a handful of beings are aware of that fact.”

“Why tell me about it?” I asked, more nervous than ever now. I was just a low-level lackey on the hierarchy. He

wouldn't normally entrust this sort of information to someone like me.

“From what you've told me, you've been chosen to save our world from the next invasion,” he said.

I waited for both Drake and Ruen to burst into laughter, but their expressions remained grave. “You're joking, right?” Neither of them reacted. “It was just a dream!” I exclaimed. “Sure, one of my distant relatives prophesized that a champion from her line would be born sometime in the future. Then my mom saw an omen that matched the prophecy when I was born, but let's get real here!”

Ruen opened his mouth, then glanced at our boss. Drake nodded in permission, releasing his minion from his command to be silent. “What happened in the prophecy and the omen?” he queried.

“One of my ancestors could apparently see glimpses of the future. She had a dream about one of her kin giving birth on the full moon, with an owl and a wolf as witnesses. Mom said I was born under those conditions, more or less.”

“Can you describe your birth in more detail?” the dragon asked.

“Mom said she looked out the window just after I was born to see it was a full moon. An owl flew past the window, then she heard a werewolf howl. She seems to think I'm the one who the prophecy was about.”

The two men exchanged troubled looks. “I haven't heard anything about any recent conspiracies in any of the realms,”

Ruen said.

“Their plans are secret,” I reminded him. “So far, the overlords are still searching for the spell that was hidden somewhere in the nine realms.”

“I believe it might be hidden in all of them,” Drake said.

“Why?”

“Due to the vision you were shown. Each overlord held a short scroll and read from them in turns. It seems the spell was deliberately broken into fragments before being hidden, since they’re apparently searching for them.”

“Why would the agent of Chaos create the gate and the spell, then break the spell up and hide it so no one can use it to unlock the portal?”

“From what Fate told you, battles between Chaos and Order only happen after long intervals. The gate was intended to be used by the forces of evil during the next battle. In your vision, reading the scroll fragments in the correct order will trigger the axis-gate to open on all nine realms simultaneously. The whereabouts of the spell must have been lost over the millennia.”

“The overlords will be working in partnership to activate the portal,” Ruen surmised just as I realized why the gate had been given that name. “The time for the next battle appears to be drawing near,” he added. “Someone has to find the fragments of the spell before the overlords can get their hands on them.”

“I pity that poor idiot,” I said, shaking my head at their bad fortune. Both of their heads swung towards me. “What?” I asked suspiciously.

“The champion has already been chosen,” Lord Gilden reminded me and pointed directly at my face. “You must enter the nine realms, find the fragments and bring them to me.”

“Sure. Okay. I’ll get right on that.” I rolled my eyes, just in case he hadn’t picked up on my heavy sarcasm. “No one who passes through the gates ever comes back,” I pointed out when they just stared at me.

“The envoys of the overlords have no trouble coming and going,” Ruen argued.

“Do I look like one of their envoys?” I said, gesturing at myself.

“You will become *my* envoy,” Drake decided. “Ruen will be your guard.”

I gaped at him, then burst into snickers. I laughed so hard that tears spurted from my eyes. The vampire glared at me, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Are you quite finished?” he asked icily when my giggles petered out.

“Sorry, but the thought of you being my guard is pretty ridiculous.”

“You might change your mind about that once you’ve both passed through the gate to the first realm,” the dragon lord told me.

“Why?” Despite my growing fear, I was intrigued by the mysterious underworld I’d never wanted to visit.

“All creatures from the underworld shed their true forms when they pass through to this world,” he said. “The opposite is true when supernatural beings from our world cross through the portals to the underworld.”

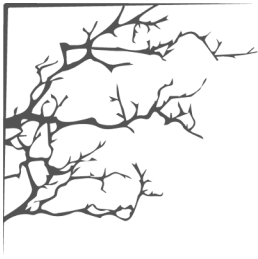
Ruen and I shared an uneasy look at that prospect. “Do you know what my kind look like in the underworld?” the vamp asked.

Drake nodded. “The vampires I’ve met who originated from there described their forms as being quite unsettling. You’ll get to see it for yourself once you cross the threshold to the other dimension.”

“What about me?” I asked. “My blood is mixed with a bunch of monsters. Do you have any idea what I’ll turn into?” I’d filled him in on our mixed heritage and the fact that I didn’t know exactly what species I was.

“How could I, when I don’t know what sort of creatures your ancestors mated with?” he replied with a shrug.

Being sent to another world was bad enough. It was worse that I would be going to another dimension without any idea what sort of monster I would turn out to be.



CHAPTER THIRTY- FIVE



SWEAT HAD SPRUNG UP on my forehead at the thought of having to embark on this dangerous mission. “I’ve never been to the underworld. I won’t have any idea where to look for the spell fragments.”

“If you truly are Fate’s chosen, you’ll have to trust her to guide your path,” Drake said philosophically.

“I’m not even sure I believe in any of this mumbo jumbo,” I confessed. “How am I supposed to trust a weirdo I met in a dream?”

“The sooner you begin your quest, the better,” he said, ignoring my protests. “I’ll compose a letter for you both that will get you in and out of the first realm. If you’re successful, I’ll make plans for you to visit the other realms.”

“He means if we come back alive,” I said to Ruen.

“I’m well aware of that,” the leech said snarkily. “May I ask how I’m supposed to act as Ms. Sterling’s guard when I’m forbidden from using violence?”

“I’m altering the restrictions I’ve placed on you,” Lord Gilden responded. “You can wound, kill and feed on anyone who attacks or threatens either you, or Saige while you’re in the underworld. You can feed on creatures to sustain yourself as well. Your usual restrictions will return once you’ve passed back to our world.”

I glanced at the bloodsucker to see his fangs were fully extended. I was pretty sure his excitement was from being able to feed at will. “Do you have any idea what the first realm is like?” I asked.

“It matches your description from the first doorway you were shown,” Drake said. “Each realm is vast and has many different creatures dwelling within their boundaries. Most are deadly, or at least dangerous. I advise you to act with caution rather than killing everyone you encounter.”

“I only kill the bad guys,” I reminded him.

“In the nine realms, it would be best to assume everyone is a bad guy,” was his sardonic response.

Our meeting seemed to be over, but there was one item left to discuss. “About the rogue wererat I had to put down,” I said and the dragon immediately tensed up. “Are you going to fix me up for that now, or should Ruen bring me back later?”

“I’ll pay you now,” Drake grumbled and reached into his pocket to produce two gold coins. “Since you destroyed a rogue werewogator along with the rat, this should suffice as your payment.”

“That sounds fair to me,” I agreed and leaned forward to hold my hand out. One of the coins was larger than the other and would be worth more.

Lord Gilden leaned forward as well, holding his hand above mine. After a brief internal struggle, he opened his fingers. I stuffed the coins into my wallet before he could

change his mind and snatch them back from me. “You should leave,” he suggested. “I have a lot to do.”

Too distracted by the impending apocalypse to be as torn as usual about relinquishing some of his hoard, he turned to face the French doors to the balcony.

Ruen and I rose to our feet and hastily exited from the room. I waited until the elevator reached the parking lot before I spoke. “He didn’t even breathe smoke from his nostrils that time.”

“Lord Gilden has larger concerns than his wealth,” my assistant said with a frown.

“Are you looking forward to visiting the underworld with me?” I asked in a forced bright tone.

“Of course not. We’ll both probably die horribly the moment we step through the gate and we’ll never see this world again.”

“That’s the spirit,” I said sarcastically at his hopelessly glum response.

“If you had any sense, you’d be dreading this as well,” he snapped as we climbed into his car.

“You think I want to traipse around in the nine realms, looking for a spell that was hidden five thousand years ago?” I asked in an incredulous tone. “I’d rather amputate my own foot and eat it than go on this insane crusade.”

He made a face, possibly being reminded of the cannibalistic wererats. “Neither of us has a choice. Lord Gilden has ordered us to go, so go we must.”

“I don’t have to go,” I pointed out sullenly. “You’re the only one who has to do his every bidding.”

“He’s your employer as well as mine,” Ruen said, sedately pulling out of the parking lot and onto the street. “You follow his orders all the time.”

“Only because he pays me to. He doesn’t control me with magic like he does with you.”

“Pray there never comes a time when you find yourself in my position,” he said dolefully. “You wouldn’t enjoy being shackled to Lord Gilден.”

“I don’t know,” I mused, conjuring up an image of the dragon putting chains on me. “The idea has a certain appeal.”

He rolled his eyes at my wolfish grin. “Must you always think about sex when we discuss Lord Gilден?”

“It’s not my fault he’s so hot,” I protested. “Can you drop me off at the Den? I want to grab a beer or two before I head home.”

I’d given up on my plan to question Lenny about whether he’d heard of any conspiracies in the underworld. The fewer people who knew about my secret mission, the better off I’d be. While Drake couldn’t forbid me from talking about it, common sense told me to keep my mouth shut. The overlords had spies on our world who reported to the envoys who visited here regularly. If they caught wind that a champion like me was about to snatch a fragment of the magical scroll away from them, they would hunt me down relentlessly.

Neither of us were in the mood to chat during the short drive to the nightclub. Ruen dropped me off as requested, then drove away. Music thumped so loudly that I could feel it vibrating in my chest when I stepped through the door. Scanning the crowd, I nodded at my acquaintances, then headed for the bar. Lenny's milky eye zeroed in on me, while the brown one watched the beer he was pouring. It was a bit creepy that he could see me through the thick cataract and move his eyes independently.

"Hey, Lenny," I said when he was free. "What's up?"

"Not my pecker," he joked. "That thing fell off a decade ago."

I snickered along with him, but privately thought that was too much information to share in public. "I'll have a beer," I requested.

"Coming right up," the zombie said and his hands went to work. He was wearing a garish hot pink shirt and mustard yellow trousers, with rainbow suspenders.

"It's good to see you're supporting gay pride," I complimented him.

"What?" he asked in confusion.

"Your rainbow suspenders," I pointed out.

"How are they supporting gay pride?" he asked. "They just keep my trousers up."

"You really need to get with the times, my friend," I told him in amusement.

“I don’t watch TV,” he admitted. “Nothing seems to interest me much anymore.”

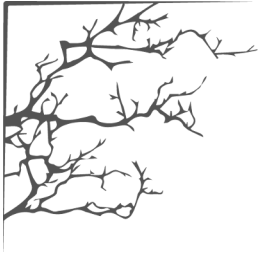
It had to be hard being the living dead. I wondered if his emotions had died along with his soul, but it would be rude to ask. He always seemed to be happy and he still had a sense of humor. Maybe he was faking it for his customers.

“Here you go,” he said, plonking a glass of beer in front of me.

I paid him for the drink, with a generous tip, then made room for the next patron. Leaning against the wall, I sipped my beer as I studied the crowd. Watching the couples kissing and groping on the dancefloor made me feel strangely lonely. I’d never had a real boyfriend and it was doubtful I’d ever have one. None of the Sterling women married or settled down. Now I knew why. My ancestors and mom had been created to produce a champion. It seemed their happiness hadn’t mattered at all.

Feeling bad for both myself and the rest of the women in my family, I decided to head home after I finished my beer. It was doubtful a job would come up, since Lord Gildea was busy organizing my secret trip to the underworld.

I put my empty glass on a table, then wended my way through the crowd to leave. After a fifteen-minute walk, I reached my apartment. I changed into comfortable clothes, then sat down on my couch with a mug of coffee. Firing up my console, I lost myself in a videogame.



CHAPTER THIRTY- SIX



MOM WAS ALREADY AWARE of my dream, so I figured it would be fine to tell her about my upcoming mission when I visited her the next day. “You’ll never guess where Lord Gilden is sending me on my next job,” I said as we sat down on our recliners.

“Do I even want to know?” she asked sardonically.

“I’m going to the first realm in the underworld.”

She stared at me, trying to figure out if I was joking or not. “You’re going *where*?” she exclaimed when I didn’t break into laughter. “No one ever comes back from the underworld. What is your boss thinking?”

“He’s trying to save our world from the apocalypse.”

Her face went a few shades paler. “Is this about your dream? Did you tell him about it?”

“Yeah. He knows everything. He’s sending Ruen and me to retrieve the fragments of the spell.”

Rather than starting the game, mom put her handset down. “Tell me everything,” she ordered.

I’d already intended to spill the beans and told her about our conversation. “Drake wants us to keep this quiet, but I wasn’t about to leave without telling you where I was going,” I said when I was done.

Tears glistened in mom's eyes. They were from a mixture of pride and fear. "I won't tell a soul," she vowed, knowing how bad it would be to get on the wrong side of a dragon shifter. "When are you leaving?"

"In a couple of days, probably," I said with a shrug, trying to hide how nervous I was. "He's arranging for us to become his envoys. I'm not sure what that's going to entail."

"He'll need a plausible cover story for you two to visit the underworld," she figured craftily. "I'm glad he's starting to see your true value."

"It wasn't like he knew I was the chosen champion," I said in his defense. "No one did. Especially me."

"*I* knew you were destined for greatness," she reminded me.

"You suspected I was," I corrected her. "If you'd been sure, you would have told me about the prophecy and the omen you saw years ago."

"I was waiting for you to be old enough to tell you about it," she protested. "I didn't want to freak you out."

"I'm twenty-one, mom," I pointed out. "How long were you going to wait to tell me I might have to save our world?"

"Soon," she said vaguely. "Maybe on your twenty-fifth birthday."

I rolled my eyes at her obvious lie. "It doesn't matter now. The cat's out of the bag and I'm going to have to step up and do my duty."

Neither of us were particularly happy about that, since I was going to be in mortal danger. “I wish I could go with you,” she said wistfully. “But I’m not the chosen one, so you’ll have to go alone.”

“Ruen will be going with me,” I reminded her.

We both grimaced at that idea. “He’ll be next to useless,” mom predicted.

“Drake took his restrictions off him. He’ll be able to maim, kill and feed off anyone who attacks us. You should have seen his eyes light up at that news. It was hilarious.”

I snickered and mom smiled unwillingly. “I guess it’ll be good that someone will have your back, even if it is just a vampire,” she conceded.

“Lord Gilden thinks we’ll change forms once we cross to the underworld,” I said. “I wonder what I’ll look like?”

“Our blood is so mixed that it’ll be impossible to guess,” mom figured. “I don’t even know what species your father is.”

“Can’t you remember what sort of supernatural beings were there during the orgy?”

“The spell muddled my mind,” she reminded me. “You have no idea what it was like to be surrounded by so many naked people.” Her expression turned slightly dreamy at the recollection

“Maybe I’ll organize an orgy if I survive my trip to the underworld,” I joked.

Our mood instantly turned somber at the possibility that I wouldn't make it back at all. "You'll survive," mom said in determination. "Fate and her consort chose you for a reason. You're the only one who has the skills to retrieve the fragments of the spell."

"They didn't really choose me, though," I mused. "Fate set this all up two thousand years ago and now she's stuck with me. What if I don't measure up? What if my skills aren't good enough?" Fate had warned me that not all of her champions were successful in their missions to save their worlds.

"That's enough self-doubt from you, young lady," mom said sternly. "I raised you to be a strong, confident woman. You were born for this, so suck it up and do your duty!"

"Yes, ma'am," I said obediently. No one argued with my mother when she spoke in that tone of voice. There were too many objects at hand for her to throw at me if I disobeyed her. Almost as strong as me, her aim was just as deadly.

"Let's get this game started," she said to change the topic now that our discussion had come to an end. "We've got a lot of zombies to kill and time's wasting."

It wasn't easy to settle into our usual routine and we were both more subdued than usual. If I didn't make it back through the gate, this could be the last time we would ever game together.

Our session came to an end an hour before nightfall. Mom gave me a long hug, holding me tightly before letting me go. "Call me to warn me before you leave," she ordered.

“I will,” I promised, fighting back the tears that were trying to rise. “I’d better go home and get changed, just in case a job comes up.”

She waited for me to climb into my hatchback before waving a final time and closing the door. I gulped down the lump in my throat at the thought that I might never see her again, then I drove home.

Ruen didn’t call and I didn’t feel like going out. I gamed until the wee hours of the morning, then caught a few hours of sleep.

I had the day free and spent it mowing down electronic zombies with the latest car I’d appropriated in the game. My heart wasn’t really in it. Not even smashing the undead to pieces with the doors was enough to lift my spirits. An impending sense of doom was growing inside me. I instinctively knew that I’d be leaving my world tonight.

Right on cue, Ruen called me an hour after nightfall. “Lord Gilden wants to see us in his office,” the vampire said, tone even grumpier than usual. “I’ll pick you up in ten minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting,” I said grimly and we hung up.

My intuition had been right, so I was glad I was already geared up and ready to go. Since I was embarking on an interdimensional journey, I’d worn appropriate hunting clothing.

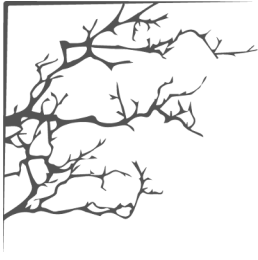
“Really?” Ruen said when I climbed into his car ten minutes later. His face was screwed up in disapproval. “*That’s* what you’re wearing to the underworld?” Instead of a black

suit, he was wearing casual clothing. I'd never seen him in jeans and a t-shirt before, so it was a bit of a shock.

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” I asked with a frown, looking down at my black leather bustier and leather pants. “I’m wearing boots with a flat heel this time, just in case we have to do any running.”

He shook his head and pinched his lips shut because he knew he couldn’t talk me into changing my outfit. I was a badass bounty hunter and I had a reputation to uphold. It wasn’t like I could wear a tailored suit to another dimension where everything we encountered was likely to try to kill us.

I sang along with the radio to keep my spirits up as he drove to the dragon’s lair with maddening slowness.



CHAPTER THIRTY- SEVEN



MY ASTONISHMENT AT seeing Ruen in casual clothing increased when we reached Lord Gilden's building. "Are you wearing sneakers?" I asked, staring at his feet in disbelief after we climbed out of his car.

"We will be traversing through rough, rocky territory," he reminded me. "I highly doubt there will be cars or roads in the underworld. Sneakers will be far more suitable than wearing shoes with slick soles."

"You don't have to be so snotty about it," I muttered, rethinking my outfit now that he'd pointed that out. Leather tended to sweat after wearing it for a while. "I should have brought a couple of changes of clothes. We don't even know how long we'll be in the underworld."

"I packed a bag," he said smugly. "Unlike you, I possess the ability to think ahead."

Scowling at his back, I followed him into the elevator. Lord Gilden wasn't alone when we reached his office. A pair of werelions were with him. "Right on time," Drake said when we stepped out. He swept his eyes from my head to my feet, then back up again. "I see you'll need to stop off at your apartment to get changed before my men can escort you to the gate."

“I’ll need to pack a bag,” I said sheepishly. “I just realized we could be there for a while.”

“You won’t be able to take anything with mechanical parts, like watches, electronic equipment or guns,” he advised us.

“I can’t take my twins?” I asked in dismay. He knew I was talking about my beloved guns.

“I’ve heard some items vanish when they’re transported through the gates and are never seen again,” he replied.

“What about knives and bows? Can I take them with me?”

“I wouldn’t take anything that you wouldn’t want to lose,” he suggested.

I’d intended to gear up heavily before we left. Now I’d have to rethink that plan. “Yeah, I definitely need to visit my apartment before we leave. I’ll need to take some of my backup weapons along.”

“I’ve compiled a letter addressed to the overlord of the realm you’ll be visiting,” the dragon said and ambled over to his desk to pick it up. He handed it to one of his guards rather than to me. “Make sure Ms. Sterling receives this before she steps through the gate,” he ordered.

“Yes, my lord,” the shifter replied, then tucked the envelope into an inner pocket of his jacket. Both men wore suits, but they were far less expensive than Drake’s.

“If anyone questions you about why you’re in the underworld, show them the seal on the back of the envelope,” Lord Gilden said. “Tell them you’re my envoys and that I wish

to discuss trade options with the overlord. They should let you pass without interference.”

“What if they don’t let us pass?” Ruen asked a touch too eagerly.

“Then you’ll have to take necessary steps to stop them from hindering you.”

Ruen read between the lines and smiled grimly. “I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

A frown flickered across Drake’s face, then was gone before I could be sure I’d seen it. My curiosity about why the vampire was indebted to the dragon increased even more. Maybe my questions would be answered during our strange mission.

“Follow Ruen and Ms. Sterling to her apartment, then escort them to the gate,” Lord Gilden ordered. His men nodded, then herded us towards the elevator.

“Wish us luck,” I called over my shoulder.

“May you both be successful in your endeavor and return to our world intact,” he replied.

“Did he just cast a dragon spell on us?” I whispered to Ruen.

“No, I did not,” Drake replied in amusement. “I’m afraid I don’t have the power to influence your success.”

“His hearing is so freaky,” I complained not quite beneath my breath as I entered the lift. My last glimpse of the dragon

was to see his golden eyes locked on me and his perfect mouth tilted upwards in amusement.

The guards climbed into a dark gray SUV and followed us to my apartment. “I’ll come with you and help you pack appropriate clothing,” my assistant offered, then climbed out without waiting for me to reply.

We took the elevator up to my floor and I unlocked the door. Ruen hadn’t been to my place since I’d furnished it. He took everything in at a glance and didn’t bother to hide his sneer when he spied my gaming console and collection of videogames. “May I come in?” he asked, standing just outside the doorway.

“I forgot you need to be invited in,” I said. “Sure, come on in.”

He stepped inside and closed the door. The guards were waiting for us in the lot. They knew we weren’t going to run from our duty. As far as they knew, we really were going to be acting as trade envoys.

“Why don’t you get changed into something more suitable, while I pack a bag for you?” my minion suggested.

“You’ll find a backpack on the top shelf of my closet,” I said, then crossed to my dresser. I picked a red t-shirt and faded blue jeans and grabbed a pair of sneakers. I ambled to the bathroom to get changed and put my hair up into a ponytail while I was there. Grabbing a few toiletries, I saw Ruen had already finished my packing when I stepped through the door. “Can I squeeze these inside?” I asked, holding up the items.

“They should fit in the outer pocket,” he replied, pointing at it.

I shoved the toothbrush, toothpaste and hairbrush into the pocket. It wasn't that time of the month, but I shoved some tampons in there as well, just in case. “Do you think they'll have toilet paper in the underworld?” I asked.

“I highly doubt it,” he said with a hint of impatience.

“I'll take a roll with me,” I decided, darting back into the bathroom to grab one. He didn't need to empty his bowels or bladder, so one roll should do it. I could always resort to using leaves if I ran out.

“What weapons do you intend to take with you?” Ruen asked.

“A few knives and one of my mini crossbows,” I replied.

“May I borrow some knives?” His tone was almost diffident and he clasped his hands together, as if unsure whether I'd agree.

“I've got plenty of spares in the chest over there,” I said and carried my backpack over to it. Opening the chest, I chose enough weapons and sheaths for both of us. We took a few minutes to strap them to our arms and legs. I picked up one of my spare mini crossbows and a quiver of bolts. “Okay, I think we're done here,” I figured. There was no need to take my kill-bag with me, so I would leave it and my wallet behind.

Ruen tested the straps of the sheaths he'd attached to his body. We both had four knives clinging to our wrists. I felt a

bit naked without any guns as I slung the crossbow and quiver over my back.

“You packed me extra undies and socks, right?” I asked, just to be sure.

He nodded, while making a face. “I had to dig deep in your dresser to find something other than thongs.”

“They’re comfortable,” I said defensively. “Plus, they don’t leave visible panty lines when I’m wearing tight clothing.”

“All of your clothing is tight,” he muttered not quite quietly enough.

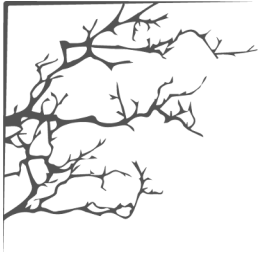
“What am I going to do for food while I’m in the underworld?” I asked in sudden concern. “Should I take some supplies with me?”

“You’re a hunter, Ms. Sterling,” he reminded me, looking pointedly at my weapons. “I’m sure you’ll be able to stab something to death and devour it.”

“How do you know there’s anything edible over there?” I asked sulkily as he opened the door to leave.

“The fact that beings have lived there for possibly millions of years was my first clue.”

His snark was always amusing and I snorted out a laugh. “I’ll be with you in a second, I need to use the bathroom,” I told him, then closed the door in his face. Locking it and sliding the metal bar in place, I trotted to the bathroom and turned on the faucet. Then I called my mom just like I’d promised.



CHAPTER THIRTY- EIGHT



“HI, MOM,” I SAID WHEN she answered after a few rings. She knew this wasn’t just a social call from the tenseness in my voice and the fact that I was whispering.

“Is it time for you to make that trip we spoke about?” she asked, just as tense as I was.

“Yeah. I might be gone for a while and I’m not sure when I’ll be back.”

“Be careful and always trust your gut, Saige,” she advised me.

“I’ll try. I’d better go before Ruen kicks the door down and drags me out by my hair. I love you, mom.”

“I love you too, kiddo,” she said in a choked-up voice. “Come home soon.” We hung up before we could burst into tears. Neither of us got mushy very often, but this might be the last time we ever spoke to each other.

I used the toilet, then washed my hands, knowing Ruen would be able to smell it if I didn’t. This was supposed to be a secret mission. His boss might be pissed if he found out I’d told my mom about our plans.

Since I couldn’t take my phone with me, I placed it on the charger and grabbed my gear. Unlocking the door, I strutted

out, wiping my damp palms on my jeans. “Okay, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Ruen straightened up from his slouch, then took the lead. One of our escorts climbed out of the SUV when we exited from the building. “You should leave your car here,” he suggested. “We’ll drive you to the gate.”

Ruen wasn’t happy about leaving his precious sedan behind, but he didn’t argue. He retrieved a backpack almost identical to mine from the back seat of his car, then locked it. We climbed into the back of the SUV and became enshrouded in the smell of pine scented air freshener.

The locations of the gates were highly confidential. Since we were supposedly envoys, there was no point hiding their whereabouts from us. I was pretty sure the lions didn’t think we’d be making it back from the way they kept sneaking glances at us.

We drove to an area that was dotted with warehouses and pulled into a parking lot behind one of the structures. Several vehicles were parked in the lot and lights were on inside the warehouse. I could sense a mixture of shifters inside as we climbed out. They were more powerful than the wererats we’d encountered in Sector G. I could take on a few of them without too much trouble, but I’d have my hands full if I had to face a group of them.

One of our escorts knocked on the metal door. A panel slid aside and the guard examined us closely. We were clearly expected, because he shut the panel, then opened the door without asking us our names.

“Follow us,” our escort said, then stepped inside.

The warehouse smelled like dust and shapeshifters. Nothing had ever been stored in here. It was just a façade to hide the gate. Speaking of the gate, it was hidden inside a huge metal box that stood ten feet high and six feet wide. A low hum came from within it. The bare concrete floor vibrated slightly beneath my sneakers.

“I wish I’d brought a snack with me,” I said as nerves hit me hard. “I might never get to taste chocolate again.”

One of the guards reached into her pocket and tossed me a candy bar. “Everyone should be given a last supper when they’re facing potential death,” she said when her colleagues flicked looks at her.

I nodded in thanks, then tore the wrapper open and stuffed half of the bar into my mouth as a shifter took a key out of his pocket. He inserted it into the lock on the metal box, then swung the door open. I almost choked on my snack when bright blue light blazed out. Ruen flinched and closed his eyes, half turning away from it.

“How have humans not discovered the gates?” I asked.

“They’re only visible to supernatural beings and people who can use magic,” one of the guards replied.

Squinting hard, my eyes still watered, but the light was bearable. I finished my snack, then stuffed the wrapper into my backpack.

“Here’s the letter Lord Gilden entrusted to me,” one of our escorts said and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said and slid it into my backpack. “Any last words, Ruen?” I asked.

“I wish we’d never met,” he mumbled, which made the shifters snicker.

“Yeah, me too,” I said ruefully, then grasped hold of his arm and propelled him through the gate.

My entire body tingled from head to toe and I could feel my hair standing on end. Something drastic happened to my body, but I was too dazed from being transported to another dimension to figure out what it was. The blindingly bright light wasn’t blocked by a metal box on this side of the gate.

Still holding onto Ruen’s arm, I staggered away from the portal. His skin felt different beneath my fingers. It was slick, damp and his wrist was much thinner than it had been on our world. The vampire was doubled over, gasping in apparent pain. The spell that prevented an army from passing through it was still strong even after all this time. It didn’t seem to affect me as badly as the vampire.

We were on a path between rock walls that stretched high into the air. Once we’d distanced ourselves from the gate, I dropped Ruen’s arm and tried to wipe my hand on my jeans. Instead of encountering fabric, they rubbed against my hairy thigh.

“What the hell?” I asked. My vision was still too blurry to see clearly, but I could tell something had gone horribly wrong. Even my voice sounded strange and my mouth felt weird.

“What happened to me?” the bloodsucker asked. His voice had changed as well. It now sounded high and reedy.

Blinking until my vision finally cleared, I looked at my companion and gaped in horror. “Holy hell, Ruen! You’re freaking *hideous!*”

He’d somehow shrunk to the size of a child and was now skeletally thin. His clothes had turned into rotting black sackcloth. His ribs were prominent through the tears in the fabric. His hair had lengthened and hung over his face. Already hollow before his transformation, his cheeks were now even more sunken. The eyes that peered at me through the greasy strands were dead pools of blackness. Not only were his teeth longer and sharper than usual, there seemed to be a lot more of them. Colorless, odorless fluid oozed from his pores, giving him a slimy appearance.

“You’re hardly a beauty queen yourself, Ms. Sterling,” he retorted, straightening up as his pain subsided.

I looked down to see I’d transformed just as much as he had, if not more. My jeans and t-shirt had changed into a weird bra and loincloth made from what looked like animal skins. My shoes were gone and my feet were bare, from what I could see of them.

“I’m huge!” I wailed, poking the gigantic belly that clung to the front of my body. My boobs were far larger than they had been. Worst of all, my skin was now an ugly gray-green color. “What the hell am I?”

“I’d say by your tusks, size and general ugliness that you’re this world’s version of an ogress,” my companion told

me.

“What do you mean my size?” I asked. “I’m normal. You shrank down and look like a kid now.”

“I believe I actually grew half a foot in height,” he said. “You, on the other hand, appear to be over ten feet tall.”

“Where are my weapons?” I asked, noticing that my knives and crossbow had vanished. I still had my backpack, but it now looked like a hessian sack. “The letter!” I said in alarm and opened the rope that held the bag shut.

“Is it still there?” Ruen asked in his girlish voice.

I took out a scroll that was sealed with red wax. An image of a dragon had been pressed into it. “It looks different, but it still looks official,” I said in relief. My keys hadn’t changed much and had made the journey intact.

Ruen’s borrowed weapons and sheaths had made it through the gate, but they looked handmade now. He drew a knife and tested it to find it was sharp. “At least I won’t be defenseless,” he muttered and slid it back into its sheath.

My eyesight was far sharper now that the blurriness was gone. My sense of smell and hearing were also better in this world. It was nighttime and the stars were out, but the moon was absent. The constellations were different here, which made my head spin for a few seconds. It was late fall back home and the temperature here seemed to be similar to ours.

A low murmur of voices drifted to me and I searched for the nearest weapon. All I could see were rocks, so I quickly

scooped some up and clenched them in my left hand. It was large enough to hold dozens of projectiles.

“It would appear that we’re about to receive some company,” the vampire said, then grinned in anticipation.

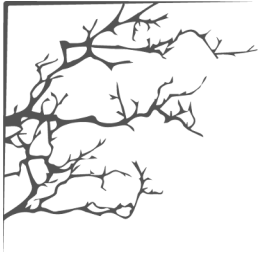
“No killing unless we have to, remember?” I reminded him.

“I’m aware of my restrictions,” he replied. “Can you sense them?”

“Yeah. They’re fairly low on my monster scale and are just pimple level.”

“Get ready for action. I have a feeling they won’t believe we’re envoys,” he warned me.

Neither did I, but a girl could hope. It was doubtful the denizens of this realm would give us a chance to explain who and what we were once they got a look at us. If I were them, I’d probably run screaming in terror.



CHAPTER THIRTY- NINE



IT WAS SO RARE FOR anyone to pass from earth to the underworld that the gate wasn't closely guarded on this side. Since it was at the end of a path between two high rock walls, only someone with wings could have escaped without being noticed. We had nowhere to hide as a small contingent of guards rounded a curve just ahead.

My prediction that they would run screaming turned out to be wishful thinking. All seven creatures stopped dead when they saw me. Ruen quietly stepped behind me, staying out of sight. Vaguely humanoid, the guards were taller than humans and heavily muscled. Just like in my vision, their heads were lodged in their torsos, rather than sitting on their necks. Their faces were scrunched up, like someone had tried to push their chins up into their noses at birth. Glittering eyes that could see in the dark were locked on me.

Their foreheads were tattooed with matching images of a horned helmet. I recognized the helmet from the vision I'd been shown in my dream. These beings worked for the overlord of this realm. Armed with spears, they wore tough brown leather armor with holes in the center to expose their faces.

Their shock broke when one of them shouted. "It's an ogre! Kill it!"

A spear was thrown at me and my training took over. Slapping the weapon to the ground, I tossed a rock at the guard in retaliation. It whistled through the air and hit him directly on the forehead. Blood exploded from him at the force of the blow and he was thrown backwards. His friends watched him tumble a few yards until he lay on his back, feet twitching in his death throes.

“Oops,” I said guiltily.

Either the smell of blood, or being attacked drew Ruen out from hiding. The remaining guards shouted in anger and converged on us. The vampire opened his mouth and his jaw seemed to become unhinged. His mouth opened far wider than should have been possible, then he screamed. His voice was so loud and shrill that I had to clap my hands over my ears. The guards fared much worse. A couple were rendered unconscious from the blast of noise. The others reeled on their feet with blood trickling from their shattered eardrums.

The rocks in my hand were mashed into my ear as I staggered away from him. My eyes were watering from the pain his scream had induced. I blinked them clear in time to see my assistant unleash his pent-up aggression on our foes.

Ruen moved as fluidly as the liquid that oozed from his pores. His tattered rags fluttered wildly and his straggly hair blew back from his hideous face from his sheer speed. Pouncing on the lead guard, his teeth latched onto the hapless creature's shoulder, since he didn't have a neck. Even with my damaged ears, I heard the gross sucking noises the vampire made as he fed.

In seconds, the guard had been drained of his blood and his life. He didn't have two neat puncture wounds in his skin. Instead, his flesh had been ripped open and a ragged hole gaped widely through his armor. Both the corpse and its attacker were covered in blood.

Ruen leaped through the air and landed on his next foe's back, taking him to the ground. Shaking off the stunning effect of his scream, I lumbered forward as the other guards rallied. Plucking rocks from my ear, I tossed them at our enemies before they could stab the leech in the back.

The two guards who'd been knocked out woke up as I killed two more of their companions. Ruen and I finished them off in short order. He'd drained three of them to death. I could hear blood sloshing around in his now distended stomach.

"I've never fed on so much blood before," Ruen said, now seemingly like his old self, except for his appearance. His hollow cheeks had filled out and he wasn't gaunt anymore.

"Are you okay? Are you going to puke?" I asked warily when he put a hand on his gut.

His response was to belch long and loudly. Droplets of blood were expelled from his mouth in a fine mist. They hung in the air for a couple of moments before falling to the ground. My eyesight was so acute that I could make out each individual droplet.

"I feel much better now," he said, grinning disturbingly.

"We need to get out of here before more guards come along," I said. There was no way we could hide what we'd

done. We just had to hope no one in the underworld would figure out we were responsible for their deaths.

Tilting my head to the side, I banged on my skull until the rocks fell out.

Ruen gaped at me in astonishment. “I’ve heard the term you’ve got rocks in your head, but I didn’t know it was based on ogres.”

“I don’t have rocks in my head,” I said with a scowl as I began trotting along the path. He had to run to keep up with me, since he was so much shorter than I was now. I told him about accidentally pushing the rocks into my ear when he’d screamed like a banshee. “What the hell was that, by the way?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he confessed. “I’ve never been able to do that before. Perhaps this is what vampires are like in the underworld.”

“No offense, but you’re as creepy as hell in this realm,” I told him.

“At least I didn’t gain five hundred pounds,” he muttered.

“I heard that!”

“Your hearing is much better in this dimension,” he said uneasily.

“All of my senses are sharper,” I divulged. Then my stomach growled so loudly that it echoed up and down the rocky crevice.

“We need to find a way out of this passage,” Ruen said, looking around in search of an escape route. “There could be more guards ahead.”

My stomach growled again and hunger began to gnaw at me. “I think I’m going to need to find something to eat soon,” I warned him.

“You could have eaten one of the guards,” he pointed out.

That thought had my upper lip lifting in disgust. “I’m not *that* hungry.”

He shrugged and kept on running. Neither of us grew tired as we ran for a good mile or so before the crevice began to widen. We reached the end of the rocky passageway and found ourselves in a valley. A ring of tall mountains encircled us, with only one trail over to the right. It led towards the smallest peak.

“It looks like we’ll have to go that way,” Ruen figured. “I can see smoke rising from just beyond the shortest mountain. Someone must be living nearby.”

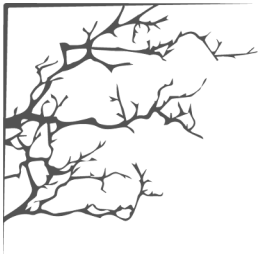
“We’ll have to try to sneak around them,” I figured, doing my best to ignore the hunger that was growing by the second.

He gave me a skeptical look, eyeing my new height and girth. “I don’t think that’s going to be possible. I think we’ll have to kill our way through every being who impedes us until we find what we came here for.” His creepily empty eyes shone with fervor at the thought of killing and feeding on our potential foes.

“We’re only supposed to defend ourselves from anyone who attacks us,” I reminded him as we took off again.

“You saw how the guards reacted when they saw us,” he said in self-defense. “We had no choice but to kill them.”

“At least there were no survivors to tattle on us,” I muttered, then continued down the path that would lead us to the smoke in the distance.



CHAPTER FORTY



WE RAN FOR A COUPLE of hours, which drained us both physically. Ruen's distended belly shrank until he looked skeletally thin again. He needed blood to keep up such a fast pace and I needed food to keep going. By mutual agreement, we slowed to a walk, still following the trail that was leading us to the shortest mountain.

"I really need to find some food," I complained when my belly rumbled louder than ever. It was so noisy it startled a bird into flight. Just like in the vision, it had mangy fur, beady yellow eyes and leathery wings. The trees were gnarled, twisted and bent into strange shapes. Nothing on this world looked or felt normal to me. Even the air smelled weird.

"You could try eating that," Ruen said, pointing at another bird that was crouching beneath a log just off the path. It was a very different species from the mangy, batlike bird. This one had iridescent feathers in shades of blue and green, not unlike a peacock. It even had a crest on its head. Its eyes were green and looked terrified, but not of us.

At that thought, a low growl came from our left. I turned to see the underworld's version of a dog advancing towards us. The size of a small pony, it had reddish brown fur and a disproportionately small head compared to its powerful body. Its growl deepened and the bird tried to shrink itself down even more.

Another growl came, this time from our right. “I think they were chasing the bird and cornered it here,” I said.

“They appear to think we’re going to steal their prey,” Ruen mused.

“You did tell me to eat it,” I reminded him.

“I was joking.”

“They don’t know that,” I said, gesturing at the dog on our left.

Taking my movement as a threat, the animal howled in rage and sprinted towards me. I didn’t have any rocks on hand, so I scooped up a large tree branch. I swung it at the hound when it leaped at me. The branch smashed into the creature’s head, killing it instantly.

I turned to see Ruen duck under the second dog when it jumped at him. He caught hold of it by its back leg while it was in midair and yanked it to the ground. His fangs latched onto the beast’s neck and he began to feed. Blood ran from the corners of his mouth as he swallowed it down with great, noisy gulps. The hound thrashed for a few seconds before it expired and went limp.

“That’s so gross,” I complained as the bird cautiously emerged from beneath the log. Instead of taking off now that she was safe, she fluttered her wings. One of them hung limply by her side. “You poor thing,” I said, amazed at how pretty she was. “You can’t fly, can you?” Eyelashes that were too long and lush to belong to a male lowered sadly. “Do you want me to carry you?” I asked, feeling like an idiot for talking to a

bird. In response, she hurried over to me and looked up expectantly. “Aw, aren’t you the cutest thing in this world?” I crooned and bent to pick her up.

Ruen finished feeding and licked the blood from his mouth and chin in satisfaction. He scowled when he saw me cradling the bird and petting her crested head. “The last thing we need is for a wild animal to be following us around,” he said in disapproval.

“She’s just thankful we saved her from the bad doggies, aren’t you?” I said in a sickeningly sweet tone. The bird chirped in reply, then snuggled against me. She didn’t seem all that wild to me. I’d never had a pet before, so I had nothing to compare her to.

“Do you think you could eat one of these dogs?” Ruen asked, nudging the corpse with his ratty shoe. They were no longer sneakers and had turned into something like sandals.

“I can’t eat it raw,” I said with a grimace. “I might be able to choke it down if we cook it.”

“Let’s move off the path and try to make a fire,” he suggested.

The bird promptly extended her uninjured wing, pointing off the path and into the trees. “I think she wants us to follow her directions,” I said.

Ruen rolled his eyes as I picked up one of the dead animals. He didn’t bother to argue with me and merely grabbed the second dog before following us. The bird led us to a clearing in the trees to an old campsite that hadn’t been used

in years. It was a few hundred yards from the path and we would be out of sight.

“What a clever little bird,” I said, then sat her on the ground.

“Do you know how to make a fire?” Ruen asked.

I hazarded a guess. “By rubbing two sticks together?”

“You’re lucky Lord Gilden sent me with you. You wouldn’t have made it out of the crevice alive without me,” he said, but without his usual dourness. Deep down, I was pretty sure he was enjoying himself.

He gathered a bunch of sticks and dead leaves and placed them in the ring of rocks. Next, he picked up a couple of rocks that had scrape marks on them. He scraped them together to create a spark on the kindling, then blew on it to start a fire. While he didn’t technically need to breathe, he could suck and blow air when he needed to.

Soon, my assistant had a fire started and carried one of the carcasses away from the camp. I watched in growing unease as he expertly sliced the corpse open with a knife I’d loaned him. Cutting the meat from the bones, he made a pile of steaks and carried them back to the fire. I skewered one of them with a stick and roasted the meat over the flames.

“Well?” Ruen said impatiently when my first steak was done. “Are you going to try it?”

I’d never imagined I’d find myself in one of the nine realms of the underworld, sitting at a campfire in ogre form and eating a dog, but here I was. “Here goes nothing,” I said

with an internal wince. I took a small bite, chewed and swallowed.

“What does it taste like?” the vampire asked.

“Utterly disgusting,” I complained, then stuck the whole thing into my mouth. “More!” I demanded as my hunger roared to life. The meat was chewy, gamey and gross, but at least it was food. I ate the entire dog, then Ruen butchered the second one.

Dawn was only a couple of hours away by the time I’d cooked and devoured my second meal. The bird climbed onto my lap and was cooing softly and contentedly. I stroked her gorgeous feathers, wishing I could take her back home with me if we survived this ordeal. But she belonged here and I couldn’t exactly have a pet living in my small apartment with me anyway.

“How do you know how to butcher the dogs like that?” I asked.

Ruen was staring into the fire as if mesmerized. “You could say I have experience at dissecting bodies,” he replied with a smirk.

“Were you a veterinarian before you were turned?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know how to dissect bodies?” He gave me an enigmatic look and didn’t respond. I was guessing he hadn’t been a doctor or a scientist. “What will we do if we run into more guards?” I asked to change the subject that he obviously didn’t want to talk about.

“We’ll kill them,” he said in a slightly dreamy tone. “We’ll drain their blood, break their bones and tear out their hearts.”

“That seems a bit excessive,” I pointed out with my unease growing at the fervor in his tone.

“We’ll strip their skin from their flesh with knives and lick the blood from their writhing bodies,” the vamp went on as if he hadn’t heard me. “We’ll cut off their lips and suck out their blood in a deadly kiss.”

“Ew. I’m not doing that.”

Completely lost in his morbid fantasy of rending and tearing, he was beyond hearing me by now. “I’ll hang them from hooks and remove one limb at a time, feasting on their blood and fear while keeping them alive for as long as possible.”

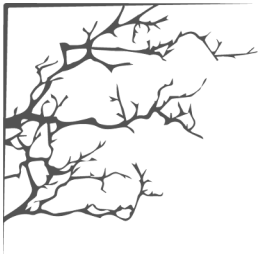
Noting that he’d dropped me from his fantasy of going on a killing spree, I exchanged a worried look with the bird. “Do you think he’ll turn on us?” I whispered.

The bird peered across the campfire at the bloodsucker, who was still in mid-monologue, then chirped in unease.

“Do you want me to put you up high in a tree?” I asked her. Birds usually roosted at night, but the trees in this area weren’t particularly tall. She shook her head and tucked it under her uninjured wing, then settled down to sleep. She trusted me to guard her and keep her safe.

There was no way I was going to close my eyes with Ruen still mumbling about all the ways he was going to maim and

kill our enemies. I didn't feel tired yet, so I waited for dawn to arrive to see what the day was going to bring.



CHAPTER FORTY- ONE



THE FIRE EVENTUALLY died down until it was just smoldering embers and the sky began to lighten. Ruen didn't seem to notice the dying of the night. He continued his monologue until the blackness gave way to a deep, dark brown. Suddenly, he broke off his detailed description of how he was going to remove our enemies' eyelids and suck their juicy orbs from their lidless sockets. "I'm feeling very sleepy," he told me, swaying a little and sounding slightly drugged. He keeled over just as the first rays of sunlight appeared at the top of the mountain.

I reached over to catch my assistant before he could land face first in the coals. "I guess vampires can't stay awake during the day in the underworld," I figured, placing the bird on the ground so I could move Ruen away from the fire.

A hunch told me to stay close to my fanged companion. I watched him closely as the sun rose higher. Smoke began wafting off his skin and the gross fluid that oozed from him sizzled. His chest wasn't rising and falling and he looked about as dead as a corpse could get. His reaction to sunlight meant he was probably hibernating until nightfall.

Worried that he might burst into flames, I didn't know what to do with him. He needed cover and there didn't seem to be any buildings anywhere nearby. The bird had woken up

when I'd moved her. She chirped at me to get my attention and pointed at the sack that held my belongings. With little choice, I reached for it and tipped out the contents.

“Sorry, Ruen,” I apologized, then stuffed my companion into the sack. I put my spare animal skin bras and loincloths on top of him to give him more cover. “Thanks for the suggestion to put him in the sack,” I said to my new flighted friend. She fluttered her eyelashes bashfully, then tucked her head beneath her wing again.

We'd had a long night and I'd expended a lot of energy running for so long. Tiredness caught up with me, so I lay down to snooze. Curling around the bird and the sack where Ruen was stashed, I fell into a deep sleep.

If I dreamed, I didn't remember it. Waking up a few hours later, the sun indicated it was probably about ten o'clock, earth time. I wasn't hungry yet, but I knew I'd need to eat again if I expended a lot of energy.

“At least I know I can eat the dogs,” I said philosophically as I gathered up Ruen's sack full of belongings. His bag was a lot smaller than mine and all of his spare clothes had transformed into rags. “Are you staying here?” I asked the bird, who'd woken up when I did. She shook her head and lifted her good wing like a child reaching up with one hand, begging to be picked up.

I tucked her beneath my arm, then slung the sacks over my shoulder and returned to the path. Needing one hand free, just in case of an attack, I shifted the bird to my unencumbered shoulder. Her talons held on firmly and she seemed to be

content. She deftly shifted her balance when I bent down to grab a tree branch to use it as a makeshift weapon.

The trail steadily led upwards, twisting and turning to veer around the steepest parts of the mountain. At last, I reached the summit. The sky had lightened to the old rust color I'd seen in the vision Fate had shown me. I stood on the top of the mountain and peered around at the strange realm. Settlements were dotted here and there. I could just make out a far larger group of buildings. They were so distant that they were mere dots on the horizon.

“I wonder if that's where the overlord lives?” I murmured.

From here, I could see the smoke was coming from a ruined village in the foothills below. Wind ruffled the bird's feathers and made the leaves on the trees around us rustle softly. It almost sounded like the trees were murmuring about us as I continued my trek.

I encountered a couple more of the mongrel dogs, but they kept their distance from us. Maybe they could smell their kin on me and knew I'd fed on their carcasses. They eyed the bird hungrily and slunk off into the foliage when I hefted the branch threateningly.

My descent down the mountain was much faster than my ascent had been. The path ran straight and was steep enough for me to slide uncontrollably during some parts. I was glad my butt was bigger than my boobs and belly. My weight was evenly distributed and it helped me to stay on my feet.

I was about halfway down the mountain when nature called. “Uh, oh,” I said, hunching over when my bowels

cramped. The bird took one look at my face, then wisely jumped free a moment before I rushed over to a shrub. I barely had enough time to remove my gigantic undies, lift my skirt and squat before evacuating the food I'd eaten. A flood of urine accompanied the endless turd that emerged from my body.

When the disgusting process was over, I waddled away from the mess, then used a fluffy shrub to wipe myself clean. My roll of toilet paper had vanished along with my weapons, hairbrush toothbrush and toothpaste. I would have used the entire roll trying to clean myself up. "Boy, am I glad Ruen didn't see that," I muttered, casting a disbelieving glance at the mound of waste I'd left behind. The bird emerged from where she'd been hiding. She trilled a few notes that sounded amused. I picked her up and we continued our journey.

Finally reaching the foothills, I debated about whether I should check out the village, or avoid it altogether. So far, I hadn't seen any guards. It might take days or even weeks for them to discover their comrades had been slaughtered, depending on how regularly they changed shifts.

As if in response to that thought, I spied a building through the trees. It was just off the path and was made from rough brown bricks. Stopping dead in my tracks, I strained to listen for voices. My eardrums had healed from Ruen's piercing shriek. The only things I could hear were birds and insects.

"Do you think it's safe to take a look at that building?" I whispered to the bird.

She peered at the roof we could just make out, then nodded. She knew this world far better than I did and she didn't seem evil, so I decided to trust her. Intelligent animals could be common in the underworld for all I knew. Or she might just be responding to the sound of my voice. I guessed I was about to find out.

Thanks to my size, it was impossible to sneak noiselessly. I stayed on the path where I'd have less chance of stepping on branches or kicking rocks by accident. The building was larger than I'd expected when I reached it. I bent to peer through a window to see a row of ten cots inside.

"It's a barracks," I figured, unable to sense anyone in the area. My senses didn't extend to animals. Not even ones from other dimensions.

Too big to fit through any of the entrances, I looked through the windows instead. From the uniforms and spare weapons, the gate guards kept their supplies here. A room full of sacks of food bolstered that idea.

"Why bother having bunks if they all guard the gate together?" I mused. There were enough beds for ten soldiers, but only seven of them had been headed for the gate. "Maybe three of them are heading back to the city," I said.

It was possible they'd somehow known someone had come through the gate and had gone to investigate. Three of the guards might have been sent to report to the overlord. If so, then our presence here definitely wasn't a secret.

I could smell bread, dried meat and other food stored in the sacks. Kicking the locked door to the room open, I squeezed

my upper body inside. My gut and butt were too big to fit through it. I grabbed the nearest sacks, then heaved myself backwards. My boobs got stuck, then the bra broke and breasts the size of boulders swung free. I squashed them against my body with one arm and wriggled free of the doorway. Glad Ruen wasn't awake to see this, I fished a spare bra out of the sack and donned it before moving on.

Now that I had a supply of food, I picked up my pace. The trail led me to the ruined village. The smoke was coming from the largest building that had probably been an inn. All of the structures were made from brick and had thatch roofs. Flaming torches had been tossed onto the roofs and had burned them to cinders. The inn's roof hadn't quite burned completely and was still smoldering slightly

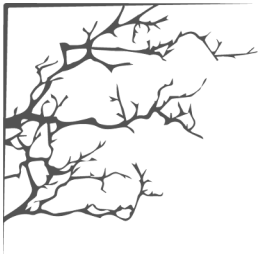
Corpses were strewn on the ground. None of them had tattoos of their overlord on their foreheads. They were similar to the guards, with the same squished faces in their chests. Instead of leather armor, they wore crudely made clothing. The fabric was similar to the sackcloth tatters Ruen was wearing, but better quality. Most of the dead were lying near spears and knives. It looked like a neighboring village had attacked this one. If there were any survivors, they'd fled from the town.

It wasn't a surprise to find the underworld was filled with savages. So far, the pretty bird perched on my shoulder was the only being that seemed even remotely friendly.

Speaking of the bird, she was currently grooming my bald head. She pecked at my skull, picking off the lice I must have

picked up. They were going to have a hard time leeching my blood from me. My skin was far too thick for them to penetrate it with their tiny teeth.

Time was wasting and I had no idea where the spell fragment was. I returned to the trail and began loping towards the city, hoping to find inspiration along the way.



CHAPTER FORTY- TWO



AFTER TROTTING ALONG the path for a few hours, I heard voices far ahead and slowed down. They were too distant for me to sense them, but it sounded like dozens of people were heading in my direction.

I looked around to see the ruins of a town off the path. The bird chirped at me urgently, so I ducked down as low as I could go, hoping the trees would shield me. Hurrying as fast as I could, I sensed more guards arriving. They were all about the same strength as the ones we'd slain at the gate. None were powerful, but it seemed prudent to skirt around them.

The ruins gave me enough cover to block me from sight. I stayed low and hurried towards some distant hills. The guards must have a far larger settlement nearby for them to have gotten here so quickly. While the overlord probably didn't know that someone had come through the gate yet, someone would inform him about it after the bodies were discovered.

"I'd hate to be in Drake's shoes the next time the envoy from this realm pays him a visit," I whispered. The bird cocked her head and cooed questioningly. "Drake Gilden is a dragon shifter. He's in charge of the supernatural community in Nexus, the city where I live," I told her. She nodded, then went back to scanning for danger.

I finally straightened up after I could no longer sense the guards, or hear their voices. I decided to head to the hills and to stay away from the road until it was safer. Snacking on the food I'd stolen, I was able to keep up my pace without my stomach rumbling loudly enough to give me away.

The hills were further away than I'd realized. It was late afternoon by the time I reached them. I slowed my pace when I sensed some dangerous creatures in the area. My monster scale told me they were towards the top end of my gauge.

Mom and I had created a scale for the creatures we'd fought. Rashes and scabs didn't really count. Pimples were the lowest and were number one on my range. Gangrene was the highest at a ten. These things were possibly festering boils, which was about a seven. One alone would have given me pause and I could sense five of them.

The bird's crest rose and she chirped softly in warning.

"I know," I whispered as I looked around, searching for the creatures. "I can feel them, but I can't see them."

Four of the mounds I'd taken to be hills began to move, then stood up. My jaw dropped when I realized they were ogres, but they were far bigger than I was. Twice my height, their bellies and butts were grotesquely large. They were naked and carried tree trunks as weapons.

From Ruen's description, they looked like me, with gray-green skin and tusks jutting up from their lower jaws. None of them had any hair, not even to hide their private parts. My eyes went to their junk that was swinging free. Even flaccid, they were ginormous and their balls were bigger than my head.

A snicker escaped from me and they turned in my direction. Freezing when they saw me, their heads went back and they sniffed deeply.

“Female!” one of the ogres said eagerly.

“Mine!” another one declared.

A fight immediately broke out between them as they each tried to claim me as their own. I wasn't about to stick around to wait for the outcome. Turning to run, I slammed directly into the fifth ogre that must have snuck up behind me. Unlike me, he could use stealth.

He grinned down at me when I bounced off his gut, then grabbed hold of my arm before I could flee. “Mine!” he roared in triumph.

“I don't belong to any of you idiots!” I shouted in denial. “Let go of me!”

“Fight!” a third ogre challenged the one holding me.

“Fight!” he agreed and tugged me after him.

The bird clung to my shoulder as I was propelled deeper into the hills. I kept hold of my sacks, hoping the sun would go down and Ruen would wake up soon. Compared to these guys, I was a helpless little female. Not even my training was going to save me from this dilemma.

“My vampire sidekick will wake up soon and rip you apart if you don't let me go!” I warned my captor as he reached their village. Although Ruen was deadly in his true form, I doubted he would be able to defeat these creatures. The ogre ignored my lame threat completely.

Their houses were hollowed out hills and were pretty much just caves. Shoving me into one of the hollows, he rolled a gigantic boulder in front of it. I put my shoulder to it and pushed as hard as I could, but it was too heavy for me to move. There was just enough space to see over the top of the rock as the five monsters faced off in the center of the village.

I expected them all to charge at each other, but they weren't quite as stupid as they looked. The pair that had challenged each other began stamping their feet and roaring loudly. They looked a bit like gorillas that were working themselves up for a fight. This went on for long enough for me to grow bored.

I snapped back to attention when they finally rushed at each other, swinging their clubs. Weaker beings would have been splattered all over the place from the impact of the tree trunks smashing into their flesh. Absorbing the damage, they merely grunted at the impact and swung again. It took almost an hour for the fight to finally be over. The ogre who'd claimed me bellowed in victory when he knocked his foe out with a well-timed blow to the head.

Fortunately for me, the battle wasn't over yet. He still had three more opponents to defeat. There was less posturing this time. A second ogre rushed forward and they began slugging each other with their clubs.

Night fell while the final challenger was taking his shot at the title. The now soggy sack I'd dropped to the ground began to move, then Ruen's head emerged. "What happened?" he

asked groggily as he wormed his way out of the sack. “Where are we?”

I reached down to pull one of my bras off him and helped him to his feet. My bra was so big he could have used it as a hammock. “You died when the sun came up,” I told him. “I was captured by five ogres. They’re fighting over which one will get to mate with me.”

“Oh. Okay.” Still waking up, it took a few seconds for my comment to register. “Wait, what?” he asked in alarm.

Quickly explaining what was going on, I picked him up so he could watch the final fight. “I’m not sure I can take down something that large,” he said, but from the dreamy look in his eyes, he was eager to try.

The bird’s gaze was locked on the ogres. She hadn’t made a sound throughout the battle. I had a feeling she knew exactly what was going on and was dismayed by it.

Slugging his final opponent in the head with his club, the victor roared and raised his fist in the air in triumph when his foe fell. Bruised and battered, he staggered over to the boulder and managed to roll it out of the way. “We mate now,” he told me as he grew hard.

“Nope,” I denied, backing away from his enormous erection. “No way. That thing won’t fit inside me. You’ll tear me apart.”

Ruen sidled out of the way, sizing up the ogre. The monster reached for me and the bird stretched forward to peck him on the finger. Freezing in place, the ogre didn’t react when

the vampire leaped onto his back and tried to sink his fangs into his neck.

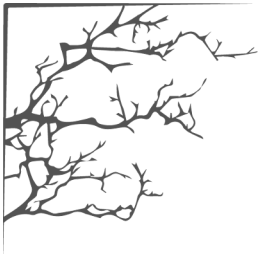
“What’s happening?” I asked at the dazed look on the creature’s face.

The bird leaped clear and scampered away just as the ogre’s back bowed. With a groan of ecstasy, he ejaculated all over me. I was blasted back by the force of it and crashed into the wall, covered from head to toe in a river of sticky fluid. Hearing a loud thud, I opened my eyes to see the monster had fallen to the ground, apparently unconscious.

Ruen stopped trying to bite the ogre now that he was down for the count. His eyes widened when he saw me, then he began to shriek with laughter, pointing at me in wordless hilarity.

I wiped my face with my hand and flicked the mess onto the ground. “I didn’t sign up for this,” I muttered in annoyance and quickly gathered our belongings. The bird clearly didn’t want to perch on my shoulder while I was covered in sperm. I stuffed both her and Ruen into my sack, then cautiously stepped out of the cave.

All four of the defeated ogres were still unconscious, so I got the hell out of there before they could wake up.



CHAPTER FORTY- THREE



I SPRIED UNTIL I was breathless and forced myself to keep going. Ruen's mad cackles petered out after a few miles. "Let me out of this sack!" he shouted and I skidded to a stop.

Putting the sack down, I began stuffing the food I'd pilfered from the soldiers into my mouth as the vamp climbed out. He had the bird tucked into the crook of his arm and was still grinning. "That was the funniest thing I've ever seen," he declared.

"I liked you better when you had no sense of humor," I said grumpily. "I hate this world and everything in it." The bird made a despondent noise and I hastily amended my statement. "Except for you, of course. You're awesome." She perked up and preened, fluffing her feathers proudly. "Can you make Ruen orgasm like that?" I asked her.

"Don't even think about it," Ruen said in alarm when the creature eyed him speculatively. She reached over to peck him and he tossed her at me before her beak could touch him.

Catching her, I held her away from my body so she wouldn't get stuck to the jizz. "I need to wash this off, asap." The bird pointed off to the side with her wing, so I held her out to Ruen. "You're going to have to carry her. Her feathers will get stuck all over me if I carry her and she'll look like a plucked chicken."

My assistant wasn't happy about it, but he gingerly took her back from me. She fluttered her long eyelashes at him and snuggled against his side when he tucked her beneath his arm again. "We should keep moving," he said, looking back over his shoulder to search for signs of the ogres. "How dangerous were they?"

"About festering boil level," I told him as I grabbed my sack again. "They were too strong for me to take on in a pack."

"At least we know where your strength and resilience come from now," he said as he trotted to keep up with my long strides. "Lord Gilden will be happy to have the mystery of your ancestry solved."

"I guess so," I said glumly.

"You're disappointed to find out what sort of monster you are?"

"I just wasn't expecting to be so huge and hideous."

"The ogres seemed to find you attractive enough," he said teasingly. "I bet you're beautiful, for their kind."

"Yeah, that's a real comfort," I said with a grimace.

The bird directed us to a pond, somehow sensing or smelling it from a mile away. We came to a stop and stared at the placid water. "It's yellow," I said, making a face at the bright yellow liquid. "I bet there's a giant around here somewhere and this is where it pees."

Ruen snickered, then took a deep sniff. "It doesn't smell like urine."

“Maybe it’s acid. It’ll probably melt my flesh off,” I predicted. The bird shook her head impatiently, then leaped from Ruen’s arms. Landing lightly on the ground, she delicately picked her way through the grass to the pond. She drank from it, then turned to look at me pointedly. “Okay, fine, I’ll bathe in the pond,” I said in capitulation. If anything bad happens to me, it’ll be on your head.”

Dropping my sacks to the ground, I didn’t bother to disrobe, since my clothes were just as sticky as my skin. I waded into the water to find it was only waist deep.

“What does it feel like?” Ruen asked curiously.

“Wet,” I replied, then scooped up a handful of liquid to cautiously taste it. “It tastes stale and a bit salty.”

“That’s probably from all the semen clinging to you,” he joked.

Giving him an annoyed glare, I began washing the gunk off. I lay back in the water and made sure to wash myself as thoroughly as possible. When I sat up, something long, fat and yellow was dangling in front of my eyes. “What the hell?” I asked and grabbed hold of it to pull it off my forehead. About a foot long, it looked a bit like a worm, but had a huge, gaping hole for a mouth, with razor-sharp teeth.

I glanced at Ruen and the bird to see them both gaping at me in horror. I looked down to see I was covered in the disgusting things. While their teeth couldn’t penetrate my flesh, they were doing their best to chew through it.

“They’re leeches!” the vampire screeched in hilarity, then he began laughing at me again.

“This realm sucks,” I muttered, standing up and wading over to the grass. I dislodged the bloodsuckers with sweeps of my hands. They fell to the ground with wet plops, then began squirming their way back to the pond.

“There’s one hanging off the back of your head!” Ruen said, eyes streaming with bloody tears he was laughing so hard.

I ran my hand over my bald pate to get rid of the final creature, then kicked it to send it flying back to its watery lair. While the bird wasn’t capable of actual laughter, she was definitely looking amused. Ruen was bent over with his hands planted on his knees as he tried to catch his nonexistent breath.

“Did I get them all?” I asked the bird and turned in a slow circle for her to inspect me. Her head bobbed up and down, so I grabbed my gear. “Let’s keep going. We’ve got a long way to go before we’ll reach the city.”

“Why did you leave the road?” the vampire asked, catching his sack when I tossed it to him. He was still giggling quietly, but had regained his poise.

I told him about the barracks I’d discovered and my theory that three guards had gone in search of reinforcements. “They brought back dozens of soldiers, so I thought it would be best to avoid them,” I finished up.

“Then you walked directly into a pack of ogres and almost ended up as their mate,” he said with a smirk.

“Laugh it up,” I complained. “That could have happened to anyone.”

“We’re lucky you turned out to be an ogress,” he mused as we continued our journey. “They probably would have killed us on sight if you’d been in your human form.”

“What do you mean ‘us’?” I scoffed. “You were stuffed in my sack, dead to the world.”

“It’s inconvenient that my kind can’t seem to stay awake during the day here,” he said, all amusement vanishing.

“Your ooze started smoking when the sun touched it. I was worried you were going to burst into flames.”

“It’s not ooze,” he argued, lifting a hand to inspect the liquid that dripped from his skin.

“What is it, then?”

“It’s secretion,” he said primly.

“That’s just a fancier word for ooze,” I pointed out. He scowled, but couldn’t come up with a retort.

We angled back towards the road, while still heading towards where I thought the city lay. Birds, animals and insects were plentiful. The ones that were awake kept their distance from us. The ones that were asleep fled when I woke them up as we passed by. My footsteps were loud no matter how hard I tried to sneak.

Lights from flaming torches caught my attention. I guided Ruen towards them to see who it was. Voices carried to us just as I sensed it was a group of soldiers.

“Who do you think came through the gate and killed the soldiers?” one of them asked.

“It must have been a coven of vampires. Three of them had been completely drained of blood.”

“The others were killed by rocks. Vampires don’t use rocks as weapons. They use their fangs.”

“What are they doing here? The undead rarely come to our realm.”

“I want to know what other sort of creature came through the gate with them. Whatever it is, it’s big and strong. I heard the rocks it threw smashed all the way through the guards’ bodies and left huge, gaping holes in their backs.”

Ruen put his hand over his mouth to muffle his snort of laughter. The tales about our not-so-secret visit to this realm were already getting wilder.

“The overlord will send trackers to find them. Whoever or whatever they are, they’ll be taken to him for questioning. Once he’s found out why they’re here, they’ll be executed.”

“No one can invade our realm and survive for long. If the creatures in the wilds don’t get them, we will.”

Guttural laughter rang out, which made Ruen giggle even harder. I flicked him a warning look, but it did nothing to quell his amusement. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I hissed once the soldiers were out of earshot.

“Nothing,” he denied, still giggling a little. “It just amuses me that they think an entire army has invaded their turf and there’s only two of us.”

“We’ve got the bird on our team now,” I reminded him, gently stroking her soft head. “She must be magical to make that ogre climax like that.”

“Maybe she can guide us to the fragment of the spell that’s hidden somewhere in this realm,” he joked.

The bird turned to look at him, green eyes widening. She looked at me and fluttered her eyelashes. “Can you lead us to the magical spell?” I asked incredulously. Birds couldn’t smile, but I could almost feel her smugness when she nodded. “Huh, maybe Fate really is guiding me,” I said in amazement. We’d just happened to stumble across the bird when she’d needed help. Now she seemed to feel indebted to us for saving her life and she was willing to be our guide.

“If so, I hope she can lead us there before the overlord’s trackers find us,” my unholy assistant said.

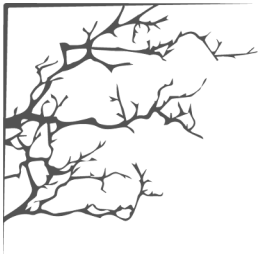
“Which way should we go?” I asked my feathered friend. She pointed towards the city far in the distance. “Is it in the city?” She shook her head and gestured for me to get going.

“It’ll burn up your energy, but I think you should run,” Ruen suggested.

“You’ll need to drain some of the guards if you want to keep up with me,” I said.

“I won’t need to,” he said, then trotted over to me. “You can keep carrying me.” With that, he clambered up onto my back. Now it was my turn to laugh, reminded of the time he’d clung to me like a leech, licking wererat and wereregator blood

off my skin. I lumbered into motion, staying near the road, but not close enough to be spotted by patrolling soldiers.



CHAPTER FORTY- FOUR



EXPENDING A LOT OF energy meant I had to eat constantly. I mowed my way through the sacks of food until there was only a small amount left. The bird pecked at a hunk of bread I gave her, content to devour it. Ruen hadn't fed and kept sniffing the back of my neck hungrily as he rode on my back. It was creepy, but I didn't have the heart to tell him to stop. We were both different in the underworld and we couldn't control our instincts.

"I need to feed," the vampire said as dawn drew close.

"On what?"

His senses were more acute here and he pointed to some bushes. "On whatever that animal is that's sleeping over there. Put me down. You'll frighten it away if you blunder along behind me."

I shucked him off and he landed on the ground gracefully. He went into a crouch and almost seemed to blend in with the ground in his dark, ratty clothes. Scuttling like a cockroach, he leaped on his prey. I heard frightened squeals and thrashing, then sucking noises. Ruen returned a minute later, satiated and smiling. "What was it?" I asked.

"I have no idea, but its blood was very tasty." This new happy version of Ruen was disturbing. I just wanted to get this quest over and done with so we could go home. I sincerely

hoped we would both return to normal again when we crossed back through the gate.

We continued our journey until the sun began to rise. Ruen squinted at the lightening sky and scowled. “I suppose I’d better climb back into your sack.”

“In you go,” I said with a smirk, holding it open for him expectantly.

Grumbling beneath his breath, he stepped into the bag and made himself comfortable. “Try not to get into any trouble while I’m sleeping,” he said, then looked at the bird that was peering down at him from her perch on my shoulder. “Make sure Saige doesn’t do anything stupid.” The bird nodded, then he sat down. The sun rose and the vampire slumped sideways, dying for the day.

“Peace at last,” I said, slinging the sack over my shoulder again. “He’s not usually this talkative back home.”

The bird cocked her head to the side, then rubbed her face against my cheek. Cooing softly, she put her uninjured wing around my neck in a decidedly friendly manner.

“Do you want to come back to my world when we’ve finished our mission?” I asked, reading between the lines. She nodded and her crest rose in excitement. “I’ll tell you what,” I said craftily, knowing it could be tricky dealing with magical beings. “If you lead us safely to the scroll fragment and we make it back to the gate intact, you can come to our dimension with us.”

She let out a trill of beautiful music and squeezed me with her wing before drawing it from around my neck. Pointing dead ahead, she insisted we needed to continue on towards the city. Hoping I hadn't just made a deal with a devil, I didn't feel tired enough to sleep, so I kept walking.

Trudging parallel to the road, I kept my distance from it and remained alert. I walked directly into a group of animals that seemed vaguely piglike a few hours later. They made the same squeals as the creature Ruen had fed on when they saw me. Using my club, I bashed two of them to death before they could flee. I was in a clearing that was screened by trees and shrubs. It seemed like a good place to make camp, so I decided to stop to get some rest.

Ruen had brought the flintstones to start a fire along and had stashed them in his sack. I put our gear down and gathered up some rocks to build a campfire. It took a while to find enough twigs and sticks and get a fire started. Wishing Ruen was awake to guide me, I did a terrible job of butchering the pigs. They tasted great roasted over the flames. I was tired enough to sleep by the time I'd eaten the second one. I doused the fire before anyone could spot the smoke and come to investigate it.

"Wake me if you see or hear anything dangerous," I said to the bird when I curled up on my side. She nodded and perched on my huge gut to give her a height advantage. I fell asleep to her soft, melodious song.

It was dark when a bony finger poked me in the cheek to draw me from my deep slumber. "Wake up, Saige!" Ruen

hissed quietly in annoyance.

“I’m awake!” I hissed back.

“Shh! Keep your voice down,” he scolded me quietly. “I heard a large group of soldiers passing by a few minutes ago. I think they’re still searching for us.”

The bird was tucked beneath his arm with her head under her wing, fast asleep. “Was she like that when you woke up?” I asked.

He glanced down at the slumbering creature. “Both of you were dead to the world,” he said. “I thought I was going to have to stab you to wake you up.”

“At least we’re still breathing,” I said defensively, pushing myself to my feet. “You’re the one who turns into a corpse during the day.”

“We need to get moving,” he said with a scowl. “The overlord’s trackers could be on our trail soon.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I said as we gathered our meager belongings. He shot me a skeptical look, which I ignored. “It’s probably not a good idea to stay so close to the road if trackers will be coming this way. We should cut overland to get to the city.”

“Stumbling around in the wilderness is a fantastic idea,” he said with heavy sarcasm. “I can already imagine all of the ogres and other monsters we’ll no doubt run into.”

“The alternative is to head to the road and hand ourselves over to the guards,” I went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “We can show them the letter Lord Gilden gave us and ask them to take

us to the city. We'll get there a lot faster, but we might have a hard time sneaking away to search for the spell fragment." The letter was protected by a spell the dragon must have cast on it. Ruen's ooze hadn't made it turn soggy like the rest of my gear.

He opened his mouth to argue with me out of sheer principle, but couldn't come up with a better idea. "Fine," he said in capitulation. "We'll wander around in the wilderness. What could possibly go wrong?"

"I have my fingers crossed that you'll be the one getting covered in jizz and leeches the next time," I said with a smirk, holding my hand up to cross my huge, thick fingers.

He sent me a sour look that gave me a twinge of nostalgia for his normal gloomy personality. "I see you managed to slaughter dinner for yourself," he said as we skirted around the mess I'd left behind. "Your hands are coated in blood."

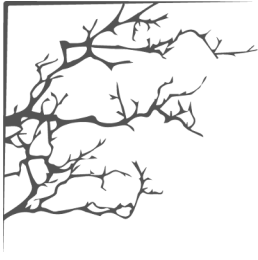
"There's no water around here to wash it off with," I said with a shrug. "You could lick them clean for me."

He shuddered in reaction to that suggestion. "It's gone cold and it would taste horrible."

I'd done my best to wipe my hands clean on the grass, but grime was lodged in the creases and was wedged beneath my fingernails. "I'm thirsty, so we'll have to search for water anyway," I said. "I'm feeling chock full of energy, so climb aboard if you want a ride," I offered.

Ruen heaved a small sigh, then gave in. He couldn't keep up with my pace without draining his energy, so he leaped onto my back. The bird woke up at his sudden movement and

scrambled up to perch on my shoulder. Her talons dug into my thick skin when I took off at a lumbering run.



CHAPTER FORTY- FIVE



ONCE AGAIN, THE BIRD led me to water. It was the same yellow color and tasted just as flat and salty. Dipping my hands into the pond was enough to draw leeches to me. I batted them away and scraped the blood and dirt from beneath my fingernails until they were clean.

“Do you have a name?” I asked my magical companion when I was done. She nodded, surprising both Ruen and me. “Can you spell it for us?” She gave me a look that indicated she thought I was an idiot, so I elaborated. “Stop me when I get to the right letter.” She nodded again, then chirped when I said A.

“Your name starts with an A?” Ruen asked, just to be sure the bird understood our intentions. She rolled her eyes and nodded. “I was just checking,” he muttered.

I began reciting the alphabet as we continued our journey. “Your name is Aurora?” I asked once I’d gone through the lengthy process of getting her to spell it out. “That’s pretty,” I complimented her when she nodded. Her response was to affectionately rub her head against my cheek.

“I’d like to know how Aurora came to be in the wilds where we found her,” Ruen said from his perch on my back. “She must have a home somewhere.”

“I don’t think any of us have the patience for her to spell that out for us,” I said doubtfully. Aurora shook her head, then gestured towards the horizon. We’d told her about our plan to cut overland rather than following the road. She knew we wanted to avoid the overlord’s trackers and was willing to help us. I hadn’t told Ruen about the bargain I’d made with her. He might object to taking a magical bird back home with us. That was a fight I would put off for as long as possible.

Between the three of us, we had better success at avoiding dangerous creatures as I sped through the wilderness. Aurora could sense anything magical and Ruen’s hearing and sense of smell were uncanny. I could pick up on intelligent creatures, except for Aurora. She was smart and she could communicate, but she was still an animal and didn’t show up on my radar.

“Are there other beings like you in this realm?” I asked when we took a break so Ruen could hunt for a snack.

Aurora lifted her good wing, then let it drop. I took that to mean there were similar beings, but none quite like her.

“Can you perform other magic, or can you just make things climax?”

She shook her head, so her talents were singular in nature. Then again, being able to sense magic and magical items was a talent all of its own.

“Can you use your talent on anything, or only intelligent beings?”

She nodded, but I wasn’t sure which choice she was responding to. “Did you mean you can use it on anything?”

She nodded again to clarify. “So, if we get attacked by an angry bear, you could make it orgasm so hard it would knock it out like it did to the ogre?” Again, she nodded. “That’s the weirdest talent I’ve ever heard of, but I guess it must come in handy.” She shrugged to indicate it had its ups and downs.

Ruen returned, smelling like fresh blood and smiling happily. His mood would become sour as his blood high wore off. The only time he was happy was when his belly was full. It was no wonder he was so cranky back home, since Drake wouldn’t let him feed with abandon.

“Did you two ladies have a nice chat?” he asked before clambering onto my back.

“Aurora was telling me about her orgasm talent,” I said, knowing full well he’d heard every word I’d uttered. “She can apparently use it on anything.”

“Can you use it on more than one creature or being at a time?” he asked.

She shrugged, then pointed at her beak. “I think she has to peck them to get it to work and she only has one beak,” I figured. She nodded in confirmation.

“That’s a pity,” the vampire said. “It would be handy if she could disable an entire army with her talent.”

“She saved me from the ogre, so I’m grateful we ran into her,” I said, which earned me a hug from the bird. I wasn’t used to anyone except my mom being affectionate towards me, but I kind of liked it. It was like having an actual friend, which was something I’d lacked my entire life.

“How many days will it take us to reach the city at this pace?” Ruen asked. Aurora chirped seven times. “A week is far too long,” he fretted. “The trackers will be able to move faster on the road. They’ll find our trail soon and they’ll be able to catch up to us before we reach our destination.”

Grimacing at what I was going to have to do, I knew I didn’t have a choice. “Buckle yourselves in, kids,” I warned them. “You’re in for a bumpy ride.”

I took off at a run before Ruen could ask me what I’d meant by that. Wind whistled past me and my boobs, belly and butt wobbled madly. If I hadn’t been wearing the bra, my breasts would have swung around all over the place, smashing into each other, my gut and my face.

Aurora clung to me tightly and the vampire went off into fresh peals of laughter, amused by my blubbery body. My eyes were slitted against the wind as I did my best not to trip over anything. The ground shook from my footsteps. Birds and animals were startled into bursting from their hiding places. I snatched up something that resembled a deer and fed on it to keep me going.

Ruen leaned over my shoulder to latch onto the carcass, draining it of blood before it could go cold. His laughter had subsided, but I could feel him giggling every now and then.

Running so far and so fast depleted my reserves. My fat withered away and I had to eat everything I could catch to keep going. Sleeping for most of the day, I continued on as soon as I woke up. The trek that should have taken a full week only took three nights to complete.

Starving and trembling with fatigue, I stood on a rocky outcrop of a low cliff, staring at what passed for a city in this realm. Just like the vision in my dream, the buildings made of brown bricks were clustered together. There was no electricity here. Flaming torches and lanterns offered the only form of light.

I could tell at a glance that this wasn't the place I'd dreamed about. There were far too many buildings and none of them had a clearing with an army in the middle of it. The cliffs were too small to be the ones from my vision. I guessed the overlord was training his soldiers somewhere else, getting them ready to invade my world.

"Is the scroll fragment hidden somewhere in the city?" I asked.

Aurora shook her head and gestured beyond the metropolis. It was ringed by increasingly tall cliffs. Only one road passed through it.

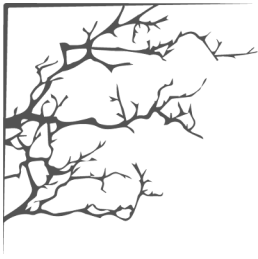
"Can we skirt around the cliffs, or do we have to go through the city?" Ruen asked. He'd fared far better than I had, since he'd ridden the entire way on my back. Feeding on the blood of the animals I'd caught, the vampire wasn't weak and exhausted like I was. Aurora's response was to point down at the city. "I thought so," my fanged sidekick said gloomily.

"I won't be going anywhere until I've replenished my energy," I pointed out, poking the saggy skin where my belly had once been.

"I can smell a herd of those deerlike things nearby," Ruen said. "I'm sure you'll feel much better once you've devoured

them.”

My stomach rumbled loudly enough to echo around the cliffs. A startled shout came from a lone guard on patrol at the edge of the city. He looked up, but we stepped back out of sight before he could spot us. We would have been tiny dots to him, but it was better to be safe than to get captured. It had rained a couple of times during our trek. I hoped he thought it was thunder from a distant storm.



CHAPTER FORTY- SIX



THE NIGHT WAS ONLY half over, so Ruen helped me slaughter ten of the deerlike beasts. He drank his fill of blood, then taught me how to butcher animals more cleanly. Aurora ate grass seeds and insects for dinner as I cooked my feast over a campfire. We sat down to strategize once my belly was distended and I couldn't fit another bite in.

“How are we going to sneak through the city?” I asked.

Ruen looked me up and down, then shook his head. “Nothing your size could sneak past the guards. Ogres aren't exactly built for stealth.” The males I'd met could be quiet when they wanted to, but they couldn't shrink themselves down.

“We're built for eating, mating and rampaging,” I said in irritation.

His expression turned thoughtful. “You've just given me an idea,” he said craftily.

“Do I want to hear it?” I asked warily.

“It's brilliant!” he boasted, rubbing his hands together gleefully. He outlined his plan and I had to admit it didn't suck completely. Aurora looked doubtful, but she couldn't come up with a better idea. Even if she had thought of something, she wouldn't have been able to communicate it to us.

“When should I embark on this crazy scheme?” I asked with great reluctance.

“You still have four deer left,” Ruen replied. “You should sleep the day away and eat your fill when you wake up. We’ll head to the city once I rise tomorrow night.”

“We’re going to get captured and have to explain ourselves to the overlord,” I predicted.

“We’ll pretend coming through the gate turned us both into ravenous monsters,” he said, adding to his plan as he went. “It isn’t like they’ve had many visitors from our realm come here lately to make a comparison.”

“Not that we know about, anyway,” I mused. “I guess we don’t have any choice.”

“If they capture us, pretend to be an idiot like the male ogres we encountered. I’ll step in only if it becomes necessary.”

Aurora’s head bobbed up and down in agreement. She was willing to do her part to help us with our mission. We would only need her assistance to get through the city if things went horribly sideways.

Dawn was drawing closer, so I banked the fire. I’d stuffed the cooked meat into the spare sacks I’d stolen from the barracks. Nothing would be stupid enough to approach a sleeping ogre, so I figured we’d be safe enough up here on the clifftops. Ruen climbed into my sack before the sun could rise. The rustling noises he made halted when he died. My spare

clothes were coated in layers of the clear gunk that oozed from his pores by now.

I slept for a few hours, then woke up feeling hungry. After eating the rest of my food, I found it wasn't enough. I left Aurora to stand watch over Ruen and went hunting for more animals. My gut was pleasantly full and back to being fat again when the vampire rose for the night. While I wasn't as big as I had been, I still looked formidable.

"Are you ready for the show?" I asked when my partner stretched out his kinks.

"Just give me a moment to grab a snack," Ruen replied. He streaked out of sight and returned a few minutes later, sloshing with blood. "Now I'm ready," he told me.

"Into the sack with you both," I ordered and held it open for them.

Ruen picked Aurora up and stepped into the sack. I stuffed everything we owned inside, then slung it over my shoulder. I'd found a bigger branch to use as a club, so I looked the part I was about to play.

Backtracking from the cliff top to the road, I couldn't see, hear or sense any guards nearby. "Here we go," I said nervously, then stepped out onto the path. Trotting along it, I made it all the way to the entrance to the city before I was spotted.

"Ogre!" a soldier shouted shrilly. "Kill it!" More guards came running from a nearby building. They all had tattoos of their overlord on their foreheads.

“Hungry!” I shouted, swinging my club threateningly. “Eat you!”

Rethinking their plan, they turned and fled, shrieking in terror.

“Go!” Ruen hissed at me from inside the sack. Letting out a roar, I began to run.

While I wasn't moving at top speed, I was sprinting quickly enough that everything passed by in a blur. Denizens of the underworld leaped out of the way of my fake rampage. Screams and shouts of alarm rang out. More soldiers came running, then wisely decided to let me pass.

Buildings large and small were left behind in my mad dash. I entered a market and smashed a few food stalls with my club, pretending to be a mindless beast. I made sure to grab sacks full of bread and dried meat as I went. My looting would hopefully add to my ruse that I was in search of food.

People shut themselves away inside their houses in fear that I would devour them. The slobber that flew from my tusked mouth with each roar seemed to be highly effective.

“Chase it out of the city!” a soldier called out as a heavily armed contingent arrived. They wore metal armor and were carrying better weapons. Breaking into two groups, they flanked me and blocked the path behind me so I couldn't retreat.

It was good that the road led directly through the city, or I'd have become lost for sure. Shouting and banging their spears on their shields, the guards hounded me towards the far

side of the metropolis. One of them came too close and paid the price when I slammed my club into him and sent him flying into a building. Crashing through the window, he landed with a pained squeal.

Ruen chuckled darkly, but it was lost beneath my roar. The guards drew back fearfully as I continued my race to safety.

“Let it through!” the soldier in charge called out when thirty or so troops attempted to bar my way from the exit. They scattered from my path, diving out of the way before my club could smack into them.

I kept running, leaving the city behind until it was just a distant speck. When I finally came to a stop, I staggered off the road and slumped to the ground in exhaustion.

“That was an amazing performance, Saige,” Ruen said in praise when he slithered out of the sack with Aurora in his arms. “You truly encapsulated the heart and soul of being an ogress.”

Stuffing a loaf of bread into my mouth, I chewed and swallowed, while giving him a sardonic look. “I can’t believe that worked. I’m half the size of a real ogre.”

“We haven’t seen any other females. Maybe they’re all your size,” he figured. “You’re downright petite compared to the males. Huh,” he mused. “That’s not something I ever thought I’d say about you.”

I threw a chunk of bread at him at the insult. It bounced off his head and Aurora neatly caught it with her foot. She started

pecking at it and I smiled at her indulgently. “She’s got great reflexes, just like me.”

“You’re practically twins,” Ruen muttered, brushing crumbs out of his filthy, matted hair. It was a pity my hairbrush had vanished. His locks were in dire need of grooming. “We need to keep moving before the soldiers come looking for you to make sure you aren’t going to attack the city again,” he said.

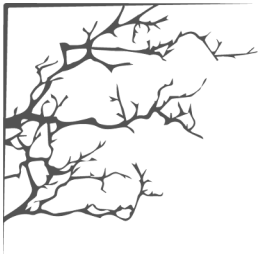
“I didn’t attack it,” I said in exasperation, but heeded his advice anyway. “All I did was smash a few food stalls and shout that I was hungry. I only bashed one person with my club.”

“That was my favorite part,” my fanged companion confessed. “His scream of pain was lovely.”

Aurora paused in pecking her meal to glance at him, then continued eating. She didn’t seem to mind being held in the crook of an arm of a psychopath.

Ruen climbed onto his perch on my back and I continued eating as I trotted along the road. Aurora finished her meal, then he placed her on my shoulder to guide us.

I walked a few more miles from the city, then the bird indicated for me to take a path that branched off towards the cliffs. Heavy foot traffic had come this way regularly. I couldn’t sense anything dangerous, but we all kept our senses alert as I lumbered along the trail.



CHAPTER FORTY- SEVEN



A SLIVER OF MOONLIGHT appeared above the cliffs when I approached it. Weak and wan, the moon was smaller and less impressive than ours. It was lucky my eyesight was so good in this form, because the shadows thickened when I reached the end of the trail.

“What now?” I asked, looking around and not seeing any way through the barrier that loomed over us.

“Follow the footprints,” Ruen suggested, resting his pointy elbows on my shoulder and leaning forward so he could peer ahead.

They led me to a narrow crevice that cleverly blended in with the cliff face. “I’m not sure I’ll fit through there,” I said doubtfully.

“You wouldn’t if you were still gigantically fat,” he said with a smirk. “You might be able to squeeze through it if you suck your gut in.”

“Maybe you should go first and see where it leads,” I suggested.

“Good idea. The crevice might become narrower and it wouldn’t do for you to get wedged inside it.”

He clambered over my shoulder and leaped to the ground. In seconds, he’d vanished into the darkness. I sensed him

moving quickly through the gap until he faded from my range. Aurora huddled on my shoulder, content to remain with me.

Ruen returned about ten minutes later. “Where does it lead?” I asked.

“Through to the other side of the cliffs,” he reported. “It gets a bit tight in some places, but I’m confident you’ll make it through.”

“What’s on the other side?”

“An open plain surrounded by more cliffs, as far as I could tell. The trail leads in the same direction that we’ve been following.”

“Is the spell fragment on the other side of the cliffs?” I asked Aurora. She nodded and gestured for me to get going. “You go first,” I said to the vampire. “I might need you to pull me through if it gets too tight.”

He smirked, then bowed sarcastically and took the lead. Sucking in my gut, I squeezed my way into the narrow cleft.

It took an hour for me to forge my way to the end of the passageway. Ruen had to tug me through the tighter spots, just as I’d figured. My skin was too tough to scrape easily, so I left little trace of myself behind, apart from my huge footprints. The dirt was softer here and it would be easy to follow our trail.

Just as Ruen had said, a huge plain lay beyond the cliffs. The crags curved in a wide circle around the grassy area. The plain sloped down gently to a mountain range I could just make out in the distance. The item we’d come in search of lay

somewhere ahead. Hopefully, Aurora could lead us to it without running into the soldiers who were training somewhere in the area.

Walking beside me rather than riding on my back, the leech constantly turned his head from side to side as he searched for danger. I was far taller than he was and spotted the training compound first. “We’re nearing the place I saw in my vision,” I warned my companions.

“Can you sense anything dangerous?” Ruen asked.

Power was faintly pulsing from the buildings and I nodded. “It’s pimple level right now, but I have a feeling it’s going to get a lot stronger the closer we get to it.”

We fell into a grim silence as Aurora indicated for us to keep going.

Just as I’d feared, the power grew with each step I took. It passed from pimple to boil, then ulcer level. It climbed past cyst and abscess. It surpassed canker and festering boil, then settled on carbuncle, level eight out of my scale of ten. “I have bad news,” I whispered to my team.

“How bad?” Ruen asked.

“Really bad,” I replied. “The power is now carbuncle level.” He winced in reaction at that news. Neither of us had tried to fight something this strong before. “The really bad news is that there are three powerful beings. One is a carbuncle. The other two are festering boils.”

“They’re as powerful as the ogres?” he asked incredulously.

I nodded sourly. “And I’m pretty sure I know who they are.”

“The overlord and his two underlings you saw in your vision?” he guessed.

“Yep. If they’re the same three beings from my dream, then the underlings are almost as dangerous as their boss.”

Aurora was shivering and seemed to feel them as well. She chirped in dread, then pointed at the compound.

“The fragment is in there?” I asked. She lifted her wing, then pointed downward. “You can sense it beneath the ground?” I interpreted and she nodded again.

“We need to search for an entrance to wherever the fragment is being kept,” Ruen said. “It would be best if we avoid the buildings.”

“What if the only entrance is in the compound?” I pointed out.

“Then we’ll have to fight our way through the soldiers,” he replied, eyes glittering in impending excitement.

“I hate to break it to you, but there are hundreds of soldiers in there,” I said.

Deflating at that news, he was at a loss. “I’ll search for the entrance. You two wait here.”

He could sneak far more effectively than I could. The beings here couldn’t seem to sense us, so I nodded in agreement. “Aurora and I will move off the path and wait for

you.” He dropped to the ground, then hunched over to make himself harder to see and scurried away.

I quietly plodded away from the trail and sank down to the ground to wait. Aurora remained on my shoulder so she could see above the long stalks of grass. I could sense Ruen casting about, looking for the entrance to the underground chamber.

After several hours, he returned and prodded me in the side to wake me up. “I found it!” he said in excitement.

“You found the piece of the spell?” I asked in amazement.

“No, you idiot,” he retorted as I heaved myself upright. “I found the entrance to the cave.”

“What cave?”

Rolling his eyes dramatically at my questions, he gestured towards the distant mountains at the bottom of the slope. “I couldn’t find an entrance to any underground buildings, so I widened my search. I came across an old trail that led me to a cave. There wasn’t enough time for me to search it properly, but the tunnel leads back in this direction.”

“Wouldn’t it be ironic if the overlord’s compound is sitting directly over the spell he’s looking for and he doesn’t even know it?” I said in amusement.

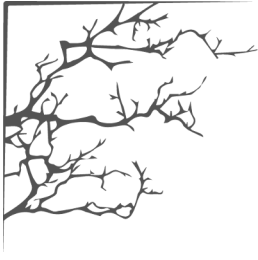
“That would be hilarious,” Ruen said with heavy sarcasm. He was getting cranky, which meant he needed to feed. “May I suggest we head to the cave before the sun comes up? You’re too big to hide in the grass. You’ll be spotted if any sentries go out on patrol during the day.”

My gut stuck out above the grass even when I was lying on my back. I could either dig out a hollow and sleep the day away in it, or I could take his advice. “Get on my back,” I ordered in resignation. I wanted him to be at my side when I went in search of the spell and I had no idea what we would find in the cave.

Ruen scrambled into position and I loped away from the compound, giving it a wide berth. Once I was distant from it, I broke into a run. My assistant directed me to the entrance of the gigantic cave he’d discovered. We made it just in time for him to drop to the ground, then keel over as the sun came up. I caught him and swung him into my arms. I didn’t need to stuff him into my sack this time, since the cave would offer him shelter from the sun.

“Do you think you can stay awake long enough for me to do some hunting?” I asked Aurora. She looked away guiltily, which meant she was exhausted. “I can’t sense anything dangerous in the immediate area, so you should be safe enough.” I said, peering around the dark cavern. “I can see a high shelf over there. I’ll stash Ruen on it and you can sleep up there with him.”

She nodded, then daintily covered her beak with her wing as she yawned. I crossed to the natural rock shelf and placed the bloodsucker on it, then tucked her in beside him. I put our belongings on another shelf, then went out to hunt.



CHAPTER FORTY- EIGHT



I SPENT A COUPLE OF hours hunting for food, then cooked it just inside the mouth of the cave. Ruen hadn't explored deeply enough to discover if anything lurked inside. It was best to sit tight and wait for him to wake up. Besides, I needed to eat and get some sleep after expending so much energy during the past few days.

Dousing the fire with dirt once I was done, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Aurora blinked down at me sleepily from her perch on Ruen's unmoving chest. I lay down on the ground beneath them and slipped into slumber.

Ruen waited until he'd fed before waking me. Aurora was perched on my gut, standing guard when he nudged me awake with his foot. "We need to get moving," he said in a hushed tone.

"What's wrong?" I asked, moving the bird to my shoulder before standing up.

"I'm not sure," he replied, then shivered. "Something feels off about this cave."

"It must be because of the scroll," I figured. "Are you sure it's in here?" I asked Aurora. She nodded and pointed deeper into the tunnel.

We gathered our gear, then Ruen scrambled onto my back. I didn't intend to run through the cave, but he had a better

view of what was ahead from up there. I tried to walk quietly, but my feet were too damn big. The dirt was almost sandy and crunched with each step I took.

Before long, I felt danger flickering at the edges of my senses. “There’s something powerful up ahead,” I whispered.

“How strong is it?” Ruen asked.

“I can’t tell, yet. I’ll let you know once we get closer to it.”

The cave was cool, damp and water dripped from unseen chambers. We passed tunnels branching off from the main one. I didn’t need to worry about becoming stuck. Three male ogres could have passed through it walking side by side and the ceiling towered high above us.

Ruen’s prediction that the cave would lead us to the compound turned out to be accurate. Although it wasn’t perfectly straight, the tunnel took us towards the area where Aurora had sensed magic. My monster radar told me the creature that was guarding the scroll wasn’t going to be easy to defeat.

“How strong is it now?” Ruen whispered when we were only a few hundred yards from the compound. The tunnel had been steadily sloping downward, so we were fairly deep beneath the ground. I couldn’t sense the overlord or his minions. Maybe the thick rock above us blocked it.

“It’s a carbuncle, just like the overlord, but it feels different from him,” I said quietly. “It must be behind that pile of rocks over there.” I gestured at the mound of rubble near the back of

the cave, then a glimmer of light caught my eye. “Do you see that?” I asked, pointing upwards.

“What are you pointing at?” Ruen asked, squinting in the direction I’d indicated.

“There’s a gleam of light up high on the wall on the right at the back of the cave.”

His head tilted back further. “I see it,” he confirmed. “Do you think it’s the scroll?”

Aurora nodded in confirmation, eyelashes fluttering in excitement. She pointed at it, then winced when she accidentally jostled her broken wing.

“How the hell are we going to get it down from there?” I wondered.

“How did it get up there in the first place?” the bloodsucker pointed out.

“I have no idea,” I said with a shrug. “Let’s move closer and see if we can find the creature that’s guarding it.”

“What makes you think it’s guarding it?”

“Why else would a carbuncle be living here?” I said wryly, gesturing at the piles of animal bones that were scattered all over the place.

“The axis-gate was created five thousand years ago,” he reminded me. “What type of creature could possibly live that long?”

“Dragons?” I mused. “Aren’t they immortal?”

“I have no idea. Lord Gilden is the only dragon I’ve ever met, but he’s a shifter. I’m not sure how long true dragons live for.”

“Where’s it hiding?” I asked in frustration as we moved closer to the scroll. There didn’t seem to be any tunnels branching off back here. As far as I could see, the cave ended just beyond the pile of rocks.

Ruen tilted his head back to see if anything was clinging to the ceiling. Aurora was peering around, probing the darkness. She spotted something and brushed her wing across my cheek.

“What is it?” I asked in a hushed whisper. She pointed at an object lying at the base of the rockpile. I moved closer to the gray lump, trying to make out what it was.

“Is that a foot?” Ruen asked incredulously.

“It can’t be,” I scoffed. “It’s got to be six feet long.” The lump twitched, then moved. It split apart at one end to form five long sections. It took me a second to realize they were toes. “It’s definitely a foot,” I said in dismay and began backing away.

“It’s too late,” my undead minion said in despair. “It’s awake and it knows we’re here.”

The rockpile shuddered, then the guardian of the scroll sat up. I’d already figured out that he was a giant, based on the size of his foot. The long gray beard that clung to his craggy face gave his gender away. He wasn’t actually made of rock. He was just covered in huge gray lumps.

“I don’t think my club is going to be much use against that thing,” I said, glancing dubiously at the branch in my hand.

“I highly doubt any weapon will be strong enough to penetrate the giant’s hide,” Ruen agreed.

The guardian ponderously pushed himself to his feet, then stretched as if he hadn’t moved in decades. None of the bones were fresh. He’d been in hibernation until we’d come along and had woken him up. Easily four times my height, he was tall enough to reach up and place the scroll on the shelf.

“Maybe we don’t have to actually kill it,” I said craftily.

“Why not?” Ruen was doubtful, but willing to listen to my hastily formed plan.

“How good are you at climbing?”

“Very. In this form, I seem to excel at it even more.”

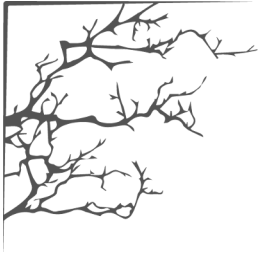
“Awesome. Here’s what we’re going to do.” Both the leech and the bird leaned in to listen to me as I whispered instructions. The giant was slowly becoming more aware of his surroundings. Soon, he would notice us. When he did, I had no doubt that things would get interesting. “Are you both clear on what you need to do?” I asked.

Aurora nodded and Ruen eyed the guardian speculatively. “It might just work,” he murmured. “Are you sure you can pull this off?”

“No, but I can’t think of a better plan.”

“Neither can I,” he said with a fierce grin. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Let’s do this,” I said grimly, then my team raced away from me, leaving me to face our humongous foe alone.



CHAPTER FORTY- NINE



“HEY, YOU!” I SHOUTED to get the giant’s attention. Looking around owlishly, he didn’t spot me until I waved my arms. “Hi, there!” I exclaimed, just in case he was friendly. “I don’t suppose you could reach up and hand me that scroll fragment, could you?”

His response was to bellow in rage and stomp towards me. Joints that hadn’t moved in ages creaked loudly and dirt and rocks rained down from him. As naked as the ogres who’d tried to claim me, it was impossible not to stare at his genitals. It was mesmerizing to see his junk swinging with each step he took.

“Move, Saige!” Ruen hissed, snapping me out of my daze.

Instead of sprinting away from the oncoming monster, I raced towards him. He bent down to swing a hand at me and I easily dodged it. “Ha, ha! You missed me!” I jeered.

Large brown boulders and rocks were scattered throughout the cave. I spied Aurora hunkering behind one as Ruen crept closer to the back wall of the cavern. The giant made another swipe at me, moving slightly faster this time. His body was getting used to moving again and he was becoming nimbler. We had to get this done before he got up to full speed.

My plan would have been a lot easier to pull off if I’d been in my human form. I expended a lot of energy getting the

guardian to chase me around. I was panting for air by the time I maneuvered him to where I wanted him.

“Keep him there!” Ruen said in a loud whisper from his hiding spot in a crevice in the wall.

Darting from side to side, I did my best to keep the giant’s attention on me. He was standing directly beneath the object we’d come here to retrieve. Ruen sprang into action as the guardian swung his hand at me again. The vampire leaped onto the creature’s leg and quickly scrambled upwards, using the unsightly lumps for purchase.

Unaware of my assistant scaling his body like a ladder, my foe made another grab for me. His fingertips brushed my shoulder and that was enough to make me stumble and fall to my knees. “He’s freaking strong!” I complained, surging to my feet before he could close his fingers around me.

I glanced up to see Ruen had reached the giant’s shoulder. Running out of the way when a huge hand came towards me, I lost my balance and tripped over.

Aurora screeched loudly, drawing the giant’s attention away from me for a few precious seconds. I scrambled to my feet and looked up to see Ruen standing on the guardian’s gnarled head. He took a running jump and launched himself at the shelf where the magical item was stashed.

Completely oblivious to the vampire’s actions, my opponent returned his focus to me. I raced away from him, but I didn’t move fast enough. His fingertip clipped my leg and I went sprawling on my face. I heard a triumphant shout from above, then Ruen leaped to my rescue. Landing on the giant’s

head, the vampire did a frenzied tap dance on my foe's pate to distract him. Faint light shone from the prize he held in his fist.

The foot that had been raised to stomp me to death hesitated long enough for me to scramble out of the way. The stupefied expression on the guardian's face was enough to make me burst into snickers. Ruen tucked the scroll fragment into his sack, then began his descent.

Massive fingers brushed the top of the giant's head. When he found nothing there, he glared down at me and bellowed in annoyance. I was back on my feet by now and knew it was going to be tricky getting out of there alive. He was far less creaky now and was moving more fluidly.

Ruen dropped to the ground, but stayed behind the giant so he would be out of his line of sight. If the guardian discovered the item he was guarding had been stolen, he would probably go berserk.

I started backing away towards the exit, hoping he'd let me go once he realized I was leaving. Unfortunately, he was too angry to let me walk away. He rushed at me and there was no way I could avoid him this time.

Aurora burst out of hiding, holding her broken wing against her body protectively. She reached the giant just as he bent down to snatch me into the air. The bird pecked him on the toe and he froze with his fingers mere inches away from me.

"Holy crap, that was close!" I said in relief.

The giant straightened up, eyes going blank from whatever vision the magical bird was showing him. Then his back bowed and I knew what was coming next, no pun intended. I dove out of the way just as a geyser of thick fluid gushed out of the giant. Swaying on his feet, he fell sideways and crashed to the ground, out cold.

“You could have drowned if you’d been standing in the path of that stream,” Ruen said in awe as he carried Aurora over to me.

“I really owe you guys,” I said in gratitude, bending down to pick him up and hugging him to my gigantic bosom.

“Ew. Put me down!” the leech complained as his head became caught in my colossal cleavage. “I can’t breathe!”

“You don’t need to breathe,” I reminded him, but put him down anyway.

Aurora looked very pleased with herself. She waited for me to take her from Ruen and place her on my shoulder, then she snuggled against me. It was like having a warm feather duster brushing against my neck, but it wasn’t an unpleasant sensation.

“Let’s get the hell out of here before he wakes up,” I suggested.

“You should take this,” my undead assistant said and reached into his sack.

I took the scroll from him and examined it curiously. Made of thick, ancient ivory colored parchment. It had been torn at the bottom, but the top was intact, which meant it had to be the

first piece of the scroll. I unrolled it and glanced at the words that were inscribed in red ink. The words almost seemed to squirm on the page when I tried to read them. “It’s gibberish to me,” I said, then stuffed it into my sack. It felt tough enough not to crumple if it became squashed by anything, such as Ruen when he fell asleep at dawn.

“If we hurry, we should be able to backtrack and make it past the cliffs before the sun rises,” Ruen said.

We all wanted to be far away before the giant woke up and discovered our theft. I grabbed him by the arm and swung him onto my back, then began to trot back along the main tunnel. After a few seconds, dread reared its ugly head and I came to a stop.

“What’s wrong?” Ruen asked.

“I can sense someone coming,” I whispered.

He peered over my shoulder, trying to see ahead, then we both heard footsteps. It wasn’t just one person, but lots of people. “Tell me it isn’t who I think it is,” he pleaded.

“It’s the overlord, his two minions and a bunch of soldiers,” I confirmed. To my senses, the creature in the lead was a carbuncle, followed by two festering boils, then dozens of pimples and boils. “I don’t want to sound dramatic, but I’m pretty sure we’re screwed,” I added.

“We managed to defeat a giant,” Ruen reminded me. “We can take them down, too. It’s not like they brought an entire army with them.”

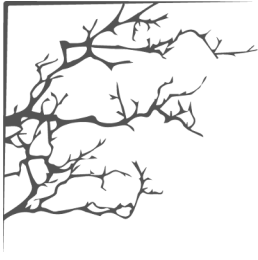
“That’s true,” I conceded. “I wonder how they knew we were here?” An animal howled further down the tunnel and I had my answer.

“That must be one of the trackers,” Ruen figured as he dropped to the ground.

“How are we going to play this?” I asked, hoping he would be able to come up with a plan. “Should we act like stupid monsters?”

“We could try it,” he mused as the overlord drew closer by the second. “It might throw them off long enough for us to kill them.”

We were about to face overwhelming odds, but he was perversely looking forward to it. From his malevolent grin, he intended to vamp out and wreak as much havoc as possible on our opponents.



CHAPTER FIFTY



THREE PAIRS OF GLOWING red eyes appeared in the gloom. The overlord and his two main minions wore the metal armor from my dream, with red capes for embellishment. The faces that were carved into their torsos were more frightening in real life. Their mouths gaped open wide, ready to bite. They were almost identical to their helmets.

“These are the interlopers who you’ve been chasing?” the overlord asked in a deep, malevolent voice. His tone was incredulous and I was both horrified and fascinated to see the razor-sharp teeth of his helmet moving as he spoke. Then I realized he wasn’t wearing a helmet at all. He was completely made out of metal.

One of his soldiers hurried forward with a doglike creature on a leash. “Yes, my lord,” the lackey said. He bowed deferentially as the beast snarled, barked and fought to break free so it could attack us. “We tracked them all the way from the gate to here.”

“What is a vampire doing here?” one of the smaller metal creatures asked, pointing at Ruen. He and his counterpart were half a head shorter than their ruler, but wore the same type of armor that he did.

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out,” the overlord said. Looking beyond us, his glowing eyes widened when he spied the fallen guardian. “They killed the giant,” he said in

amazement and uttered a harsh laugh. “It seems these creatures have accomplished my task for me. One of them has the scroll. Kill them and search their belongings.”

Exchanging a quick look with Ruen, I saw a crazed look enter his eyes. He subtly gestured for me to take a step back, then turned to face our foes. When he sucked in a breath, I backed away and put my hands over my ears. The vampire shrieked at the small army, making them reel backwards, screaming in pain and shock.

Even the trio of metal creatures were affected by the piercing noise. Dazed and confused, they stumbled off to the side as Ruen went on the attack. Pulling his knives, my assistant began carving his way through the soldiers. He slit the dog’s throat, then stabbed its leash holder through the eye. He didn’t even pause to feed as he uttered a gibbering, endless laugh of pure joy while unleashing carnage on our foes.

Seizing my chance, I put Aurora down, then barreled towards the overlord and his lackeys. Crashing into them with my gut, I sent them flying into the wall. I clubbed an underling’s head in before he could recover. Blood and brains gushed out through a deep crack in his metal skull. He slumped to the ground with the red glow fading from his eyes. I felt magic seep out of his metal corpse, then fade away to nothing.

I quickly bashed the second underling to death as the overlord rallied and climbed to his feet. Again, magic seeped out of the second metal corpse. The teeth on both of the ruler’s mouths began to gnash as he curled his hands into fists. None

of the metal warriors carried weapons. They didn't need them, since their hands were made from living armor. The overlord's fist crashed into my gut and sank in up to the elbow. My air whooshed out from the force of the blow and I staggered backwards.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ruen slicing his way through the slowly recovering minions. Aurora was darting among them, pecking exposed flesh to induce them into a sex fantasy. As always, it ended with them falling unconscious to the ground after climaxing. Ruen killed them as well so they couldn't snap out of it and resume their fight.

The overlord punched me again and his fist sank deeper into my gut. One of my organs ruptured and I gasped in agony. No one had ever managed to truly hurt me before, either on this world, or on my own. I found I didn't like the sensation of pain at all and retaliated.

I swung my club towards the overlord and he ducked under it. Far faster than me, he punched me in the kidney when I swung too far. My knees buckled, but I caught myself with one hand against the wall. I kicked backwards, connecting with his knee. He bellowed in pain when the metal caved in.

Limping out of my range, he cast a glance at his decimated troops. A few were still standing and Ruen was toying with them. The vampire had messily fed on his last few victims and was covered in their blood. Aurora was keeping her distance now that they'd come out of their daze from his shriek. Their spears could easily skewer her to death.

“Who sent you here?” the overlord asked. “Was it the dragon who rules over Nexus?”

“Hungry,” I responded, pretending to be a dumb ogre.

“Is that filthy creature your master?” he asked, nodding towards Ruen. “I can kill him and free you from him,” he said enticingly. “Let me pass and you can roam this realm at will.”

“Eat you,” I replied and licked my lips, tongue skimming over my tusks.

“Not even ogres can eat metal,” he said derisively, falling for my ruse of being a moron. “If you let me pass, I’ll give you enough food so you’ll never go hungry again.”

My stomach rumbled and he smiled in triumph. “Want food now,” I said, wondering how I could kill this thing without him rupturing anything else inside me.

“I don’t have any food with me,” he said peevishly.

“Hungry!” I roared and he flinched backwards. I swung my club while he was distracted, but his fear was fake. He ducked under it, then tackled me to the ground, proving he was far stronger than I’d expected. Pressing himself against my gut as he held my hands against the ground, the mouth on his torso began to chew.

I screamed in pain when the metal teeth sheared through my thick skin and reached blubber. Blood sprayed both of us and I thrashed to try to knock him off. Laughing in delight, the overlord lowered his head to my chest and bit into my gigantic boob.

“Get him off me!” I shrieked.

Ruen was there in a flash, standing on my meaty thigh as he tried to pull the overlord off me. Aurora jumped onto my chest and pecked the metal creature on the head. Her beak bounced off his skull without affecting him.

Already weak from using so much energy to run here, blood loss would steal what strength I had left. Soon, he would chew through my fat to something vital and then my life would end.

Aurora went for the overlord's eyes, beak darting at the glowing orbs. He brushed her away with a sweep of his hand, letting go of my arm in the process. I got my hand under his chin and pushed upwards just as I saw something huge and gray looming over us. Realizing the giant had woken from his short coma, I threw the demon under the bus. "The overlord stole the spell fragment!" I shouted.

The giant roared loudly enough to stun us all as the noise reverberated around the cave. He reached down and picked the overlord up. Holding onto his body with one hand, he pulled my enemy's head off as easily as plucking the petals from a flower.

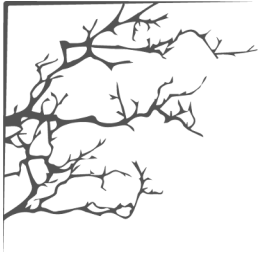
We stared up in astonishment as the overlord's legs kicked for a few seconds before going still. The magic I sensed leaking from the metal corpse was stronger this time. The guardian tossed the body and head aside and they landed with loud clangs. He glowered down at us when he realized I'd lied and that his foe didn't have the fragment at all.

Aurora did the only thing that could save us and raced over to peck him on the toe again. This time, I didn't have the

strength to roll aside when the giant climaxed a few seconds later. Ruen leapt clear, but I became coated from head to toe in semen once again. I'd barely had time to put my hands over my face so I didn't drown in it.

Ruen went into helpless peals of laughter at the sight of me dripping in jizz again. Badly wounded and bleeding heavily from being gnawed on, I weakly struggled to my feet. The vampire was leaning against the wall, unable to stand up properly as bloody tears rolled down his face.

Picking him up, I squashed his face between my boobs, rubbing the giant's goo all over him until he was coated in it. "Now you know what it feels like," I said vindictively and dropped him to the ground. He gaped up at me, then we were both laughing hysterically.



CHAPTER FIFTY- ONE



AURORA WAS TOO WORN out from using her magic on so many beings to protest about getting sticky when I picked her up. Ruen grabbed our gear, then we scurried to the exit as quickly as we could.

“What’s going to happen now that the overlord is dead?” I asked, speaking in a whisper just in case some guards were stationed nearby. I couldn’t feel any, but I was rattled and in pain and found it hard to concentrate. The vampire had eradicated every soldier that had been in the cave.

“I have no idea,” Ruen replied. “I suppose someone else will have to step up and lead this realm.” We reached the exit and he paused to examine me. I was hunched over, with my wounded boob and gut throbbing in agony. “How badly are you injured?”

“The overlord didn’t chew his way through to my organs, but it freaking hurts. The bleeding seems to have stopped, though. I think the gunk is actually helping to seal the wounds.”

“Ogres are tough and I guess they heal quickly,” he figured. “The semen will cover our scents, which might confuse the trackers long enough for us to escape.”

“We should use a different way to get back to the gate,” I suggested. Aurora shook her head, then gestured towards the

direction we'd come from. "We have to go through the crevice and the city?" I surmised. She nodded, talons grasping for purchase on my slippery shoulder.

"Come on," Ruen said, still keyed up from the battle. "Let's get as far away from here as we can before dawn arrives."

Skirting around the compound, we headed to the cleft between the cliffs. It was easier for me to slide through the crevice this time, thanks to the sticky coating. I did my best not to scrape the areas where I'd been bitten, but it wasn't easy.

It wouldn't be long before someone would be sent to investigate the cave when the overlord didn't return to the city. My wounds felt slightly better, but I was in no shape to continue walking once the sun began to rise. Ruen found a shallow cave a short distance from the road. He entered first and I had to crawl in after him. He died once the sun came up and I lay down beside him to shield him from the rays.

Aurora stationed herself in front of me to keep watch. The last thing I felt before sleep dragged me under was her brushing her wing over my cheek soothingly.

Hunger woke me up late in the afternoon. Aurora's head was tucked beneath her wing and she was fast asleep. My bulk protected Ruen from the sun, but he would be exposed once I left the cave. I stuffed him into the sack, checking to make sure the scroll was still there. It was and it was still glowing with faint light. Magic had kept it intact for thousands of

years, protecting it from dirt, damp and anything else that would have destroyed normal paper.

The giant's emissions had dried and hardened. It was tempting to scrape it off, but Ruen's suggestion that it might hide our trail stayed with me. Leaving it in place, I cautiously stretched when I emerged from the cave. My wounds were healing, but they still hurt like a bitch.

I couldn't sense any guards nearby, so I went hunting for food. I threw rocks at a flock of hideous birds with leathery wings and mangy fur to knock them from a tree. I'd grown used to eating animals raw, so I tossed them into my maw whole. It might freak Aurora out if she saw me eating her distant kin, so I didn't carry any of them back to the cave with me.

Even after eating a dozen birds and a couple of piglike beasts, I was still ravenous. Healing took a lot out of me, it seemed. I couldn't find anything else to eat, so I trudged back to the cave shortly before nightfall.

Aurora was awake and was pacing anxiously when I arrived. She gave a glad cry and raced over to meet me. "I'm okay," I said, tiredly scooping her up. "Did anything happen while I was gone?" She shook her head and snuggled against my chest, ignoring the caked-on goop that covered me.

The sack rustled, then Ruen cautiously stuck his head out. He snickered when he saw the dubious coat of armor I'd acquired. "I wish I had a camera to record this sight," he said.

"You're coated in it, too," I reminded him.

His upper lip lifted to show his fangs. “I forgot,” he said ruefully. “How are you feeling?”

His concern was surprising, since I didn’t think he actually cared about me. Then again, he needed me to get him back to the gate safe and sound. “I feel a bit better,” I replied. “I did some hunting while you were sleeping, but I need more food.”

“Maybe you can steal some from the food stalls when we pass through the city,” he joked.

“Good idea,” I agreed, taking his suggestion seriously. “I don’t have the energy to run, so let’s get moving.”

“I need to feed,” he said, sidling around me to exit the shallow cave. “I’ll catch up to you.”

Sighing in resignation, I grabbed our gear while he went in search of a meal. Aurora didn’t argue about being stuffed in my sack. She probably felt safer being out of sight. I started trudging along the road and sensed Ruen coming a few minutes later. He’d found something to eat and was content once more. He also gave me a few bird carcasses to snack on.

It took us a few hours to reach the outskirts of the city. My sidekick walked beside me, easily keeping up with my slow pace. “Get in the sack,” I ordered, coming to a stop when we were close to the city.

Ruen grumbled beneath his breath, but he knew better than to argue with an irritated ogre. Now that we’d accomplished our task, I just wanted to go home. I planned to take a shower, eat a huge meal, sleep for a week, then spend the following

week gaming. I deserved a break after my efforts and I was going to take it.

Once the vampire was hidden in my bag, I slung it over my shoulder and continued my journey.

A guard spotted me as I approached the entrance to the city and instantly panicked. “The ogre is back!” he shouted and screams rang out. I was too tired to increase my pace as I entered the city.

Soldiers came running, carrying spears and shields. “What do we do?” one of the lackeys asked, nearly gibbering in fear.

“Get the Captain!” someone else decided.

A guard took off running, while the rest of them followed me at a distance. He returned with the same guy who’d called the shots the last time. “Has it attacked anyone?” the captain asked, buckling his shield on his arm in determination.

“Not yet, sir.”

“Do you want us to kill it?”

“Maybe if we all rush it together, we might be able to take it down.”

I cut a look at the idiot who’d suggested that and bared my tusks at him. He blanched and melted to the back of the growing crowd.

“What do you want?” the captain asked, enunciating his words loudly and clearly, as if I was hard of hearing as well as stupid.

“Food,” I replied wearily. “Hungry.”

“What the hell happened to it?” someone muttered. “Why is it coated in that yellow stuff?”

“Ogre orgy,” I lied.

“Ew,” he said, screwing up his nose. I still hadn’t gotten used to seeing their heads in their chests and almost burst into snickers.

“Maybe if we give it food, it’ll go away,” the captain mused.

“It looks tired and wounded,” a lacky said speculatively. “I think we should kill it while it’s weak.”

Snarling in anger at his threat, I darted forward and picked him up. Knocking his spear away, I shoved him into my mouth until only his feet were showing.

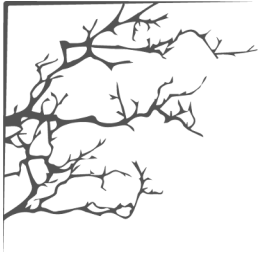
“Don’t eat him!” the captain shouted, holding his unarmed hand up peacefully before I could bite down on his subordinate. “Let him go and we’ll give you all the food you want!”

I’d only been pretending to eat the minion, but my threat had worked better than I’d hoped. Screaming and thrashing, the soldier squirmed in my mouth. He began crying in terror, so I decided he’d had enough and spat him out. Covered in ogre spit, he bowled into some of his buddies, knocking them all down.

“Food! Now!” I demanded belligerently.

“Follow me,” the captain said. “Keep your distance from it,” he ordered his troops. “Don’t threaten it. We’ll let it take what it wants and maybe we’ll all make it out of this alive.”

He courageously led the way along the main road with his lackeys following twenty feet behind me.



CHAPTER FIFTY- TWO



RUEN'S MUFFLED SNICKERS came from inside the sack. Aurora's feathers rustled as she shifted position, then his giggles became more muted. She must have put her wing over his mouth. I plodded along, stomach growling loudly enough to draw curious people to their doorways as I passed their houses. Some screamed and ran. Others gaped in wonder and fear at our procession.

The captain led me to the food stalls that had been repaired after my short rampage. The owners of the stalls fled the moment they saw me. I had a long walk back to the gate and needed to replenish my energy. This would be an easy way to stock up on supplies.

"Take anything you want," the captain said, gesturing at the plethora of food. "Just don't eat anyone and we'll let you leave peacefully."

An empty wicker basket that stood about four feet high was standing next to one of the stalls. Picking it up by the handle, I started filling it with bread, vegetables, fruit, dried meat and all sorts of edible goods.

"Is it going to leave any food for us?" one of the soldiers muttered petulantly, then hunched his shoulders protectively when I glowered at him. "Take it!" he blurted. "Take it all!"

“Moron,” I muttered beneath my breath, which sent Ruen into a fresh fit of giggles. My sack was still damp from the ooze he secreted. Not even his coating of jizz could halt the flow.

Once the basket was full, I flipped the lid shut and heaved it over my shoulder next to the sack. I needed one hand free, just in case I had to club someone to death.

“Are you done?” the captain asked in a slightly acerbic tone. “Will you leave now?”

“Yep,” I replied. “Thanks,” I added, to his amazement.

Confused that an ogre could be polite, he and his men escorted me through the city, then watched me trudge away with my spoils.

As soon as we were out of sight around a bend, I put the basket down and let my friends out of the sack. Ruen opened the basket to peer inside. “There’s enough food in here to last you for a month,” he exclaimed. Aurora held her wing up imploringly, so he picked her up so she could take a look. Her head darted down to grab a bread roll and she began to munch on it contentedly.

“I’m going to need to eat as much as I can if we want to make it back to the gate quickly,” I reminded him. “Unless you want to walk all the way back.”

That would take at least ten days at my current pace and he shook his head. “I suggest we avoid the road and cut through the wilderness again. Once the army discovers their overlord is dead, they’ll be enraged and they might want revenge.”

“You carry the sacks,” I ordered. “I’ll carry the basket and eat while we’re walking.”

He obediently picked up our belongings and tucked the bird beneath his arm. The fact that he didn’t argue with me meant he was anxious to leave. I picked up my pace as he led the way down the road. We needed to get clear of the cliffs before we could lose ourselves in the wilderness.

Stuffing handfuls of food into my mouth, I chewed and swallowed methodically without tasting any of it. My stomach slowly became full and the healing process sped up. After three nights of constantly feeding and plodding along, I’d devoured most of the food. My gut and boob had healed and I was back to my original size.

“I can’t believe you ate all of that food so quickly,” Ruen said in disgusted amazement when he woke up.

“Says the leech who keeps drinking so much blood that he sloshes with it,” I retorted.

A dreamy look came over him at the fond memory of slaughtering his meals. “I’ll never forget this mission. Not for as long as I live.”

“Neither will I,” I said with a grimace. My memories would be far less pleasant than his.

Ruen went off to hunt and I quickly devoured the dregs of food in the bottom of the basket. Aurora took a bread roll when I held it out to her. “It’s the last one,” I warned her. She didn’t need to eat much and could make it last for a few days if she needed to. Nodding, she allowed me to place her on my

shoulder. She gripped my skin with her feet and tucked the roll beneath her injured wing.

I took off at a jog, meeting up with the vampire as he returned. I already had all of our gear, so he didn't need to backtrack. "Can I get a ride?" he asked, holding his thumb out like a hitchhiker.

My response was to grab his arm and swing him up onto my back on my way past. Chortling in glee when I began to sprint, he clung to me with one arm around my neck and his bony knees digging into the flab on my back.

It took four nights to return to the area where the gate was located. I made sure to give the ogres a wide berth this time. Aurora could sense the gate and all the others that were scattered around the realm. We'd found her close to the one we'd used to get here, so she knew exactly where we wanted to go. Going through another portal could take us to another country for all I knew.

"We should slow down and approach the gate slowly," Ruen suggested when we reached the foothills of the mountain. "The overlord might have sent more soldiers to guard it after learning about our arrival."

"Good idea," I said, then shucked him off. I was panting hard from my long sprint and needed to eat again. I'd become an expert at snatching up prey and eating on the run. Ruen had drained the blood from most of my food. Aurora had eaten grass seeds and insects after she'd finished her roll.

We kept our senses on full alert as we scaled the small mountain. The barracks was empty, but we could smell fresh

scents. “Several guards were here recently,” Ruen figured. “They were heading for the gate.”

“Should we kill them if we catch up to them?” I asked.

His eyes gleamed with glee at that prospect. “Only if we have to,” he said, unaware of the longing in his tone.

It was still early and dawn was hours away, so we got moving. Neither of us could sense, smell or hear anyone on the trail. We saved time by using the path rather than forcing our way through the trees and shrubs.

We had a clear view of the valley below when we reached the summit of the mountain. Two groups of soldiers were heading towards each other, but were still some distance away from meeting. Their flaming torches gave away their positions.

“They’ll stop to talk for a while,” Ruen predicted. “If we hurry, we might be able to skirt around them and make it back to the gate before they even know we’re here.”

“You mean we aren’t going to slaughter them all so you can tear their eyelids off and suck their orbs from their lidless sockets?” I said sardonically.

“Not this time,” he said primly, pretending he hadn’t gone on a disturbing monologue about all the ways he wanted to maim and kill our adversaries.

Aurora caught my eye and rolled hers. I had to muffle my snort of laughter so the vampire didn’t get into a snit. “Climb onboard,” I offered. “The good ship Saige is about to set sail from the dock.”

“Please stop,” he said in a pained tone. “You know nothing about sailing, ships or docks.”

“Keep your arms inside the vehicle at all times,” I continued as if I hadn’t heard him. “Decapitation and dismemberment could be the consequences if you ignore the warnings.”

Ruen snickered as he clambered onto my back. Aurora looked at the trees that surrounded us and scrambled down from my shoulder. I felt her soft body press against my back as she squirmed between Ruen and me. I took off running, quickly picking up speed during the steep descent to the bottom. An avalanche of rocks started, then small boulders were bouncing and rolling around me. I veered off the path as shouts sounded from the alarmed guards.

The noise of the avalanche muffled my footsteps as I sprinted through the trees and shrubs. Ruen heeded my advice and kept his limbs and head tucked behind me. Dodging trees, I skirted around the two groups as they spotted each other. I was long gone by the time they converged.



CHAPTER FIFTY- THREE



BIRDS AND ANIMALS FLED when they heard me coming as I raced across the valley. Ruen and Aurora were peering over my shoulder, now that they were no longer in danger of being decapitated by branches. I headed directly for the pathway that led to the gate, stomach gurgling with hunger and feeling weak from using too much energy.

“The soldiers must have heard you,” Ruen said, turning to look over his shoulder. “I can hear them chasing after us.”

I reached the mouth of the mile-long crevice between the high rock walls that would take us to the gate. By the time I neared the end of the path, I was staggering from exhaustion. Four soldiers stood guard about fifty yards from the gate.

“Don’t stop!” Ruen urged me, thumping me on the back with his bony knees. I’d slowed down enough for the soldiers that were chasing us to see us. They shouted in glee, thinking they had us trapped.

Putting my head down, I put on a final burst of speed. One of the guards managed to dive out of the way, but the other three weren’t so lucky. Two bounced off my gut and were trampled beneath my gigantic feet. The third one clung to my boobs, staring up at me with a terrified expression.

I peeled the soldier off me and tossed him over my shoulder, then had to lift my hand to shield my eyes from the

bright blue light. “I’m going through the gate!” I shouted to warn Ruen. He cringed behind me, holding onto Aurora tightly as I ran full tilt through the magical portal.

Again, my entire body tingled from head to toe when I became encased in the light. It was worse this time. I figured it was because three beings were passing through the portal instead of just two. My transformation happened so fast that I didn’t feel myself shrinking. One moment, I was a huge ogre who was wedged in the doorway. The next moment, I became human again. We spilled through the gate and landed in a heap on the bare concrete floor of the warehouse.

“Don’t shoot them!” one of the shifters who was standing guard shouted. “They’re Lord Gilde’s envoys!”

Ruen was tangled up with me. He had one hand on my shoulder, another one clutched my shirt in a death grip and a third one was holding tightly to my arm. Someone spoke even as I was trying to figure out how he’d grown an extra hand.

“Who the hell is the woman with the green and blue hair?” someone asked.

Still shaking in exhaustion and hunger, I pushed Ruen off me and turned my head. A pair of stunning green eyes stared at me from an exquisitely beautiful face of a woman I’d never seen before. “Aurora?” I croaked. In this form, I could feel magic emanating from her. It was her hand holding onto my shirt so tightly.

“It’s me,” she replied in a melodious voice.

“But, you’re a bird,” I mumbled in stupefaction.

“It’s a long story,” she said with a grimace and struggled to sit up.

“Why is she naked?” the shifter who’d stopped his colleagues from shooting us asked. One of the other guards was talking on his cell phone. I heard Drake’s name mentioned and figured he was reporting to our boss.

I took the hand the shifter offered me and let him pull me to my feet. Aurora was handed a jacket and drew it around herself. “My feathers didn’t follow me through the portal,” she said, which only confused them more. Almost a foot shorter than me, she was slender, had light brown skin and short, spiky blue and green hair. She wasn’t full-figured like I was and had small boobs in comparison to mine.

The door to the portal was swung shut, cutting off the blinding blue light.

Ruen recovered from the pain of his transformation and rose to his feet. All signs of his former joy were gone. He was back to being his usual pessimistic self again. “I need a shower and to burn these clothes,” he said gloomily.

All signs of the giant’s semen were gone, but our clothes were tattered and our hair was greasy. My weapons were gone, but the ones he’d borrowed from me were still strapped to his arms and legs.

“We’ll take you to Lord Gilden,” the lead guard said. It wasn’t a suggestion and the werelion wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“I’m starving. Can we stop for burgers on the way?” I asked as my stomach rumbled loudly.

“What’s a burger?” Aurora asked.

“You have a lot to learn about this world,” I told her as we followed two of the guards to the exit.

“I’ve never been to this dimension before,” she said. “I’ve only ever lived in the underworld.”

The shifters exchanged looks, probably doubting the wisdom of bringing her along. Our boss hadn’t told them to leave her behind when he’d been notified about our arrival. They indicated for all of us to climb into the back of the SUV when we reached it.

We had a silent ride to Lord Gilden’s building. Aurora stared out through the windows, taking everything in. She didn’t ask any questions and huddled close to my side. Ruen had removed my weapons and handed them back to me. His head was resting against the back of his seat. I knew he was awake, but he clearly didn’t want to engage in conversation.

I peered into my backpack when I slipped my knives inside it, then quickly closed it again as a glimmer of light shone upwards. The scroll fragment was buried at the bottom of my pack. The glow was fainter here, but it was still visible.

Aurora flicked a glance at my backpack, but knew better than to say anything. As far as the shifters knew, we’d gone to the underworld as trade envoys. The dragon lord was the only one we could tell the truth to.

As per my request, we stopped at a fast-food restaurant to grab a couple of burgers. I could have eaten five of them on my own, but I handed one to Aurora. We wolfed them down as we continued our journey to the center of Nexus.

I pulled a t-shirt out of my backpack and handed it to Aurora. “Put this on,” I suggested. My jeans were far too large for her and she’d never be able to keep them up. She shucked off the jacket and the werelion almost ran up the back of the car that had stopped at a light. He slammed on the brakes when his colleague sucked in an alarmed breath. We all jerked against our seatbelts, except for Ruen, who hadn’t buckled himself in. His reflexes were good enough to lift a hand and brace himself against the seat. He didn’t even bother to open his eyes.

“Watch the road instead of the naked girl,” the second lion growled, but he turned to watch Aurora wriggle into the t-shirt. She pulled the jacket back on over the shirt, then leaned against me. It was a bit weird to have a woman clinging to me like this. I’d grown used to her affectionate nature in the underworld. Now that she’d assumed a human form, it was going to take some adjustment for us all.

The SUV pulled into the driveway to the underground parking area of Drake’s building. It parked in one of the slots for employees and Ruen opened his eyes. “Home sweet home,” he said peevishly.

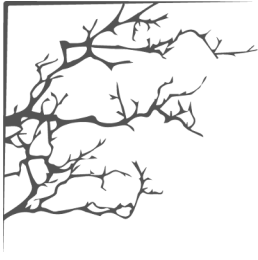
“Aren’t you glad to be back in our world?” I asked as we climbed out.

“I had a certain freedom in the underworld that I lack here,” he replied, then cut a look at our escorts without elaborating. I knew he was talking about being able to kill, maim and feed on our enemies. Now that we were home, the restrictions his boss had placed on him had returned.

“I can feel someone very powerful and magical somewhere above us,” Aurora said in a low voice.

“That’s Drake,” I said. “He’s the dragon shifter I mentioned.”

Her eyes widened and she seemed to be on the verge of fleeing. Then she braced herself and followed us into the elevator when the door opened. She slid her hand into mine and became glued to my side as it whisked us upwards. I felt bad for her for being in a new form in a new world where everything was strange and frightening. I needed a bit of comfort myself after our ordeal, so I didn’t tell her to let go.



CHAPTER FIFTY- FOUR



AURORA'S KNEES WERE practically knocking together when the elevator opened. The shifters didn't follow us into Drake's office. They took the elevator back down to the garage.

Lord Gilden stood in front of a window next to the French doors with his back to us. "I'm glad you made it back, safe and sound," he said as he turned around.

"We're relieved to be home, my lord," Ruen said. "It wasn't easy, but our mission was a success."

Aurora began to tremble when the dragon switched his attention to her. I squeezed her hand, silently telling her she wasn't in any danger. "I see you've brought someone back through the gate with you," he said in heavy disapproval. "I'm sure you have a reasonable explanation for it."

"This is Aurora," I said in introduction. "Aurora, this is Lord Drake Gilden. He's in charge of the supernatural community in Nexus."

"Hello, my lord," she said in a trembling voice.

He inclined his head in greeting, then switched his golden gaze to me expectantly. He wanted to know my reason for bringing her back with me and he wanted to hear it now.

“We ran into Aurora shortly after we entered the underworld,” I began. “She was being attacked by a pair of hungry dogs. I saved her from them and she helped us find the scroll.”

“She knows about the scroll?” Drake asked in a sharp tone.

“She led us straight to it,” Ruen told him. “We probably would have stumbled around for months without her guidance.”

“How exactly did you find the scroll?” he asked, belatedly gesturing for us to take a seat. He’d been expecting an extra guest, going by the third chair that had been placed in front of his desk. We all took a seat and Aurora glanced at me for guidance.

“Aurora can sense magic,” I explained. “She has a different form in the underworld.”

“What form might that be?”

“She’s a bird,” Ruen said. “She’s smaller than a peacock, but similar in coloring.” Aurora would have been drab shades of brown if she’d resembled a peahen.

“A bird isn’t your natural form, is it, Aurora?” Lord Gilde said, piercing her with his gaze. She trembled harder and shook her head, but clamped her lips shut.

“Do you want the scroll?” I asked to distract him.

“That can wait for a few moments,” he said, to my surprise. “Would you like some refreshments? I’m sure you’re all famished from your lengthy journey to another dimension.”

Ruen's fangs descended and he swallowed when he began to salivate. "If it isn't too much trouble, my lord," he said in a tone that was almost humble.

My rumbling stomach had to be the cause of Drake offering us refreshments. The constant noise was getting on his nerves. He called someone to bring some food and blood up to his office, turning away to face the French doors while he spoke.

"It's okay," I whispered to Aurora when her trembling didn't diminish. "I won't let anything bad happen to you."

"Do you promise?" she asked, looking at me beseechingly.

"I promise." I'd never had anyone relying on me like this before. It would be hard for her to adjust to living in our world. I'd help her out until she got settled. It would be cruel to abandon her when she needed a friend so badly.

My vow finally had her unclenching my hand and her trembling stopped. Drake spun his chair back around after he ended his phone call. He took in Aurora's new relaxed state and I knew he'd heard our conversation. "Food and drinks will be brought up shortly," he said. "Why don't you begin telling me about your mission? Did you meet with the overlord?"

"Yep," I replied. "He's dead, by the way."

"You killed him?" he asked, voice rising in shock.

"I tried to off him after he started chewing his way through my boob and gut, but a giant stepped in and tore his head off for me."

Lord Gilden stared at me with his mouth open, unsure whether to believe me or not. He looked at Ruen and the vampire nodded. “We were lucky the giant woke up when he did. None of us would have made it out of that cave alive if he’d remained in his sex coma.”

Drake put one hand over his face and held the other one up to silence us. We didn’t dare move until he heard the elevator door open. He gestured at his lackey to wheel a trolley laden with food over to us. “I need to make a phone call,” he said when the servant was gone. “I’ll be back shortly.”

Ruen barely waited for his boss to stand up before he snatched a thermos from the tray. Taking the lid off it, he inhaled the smell of blood. His fangs clanked against the metal when he put it to his lips and began to drink.

“Are we in trouble?” Aurora asked once the dragon lord had stepped through a door over to the left.

“Probably,” I said with a shrug, then picked up a plate full of sandwiches. “I don’t think he was happy to hear the overlord is dead.”

“It wasn’t our fault,” she said, taking the second plate from me when I handed it to her. “We were just defending ourselves.”

“This will probably cause some kind of diplomatic kerfuffle,” I figured. “They know someone came from our world to theirs. It’s possible they’ll think we deliberately assassinated their ruler.”

“I highly doubt that,” Ruen said, using a napkin to delicately wipe the blood from his lips. He’d chugged down the entire thermos in seconds. “Even the stupidest idiot could figure out what happened in that cave,” he went on. “They’ll be able to tell the giant was responsible for the overlord’s demise. Lord Gilden will come up with a plausible story to cover the reason why we were there.”

“We’re trade envoys,” I said ruefully around the sandwich I’d stuffed into my mouth.

Aurora tentatively took a bite of her food, then scarfed it down. “Everything tastes so good here,” she said when she’d finished her first sandwich.

“Wait until you try coffee,” I told her, then poured us both a cup. Adding cream and sugar, I handed her one of the cups.

Smelling it first, she took a cautious sip, then grinned. “I love this world. I never want to leave it.”

Now that I’d seen what life was like in the underworld, I appreciated my own dimension far more. I’d never take toilets for granted again. “Me neither,” I agreed, but suspected I wasn’t going to have a choice about that. Fate had picked me to be her champion and my job had only just begun.

Ruen drank the second thermos of blood at a more sedate pace. We finished our food and beverages, then quietly chatted until Drake returned. His expression was grim, but he didn’t tell us who he’d called. He took a seat behind his desk, then tented his hands together. “Tell me everything that happened,” he ordered.

I did most of the talking, with Ruen clarifying some details when it was necessary. Lord Gilden alternated from disbelief, to amusement and every emotion in between. He didn't interrupt us or ask any questions. He just took it all in, sipping a glass of whiskey from time to time.

I toyed with the whiskey he'd poured for me, only taking small sips every now and then. It took a couple of hours to fill him in completely. "As we already said, the giant that was guarding the fragment killed the overlord, then Aurora knocked the giant out with another cosmic orgasm," I said. "We ran for our lives and headed back to the gate. I pretended to be a dumb, hungry monster on my way back through the city. The soldiers let me take all the food I could carry in exchange for me not eating them."

Drake's lips twitched and he almost smiled, then indicated for me to go on.

"It took two nights of walking and four nights of sprinting before we reached the gate. A few guards were standing in my way, but I barged through them. We jumped through the gate and made it back here intact."

Heaving a small, enigmatic sigh, the dragon leaned forward. "May I have the scroll?" he asked.

"Sure. You can have your letter back, too, since we didn't end up using it," I replied and fished around inside my backpack.

Drake gingerly reached for the rolled-up sheet of parchment that glowed faintly. It was almost like he expected it to explode in his hands. The glow intensified when he

touched it, then died down again. Aurora stiffened slightly and glanced at me as if she wanted to say something. I shook my head warningly. Whatever she had to say could wait until we were alone.

“Can you read it, Lord Gilden?” Ruen asked when Drake’s eyes moved across the red ink.

“Of course,” he replied. “I’m a dragon, after all.”

“So?” I asked in confusion as I placed the unopened letter on his desk.

“Dragons can understand all spells. Even ones that are written in foreign languages,” he explained.

“What does it say?”

Rolling it back up, he tucked it into an inner pocket of his jacket. “It would be safer for us all if you don’t know,” he replied, then checked his watch. “Dawn will arrive soon. I’m sure you all need to rest.”

“I could sleep for a week,” Ruen muttered.

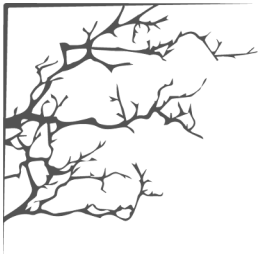
“Me, too,” I agreed and we all stood up.

“Where will Aurora be staying?” Drake asked in a tone that was a little too casual.

“With me, for now,” I decided, not liking the way he was looking at her. His eyes were glittering as if she was treasure he coveted. Aurora nodded and crowded in close to me, taking my hand again.

“I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again soon,” Lord Gilden said with his eyes locked on my new friend. It was a relief to step

back into the elevator and for the door to slide shut.



CHAPTER FIFTY- FIVE



RUEN'S CAR WAS STILL parked at my apartment. The shifters drove us to my building and dropped us off. "I guess I'll see you when the next job comes up," I said as the vampire trudged over to his ride.

"Or when Lord Gilden sends us to the next realm of the underworld," he said dourly.

Aurora lifted her hand to wave at him. He almost smiled, then nodded and climbed into his car. "Is he always this sad in your realm?" she asked when he drove out of the lot. He was keen to return to his apartment in the silver tower before the sun rose.

"You think he's sad?" I asked, tugging on her hand to get her to follow me inside. She still hadn't let go of me and was showing no signs of doing so. "I just thought he was a bit of a douchebag."

"He was very different in the underworld," she pointed out. "At least, he was after he'd fed."

"Drake doesn't let Ruen feed very often," I whispered, just in case any of the beings in my building were awake. Most of them were home, sleeping after a long night of working.

"Why not?" she whispered back.

I shrugged, then pushed the call button for the elevator. “After watching him go nuts and murder so many guards and slaughter so many animals, I’m starting to think he might be mentally unstable.”

“I’ve never met a vampire from your world before, so I have nothing to compare him to,” Aurora said. “The ones from the underworld aren’t as morose as he is.”

“I’ve found the hungry ones are always miserable,” I said, then grimaced at the memory of four leeches begging to lick blood off me. “They’ll do anything for blood, no matter how degrading it is.”

She shuddered as if I’d triggered a horrible memory. “I’ve met many beings who will do anything for the pleasure I can give them. They would sell their souls just for a taste of it.”

“We really need to talk,” I said as the elevator carried us to my floor. “But not here. The walls have ears.”

She looked around in fear. “Where? I don’t see any.”

“It’s just an expression,” I said, trying not to laugh. “It means there are a lot of people around who might overhear us. Their hearing can be really sharp.”

“Oh,” she said and her cheeks darkened a bit in embarrassment. “I have a lot to learn.”

“I’ll teach you everything you need to know,” I assured her, leading her to the door at the end of the hallway. “What did you want to say when Drake took the scroll from me?” I asked. My keys had survived the trip to and from the underworld, thankfully.

“The magic flared as soon as he touched it,” she replied. “It was almost like it recognized his touch.”

“He can use magic, so maybe it was just reacting to his ability,” I said as I pushed the door open. My apartment was dusty and slightly musty from being unoccupied for a couple of weeks. The first thing I did was to take my phone off its charger. “You can take a shower if you like,” I told my guest. There was no need to show her around. She could see the entire apartment at a glance.

“What’s a shower?” she queried.

I put off the call I needed to make long enough to grab her a towel, a fresh t-shirt and to show her how to use the shower. I instructed her on how much shampoo and conditioner to use and gave her a washcloth and bodywash.

Closing the bathroom door to give her some privacy, I called my mom. She answered straight away. “Saige?” she asked, voice trembling with emotion. “Is that you?”

“It’s me, mom,” I replied, feeling a bit choked up myself. “I just got back home.”

“Obviously,” she said and I could practically hear her eyes rolling. “When can you come around? I want to hear everything in person.”

“Aurora and I are beat,” I replied. “We need to sleep for a few hours. I’ll text you before we leave, so you’ll know when to expect us.”

“Who’s Aurora?” she asked suspiciously.

“She’s a new friend I made on my mission.” I couldn’t say more with my neighbors able to overhear every word I said. “Do you still have any of my clothes left from when I was a teenager?” I asked to change the subject.

“No. Why?”

“Aurora needs clothes and they might fit her.”

“What size is she?” mom asked.

“Tiny. She’s about the size of a thirteen-year-old kid.”

“I’ll see what I can rustle up,” she promised. “Get some sleep and I’ll see you when you get here. I’m glad you’re home, Lil Bish.”

“Me, too,” I said, suppressing my tears of relief that we’d made it back. We hung up and I made a cup of coffee. I didn’t have any fresh cream in my fridge, so I drank it black.

Aurora finally turned the shower off and emerged a few minutes later wearing the clean t-shirt. It was ridiculously big on her and exposed a bony shoulder and half of her upper chest. “I like showers,” she said with a sleepy grin. “Can I go to sleep now?”

“Sure,” I replied. “You should be able to fit on the couch.” I gestured at the couch and she looked at it doubtfully. “I’m going to take a shower now,” I said. “I’ll try to be quiet so I don’t wake you up.”

I took a sleeping shirt into the bathroom, while Aurora gingerly sat on the couch to test it out. With the memory of being covered in semen, I scrubbed myself for longer than was necessary. My purple hair was squeaky clean when I dried

myself and blow dried my hair. I didn't look any different when I checked my reflection. There were no signs that I'd morphed into a gigantic monster. "Mom is going to freak out when I tell her what we are," I murmured.

Dumping my ruined clothes in the trash, I climbed into bed and crashed. It felt like mere minutes had passed before I began dreaming. Drake was in bed beside me, kissing my neck. I turned my head and our mouths met. His tongue sought entrance and I opened for him. He rolled on top of me and I felt his large erection pressing into my stomach.

"I've been waiting for this since the moment we met, Drake," I whispered. His golden eyes met mine, then he thrust into me. The bed shuddered and I gasped in pleasure. This was what I'd been searching for in my infrequent encounters with the opposite sex. He was the only man who could give me what I craved.

Lord Gilden nuzzled my breasts as his hips slammed into me, pushing himself in deeper and deeper. I clutched him with my legs, pulling him to me as pleasure built up. His mouth was hot when he took my nipple between his lips. Smoke issued from his nostrils, which meant he was fighting to stay in control. He nipped me with his teeth and my hips bucked. Then I climaxed hard enough for him to have to hold onto me so I didn't throw him off the bed. He kept hammering into me, making me orgasm over and over until he reached his own climax.

I almost woke up from my body shuddering in reaction to my orgasm. Then sleep dragged me back down again and

straight into another fantasy of being naked with the dragon.

A few hours later, I woke up and found I wasn't alone. Aurora's arm was draped over me, resting on my boobs. I felt pleasantly wrung out, as if all the orgasms I'd had in my sleep had been real. I shifted her arm off me and rolled out of bed, waking her up in the process.

"Did you sleep well?" Aurora asked me slyly.

"Like the dead," I mumbled, cheeks heating at all the erotic fantasies I'd had.

"Does Lord Gilden know you're in love with him?" she asked.

I gaped at her, then shook my head. "I'm not in love with him!"

"Then why did you dream about him for the past five hours?"

"How do you know what I was dreaming about? And why were you in bed with me?" My tone was suspicious.

"It's one of my talents," she said mysteriously. "And the couch was lumpy. Your bed is big enough for two, so I didn't think you'd mind if we shared it."

"Did you make me have those dreams?" I asked uneasily.

Yawning, she sat up and stretched. "I didn't create them," she said, blue and green hair sticking out everywhere. "I just enhanced them."

"Deliberately?"

“No. Simply touching someone can influence their needs and desires when my power leaks out.”

We were talking quietly, but this still wasn't a conversation I wanted to have in my apartment. “We'll talk about it later,” I said when my stomach rumbled. “I'm starving and we need to visit my mom.”

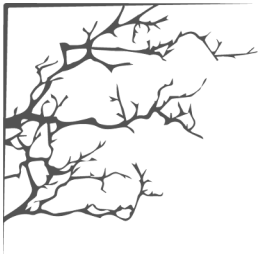
She nodded, then slid off the bed and ambled into the bathroom. I got dressed while she was freshening up. I found an old skirt that was too small for me and used a belt to tie it around her tiny waist when she was done. I had to punch a new hole in the belt and almost wrap it around her twice.

“How do I look?” she asked, holding her arms out wide.

“Like a kid dressed up in her mom's clothes,” I said with a smirk. “It'll have to do for now. Let's get going.” I sent a quick message to my mother that we were on our way.

“Does your mom have coffee?”

“She's got all kinds of stuff I think you'll like,” I replied, making her grin happily.



CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX



AURORA STOPPED DEAD when I led her outside to my bright orange, dented hatchback. “What is *that*?” she asked with a frown.

“It’s my car,” I said defensively.

“What happened to it?”

“Hail,” I explained.

“Did hail turn it that hideous color?”

“No. Hail caused the dents. The car manufacturer painted it orange.”

“But why?” she asked in true bewilderment that anyone would deliberately choose to paint it that color.

“They probably thought it would be popular back when they made it,” I said with a shrug and unlocked the doors. She reluctantly climbed into the passenger seat, then copied me when I buckled myself in.

I drove to my mom’s house, answering all of the questions Aurora came up with on the way. She wanted to know all about Nexus and the people and creatures who lived here. We didn’t need to worry about being overheard now, since we were constantly on the move. I was going to have to find somewhere private to have an in-depth discussion about exactly who and what she was.

Mom opened the door when she heard me pull up. Aurora grinned and waved and mom waved back. “You look just like her,” she told me. Mom had yellow and green hair, didn’t have any tats and was heftier than I was, but there was a definite resemblance between us.

Getting out, I locked the car, then strode up the path. My pace quickened until I was almost jogging. Mom opened her arms and I threw myself at her. She hugged me tightly, stroking my hair in relief that I was back. We didn’t need to voice our feelings. We both knew how glad we were that I was home.

“Hi,” my new friend said brightly when I stepped back. “I’m Aurora.”

“I’m Pearl, Saige’s mom.” My mother offered Aurora her hand and they shook politely. “Come in,” mom invited us.

We followed her to the dining room to find she’d made us lunch. “I love you, mom,” I said with great sincerity as I sank down onto my usual chair.

“I love you, too, Pearl,” Aurora said fervently, eyeing the bounty that lay before us. She took a seat beside me rather than across the table where her plate full of food waited.

Mom quirked an eyebrow and I gave her a small shrug. I reached for the second plate and slid it over to Aurora. Mom had made a pot of coffee, since she didn’t know how my new friend took it. I poured cups for us all, then we began to feast.

“What can you tell me about your mission?” mom asked.

I could sense some shifters nearby and cast a warning look towards the door. “Not much,” I replied. “We found the item we were looking for, but there were complications along the way.”

“I helped Saige and Ruen,” Aurora said proudly. “They saved me when I had a broken wing.”

“Wing?” mom asked in confusion.

“How’s your arm?” I asked, realizing she’d shown no signs of pain since coming through the gate.

“Transforming into this body seems to have healed me completely,” she replied, moving her left arm up and down with ease.

Mom had fought and killed hundreds of creatures from the underworld, but they’d mostly been in human form. She hadn’t seen them in their true forms, because she’d never been to their realms. “I have something to tell you and you need to brace yourself for it,” I whispered.

Mom put her half-finished sandwich down. “What is it?” she asked, tensing up to take the blow.

“We’re ogres,” I said.

Her lips quirked upwards, thinking I was joking. Then Aurora nodded to back me up. “Saige was an ogress in the underworld,” she whispered. “She was amazing! You should have seen her fighting the overlord and his servants!”

I nudged her in the side, reminding her we needed to keep this a secret. She gave me a chastened look and resumed eating.

“You saw one of the overlords?” mom asked in a cross between amazement and horror.

“Yeah. He’s dead, but we didn’t kill him. I only killed his henchmen.”

Sitting back in her chair, my mother was lost for words. “Does Lord Gilden know about this?”

“He knows everything,” I confirmed with a grimace.

“Not quite,” Aurora muttered and hunched her shoulders.

“Will anyone come looking for you for retribution?” mom asked in concern.

“They don’t know exactly who came through the gate, since Ruen and I changed so drastically,” I replied. “Even our scents changed, so it would be hard for them to track us down.”

She was relieved to hear that, but her worry didn’t diminish by much. “Why did you have wings in the underworld?” she asked.

Aurora swallowed her food before responding. “Because I was a bird. These sandwiches are excellent. Can I have more coffee?” She’d gulped her drink down so fast that she probably hadn’t registered the taste.

Mom poured her another cup, trying to digest our story. In her position, I’d want to know exactly what the hell my only child had been up to as well. Struggling with my head and my heart, my heart won. “We’ll tell you everything, but you have to keep it to yourself,” I whispered.

“Let’s go to the basement when we’ve finished eating,” she suggested. “It’s more private down there.”

Noises were muffled in the basement, which was one of the reasons why I’d moved my bedroom down there as a teen. “Good idea,” I replied, then we dug into our food.

Taking a fresh pot of coffee downstairs when our meals were finished, we sat on my bed and an old armchair I’d used for gaming.

“If anyone else had told me this story, I’d kick them out of my house,” mom said when we were done. “What *are* you?” she asked Aurora.

“She can’t talk about it,” I said on her behalf.

My new houseguest nodded to back me up. “People are looking for me. The less you know about me, the safer we’ll all be.” Her tone was so convincing that I almost believed her myself.

“You gave the scroll fragment to Drake?” mom asked.

“Yeah. He looked at it like it was a gigantic bar of gold,” I said in amusement. “He wasn’t happy when we told him the overlord is dead.”

“It’ll cause an upheaval in the underworld,” mom predicted. “They’ll need to find a replacement for him. At least they won’t be able to open the axis-gate now that Lord Gilden has one of the fragments,” mom said in satisfaction. “My baby girl thwarted their plan to invade our world.”

The pride in her tone was almost enough to make me blush. “I guess my work as the champion of our world is

done,” I said in relief. I’d thought I would have to retrieve all of the fragments, but she’d made a good point. The overlords needed the scroll to be intact to cast the spell. Even depriving them of one fragment was enough to ruin their scheme. The weight that had been resting on my shoulders lifted a little. I straightened up, feeling much better without the responsibility bearing down on me.

“By the way, I asked one of my neighbors if her daughter had any spare clothes I could buy from her,” mom said and heaved herself to her feet. “She was happy to give me some clothes her daughter no longer wears. They’re clean and in good condition.”

We headed upstairs to the living room where a basket of clothes sat on the floor next to the couch. I picked it up after giving them a cursory glance. “These are for you, Aurora,” I told her.

Her eyes welled with tears. “You’re giving me clothing, for free?” she asked, unable to believe her good fortune.

“My neighbor was going to give them to charity,” mom explained. Now that she knew Aurora didn’t come from our world, she wasn’t as confused by her strangeness.

“Thank you!” Aurora said and hugged my mom. She hugged me next, grabbing me from behind, since my arms were full.

“We should get going,” I suggested. “We need to shop for food along the way. It’ll be dark in a couple of hours and a job might come up.”

“Be careful what you say when you’re in your apartment,” mom warned us.

“We will,” I said dutifully as she led us to the door. “Thanks for everything,” I said, encompassing our entire visit with her. She nodded, then gave me a quick hug before I stepped outside. I placed the basket on the back seat, then we climbed into my car and drove away.

“I like your mom,” Aurora said. “She’s a good person.” She hadn’t met enough earthlings to make that distinction yet. Then again, she came from the underworld, where everyone was supposed to be evil. I hadn’t gotten that impression from some of the soldiers we’d met. They’d just seemed like normal people trying to survive in a harsh world to me.

“She’s pretty awesome,” I agreed, keeping the rest of my thoughts to myself.



CHAPTER FIFTY- SEVEN



I STOPPED AT A GROCERY store on my way home to stock up on supplies. Aurora drew stares with her beauty and her green and blue hair. So did I, since my tats and purple hair tended to stand out. She clung to my side as I pushed a cart around, tossing food and other items into it. I needed toothpaste, a toothbrush and a hairbrush to replace the ones I'd lost. Aurora needed stuff as well, so I tossed items for her into the cart. For now, her clothes would have to be stored in my suitcases until she found her own place to stay.

“Why are they staring at us?” Aurora whispered.

We were surrounded by humans and we were the only supernatural beings in the place. “We don't look like them and humans get nervous whenever they see something they think is strange,” I explained quietly. “They probably think we're gay, since you're practically plastered to my side. A lot of people aren't comfortable seeing gay people touching each other in public.”

“Why is that a problem for them?” she asked with a frown.

“For lots of reasons. I'll tell you about it later.” There was too much to go over to explain it in a grocery store.

It was a relief to climb into my car once the groceries were packed into the back. I was used to being stared at, but it still grated on my nerves after a while.

Aurora carried the basket of clothing and I carried the groceries when we reached my apartment building. She immediately stripped naked when we were inside and began trying on the clothes. Mom had gone above and beyond and had gone out to buy underwear for Aurora. They still had their tags on them and I tore them off for my friend.

She modeled the clothing for me while I put the groceries away. “I love them!” she exclaimed, wearing a hot pink pair of jeggings beneath a white t-shirt with a sparkly unicorn on her chest. She sat down to pull on a pair of barely worn sneakers, then skipped over to my full-length mirror to check herself out.

I found I was grinning, glad to see her happy after her ordeal in the underworld. “They look good on you,” I complimented her. She had shapely legs and a tiny butt that men would probably drool over. It was hard to believe she was a bird in the dimension where I’d found her.

Aurora was about to say something else, but the words died on her lips when we both sensed something at the same time. “Lord Gilden is here,” she whispered. “I can feel his magic.”

I’d sensed his power as he’d pulled into the parking lot. He’d probably let it leak out on purpose to warn us of his arrival. I hurried over to my window and peered outside to see a sleek black sports car in the lot. Drake climbed out, then looked directly into my eyes. “He’s here to see me,” I figured. His gaze switched to Aurora when she squirmed in beside me. “Or you,” I amended with a frown.

The dragon lord shut his door, locked the car, then headed for the entrance. He was wearing another black tux with a white shirt and a black bowtie. Either he was coming back from a function, or he intended to go to one after his visit with us.

I made fresh coffee and had three mugs ready by the time a knock sounded at the door. Aurora looked at me in dread, but I couldn't ignore him. He wouldn't leave until he'd gotten what he'd come here for, so I opened the door. "Lord Gilde," I said with a big, fake smile. "What a surprise."

"Ms. Sterling," he said in polite greeting, eyes searching for Aurora and finding her sitting on the couch. She'd drawn her knees up and was huddled against the armrest, trying to make herself as small and inconspicuous as possible. "May I come in?" he asked.

He wasn't a vampire and he didn't need a formal invitation. He was just being polite. "Sure," I said and stepped aside to let him in. "I just made coffee, if you want some."

"That would be lovely, thank you," he said, taking in my apartment at a glance. Unlike Ruen, he didn't make any disparaging remarks about it. "How are you, Aurora?" he asked, making her hunch down even more.

"I'm well, thank you, my lord," she said in a small voice.

I'd already placed three mugs of coffee on the coffee table and took the middle seat before my guest could. I'd seen how he preferred his coffee during our infrequent meetings over the past few months.

Drake sank down beside me, dominating the room with his mere presence. “I’m sure you’re both wondering why I’m here,” he said.

“I’m going to hazard a guess that it has something to do with Aurora,” I said wryly, since he could barely keep his eyes off her.

“I have questions,” he said, then lifted his hand and waved it in a circular motion.

“What did you just do?” I asked when the hair on my arms and nape of my neck stood up.

“He cast a muting spell on the apartment,” Aurora told me.

“We can now talk in private,” the dragon said. “No one will be able to overhear our conversation.”

“Is it permanent?” I asked with a frown.

“Only if you wish for it to be. I can leave it in place when I leave, or dispel it.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, unsure whether it would be a good thing or a bad thing to have in place. “Before you ask us your questions, there’s something I need to know.”

“What’s that?” he enquired, shifting his gaze to me.

“Is Ruen a complete and utter psychopath?”

He blinked at my blunt question, then nodded. “Yes, he is.”

“I knew it!” I hissed in satisfaction at being right. “Are you controlling him with a spell?”

He nodded. "It was the only way to ensure he wouldn't slaughter his way through the population of Nexus."

"Why did you turn him into your minion if he's so unstable?"

He picked up his coffee, took a sip and nodded in approval before replying. "Three centuries ago, I heard a vampire was raging through a small country in Europe," he said to begin his tale. "He decimated two villages in a matter of several nights. He was drawing too much attention to our kind, so I went in search of him." By our kind, he meant supernatural beings in general, rather than vampires.

"Why did he kill so many people if he only needs to drink a small amount of blood?" Aurora asked.

"He'd only recently been turned when his master was killed by a mob of humans," Drake explained. "He went mad from his loss and was beyond reason when I cornered him in a house. He'd just finished mauling a family to death when I arrived. He was naked and covered in their blood, as if he'd rolled in it like a dog rolling in a rotting carcass."

My upper lip lifted at that image. "I can totally see him doing that," I murmured, then gestured for him to go on.

"I cast a spell that allowed Ruen's mind to become free from torment for a short time," he went on. "I asked him if this was how he wished to live. He was horrified when he saw what he'd done and begged me to end his misery. I promised I would ensure he wouldn't lose his mind again, as long as he agreed to become my servant. He agreed to my terms and we sealed the deal with blood and magic."

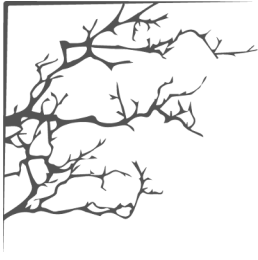
“You have absolute control over him, don’t you?” I asked. “That’s how you could release him from his restrictions not to kill others when we were in the underworld.”

“From what you told me, Ruen was able to retain his sanity during your mission,” he reminded me, disliking my judgmental tone. “Is that not better than being a rabid beast, killing for the sheer pleasure of it?”

“He did seem happy for once,” I admitted. “But only when he was slaughtering our foes.”

“As has been the case for the past three hundred years,” he said in satisfaction that I’d confirmed his story myself. “Have I answered your questions adequately?” His tone was courteous, but I sensed his impatience. He hadn’t come here to answer questions, but to ask them.

“You told me what I wanted to know,” I replied as Aurora quaked beside me. She was about to be grilled by the dragon and neither of us were looking forward to it.



CHAPTER FIFTY- EIGHT



LORD GILDEN PINNED Aurora with his golden stare. “I want to know exactly who and what you are,” he demanded. He didn’t use magic to compel her, but she shrank away from him anyway.

I put a protective hand on her arm and she clutched it like it was a lifeline. “Why don’t you tell us your story in your own time?” I suggested, glaring at the shifter in annoyance. He heaved a small sigh, then sat back against the couch in capitulation, cradling his mug of coffee in one hand.

“As you’ve probably guessed, I wasn’t born a bird,” Aurora began. “I come from the ninth realm of the underworld. Due to my mixed heritage, I have talents that are highly coveted.”

Drake opened his mouth to ask a question and I surreptitiously elbowed him in the side. He grunted at the impact and closed his mouth. Aurora was already nervous about telling us her tale. She didn’t need any interruptions to ruin her concentration.

“A powerful being learned about my talents and captured me,” she went on, shivering at the memory. “When I refused to allow him to use me for his own gain, he had a magic user curse me. She turned me into a bird and he imprisoned me in a

cage. He beat and starved me until I had no choice but to comply with his wishes.”

“If I ever meet this douchebag, I’ll kill him for you,” I offered, furious that she’d been so badly mistreated.

“Do you promise?” she asked, huge green eyes glittering with tears.

“Yeah,” I replied and I meant it. “How long did he hold you captive?”

“I lost track of time,” she said. “Several centuries, I think. I was only able to escape after he threw my cage across the room in one of his rages. The hinges broke and I waited for him to storm off before I fled. I sensed a gate to another realm and flew to it before I could be discovered. Guards tried to stop me, but they were too slow. I passed through the gate and kept going until I couldn’t fly anymore. I broke my wing when the dogs chased after me. I thought they were going to eat me, but you came along and saved my life.” She gave me a tearful smile of gratitude.

“You made it all the way to the first realm,” I said in amazement. “You must be really scared of this guy.”

“He’s a monster,” she said with a shudder.

Drake leaned forward to speak, keeping his tone even rather than commanding this time. Aurora had run from a domineering, dangerous man and she was terrified of anyone similar to him. “You’re able to induce an orgasm that is strong enough to knock powerful creatures out after they climax. What other talents do you possess?”

She took a long drink of coffee to procrastinate before replying. “I can make people experience their greatest sexual fantasies as if they’re real,” she said reluctantly. “I can also use sex as a weapon to punish my former master’s enemies.”

“You said you have a mixed heritage,” I recalled. “What sort of being are you?”

“She’s a sex demon,” Lord Gilden said before she could respond.

I went rigid with shock. “You’re a *demon*?” I asked in horror. She didn’t smell like the other hell spawn I’d met. Her scent was rather pleasant and unique.

“I’m half demon,” she admitted. “I’m not evil, though,” she hastened to reassure me.

“I thought all demons were malevolent.”

“Most tend to be evil, but some resist their darker urges,” Drake said. “Her father must have mated with a succubus to create her.”

Aurora nodded unhappily. “My kind are rare and usually die before we can be born. I have particularly strong talents, which is why I was imprisoned. I finally feel safe now that Saige has promised to be my protector and has claimed me as her own.”

She gave me a worshipful smile and Drake tensed beside me. “What do you mean by that?” I asked. “You don’t belong to me. I don’t own you.”

“Someone has to own me,” she said as if it was obvious. “If you don’t uphold your promise to protect me, someone else

will imprison me and use me again.”

“I’m happy to be your friend and give you a place to stay for a while, but I’m not sure I’m comfortable with owning you,” I said uneasily. Her face fell and her shoulders slumped as my denial.

“I’d like to see a demonstration of your power,” the weredragon said, forming it as a request rather than a command.

“That’s a really bad idea,” I warned him. “Your trousers will get messy and it looks like you’re going to a swanky party tonight.”

“I came here from the function,” he said, dismissing my concerns. “Will you show me what you can do?” he asked in a charming tone.

Despondent from my rejection, Aurora nodded dejectedly. “We should move away from the couch,” she suggested and stood up.

I rose with them and followed them to the area behind the couch. Drake’s eyes were glittering again and I suddenly got a bad feeling about this. Aurora took his hand and brought it to her mouth. “Wait!” I said and reached out with lightening reflexes just as she kissed him. Her lips brushed against my fingers just as they connected with Lord Gilden’s knuckles. I heard her gasp in trepidation, then I was drawn into a fantasy.

I was naked and lying face down on a gigantic bed that was strewn with red rose petals. The sheets were red satin and felt cool and smooth beneath my skin. Strong hands massaged

my back, kneading out the knots. They moved down to my butt and grasped hold of my cheeks. “I love your derrière,” a familiar sexy voice said.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw a very naked and extremely aroused Drake kneeling on the bed behind me. “You do?” I asked in a sultry tone.

“Almost as much as I love your breasts,” he added with a wicked smile. “You’re not like the waifish women who throw themselves at me in the hopes of catching my eye. You have luscious curves a man can sink into and become lost in.”

To prove it, he leaned forward and slid his hands beneath me to grasp hold of my breasts. He leaned down until he lay against my body, pressing me into the mattress. I moaned in lust as he rubbed his shaft against me. “Don’t torture me, Drake,” I begged. “Put me out of my misery and take me!”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said with masculine satisfaction, then slid into my depths.

Larger than any man I’d been with before, he filled more than just my body. He filled the void I’d always felt inside. I’d unconsciously been searching for the one man who could give me what I wanted and needed. Now that he was inside me, I instinctively knew he was the one for me.

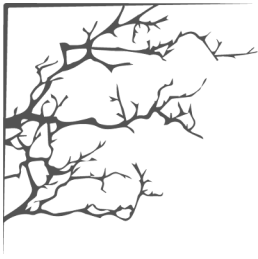
Drawing back, he plunged into me again and we both groaned at the sensation of flesh on flesh. He set a rhythm that quickly built us both towards a precipice. The dream changed just before we could climax.

No longer lying on a bed, we were falling through the sky. I flared my wings to halt my fall, stunned to find I was a silver dragon. Drake's wing brushed against me and his golden scales contrasted with mine perfectly. He was even more magnificent in this form and my desire for him grew. He was fully erect and the sight of his organ made me throb with lust. I rolled onto my back, lowering my tail to offer him access to my body.

Fire burst from his mouth in excitement, then he wrapped his long tail around me. He beat his wings with powerful strokes to carry us high into the air. I surrendered control to him, trusting him not to let us fall to our deaths. It grew colder as he climbed so high that we could barely breathe. Then he plunged his organ into me, making me scream in pleasure. Fire burst from my mouth, bathing the sky in red light as we mated while falling.

Drake held me tightly with his tail, organ filling me up and giving me pleasure like I'd never felt before. Helpless against the orgasm that built inside me, I could only shriek my ecstasy to the sky as I climaxed.

Lord Gilden roared in triumph when he came, then flared his wings to break our fall. He landed on the ground and gently placed me on the soft grass, nuzzling my neck in satisfaction and affection.



CHAPTER FIFTY- NINE



AURORA DROPPED OUR hands and staggered back a step, snapping us out of the fantasy. “I’ve never seen two fantasies become entwined like that before,” she gasped. “It shouldn’t have been possible.”

Both Drake and I were on our knees, still reeling from the most powerful orgasms we’d ever had. It made my other sex fantasies feel like foreplay in comparison.

“Can you do that every time?” the dragon shifter asked in a hoarse voice. Now that I’d seen him in his true form, I felt like an idiot for not putting it together sooner. His name literally meant golden dragon, even if it was around the wrong way. Drake was an ancient name for dragons that had been used in Europe long ago, according to my mom.

“Of course,” Aurora said. “There’s no limit to the number of times I can induce orgasms. I can make you come over and over all night long if you wanted me to.”

I could see him coming out of his daze and calculating her value and spoke before he could. “I claim you!” I blurted. “You’re mine and you belong to me!”

“Do you mean it?” Aurora asked, clapping her hands in relief and delight. “I’m so happy!” she said, then she threw herself at me. I’d just staggered to my feet and barely managed

to stop myself from falling down again when she collided with me.

Lord Gilden regained his footing, giving me a disapproving frown. It was a bad idea to make an enemy of someone as powerful as he was. He watched us both while Aurora cried with happiness, then his frown smoothed out. “Thank you for the demonstration, Aurora,” he said, pretending he hadn’t just ejaculated in his trousers.

“My job is done now, right?” I asked as he headed for the door.

“Which job might that be?” he paused to ask.

“Retrieving the scroll fragments,” I said. “I found the first one, so now the overlords can’t use it to open the axis-gate and invade our world.”

He shook his head regretfully. “I’m afraid your task has only just begun, Ms. Sterling. We can’t allow such a powerful item to remain in the underworld. The fragments need to be found and brought to me for safekeeping.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that,” I said unhappily as the full weight of responsibility returned to burden my shoulders.

“Do you want me to dispel the enchantment?” he asked after opening the door.

Aurora and I would be able to talk without fear of being overheard if it remained in place. “Leave it,” I requested as I crossed to him.

“I’m sure Ruen will be in contact with you with your next mission soon,” he said, then left. There was no mention of payment for the monumental task Ruen, Aurora and I had accomplished. I guessed saving our world from an apocalypse would be our only reward.

I closed the door rather than watching him stroll down the hall to the elevator like I wanted to. Aurora was staring at me with shining eyes and it wasn’t from tears. She looked like she was about to burst with joy. “Are you really that happy that I’ve claimed you?” I asked, feeling weary from the epic orgasm that had taken me to my knees.

“I’m happy for *you*, Saige,” she said, then lurched forward to hug me again. I almost shoved her away out of reflex, just in case she accidentally sent me into another sex fantasy.

“Why are you happy for me?” I asked in confusion. I’d just been told I’d have to enter eight more realms of the underworld, which could result in my horrible death or dismemberment. As far as I was concerned, I didn’t have much to be glad about.

“You’ve found your true mate!” she exclaimed.

“What mate? What are you talking about?”

She took a step back, but kept hold of my hand. After having wings for so long, she was probably ecstatic to have fingers again. “Like I said, I’ve never seen two fantasies become linked before.”

“So?”

“One partner is always dominant when I link them together,” she explained. “They enact their greatest fantasy on the other person and they just have to submit to it.”

“Why was our fantasy different?”

“Because you’re equals,” she said. “You were meant for each other. That’s why you both orgasmed so hard and at exactly the same time.”

I looked at her like she was crazy. “I thought everyone came in their fantasies.”

Drake couldn’t be my perfect mate, because dragons only ever mated with their own kind. He might have sex with other species, but he would never procreate with any other type of being. I’d only been a dragon in the vision we’d shared because that was his ultimate fantasy.

She shook her head in denial. “That only happens in solo fantasies. When I connect beings together, the dominant person is always in charge. They’re the only one who gets to orgasm.”

“I can’t possibly be Lord Gilden’s equal,” I pointed out, heading over to the kitchen with her still holding my hand and following beside me. “He’s a dragon shifter and I’m an ogre. At least, I am in the underworld.”

“Are you?” she asked shrewdly.

“What do you mean? You saw me yourself. I was big, green-gray and ugly, just like the other ogres we met.” Once again, I was mystified by her. Aurora was the most enigmatic person I’d ever met, barring Drake.

“You’ve only been to one realm of the underworld so far,” she mused. “Maybe things will be different in the next one we visit.”

“We?” I asked as I prepared more coffee for us both.

“I’ll be going with you, of course,” she said with a smirk. “How will you find the scroll fragments without me?” Some of the burden that I would be going alone lifted from me. “Ruen will no doubt be coming as well,” she added, which tarnished some of my joy.

“Oh, goodie,” I said drolly, clapping my hands and rolling my eyes. “We’ll get to see him turn into a psycho eight more times, if we manage to survive long enough to make it all the way to the ninth realm.”

She snickered and poured cream and sugar into our mugs. “He’s funny when he’s happy,” she said.

“The only time he’s ever happy is after he’s murdered something,” I pointed out.

“At least he gets to experience some joy,” she said with a shrug. “Some people never get to know what happiness feels like.”

“What did you mean when you said maybe things will be different for me in the next realm?” I asked as we took a seat on the couch again.

She cut a look at me as if she was reluctant to tell me. “I can sense magic,” she said.

“Yeah. So?”

“I can sense magic in *you*.”

I looked at her in fresh confusion. “Ogres aren’t magical. We’re just huge, strong and dumb.”

“Didn’t you say your ancestors had sex with all different types of beings from the underworld?” I nodded and she made a gesture as if I’d made her point. “You have lots of different monsters mixed in your genes. Ogres aren’t magical, so you have something else inside you that is.”

Her logic couldn’t be denied, but I still wasn’t convinced. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see what happens when Drake sends us to the next realm,” I figured.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing at the machine sitting on my coffee table, just noticing it for the first time.

“That is the most magical device in all of existence,” I told her and her eyes widened in delight. “It can take you to worlds where you can kill hordes of zombies, become whatever type of being you want and save countless people from doom.”

“I can’t sense any magic in it,” she said, still willing to believe me.

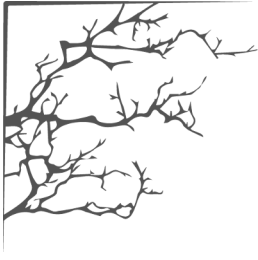
“It’s a gaming console,” I said and pointed at the videogames on my shelves. “Each disk has a different game on it. I’ve played them all dozens of times and I never grow tired of them.”

“Will you teach me how to play them?” she asked.

My affection for her grew at her request. “Aurora, by the time I’m done with you, you’ll be an expert gamer,” I declared.

She clapped in glee and anticipation as I fired up my TV and gaming console. Not only had I gained a friend, I now had someone to share my love of gaming with. Together, we could defeat our foes both electronically and in the underworld. Ruen would be our vampiric sidekick and we would carve our way through the nine realms to complete the quest the dragon had sent us on.

“I’m starting to feel like I’m actually living in a game,” I muttered, unsure whether to be happy about it, or to curse Fate for giving me such an impossible and dangerous task.



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