

J.A. STOWE



THE
ENCHANTER'S
BLOOD

ARSYN MORGAN BOOK ONE

The Enchanter's Blood

Arsyn Morgan Book 1

J.A. Stowe

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*For all who prefer daydreams.
May you get a little lost.*

The Four Worlds

Earth

Home to the humans, hunters and demons.

Porada

Home to the druids and elementals.

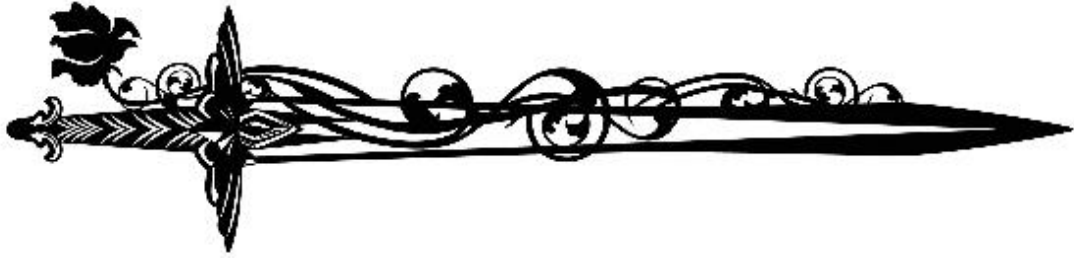
Draqaar

Home to the daeva.

Eranor

Home to the bennu.

One



“THIS WAY, SYN,” Em said, as we walked down the hallway of the old apartment building. The planks of the worn wooden floor creaked under my boots and yellow lights flickered on the peeling walls.

I scratched at the scarf covering my head and pulled my hood back up. These disguises were getting irritating. Em never seemed to complain, though. I always thought she secretly liked the anonymity.

“Can this guy even afford us? This place is a dump.” I kicked at a splinter poking out of the old wooden floor.

“Sabrina wrote that he seemed desperate. Something about ‘he’d probably offer his firstborn for our help.’” Em stopped suddenly and grabbed my arm, pulling me to a door labeled 265.

She cocked her head at the paper in her hand. “She also wrote that he was ‘very ... *soggy*’? Whatever that means.”

“I’ll remind her we don’t speak hundred-year-old daeva.” I raised my hand to knock on the door but paused before my knuckles made contact. “Wait. Did you just say soggy?”

Em shrugged and stuffed the paper in her pocket. “I guess we’ll find out what she means soon enough.”

“Well, this just got a lot more interesting.” I knocked on the door.

“It’s open!” a man yelled from inside. I raised my eyebrows at Em, but she turned the knob and pushed the door open.

“What the hell?” she said, her eyes wide as they skimmed over the apartment. Orange sunlight poured in from the

windows on the far wall, illuminating the first living room swamp I'd ever seen.

"I guess this is what Sabrina meant by soggy." I stepped over a puddle on the linoleum. Water covered every surface in the room, and towels were draped over the furniture to keep it dry.

I paused in the middle of the room, taking it all in. The noise of running water came from deeper in the apartment.

"Mr. Eckson?" I called. "It's the Enchanter. You asked for my help?"

"I can't leave the shower!"

My boots squished on the wet carpet as I walked down the hall. The door to the bathroom was wide open.

"If he's naked, I'm done. You're on your own," Em warned from behind me. I smirked at the wariness in her voice and assessed the magical crisis before me.

A small dark cloud hovered above the shower, raining into the tub. When I squinted, I could see blue mana churning in the mist.

"He's not naked, but he *is* cursed." I stepped into the bathroom. "Well, I guess he could still be naked behind the curtain."

"Very helpful, *Enchanter*." Em timidly followed me inside. "Mr. Eckson? How can we help?"

Mr. Eckson pulled the curtain open a sliver and poked his head through the gap. A small part of the cloud broke off to follow his head and rained on the tile.

He closely resembled a drowned middle-aged chipmunk. His shoulder-length blond hair stuck to his head, and water dripped down his face. He wiped it from his eyes, but after a few swipes, he gave up and kept them shut against the stream.

Whoever did this to him must have been seriously pissed. My money was on a "Vexed Ex." Coined that baby myself after my zillionth Enchanter case.

I pressed my lips together and concentrated on Mr. Eckson's aura. Mana surrounded him, but he didn't seem to give any off himself. He was human, then. That made my job easier.

When he opened his mouth to speak, he twisted his head to the side and spat out water. "I, uh, got involved with this spirited little water elemental, and she caught me ... She caught me with another girl."

"Aaannnd then she cursed you," I finished for him. I sighed. How predictable.

Many of my clientele found themselves in a similar situation. Well, the curses were typically more boring, like a perpetual itch in your pants or a fresh fear of fire.

That last one was usually just because a fire elemental blew up the guy's house or something, but either way, mission accomplished. Unfortunately, no amount of my magical vacuum power could cure you of *that* particular curse.

"Easy peasy," I said. I rubbed my hands together.

Mr. Eckson sagged in relief and opened the shower curtain the rest of the way. I could see Em stiffen out of the corner of my eye, but the man was fully clothed in sopping wet PJs.

I held my hand out, and he grasped it with his pruny one. Ugh, he really was soggy.

"This won't hurt, but you may feel a little pull. This is completely normal. Just hold still, and the Enchanter will be done in a moment ..." Em rattled through her spiel.

Em was the brains behind the Enchanter operation, and she had a whole hell of a lot more patience than me. She dealt with the clients; I dealt with the curses. We made a perfect team.

I tuned her out while I began my work.

With our skin contact, the magic of the curse assaulted me. It sank into my coat like fog, and the salty smell of the ocean filled my nose. It covered his skin in a sheen of blue, like an oil slick.

I closed my eyes and drew the oily blue mana to me. It slithered onto my hand and sank into my skin. It was like ice

water injected into my veins, and I gritted my teeth against the sensation.

Curses were the worst. The anger and hate twisted the mana into something dark. It took the longest to digest, sitting at the bottom of my stomach like a heavy stone until it finally combined with the rest of the mana in my blood.

Finally, I breathed in the magic that sustained the cloud above him. Warmth spread through my veins, chasing away the chill. Much better.

The patter of rain dwindled as the mana entered my system like a shot of adrenaline. A familiar buzz settled in my limbs.

I opened my eyes to see Mr. Eckson's slack mouth. He jerked his hand from mine.

"That's impossible," he said, bracing himself against the wall with one hand. He cowered against the tile wall to put as much distance between us as possible.

Technically, he was right. No one should be able to do what I could, not even other hunters. But my family was special. All it took me was a little creativity.

I wiped my wet hands on my pants. "Yes, well, that impossible act will cost five hundred dollars. Sabrina will be in touch."

I walked out of the waterlogged apartment, and Em joined me on the street.

Haven was a bustling port city on the northern Oregon coast. After its creation, it quickly became a secret hub for otherworlders on Earth. It became not so secret after the Aegis wanted authority on Earth and made their presence known a few decades ago.

Humans had long suspected they weren't alone, creating myths about shape-shifting humanoids and spell-wielding witches, but little did they know there were three entire planets of otherworlders. And they'd been living here for centuries.

It was dark as we walked back to the Dungeon. It was a Haven underground staple where the who's-who of the shadowy

world came to drink, party, and have extremely important business meetings.

It was also owned by my favorite otherworlder.

The deep sound of bass shook the air as we rounded the corner of the block. The Silver District was alive with activity, and the line outside the Dungeon was long. We went around it, and I handed our token to Brandon, the new bouncer.

When he reached to take the token from my hand, I recognized druid marks on his forearm. It was a bit of a faux pas to ask what spirit he had, but judging by the look of him, I guessed he would either make a normal-sized bear or a ridiculously buff parakeet.

He handed me back the token and unlatched the rope for us. A few otherworlders watched us warily. Our disguises made it a little hard to blend in.

I wore some leggings tucked into tall lace-up leather boots. I'd pulled the hood of my jacket over my scarf-wrapped head. I was not about to be exposed by a rogue gust of wind. Air elementals could be tricky bitches.

Our masks really completed the look, concealing the lower half of our faces. I doubted anyone from my past would recognize me, but Enchanter work made its own enemies.

The Dungeon was pretty much exactly as you'd expect a place called 'the Dungeon' to be. Metal cages hung from the ceiling, with dancers grinding on the bars. The entire first room was one big dancefloor, complete with some creepy graveyard fog and stone flooring. It had this whole swanky sex dungeon vibe.

We elbowed our way through the crowd until we were through the archway to the back room. It was quieter here, but the pounding from the front still shook the air. Dark leather booths lined the perimeter, separated by spiked walls.

Donald, my best and only imp friend, waved at me from a table. He was about three feet tall, with leathery wings and a face only a mother could love. Except that demons didn't have mothers.

“Enchanter! Murdock here says he’s never tasted human before.” He wiggled his scaly eyebrows.

A mountain of a man sat in the seat next to him. An orc, if his squat form and face full of piercings were anything to go by. I flipped Donald off and winked at the orc as I passed.

Donald cackled. The orc raised his eyebrows and glanced between us. Donald and I had a special relationship. It had actually started a long time ago when my family tried to kill him, but he didn’t have to know that.

He was my go-to man, or imp, or whatever. He helped me whenever I needed information about otherworlders, and I had a lot to learn. Turns out there was a lot more to know about a species than just how to kill them. Who knew?

We followed the wall of booths to the corner, where I knew a door was hidden under a powerful glamour. I pushed on it, careful not to draw in any of its magic. It opened to a narrow hallway with a line of doors on one side.

The magic of the wards washed over me as we walked over the threshold. No one would remember us entering or leaving. Sabrina’s magic ensured that.

Sabrina was a daeva woman who came to Haven a few decades ago from the daevas’ home world, Draqaar, and started the club. Using her psychic daeva magic, she offered discretion if you played by her rules and total mind fuckery if you crossed her.

She created the perfect neutral ground for otherworlders to work, which is why Em and I operated the Enchanter through her. A few years ago, Em had the brilliant idea to put my hunter abilities to work.

Em was human, and otherworlders liked humans just fine, but hunters weren’t exactly popular among otherworlders. This was mostly due to the tiny detail that we were born to vanquish otherworlders from the realm of men.

Come in, Arsyn, Sabrina said in my mind before I could knock. Em and I entered the small office. It was still dim, but compared to the club, the lamp on Sabrina’s desk could have been the sun.

Sabrina smiled slyly at us from behind her heavy oak desk, like she knew something we didn't and enjoyed it. Straight jet-black hair fell to her hips, and her angular face was something gushy poets wrote songs about. I always wondered if somehow she wore a glamour I couldn't see through. No one could look that hot all the time.

"Mr. Eckson is once again curse free," I said.

"Good. Because you have an urgent request."

Sabrina pulled an envelope from a drawer and handed it to Em. It had a wax seal with a shield stamped on it.

"I had a very interesting visitor tonight," Sabrina purred. Curiosity sparkled in her purple eyes. "There's a team of Aegis guardians in Haven. Apparently, you've made a name for yourself."

Em squealed in excitement, but my mouth went dry. The Aegis could only spell trouble for me. They were all about keeping the peace, and hunters were all about murdering en masse. Needless to say, we didn't get along.

My chest tightened around the breath I'd sucked in. "What the hell do they want with us?"

Em tore into the envelope. She pulled out a letter and unfolded it to reveal two neatly written lines. I narrowed my eyes as I read over her shoulder.

"They want us to remove a mind block." Em fanned herself with the envelope. "I think I'm gonna faint."

"It's too risky. What if they figure out what I am?" I tapped my foot. The muscles in my legs quivered with the need to run. When I looked at Em, she was making her sad puppy eyes.

"We have to!" she whined. "It's the Aegis! The freaking *Aegis*, Syn."

"That's exactly why we can't." I crossed my arms. "We're tangled in some pretty shady stuff. I'm surprised their heroic little hearts didn't explode when they stepped foot in the Silver District."

"They're not like that. They killed, like, a whole clan of druids last week," Em said.

“The druids were probably eating children or something.”

“Girls,” Sabrina interjected softly.

“The druids were selling slaves to the daeva black market, actually.” Em raised her chin as if she’d won.

“How is that better than what I said?”

“Well, they weren’t cannibals!”

“Girls,” Sabrina tried again.

“Okay, so they killed a village of non-cannibalistic slavers. Sounds pretty heroic to me.”

GIRLS! Sabrina yelled in our minds. She must have put a psychic kick behind it because Em’s hands flew to her temples. I fought against the urge to stick my tongue out at her.

“Arsyn, I suggest you accept this request.” Sabrina smoothed her dress and sat back down.

I started to argue, but she held up a single finger. Her mind magic might not work on me, but she was intimidating as hell.

“A bennu man dropped off the letter. He was extremely well shielded, but he appeared on edge. I wouldn’t test the moral resolve of these guardians if you stand in the way of their operation. Emmaline is right, the Aegis isn’t some league of saints.”

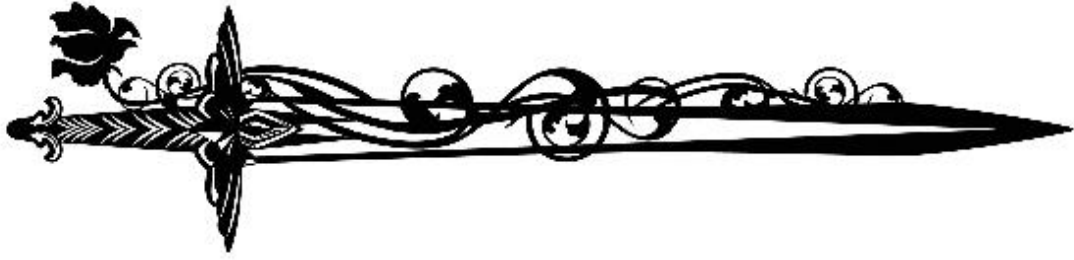
“Yeah, that makes me feel so much better.” I threw back my hood and unraveled my scarf. Sabrina watched me expectantly and Em held her breath.

My heartbeat fluttered in my stomach. Bennu, and especially agents of the Aegis, were the only beings hunters were truly afraid of.

When I was young, an Aegis team wiped another hunter family out after they caught the attention of the bennu organization. There were no survivors, not even the children were spared.

“Okay,” I said, tearing off my mask. “We’ll do it.”

Two



SABRINA KEPT ONE of her hotel rooms in the basement unoccupied for situations like this. Situations that were best contained safely inside the Dungeon's wards.

Ironically, the basement was less dungeony than the first floor. Earth elementals liked the underground rooms, and Sabrina was more than happy to refurbish the place for paying customers.

The living room was filled with plush white furniture, stark against the dark hardwood. A kitchenette occupied one corner, and a squat bed sat in the other.

I went to the bathroom while I paced the short distance in the main room. My hood was still off, and I held my scarf tightly in my hand.

"I can't wait to meet *the* Cyrus," Em said. "His unit has been the only one sighted on Earth in a while. Alani thinks it's because they're being punished, but I think they're just the most conspicuous."

What the hell was I doing meeting with the Aegis? If they knew what I was, they would kill me on the spot.

I blew out a deep breath and re-wrapped the scarf around my silver hair before securing my mask. My gray eyes still swam with the pearlescent mana from the spells I'd absorbed that day.

I'd have to be careful tonight. If I siphoned too much, it wouldn't be pretty. Too much mana made a hunter drunk, but not in a good way. More in a useless-stupor-until-you-pass-out-and-wake-up-hungover kind of way. Hopefully, the Aegis just needed a little job, maybe a simple magical tattoo removal or help with a watered-down love potion gone wrong.

At a brief knock at the door, Em ran across the room to get it.

I glanced at my disguise one last time to ensure everything was covered. Then, I put on my confident face and strode into the living room as if I weren't meeting the beings that haunted my childhood.

Three towering men sucked all the air from the room. My iron choker warmed with the barrage of energy as it tried to protect me from their suffocating power.

Em stood up straighter and tried to swagger her way to me, though she ended up looking like she had a bug in her pants.

To my left was a suave-looking druid. His black hair was slicked back from his face, revealing warm brown eyes. Neatly trimmed stubble covered up some tattoo-like markings that climbed up his neck and around his hairline.

More markings peeked out of the cuffs of his blazer, wrapping themselves around his wrists and climbing down his fingers. I knew a little about druid markings, but I'd never seen that many before.

The next man was the tallest of the three and gave off the most power. His aura filled the room and squeezed the breath from my lungs. His mana was the color of golden sunlight. Its minty scent tickled my nose.

Bennu.

My father's words echoed in the back of my mind. Bennu were the most dangerous. They were born at the dawn of time and reincarnated. There was no escape if a bennu wanted you dead. They augmented themselves with runes, making them faster and stronger. They could teleport between worlds and wield enchanted weapons.

My throat closed up in panic, but I swallowed it and forced air into my chest. *They* asked for *my* help. It was just another Enchanter appointment. I did this all the time.

The bennu's blond hair was disheveled, like he had styled it carefully in the morning, then run his hands through it too

many times. He gazed back at me with cold blue eyes, examining me like I was doing to him.

The pointed tips of his ears were covered in intricate silver caps, incised with faintly glowing runes. More tattoo-like runes covered his arms, left bare by the tight black T-shirt he was wearing.

I'd only ever seen runes in books, and I always thought they resembled something out of a witch's summoning ritual. Druid marks looked like vines and natural things, but bennu runes looked like a blocky alien language.

I finally focused on the last man in the room, a daeva like Sabrina. He leaned against the wall, dressed in even more clothing than I was. His disguise was much more medieval, billowy cloak and all. He wore a mask like mine, but his hood draped over his forehead. The only bit of him I could see were his vibrant purple eyes.

A scar cut across his right eye, splitting his dark brown eyebrow in an angry jagged line that trailed down his cheek and disappeared under his mask.

I felt him poking at my mind, testing my barriers to get a feel for my shielding. He would be sorely disappointed. Hunters were walking, talking, magical dead zones. I did the mental equivalent of slapping his hand away from my brain, and he flinched, surprised.

At the slight movement, the other two turned their attention to him. He stayed glued to the wall, but he tilted his head in curiosity.

"Well, one of us is going to have to change," I deadpanned, my eyes fixed on the daeva man dressed head-to-toe in black. The druid gasped and burst into laughter. At least someone appreciated my sense of humor.

Em sent me a warning look, but even the bennu's lips twitched at my attempt to break the tension. I shrugged and shook the nervousness from my limbs. I passed by the daeva to take a seat in one of the armchairs.

The druid followed my lead and sat on the couch. The bennu man folded his hands behind his back and scanned my

body as if he was trying to figure me out.

I bit back a laugh. Good luck. I didn't even understand myself half the time.

"I'm Cyrus, the captain of our unit." The bennu nodded sharply.

The druid waved his hand. His black druid markings were stark against his olive skin. "If we're introducing ourselves, I'm Felix. The handsome one of our unit."

Cyrus took a deep breath, as if gathering his restraint, and gestured toward the druid. "Strong daeva magic has been used to block a piece of information in Felix's mind. It's crucial to the case we're working on."

We were getting right to it, then. For an immortal being, he really was impatient. I glanced skeptically at the daeva in the room. Why would they need me for a mind block?

Cyrus followed my eyes. "Ari has tried for the last few days. We believe the block was placed there by a group of Daevasi. So far, it's proven impenetrable."

"Daevasi?" Curiosity took control of my mouth. Most of what I knew about the other worlds was from what my family taught me, and hunters usually weren't concerned with anything beyond strengths and weaknesses.

"The upper class in daeva society. Their magic tends to be much stronger."

"I can handle it," I said.

A few eyebrows went up at the confidence in my statement, but it was true. I'd removed mind blocks before. It was pretty basic stuff.

"Okay, no time like the present," I mumbled to myself, and stood in front of Felix.

"The Enchanter's magic works through touch, so ... well ... she'll have to touch you," Em supplied. She'd edged closer to the bennu. Excitement had her stumbling over her practiced lines, and she fidgeted nervously with her hands.

Felix grinned. "You can touch anything you want."

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “Your head will be just fine, thank you.”

“Please stay still while she works. You might feel a pulling sensation. This is normal. Just try to relax, and whatever you do, don’t fight it,” Em finished and gave me an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

I took another deep breath and looked around the room. Cyrus cocked his head at me. Ari crossed his arms and kicked his foot against the wall, looking bored. Felix rubbed his hands together and scooted to the end of the couch cushion.

I raised my hands and gently pressed my fingers to his temples. His magic flooded me. A torrent of orange mana shot through my veins. His magic was like citrus, and I held back a moan at the taste of it. It lit up my brain like a sugar rush.

He was the strongest druid I’d ever encountered. I gritted my teeth and focused on the coolness of the iron around my neck. Solid metal filled my mind, and I used it to slam a wall down, damming my channels. It reduced the torrent of mana into a manageable stream.

With everything under control, I focused on the mana swirling around him. I couldn’t detect any traces of a curse or even daeva magic. Whoever placed the block hid it well. No wonder Ari couldn’t break it.

He narrowed his violet eyes on my hands and leaned away from the wall. He raised his eyebrows in a challenge. He didn’t think I could do it.

There was still a chance I could remove it, but it would mean taking off the one thing protecting me from the full onslaught of their magic.

“I need to use the restroom real quick.” I made a B-Line to the bathroom. I shut the door behind me and reached under my scarf to unclasp my choker.

It was a Morgan family heirloom. My great grandfather had forged the braided iron strands with the blood of our ancestors as a gift for my grandmother. It dampened my magic and gave me better control over my siphoning ability.

Most hunters had to drink mana to absorb it. Most hunters outside of my family filed their canines to points. Yes, that meant we were probably the origin of the vampire myth, and yes, we drank from humans sometimes. All living things contained mana. It was life. Some just had more than others, and a few beings could even bend it to their will, which is where otherworlders came in.

Because all hunters were immune to spells and curses, we were their kryptonite. My ancestors saw this as a sign that we were destined to protect Earth from the otherworlder invaders.

I popped my choker into my pocket, flushed the toilet, and washed my hands in case they were listening.

Three intoxicating auras assaulted me as soon as I walked back into the room. They caressed my skin, sending tingles down my spine and flushing my body with warmth. I tried to ignore the onslaught of smells, colors, and sensations, but by the time I took my place in front of Felix, my head spun.

When I grabbed his face, I nearly passed out. His mana surged into my body. It scorched its way through my soul and threatened to burn me from the inside out. Black spots floated on the edges of my vision, thickening and spreading.

I swayed on my feet, but Em came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. I leaned more weight into her and focused on Felix's aura.

A faint tendril of purple magic seeped out of his head, just below the crown. I shifted my hand, running it through his silky hair to the source of the daeva magic.

I dug my fingers into his scalp. I shivered as the oily mana jumped to me, unbidden. The spell was powerful. It drilled its way through my skin and tore at my insides. I struggled against the urge to drop my hands. My fingers tensed into claws in his hair.

Felix gasped. I watched as some of my own silver mana bolted down my arm and soaked into his skin. *What the hell?* I dropped my hands to cut off the flow, but Felix snagged my wrist.

“What are you?”

I was drowning in his mana. His muffled voice filtered lazily to my ears, like he was talking to me from above the surface. The sound vibrated against my overly sensitive skin.

I opened my mouth to tell him it was none of his business, but my tongue was numb. The room lurched suddenly, but Em's arms stayed around me. I jammed my hand in my pocket and gripped my iron choker.

The oily mana hit my stomach, and a wave of nausea rolled through my body.

"Bathroom," I slurred. Someone scooped me up and carried me to the toilet. I clamped my eyes tight. Em shoed everyone from the bathroom, and I pulled my mask off just in time to vomit. Em patted my back woodenly.

When my stomach was empty, I leaned my back against the tub and wiped at my mouth with my sleeve. A headache was already building at the base of my skull.

"Damn girl, that was dumb." Em reached into my pocket and wrested the choker from my hand.

"That daeva was being an asshole," I rasped. Em lifted my scarf and clasped the choker around my neck.

"He didn't even say anything."

I tried to stand, but the floor swayed, and I stumbled and crashed into the wall. I slid down and settled for sitting on the edge of the tub.

"Is she ok? Can we come in?" Felix asked from the other side of the door.

Em looked at me, and I nodded. I pulled my mask back up. The nausea had passed, but now my body buzzed with unstable energy. My muscles twitched, and my heart thrashed in my chest. The blood in my body was pressurized, and I was about to burst.

Felix's head popped in when Em opened the door, but he was quickly pushed through the doorway as two more colossal bodies crowded into the small bathroom.

He knelt in front of me and reached for my hand, but stopped himself. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have grabbed you."

Whatever you did, that feeling. It just ... it surprised me.”

“Can we move this little chat back to the living room so we don’t smother the talent?” Em remarked from behind a wall of broad shoulders and intense looks.

Em, Felix and the bennu filed out of the room, but Ari slipped his arms underneath my legs and picked me up, bridal style. I squeaked in surprise. His magic brushed against me.

It was strange. Most daeva mana just felt like something gripping your insides, but this man caught me off guard. His power smelled like cinnamon and spices. It caressed me, like blunt nails dragging across my skin.

“What the hell, man? I can walk on my own.” I couldn’t, but I still had my pride.

He gave me an incredulous look and carried me into the living room, ignoring my protests.

“Seriously, I’m fine,” I insisted. Ari set me gingerly down in the seat and hovered next to me.

“Did it work?” I asked Felix.

“Yes, I remember.” Felix rubbed his chin. “The logs were warded. It’s another one of Valeria Orsava’s operations. It has to be. She’s the only one that has a connection to the market in Kaslen.”

“You’re sure?” Cyrus asked.

“She checks all the boxes.”

I felt like I was imposing on a private conversation, so I stayed as still as I could. Maybe they were like those dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* and would only notice me if I moved.

“She has an estate south of Qaanir,” Felix said. “We could call in a few favors—”

“Her estate isn’t an option,” Cyrus interrupted, shaking his head.

He pulled something that looked like a shiny metal pen out of his pocket and twirled it in thought. It sprouted into a blade, and he twirled the dagger between his fingers. It was covered in

engraved runes, shining with dull golden light. He tossed it up, and it turned back into a thin cylinder mid-air.

“The ball.”

I jumped at the gravelly voice. Ari’s voice, I realized. It sounded rough from disuse, but its jagged melody played on repeat in my mind.

“Everyone will be wearing a glamour.” Cyrus closed his eyes, but he still played with the dagger. It shifted in and out of its sharp state as it moved.

Ari stiffened next to me. I didn’t understand. If he was powerful enough to be in the Aegis, he should be able to resist a glamour.

“The Enchanter can see through glammers,” Em said.

The dagger clattered to the floor, and Cyrus looked at Em like he just remembered we were in the room.

I slowly turned to look at her. The skin around her eyes crinkled in a smile, and she shrugged. Another wave of nausea punched me in the gut, making me double over in my seat. I groaned and clamped my hand over my mouth.

I reached out and caught Ari’s hand in a death grip. I needed the bathroom, and he was the closest Uber. He squeezed my hand back, and the warmth of emotion bloomed in my chest.

Wait, no. That was mana.

It surged from my heart and poured from my body. The pressure in my head subsided slightly.

“What are you doing?” My voice came out breathy, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. I didn’t think daeva magic worked on me, but I needed whatever he was doing to never stop. Maybe he’d consider a position with Enchanter inc.

When no one answered, I hefted one eye open.

Pulsing purple light flooded the room. Em, Felix and Cyrus stared at Ari with empty looks, their eyes glazed over with an unblinking sheen.

Well, that certainly didn’t seem good.

The door flew open, and a very pissed off Sabrina stormed into the room. Whatever he'd done must have tripped her wards. She took one look at Ari and then her eyes glowed brightly to match his. They seemed to have some sort of mental sparring match, and after a few moments, the oppressive energy subsided. The other three in the room blinked in confusion.

“Wraith,” Sabrina growled at him.

I pulled at Ari's hand, but his gaze remained pinned on the floor. I pulled again, sending more strength behind it, and his lilac eyes snapped to mine. They swirled with silver.

“Fuck.”

I dropped Ari's hand and pushed to my feet to address the room. “Okay, so don't get mad, but I think I filled him with my juice.”

Felix snickered at that, and I grimaced.

“I put my mana in him?” I tried instead. Felix giggled again, and I blew out a breath. “Gods, how do I put this?”

“I think we get the picture,” Em said.

“I take it you've never done that before?” Cyrus sheathed his dagger, making it an inert pen-sized cylinder again. Sabrina's eyes still pulsed with light. She would make their lives a living hell if they disrupted her business again, Aegis agents or not.

I shook my head and fought off a yawn. The mana drunken loopiness was giving way to regular, tired loopiness.

“I didn't even know it was possible. I always thought this thing was a one-way street.”

“No one can know,” Ari insisted.

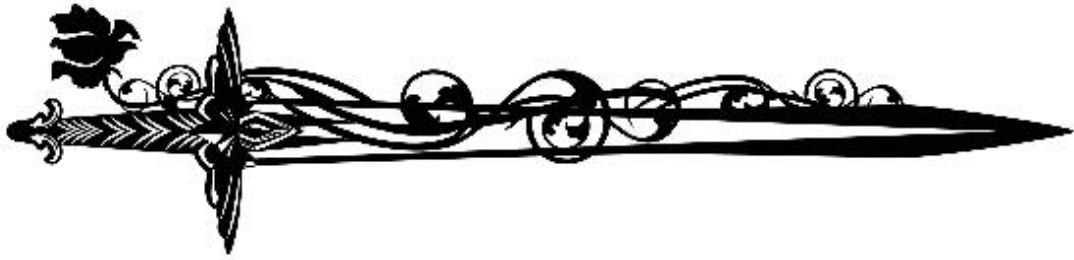
“Trust me, I wasn't about to go advertising a new item on the Enchanter menu.” I dropped back into my seat. I felt empty and tired.

Felix cleared his throat and rubbed the palms of his hands on his pants. “So glamours, huh? You free Saturday night?”

Sabrina glided to the center of the room. She snapped her fingers and pointed to the door. “We'll discuss this later. The

Enchanter needs to rest, and she has other appointments to consider. For now, why don't you gentlemen join me in my office?"

Three



EM PRACTICALLY CARRIED me home after the meeting. Being drained of mana was almost as bad as overflowing with it. Almost.

We lived in one of Sabrina's apartments in the Silver District, only a few blocks from the Dungeon. Our apartment was my little slice of heaven. Em and I moved in together after she ran me over with her car and we became besties. Long story.

Em dropped me on my bed, and I passed out on top of my covers in my full disguise, boots and all. I slept until my phone went off in the late afternoon. I shot up, searching for the source of the sound with my hands, and swiped at the screen to turn it off.

I peeled my eyes open and winced at the bright sunlight. When I saw the message on my lock screen, I jumped to my feet. Today we were meeting with a collector of bennu artifacts. He sent a detailed letter in his request for an appointment, but he had me with the subject line of "my bennu weapon attacked me." I loved a unique job, but throw in some possessed weapons and I was in heaven.

I dragged myself to the bathroom and groaned at my reflection. I wasn't a delicate sleeper, and somehow my scarf had ended up severely tangled in my hair.

I took my time pulling at my silver locks, and after a good fifteen minutes of tugging and brushing, I managed to tame the beast. I stripped off the rest of my clothing and showered quickly. My muscles protested with every movement. It felt like I'd run a 10k and then a linebacker tackled me as I crossed the finish line. I half expected to see visible bruises on my pale skin.

I turned to see my back. A line of rusty red dots the size of thumbtacks trailed down my spine from the base of my neck. My hunter marks.

We refined the blood of our kills into ink. Hunter marks celebrated the power of blood. How it fueled us and how it gave us the power to vanquish our enemies.

After I was done, I wrapped my hair in a towel and joined Em in the living room, still dressed in my robe.

Even though it was 5 p.m., the smell of coffee saturated the air, and Em sat at the table eating breakfast. Em's light brown hair was cropped close to the sides of her head, and the longer top flopped over her forehead.

"That thing is so obnoxious," Em said, eyeing me as she bit into a slice of toast.

My robe was silk and had a feather trim, but, given that my career demanded I wore head-to-toe boring clothing, I had the right to feel glamorous at home. I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down next to her.

"Jealousy looks terrible on you, Em."

She grumbled but changed the subject. "How are you feeling? You seemed pretty wrecked last night."

"Yeah, that could have gone better," I admitted, stealing a piece of bacon from Em's plate. "But hey, at least I was asked to the dance."

"Are you gonna do it?"

"Maybe."

Em narrowed her eyes at me and my food robbery until something clicked in her mind. Her face morphed into a shit-eating grin. "You like them!"

"I *like* feeling useful." I stole an entire piece of toast this time. "And this is way more interesting than de-cursifying ungrateful morons."

"Whatever you need to tell yourself."

"They're paying a lot."

“Of course.”

Em hummed, still wearing that smile. She knew me too well. Last night had been embarrassing, terrifying, and exhilarating. I couldn't wait to do it again. I'd never pushed my power that far, and it seemed I had a shiny new ability.

I wasn't sure if this was bad, or *really* bad. None of my family had ever mentioned the ability to give mana to an otherworlder, but we didn't exactly run around without our blood-infused iron, let alone spend any time with an otherworlder unless we were trying to kill them. Maybe they just didn't know.

Em's alarm went off, reminding us of our appointment. She put her dishes in the sink and went to her room to get ready. She wasn't as excited about this job as I was.

I got dressed in a fresh pair of dark clothes and tied my damp hair in a low bun. I finished my disguise with my jacket, scarf, and mask and waited at the front door, shifting from foot to foot. The sun was setting as we walked down the stairs of our complex, and I practically skipped down the street. Em was quiet as she stomped behind me with her own little metaphorical cloud hanging above her head.

“This is stupid!” she said finally, as if holding the words inside her one second longer would cause her to explode. “We shouldn't be playing around with powerful artifacts. What if the thing just bursts into flame as soon as you touch it? What if it turns your skin green? What if—”

“What if it grows six heads and does the hokey-pokey? We don't know what will happen. That's why it's fun!” I said. I turned around and furrowed my brow so she knew I was making a face at her. “You have heard of fun, haven't you?”

Em trudged past me. “Gods give me patience...”

“I thought you liked bennu stuff?” I jogged to catch up with her. She moved fast for someone with such short legs.

“I *like* when bennu artifacts are properly taken care of in the hands of a museum.” She pushed through the heavy door to Mel's Motel and Restaurant. “This clown probably doesn't even know which artificer made it.”

Mel's was not a classy joint, even by my standards. It was planted firmly in the middle of the Copper District. The Copper District catered to seedy humans and otherworlders. Rumor had it a human crime boss controlled the whole place, and, considering the mind blocks and silence curses I'd undone here, I believed it.

The lobby was just big enough to walk through, and the concierge glared at us from behind a lattice of metal bars and bulletproof glass. The client had already secured a meeting room, so we passed the desk and wove through the crowded tavern to the stairwell. A brawl broke out at a table as we made a beeline for the steps. I saw someone raise a chair above his head as we turned the corner.

When we reached the room, Em knocked. A man who looked like a green thumb-thumb opened the door. Orcs weren't known for their beauty.

He looked down the hall before letting us in. The hotel room was sparse. Suspicious stains covered the tan carpet, and the overstuffed mattress was left bare.

An older gentleman in a tailored suit sat behind a splintered desk, centered in the small space. His graying hair was neatly combed, and a thin mustache curled daintily above his lip. Two chairs faced him on our side of the desk, and he motioned for us to sit.

I eyed the threadbare seat. It looked like it would give me some sort of venereal disease, but I wasn't rude. I took the offer. Em remained standing. She loomed over my shoulder and frowned at the piece of metal on the desk.

It looked like a sword hilt, but it was engraved with dozens of tiny runes. It shuddered like it felt a chill in the room. I leaned in closer. My fingers itched to run over the inscription.

"Thank you, Okgan," the man said to the orc before turning back to me. "You are the Enchanter, yes? I'm Randall ... Smith. I was told you could assist me with a minor issue."

I raised an eyebrow at his obviously fake name. We weren't the only ones in need of a mask.

“We can’t promise anything.” I sat on my hands to keep myself from touching the artifact. “But what exactly can we do for you?”

Randall steepled his hands and crossed his legs. I caught the beginning of a thick, dark line on his wrist. Looking closer at his aura, I caught a flash of sunny gold mana. His hybrid blood wasn’t potent, but I’d bet he had a bennu somewhere in his family tree.

“Being a collector of rarities, I’ve amassed a number of bennu artifacts from various master artificers. Most are quite tame, happy to be put on display, and even cleaned on occasion. However, when I tried to get this monstrosity to come out, it viciously attacked me. The blasted whip wrapped around my leg and hung me upside down!”

He fluttered his hands to emphasize the absurdity of what had happened.

“Thank the gods Okgan was there when it happened, or I could have lost a limb!”

He reclined again and smoothed his mustache.

“It is a one-of-a-kind artifact made by the Luminary herself. My hope is that you can remove whatever runes make it so ornery.”

“Can I touch it?” I asked, my eyes transfixed on the whip.

Em cleared her throat. “What the Enchanter means is we will have to do a careful examination before being able to determine what is possible. But her ability works through touch.”

Randall stared at her, then me. “You may touch it if you must, but I’ll wait outside with Okgan. I’d rather not be attacked by my own relic again.”

“I’ll examine it and let you know what I can do.” As soon as Randall closed the door behind him, I let out a little squeal.

“Alright, alright, calm down, crazy woman. He’s going to think you’re a disenchanting virgin.” Em walked around the desk to get a closer look at the whip.

“Last night was the first time I’d ever seen one in person.” I cocked my head. “Maybe Cyrus would let me play with his dagger.”

Em snorted. Why did everything have to be an innuendo with her?

“When I went to the traveling collection last year, I attended a seminar on runic weapons,” Em said, kicking it into robot mode. “Bennu artificers create masterwork artifacts in their workshops in the bennu capital of Niaras—”

“Gonna have to speed it up a bit there, Em.”

She sighed heavily. “The presenter demonstrated a metal boomerang that was enchanted to fly miles to cut the head off a single target before returning to its owner.”

“Now, that’s more like it!”

The whip shivered again, rattling the desk. I reached out and gently picked it up, cradling it in my palm. It felt alive. Its heat nearly burned my skin as its runes reacted to my touch, flaring to life. Shafts of golden light shone through the etchings until the room was so bright it forced me to close my eyes.

Its magic awakened, yawning amber mana like the last rays at sunset. I opened my eyes and blinked at the fully unfurled silver whip in my hand. Gleaming scales covered its length like polished snakeskin. Lines of thin runes covered the handle.

“Holy shit,” Em breathed. She took a step forward and gawked at the weapon. “It’s definitely bennu. What the hell, Syn!” She smacked my arm. The whip twitched in my hand. It flared brighter and moved to defend me.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to soothe it. It would look weird if I pet it, right?

“Huh. Now, how do I get you to turn back into that hunk of metal?” I asked the whip.

It wrapped itself around my arm as if it were begging to stay out. Ticklish, I giggled.

“Alright, listen. If you go back inside, I’ll see what I can do about you getting out more, okay?” It pinched my skin, and in

another flash of light, I once again held a metal cylinder wrapped in soft leather.

“Randall!” I called over my shoulder, making Em jump. “It’s safe. You can come in now!”

The door to the hotel room opened and Okgan’s hefty form filled the doorway. Once he saw that everything was secure, he angled himself to let Randall through. Randall walked to the other side of the desk, giving me and the whip a large berth.

“So, can you help?” He eyed the whip like it was a rabid dog.

“I can’t just selectively remove runes,” I told him. Not entirely true, but I wasn’t familiar enough with bennu runes to know which ones did what. I’d be the dispelling version of a toddler doing open heart surgery.

“But you could remove all the runes?”

“I have a different proposition.” I smiled and finally gave in to my urge to stroke the dormant whip.



“YOU’RE AN IDIOT,” Em said as we walked back to the Dungeon. “You can’t just gallivant around Haven with a magical whip. You’re going to draw way too much attention to yourself.”

“He’s for emergencies.” I ran my fingers over the engravings in my pocket and whispered, “Shh, I won’t let big bad Em hurt you.”

“He?” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “And why are you talking to an inanimate object?”

“He’s not an inanimate object. He’s a magical whip with emotions that can rip your face off.”

“It can’t rip your face off,” Em said dubiously.

Sundays at the Dungeon were relatively tame. The joint became your typical neighborhood bar, just with chains and skeletons hanging from the ceiling.

The skeletons weren't real. Hopefully. Every time I asked Sabrina, she just laughed.

When Em and I came back from Sabrina's office after our check-in, Em ditched me for one of her girlfriends, who was tending the bar. Alani was a gorgeous air elemental with long white hair. When she saw Em, she leaned over the bar to hug her. Alani and her twin, Inala, were two of the only people who knew Em and me outside of our Enchanter disguises.

When they finally released each other, Alani spotted me over Em's shoulder and waved. I saluted back but walked for the door. I loved them both, but I wasn't a huge fan of being a third wheel, and I had a new book at home that was calling my name.

"Enchanter!"

Apparently, my book wasn't the only thing that was calling my name. Felix popped into my vision, waving his hand in my face as I stared at him. He wore a sharp suit again, this time with pinstripes and a pastel pink pocket square.

"What are you doing here?" I hadn't expected a member of the Aegis to toss back some beers and kick it with the Haven underground.

"Hello to you too," he crooned. Then he rubbed the back of his neck in an unexpectedly nervous gesture. "We're getting drinks and planning that daeva thing," he whispered covertly, shielding his mouth with his hand.

"So, you're *not* here for the blood ritual, then?" I asked in a serious voice. "Because if you guys are squeamish, I'd get out of here by midnight."

Felix stared at me, open-mouthed, until I couldn't hold in my laughter anymore.

"Oh, you'll pay for that," he told me, a wicked gleam in his amber eyes.

“Bring it, furball!” I was smiling now. I couldn’t help poking the bear. Or whatever he was.

A shadow appeared over Felix’s shoulder, and when I reached out with my senses, Ari’s heavily cloaked form emerged. A dark purple aura engulfed him, almost obstructing him from my view.

I kept my eyes on Felix as Ari approached. I’d already told them I could see through glamours. So, was he hiding himself from the other agents or from the public? Why couldn’t he just walk around like a normal, visible person?

“C’mon Scrappy, Cyrus wants to talk.” Felix turned me around and gently guided me to a booth near the back

Cyrus was dressed in his black T-shirt and jeans combo, but his styled hair had survived the day this time. He sat across from two elementals. Other than their elements, they were identical.

They were shorter than the others, though they still towered over me. Where Felix looked like he belonged in a firefighter calendar, these two were more slender, their features more graceful.

One had fire magic, and the other water. Water boy’s eyes were a pretty teal, like the color of a shallow lake, and his metallic blue hair was in a messy fringe style.

He crossed his arms and tapped his fingers on his leather jacket. Felix took a seat beside Cyrus. I inhaled the elemental’s watery aura, and its mist sank into my skin. It immediately turned to ice.

I bit back a gasp as it drilled into my soul. But there was something else there, too. The smell of wet earth and growing things. Earth magic?

When I squinted at it, hints of green marbled his blue aura like strikes of lightning in thunderclouds. Interesting. I’d never seen someone with more than one element before.

The fire elemental had dark red hair and shadowy orange eyes like burning embers. He wore a black sweatshirt and ripped jeans. His aura was wild. It thrashed in the air, its burning

tendrils caught in a spectral wind. It glowed with red light, but again I sensed something underneath it.

I pulled some of his magic in, too curious to resist. It tore through my insides like a tornado, stealing the breath from my lungs. Smoke filled my nose, and the taste of ash caught in my throat. A blast of air trailed behind, clearing the smell of fire and leaving my mind spinning.

Fire *and* air magic. What the hell was with these two? Red-hair winked at me, and I quickly returned my attention to Cyrus.

“Enchanter,” Cyrus said. He lounged on the worn leather bench like it was his personal throne. I had the sudden, absurd urge to curtsy.

“Cyrus,” I offered in return, mimicking his even voice. His lips twitched into a brief smile before he schooled his expression.

“Please, sit. This is Skye.” He pointed to the blue-haired elemental, who avoided my eyes. “And this is Shael.” The red-haired elemental grinned and patted the bench seat next to him.

“Nice to meet you.” I slid into the edge of the booth next to the twins.

I watched Ari out of the corner of my eye, still cloaked in his invisibility glamor. He remained standing at the head of the table. His gaze swept over the rest of the bar.

I turned to Cyrus. “Felix said you wanted to talk about the ball?”

He nodded. “I can’t talk about all the details here, even with Sabrina’s protections. I can tell you, however, that it involves taking down the leader of a human trafficking ring.”

This made my ears perk up. The Enchanting business was great money, but I found it lacking in the ‘serving a greater purpose’ department.

“I’m listening.”

“It’s illegal under the treaties to bring slaves from other worlds into Draqaar, but we’ve uncovered a set of channels here

on Earth and on Porada that are under this woman, Valeria. If we cut the head off the snake, the body will die.”

I chewed my lip beneath my mask. It was a tempting offer. Money *and* purpose. Not that I really believed we’d accomplish some world-altering feat. I’d learned from my life as a hunter that everyone had their own agenda, but at least it would be one more evildoer off the streets.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m in.” It was a simple task, and maybe Em was right about them. Maybe these men could prove me wrong.

“So, what are you anyway?” Shael ran his hand through his blood-red locks. While Felix and Cyrus seemed to keep their hair carefully styled, the twins’ hair reflected their auras: striking and untamed.

“You know it’s rude to ask a lady about her race.”

“It should be an easy enough question unless you have something to hide,” Skye challenged, narrowing his eyes.

“Then why don’t you go first?” I tilted my head. The twins shared a look, and tension saturated the air around the table. They tried to hide it, but their auras reacted to their emotions.

Shael shrugged. “I’m a fire elemental.”

“Not that I owe you an explanation, but I’m a water elemental,” Skye added coldly.

“And I’m not an idiot.” I crossed my arms. They wanted to know my deepest secrets, but they wouldn’t even share their real elements. “You also have air magic.” I pointed at Shael, then Skye. “And you’ve got some earth magic in the mix.”

Pressure swelled painfully in my ears as the magic around me spiked.

Cyrus sucked in a breath and leveled his frigid gaze at me. “Explain.”

“I can feel it in your auras,” I said through clenched teeth.

“What the *hell* are you?” Skye’s tone was low and deadly.

Felix glared at him. “Ignore him. It’s a bit of a touchy subject.”

“Oops.” I wanted to knock them off my trail, not to plant myself at the top of their shit list.

“So, you don’t know what it means?” Shael whispered. “That we each have two elements?”

“Fuck no.” I slowly scooted to the edge of the bench. I’d never heard of it, but I just assumed it was rare. “I make it a personal goal to piss off as few dangerous psychopaths as possible.”

I was out of my seat and turning to leave. I should be more careful. I let myself get too comfortable around them. They would kill me if they knew what I was. I had to remember that.

Ari dropped his glamour and stood between me and the exit.

“Stop,” Cyrus commanded. “Sit.”

I plopped my butt back down on the leather bench. “Yes, sir.”

Ari took a seat across from me. He left his glamour off, and his intense lilac eyes bore into me.

“Sorry. You caught us off guard.” Shael’s knee bounced beneath the table. “Our abilities have been used against us in the past.”

Skye’s lips pressed into a thin line, but he said nothing.

“I guess I have some explaining to do,” I said, feeling a little guilty. I shouldn’t have said anything. “I can sense auras.”

I pointed at Felix.

“For example, you have the aura of a druid, an orange aura that smells like citrus with, like, warm fur undertones.”

Shael snickered, and Skye elbowed him in the side. “Yours probably doesn’t smell like a field of flowers.”

“I bet my aura’s better than yours!” Shael elbowed him back.

“Actually, yours smells like smoke and feels like a tornado,” I said, looking at Shael. “And Skye, yours is like

taking a mud bath in a cloud, so neither of you is particularly pleasant.”

“Whose aura do you like the best?” Shael asked. My eyes flicked to Cyrus before I could stop myself.

Shael and Felix broke into grins. Felix even giggled.

“What? It feels like a ray of sunshine on my skin and smells like mint.”

Cyrus wore a victorious smirk, but he cleared his throat. Back to business. “I’ll supply the costume. I assume you want to keep your identity secret, so I’ll take that into account with the design.” His gaze traveled down my body, even the parts covered by the table, like he was taking measurements. “Anything I should be sure to cover?”

He was fishing for information. Clever.

“Everything,” I said, giving him nothing.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “That should be easy enough. It will be winter in the city of Qaanir. Go here for a fitting tomorrow. This has all the details.” He slipped a piece of paper across the table. I took it and shoved it in my pocket.

“I’ll be there, boss,” I said as I stood. “Em’s starting a game of pool, so I’d better take her home before she gets into a fight.”

I took a deep breath as I walked calmly to the pool tables by the bar. Don’t run from them, Syn, you’ll look like prey. Somehow, telling myself that didn’t calm me down. I snagged Em by the arm and practically dragged her out the door while she berated me with questions. I didn’t answer her until we were a block away.

“So I kinda did an oopsie.” I finally released Em, but I kept walking.

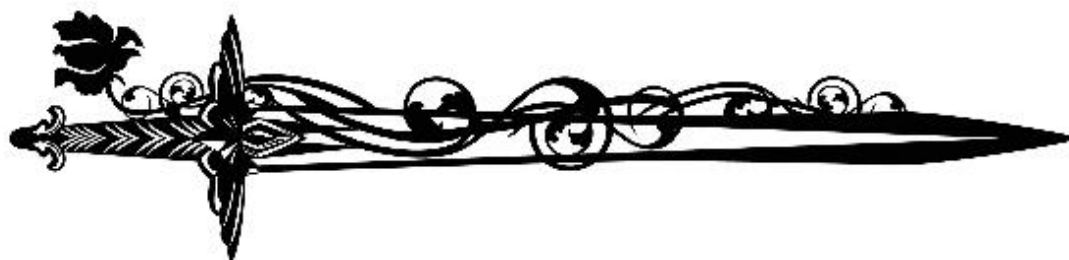
“What did you do?” She pinched her brow. “And why do you have to make it sound like you peed on the carpet?”

“Oh, nothing much. I just agreed to do another job, then revealed too much about my abilities and pissed off a group of the world’s deadliest men.”

“Syn, calm down.” Em took hold of my shoulders and made me stop. I practically vibrated with the need to run. “I’m sure everything is fine. They seemed to really like you yesterday. You’re just overreacting.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the one who’s gonna be out of work if they kill me,” I grumbled and resumed my stride.

Four



I HAD JUST managed to wrap the whip around the leg of the table when Em opened the front door with Alani and her twin, Inala, behind her. The whip locked itself around the wood and I tugged lightly. The small pull still launched the table across the room.

“Fore!” I yelled and ducked. It crashed into the island counter of our kitchen. This thing was really hard to control.

Em pinched the bridge of her nose. “What are you doing?”

The whip shrunk in my hands, sheathing itself and leaving me to face Em’s wrath alone. Coward.

“Training?” My shoulders climbed to my ears.

Em sighed and trudged to her room, picking up a jacket before returning to the doorway where her girlfriends were waiting.

“Just don’t scratch the hardwood. Sabrina will be pissed.” She closed the door with a heavy click.

“What crawled up her ass and died?” I rolled my eyes and rubbed my hands together. Now began phase two of testing. “Just how sentient are you?”

I spent the next hour asking the whip questions. He would nod or shake his tip. By the end of the questions, I knew he had been forged in Eranor, and he had really liked his creator. He hadn’t seen her in over a thousand years. She’d given him a name then, but it wasn’t like he could tell me, so I decided to come up with my own.

“How about Sparky?”

The whip shook his tip. He was hard to please.

“S&M! Get it? ’Cause chains and whips...”

He really wasn’t excited about that one.

I snapped my fingers. “Oh, I’ve got it! Haunted Rope.” If a whip could have a facial expression, Haunted Rope would be glaring.

“Maybe just shorten it to Ted?” I offered. The whip didn’t nod, but he also didn’t shake his tip, so that was progress. My phone’s alarm went off. I had to be at the tailor’s in half an hour. “Okay, fine. We’ll put it on the back burner for now.”

Ted—definitely calling him Ted from now on—sheathed himself, and I set him on the counter.

I rushed to get ready and even swiped my eyelashes with some mascara before I headed out. It *was* the only part of me anyone could see. I might as well make the smallest effort.

The tailor’s shop was a short walk away. Felix and Ari waited for me outside the brick building. I slowed my pace, enjoying the scene in front of me.

Ari had traded out his cloak for a black leather duster, but he still wore a mask similar to mine. Despite that, I could see his bored expression from a block away.

Felix talked and gestured energetically while Ari stared at him as if he could mentally slap his hands over Felix’s mouth. Which, as a daeva, he actually could.

A group of otherworlders watched them from a small park across the street. A girl with a druid mark on her cheek relaxed on a bench. When she spotted me, she sat up and smacked the arm of the green-haired elemental next to her. He shifted his attention to me, and one by one, the rest of the group turned.

I kept my eyes forward. Hopefully, they wouldn’t be any trouble. I hadn’t brought any hunter weapons with me today, afraid the tailor would spot them.

I ignored the stares as I joined Ari and Felix. Ari glared at the group of otherworlders and shot a questioning look at me.

I shrugged. “Probably just some fans of my work.”

“Should we be concerned?” Felix asked.

“Usually, people are just angry that I undid some revenge curse on their ex. Nothing too serious.”

Felix watched the group, his expression tight, but didn't push it any further.

The shop was quaint. It stood out in the middle of the gloomy Silver District. Tall windows displayed extravagant gowns and suits. A poofy bright orange dress engulfed one of the mannequins.

I gulped. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Felix followed my gaze and chuckled. “Don't worry, Your Darkness. Cyrus would never torture you with that.”

He leaned in closer to whisper in my ear, “Unless you royally piss him off. Then it's all fair game.”

I gasped in mock horror and tried to ignore the tingles his breathy voice sent down my spine. “Anything but ruffles.”

Felix laughed and walked through the door that Ari held open for us. The girl inside flinched in surprise. As she took us in, she grew pale. I guessed we must make a strange trio. Two people wearing what could essentially be super villain outfits and Tattoos McGee to my left.

It didn't help that Ari was very expressive with his eyes, and it turned out his resting face was a study on whether a look could flay you alive.

“Appointment for Felix Hrafnsson.” Felix leaned against the counter, oblivious to our effect on the girl.

She nodded stiffly. “H-he's expecting you, Mr. Hrafnsson. Evan's room is the door to the left.”

Felix snagged my hand and led me down the hall. We walked through the open door to a small room. A raised circular platform sat in the center, facing a set of mirrors. Ari followed like a silent shadow and took his place leaning against the wall. At least he didn't glamour himself this time.

Felix released my hand and browsed through a rack of clothes in the corner. I stood awkwardly, not sure if I should sit in the chair or stand on the platform. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long.

A beautiful daeva man entered the room and closed the door. His violet eyes flicked to Ari before they settled on me. He wore a light gray suit and had a tape measure draped over his shoulders. His dirty blond hair was braided away from his angular face.

“Ah, you must be the beautiful Enchanter who needs a dress for a Daevasi ball?” He clasped his hands and studied my body.

“That does sound like me.” I raised an eyebrow at Felix. Just how much did he tell this *daeva* man about our secret mission to infiltrate a *daeva* ball?

Felix ignored my look and pulled a red lacy gown from the rack. He held it up to my body and shook his head. He returned it to the rack and began searching again.

“I’m Evan.” The daeva smiled warmly. “Go ahead and step onto the platform, honey, and I’ll take your measurements.”

“I don’t have to get naked, do I?” I chuckled as I stepped up. I panicked a little when Evan didn’t laugh and instead narrowed his eyes at my coat.

“Actually, if you have a shirt on under that, I’d be able to get a more accurate measurement.”

“I just *had* to open my mouth,” I muttered, and slipped the jacket off. It was cold enough today to wear a thin long sleeve shirt under my coat. It was high on my neck and covered my hunter marks, but I hadn’t expected to take off my jacket. I was braless and wore a shirt from my collection of graphic T’s. It had all the otherworlder races reimagined as Pokémon types.

Felix glanced over and almost choked on his laughter.

“Laugh it up, Caterpie!” I threw my jacket at him. “Druids got bug type!”

He caught my jacket before it could hit his stupid face.

I saw Ari and Felix in the mirror as Evan began exhaustively measuring all parts of my body. After he finally stopped laughing, Felix slung my coat over the rack and returned to pulling dresses. He held them in the air. Apparently, none of them fit his criteria.

Ari stayed on the wall and watched Evan work. His gaze followed Evan's hands intently as he wrapped the tape around my chest. It grazed my nipples through my skintight shirt. I shivered.

Ari's eyes blazed as they trailed up my body. His mana brushed at my skin, and I opened my barriers a crack, curious. I gasped as an image flooded my mind.

Scarred hands ran down my waist. One hand slipped under the hem of my shirt. Need throbbed low in my stomach as his rough hands scraped against my sensitive skin. They climbed higher—

I was thrown out of the vision as a door slammed. My head spun violently. I reached out to Evan's shoulder for stability.

"Sorry," I mumbled, as I fell on him. The room spun, and Ari was gone. Felix glanced at me and ran after him, his brow creased.

"Are you OK?" Evan held my arm to steady me.

"What in the four worlds was that?" I shook my head and removed my hand from his shoulder.

He let me go. "What happened?"

My face heated as I recounted my vision to Evan while he resumed taking measurements.

He smirked. "It's daeva magic."

"No." I shook my head. "Daeva magic doesn't work on me."

"Hold this," he said. I held the tape to the hollow of my throat while he held the other end at my feet. "What I meant is, *you* used daeva magic."

"I used daeva magic." I snorted. "Sure."

"Listen." He paused, seeming to consider how much to tell me. "Ari's a very ... accomplished daeva. He wouldn't accidentally send you a vision. But you, on the other hand ..."

"I didn't send that, if that's what you're saying."

He stepped back from me and draped the measuring tape around his neck. “It’s not something that inexperienced daeva can control. Strong emotions can leak out in visions.”

I covered my burning cheeks with my hands. No wonder Ari ran away. I blasted his brain with sex dreams.

One more weird ability to add to the growing list. I wiped my sweaty palms on my leggings. I really needed to get better at this whole secret abilities thing.

“Who can do that? Send visions?”

“Any daeva with an inkling of magic.” He pulled out a notepad and chewed on the end of his pen. “And apparently, whatever you are.”

“You’re not going to tell anyone?” I asked warily.

I wasn’t sure what I would do if I didn’t get the answer I wanted. I couldn’t exactly just murder the tailor in charge of making my ball gown.

He waved his hand dismissively and began drawing in quick, long strokes on the paper. “Not my business. I deal with those men a lot. Discretion’s a requirement.”

I blew out a breath and shrugged on my jacket. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said absently. “Your dress should be ready by Friday. Any special requests from you? Cyrus gave me a list of instructions, but you’re the one wearing it.”

I smiled wickedly. “Just how many weapons do you think we can hide under the skirt?”



IN THE END, the answer was a lot. My excitement grew with each concealed compartment. I could bring all my toys.

Felix and Ari were gone when I left the shop, so I started the walk home. The group of otherworlders was still outside.

They stood as I closed the glass door behind me.

I took off at a solid pace, but after five minutes and four right turns, I was sure they were following me.

Shit. They weren't being subtle about it, either.

Hopefully, they just meant to intimidate me into leaving the city or something, but the knot in my stomach told me they were dangerous.

I slowed my pace and stuck to the main road. I couldn't outrun them, and without my weapons, I didn't like my odds of taking them. I glanced over my shoulder.

Four still followed and were closing the distance. Their auras were faint, but I made out three full-blood elementals and a druid.

Shit.

At least most of their magic was useless against me. I was worried about the druid, though. I couldn't exactly absorb teeth and claws.

I unlatched my choker and tucked it into my pocket. I had a feeling I'd need to absorb from a distance.

I turned into an alley. No point in doing this on the street and drawing a crowd. They approached me in a line and formed a wall between me and the street. The earth elemental from the park smiled viciously.

"You have a terrible habit of sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, *human*," he spat out. "You shouldn't have touched that curse."

I rolled my eyes. "You're going to have to be more specific. Were you the asshole that buried a woman alive, or were you the asshole that tortured a kid by growing vines under his fingernails?"

Yeah, that last one was as gross as it sounded.

Thorny vines broke through the cement, grasping for my ankles. They snagged my leggings. I absorbed their magic, and they shrank away before they could bite into my skin. Smoke

filled the air as they threw a fireball at me. I inhaled the magic from the air, and it fizzled out a few inches from my face.

Wind whipped at me, throwing me off balance. I absorbed all the mana I could from the air. It bombarded my body. It zipped through my limbs like an electric shock and seized my muscles. The energy built in my chest with every spell they flung at me.

The druid was on all fours as she tried to shift. I stole her magic, preventing it from rising and gathering around her. Realizing his magic kept fizzling, the earth elemental let out a frustrated cry. He slammed his body into me and tackled me to the ground.

My hunter training kicked in and I hooked my legs over his shoulders. I threw him off of me, but it interrupted my focus. Fabric tore, and I looked up to find a furious wolf the size of a small horse. The druid growled and shook off the tattered clothes from her tan fur.

I pulled my only dagger from my boot and jumped to my feet. It felt like a knitting needle in my hands. I followed the wolf's movements and stepped to the left. My knees were bent, and my hands up in a fighting stance.

The elementals watched me and the druid circle each other. They shared a look. It was my only warning before everyone attacked at once.

I stole the flames, but wind knocked me to my back. It pinned me there. I pulled the spell into me and struggled to my knees. Vines snaked around my wrists, pulling them to the ground. The thorns bit into the leather of my sleeves but didn't pierce my skin.

I desperately drank the earth mana. My stomach lurched, but I fought against the bile burning my throat. I looked up in time to see the wolf lunge, teeth bared and snarling.

A shadow swept across my vision and hit her like a truck. She let out a sickening whine as her body cracked the brick wall.

The vines retreated from my wrists as they slithered back through the fissures in the concrete. The earth elemental bashed

his head against the ground. The other two were on either side of him, writhing in pain and screaming.

My arms hung limp. Numbness gripped my muscles. I focused on staying conscious as black spots clouded my vision.

A familiar figure all in black stood above the naked druid. She had shifted back into her normal form. Sobs wracked her thin body. Her bony fingers clutched at her head and pulled chunks of hair from her scalp.

“Please,” she begged. She pounded at her skull with her palms. “Make it stop.”

Blood bloomed from Ari’s chest. It soaked into the dark fabric of his shirt, glistened on the leather of his duster, and dripped down his fingers. He ignored it, his glowing eyes focused on the druid.

She shifted her hand into a claw and dragged it across her own throat. She tensed and coughed, spraying dark blood on the concrete before she was still.

Ari turned to the elementals, still on the ground.

“Ari?” My voice came out a pathetic whimper. His eyes, like blazing purple flames, snapped to me. He knelt and gently cupped my face in his hands as the screams intensified.

I tried to turn, but Ari held my head in place. Mana saturated the air, building until the pressure snapped.

The silence that came next was deafening, but the stillness was short-lived. Ari crumpled to the ground. Crimson blood spread around him and collected in the cracks of the concrete. His hands clenched into fists and his eyes squeezed closed; he didn’t make a sound. Violent tremors wracked his body. His churning purple aura condensed around him.

Footsteps approached, and I vaguely registered that I should get up. I should be ready to fight. I should have felt bad, vulnerable, even scared. Hell, there were dead bodies all around me, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Ari. He rolled to his side and curled around himself.

I was no stranger to blood and death, but this was no fight. Ari swooped in, and everyone was dead within seconds, killing

themselves to avoid whatever torture he'd ignited in their heads.

A hand touched my shoulder, pulling me out of my daze.

"It's the daeva curse. He could only hold it off for a short while," Felix explained gravely. "He's experiencing the pain he's inflicted on others. It'll pass in a few days."

It was why daeva never really harmed us. They could fuck around with your head, sure, even crack open your mind or fill your head with nightmares, but they could never cause physical pain or injury without it being returned.

He killed them to save me, knowing this would happen.

"Why the hell did he do that?" I took Ari's hand but flinched at the greasy mana I felt on his skin. "Wait." An idea formed in my mind. "It's a curse..."

I could help him. I had to help him. No one would suffer for me. Never again.

"Did you hit your head?" Felix bent down and grabbed my face.

I slapped his hand away. "Help me get his shirt off. That seems to be where most of the blood is coming from."

"Whoa whoa whoa. I like my head right where it is, thank you. I am *not* undressing the man who just killed four people with his mind."

"Fine, I'll do it myself." My hands shook as I wrestled with the buttons on his jacket. Felix nudged my hands away and finished unfastening them. Ari's hood fell back from his face, revealing shaggy brown hair.

I rolled him over and wiggled him out of the duster. His muscles were tense, locked in place. It made it difficult to bend his arms to take off the jacket. It felt like I was undressing a life-sized Barbie doll.

"Go get the others." I threw the bundle of leather to Felix, not looking to see if he caught it. "If this doesn't work, we'll probably both have to be carried away." Felix didn't respond, but I saw a flash of black out of the corner of my eye, and something took off into the air.

I leaned over Ari and pressed my palms to the blood-soaked concrete on either side of him. I scanned for any buttons or even a zipper on his shirt. It was made of a smooth material, stretching from the waist of his black pants to his chin. There were no tears in the fabric, no sign anything had pierced through.

My eyes caught a glint of silver to my right. Hopefully Felix was kidding about the whole beheading thing because I had a feeling Ari's shirt wouldn't survive this encounter.

I picked up my dagger as Ari's back arched, and he released a haunting cry. His eyes opened. His unfocused gaze darted around, chasing invisible phantoms.

Every muscle in his body was tense, but he wasn't moving anymore. I carefully made a cut on the hem of his shirt and tore through the rest. I sucked in a breath when I pulled the cloth away. Countless scars scored his skin.

Angry red lines blended with old white marks crisscrossed on top of one another, lacerated into his raised skin. There was the shape of a four-pointed star cut deeply into the left side of his chest among the random slashes.

"What happened to you?" I whispered. He whimpered, and waves of convulsions took his body.

Blood poured freely from four fresh wounds across his chest. The mana of the curse pooled in the wounds, like an oil slick on the blood. I placed my hands on the bloody star on his chest and opened my barriers.

Purple magic shot up my arms. Instead of joining the rest of the mana in my blood, the curse shot up my spine and drilled its way through the walls of my mind.

Jumbled memories assaulted me, voices talked over each other, and mismatched images flashed across my vision. I felt like I was stabbed, hugged, punched, then kissed breathless. Finally, everything settled all at once and snapped into place like an over-stretched rubber band.

I squinted into the darkness until my eyes adjusted. I was in some sort of medieval-looking dungeon. Beams of moonlight

filtered through a small, barred window. The cool light hit patches of the dirty floor.

A choked sob drew my attention to a figure I hadn't noticed before. A small boy cried in the corner. He pressed himself against the stone, trying to make himself as small as possible.

"Hello?" My voice echoed through the space, but he didn't react to the sound. Was I a ghost? Did I die in that attack?

"Sam," a smooth, feminine voice said from the darkness, "please try to understand."

A torch flared to life, illuminating a thin woman in a tattered dress. Her brown hair was collected in a disheveled bun, and chaotic strands framed her purple eyes. Tears streamed down her face, carving lines down her bruised, dirty cheeks. She took a step forward and gripped the bars of our cell.

In the flickering light, I could see the boy clearer. He had ratty brown hair a shade lighter than the woman's. He wore nothing but rags. Dirt and soot streaked his ashen skin. I tried to move closer, but it felt like I was trying to swim through tar.

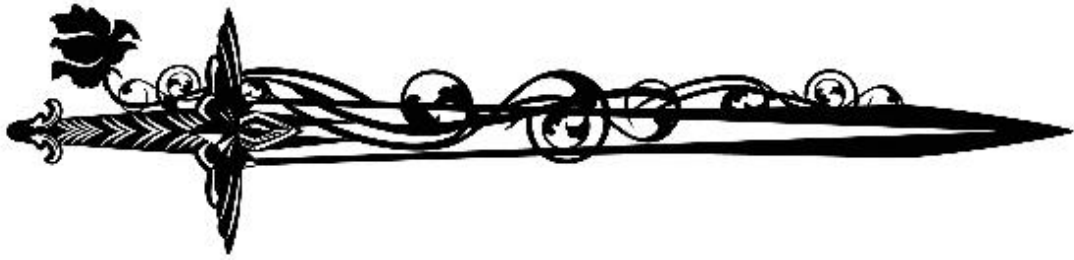
"You'll be returned to us in a few years once you've worked off your father's debts." The woman smiled, but it was empty. "Zentiir is a good Daevasi man. Just do whatever he says, and you'll be home in no time."

The boy was silent as he hid his face in his hands. After another moment, she nodded to herself and stepped back from the bars. She slipped into the darkness without another look.

The boy's sobbing grew louder once she was out of sight. My heart throbbed painfully at the broken sound. I pushed through the resistance in the air as I tried to get to him. My hair stuck to my sweaty forehead. My skin stung and shallow breaths rasped in my lungs.

I collapsed to my knees in front of him and forced my hand through the thick air. Before I could touch him, his head snapped up. Glowing lilac eyes found mine before the vision sputtered and I fell.

Five



MY HEAD THROBBED, the pain radiating down my neck. I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow. My mask pressed against my nose and my hood flopped over my head. I wiggled my toes. Even my boots were still on.

I must have fallen asleep in my disguise again. I groaned and pushed up from the bed. Wait. This wasn't my bed.

“Good morning, sleepyhead!” Felix dropped himself on the mattress next to me, practically launching me into the air. “I never pegged you as an air elemental, but it does explain your spunk.”

My hands flew to my head, running over the fabric of my scarf. Entire clumps of my hair stuck out.

Swell.

I wanted to shove my face into the pillow and try to fall back asleep. Wasn't that what you were supposed to do in a nightmare? Maybe I could ask Felix to pinch me.

Instead, I sat up and faced the druid in the room like a big girl.

“Where am I?” My voice was rough from sleep. I cleared my throat. “Where's Ari?”

Felix ran his hand through his dark hair. He wore a T-shirt and gray sweats. His markings wove along every inch of skin I could see. They disappeared into his shirt and climbed across his collarbone.

“Well, the other guys and I found you passed out in the alley. We brought you back to our room in Sabrina's hotel to sleep it off.” He played with the corner of the comforter.

Sabrina ran a little hotel above and below the Dungeon. Otherworlders loved their secrecy almost as much as they loved their well-decorated rooms, and Sabrina supplied both in equal measure. She warded all the rooms to oblivion. She probably already knew I was here.

“Where’s Ari?” I asked again.

“Ari wasn’t there when we got back. Just you, out cold in a puddle of blood ... and all those bodies, of course. I think Cyrus just about had a heart attack.”

My shoulders sagged in relief. If he wasn’t there, then he had recovered enough to walk away. I did it. I absorbed the curse.

“Don’t worry, he usually takes a little time after the curse clears.” Felix squeezed my shoulder.

I nodded and scratched at my scarf. I should probably just take it off. He’d already seen my hair. “Whose bed is this?”

Now that I’d committed to waking up, I looked around the room. I was in a bed centered along one wall. Next to the closet, an open door revealed a peek at the deluxe bathroom. The furniture was painted white and embellished in gold, and plush gray carpet covered the floor. The window was open, and sunlight scattered through transparent curtains, which blew softly in the morning breeze.

“Morning?” I said in disbelief. “I’ve been asleep since yesterday afternoon?”

“You’re in my bedroom, and no, you’ve been asleep since after visiting the tailor’s *two days* ago.” Felix jumped to his feet and threw the door open. “So, how do you like your coffee?”

My mind tripped over the information. I was unconscious for two days and Felix Hrafnsson, agent of the Aegis, brought me back to his suite to sleep it off.

“I’ve never absorbed enough mana to knock me out for more than a few hours.” I followed him out of the room and into the living room of his suite.

“I guess a daeva curse put in place by an Ancient is a powerful thing.” Felix walked to the kitchenette and poured two

mugs of coffee. He dropped a straw in one. “What a surprise.”

I took a seat at the counter bar and began the long process of detangling my scarf.

“So, what are you, my mysterious Enchanter? Silver eyes and hair to match. You must be at least half air elemental. Maybe some bennu? Having to conceal runes would explain why you hide under all that clothing.”

He cocked his head in thought.

“That might also be the right combo for your abilities if you found a rune to dispel things.”

“Uh-uh, I’m not telling.” I’d let him believe whatever he wanted.

“Bennu-elemental-hybrid-says-what,” Felix said quickly. When I gave him a deadpan look, he snapped his fingers and shook his head. “Almost had ya.”

I laughed, and I tangled my hands in my hair.

“Here, let me help you.” Felix set the mugs of coffee on the counter and positioned himself behind me. “Drink up while I work on this ... situation up here.”

“It’s alright, really.” I yanked a little harder on my strands. Felix caught my hands.

“You saved Ari from days of pain. Let me make sure you don’t have to cut off all this beautiful hair, okay? It’s the least I can do.”

I grumbled, but grudgingly picked up the cup, slipped the straw under my mask, and took a sip. His deft fingers tugged gently at my hair, and I forced myself to relax. My skin tingled pleasantly as he worked. His nails scraped my scalp, and I swallowed a moan.

When he was done, he tossed the scarf on the counter and ran his fingers through my tresses. He worked out the last of the knots and smoothed my hair down my back.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He winked and scooped his mug from the counter. “Oh, and we spoke with Sabrina about what happened.

She passed it on to your associate.”

I raised my eyebrows. Em probably didn’t take that well. As much as she trusted the Aegis, she hated surprises.

He whistled. “That one can be seriously intimidating. She barged in here and demanded Skye and Shael help with your appointment yesterday since we ‘incapacitated the talent.’”

I smirked. That must have been interesting. The appointment was supposed to be regarding an arson case in the Copper District. The police thought the fire had to be otherworldly because they couldn’t put it out. Oh, and because a face appeared in the flames, threatening all the humans in the city.

“How did that go?”

“Let’s just say Shael thought a demonstration would be in order, and the cops didn’t appreciate that very much. Luckily, Skye was there. He put the fire out pretty quick.”

I groaned. “The police will never ask for my help again.”

He waved his hand in the air. “Eh, you don’t need ’em. I have a feeling we’ll keep you pretty busy now that we’ve found you.”

I choked on my coffee. It felt like I was playing with otherworldly fire. And now they knew I had silver hair and eyes. It was only a matter of time before they put the pieces together. Too bad it seemed my sense of self-preservation was chipped away every minute I spent with them.

“In fact, your associate said you didn’t have any appointments today. If you’re up for it, we could use your help with a ward that’s been hard to crack.”

Everything in me wanted to say yes; this could mean doing work that actually meant something.

As much as I hated to admit it, I did miss one thing from my time as a hunter: a sense of purpose. As misguided as it was, I used to think I was saving the world. And it felt good. Really good.

Maybe I could reveal myself once I had earned their trust. Maybe then they would believe I’d done the impossible. I

escaped the hunter order. I ‘d *wanted* to escape the hunter order.

But then again, I might as well try to tell them I was a tree shifter.

Another door opened, and an adorably sleepy and extremely shirtless Cyrus strode into the room. His messy, pale blond hair concealed the silver tips on his pointed ears. He was built like a Roman statue. The corded muscles of his arms tensed as he stretched and yawned.

His blue eyes widened on me, and he stopped in his tracks. “I told you to get me as soon as she was awake.”

My hands twitched, wanting to cover my incriminating hair, but I resisted. It would only make them more suspicious of me. Thankfully, the hair and eyes alone weren’t unique to hunters. Some air elementals like Alani had white or gray hair.

The reason for our coloring was unique, though. Raw mana powered our abilities and ran through our veins. We couldn’t wield mana like an otherworlder; we *were* mana. Which was why we needed to ingest it to survive, why we were addicted to it like a drug.

Thankfully, ‘hunter’ wouldn’t be the first thing that came to mind if someone tried to figure me out. This was partly because hunters were very guarded and partly because most *couldn’t* do what I could. My family had always been special but so unwilling to experiment.

“I wanted to have the infamous Enchanter all to myself for a little while.” Felix’s face morphed into the wicked look I expected from him.

“Have you told her about the warehouse?” Cyrus passed us and poured himself a cup of coffee. He drank it black. I wrinkled my nose.

“Yeah, I think she was about to agree to help before you interrupted.”

“She’s right here,” I reminded them. “And what exactly is she agreeing to help with?”

Cyrus leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. I tried to keep my eyes on his face, but his runes kept drawing my attention. Thick tattoos formed lines of alien-looking text. They stretched along his side from his neck to where they disappeared into the waistband of his sweats. A few symbols glowed with faint golden light, like the whips did when activated. Most were black, though. Inactive.

“Right, sorry,” Cyrus said, not looking the least bit sorry. “We traced one of Valeria’s companies to a warehouse in the Industrial District. We believe it could contain the evidence we need to prove she’s behind the trafficking, but the wards on the building are strong. Ari’s gone and we can’t risk overriding them by force in case she’s alerted.”

“We’re hoping you can drain the wards, at least long enough for us to get in and out,” Felix finished. “Do you think you’d be able to do that?”

I hummed while I thought. It was a habit I had picked up from Em in the year we’d lived together.

I didn’t have much experience in this department. I knew a few races could create wards, daeva and bennu for sure. “I assume they’re daeva wards? Sabrina is pretty familiar with my abilities. If I run into any trouble, she might be able to guide me through this.”

“So, you’ll do it?” Felix asked.

“I need something in return.”

“Money?”

“Well, yes.” I shook my head and waved my hand through the air. “You can figure that part out with Sabrina. But I need you to promise something.”

Cyrus twirled his dagger between his fingers. It flickered between different blades as it spun.

“Where did you even pull that from? Never mind.” I shook my head, trying to get my thoughts back on track. “What do you say? You scratch my back, I disarm your magical psychic wards?”

“What do you want me to promise, Enchanter?”

“No questions about me,” I said firmly. “If we’re going to work together for a while, I need you all to promise me. I can’t trust you with my safety if you’re too busy being nosy instead of watching my back.”

Cyrus narrowed his eyes, but after a moment he nodded. “I’ll propose it to the other guys, but I think we can control our ... noses for the time being.”

I blew out a breath. “Good.”

“But I need a promise from you, too.” His cold eyes watched me, looking for any twitches or tells. It seemed Ari wasn’t the only one on the team who could read lies.

“Okay.” I bit my lip. “What is it?”

“If your secrets become a danger to you or the team, you’ll tell me. I can’t help you if you don’t let me.”

My stomach sank. Somehow, he knew just what to say. I kept my secrets to protect myself. I didn’t want to hurt anyone else.

“I’ll tell you if it comes to that.” But I’d do anything it took to make sure it didn’t.



THE WAREHOUSE LOOMED above an empty parking lot. We’d waited until later in the afternoon, when Cyrus insisted there would be no one guarding the place. Apparently, they thought the wards were impenetrable, which to others, maybe it was. Much to my smug delight, I dispelled the wards easily, even though Felix hovered over me like a worried mother hen.

“You should be more careful in your state.”

“Felix, I’m not pregnant.” I rolled my eyes and followed behind Cyrus as we passed through the parking lot to the metal door.

Cyrus pulled out a marker and drew a rune on the lock of the warehouse door. It sprang open and fell to the ground.

“You can just do that with ink? Doesn’t it have to be blood or something?” I asked, genuinely curious. For hunters, blood always held power. We coated our weapons in it, and it acted like a poison to otherworlders, sapping their magic.

Cyrus ignored me and drew what looked like a leather-wrapped hilt from his belt. In a flash of light, he held an elegant, curved sword. He pushed on the door, and it opened with a loud groan, but no alarm or yelling came in response to the noise.

I pulled my own daggers from their sheaths on my hips. I wished I could have brought my hunter weapons, but nothing says “Hey, guys, I’m a hunter” more than a dagger specially made to hold my blood in the grooves of the blade.

We filed cautiously into the warehouse. Cyrus and the elemental twins went first. I followed and blinked hard as my eyes adjusted to the near pitch blackness inside.

The smell hit me first, and I gagged on the bodily fluid medley.

Shael conjured a flame in his hand, and I saw the sleeping bodies packed on rows of shelves, lying in their own filth. Purple mana swirled around their heads. They must have been cursed with a spell to keep them unconscious.

“There must be hundreds of them.” I approached a shelf. The bodies were on their backs and stacked on top of one another. “Like freaking canned goods at a grocery store.”

“It’s a slaver’s warehouse.” Venom dripped from his words. The muscle on his cheek popped as he ground his teeth together. “They’ve done the same with our people in Porada. They don’t care who they hurt as long as they have workers for their mines and fighters for their pits.”

Bile rose in my throat. Hunters were bad. They killed without a second thought. But this? This was beyond sick. My eyes locked onto a body smaller than the others. His face was slack, but his eyes darted behind his eyelids as if he was dreaming. He couldn’t have been older than nine.

“What do we do?” My voice cracked.

“We have our evidence.” Cyrus’ voice was bitter and detached. “Now we take Valeria at the ball.”

A beam of sunlight blinded me as he opened the door to leave. I stood dumbstruck as Felix followed Cyrus out without another look at the humans, packed into a warehouse like merchandise.

My knuckles were white as I strangled the life out of my daggers. How fucking *dare* they? They spouted all this bullshit about being the protectors of the worlds, but when it came down to it, they could just turn their backs and pretend like hundreds of people weren’t about to be transported to another planet and forced into slavery?

I stomped outside and made a beeline for Cyrus, who was calmly walking towards the sleek black SUV.

“You cannot be fucking serious!” I waved my daggers around at the warehouse behind us. “We can’t leave these people here!”

My iron choker burned at my neck as my magic fought to escape its constraints. It wanted to drain Cyrus of every drop of mana he had.

“We can’t afford to scare Valeria into hiding. We need her unaware of our investigation. You may not understand, but that’s not how this works. You need to accept the order and fall in line.”

I flinched. My pulse pounded in my ears.

“You—you’re such a heartless dick!” I yelled at his back.

He stopped and spun around, but instead of anger on his face, he looked ... broken. Shadows that mirrored my own swam in the depths of his icy blue eyes.

“You’re right, Enchanter. I am heartless.”

The other guys surrounded us. Skye stepped to my back. His misty aura licked up my spine. Felix regarded us warily, but Shael looked like he wanted to punch Cyrus in the face, so at least I had him on my side.

“I’m sorry I can’t listen to every little sob story and break every tiny inconvenient curse, but at least the good people of Haven have *you* to save them,” Cyrus said, sneering. “For a price.”

At that, Shael really did punch Cyrus in the face. I was glad my mask was on, or they would have seen my jaw drop to the concrete. Felix wrestled Shael to the ground before a full-blown fistfight could break out in the parking lot.

Skye’s hand on my arm shook as he shielded me. His other was in a fist. His dark blue eyes shone with mana. A thick blanket of clouds formed low above us, obscuring the sun. His control was slipping, too.

Cyrus sat on the gravel. His head hung between his bent knees. The sky opened up and dropped sheets of water over the Industrial District. He raised his head to look at me through his drenched blond hair, now plastered to his forehead. Red blossomed from his nose, running down his chin, and pain mingled with determination in his eyes.

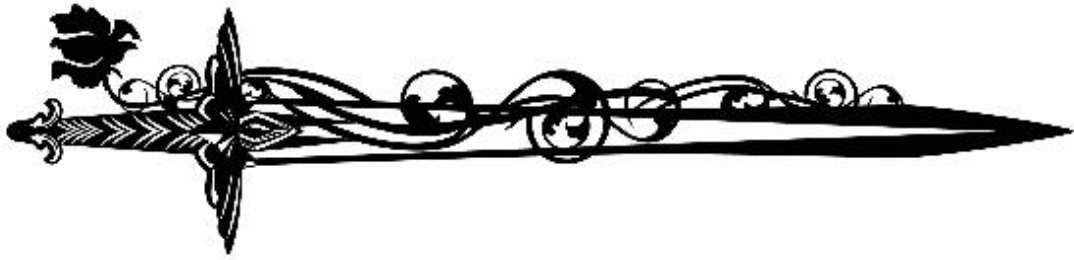
I shook my head, and a bitter laugh escaped my throat. He knew this was wrong, but he’d already decided. It didn’t fit into his pretty plan.

I turned and walked toward the main street. I would just grab a cab home.

“I’m such an idiot,” I mumbled. I had believed them, had begun to believe *in* them. They were no better than hunters, only concerned with their own narrow-minded idea of justice. Self-righteous assholes were all the same. They believed their cause to be the most important and damn the rest.

Those people in the warehouse deserved someone who actually gave a shit, no matter the cost. It was time I accepted it. Dealing with evil otherworlders was a job for hunters.

Six



“CAN’T YOU JUST, like, call in a tip to the hunter hotline or something?” Em rubbed her arms and pressed her lips into a flat line.

She didn’t take it well when I told her the daeva were trafficking humans by the warehouseful, and she took it even worse when I told her that the noble Aegis team wouldn’t lift a finger to save the humans we’d found.

I strapped my holsters to my hips. “Doesn’t exactly work like that.”

“Then I’m coming.”

“You’re not coming.”

I’d waited until sunset to launch my plan into action. I hoped it would give me a better cover and allow me to get the people out of the warehouse unnoticed.

“Syn, I can handle myself. You’ve trained me for years,” Em said. To emphasize her point, she threw a kitchen knife at the wall without looking. It landed smack dab in the middle of a painting, sticking out of the farmer’s face.

“Tsk-tsk, Em. Now who’s destroying the apartment?” I wagged my finger at her. “It’s too dangerous. The daeva may have noticed that their wards were down. I don’t know what to expect.”

“Exactly. That’s why you could use an extra hand.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. Em squealed in excitement. “But you wear your disguise *and* my old gear! No one will be surprised to hear a couple of hunters fucked some daeva up, and you might just fool them. You’ll keep watch outside while I go in and lift the curses from the captives.”

“But—”

“No buts or you’re staying home.”

“Fine.”

“Great!” I clapped my hands. “Get dressed. You’d better be covered in weapons the next time I see you.” Em disappeared into my room, and I heard my weapon trunk open.

When she returned, she’d dressed in my old leather hunter gear, plus her scarf and mask. Frayed gray threads formed simple patterns in the dark leather. The threads were dipped in blood and would give her some immunity to otherworlder magic. She looked just like a pint-sized hunter.

I wore plain black clothes and strapped a set of hunter daggers to my hips. Ted would have to stay home for now if we wanted them to think we were just a pair of hunters.

“What weapons did you take?” I asked her.

She pointed to each one as she listed it. “I took your old daggers, your throwing knives, your blood bombs—” Blood bombs were my very own invention, and they were exactly what it sounded like. Hunter blood sapped otherworlders of their magic, and these babies enveloped them in a cloud of the stuff. “—your crossbow, those star-thingies—”

“Shurikens.”

“Right, a few shurikens and your little ax. There’s no way I’d be able to take the big one.”

“Oh! Did you grab my katana? I think I left it by the bathtub.”

Em huffed. “You know I suck with that thing.”

“Alright, well, I guess we’re ready.” I wrung my hands like a nervous mother. I had no problem jumping into danger headfirst, but Em was the only friend I had in this world. I couldn’t ignore the twisting feeling in my gut when I thought about her getting hurt.

“It’ll be fine, Syn. Taking down otherworlders is kinda what you were born to do.”

She had a point, and there was no more stalling. The sun sank below the horizon. It was time.

We went down to the garage, and I started up my bike. I looked around the whole while. We'd have to be extra aware of our surroundings tonight. We couldn't afford for anyone to follow us.

When we were sure the coast was clear, we were on our way. Em nearly strangled me with her arms. She wasn't a fan of motorcycles, but tonight, the task demanded we look like hunters, and hunters were never without their steel steeds.

I narrowed my eyes as I pulled into the dimly lit parking lot. Someone restored the wards, and they were stronger than before. A lot stronger.

My body eagerly drank their mana as I dispelled them, and we parked behind a patch of tall bushes. When we got to the door, it was locked. Someone had definitely been here.

I signaled to Em to do a sweep of the perimeter. She went to the right, while I went to the left.

There were no cars, and no one lingered outside the warehouse. Maybe they'd just come back to check the wards.

I pulled my lock-picking set from my saddlebag and went to work. I heard the telltale click, and the lock sprang. I eased the door open and turned on my flashlight. The beam landed on the shelf to my right, but it was bare.

I took a step farther and swept my flashlight around the cavernous room. Aisles of shelves filled the space, but there were no people. Footsteps echoed behind me.

"I don't understand. They were here yesterday." I shook my head. We were too late.

"They must have noticed their wards were down and moved them." Em's voice penetrated the darkness.

I moved to the opposite wall, dragging the light across each rack as I went.

Violet eyes reflected back at me.

I jumped and turned, but I ran right into a solid wall of muscle. Thick arms wrapped around me. I thrashed in the man's grip. My flashlight fell to the ground, revealing more sets of purple eyes.

“Em, Run!”

“It's her!”

I struggled blindly, grasping for my daggers.

“Get the other one!”

The man holding me laughed. The vibration reached my back, making my skin crawl.

“You'll make a lovely slave.” Hot, putrid breath blew across my cheek. “Just have to break that spirit first.”

The shadows, bathed in purple mana, closed in around Em's silhouette. I heard the clash of metal, and a grunt of pain followed it. Then she screamed.

They couldn't cause physical injury without activating the curse, but that didn't mean they wouldn't. There were plenty of scarred daeva.

“Shit!” I stopped struggling and instead pulled on my captor's mana. He jerked back as I wrenched his life force from his body. Just enough for me to get away and pull my daggers.

I aimed for his throat. He caught the blade, and it cut through his hand instead. He fell to his knees and clasped his mangled hand to his chest. He shrieked in pain as the hunter blood did its work.

I kicked my flashlight, turning it to the group of shadows. Five daeva surrounded Em. They must have seen her hunter regalia and assumed she was the bigger threat.

One held her, but she kned him in the balls. Another lunged for her, but I sent my dagger flying. He fell to the concrete, my dagger planted in his back.

Em kicked him in the face as he went down for good measure. I ran to her, only slowing to yank my dagger from the daeva's back. Em fought off another guy who tried to grab her.

She pulled something round out of her pocket and threw it on the ground. It exploded, engulfing us all in my blood.

The daeva screamed and choked. I pushed Em towards the door and placed myself between her and the daeva.

“Let us go, and I won’t have to kill you.” I didn’t want to kill anyone. As much as these jerkwads deserved it, I wanted to at least try to avoid bloodshed.

“Stop fighting, and I promise not to sell you to the Ringmaster.”

“Seems we’re at an impasse.”

An arrow whizzed by me and thwacked into his forehead. Em must have taken out the crossbow. I seized on the surprise and ate the distance between me and the nearest daeva.

He saw me coming and dodged my attack. I pushed myself harder, increasing the flurry of my blades, but he danced around every slash.

He dropped low and tackled me.

Burning agony ripped through my side where my own dagger pierced flesh. I screamed through clenched teeth and pulled it out. I pressed my hand to the wound.

Another daeva came from the darkness and wrapped a chain around my neck. I jerked my head back, hitting something solid. He staggered, and the tension on the chain lessened. I pulled it from my neck and jumped to my feet.

We couldn’t win. We had to run. There was no one to be saved, and there were too many for us to take.

The second daeva grasped the end of the chain. He reached back to swing it, but I kicked out. I winced at the cracking sound my boot made as it met his knee. Then I ran.

I grabbed Em’s hand and sprinted to the door. I felt along it as footsteps thundered behind us. Em threw knives and shurikens, and even another blood bomb trying to slow them down.

I felt my hands along the rough wall until I felt a crack. I pulled on the handle, but it wouldn’t budge. I threw all my

weight into it to force it open.

“Come on! Dammit!” I rammed my shoulder into the door again.

Hot blood ran down my waist. I would not end up like one of those people lying on the shelf. I was not a possession. I was a fucking hunter.

I took a step from the door and jumped, slamming into it. The latch finally snapped, and the door gave way. I stumbled into the moonlit lot and sprinted to my bike.

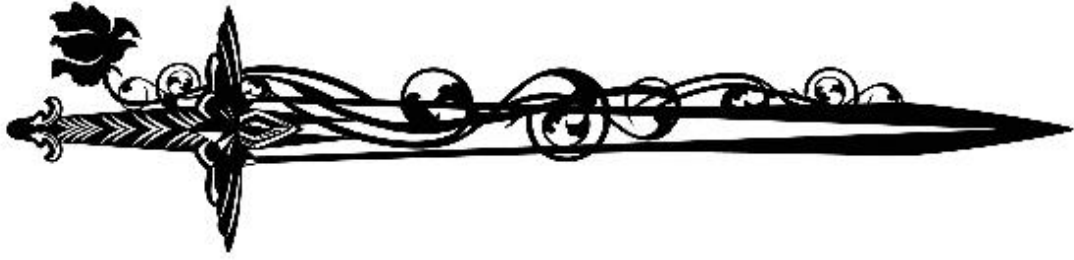
Em fell behind, but a glance over my shoulder showed she still outran them.

I hopped on, gunned it, and came to a screeching halt next to Em. She leapt onto the bike behind me. One of the daeva gave up on trying to catch us and pulled out a gun.

“Shit!”

Gunfire rang out, sending a spray of chipped concrete at me. My tire burned with black smoke as I twisted the throttle, and we flew out of the Industrial District.

Seven



“OUCH OUCH OUCH!”

“Stop being a baby,” Em said.

“Stop digging your fingers into my cut!”

“It’s for your own good. I have to clean it so you’ll heal faster. You have the ball tomorrow, remember?”

I gripped the shower rod tighter and clenched my teeth. Her evil little hands went back to work, scraping and tugging at the tender skin of my side. I hissed when the wet rag met my opened flesh.

“Oops, sorry.”

I growled, but she just smiled at me. Em was definitely a sadist.

“They knew we were coming.” I couldn’t get over that thought. As many times as I ran it over in my head, it never made sense. “Cyrus is a heartless dick. I won’t take that back, but he knows his stuff. He wouldn’t have had me take those wards down if he thought it would alert them that someone was on their heels.”

“Maybe someone saw you outside when you two had your first fight.”

I didn’t like the way she made it sound like we were a couple arguing about a girl named Tiffany.

“Maybe ... Shit!” My knuckles whitened as Em poured a fresh batch of water over the wound. “Now all I have is Cyrus’s stupid plan.”

She handed me a clean gauze pad, and I held it to my side while she secured it in place and wrapped a bandage around my

middle.

“Honestly, Syn, it sounds like a pretty good plan. Maybe you should give them a chance. I know you’re jaded about self-righteous organizations, but they do incredible things. Things you can’t do alone.”

“It’s not like I have another option.” I pulled my shirt over my head and stepped out of the tub. It would take a lot of mana to heal, but by morning I’d have nothing but a thin red mark down my ribs.

I thought the Enchanter business was beneath me, but I couldn’t even take out a few daeva.

Em was right. I should give the Aegis a chance. I could be a cynical bitch sometimes, but this situation called for the optimist in me. I just needed to dig deep to find her.



WHEN I ARRIVED at the suite Cyrus and Felix shared the next morning, I was greeted by a scene I wouldn’t soon forget. Felix, Skye and Shael sat around the dining table, cards in their hands and clothes piled on the table. Shael was down to his boxers, though Skye leaned back in his chair, fully clothed and hands empty.

Felix wore what looked like upwards of five shirts and smiled smugly at the elementals. He tossed his cards on the table, waving his gloved hands in the air in victory. “Read ’em and weep, boys!”

“What did I just walk into? And why does it look like Felix is preparing for a snowstorm?”

“We’re playing strip poker, buttercup,” Felix purred. “Care to join?”

Shael rose to his feet. His chair scraped on the hardwood. “We didn’t think you’d come.”

I sat heavily on the couch and flung my booted feet onto the coffee table. “I stand by my declaration, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still want to help.”

I smothered a yawn. Shael pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a shirt before joining me on the couch. Though the couch could easily fit four, he sat close to me, our legs touching. I felt his blisteringly hot magic through the material of our pants. I leaned into him, craving the potent mana coursing through his body.

“How’s your hand?” I smirked at Shael.

He held it out for me to see. There were no visible marks, nothing at all. His skin wasn’t even dry. “Skye healed me.”

I looked over at his twin, still at the table. “Neat trick.”

As far as I knew, elemental healing magic was incredibly rare, almost legendary. Maybe it had something to do with the fact he had both earth and water affinity?

“Listen, pup.” Felix shuffled over to an armchair opposite Shael and me. The way he moved made me think he also wore a few pairs of pants. “I know Cyrus can be an asshole, but he has reasons for the decisions he makes.”

His tone was solemn, but when he struggled to cross his legs, I couldn’t hold back a giggle.

“Hey, I’m trying to apologize here, and I would appreciate it if you took this seriously.” Felix folded his hands in his lap and maintained a somber expression, which had me losing it. My mana exhaustion wasn’t helping.

“You’re right.” I fought to regain my composure. “This is very serious, sorry.”

“As I was saying, Cyrus can seem cold and cruel, but it’s just because he’s been doing this sort of thing for so long. As difficult as it is, sometimes we have to sacrifice the few to save the many. He knows what can happen when you take a risk and it backfires. I mean, he’s been alive for thousands of years. Who knows what he’s seen?”

I bit my tongue and stayed quiet, opting for a terse nod instead. Shame flamed my cheeks. They didn’t need to know

about my little failed operation. Hopefully, they never would.

“Good.” Felix stood and motioned to the room I had woken up in just the day before. “Your gown is waiting for you in there, and may I say, Evan really outdid himself.”

I dragged myself to the bedroom, and wow, Felix wasn’t kidding. An almost impossible amount of black and silver cloth draped over the bed.

I sighed. This was going to take a while to get on, and I wasn’t sure I had the energy to deal with the number of laces and clasps I saw before me.

I closed the door and started stripping. I barely made it, but I shed the last layer. I plopped down naked on the bed, analyzing my life choices and cursing whoever designed skinny jeans.

My hand probed the bed next to me, finding a pair of black tights. I groaned. No way in hell would I be able to get myself into those. Tights took a year and a half to put on in the best of times.

I threw those puppies back from whence they came and finally peeled myself off the bed. With some skillful finagling, I got the dress on, though tightening the laces in the back practically killed me.

I slid my weapons into the folds and hidden pockets of my dress. I strapped Ted to my thigh, opposite the dress’s slit, for quick access.

I staggered to the bathroom and leaned on the counter to catch my breath. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I more closely resembled the girl from *The Ring* than a high-class Daevasi lady at the moment, but that was all on me.

The gown was truly breathtaking. Black silk cascaded down my body, kissing the ground and trailing behind me. The inside lining was pearlescent silver, and it flashed through the slit up my right leg with every step. Tightly woven black lace covered my arms and neck and joined with the structured bodice.

Next to the sink was a cowl and mask. The mask was made of a mesh of thin silver wire. I held it up to my face. It covered everything above my lips like a typical masquerade mask.

I frowned. It wasn't the usual half of my face that I covered, but it wasn't like the Aegis would immediately peg me as the lost Morgan heir based on my chin.

I left the cowl on the counter and quickly secured my hair in an elegant, if slightly chaotic, updo. By the time I finished, the pounding in my head became a steady drumbeat, pushing at my temples.

I needed to feed, but I could make it to the party. I hoped.

I pushed off the counter on wobbly legs. Thankfully, Evan gave me short heels, or I would break an ankle before we even stepped through the portal.

When I returned to the living room, everyone was in what I assumed to be very fancy Daevasi attire. If I didn't know any better, I would have said they were headed to a steampunk masquerade.

Skye was dressed in a black trench coat. Golden designs swirled through the velvety fabric. Shael wore a similar outfit, but his coat was blood red, matching his hair. They held golden masks similar to mine in their hands as they lounged on the sofa, waiting for me.

Felix looked every bit the suave predator in his dark blue suit. He moved with feline grace, walking on silent feet to the kitchen. He, too, wore a mask, but his was black and had two short horns that extended from the top, curling backward.

My eyes found the last Aegis agent. He leaned against the wall next to me. His frigid gaze studied me from behind a simple mask, making my heart beat faster. He wore a long black coat and an embroidered vest, complementing the other three. He'd parted his blond hair in the middle to conceal his silver-capped ears.

"You can't bring all those weapons." Cyrus frowned at me. "Someone will notice."

I looked down at the skirt. How on Earth did he even see them? I didn't have the energy for this right now. "I really hope you're finally making a joke."

The others turned to look at us, and Shael whistled, his eyes pinned on my lips. Skye elbowed him in the ribs.

"What? She looks great," Shael grumbled.

Felix poured himself a cup of coffee and raised the mug to me before he took a sip. Cyrus crossed his arms and continued to stare down at me. I threw my hands in the air.

"It's not *that* many. They're just for comfort since we're heading into enemy territory." I sat heavily on a stool at the kitchen bar.

Felix placed another mug of coffee in front of me. He patted my shoulder. "We'll protect you if we encounter trouble. You'll never be alone, I promise."

"I don't like being defenseless." If last night was any proof, daeva were dangerous, curse or no curse.

"We both know you are far from defenseless." Cyrus propped himself on the bar next to me and gave me that look he wore when he was ramping up to give a lecture.

I groaned, too tired to argue. "Fine. But if I die, I'm haunting the shit out of you."

I poked him in the chest and dug through my dress, depositing my array of weapons on the counter. With each reveal, Felix's eyebrows climbed farther up his forehead.

I propped my foot on the stool, and the dress parted around my thigh. There were a few cleared throats around me as I pulled the hem higher and undid the strap holding Ted to my leg. The twins seemed to find the walls extremely interesting until I dropped the whip on the counter.

The air resonated with his power. He made it clear our separation irritated him. All eyes snapped to the source of the low hum of energy, and Felix nearly spat out his coffee.

Cyrus made a choking noise. "Is that a bennu weapon?"

“Maybe...” I took a small sip from my cup. My stomach twisted with hunger.

“Why in the four worlds do you have a bennu weapon?” Cyrus demanded, once again placing himself way too close to me. This time, I didn’t flinch as his radiating aura scorched my skin.

“I bought it from a collector who didn’t want it.”

Felix beamed. “Totally called it. She’s half bennu.”

“Hybrids wouldn’t have the power to activate such advanced runes.” Cyrus narrowed his eyes and reached for the whip. When his skin contacted the smooth metal, he let out a horrible hiss and dropped it as if it had burned him.

“You’ve bonded with it.” He gaped at me like I was a unicorn juggling fire. “That isn’t possible ...”

The whip vibrated on the table. Maybe it would be a good idea to put Ted in my bag before he threw a full-on tantrum.

I plucked him from the counter, and in a flash of light, Ted was out to play. He wrapped himself around Cyrus’s ankles, lifting him in the air before he could react.

“Shit! No, Ted! Bad Ted!” I scolded. I put my free hand on my hip. “I told you no more hanging people from their feet.”

I shook the hand holding Ted, trying to free the handle from my grip, but it stuck to my skin.

Cyrus pulled a pen from his pocket. It turned into a small dagger in a flash. He swung and twisted it between the metal strands of the whip, leveraging it so it loosened Ted’s hold on his legs. Ted receded back into the handle with a snap, and I dropped him.

Cyrus landed gracefully on the floor, crouched in a relaxed fighting stance. He glared at me as he straightened and brushed off his lapel. Not a single hair on his head was out of place.

“Oh, but *you* get to bring weapons.” I crossed my arms.

“What the actual fuck just happened?” Skye said as the shock in the room thawed.

Cyrus ignored Skye's question. The ice in his gaze brought goosebumps to my skin. "You need to learn how to wield a weapon with this amount of power. The whip stays behind tonight. It's unstable, and until you learn to handle it, it is nothing but a danger."

After Ted's outburst, I reluctantly agreed with Cyrus.

Questions swirled in his cold eyes, but to his credit, he honored his word and didn't ask. Instead, he gritted his teeth like the next words pained him to say. "I will teach you how to control it another day."

I beamed at him. I hadn't trained with anyone since I was a hunter, and Ted certainly had a mind of his own. I pulled my sleeve over my hand and picked Ted up from the ground. I carefully placed him back on the counter.

Bringing the weapons was more of a security blanket than anything else. I hated going anywhere without at least a couple of blades. It made me feel naked. As long as I could remember, I'd always carried *something*. More than once, it had meant the difference between life and death.

Hunters were raised to wield steel. Children ran around the compound with swords sheathed on their backs or a knife on their hip.

Felix was right. Daeva often worked in much subtler ways, and even without the influence of their magic, some could convince someone the sky was green. I might have to rethink my old method of ramming through the door, guns a-blazin'.

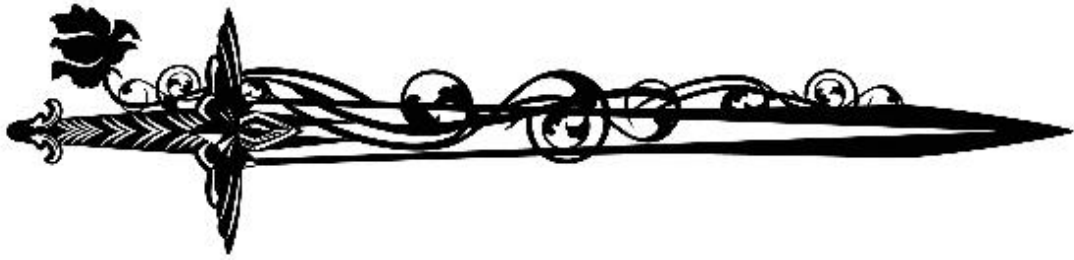
"Did she call the whip Ted?" Shael still sat on the couch, feet up on the coffee table.

"Did she really just scold it like a dog?" Felix said, still eyeing the inert metallic cylinder.

I pointed at the druid and the fire elemental. "You two saw what happens when Ted gets angry. Zip it if you want to keep your feet on the ground. He's very sensitive."

Felix smirked and held his palms out. "Meant no disrespect."

Eight



CYRUS PULLED A notepad and pen out of a drawer and gestured for me to follow him to the living room. He took a seat in the armchair and rested the notepad on his knee while he drew.

I took my coffee to the couch and sat between the twins. “Alright, Boss. What’s the plan?”

Cyrus didn’t look up from his drawing. “We teleport to the palace, you point out Valeria, we take her into custody and extract her back to the bennu capital, Niaras, to await her judgment.”

I blinked. Her judgment? I wasn’t familiar with how the Aegis operated. I knew they considered themselves a sort of peacekeeping force in the world, but no one spoke of the details.

“How am I supposed to recognize Valeria? It’s a masquerade, isn’t it?” I asked.

Cyrus paused his work long enough to pull a small photo out of his pocket and dropped it on the coffee table. I studied it. A blond woman with sharp features smiled at something above the camera. A small, deep scar dimpled her right cheek.

Skye glared at the photo. “Cameras can’t be tricked by daeva magic. Daeva rely on mind magic for their glamours to work, basically placing the image in your brain.”

“Why don’t you guys just sneak some pictures at the ball? Why bring me?”

“Bennu runes don’t work on that sort of technology,” Cyrus said.

That made sense. I'd never heard of human technology being used in other worlds.

"What are you doing?" I leaned forward to get a better look at Cyrus's notepad.

"Conjuring the portal to Qaanir."

I nodded. Of course. The man was simply drawing a portal to another world. Casual.

Felix perched on the arm of the couch and leaned on a gaudy, bejeweled cane. Where on Earth did he get that?

"Alright." Cyrus clapped his hands. "Portal's ready. Sleeves up!"

The men in the room rolled up their sleeves, exposing the skin on their arms. Cyrus took his marker and swiftly drew a rune on Felix's left forearm before moving on to Shael.

When he reached me, he frowned at my arms, still covered by my lacy sleeves. "Well?"

I hesitated. What would he do when the ink disappeared into my skin? If I wasn't starving, I might have been able to resist pulling the mana into myself, but I wasn't sure I had the strength at the moment.

I always imagined a portal was something you walked through. Had a hunter ever traveled to another planet before? Surely not. They despised the otherworlds, believing them to be poisoned with magic, a fate they hoped to resist here on Earth.

"Enchanter?" Cyrus knelt on the carpet in front of me. He held out his hand, and I slowly offered him my own. Our skin sparked on contact, and his mana rushed into me, unbidden.

This man overflowed with power. We both gasped as I crushed his hand in mine. I struggled to close my barriers against the torrent. Sunshine and mint flooded my senses, making me dizzy.

Warm rays caressed my body. Then, the heat turned sharp, like dry ice. So cold it burned.

"Enchanter?" Cyrus's tense voice pierced through the buzzing in my ears, but I was paralyzed, unable to respond or to

release the scream building in my throat.

His touch seared my skin, and his aura grew brighter. Sweat trickled down my back as I tried to slam my barriers down against the scorching flood. Cyrus's mana left a burning chill deep in my bones as it joined with the blood in my veins.

I drew upon the nullifying power of my iron, and though it felt like hours before I gained control. In reality, it was only a few seconds.

The heat snapped, giving way to the cold. I shivered, and my breath came out in shallow pants.

"Sorry." The word caught in my dry throat. "I wasn't expecting ... I've never touched you before. Your mana is ... intense."

Cyrus tilted his head at me, interest swirling in his eyes. His body was painfully still. Clearly, the exchange hadn't affected him as much. Realizing I still had his hand in a death grip, I forced myself to relax. He raised his eyebrows in a silent question.

I nodded to him, hoping he would hurry. His energy buzzed in my veins. My knee bounced as my body tried to expend the excess energy. At least it seemed the mana withdrawal was over.

"Are you okay?" Shael leaned in to take a closer look at me.

"You look even paler than usual," Skye added, picking at his fingernails.

I ignored the broodier twin and smiled sweetly at Shael. "I'm alright, thanks. It just caught me off guard."

Cyrus must have been employing some serious self-control if he kept that much power so close to his chest. Looking at his aura, I would never guess he had such potent mana rushing through his veins.

It had to take an immense amount of energy and constant thought to pull it in like that. But why would he bother if no one but me could see auras? My family was special, but even the rest of the Morgans didn't have that ability.

I shook my head. I needed to focus. We had prey to hunt.

“Well? Are you going to keep holding my hand, or are you going to draw a rune?”

Cyrus kept his gaze on me while he slowly slid the lace of my sleeve up my arm, exposing my skin. He finally looked down to draw on my arm, and air rushed back into my lungs.

He worked in quick, sure strokes, building a complicated web of ink. Every part was connected, as if it were one single line that wove around itself. He connected the ends, completing the rune. Instead of the usual bennu gold, rays of silver light poured from the rune on my forearm.

Despite my attempt to rein it in, my mana rushed to the site, imbuing the ink with power. I had been so focused on keeping myself from sucking the rune into myself that I hadn't even bothered to push my own magic down.

My body was ripped from the living room. Something dragged me backwards. Colors blurred and dissolved around me until I could no longer discern my surroundings. I wriggled in a wraithlike grasp and screamed. I clawed at my back, trying to scratch whatever had me in its grip.

Everything turned upside down, and I fell. Hard stone came up to meet my body, and suddenly I was still again. I waited until my head stopped spinning and pushed myself up.

I brushed off my dress and looked around. Crumbling marble ruins circled me, strangled by black ivy and spotted with tall gray trees, their roots climbing through cracks in the stone.

Everything seemed to be a shade of black or white, as if I had stepped into an old movie. Grand columns held up heavily decorated roofs, leaving the rooms exposed to the outside. Fountains and overgrown gardens of gray-scale plants popped up every few yards.

I half expected Roman soldiers to emerge and ask me about my business. But wherever I was, it seemed to be long abandoned. Even the air seemed lifeless, like it was suspended in time.

Something felt wrong. My mana was slowly draining from my body. I glanced down at my arm, but the rune was gone.

Looking behind me, four swirling pools took up the center of the courtyard I'd fallen into. I approached the nearest one and peered into the churning liquid. It gave off a faint light, a glow I recognized as mana.

Etched into the top of the stone wall was the word *Earth*. What in the four worlds?

I went to the next. *Porada*. The realm of the elementals and druids. Were these the portals? I stepped to the third. *Eranor*. The homeland of the bennu.

Draqaar was etched into the stone of the final pool.

"You must put your trust in the Well; the mana will bring you where you need to go," a soft voice said behind me.

I jumped so high I nearly fell into the pool.

A thin woman draped in white stepped out from behind a column. Her dress trailed through the dusty marble behind her. She was beautiful, if malnourished. Dull slate-gray hair was gathered into an elegant bun at her nape. Her willowy figure came to a stop next to me. She offered me a tired smile, like it had taken all of her energy to walk over.

"Sorry, who are you?" I asked warily.

"My apologies." She reached out and took my hand, bowing her head over it. "I am Sefira ar Vidarrin. I sensed my sons, but it appears they have already passed through."

She sighed and sat on the edge of the pool, naked sorrow evident on her gaunt features. "Bennu travel doesn't allow me much time to glimpse them. They are on our plane for such a fleeting moment."

She gestured to the pool and looked into it as though she could see an image on the surface. "You should follow them. They have arrived at the palace, and Skye is about to usher them back to Earth to look for you."

She laughed, the melodic sound echoing in the cavernous space. "He always was my sensitive boy."

I held back my snort. Skye was about as sensitive as a brick wall. But I had a lot more pressing matters than a difference of opinion where Skye was concerned.

“Skye and Shael, they’re your sons?”

She frowned at the water. “I am their mother, yes.” Her tone turned urgent. “You must follow them. They need you more than they realize.”

Okay, this lady was officially crazy. This was all probably a vivid hallucination. Maybe I *had* absorbed that rune and it had put me over the edge.

“Of course, they need me. How else are they going to—” I shut my mouth as she grabbed me with unexpected strength and threw me in the water.

I yelped. What the fuck was that lady’s problem?

To my surprise, it wasn’t water that I ended up submerged in. It felt like I was swimming through warm, heavy air. Then everything spun again. This time, I tried to catch myself with my hands, but before I could, I plunged face-first into two feet of snow.

“Oof, that one looked like it hurt.”

“That bitch!” I spat out snow. “She fucking pushed me!”

Skye and Shael each took an arm and pulled me out of the snowbank.

“Who are you calling a bitch?” Shael laughed.

“Who pushed you?” Skye growled. He glanced left and right for signs of a threat.

“Your mom, apparently!”

When my feet were back on solid, shoveled ground, I tried to get my bearings. We stood in what looked like a maze; tall hedges formed lush walls on all sides of our little clearing. Felix and Cyrus were nowhere to be seen.

“Calm down, you’re making no sense.” Skye let me go abruptly, making me stumble into Shael. His heat enveloped me, soothing my shivering body. Cyrus wasn’t joking about it being winter in Qaanir.

“What are you talking about? What happened?” Shael rubbed my arms while his brother glared at us.

What could I tell them? My weird powers activated the rune Cyrus drew on my arm, teleporting me to this black-and-white, decrepit Roman palace where a woman claiming to be their mother told me they would need me and pushed me into a well? Yeah, right.

“Nothing.” I pressed my hand to my head. “First time teleporting, it must have messed with my head.”

Yeah. That made the most sense. Maybe it had something to do with me being a hunter. We weren’t meant to travel between worlds.

“Sure.” Shael didn’t sound convinced, but his brother was already leading the charge through the maze. Shael draped his jacket over my shoulders and ushered me forward.

I opened my mouth to protest. I could handle a little chill, but he put a finger to my lips. “Fire’s my element, remember? I won’t get cold.”

“Where are Felix and Cyrus?” I asked as we made our way through the twisting corridors. Shael’s heat radiated through my right side. His hand remained pressed into the small of my back. He pushed gently to make sure we didn’t fall behind.

“They went ahead to the party while Skye and I waited for you to come through the portal.”

Skye cleared his throat and adjusted the sleeve of his coat. “We weren’t concerned. The mana takes you where you need to go.”

Not concerned, huh? Not what his possibly imaginary mother said, but okay.

“So I’ve been told,” I mumbled. The sound of classy music and tinkling laughter washed over me as we emerged from the maze into what looked like the main part of a garden.

Gas lanterns hung from golden wires strung over the garden like a web of metal. I couldn’t shake the feeling that we had wandered into a glittering spider’s den. Small groups of Daevasi lords and ladies speckled the cobblestone, fake smiles plastered on their masked faces.

“Oh, wow,” I said on a breath out.

Everyone around us made Felix look like he'd dressed for a quick trip to the grocery store. We passed a woman who looked like she wore an entire fox on her shoulders. She clasped the gleaming metal prosthetic arm of a man with a heavily waxed mustache. Purple mana hung like a thick fog in the air from the sheer amount of glamours on these people.

Cyrus was right. They'd have no hope of locating the right target without someone to see through their magical makeup. I squinted at some passing daeva, trying to see what they were cooking up, but their glamours were way more boring than I'd hoped.

One young man had glamoured away a pimple. It was a doozy, right in the middle of his forehead. But come on, he had the power to make anyone see anything. At least have some fun with it.

Skye led us to the door of the grand hall. Its dark brick walls stretched high into the sky and disappeared behind a sheet of fog. Ivy climbed the bricks and curled around wrought iron window boxes.

“We teleported into the maze to avoid attention. Not many people are wandering out there in the dead of winter.”

Guards in lustrous armor propped the towering glass doors open, allowing guests to flow into the main hall.

Skye slowed down to take my other arm. Shael leaned in to whisper in my ear, “They’ll never suspect a thing.”

As we entered the hall, movement above me drew my eyes. I stopped amidst the river of people. Blue lights twinkled on the ceiling, interspersed with the pulsating violet glow of a galaxy. Two moons lazily circled each other on gleaming tracks, propelled by gears and cogs. The whole assembly bathed the room in ethereal light, giving the occupants an otherworldly presence.

Skye released my arm. “Take her to the dance floor, brother. I’ll get us some drinks.”

My gaze shot to the polished dance floor, and I gulped. Outrageously dressed daeva twirled in synchronized circles,

switching partners in a tornado of skirts and carefully schooled expressions.

I'd never learned to dance. It wasn't exactly a skill hunters put value in. So, when Shael pulled me toward the center of the hall, I pulled right back.

"Hell no! I think I'll wait for that drink right here, thank you." Angry druids I could handle, hell, you could even throw me in a pit with a bennu and I'd happily try to knock their golden lights out, but dancing?

Willfully touching a stranger without trying to kill them terrified me more than I'd like to admit. Call me socially awkward.

Shael ignored me and plucked his jacket from my shoulders. He yanked on my arm, pulling me into his chest. "Relax, Enchantress, it's just a little dancing. I'm sure you'll pick it up."

He positioned me in front of him so I could watch the couples. He stayed close to me. I could feel the wild heat of his aura against my skin.

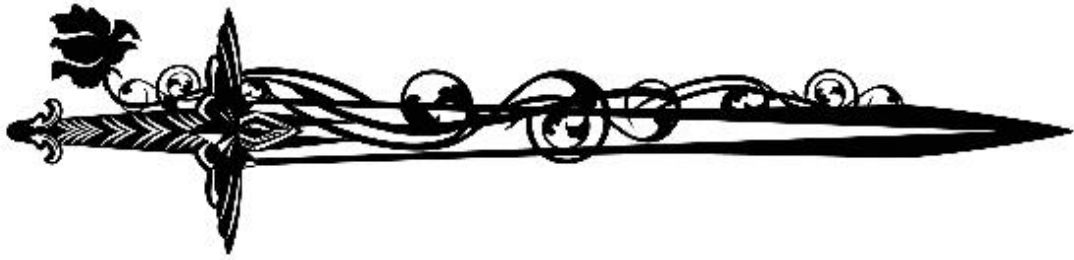
"It's a perfect way to do some scouting. Remember to look for the scar," he whispered, his head bent into the side of my neck. He was so close his lips brushed the lace of my dress.

Shael was right. We were there to do a job, and going with him meant it might be over sooner. It had nothing to do with the wild taste of his mana or the way he absently brushed his fingers over my waist.

Fire and air.

He could only be trouble. But maybe it was time I let myself burn, just a little.

Nine



“THERE’S A MILLION rooms in this place, but not a single bathroom?” I opened another heavy oak door to yet another opulent space with seemingly no purpose.

Carved wooden bookshelves lined the far wall, but they were empty. Intricately woven rugs covered nearly every square inch of the floor, and a single elegant sitting chair faced the cold fireplace.

I closed the door and moved on to the next in line. I paused outside when I heard muffled voices filtering through the dark wood.

“It’s all set up. He should be weakened by now,” a high-pitched voice hissed. “The master said there’s a reward to the one to kill him. What would one of those mindless freaks do with money? What are we waiting for?”

“Patience, Trixy,” a lower voice answered. A giddy giggle bubbled up in his chest. “We just needed to wait for the right time to strike. Look.”

This sounded exactly like the type of thing I should be avoiding. We had a mission to do. I needed to stay focused.

I should have left. Why wasn’t I leaving?

Already smacking myself for what I was sure was going to be trouble, I cracked the door open.

Two figures stood by the window, peeling back the curtains to look into the garden. They wore heavy cloaks, the hoods draped over their heads. The man unlatched the window, clutching a dagger in his other hand.

Instinct took over. I couldn’t just let some poor man get drugged and be at the mercy of these creeps, whoever they

were. Call it my hunter upbringing, or maybe just a death wish.

I burst into the room and slammed into the man with the knife. He recovered and slashed at my stomach. I recoiled, and the knife cut through the lace of my dress.

I seized his wrist and snapped it over my knee, forcing him to release the blade. I plucked it out of the air and whirled on the female, Trixy, as she was coming at me from behind.

She held her own dagger and regarded me warily, staying on the balls of her feet.

Trixy pounced. She drove her dagger at my heart. I swiped it out of the way, but she was stronger than I expected. I rolled to the ground to avoid her attack.

The male recovered and drew on his magic. I felt it surge around us, and then my dress was on fire. I tried to stamp it out for a moment before realizing I couldn't smother elemental fire unless I stopped it at the source.

I groaned. I was already on the verge of overloading.

"Stupid otherworlders and their stupid magic." I pulled my choker from my neck in one movement while my dress quite literally went up in smoke around my legs.

Red clouded my vision. Violence was bred into me. It sang in my blood, excited to be set free again. For the first time in six years, I gave in to the bloodlust. With my iron removed, all it took was a deep breath, and the male was clutching his chest in pain.

"What are you doing?" His amber eyes flashed with fear.

My lips twitched into a smile. I knelt down next to him, savoring the moment. His power was like a burning candle compared to the raging inferno I tasted every time Shael touched me.

This man was nothing. I ached to pinch the wick and extinguish him.

He held his arms up between us, as if that would protect him. I dragged a finger across his forearm, sucking him dry. I drained every ounce of mana he had in his body. It was barely a

sip to me now. His face went slack, and his eyes grew dull as the gleam of life left them.

This was the truth of hunters. We fed on more than magic. We fed on the life force that flowed through every living thing. Deprived of mana, there was no life.

He exhaled a small, airy orb with his last breath. It floated above him, suspended in the air. The breeze caught it and pulled it through the window, into the night sky.

My mother said this was the soul. Our angel ancestors collected them and brought them to heaven or hell. I wasn't sure if I believed any of that.

I held up my hand at Trixie as she shrank away from me.

“Do you want to make this easy or hard?” I asked. My voice took on a sickly-sweet tone I didn't recognize. The mana was getting to me. It buzzed through my veins, demanding more.

With one last look at the man on the floor, Trixie pushed on the glass of the window and jumped into the garden.

“Hard it is.”

I moved to follow her, never one to leave business unfinished. I paused at the windowsill. Colorful clouds of mana hung in the air. The oily residue of violent spells carried on the icy breeze. Something was happening. Something big.

I narrowed my eyes on the garden maze, the source of the mana, before pushing myself over the windowsill. Snow crunched under my heels as I hit the ground.

My blade flashed in the moonlight, highlighting the furrows carved into the wicked metal. Braided leather wound around the hilt, and the engraved shaft emitted the unmistakable glow of pure mana. Hunter blood.

The garden was full of hedges, statues, and fountains, but no guests remained. I followed Trixie's footsteps in the snow until I lost them on a bit of trampled ground. I followed the trail into the maze and nearly choked on the thick blanket of mana in the air.

Luckily for me, the trail was obvious. I doubted we had the time for me to get lost. I peeked around the last corner. A dozen cloaked figures cornered a man in the square center of the maze.

The cornered man clutched his stomach. He wore a flashy Daevasi suit, and a black trench coat layered on top. His inky black hair fell over amethyst eyes, and a carefully shaped beard accentuated his chiseled jaw. He wore an arrogant smile as the cloaked assassins closed in.

They were in a rush to finish the fight, probably before whatever they poisoned him with wore off. I took a step into the clearing and snuck up behind the nearest assassin. Amethyst eyes flashed to me for a moment, but it was all it took. They saw me.

A torrent of spells crashed into me. The shock of it made me drop my knife. Each spell absorbed into my skin, making me dizzy. I pinched my eyes closed as a moan slipped from my lips. But other moans quickly joined it. A lot of other moans. And they weren't all pained.

The man had stepped away from the hedge wall. His eyes glowed like two purple flames as he took control of their minds. Among the clouds of mana, I almost missed the ribbons of his magic. They wound around the limbs and necks of the would-be assassins like he was the puppeteer, and they were his dancing marionettes.

“Just kidding.” He laughed, his delight rising above the cacophony.

I had seen daeva magic in action before, but I think I would have preferred Ari's style of gruesome horror over this display of compulsion. The assassins were ... kissing. Cloaks and armor flew everywhere, discarded in the snow.

How is it my magic can't touch you? The daeva man spoke in my mind. His silky voice caressed my skin and rang in my head.

I fought the urge to slap my hand over my eyes. Instead, I forced myself to look over the tangle of bodies to meet the jeweled gaze burning a hole into my skin. He wore a satisfied

smirk, which only grew as the would-be assassins fully stripped off and got down to business.

A painful blush crept up my cheeks. I could suck the soul out of a living being with a smile, but seeing other people suck ... other things was where I drew the line.

“Well, I see you no longer need saving, so I’m just gonna head out ...” I pointed my thumb over my shoulder.

Running now, little dove?

I pulled the ruined material of my skirt up and turned to leave, smacking into a wall of hard muscle. Icy blue eyes dragged over my face, down to the dagger in my hand, and finally to the orgy behind me.

“Cyrus! It’s been far too long!”

“Quillon,” Cyrus greeted the other man in his normal, monotone way. “We caught a human slave carrying a drink meant for you. It was laced with hunter blood.”

Why wasn’t he freaking out? Maybe when you were thousands of years old, stuff like this didn’t faze you. I, on the other hand, would never be rid of the image now burned into my retinas.

Skye, Shael, and Felix jogged around the corner.

“I take it this hiccup distracted you from Valeria?” Quillon’s breath tickled my neck.

When did he come so close? I turned around and got an eyeful of velvet-covered chest. I was almost grateful because, judging by the sounds coming from behind him, the assassins were just getting into the swing of things.

Now that he was close, I could make out his aura, like dark shadows suspended in the air surrounding him. His power pulsed, preening in response to my attention.

I regretted not replacing my iron immediately. I looked at my hands. My veins glowed faintly. Quillon followed my gaze, and his eyes sparkled with dangerous interest.

One of his tendrils reached out to me. I braced myself, expecting him to try to probe my mind, like most daeva. To

crack open my mind and see into my desires and fears. It was something they got off on. What I wasn't expecting was for him to yank me from reality.

He sucked me into a vision. My head spun as the world tipped over until the ground felt steady beneath my feet again.

We were on a stone balcony high in the sky; even the snow-capped mountains were below us. My charred black gown had been restored, but some parts were wrong, and I now teetered in strappy high heels.

I snorted. "Why does my dress suddenly have a *very* deep V-neck?"

"Since you wouldn't let me in your head, I've taken some creative liberties." Quillon stood at the castle wall, wearing a much simpler ensemble of pants and a vest. A pocket watch was nestled in his breast pocket, and leather straps held various pieces of plate armor in place.

"Why do daeva wear armor if they can't fight?" I blurted, the overload of mana taking over, even in this place.

"Just because we don't deal the blows ourselves doesn't mean we don't fight."

"You said we're not in my head?"

"Unfortunately, no." He advanced on me. I took a step back, but the cold railing of the balcony pressed against my butt.

I touched the cool stone and attempted to pull on the mana creating the vision, but I felt nothing. Even this version of Quillon had no mana seeping from his body.

Panic held my heart in a vice-like grip. I was powerless here.

"Where are we, then? Are we in your head?" I cringed. I didn't want to be in his head. He seemed like the kind of guy to have a substantial porn folder in his mind palace.

"What do you know of the daeva?" he asked suddenly. He grasped the railing, boxing me in. "Do you know why we're cursed?"

I struggled against the growing fog in my mind, but it stayed infuriatingly blank. Thoughts slipped through my fingers like sand.

Quillon either read my face or he read my thoughts, because a dark smile twisted his features. “They really haven’t told you anything, have they, little dove?”

He brushed my cheek with the back of his knuckles. Energy jumped between us and sank into me. His mana tasted like tobacco and honey. My lips parted in a sigh as I inhaled his aura.

“I could tell you.” His touch lingered on my chin, gently pulling my gaze to his as he drew closer. “But what would you give me in return?”

Another zap of energy jolted me out of my haze.

“What do you want?” My voice came out a little shakier than I’d meant it to. I made my second question sound steadier. “Why’d you bring me here? Wherever this is.”

“I want many things, dove. But what do you have to give me?”

The dam broke. Mana poured from him like violent waves and battered against my barriers. He was trying to break down my defenses, trying to peek into my mind.

I shoved him away from me. It was like shoving a damn wall, and all it did was make him press closer. He held me in place, his hands closed around my upper arms.

His magic was unrelenting. It poked and prodded at the walls of my mind, looking for weak points and slipping into the cracks. Every stroke of his power brought me closer to bursting. My mana pushed against my barriers, screaming to be released.

I wouldn’t be able to keep him from my mind much longer. Something had to break.

My power surged to meet my desperate request, emitting a blinding light. But I needed contact. I leaned forward. My lips collided with his. He jerked back in surprise, dragging me with him. The railing dissolved behind me, and we fell.

I snapped back into my body in the maze. The force of the magic sent me crashing into Quillon. He collapsed like a ragdoll, and I landed on top of him.

Every inch of me burned with mana. I barely noticed the cold seeping through the fabric of my dress.

Quillon chuckled, and I jumped away from him like he was a poisonous snake. My usual reflexes and control had fled me, and instead of springing to my feet like I had intended, I landed on my butt in the snow.

My vision was blurry, and I squinted into the darkness at the figures blocking the maze exit. Cyrus hadn't moved, but his posture was rigid, his feet planted in a wide stance.

"Gods, I've never been so happy to see your beautiful, dumb face," I slurred. Said beautiful, dumb face was currently scowling at me, but when his attention slid to Quillon, still recovering on the ground, it turned glacial.

"What did you do to her, Quillon?" Cyrus's voice was deep and threatening.

Quillon didn't look away from me. The intensity of his scrutiny made me squirm in the snow.

"I was simply curious. What was it about this girl that had the four of you stinking of *concern*."

He rose, ignoring the powdery snow clinging to his dark coat. His face split into a slow smile. It was safe to say his curiosity had only grown.

Quillon finally turned to Cyrus. "Let's make a deal."

"No." Felix strode past the two of them. He helped me stand, but when my knees buckled, he scooped me into his arms. His citrus and pine scent filled my nose.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and grasped my iron for dear life. I wasn't sure I would survive much more. I was already hopelessly mana drunk.

"We know better than to make a deal with you. We're leaving."

I groaned. No way would I be able to focus enough to withstand the portal rune again. Hell, if it dumped me in the gray world again, I wasn't sure I'd be able to drag myself to the right well. I wanted to tug on his shirt, tell him I wouldn't be able to handle teleporting, but Quillon blocked him.

"I thought you wanted Valeria Orsava?" Quillon's silky-smooth voice held the spark of persuasion.

No doubt he was juicing it with a little of his magic.

"Let's make a deal," he repeated. Honey flowed through his words.

"Cheating," I mumbled into Felix's collar. But no one seemed to hear me.

"What are you suggesting?" Skye furrowed his brow.

"I'm so glad you asked." Quillon grinned victoriously, as though they had already agreed to his terms. "I will help you catch Valeria. This little assassination plot has her stink all over it. All I ask is that you five accept my hospitality. You may use my palace as your base of operations."

"Done." Skye said at the same time Felix growled out a "No." The rumble in his chest felt good. I leaned into him and looped my free arm around his neck.

"Splendid!" Quillon was already moving towards the opening to the maze. "I'll have our largest suite made up for you all. But it only has four bedrooms."

He paused, as if a thought had just occurred to him. "Should I have a separate set of rooms made up for the lady?"

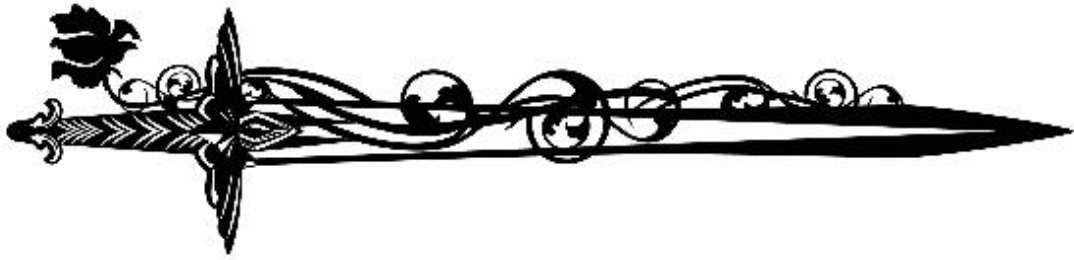
Silence stretched between us, emphasizing the moans that still emanated from the shadows.

"We stay together," Cyrus said finally.

"Very well, one set of joint rooms it is."

What sort of game was he playing? Judging by the tension in Felix's shoulders and the clenched muscle in Cyrus's jaw, we were already losing.

Ten



FELIX CARRIED ME into the palace, following the servant who guided us to our super fancy suite. She brought us in another entrance, allowing us to bypass the rest of the guests still enjoying the ball.

“Put me down!” I shrieked as he carried me up the zillionth set of stairs.

“I demand you release me at once!” I proclaimed dramatically. I even wiggled in his arms to prove how capable of movement I was.

“I never thought I would wish for her stupid mask to be on,” Skye muttered as he walked beside Felix.

“Rude,” I said too loudly and stuck my tongue out at him.

“So I could stuff it in her mouth to shut her up,” Skye finished.

“Even more rude,” I grumbled.

“What’s wrong with her?” Shael came up on our other side.

“She absorbed too much mana,” Cyrus answered, leading our little party down the hallway. Oil paintings hung on every square inch of the wall, and the thickness of the rich purple rug muted our footsteps. “She’s mana drunk.”

I narrowed my eyes. I was pretty sure I’d only ever referred to it as that in my head.

“She’s been rambling about it since Quillon left.”

Well, damn. At least Cyrus hadn’t developed a mind-reading power.

The servant stopped in front of a large set of carved double doors and handed Cyrus an old-fashioned key. She hid her face

behind a fringe of brown hair and kept her eyes on Cyrus's feet.

"If you need anything, masters, please pull the bell string in the sitting room," she said softly and broke into a jog away from us.

"That was weird," I blurted.

Felix covered my mouth with his hand. "Shhh." He carried me through the open doorway behind the others. The sitting room was gigantic and predictably lavish. A large couch and two chairs faced a burning fireplace. Tapestries depicting various stories covered the dark wood walls. One drew my eye. A silver-haired, silver-eyed man knelt over the body of a woman.

"Put me down," I tried to say, but Felix's hand still covered my mouth, so it came out as a muffled *puhmuhden*.

"Sorry, darling. I can't hear you," Felix said, passing through the opulent sitting room to the nearest bedroom on the left. An enormous four poster bed was draped in blood red silk and had matching fluffy blankets piled on the mattress. Heavy curtains framed the windows on the far wall. A stained-glass door led out to a balcony overlooking the ocean and city below.

I opened my mouth to demand Felix put me down again but remembered his hand.

He squealed. "Did you lick me?!"

"Put me down." I raised my chin and tried to gain a little authority, given I was being cradled in this man's arms like a baby.

"As you wish," Felix rumbled. The familiar devious glint turned his eyes to molten pools of gold. He tossed me to the bed and pounced. His weight pressed me into the soft mattress.

I chuckled and grabbed the nearest pillow. I smacked the back of his head with it. He pushed onto his forearms, putting enough space between us to look me in the eye.

"Oh, you'll regret that."

I blinked, and Felix was gone. I was face-to-face with a midnight-black ferret. Its intelligent brown eyes seemed to

smile, and for a moment, I wondered if I really had completely lost my mind.

I was finally broken. All the years of trauma had finally gotten to me.

It sprang at my neck. My arms flew up. I didn't want to die from a murderous ferret, but I was too slow. It latched its weird finger-claws onto my skin and started ... tickling?

Laughter bubbled out of me. I swatted my hands at the creature, but it had already moved to my stomach. Everywhere it ran, it gingerly sniffed and scratched, sending me into a fit of giggles.

Tears ran from my eyes, but I managed to stand. I ended up using a poster of the bed for stability while my other hand still clutched at the damned ferret.

Standing was the wrong move. Now it had access to all of my ticklish spots. I looked like I was doing the worst version of the Macarena ever. The ferret used my skirt to swing back up to my head like a furry gymnast and—

“Felix,” Cyrus said in a gruff voice.

We froze, then slowly looked up at the figure in the doorway. The ferret was on my head, in the middle of pulling at my hair, and my hands were poised to lift my skirt, having tried to shake the thing off me a moment earlier.

“Felix,” Cyrus repeated. The one word carried the promise of pain, and maybe a short prison sentence. He was a bennu, after all.

The ferret chattered, as if it was laughing. Wait ... did Cyrus call it Felix?

“Your druid spirit is a *ferret!*” This made me laugh all over again. “No wonder I’ve never seen you shift before!”

The tension on my hair released, and I saw a flash of black in my peripheral. Felix must have shifted back. I turned to the bed to apologize. I would blame it on the mana. A ferret was a totally badass, practical druid spirit.

Unfortunately, all words failed me. A huge black bear stretched out on the bed. The mattress groaned beneath it.

“Wait, what?” Some of the fogginess burned away, leaving the beginnings of the mother of all headaches. “All the marks! They’re all spirits?”

Felix yawned and leaned back, resting his big bear paws on his big bear belly.

“Ooh! Can you turn into a unicorn next? What about a sloth? I’ve always wanted to pet one of those!”

Em said they were nightmare fuel, but I always thought they were adorable.

Bear-Felix seemed annoyed at this and reached for a pillow. Luckily, I was getting pretty good at reading him, so I ducked. The pillow continued on its path, and I watched in horror as it hit Cyrus and burst into a cloud of feathers.

After Felix shifted back, we both sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for the feathers to clear. Felix’s clothing lay in tatters on the bed, so he held another pillow over his lap. I tried really hard to ignore all his bare skin, but I couldn’t help the fact my eyes wandered a little as we waited for Cyrus to say something.

Felix’s skin was a work of art. Intricate, smoky druid marks covered most of his arms and torso. The tangled symbols crawled over his body like vines in a rainforest. Felix caught me looking and flashed me a feral grin.

I snapped my attention back to Cyrus, pretending I wasn’t just wondering if druid marks had a taste. He hadn’t moved an inch, even after the air had settled.

He took a deep, calming breath before he spoke. “We should talk about the new course of action.”

A feather clung to his hair, but I wouldn’t be the one to tell him. He was being all scary and bossy.

As if summoned by Cyrus’s will alone, Skye and Shael popped into the room and took in all the carnage. It looked like a flock of fluffy birds had been massacred, but they didn’t ask questions. Instead, everyone looked at Cyrus, waiting.

Cyrus pulled his pen-dagger out of his breast pocket and twirled it between his fingers. He did that when he was thinking

and, given our entire plan had blown up in our faces like an overstuffed pillow, we were gonna need a heck of a lot of thinking.

I, however, was in no state to think, so I flopped back onto the mattress. I propped myself on my elbows so I could still feel included in the conversation.

“Quillon has searched the property. Valeria isn’t here. He’s reaching out to contacts to locate her.” Cyrus wandered to the window, absent-mindedly spinning the weapon as it flashed between a lethal blade and an innocuous cylinder.

“Why is Quillon helping us, anyway? He never does anything for free.” Shael had shed his mask, and I was happy to see his face again. He showed his emotion so openly. It was refreshing.

“You’re right,” Cyrus said. “He doesn’t do anything for free, and this is no exception.”

I scrunched up my face and burrowed into the silky bedding. Asking us to stay in his palace didn’t seem like such a high price to pay. It must have been something else.

“Then what’s he getting?” I asked, mentally high-fiving myself for enunciating every word correctly.

“You.”

Well, that wasn’t good. Mana surged to the surface and mixed with the adrenaline flooding my system. I shot to my feet as the need to move took hold of my body.

“Our Enchanter has piqued his interest.” Cyrus looked at me like I was a puzzle he couldn’t decide if he wanted to solve or set on fire.

“Little old me?” I scoffed and tripped on my own feet. “I’m not interesting at all. In fact, I have it on good authority that I’m the most boring person in all four worlds.”

Energy burned through my veins. I was too hot. Sweat prickled on my skin. The room was too small, filled with too many warm bodies.

“Are you okay?”

A hand caught my wrist, but I shook it off. “Don’t touch me!”

I wouldn’t be able to handle any more mana, and with mine rising to the surface, I couldn’t predict what it would do.

I looked up to see it had been Skye. Something like hurt flashed across his face, but it was quickly buried, replaced by his normal impassive look. He stepped away from me, avoiding my gaze, and a piece of my walls broke.

I wanted to reach for him, to coax him out again, to make him smile. I ached to see the ice over those deep blue eyes crack, just a little.

Shame burned my skin. Everything burned.

I kicked off my shoes and sighed when my bare feet touched the cool wood of the floor. Ignoring the surrounding voices, I stumbled to the balcony door. Someone grasped some of the material of my dress and pulled me away before I could reach the soothing outside air.

“Now, now, little enchantress. I wouldn’t go out there like that unless you are ready to go for a very brisk swim.”

“Yes,” I whispered. That was exactly what I needed. I needed to cool down. I tried to wiggle out of his hold, but when that didn’t work, I pulled at the laces of my bodice. I needed to get it off.

“What’s she doing?” The sound of water filtered through the pressure in my ears.

“I think she wants to go swimming.”

“She doesn’t look too good.”

“It’s like when she absorbed Ari’s curse...”

Their voices sounded far away. Blood rushed in my ears, filling my head with the sound of my heartbeat. I was lifted again, and in the next moment, I was submerged in cold water.

“What the actual fuck?!” I screeched as soon as my head broke the water. I wiped the water from my eyes. I was in a tiled tub that looked like it could fit an army. Gold patterns decorated the black tiles and lined the lip.

Four bodies crowded the bathroom. Skye stood the closest to the tub, smirking down at me. He must have been the one to throw me in the water.

Shael had the decency to look a little sorry. Cyrus seemed happy I'd stopped trying to strip, and Felix stood in the doorway holding the silky red pillow over his junk.

"I'll stay and make sure she doesn't drown," Skye said.

I wanted to argue, but exhaustion already pulled at my eyelids. The others left, and I relaxed into the tub. As much as I disliked their method, I had to admit I was feeling a little better.

The water had already turned a light shade of gray, reminding me that charcoal and ash still clung to my skin from the fire elemental incident. I took a sniff of my shoulder and wrinkled my nose. I could use a proper bath.

Skye leaned against the wall and stared at me, his arms crossed over his chest. He'd shed the coat from his ensemble, which left him in his embroidered vest and dress pants. He'd rolled the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows, exposing the corded muscle of his forearms.

"Turn around so I can get out of this thing." I resumed my struggle with the laces that secured the back of the dress. Gods, how did I get this on?

"Only if you ask nicely," Skye said. His fingers tapped against his arm.

I rolled my eyes at him. "Turn around," I said again.

"No."

"Well, in that case ..." I cupped my hands and flung water at him. The water droplets hung suspended in the air for a moment before raining down on the tile. I had actually just forgotten the man I splashed had control over water.

He raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"You forced my hand." I groaned and looked at the ceiling. "I'm just a girl, overloaded with mana, sitting in a tub of cold water, wanting to be naked."

As I moped, a wave formed at the end of the tub. It grew in size as it approached. I'd barely raised my hands in front of my face before it crashed into me. I spit out water and rubbed at my eyes. The tub was half empty. The rest of the water dripped from the ceiling and pooled on the tile.

"Bath time's over." Skye was smiling now. A full-on grin overtook his stony features. The sight almost made me forget I wanted to murder him.

Cyrus stopped in the doorway, carrying a bundle of golden silk. He paused, taking in the scene. Skye still relaxed against the wall of the bathroom, not a drop of water on him, while I and the rest of the bathroom looked like we'd survived a tsunami.

"Quillon sent up clothes." Cyrus proceeded into the room as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Maybe he was just getting used to having me around.

"Can I borrow your knife?" I asked him, "I promise I won't use it to stab Skye."

"Wasn't my concern before, but it certainly is now." Cyrus set the clothes on a dry part of the counter. "Why do you need my knife?"

I stood. My soaked dress weighed me down. "I can't get out of this stupid dress."

I grasped at my back and tried to untangle the laces again. They must have knotted up somehow in the evening's excitement.

"I'll help you."

"No!" I couldn't risk him seeing my hunter's marks.

Cyrus raised an eyebrow.

"I mean ... these laces are super tangled, like beyond help tangled, and ... I have ... a terrible rash. I don't want you to see it, it's super gross." I slapped my hand over my mouth to stop the word vomit that spewed from my mouth.

Cyrus frowned at me, unconvinced, but pulled the dagger-pen out of his pocket.

I grinned. “Yes! I finally get to play with your dagger!”

Em would have given me one of her looks if she were here. But luckily, this was a conversation between three mature adults.

Cyrus held up a finger. “I’m not letting you touch it. I wouldn’t trust you to walk to the bed right now, let alone use a blade on yourself.”

He moved to the other side of the tub.

“I’ll close my eyes to spare myself from your ... horrible rash.”

One of his hands grazed my neck. He carefully undid the buttons there before working his way down. His knuckles brushed my spine as they traced the path of the laces. His dagger followed, precisely cutting the silk cords holding the bodice together.

I clutched the dress to my chest and looked over my shoulder. His eyes were closed as he’d promised, but his fingers remained pressed to my lower back.

He exhaled heavily, like he’d been holding his breath. It tickled my bare skin and sent a shiver down to my feet.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Cyrus nodded once before he left the room.

Skye watched him go, then turned back to me and shrugged. “You seem to forget that you can’t even walk and are currently surrounded by very slippery, very hard surfaces.”

“Are you going to turn around, or are we going to get into a splash battle again?” I tugged on the end of one of my sleeves.

I’d meant it to be sexy, but I ended up flailing around and wrenching the fabric off. Whatever this dress was made of, it clung to me like a needy ex-boyfriend.

“I wouldn’t call that a battle. More of a splash massacre.”

I shimmied the other sleeve off. Skye watched my movements, his jaw tight as he ground his teeth together.

“Agree to disagree.” I let the dress slip a little.

Skye chickened out first, turning to face the wall. I peeled the rest of the damp cloth from my skin. I left it in a pile in the tub.

Standing in my bra and panties, the soft glow emanating from my veins was impossible to miss. I searched the pile of cloth at my feet until I found my choker and fastened it around my neck. I sighed as I felt my barriers strengthen, and the glow faded.

I stepped out of the tub and reached the counter without cracking my head open. A fact I was sure annoyed Skye, so double win.

None of the towels had survived our splash battle, so I took off my waterlogged underwear before slipping the gown over my head. A sigh escaped my lips as it slid over my skin. The fabric was incredibly silky.

I scanned my reflection. Like my black gown, it fell to my feet with a teardrop cutout just below my clavicle, revealing a long sliver of skin to the center of my chest.

A matching mask made of the same silky material lay on the counter. Was this a typical Daevasi thing, or did Quillon know about my fondness for disguises?

I tied the new mask to my face and turned to leave the bathroom with a satisfying swoosh of silk. I felt like a princess.

I took one step and slipped on the slick tile. I let out an embarrassing squeak as I fell backwards, but before I hit the ground, Skye caught me in his arms.

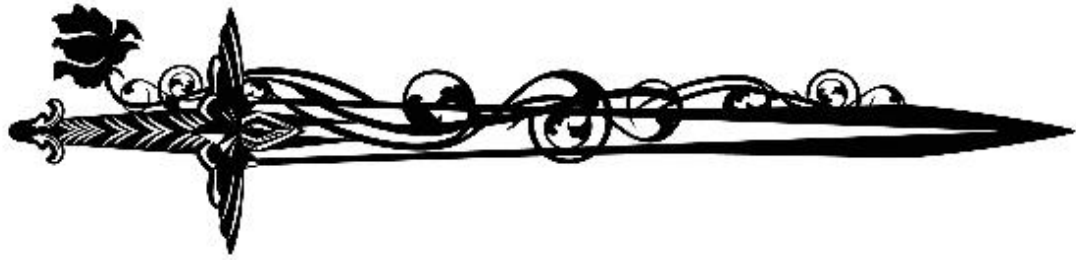
“Told you,” Skye said, but there was none of his usual bite behind his words. I shrugged, stifling a yawn.

Skye carried me to the bed. He pulled the covers back and set me down gently. I snuggled into the soft bedding.

“Night!” I called to him as he left the room.

“Night,” he said softly and shut the door.

Eleven



THE NEXT MORNING, Quillon paid us a visit. He sent food up to our room on a shiny cart, and I dug into my omelet as he strode in.

Quillon wore another Daevasi outfit. This time he wore a steel-trimmed pauldron, matching the accents on his vest. His jet-black hair was carefully combed in a neat pompadour style.

“I’ve received an update on Valeria’s location.” He surveyed the room and took a seat in an armchair. His masked gaze lingered on me, where I was sitting between Skye and Shael on the couch. The corners of his mouth turned down as he took in my clothing.

My closet was mysteriously stocked with all kinds of over-the-top luxurious gowns, masks, underclothes and cloaks. I’d found a pair of stretchy pants, a long-sleeved shirt and boots among the lacy nighties and gowns.

I’d braided my hair and selected a simple, soft black mask. Clearly, Quillon would have preferred I wear something else, probably something more fitting of a Daevasi lady. I popped my last bit of food into my mouth.

“What did you hear?” Cyrus said.

“My agents spotted her ship near Kaslen. She’s on her way back to her estate in the South.” Quillon tapped his fingers on his knee. “Given her location, it appears she left halfway through the celebration.”

“Can we intercept her? If she makes it back to her estate, how will we arrest her?” Shael leaned forward and rested his chin in his hand.

“Her estate’s heavily guarded, and she’s famous for her protective warding,” Quillon said. “I’ll have some people on it. There’s always a weak point.”

“Wait. You think she was behind the assassins last night?” I asked.

“Valeria’s been trying to kill me for years.” Quillon waved his hand dismissively as if Valeria were an annoying little sister and not a psycho slaver launching assassination plots against him. “But she’s never been able to get anyone into my palace before.”

“How *did* they get in?” I asked. The wards Quillon had on his palace were strong, the strongest I’d ever felt. “Also, why did you invite someone who’s trying to kill you to your ball?”

Quillon grinned wickedly. “To answer your second question, it’s fun to have a nemesis. As for your first question, the wards are intact, but somehow they compelled one of my slaves to poison me. Fortunately, Cyrus stopped her. Unfortunately, he also killed her.”

Cyrus pressed his lips together. “I didn’t expect her to be so ... fragile.”

“She was human, Cyrus. They’re all fragile.”

I ran a finger along my bottom lip. “You’re sure it was daeva coercion? What if she turned against you the old-fashioned way? You don’t seem like the most ... attentive master.”

Quillon leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees. “Oh, I assure you, dove. I’m a very attentive master.”

I ignored him and trudged on. “I find it very believable someone could have just wanted you dead within your palace.”

“I appreciate your passionate concern for me, but I have someone keeping my slaves. She would tell me if she detected any disturbing thoughts.”

I rolled my eyes. This man was unbelievable. The more he talked, the more it made sense that the servant actually wanted to kill Quillon than someone evaded his wards without setting off any alarms or taking the wards down.

“What about the prisoners?” Cyrus asked.

Quillon steepled his hands beneath his chin. “We’re working on it, but we haven’t been able to get anything out of them. My best people can’t sense any mind blocks or compulsion.”

“I can take a look. I have a knack for this kind of thing.” I stood.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Cyrus put his hand on my shoulder, nudging me back down into my seat. “You need to give yourself some more time to recover after last night.”

“I’m fine. I just needed to sleep it off.”

“Then you’ll have one more night while Quillon’s contacts do some research.” He tilted his head, daring me to defy him.

A part of me reveled in it. I wanted to rise to his challenge, push him out of the way and march down to the dungeons, just to show him I could handle it. But a larger, smarter part of me told me to pick my battles.

“Yes, sir,” I grumbled.

“Good girl.” A satisfied smile pulled on the corner of Cyrus’s mouth. I narrowed my eyes at him but managed to bite back my retort.

Skye tapped his chin. “How do you think they got hunter blood? It’s not exactly easy to come by.”

“One of the assassins had a hunter dagger, too,” I added.

Felix shrugged. “Valeria could have a hunter on her payroll.”

“Yeah, right.” I snorted with laughter and slapped my knee. “Hunters working for an otherworlder!”

They didn’t know hunters like I did. The elders kept everyone under strict rule, and they were way too stuck on their idea of a perfect world to get tangled up in otherworlder business.

I wiped a tear from my eye. “Good one.”

Since Valeria had a presence on Earth, I was sure she'd have tussled with hunters before. Some hunters probably wandered into her operation, expecting it to be a typical hunt, and she got the drop on them.

Hunters were hard to kill, but we certainly weren't immortal.

Cyrus gave me a sidelong glance. "I have some business to take care of back in Haven. I'll check in with Sabrina and your associate. Don't want the little one sending a search party."

He pulled out his pen and drew a hasty rune on his hand. It shone with golden light, and in the next moment, he popped out of existence.

Felix offered me his arm. "While he's doing that, I thought we could explore Qaanir."

"Can I get some more pants?" I shot a smirk at Quillon.

Felix winked at me. "We can get you whatever you want, baby cakes."



"DRAQAAR IS COVERED in deep oceans," Felix said as we boarded a small steam-powered taxi boat to take us to the market. Skye and Shael decided to tag along since Cyrus left for Earth. "Everything above ground is on ships or floating islands."

Qaanir was incredible. Canals ran between groups of platforms, providing a fast way of getting around the sprawling capital city. I'd always imagined the otherworlds to be places stuck in a time with no technology, but Qaanir was all factories and industry.

We passed by neighborhoods of wooden boats and small ships anchored to floating platforms and dwellings.

Exposed cables stretched between the buildings. I wasn't sure if it was to supply electricity or to prevent the platforms from drifting away from one another. An imposing cylindrical building ahead of us drew my eye. Sheet metal was welded together in a patchwork to form the curved walls. Its colossal form cast a shadow over the city.

Dread squeezed my stomach, and a shiver ran down my back. I pulled up the hood of my velvety cloak, clutching it against my neck to seal out the damp wind.

I pointed to the metal building. "What's that?"

Felix's gaze followed my finger, and a growl vibrated in his throat. "The Colosseum."

Shael put a hand on my shoulder, pushing heat through my layers of clothing. "You don't want to go there."

"It's used for slave fights," Skye said. "The daeva revel in violence. That's how they get their fix."

I remembered something he said when we found the captives in the warehouse. "*This* is what they do with people they steal from other worlds?"

"Some of them." His lip curled in a snarl. "Others are sent to the mines or sold as household servants."

"How could they do that ...?" Suddenly, I didn't want to marvel at the city around me. It was filled with monsters.

"Not all daeva approve of it," Felix added, sensing the change in me.

The market came into view. Never-ending lines of small platforms with tiny, open shops stretched into the distance. Canoes and taxis drifted between the merchants. The sound of fierce haggling carried over the water.

We passed a store stocked floor to ceiling with gleaming metal contraptions. Gears and mechanical parts hung on the walls. A man working on a device looked up as we passed. He smiled and wiped his forehead, leaving behind a smudge of dark grease.

Another boasted an impressive collection of feathered hats and intricately beaded masks.

“How the hell am I supposed to find pants here?”

“I know just the place.” Felix whispered something to the taxi captain. He took us to the far side of the bazaar, giving me plenty of time to gawk at my surroundings.

We stopped in front of a platform larger than the others. One whole wall of the square building was rolled up like a garage door, exposing the impressive amount of clothing packed into the space.

“You’ve been to Qaanir before?” I asked Felix as we disembarked.

“Working for the Aegis comes with some travel perks.” He sifted through a pile of black trousers.

“Why did you start working for them, anyway?”

“I had a vision.” He selected a few pairs and moved on to the next section. “It showed me a future I didn’t want to see, then it showed me what I had to do.”

“I didn’t know druids could see the future.”

“They can’t. Well, most can’t.” He bit his lip, seeming to consider how much to say. “I’m raven-spirited.”

I blinked. “And that means?”

“You really don’t know much about the worlds, do you?”

I bristled. Quillon had said something similar.

I hugged myself and watched the twins. Shael pumped air into a pair of bright red pants, manipulating the wind to make it look like they were dancing. Skye watched with a bored expression as another customer pressed her hands to her cheeks and scrambled to get away from the haunted trousers.

I couldn’t blame my lack of knowledge on growing up as a hunter anymore. Sure, they had limited what I learned about the other worlds to what I needed to know to kill them, but I’d had years to learn more. Maybe the palace had a library. I’d have to ask Quillon when we returned.

Felix selected a pair of pants and tucked them under his arm. He tousled my hair as he passed me in the cramped space.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Sometimes I forget how lucky I am to be with the Aegis.”

He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Rava, the first druid Ancient, was gifted with fateweaving. It’s a rare gift, so when my spirit revealed itself, my parents sent me to the Northern Temple to develop my gift with the priests.”

I resisted asking any more questions. It seemed I had a lot to learn. Luckily, Cyrus brought a distraction when we got back to our rooms.

“Ted!” I rushed to the coffee table, where my small arsenal of weapons sat.

Cyrus blocked my hand before I could touch the whip. “Why don’t we hone your rune abilities on something less sentient first?”

“You mean ...”

He grimaced. “Yes, I’ll let you play with my dagger.”



“NOW YOU’RE NOT even trying,” Cyrus scolded. After an hour of trying to channel my mana into the pen, all I’d accomplished was to make it slightly warm. And I was pretty sure that was just because I’d held it in my palm for so long.

“I don’t know why it’s not working. It comes so easily with Ted.” I threw my hands up, dropping the engraved pen in my lap.

“In case you haven’t noticed, it has a mind of its own.” Cyrus ran his fingers through his light blond hair. “Maybe we’re approaching this wrong. I’m trying to teach you how to use an artifact the way a bennu would, but your magic works differently.”

“The only other times I’ve used my mana was when it burst out of me.”

Felix, Shael and Skye whooped, and I scowled at them.

The three circled one another. Skye lunged at Felix with his staff, but Felix easily deflected the strike and ducked behind him, knocking him on the head with his own staff.

Shael took his opportunity to attack. He raised his training swords and belted out a battle cry.

Felix swung around and kicked Shael in the chest. Shael fell to the ground, gasping for air. Though Felix was one of the largest men I’d ever met, he moved with impressive agility and grace.

“What did it feel like?” Cyrus placed the dagger back in my hand.

We sat on a bench in the garden; tall shrubs and flowers surrounded our little clearing. The sun sank into the ocean and flooded the garden with red light.

I breathed deeply and searched for the feeling of the mana that coursed through my veins. Trying to use my raw mana to activate bennu magic felt like trying to shove a square peg in a round hole. I had to find a way to make it match. If only I had bennu mana.

“I have an idea,” I said.

He nodded, his icy blue eyes pinched with skepticism. I reached out for his hand and braced myself for the influx of electric golden mana. Touching him was easier this time, and I siphoned just enough mana for my experiment.

Instead of pulling the mana into me, I redirected the energy to my other arm and into the artifact. I nearly dropped the dagger as it sprang to life, shifting into its deadly form with a brilliant flare.

“Yes!” My shout drew the attention of the other guys, and they jogged over to see what the commotion was. “I did it!”

Skye grumbled something under his breath and passed his brother a coin. Shael grinned at me and pocketed the money.

I tossed the dagger to Cyrus, still unsure of how to turn it back, and swiped Skye's staff as I passed him. He tried to grab it back, but I dodged and danced around him.

"That's what you get for betting against me." I strolled to the patch of grass they had been sparring on. "C'mon, Shael!"

We faced each other on the soft grass. He whirled his wooden swords in his hands, watching me. "No mana, Enchantress. Can you hold your own without your magic tricks?"

I nodded, suddenly hesitant. I hadn't fought much with a staff. It wasn't a weapon most hunters were familiar with. We preferred our toys sharp and dipped in our blood.

The staff's weight felt foreign in my hands. I struck the air in front of me, testing the staff and Shael's response. The polished wood cut through the air, and it was surprisingly easy to handle.

Instead of taking a step back as I expected, Shael charged forward. I knocked his swords back with the ends of my staff, but he stayed on the offensive.

Shael fought like a wild animal. Every action was aggressive, and he put his full power into every movement, showing no signs of tiring. All my focus was on blocking and dodging, but I couldn't keep it up. Shael was relentless, chipping away at my strength.

I wasn't fast enough to block a strike to my side. He whacked me, throwing me off balance and leaving me vulnerable to his onslaught.

He trapped my staff between his blades and sent it flying into the dirt behind him. He held his blades on either side of my neck and exerted enough pressure to force my surrender.

I raised my hands. "I'm a little rusty."

Cyrus stepped up behind me. He pushed Shael's swords from my neck. "You fight only on reflex. You need to be thinking ahead, taking your opportunities to strike."

"That was embarrassing." Felix chuckled and handed me the staff Shael had flung.

“Just. Rusty.” I growled, taking up my position on the grass. Shael joined me, and we began again. This time I was prepared, and I countered every swing. We were stuck in a dance of push and pull. I met every step forward with a shove back.

I jumped away from him, forcing him to overreach. He put all his weight on his front leg. Ducking down, I kicked out and caught his ankle with my foot.

All it took was a little extra push, and he tumbled to the ground. At the last moment, he dropped his swords and grasped my staff, pulling me down with him.

I landed half on top of him. Our chests pressed together as we breathed hard. I tried to push myself up, but his arm snaked around my back, locking my body to his.

“Tie?” I offered.

“I’ll get my rematch,” Shael whispered into my neck. Heat flared on my skin. “And I won’t let you pull that trick next time.”

“Next time, I’m bringing my whip.”

His eyes shone with interest and a smile grew on his face.

“I’ve been told Ted has quite the appetite for hanging people upside down by their ankles.”

I swore Shael grew a shade paler at my warning. He released me and helped me back up.

A soft cough made us all turn around. The servant who showed us to our rooms the night before stood along one of the hedge walls. She flinched when our eyes landed on her, and for a moment, she seemed to want to meld with the hedge behind her.

Instead, she puffed out her chest and met Cyrus’s gaze. I saw it now. She emitted a faint green aura, but her eyes and hair were a very human shade of brown. An elemental hybrid.

“Apologies,” she said, “I ... I heard a yell and ...” She floundered, her ears turning red. “Apologies.”

The guys looked at one another, having a silent conversation.

“It’s okay,” I said. Her wide eyes darted to me. She nodded and bowed her way out of the garden without another word.

I watched her form retreat. She slipped on a patch of ice but kept her pace and crawled up the rest of the stone stairs.

“That was ...”

“Weird, yeah, we know,” Felix finished for me.

“She’s a hybrid,” I said, mostly to myself. “An elemental hybrid. It’s faint, but she definitely has some earth magic.”

Skye frowned and looked away. “She’s a slave.”

“Why doesn’t the Aegis ban all slavery, not just when they are stolen from other worlds?” I asked.

All eyes turned to Cyrus, as if they’d had this conversation before and disagreed with him.

“It’s complicated.” Cyrus ran a hand through his pale blond hair. “And now that many bennu are hiding out on Eranor, we lack our usual teeth.”

“Not that they were trying very hard before.” Skye crossed his arms.

Once again, I felt as though I was missing crucial information. “Why would bennu hide in Eranor?”

Bennu were known for their fearlessness, something I assumed came with immortality.

“Bennu aren’t reincarnating,” Felix told me, earning a glare from Cyrus.

“What? Why? How is that possible?”

Bennu had been around since the creation of the Ancients. When a bennu died, they simply reincarnated in the bennu capital city of Niaras.

Cyrus clenched his jaw, clearly disliking the direction the conversation had gone. “We don’t know, but some believe it has to do with our connection with the Aether, the realm of the

Ancients. Our spirits are no longer being ferried to the Aether to be reborn in the Eternal Well in Niaras.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. What do you say to that? As much as the Aegis was a threat to me, they were the reason the four worlds remained in some semblance of order. They were the peacemakers and the portal keepers of our worlds. Without them, everything would collapse.

We picked up our equipment and began the trek through the palace to our rooms.

“Is there another way for people to move between the worlds?” I asked. “Other than bennu portal runes?”

Cyrus nodded stiffly and picked up the pace, as if he could physically run from my questioning. “Yes. There is an ancient, now unused network of pathways. But there is only one entrance on each planet. All locations but one have been lost.”

“The well in Niaras?” I wondered if I had jumped in the pool reading Niaras in the gray world, would I pop out where the bennu reincarnated? The Draqaar pool hadn’t spit me out in a well.

“Yes.” Cyrus lowered his voice as we passed a pair of servants. “The Eternal Well is an entrance from Niaras to the Aether. It’s a weak point between the two worlds, allowing bennu to push through from the Aether to the physical plane to be reborn.”

I chewed my lip. Maybe I should tell them about my strange encounter in the gray place. “You’ve been to the Aether?”

Cyrus held me back when we arrived at the door to our suite. “Why are you asking so many questions, Enchanter?”

“I’m just curious.” I shrugged. “Before working with you all, I never really paid attention.”

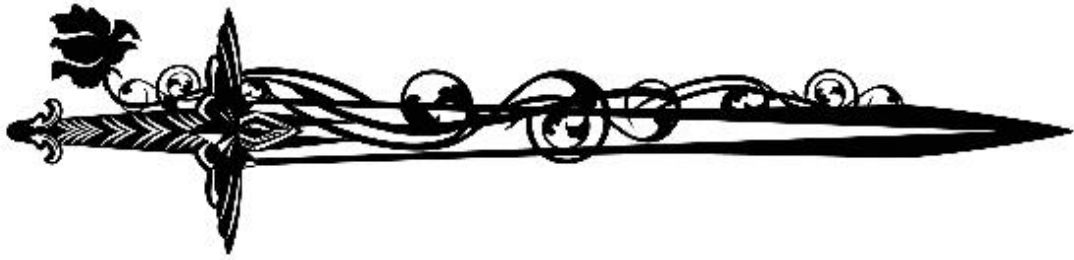
Cyrus considered me for a moment. “Alright. If you have more questions, I’ll try to answer them.”

“Thank you, Cyrus.”

His offer meant more to me than he could know, but would he make the same offer if he knew what I really was? Probably

not. It would mean feeding information to your enemy.

Twelve



CYRUS'S WORDS ECHOED in my mind as I bathed. My heart soared at the feeling of belonging I craved so much since I ran from the hunter Order.

But I couldn't join them. Sooner or later, every secret gets out. Would it be worth it? To spend whatever time I had before then doing some good, and accept that one day everything would come crumbling down? I wasn't sure.

"One thing at a time, Syn." I dropped my towel. A bruise blossomed on my ribs where Shael had landed his blow.

I dressed in another simple gown and padded barefoot into the main room. The fireplace roared. Felix messed around at the bar by the window, and a cart piled high with food was parked near the door.

His stubble had grown out in the last few days. He'd changed out of his training clothes and now wore a dark button-down tucked into a pair of red-trimmed slacks.

He handed me a glass of dark wine and sat beside me. "What's your deepest secret?"

I almost spit out the wine I'd been swallowing. Thankfully, I just choked on it and coughed until tears rolled down my cheeks.

"I'm not answering that," I said once I could breathe again.

"Then I dare you to eat a spoonful of that green stuff." Felix pointed to the food cart.

"Sorry?"

"Those are the rules of truth or dare." He took a sip of his wine and crossed his legs.

I raised my eyebrows. “I wasn’t aware we were playing a game.”

“Everything’s a game, angel.” He got up and replaced the glass in my hand with a small dish of green paste. “Now, eat up. I have a lot I want to make you do tonight.”

I dipped my finger in the dish and swiped some on my tongue. Spicy. It coated my throat and made me descend into another coughing fit.

“My turn,” I rasped. I took a gulp of wine, which only worsened the burn.

“Dare,” Felix said.

I frowned. I was hoping to use the game to get some answers. Maybe I still could.

“I dare you to wear only tan colors for a week.”

He recoiled. “I changed my mind! Truth! You’re cruel.”

I clapped my hands together. There was so much I wanted to ask. “How do druids get more spirits?”

Felix reclined on the couch, looking thoughtfully down at his exposed arms. “A druid gifts a spirit to another, but you must be strong enough to accept it.”

I chewed my lip. “So other druids gave you their spirits? Why?”

He held up a finger. “Truth or dare, my dear?”

“Truth,” I said, opting for what I hoped was the safer option.

“You said everyone’s magic has a taste, a feeling. Do you like mine?”

His question surprised me, but the answer was already tumbling from my lips. “Yes.”

He straightened a fraction and smiled. “Dare.”

“Take off your shirt.”

If his druid marks were spirits, I wanted to know just how many he had. At least, that’s what I was telling myself. Felix’s

broad shoulders bulged with his movement. He was one of the tallest men I knew, yet he moved with impressive grace.

Felix's amber eyes held a devious gleam as he unbuttoned his shirt, exposing more ink-covered skin with each flick of his fingers.

Where bennu runes were thick, harsh lines, druid marks were elegant and wild. The more I looked at them, the more they seemed to move, as if they were alive beneath his skin. Felix shrugged off his shirt and reclined again, slinging an arm behind me.

"Truth or dare?" He smirked, noticing the way my eyes lingered on his chest. I tore my gaze back up to his eyes.

"Dare," I said. My heart quickened as the buzz of adrenaline made me bold.

"Wonderful!" He hopped up and walked into my bedroom with purpose. "Since you've chosen what I'm wearing, I think it's only fair that I get to do the same."

I took a deep breath, a little of my confidence leaving me. Half the closet was lingerie, and the other half was what I imagined a daeva girl would wear to prom.

I followed him into my room just as Felix was coming out of my closet with a few items of clothing draped over his arm. He laid three outfits on the bed. The first was a thin black dress, the second a much shorter version of what I was already wearing, and the third was, as far as I could tell, just a pile of white lace.

"Choose one," he purred, standing close to my back. His power caressed my skin, tracing its way up my spine and igniting a thrill within me. His aura told me what his body language didn't. He was affected.

He clasped his hands behind his back. Tendrils of his magic wrapped around me. Like his energy couldn't help but touch me.

I picked up the first dress. The material was sheer, but as I lifted the gown, I found a black slip dress on the bed beneath it.

Felix showed no intention of giving me privacy, so I went to the bathroom to put it on. The slip was short and came only to the middle of my thighs, but it covered all the important parts. The gown itself draped to the floor in a cascade of thin black fabric. The bodice was tight, the paleness of my skin revealed through the wispy material.

The slip covered most of my hunter's marks down my spine. My hair tumbled down my back in loose curls, concealing the rest.

When I left the bathroom, Felix wasn't alone. Shael sat cross-legged on the bed, laughing at something he'd said, but it died when his eyes locked on me.

"Wow, Felix. Is this a dare for her or us?" He pushed a lock of his wild red hair out of his face.

"Where's Skye?" I asked. Felix watched me, his unblinking gaze following me as I crossed the room and joined Shael on the end of the bed.

"I thought *I* was your favorite!" Shael held his hand to his heart, feigning hurt. "He and Cyrus are meeting with Quillon about boring business stuff. Turns out I made the right choice, leaving early."

"Alright, Shael." I took a long drink of wine, reveling in the game. "Truth or dare?"

"The fact that you have to ask tells me you know nothing about me."

I rolled my eyes. These two were going to be a handful without Cyrus's supervision.

"Fine. I dare you ..." Shael's eye twitched. "... to massage my feet."

I leaned back on my hands and plopped my feet in his lap.

"You didn't have to dare me," Shael said. He began rubbing my feet, sending pulses of heat through his fingers with each squeeze. A moan escaped my lips. It felt amazing.

"Enchantress?" Shael's voice cut through the bliss.

"Truth."

Shael grumbled but kept massaging. “Why do you wear the mask, even just around us?”

“To protect my identity.”

“We’ve seen both halves of your face. I think we’d be able to put it together. Why do you really?”

I wrinkled my nose. Why *did* I wear it around them? My face didn’t expose me as a hunter, and I doubted the Aegis would have much trouble identifying me if I seriously screwed up and had to run.

“The disguise makes me feel more in control, I guess,” I mused. The alcohol and excitement loosened my tongue. “Like the Enchanter isn’t *me*. She’s just a mask I put on.”

Felix and Shael shared an indecipherable look.

I pointed to Felix. “I dare you to shift into a chicken and do the chicken dance.”

Shael and I lost it while Felix turned into an onyx chicken and crawled from the leg of his pants, now crumpled on the floor. He flapped his wings and wiggled his tail feather before shifting back into his tall—now completely naked—mountain-of-a-man form.

Druid marks decorated nearly every inch of skin, climbing down his legs, slithering over his chest, and wrapping around his arms. I couldn’t help but stare. His body was a beautiful canvas, and though the marks were separate spirits, they flowed into one another, creating one united picture.

A mark on his forearm seemed to rise from his skin. The flowing lines floated to the surface and stretched toward me. It looked like a leaf, or the skeleton of one, barely an inch in length.

I stood before I could stop myself and reached out to touch the mark.

Felix seemed unbothered by his nudity. Inala told me some druids in Porada skipped clothing altogether.

“I dare you to kiss me,” Felix said, his voice rough. I dragged my eyes up his arm, up his neck, rising to meet his

sharp gaze. A lock of his dark hair fell into his face. He was a deadly predator, wild and untamed.

My breath hitched as I took another step and leaned in. He swooped down to claim my lips with his. I gasped against his mouth. The taste of oranges wrapped around my tongue. His power pushed against my barriers, his excitement kindling his magic.

My palms pressed into his hard chest. One wandered to the hot skin of his forearm, seeking the mark that called to me. I heard her voice in my mind, humming her approval as my finger caressed the lines of the mark. Felix's mana scorched its way into my veins wherever we touched. It filled my body with a raging, howling fire.

My hand prickled with pain.

Fylgja, her soft voice whispered in my mind. Then everything went dark.

I collapsed. The hardness of the floor pressed against my body. Dim light filtered through the transparent fabric covering my head. I struggled to remove the shroud, but my body wouldn't obey. I crawled and emerged from the cloth that covered me.

Tattooed ankles met my eyes. Felix knelt down to my height, ignoring the fact he was naked. "Now, this is interesting."

I turned my head to the side, trying to avoid making eye contact with his junk, and ended up looking directly into the mirror in my closet. A silver fox stood in front of Felix's kneeling form. She stared right at me.

I screamed, and it came out as a horrible chittering howl. What the hell had he done to me?

"Calm down, *min Vættir*." Felix scooped my clumsily squirming body into his arms. "A spirit has chosen you."

He sat on the bed next to Shael and held me tight to his chest, stroking my head. I nipped at his hand, drawing a chuckle from him, but he let me go. I found my footing like a baby deer and took a few wobbly steps to Shael.

Shael seemed as shocked as I was. His mouth hung open, his hands braced on either side of his body as if he might have to jump to his feet at any moment. He looked at me, then Felix, then back to me.

“She’s a fox,” he said, as if convincing himself of the fact.

Felix inspected his arm where I’d touched that mark. A space was left blank, nothing but the empty silhouette on his bronze skin.

My right paw felt tender, like I’d burned it. I laid down next to Shael and examined it. If I squinted, I could just barely see a splash of orange on my pale fur.

The mark! Now that I saw it, I could feel the mana igniting its power. It felt just like a bennu rune but connected to my soul. Orange mana pooled around it, so I pulled some of the mana back into my blood. My vision blurred, and I dove under the bedcover as I drained the rest of the mana from the mark.

Silky sheets slid across my bare skin. I pulled the blanket from my face and sat up, holding the bedding against my chest. “What the fuck was that?”

“I don’t know,” Felix said. “I’ve never seen a spirit jump from one druid to another like that.”

“I’m not a druid,” I objected.

“No.” Felix studied my hand. The mark that had once been on his arm now adorned the back of my hand. “No, you’re not.”

I redressed in the gown Felix had picked out for me and walked to the main room. Felix had put his pants back on, but he was still distractingly shirtless.

I sat at the end of the couch, sipping from a mug of tea Felix had made for me, while Shael went to fetch Cyrus and Skye. Apparently, me stealing a spirit from Felix and turning into a fox warranted a family discussion.

“Did I take her from you?” I asked quietly, staring into my mug. I’d once been told the bond between a spirit and a druid was sacred, the mark on your skin reflecting the mark on your soul.

“She was never really mine to begin with.” Felix ran his hand through his dark hair. “She’s chosen you.”

“What do you mean? That she was never really yours?” I asked, “How did you get your marks?”

A shadow fell over Felix’s face, but he didn’t turn away. “I told you I was sent to the Northern temple when my spirit revealed itself,” he began. “There’s a ... prophecy about the mortal raven, the boy born with the ability to see the threads of fate. Poradans believe that the raven-spirited boy would be vital in the revival of our worlds.

“When a druid has become old and unable to serve the Ancients in their life, they will sacrifice themselves at the temple, gifting their spirit to a priest in a final act of faith.” Felix searched my eyes, as if bracing himself for my revulsion.

He would find none. I was familiar with the concept. The hunters had a similar tradition, and it had taken my mother. Her death opened my eyes to the true darkness of the order. I fled the next day.

“When the people heard about the Raven Priest, there was a line of druids, young and old, who wanted to give their life to the fated one to bolster his strength so that he might save the world.”

I rubbed my chest. The spirit’s affection for the man in front of me gripped my heart as though it were my own.

I reached out and took his hand. “They killed themselves?”

He nodded. “They put their faith in me so completely that they gave their lives, and I have nothing to show for it.”

The door opened, causing us to jump apart. Cyrus swept into the room, took one look at my outfit and then my hand, and leveled Felix with an icy glare.

“What did you do?”

“I’m not the one you should be asking,” Felix said. His face morphed into a smile, though it fell short. Cyrus slid his glare to me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It was like the mark called to me, like she wanted me to have her.”

“Why do you say that?” Cyrus tilted his head and narrowed his eyes.

“She said *fylgja* just before it happened.” I bit my lip.

Felix jumped at that. “*Fylgja*? You’re sure she said that?”

“Yes.” The spirit’s ethereal voice was something I wouldn’t soon forget.

“Then she’s chosen you. Somehow, she’s your soul’s druid spirit,” Felix said, confusion and curiosity warring in his voice. “For druids, our *fylgja* chooses us when we’re born. It is the spirit that is bound to our soul. My raven is my *fylgja*, and yours, apparently, is the fox.”

I chewed on this information. Did this mean I was a druid? I supposed it was possible someone in my family tree broke from the ranks and had a child with an otherworlder. But why was I able to activate bennu runes and receive daeva visions?

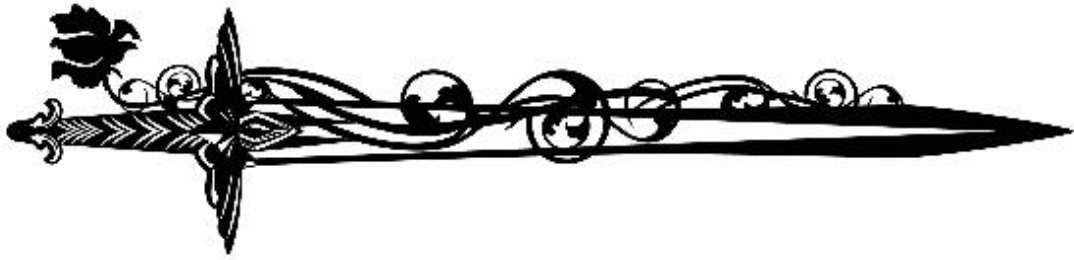
“It’s late, I’m going to bed.” I pushed my way through the wall of men and didn’t stop until I was safely in my room with the door closed. I walked numbly to my bed and slid under the covers. My hand pulsed with warmth.

I’d always been confident in who and what I was. It was something I struggled against and hid behind layers of lies and cloth. It was one of the few things I was sure of. Now? I didn’t know.

Where did hunters come from? We were told we were descended from angels, glorious, wrathful beings meant to cleanse Earth of otherworlders. Why was I any different?

I squeezed my eyes closed. Eventually, sleep took me, and I dreamt of a little white fox. She ran through the woods. She ran and ran until she collapsed, and her shadow caught up with her.

Thirteen



TAPPING ON THE window stirred me from my sleep. I cracked my eyes open to see the room was still dark. A shadow darted across the balcony door. A shadow wearing a heavy cloak.

I reached under my pillow and pulled out a small dagger. It was something I'd grown used to sleeping with at home. Once you learned not to prop the pillow on your arm, it was relatively safe.

I got out of bed and stalked to the balcony.

Cold night air washed over my face as I pushed the door open and stepped outside. The moon scattered its rays on the fog that hung low over the city.

"Ari?" I whispered. I squinted into the blackness, finding a cloud of purple mana at the wrought-iron railing of the balcony. He was dressed in his usual cloak. The hood draped over his head, and his mask covered his nose and mouth.

My heart jumped in my chest. The last time I'd seen him, he was unconscious, battling the curse he'd been willing to endure to save me.

"You look better." I set my dagger on the table.

"I could say the same to you." His voice was a familiar hoarse timbre.

"I've already been scolded by Felix if that's what you came to do."

"No."

"How did you get here, anyway? Isn't the palace supposed to have crazy strong wards?" I glanced around, expecting an

alarm to go off at any moment.

He turned and braced his forearms on the railing. I joined him. The wind stirred my dress around my ankles. The city sparkled, lit by thousands of gas and electric lanterns. The light reflected on the ocean below.

“Is that why Sabrina called you Wraith?” I wondered aloud. I tapped my chin. From what I knew about the Aegis, they didn’t accept just anyone. What was it about Ari that secured his position?

“Valeria has a spy in the palace.” The gravel in Ari’s voice sharpened his words to tiny razors.

I jerked back in surprise. “What? A spy for Valeria?”

He remained silent, gazing down at the city. He tucked his chin to his chest, covering his face with his hood.

“Who?”

“I don’t know. There’s something protecting the minds of the servants. Or someone.”

I watched as a blurry figure pulled laundry from a line. “Quillon said he had someone monitoring them. Wouldn’t she notice?”

“No, she’s not Daevasi.” He straightened and finally turned to me. Piercing lilac eyes burned in the darkness of his hood. “Free daeva. Not powerful enough.”

I edged closer to him. “Why are you telling me? Have you spoken to Cyrus?”

“Cyrus has trouble thinking outside the box.” Ari bent down, lowering his head to within an inch of mine. He reached a gloved hand out and caught a fluttering strand of my silver hair. He gave it a small tug, sending a sharp jolt down my neck. “Goodnight, Enchanter.”

Before I could say goodbye, he launched himself over the edge of the balcony and disappeared.

“A gift for the theatrics, that one,” I mumbled and dragged myself back to bed. This time, I dreamt of the boy in the vision. His face morphed from the frightened face of innocence into the

scarred face of the Wraith.



THE NEXT TIME I woke, sunlight battered my windows, melting the frost that had gathered there overnight. I bathed and dressed in a plain long sleeve shirt with a flexible leather corset Felix insisted would be both stylish and functional.

Felix was overbearing when it came to dressing me, but I had to admit he did it well. The resulting outfit helped me blend in with the daeva but was practical at the same time. I covered it all with my favorite thick woolen cloak.

I slipped a few weapons into various pockets and straps on the corset, and secured Ted to my hip, careful not to let my skin touch him. I snagged a couple scones from the tray of food before heading to the garden. The halls of the palace were quiet, and I found my way to the clearing we used as a training yard without running into anyone.

The boys were already in the middle of their session. Felix ran literal circles around Skye and Shael, shifting into black versions of various animals. I even thought I saw a flicker of a black alligator for a moment before he shifted into a rat, drawing a high-pitched squeal from Shael.

“You’re late.” Cyrus appeared out of thin air behind me.

“I had a visitor last night.” I finished the rest of my pastry. “Kept me up a little late.”

Mana surged at my back, like warm rays of sunshine. I smiled. This was too easy.

“There was someone in your room last night?” His voice was low, dangerous, like the retreat of the sea before a tsunami.

Cyrus kept his emotions under tight control, but I’d learned to read his aura. He had a much harder time keeping that in check. At the moment, it pulsed with barely restrained energy.

He was so jealous.

“Ari was on my balcony,” I said, deciding to take pity on him. I went through a few stretches, preparing myself for training.

“He hasn’t returned to Draqaar since he left four hundred years ago.”

I sprung back up from my toe-touch. “He’s four hundred years old?”

Cyrus took a step closer to my back and dipped his head beside mine. His breath tickled my ear. “I was born at the dawn of time, Enchanter. How old does that make me?”

“Old as hell.” I spun around to face him and gestured to the whip on my belt. “Now, are you going to show me how to use this thing? Or are you just here for your stunning good looks?”

“You’re not ready.”

“I thought you said it was stupid of you to teach me like a bennu?” I crossed my arms. I was using this whip, with or without him.

“Not my exact words,” Cyrus grumbled, but he gestured for me to follow him. He led us to a circular area where the snow had been cleared, revealing trampled, frozen grass beneath. He picked up a handful of flat stones from the path. He drew a rune on each with his marker and placed them along the border of our circle.

“What are you doing?”

He didn’t answer me and instead continued until he placed the last stone. A golden dome shimmered as it formed around us. He warded our clearing. I knelt down and inspected the rune on one of the stones. Blocky lines formed what looked like a slanted *N* with a line through it.

“What exactly do you think is going to happen?” I rolled my eyes but took my position in front of him.

“I don’t know.” He took a step towards me, forcing me to crane my neck to look at him. “Your magic is unpredictable, so I’m taking precautions.”

His hand slipped beneath my cloak and settled on my waist. He drew me closer. My heart fluttered in my chest, responding to the shivers his touch sent down my spine. His hand trailed down my side until it landed on the holster at my hip.

Cyrus unfurled the whip in one fluid movement, and Ted emerged from the inert cylinder in a glorious arc. My breath hitched in my chest. The last time Ted had been out, Cyrus was a lot less ... on the ground.

This time, however, it appeared Ted was willing to behave. Cyrus wielded him like a radiant god. A halo of brilliant light emanated from both of them as he tested the whip's movement.

"It's calm for the moment, but eager." He held the handle out to me.

I grasped Ted gently, savoring the rush of energy at the contact. I dragged the whip along the ground, watching as the burnished metal caught the sparse rays of sunlight.

"Good. Now turn it to its dormant form," Cyrus instructed.

I nodded. I tried to redirect the energy I felt passing from me to the whip, but it slipped away with every attempt to rein it in. That wouldn't work.

Like the ward Cyrus had placed around us, I imagined a barrier forming on my skin, cutting off the flow of mana into the handle. Painstakingly, I reduced the mana to a trickle, until eventually it stopped. Ted trembled but retracted back to his hilt.

"Good. Now turn it back." Cyrus strolled along the boundary of the circle.

I groaned but obeyed. We continued this way for the better part of an hour. Cyrus wore a path into the perimeter of our space. By the end of our session, I could summon Ted at will.

Cyrus dropped the wards, and the shimmering wall of our bubble disintegrated.

I stuffed my shaking hands into the pockets of my cloak and fought the urge to nap right there on the ground. Using

mana like this was tiring. I had to exert precise control over every action. I had to ignite every rune with intention.

No wonder Cyrus was so cranky all the time.

“You’re learning fast,” he said, before he turned on his heel and strode to where Skye and Shael were sparring.

“Good talk,” I said to his back.

The crunch of snow drew my attention away from the lecture Cyrus was giving the twins. Someone ducked behind a wall of hedges and moved toward the door to the palace. They’d been watching my training.

I tiptoed along the other side of the hedge, moving as quietly as I could. When they reached the end, they made a dash for the door, but I jumped and grabbed a handful of cloak.

The hood fell from her head, revealing long muddy brown hair. It was the elemental hybrid servant.

“Why were you hiding?” I asked. I wasn’t sure whether I should sound the alarm on a spy or hide with her to avoid any more training with the drill sergeant.

Ari’s warning rang in my ears. There was a spy in the palace, and now there was a girl watching us from the bushes. Either she was involved, or she’d be a helpful lead. If there was anything going on in the palace, the servants would know.

Her eyes were wide in panic, locked on the guys behind me, so I pulled her back behind the hedge.

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “We won’t hurt you.”

I was suddenly aware I held onto her with two fistfuls of her clothing. I let out a nervous laugh and released her before brushing the wrinkles away.

“My name is—well—you can just call me Enchanter.” I held my hand out, hoping handshakes were a thing on Draqaar.

For a moment, we just stared at each other. She tentatively took my hand. Her small one was callused, and I felt the faint current of earth magic flowing through her.

Her face twitched into a skittish smile. “Kira.”

“Nice to meet you, Kira. I’ve been meaning to ask someone if the palace has a library?”

“Y-yes, Lady Enchanter,” Kira stuttered. “The palace has an extensive library in the west wing.” She stood frozen in place, wringing her hands.

“Lead the way, then,” I urged gently. “There’s no way I’ll be able to find it on my own. I don’t even know which direction is west.”

Kira nodded and led me through the halls to a part of the palace I hadn’t ventured into yet. I mentally mapped the building, making sure I’d be able to find my way back. The other staff gave us strange looks as we passed.

“What’s their problem?” I asked her after a male servant practically tripped over his feet when he saw the two of us.

“Slaves aren’t supposed to interact with those of your standing, my lady.”

“You’re just showing me where the library is,” I said, confused.

“I should have informed one of the free staff of your needs, and they would have shown you.”

“That’s stupid.” My voice echoed.

She snorted a laugh but followed it with a soft gasp. She covered her mouth with her hand. Kira had paused at a tall archway leading to another long hallway lined with floor-to-ceiling windows on either side, letting in the gray-tinted sunlight. “You aren’t from Draqaar.”

“No, I’m not.” I smiled at the timid girl in front of me. “I’m from Earth.”

She remained silent, her head tucked to her chest.

“Can you read?”

“Y-yes, Lady Enchanter. My master in Kaslen believed all his slaves should be able to read.”

“Great! I desperately need your help.” I grabbed hold of her hand and dragged her down the windowed hall and through a pair of heavily carved wooden doors to the tower beyond.

The vast library stretched before me, at least three stories tall. Small, ornate desks dotted the space, separated by a few sitting areas with high back leather chairs.

“Gods, you guys don’t do anything half-assed, do you?”

She laughed again, more freely this time. “Daevasi enjoy extremes.”

I wandered through the soaring bookshelves, already lost. I ran my hand along the spines of the books. I didn’t recognize any of the titles, and many of them were in strange languages.

Kira followed me, her hands clasped at her waist. After running around the perimeter and peeking in a couple of closets, I was comfortable that the library was empty.

“Are you looking for any book in particular, Lady Enchanter?” Kira asked finally, as I closed the door to a small bathroom.

I paused. Subtlety wasn’t something I’d attempted before.

I perused the nearest bookshelf. “Oh, uh ... yes. I wanted to find a book on daeva compulsion.”

Kira’s brow furrowed, and she walked to another shelf. She pulled a heavy volume and held it out to me. “Here, my Lady.”

“Thanks. How did you know where to find this?” I clasped it to my chest and slapped it onto a table.

“Sometimes when I’m cleaning and no one’s around, I’ll read.”

I cracked the book open, revealing yellowed pages. I flipped through slowly. “Do you know how someone could use compulsion within the palace wards?”

She sucked in a breath. “This is about the poison.”

I winced. Maybe subtlety wasn’t my thing. Oh well, bluntness was much more efficient.

“Yes. My ... colleagues and I are here to stop a person who steals people from the other worlds. We believe she’s behind the events the night of the ball.”

She played with the frayed hem of her sleeve while emotions warred on her face. “I really don’t know anything. I’m sorry.”

I tapped my fingers on the desk. I didn’t think Kira was involved in a mass uprising against Quillon, but perhaps she could still be of use. There was strength below her timid shell. I saw it in her actions. She watched us to sate her curiosity, even though she was afraid. She brought me to the library, even though she knew it was against the rules.

My stomach churned, but I plastered on a tight smile. “Were you born on Draqaar, Kira?”

“Yes.” She released her clasped hands, and her hunched shoulders straightened a little. “But my mother’s from Porada. She’s an earth elemental. They brought her here to work in the mines below the ocean.”

I nodded. The daeva took many slaves from Porada. It was clear when I looked at the auras of the servants I’d come across. Elementals and druids outnumbered humans five to one.

“You’re from Earth ...” Her shining eyes finally landed on me again. “Is it true what they say? No slaves?”

Her gaze was so hopeful, so unbroken. My throat tightened around my answer. “I can’t speak for the entire planet, but in my city of Haven, every citizen’s equal.”

Kira wiped her palms on the front of her dress and took a shaky breath. “Quillon is a good master. I knew Sandi, the girl who was killed that night. The one they say had the poison.”

“Kira!” A panicked shriek made us both turn to the door. A middle-aged daeva woman stood in the archway. She wore a fine velvet dress, but her round red face was uncovered, telling me she wasn’t Daevasi. This must be the free daeva matron Ari mentioned.

“Matron!” Kira jumped and muttered an apology before running out of the room. I pushed to my feet and moved to follow her, but the daeva woman intercepted me.

“Sincerest apologies, my Lady. She forgets her place.”

I tried to move around her, but she stepped to either side. “I asked her to help me.”

She didn’t carry herself the way other servants tended to. Those I’d encountered so far kept their eyes on the ground, scuttling away as I passed.

“As that may be, slaves must not forget their place. Can’t have them getting any ideas! I’m sure you understand.”

I stamped down the urge to do this ‘matron’ any serious bodily harm.

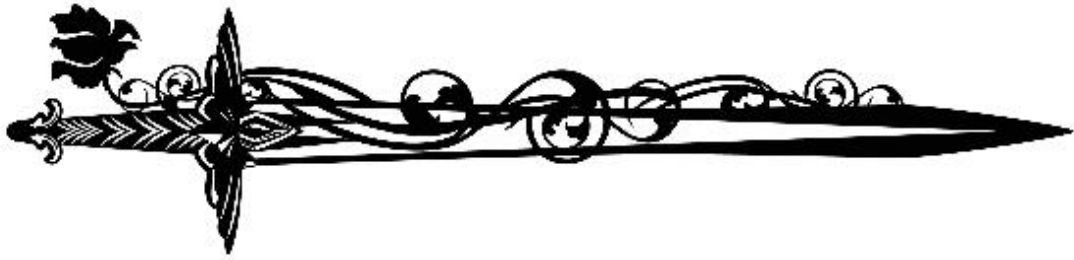
She flapped her hands as if physically clearing the air between us. “Anyway, I’m here to fetch you. King Quillon requests your presence at the prison.”

Nose in the air, she sauntered back down the hallway.

I stood there dumbstruck.

The prison? Oh, this was going to be interesting.

Fourteen



LUCKILY, MISS “SLAVES must not forget their place” left me at the dock where I boarded a waiting taxi.

I smiled at the old skipper as I stepped onto the small metal craft. He brought us through the canals to the edge of the city, where it suddenly opened to nothing but ocean.

My lips parted as I took in the scenery before me. I had explored little of the city, and my room in Quillon’s palace faced the sprawling city center.

“There aren’t any walls?”

“Wards,” the skipper replied gruffly.

Of course. If someone wasn’t welcome, they probably wouldn’t be able to cross the threshold. Unless you were the Wraith, I supposed.

The prison was just outside the limits of Qaanir. An industrial barge was anchored far from the edge of the city. Looking around, there seemed to be nothing but calm, empty water stretching into the misty horizon.

I wondered if they regretted it, destroying their world in the pursuit of resources. Given the way some daeva still plundered the other worlds, I doubted it. Clearly, they had adapted.

A thick wall of magic enclosed the water around the hulking ship. Strong wards covered the area like a steel blanket. I felt it as we approached, but the wards didn’t recognize me. Their oppressive power already pushed at me. I glanced back at the skipper, but he seemed unaffected.

Our small boat continued forward. I could already feel the magic’s repulsion, like two positively charged magnets. I had a

couple of choices. I could tell the skipper to turn around and miss the interrogation.

Or I could allow the wards to attack me.

I didn't have to absorb them entirely. Not that it would have been an option, anyway. The amount of mana aside, I wanted to avoid dissolving the one thing that ensured the prison's security.

I braced myself for the aggressive magic of the ward. It washed over me as we passed through it. I absorbed the barrage of layer upon layer of spells like a wave crashing against a seawall.

I pulled it into me and released a sigh as the icy rush of mana sank into my blood.

I saw Quillon on the deck above us as we approached. He wore all dark clothing. His cloak whipped out behind him in the strong sea wind. He looked so much like Ari, I had to do a double take.

I was still buzzing from the influx of mana when Quillon offered me his hand to help me onto the dock. I took it, thankful for his support since my legs were still unsteady on the bobbing surface. Once I was on the barge, he tugged sharply, and I fell into him.

His mana caressed my skin. It smelled like tobacco and honey. Even his aura was obnoxiously posh.

His smile was predatory. "So, it's true."

"What is?" I said, trying to pull away from him.

"You can pass through wards."

"You did that on purpose?" I moved to smack his chest, but he caught my hand.

"Would you have told me if I'd asked?"

"Try it next time. I might surprise you."

"Now, what would be the fun of that?" He released me and smoothed the collar of his shirt.

We climbed the rusted ladder to the barren deck of the ship. A blacked-out flag atop a single flagpole whipped around in the wind, but otherwise, there was nothing. No guards, no janitors, not even the seabirds dared to land on the rigging.

Quillon waved me to a thick metal door leading belowdecks. It groaned as he pulled on it, like a beast opening its mouth. Sprockets and belts lined the walls, forming a network of machinery. Their whirrs and clanks penetrated the eerie silence and swallowed the echoes of our footsteps through the bare halls.

Quillon stopped at a dark room deep in the bowels of the prison. He spun the wheel, and the door creaked open. I ducked inside, and Quillon propped himself against the doorway.

Three restrained people sat in rusty chairs. The only light in the small space was from a tiny round window and a single burning lantern hanging low from the ceiling.

I carefully approached the prisoners, unsettled by the blank looks on their faces. Their dead eyes tracked me as I reached the woman on the right.

As far as I could tell, they were all humans, which would make my job easier. Humans didn't have any extra tangible mana, all of it was tied up in their soul, inaccessible.

The woman had tangled dirty blond hair and still wore the dark clothing I'd seen the assassins wearing the night of the ball. She had a short leather cord wrapped around her neck, weighed down by tarnished dog tags.

There was no obvious curse on her. I squinted at her head, searching for any purple magic indicating a mind block or compulsion. I circled her a few times before I reluctantly placed my hand on the cool skin of her hand. Nothing.

It was strange. Even with humans, I felt some sort of spark of life, but with this woman, I felt nothing. I turned away from Quillon and swiftly unlatched my choker. I stuffed it in the pocket of my cloak before I resumed my search. Quillon watched silently from the doorway, analyzing every move I made.

Even after taking off my iron, the only mana I felt was the impatient aura of the daeva king in the room. After a few more circles around my target, I knelt on the ground in front of her and bit my lip in thought.

We stared at each other before something caught my eye. One of the dog tags had shifted, revealing a blocky symbol carved into the surface. It was some sort of logo with the words *First Unit* below it.

I jumped to my feet and reached for the pendant. The moment I touched it, oily mana assaulted me. White hot magic shot through me, followed by a creeping chill. Powerful incantations swept through me, trying to make me forget who I was, what I was doing.

I dropped it, and it stopped.

Quillon moved from his spot at the door and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“It’s a bennu rune,” I said, breathless from the aftershocks of the curse. “But it has daeva magic in it, too. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

Quillon glared at the necklace before tugging it from the woman’s neck. She screamed. Her guttural cries echoed around the metal room. Agony rippled through her as she struggled against an unseen force. Her back arched against the chair, every muscle taut beneath her painfully pale skin.

The other two prisoners watched the scene with sedate apathy. I covered my ears to muffle the screams. Quillon peered at the object in his hand, then back at the writhing woman, considering his options.

He pressed the dog tags back to her skin. Immediately, she calmed and gazed vacantly at him like nothing had happened.

I dropped my hands from my ears and blew out a breath.

“In all my years of dispelling curses, I’ve never seen two different magic work together like this.” I bit my lip, dissecting my thoughts. “It’s as if the bennu and daeva magic were cast in the same spell by the same person.”

I couldn't tell what the magic was meant to do, but its oily grip still lingered on my mind. It felt like a disease. The mana was corrupted and twisted into an unnatural form.

Quillon scowled at the floor, his lips pressed into a grim line. "Can you do anything? Dispel it?"

Nausea roiled in my stomach at the thought of absorbing the thick, oily mana, but I nodded. The woman watched me as I approached. I took hold of the pendant, still pressed to the side of her neck.

When the magic reached for me, I welcomed it and drew it into me. I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat as it sank into my skin and clawed its way into my veins. It felt like an hour passed before the mana slowed to a trickle, and then finally, the necklace was depleted.

The prisoner slumped in her seat. I pulled away at the sudden movement. This time, she remained silent as I took the pendant with me.

"Did it work?" I looked between Quillon and the woman.

Quillon stiffened and left the room. "She's dead," he called out over his shoulder.

"What?!" I screeched, sparing the woman a glance before rushing after him. "Oh gods, did I kill her?"

"Doesn't matter," Quillon stated, eating up the distance back to the deck with his long legs. I jogged to keep up with him. My thoughts raced, and questions stuck to my tongue.

"Of course it matters! It was a life, you—you unbelievable robot!"

"They're *all* dead," he said simply as we reached the barren deck of the barge. "Have been since Valeria sent them after me."

That news hit me like a bus. I missed a step, and Quillon caught me and plucked the pendant from my hand before continuing down to the dock.

"How's that possible?"

He sat on the bench of the taxi and motioned for me to join him. “There’s a legend about the last reaper, Enoch.”

Once we were underway, he cleared his throat and gazed at the runes on the pendant.

“Daeva aren’t superstitious, but we love an underdog story. Long ago, a slave went on a killing spree, breaking into the impenetrable homes of Daevasi and murdering them.

“Eventually, the Daevasi caught him and executed him for his crimes. But the leader of the bennu wanted him back. He made a valuable asset, after all. Enoch captured the slave’s soul and bound it to a four-pointed star. They carved the rune into his chest. They resurrected him.”

Quillon ducked his head to my ear and whispered the last words.

“His name was Samir, though he’s not known by that name anymore.”

We passed through the prison’s wards again, and dizziness washed over me. I closed my eyes to still my spinning head, but a memory played on the back of my eyelids. My hands pressed to a four-pointed scar.

“Oh gods.” My stomach churned with the bobbing of the boat.

“I believe he goes by ... Ari? Is that what he’s calling himself now? Chained?” Quillon pondered, pretending not to notice my inner meltdown. “I always preferred the Wraith, myself. More fitting, considering his situation.”

“You’re saying Ari’s undead? Like those people?” I shook my head. Quillon was messing with me, and it was a cruel joke. The prisoners were like empty husks of what a person should be. Ari wasn’t a picture of naked emotion, but he was far from a mindless zombie.

“Not exactly. Yes, he’s undead.” Quillon kept his back straight and his voice low as we drifted through the canals nearing the palace. “But no. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, he’s not like those people. Enoch restored his soul. Daeva coercion is

not absolute. But it's much easier to control someone's mind when you don't have to worry about any pesky consciousness."

"Enoch's behind this? He's working with Valeria?"

Quillon thought for a moment before he answered. "I don't think Enoch has anything to do with this."

"Why are you telling me all of this? I didn't expect you to be so forthcoming with information."

"I assure you, dove, I have my motives."

The taxi pulled into the palace's dock, and Quillon offered me his hand again. This time I ignored it and jumped nimbly to the platform, leaving him behind.

Clouds cast pale shadows over the landscape as I walked by the grand entrance on my way to the garden.

Shael and Felix were still there, though their training had devolved into an intense snowball fight. I began to sneak around them, using the various fountains and animal-shaped hedges as cover.

I just wanted to shut myself in my room with that plate of pastries and a book. A little alone time to digest the events and mana of the day.

A shadow fell over me, and suddenly I was covered in a mound of icy snow. Unless we'd somehow had a miraculous avalanche in the middle of the ocean, there was only one explanation. I dug my way out but not before snow permeated every fold of my clothing.

Skye stood by an iron bench, a smug smile on his lips.

I glared at him while I shook off the rest of the snow. "I thought you'd be too mature for a snowball fight."

"I was practicing a spell, but I saw an opportunity too good to pass up."

I noticed a pocketknife in his hand. "You were practicing healing?"

Shael skidded to a halt next to me, a freshly made snowball in his hand.

“Hey, Enchantress.” He took in my disheveled appearance. His eyes lingered on the flecks of snow that still clung to my cloak and hair. “I didn’t know you were playing.”

“I wasn’t. Skye ambushed me.” I pointed to the pile I’d crawled out of.

“Hey, man,” Shael turned to his evil twin, “you know the rules. No magic, only snowballs.”

“It *was* a ball of snow,” Skye deadpanned. “Just a really big ball of snow.”

“Well, in that case . . .” Shael threw his snowball into the air and caught it with a gust of wind. He launched it at his brother, hitting his chest in a burst of ice.

Skye staggered back, trying to regain his balance. Shael had already summoned a swirling tornado the size of a family minivan. It picked up all the snow in the area before he sent it on a twisting path to Skye.

Skye took off, headed for the maze, probably assuming Shael wouldn’t destroy the garden. He was wrong.

Shael guided his tornado through the lines of foliage, pulling chunks of vegetation into the destructive wind as it went. The tornado yanked some up entirely. Their roots whipped around in the cyclone.

Skye raised his arms, and the remaining hedges grew bare branches to form a protective dome around him.

“Surrender and accept your punishment!” Shael yelled over the deafening sound of the wind. His tornado ripped through the barricade of tangled branches with ease. Shael dropped the intense winds once everything lay torn apart, but Skye was nowhere to be seen.

The ground was pulled from beneath me, forming walls of ice around Shael and me. I struggled to remain standing, but Shael just laughed, childlike excitement in his voice.

“Now it’s war!” He pressed his hands to the wall, and steam filled the air. Clouds formed above us, and snowflakes started falling.

“What in the four worlds is happening?” I whispered to myself. These two wielded the power of natural disasters like it was nothing more than a toy, and the world was their playground.

Shael had melted his way through the wall, and I heard more snow being shifted on the other side, along with grunts and taunts.

I climbed through the hole in the wall and found the two of them wrestling, using their magic in the tussle. Skye caught Shael’s foot with a root, and at the same time, Shael used a gust of wind to knock Skye off balance. They both fell and resumed their grappling on the ground.

I grabbed a handful of snow and summoned all my strength to hurl it at their heads. Thanks to my practice throwing knives, it hit its mark, even with the two of them moving around.

Two pairs of iridescent eyes focused on me.

Uh-oh.

My heart drummed in my chest. I broke out in a sprint and ducked behind a sculpture of an important-looking daeva man. Shael disappeared, but Skye was getting close. A large orb of snow floated behind him.

I made another snowball and waited for Skye to come within range. I nailed him in the junk. Predictably, a laugh came from the hedge behind me, giving away Shael’s position. I rolled to the corner, my hunter training kicking in.

Raw mana sang in my veins and pushed extra strength into every throw, extra speed into every movement. I sent a barrage of snowballs careening toward Shael.

He summoned a blast of air to knock some off course and melted the rest. With each spell, I saw his mana surge towards his hands. If I could cut off the flow, he’d be at my mercy.

He continued stalking toward me, thwarting every attack. I threw another snowball, and when I saw his aura swell, I beckoned the mana to me. To my delight, it obeyed, even though I had my choker on. Shael faltered, missing a step. As he stumbled, my snowball hit him square in the forehead.

Arms wrapped around my front. They grabbed my wrists and locked me to the warm body behind me.

“Playing dirty?” Skye’s voice rumbled at my back.

“You started it,” I said, grinning triumphantly.

“What do you think, brother? What’s her punishment for breaking the rules?” Skye asked as Shael took his place at my front. The snow on my clothes had melted, but their heat surrounded me, making me shiver for an entirely different reason.

Shael wore an evil smile, and his eyes sparkled with a wickedness that surprised me. “Restrain her with vines and I’ll brand her skin with our initials.”

Skye’s hands tightened on my arms. “I can drop her back in that tub. She looked so good, soaked and begging for me to take her dress off.”

“Not exactly how it went.” My breathing came in shallow gasps, my chest tight with uncertainty and desire. “And I can just absorb all the mana you throw at me.”

“You’ll reach your limit eventually,” Skye growled in my ear. His warm breath tickled my neck. His lips were so close to my skin. I lifted my chin, desire curling in my core, wanting him to close the distance.

“She *is* more fun when she’s mana drunk.” Shael took another step toward me. His hard chest pressed to mine. He gripped my waist, his fingers digging into my skin. I was drowning in their auras. My senses filled with smoke and rain, the feverish heat of a wildfire and the crisp chill of an autumn downpour.

I needed to get away before I did something stupid. Like taking my clothes off. That was definitely a bad idea.

“Or ...”

I dropped out of their hold and used my unexpected strength to turn Skye’s grip against him. I dropped my center of gravity and used the momentum to throw him over my head. He landed on his back in the snow, and I rolled to my feet a short distance away.

I held my hands up. “Truce?”

Skye climbed to his feet, a wicked promise in his crystalline eyes. Snowflakes dusted his azure hair like a spattering of stars in the midnight sky. He looked predatory, his muscles taut, like he wanted to pounce and catch me again.

Shael, on the other hand, was still smiling, as though he approved of my resistance because it gave him a reason to burn everything to the ground.

Felix took this moment to emerge from behind a stone bench.

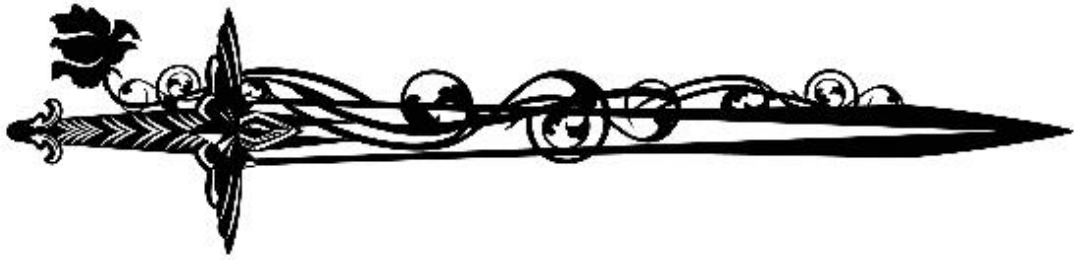
“Wow,” he said, fanning himself dramatically. “I hide for two seconds and almost miss a three-way.”

“It was just a snowball fight.” I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help blushing. I took his interruption as just the excuse I needed to retreat.

I didn’t know what I wanted. Judging by the dampness in my underwear, my body had made up its own mind. But there was no way I was doing anything with any of them. They were my mortal enemies, after all.

It didn’t get more complicated than that.

Fifteen



I SPENT THE rest of the afternoon in the library. It was as good a place as any to hide from your feelings. I read up on Draqaari mythology and only briefly got distracted by some erotic fiction about a forbidden affair between a Daevasi lady and a gladiator.

When someone came in to clean, I took my pile of books back to my room. As I arrived, Kira ducked out, taking the cart with the morning's dishes and uneaten food with her.

I didn't want to cause her any more trouble, so I whispered a quick "hi." She smiled at me but averted her eyes and hurried down the hall.

A freshly stocked cart sat just inside the door, piled high with extravagant dishes. I went to snag another strawberry pastry and noticed a slip of paper poking out from beneath the plate.

I grabbed it and went to my balcony, overlooking the sprawling palace garden and the rest of the city. Ivy crawled along the wall and railing. The sunset splashed the sky with bright colors and stretched the shadows below me.

I wrapped a blanket around myself and took a seat on the plush loveseat. Once I was comfortable, I unfolded the note. In rough handwriting, it read:

I want to help.

Kira left the letter unsigned, likely in case someone else found the note. I smiled to myself and took a bite of my pastry. The girl had some spirit. She was curious, and although she could barely look at the guys, she had a spark of bravery in her. She reminded me of Em when I first met her.

Even when everyone told her she was nothing special, she knew otherwise. It wasn't always flashy abilities or impressive skills that won in the end. Often, it was those who'd been overlooked who held the most power. It took a special strength to exist in a world of literal magic and to match it with determination alone.



I BLINKED HARD in the darkness. Fog obstructed the light from the city below the balcony. I must have drifted to sleep. Tiny water droplets clung to the blanket I was still wrapped in, and my breath turned to mist in the frigid air.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I noticed the cloaked figure standing in the dark corner of the balcony.

“Gods, Ari!” I clutched my chest underneath the blanket, willing my heartbeat to slow. “You really shouldn’t creep in the shadows like that.”

“Sorry,” he rasped. “I’m still not used to being seen when I’m ... creeping.”

“Not better.” I chuckled.

I suddenly felt awkward. Should I bring up the whole undead thing? Maybe it was a sensitive subject for him.

“I helped Quillon with the prisoners today,” I said. Ari didn’t seem surprised. “You already knew, didn’t you?”

“I’m the Wraith, remember.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re a legendary spy and assassin.” I rolled my eyes dramatically. “You know, it’s really unattractive when someone clings to their glory days.”

Ari laughed, the sound more like an old car changing gears than a human noise. It was music to my ears.

“Noted,” he said.

A shiver racked my body, the blanket no longer able to keep me warm against the winter night.

Ari's eyes narrowed on me. "You're cold."

"Not all of us are wearing ten layers." Or maybe it was because he was undead?

I slipped through the door into the warmth of my bedroom, and after a moment, Ari followed. I shed the blanket and went to the closet to change into one of the many nightgowns Quillon had stocked my closet with. I chose a simple long sleeve gray gown and changed quickly in the cramped space.

When I returned, Ari still stood woodenly by the door to the balcony. I climbed under the thick covers of my king-sized bed and hugged myself.

"You're still shaking." In a blink, he was at my side. It was like he teleported, but that wasn't possible.

He took off his cloak and draped it over my shoulders. It smelled like him, a cozy, spicy scent.

"Thanks," I said and patted the bed next to me. His eyes widened a fraction, and he stiffened. I bit back a laugh. The infamous Wraith was scared of sitting next to me.

I scooted over a couple of inches to give him more room. He sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, facing away from me. He only sat far enough back to keep from falling off.

I examined Ari without his ever-present cloak. It was easy to forget how massive he was since he was always stalking around and clinging to the shadows.

His shoulders were broad, tapering at his hips. His muscles flexed beneath the black sweater he wore. Thin lines of scars peeked out of the neckline and disappeared beneath the messy strands of his chocolate brown hair. I hadn't seen him without gloves since the time I accidentally infused him with my mana when we first met.

"Why do you wear so much to cover yourself? Even when no one can see you?" I leaned toward him, willing him to come closer.

"You can see me," he replied, still not turning to me.

“Well, I don’t mind.” I nudged his back with my leg. “I’ve practically seen you naked at this point.”

He stiffened further, convincing me he’d snap his spine in half if I said anything more.

“They don’t bother me,” I whispered, hoping my hunch was right. “Your scars, I mean. I won’t pretend to know everything you went through, but you don’t have to hide it from me.”

It was silent as I counted my heartbeats, waiting for Ari to answer.

“Enchanter,” he said, his voice hoarse, finally turning around, “are you trying to get me out of my clothes?”

I blinked slowly. “Did you just make a joke?”

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. His eyes crinkled, though his scar pulled at his right eye, cutting across his eyebrow and cheek.

“I’m rubbing off on you! Just wait. In a few weeks, I’ll have you helping me play childish pranks on Skye.”

Ari shifted in the bed to sit next to me, our backs to the headboard. Our sides touched. He didn’t feel cold like I thought someone undead might. Maybe I shouldn’t trust everything Quillon said to me. He clearly had other motives.

I sank into the pillows behind me and leaned against Ari. We sat like this for a long time. Eventually, he relaxed, and I rested my head on his shoulder. I yawned as the excitement of the day finally caught up with me.

“Have I ever told you your aura smells like gingerbread?” I snorted at the look he gave me.

“No, it doesn’t.”

I nodded, enjoying his irritation. “Oh yes, it does. Just like my grandma used to make.”

Ari growled and lay on his side, dragging me down with him. He faced me. The mask concealed his expression, but Ari was still easy to read. His eyes burned low with warmth, like the lilac coals of a smoldering fire.

He slung his arm across my stomach and pressed me into the bed. "It's late. Sleep."

"You're bossier than Cyrus." I laughed and grasped his arm. His blood rushed in a steady beat beneath my touch, carrying his intoxicating mana.

"Sleep," he repeated. I felt the heat of magic flutter across my skin with his command. Drowsiness washed over me for a moment before I absorbed the spell.

"That won't work on me."

"Worth a try," he grumbled.

Are you really undead? Did Quillon tell the truth? Do you feel any different?

I pushed down my curiosity and swallowed my questions. How could I expect any of the Aegis men to divulge their secrets when I was keeping so much from them?

I ran from my past life and told myself that hadn't been me. It wasn't me who bowed politely to delegates, donned hunter leathers, and butchered innocent families. I was a new person now, a new Arsyn Morgan. Though I rarely went by that name anymore.

Like Ari, I'd chosen a new name and worn it like armor. Yet every day that passed, it felt as though the Enchanter was no longer a tool to make a living. She was becoming a part of me.

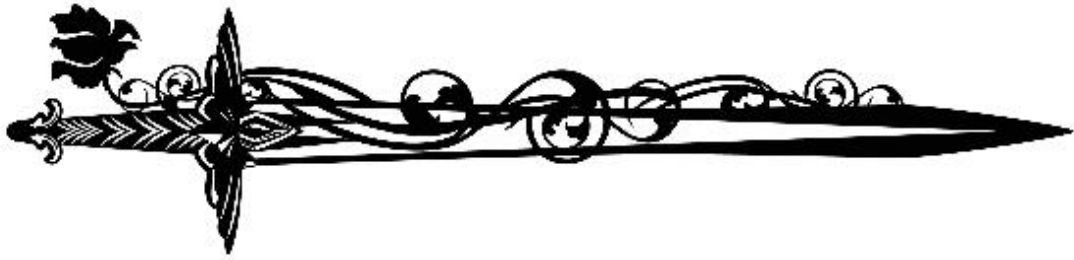
The Enchanter helped people. She dispelled curses, saved people from bondage and brought down slavers. What happened when you forgot who you were and became your mask?

Ari made small circles on my stomach with his thumb. He still watched me, though his gaze had lost some of its intensity.

"Will you stay tonight?" I whispered. Sleep's grip tightened on me, flooding my mind with numbing fog.

Until sunrise. His voice in my head was soft. Its ghostly echoes lulled me to sleep.

Sixteen



“HAVE I EVER told you your aura smells like gingerbread?” I snorted at the look he gave me over his shoulder.

“No, it doesn’t.”

A pink ferret hung from the curtains and launched itself across the room. A sloth threw a snowball at it, nailing it mid-flight and sending it careening to the ground in a ball of squeals and magenta fur.

I nodded, enjoying Ari’s irritation. “Oh yes, it does. Just like my grandma used to make.”

His back was to me. The muscled planes flexed beneath the thin black shirt he wore. Desire flooded me, remembering the chiseled bare chest I knew he hid beneath all that clothing.

“But your aura feels like nails dragged across my skin,” I said, my voice husky. A feverish ache pulsed low in my belly. Ari was a man of secrets and self-control. I wanted to see it shatter. “Like this.”

I gently scratched his chest with my nails. I traced the ridges of raised scars through his shirt. His body was hard beneath my touch. The outline of defined muscles pushed against my hand.

I pressed my palm to his stomach and followed my path back up. My breasts brushed his back, igniting a fire in my core. When my fingers touched the bare skin of his neck, his gloved hand shot up to catch my wrist.

“Well, well, well, little dove. I’m surprised.” Ari’s voice was too smooth, too melodic. Black clothing melted into red and

gold embroidered pajamas. As he stood and turned to me, his face morphed to high cheekbones and a manicured beard.

Quillon.

I gasped and scrambled to the other side of the bed. Even in his pajamas, he wore a velvet mask. Maybe we had more in common than I thought.

“When I felt your projection, I was intrigued. I didn’t know you had daeva blood, but I suppose it makes sense. You have a devious side.”

Quillon ran a finger along his lower lip, his crystalline eyes locked on mine.

“I’d expected a dream about your family back on Earth, or maybe even a hot little dream about one of those elemental boys. But I can see you like your men tall, dark and undead.”

“Get out of my head!” I yelled through clenched teeth. I tamped down the urge to throw a pillow at him. I’d already seen how that could go wrong. “Can’t a girl have an embarrassing dream about a coworker without someone butting in?”

He chuckled and sat on the bed and crossed his legs at the ankles. “Your mind called out to mine, dove. I simply accepted the invite.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and willed myself to wake up. How did this thing work, anyway?

“Well, since I have you, I’d like to make a proposal.” Quillon entwined his hands and rested them behind his head.

“Not another one.” I sighed. Last time Quillon made a deal, Cyrus was none too pleased. Quillon was the epitome of daeva royalty. He didn’t even need his magic to mess with your head.

“I know you can dispel the daeva curse.” Quillon watched me out of the corner of his eye.

I held my breath and shifted in my seat. How did he know that? He said he couldn’t get in my mind.

“Relax, I haven’t been in your head. You are still regrettably impermeable, but your associates need to work on their mind shielding.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to dispel the curse entirely. I want you to free the daeva,” Quillon said plainly, as if he were asking me to do the dishes.

“And how exactly do you propose I do that?” I crossed my arms. “If you saw what happened, you know dispelling Ari’s curse almost killed me.”

Quillon waved his hand dismissively. “We’ll figure out the details later. I’m already working on a potential lead. All I need now is your agreement.”

I chewed my lip in thought. Even if I could do what he asked, would I want to? The curse seemed to be the only thing keeping daeva like Valeria from wreaking total havoc. At least with this limit, she couldn’t do physical harm with her own hands.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The curse has its advantages ...”

Quillon picked up a book from my nightstand. It was a text on Draqaari history. “Have you gotten to the part about the curse yet?”

I shook my head. I was planning to read more tomorrow.

“Well, in that case, I’ll give you the short version. A thousand years ago, Draqaar was a very different place. I won’t tell you we were saints, but even the Aegis isn’t immune to corruption. They launched a campaign against us, and eventually they even pulled our Ancient into it.”

He paused, and a faraway look grew in his eyes. “We weren’t always cursed.”

“What happened?”

“Our Ancient, Daev, came to Draqaar.”

“Sorry, the daeva Ancient is a guy named Dave?”

“Day-Ev,” Quillon pronounced carefully. “Two syllables.”

I shrugged my shoulders but motioned for him to carry on. He was a font of information as of late.

“Daev appeared at the altar of his temple, now abandoned and flooded. I believe he tied the curse to the touchstone there. If that’s the case, then you can dispel it.”

“So, it was your own Ancient that cursed you.” I smirked.

Quillon shot me a lopsided smile. “Daev could have taken his gift back, made us all human like the bennu wanted. But that would be too straightforward, and Daev was the original daeva.”

He tossed the book back onto my nightstand and stood up, brushing off his silk shirt.

“But his curse had unforeseen consequences. When we could no longer hold the weapon in our own hands, we made others wield it for us. From that day forward, a new, delicate system took hold. With the curse in place, there was no other viable option. We must be able to defend ourselves.”

Silence stretched between us. I was missing something. Quillon always had a motive.

“Why do you want to break the curse, anyway? You don’t seem like the bloodthirsty type. I don’t see how it will benefit you.”

“I want the throne,” he said bluntly. “I’m the king of Qaanir, but I want all of Draqaar. Daeva don’t engage in barbaric coups to seize power. If I’m the one to break the curse laid upon the daeva for a thousand years, I will be a hero. A good first step, don’t you think?”

He asked for a lot. I would undo the work of a literal god and elevate him to kingdom.

“What will I get in return?”

“What do you want?” He examined me, tilting his body over the bed.

There was only one thing I could consider as payment for such a request. I thought of Kira, quiet and strong. And Ari as a child, sobbing in his cage.

“Free the slaves.” Hope surged in my voice. “If what you say is true, the system can change when the curse is gone. You can free them.”

Quillon remained impassive as he looked down at me. Either he expected me to request this, or he was very good at masking his emotions.

“I’m sure ascending to the throne will go much easier when there are thousands of grateful, newly freed citizens and warriors backing your claim,” I said, trying to convince him.

It would be futile to try to change his mind, of course. He’d already weighed out all his options and either he was willing to accept my offer, or he wasn’t.

“Alright, dove.” Quillon wandered to the other side of the bed where I sat. “You help me break the curse, and I promise to liberate all slaves under my rule.”

He stopped in front of me. “Do we have a deal?”

Why did I feel as though I was about to sign my soul away to the devil? To me, there was no choice in it at all. He offered me an opportunity to help so many people and to stop the slave trade altogether.

I never believed the world could change. I’d seen the hunters try to vanquish the otherworlders. I’d heard Em talk about the blunders of the Aegis. But this? This could change the lives of thousands of people.

I wanted to accept on the spot, but I wouldn’t make a rash decision like Daev. I needed to weigh the potential consequences.

Deep down, I knew there was little that would convince me not to accept. I had the opportunity to change everything for the enslaved of Qaanir.

Kira would be free. I could already see the hope in her eyes shifting to gaze upon the endless possibilities of the future. She could come to Earth. Sabrina would take her under her wing and have her serving drinks at the bar before she could blink.

But I needed to speak with Cyrus and the others before I could give Quillon my answer.

Quillon would look out for his own interests above anything else. I couldn’t trust what he told me, at least not on its surface.

“I need a few days to think about it,” I said finally. To my surprise, Quillon smiled again. It made my insides twist with worry.

“Thursday then.”

Then the world was swept out from under me in a blur of colors and muffled noise.



I SAT UP in bed. Shockwaves from my dream still coursed through my brain. Ari was gone, but heat lingered in the space where he'd been. A blurry shadow caught my eye from the balcony, but when I looked, nothing was there.

I groaned and flopped back on my pillows. I felt like I hadn't slept a wink. Maybe I should have stayed in Haven. I wasn't cut out for all this meaningful shit. I missed when my actions didn't have consequences.

I took my time getting ready for the day. Cyrus and the boys would be training in the garden, but I didn't rush to join them.

Quillon offered me an opportunity to make a real difference, but at what cost? Freeing the daeva from the curse could be a terrible mistake and could just make everything worse.

I grabbed some breakfast from the perpetually refreshed cart in the main room.

After securing my cloak, I made my way down to the garden and began sparring with Shael. After a few rounds of him kicking my ass, he helped me up and held my shoulders.

“What's wrong? Your mind's somewhere else.”

“Huh?” I had to work to focus on him. “Oh, yeah, it's just something Quillon offered me last night.”

In an instant, tall towers of muscle surrounded me on all sides, blocking out the day's faint sunlight.

"Quillon made you an offer?" Cyrus demanded. I shook off Shael's hands and turned around to face him.

"I wasn't going to keep it from you," I said. "In fact, I need your advice."

His head jerked back like I'd hit him. "Are you asking for help?"

"Oh, come on, it's not that surprising," I insisted. He lifted a single eyebrow. "Fine! I can be stubborn sometimes, but this is a biggy. Quillon wants me to break the daeva curse. As in dispel the curse of the Ancient altogether."

A gust of hot wind blasted us at the same time as clouds rolled in and the sea in the nearby canal churned. Hot and cold auras lashed out at my skin, stinging and soothing where they touched.

"But the curse keeps them from hurting people."

"They still hurt people." I glanced at the twins, noting their dark expressions. "But in return, he would free all slaves under his rule."

As quickly as it began, their auras settled, and the weather calmed.

"What?" Skye whispered from my right. Shock slackened his face.

"He said the curse drove daeva to slavery in the first place, so I asked for him to end it if I dispelled the curse."

"You have to take the deal," Shael said from behind me. He reached out and ran a hand up my back. I leaned into his touch.

My eyes sought Cyrus's reaction. He looked down at me, his expression carefully unreadable. "You were wise to give it consideration and seek counsel. I will do some research and speak to my associates in Niaras about the potential repercussions of such an agreement."

He took a deep breath. The only sign that my announcement had shaken him.

“If this is a viable offer, this could mean reaching a goal we’ve pursued for centuries.”

I could make a difference.

It seemed impossible that a single person could hold the key to change. Maybe my magic meant something. I’d spent so many years hiding myself and downplaying my abilities. What if my hunter magic could be used for a virtuous cause?

Doubt crept in like a trickle of cold water.

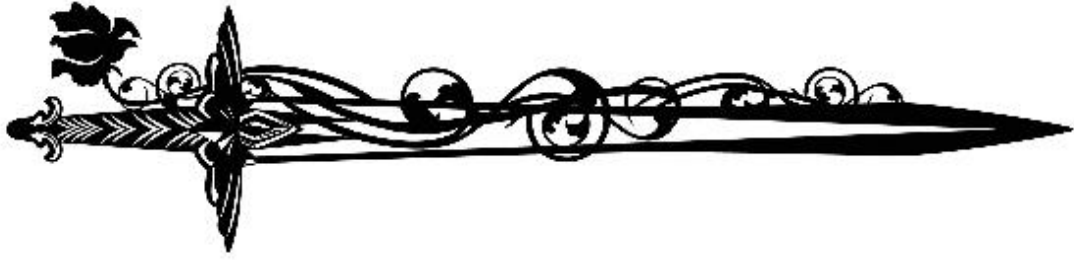
What if I couldn’t hold up my end of the bargain? I’d never tried to dispel anything so immense or complex before. What if I couldn’t do it?

Everyone wanted to believe they could change the world. The hunters fought and killed for their beliefs, but nothing ever slowed the flow of otherworlders to Earth.

Em placed her faith in the Aegis, but more and more of them hid away from their oaths, staying on Eranor where it was safe. The Aegis had unlimited resources, and Cyrus said they’d been trying to end slavery on Draqaar for centuries.

Why would this be any different?

Seventeen



FOR THE REST of the day, Skye and Shael stayed glued to my side. They bombarded me with questions about my abilities, clearly already placing their hopes in me and my bargain with Quillon. They were making me nervous.

When Kira knocked on the door to our rooms, I was relieved. Shael held the door for her as she brought in the cart with our dinner. After she parked the cart to the side, she pulled a shoulder bag from a hidden shelf beneath it.

She took out a thin leather-bound book and placed the bag on the couch. She eyed Skye and Shael warily.

“What’s that?” Shael used his magic to boost his jump and land on the couch. His bounce sent the bag flying across the room and directly at Skye. He plucked it out of the air and held it out to Kira.

She blushed painfully but took it from him. “It’s for the Lady Enchanter.” She shot me a questioning look.

“It’s okay. They’re weirdos, but they’re with me.”

She nodded stiffly. “I knew the girl that was killed that night, Sandi. The girl who went to poison Quillon,” she said, glancing at Skye and Shael out of the corner of her eye. “I didn’t know her very well, but I volunteered to clean out her bunk and found her diary under her mattress.”

“You didn’t have to go through so much trouble.” I took the diary from her outstretched hand and inspected it. I opened it to the first page and squinted at the writing. The words were strange. I flipped through it, but I couldn’t read any of it.

“She wrote in the old tongue,” Kira explained, noticing my confusion.

Skye stepped forward and snatched the book from my hand. “Today I had to clean the floor of the ballroom with Raila. She wouldn’t stop talking about Troy the entire time. So boring.”

“You can read that?” I asked him.

“Poradans still use the old tongue for religious purposes.” Skye didn’t look up from the pages.

I looked at Shael, but he just shrugged and patted the cushion next to him.

“Alright then, go ahead.” I took Kira’s hand and led her to the couch where I sat next to Shael. He slung his arm across the back of the sofa and leaned into me. His hand lightly circled my shoulder.

Timidly, Kira sat on the far end, her back straight and her hands in her lap. She smiled at me again through the fringe of her hair.

Skye took an armchair and began reading. Most of it was Sandi’s musings on the best cleaner to use on stained wood or her complaining about her roommate, Raila.

If I were her, I would have stopped being Raila’s friend after she stole credit for my work and used the time off to sleep with my crush.

To my disappointment, there were no murder plots or even any harsh words about Quillon. Just a gushy love poem about his beard. We were getting nowhere. Maybe she really was compelled.

The sun sank behind the Qaanir skyline, spraying crimson rays across the sky. Shael started a fire in the fireplace, sparking the kindling with his magic. Kira perked up and watched as he summoned the flame. Her lips parted slightly, and she tilted her body toward the fire, as if it pulled her.

This gave me an idea of how I could repay Kira for her help. Or rather, how Skye and Shael could.

“Could someone who was half elemental access their magic?” I asked, drawing everyone’s attention.

“It’s possible,” Skye answered, his eyes on Kira. A strand of dark blue hair fell into his face, and he pushed it away. “It depends on the strength of the ancestor’s magic.”

“My mother had incredibly powerful Earth magic.” Kira lifted her chin. “They sent her to the mines because she could move earth so easily.”

Skye and Shael shared a solemn look as Kira spoke. Skye’s features softened as he rubbed his chin. He stood and disappeared into the room next to mine, the one he and Shael occupied. He returned with a mug of dirt and stopped by the food cart to pick up an apple. He finally settled on the carpet by the newly kindled fire.

“Why do you have dirt in your room?” I asked.

“Come here,” Skye said to Kira, ignoring me. Kira apprehensively obeyed and knelt awkwardly in front of him.

Skye set the mug on the floor and tossed the apple to Shael. “Once my brother has kindly freed a seed, I’ll show you how to make it sprout.”

Shael took the hint and started devouring the fruit. I sat back and watched the scene before me. The twins had a soft spot for their people. Porada had taken the brunt of the daeva’s greed and abuse.

Apple half-eaten, Shael floated a seed down with a draft of wind to the makeshift pot and set it gently on the soil. Skye pushed it beneath the surface.

“Elemental magic is tied to emotion. Place your hand on the earth.” Skye took her hand and guided it to the mug. “Now, close your eyes. Everything has life in it. Do you feel it?”

Her brow furrowed in concentration as she dug the tips of her thin fingers into the dirt. She gasped. “I feel it! It’s like a tiny fluttering heartbeat!”

Skye sat back, propping himself up with his hands. The corners of his mouth rose softly as Kira discovered her magic.

“Good. It’s time to coax it out of its shell. Imagine nourishing it with a little piece of your soul. It’s the energy that fills your lungs, pumps your blood, and sparks your thoughts.

It's everywhere inside you. It's your life force. It's what you feel so faintly in the seed. To grow, it needs mana. It soaks it up from the sun, from the soil and from the water. Using elemental magic just means sharing some of yours."

A look of euphoria crossed Kira's face. Her aura flickered and shuddered around her. Faint green mana shimmered on her skin and moved hesitantly down her arm.

A tiny nub of green emerged from between her fingers. It grew another inch before Kira sat back. Exhaustion pulled at her limbs, but a smile lifted the lines of her face.

"Thank you," she said, emotion catching in her voice. "I begged my mother to teach me, but she always avoided it. She was worried if I had our family's earth magic, they would send me to the mines like my brother."

Skye flinched at her admission, like it hurt him physically when she spoke of her enslavement. The clock above the fireplace chimed, announcing that it was eight o'clock. Kira stood and brushed off her threadbare skirt.

"I need to go. The matron was expecting me on the hour!" Kira hurriedly slung her bag over her shoulder but didn't move to collect the journal. "I should have more time tomorrow morning after breakfast. I'll find you!"

She scurried out of the room, looking both ways down the hallway before gently closing the door behind her.

"I always knew you were a big softie." I smirked at Skye.

"Tell anyone and I'll have to kill you," he said, too seriously for me to completely disregard it.

Shael groaned from his seat next to me. "I'm bored." He slung his socked feet onto the cushioned armrest and crossed them at the ankle, making himself comfortable.

All the Aegis men had adopted the style of the Daevasi to varying extents. Cyrus, of course, donned the full garb and even wore a structured mask when he was out of our rooms.

Felix had taken to the flamboyant nature of the dress, choosing to wear the intricate patterns and loud colors that

seemed popular among the elite daeva. I'd even seen him walking around with that cane he took to the ball a few times.

The twins, however, only loosely adopted the look. They mostly wore what was most comfortable. Today that was billowy linen shirts tucked into plain dark trousers. Skye wore a black velvet vest, but both kept their wardrobe simple.

"Let's watch a movie!" Shael said, drawing a laugh from me.

"I doubt Cyrus will personally portal us back to Earth just to go to a movie."

"No, silly." Shael leaned forward to boop my nose. I swatted at his hand. "The daeva have mind projectors. They like to combine technology and magic. Personally, this is one of my favorite inventions."

I looked at Shael skeptically before looking at his brother for confirmation. Skye nodded from the floor. "It projects the image and audio into your mind. You see it in the world like watching it on a screen."

I threw my hands up and cursed.

"You're telling me I've spent this many days slumming it in the real world when I could have been binge-watching whatever the daeva version of *Friends* is?"

Shael jumped forward to restrain me. "Hurry, brother! Our Enchantress wants TV!"

Skye grumbled but fished what looked like an antique clockwork box out of a cabinet and got to work setting it up.

Shael repositioned us so I was sitting in his lap. I tried to wiggle out of his hold, but for all his lithe looks, he was surprisingly strong. I watched Skye's measured movements as he wound up the crank on the side of the box and set it on the coffee table. He selected a cartridge from a cardboard package and clicked it into place on the side.

"Promise not to scream if I let you go? I don't want you breaking any glass," Shael said in my ear. I rolled my eyes but nodded. My voice wasn't *that* shrill.

He took his hand from my mouth but kept his arms wrapped around me, locking me to his chest.

“I can’t believe no one told me,” I whisper-yelled. “I’ve been so bored here. I exercised for fun, Shael. I read *nonfiction!*”

Shael just laughed at me and relaxed into the cushions of the plush loveseat. He made no move to release me, and after a moment, Skye sat on my other side. He lifted my legs briefly before setting them on his lap.

The box whirred quietly, and an image flashed on the wall above the fireplace before solidifying into a scene. I didn’t know exactly what I expected, but a sitcom about four young daeva who became business partners by buying a fishing boat was not it.

I smiled when it finally dawned on me. “It’s a daeva sitcom.” I shot a knowing look at Skye, who pretended to focus on the show. “Softie.”

We watched half of the show’s first season before Skye made me go to bed. After we said goodnight, I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was late. I’d lost track of time with the twins. Was Ari waiting for me?

My room was empty, so I wrapped a robe around myself and stepped onto the balcony. Damp stone met my bare feet as I walked the distance to the railing.

The night was chilly, but pleasant. A soft breeze kept the fog from settling over the city. It left me with a crystal-clear view of the floating platforms, precarious metal walkways and hanging lights.

Dark forms were still busy with chores and work, hanging up laundry and carrying baskets on the narrow paths along the canals. Small boats floated lazily in the canals, their rusted decks lit by a single lantern at the bow.

The sight made me realize how much I missed Haven. There was no thundering base from the clubs of the Silver District. No boisterous stragglers or fights breaking out in the streets.

It was too quiet.

Qaanir had its charms, and I was definitely going to add cloaks to my everyday disguise, but there was no vibrancy to the air, no unrestrained sense of spirit and excitement. Everyone had a place, and they had no choice but to live and die there.

I turned my back to the city. I scanned the shadows around me, but no dark figures appeared, and I didn't sense any mana. Ari wasn't here.

I blew out a breath, trying to dispel the heaviness in my chest. He hadn't said he would see me again. I'd just started to expect his late-night visits.

Who was I becoming? I wasn't some heartbroken maiden who relied on men for her happiness. I was an ex-hunter, a survivor. Living this lie was making me soft. I would never be able to be what the Aegis wanted me to be.

I could dress up all I wanted, but I would always be the runaway hunter. No one would accept me for who I was, not even my own people anymore. Not after I ran.

I'd been incredibly lucky to find my perfect little bubble of security and comfort under Sabrina's management. But I wasn't sure I could go back to my old life dispelling petty curses and reversing botched glamours for the affluent of Haven.

Em would know what to say. She was always so much better with this sort of thing. She'd tell me what to do.

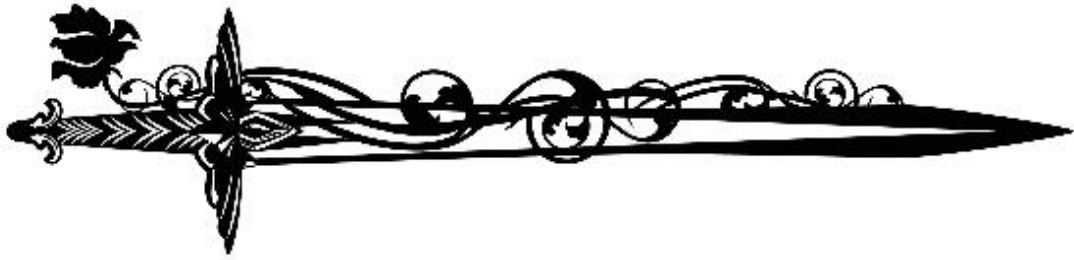
Or she'd just fangirl over the Aegis for an hour.

"I miss you," I whispered. I pushed off from the railing and stepped back into the warmth of my bedroom. If I'd been in Haven, Em and I would have worked Enchanter cases all day. I'd finish the shift with a drink at the Dungeon with Donald while we argued about how many nipples a chupacabra has.

I drew the drapes closed over the windows, ensured my door was locked, and took off my mask. I felt naked without it.

I flopped down on my bed and stared at the ceiling until sleep claimed me.

Eighteen



THE NEXT MORNING, I got more weird looks than normal as I made my way down to the garden. Did I have drool on my face or something?

I wiped at my mouth. I really should have at least looked in the mirror before I left our rooms.

Training had become a daily ritual. It reminded me of my life in the Morgan compound. There wasn't much else to do, and when you grew up around death, learning to fight became a strange comfort.

I went to my usual clearing in the snow and stretched while I watched the others. Cyrus circled Skye and Shael as they grappled, calmly issuing corrections and teaching techniques.

“Hey, pretty lady.”

I jumped and spun around to face the voice behind me. “Gods, Felix! Where the hell did you come from? We should get you a fucking bell.”

Felix just smiled at me and stepped closer. He took my hand and flipped it to show my druid mark. “Cyrus has been training you on bennu runes, so I thought I'd train you on your druid spirit.”

I hesitated. It was a nice offer, but I still wasn't sure I wanted the druid spirit. Things were too busy in my life to think about the meaning behind yet another strange ability.

“I don't know, Felix. There's so much going on and—”

Felix made puppy eyes at me and pouted. He even emitted a whimpering sound.

“Don't do that.”

“I can’t help it when you make me sad.”

“Oh, my gods.”

Felix shifted into a black labrador. His little furry head stuck out of the collar of his Daevasi suit. He looked up at me with big brown eyes and whined.

“Okay! Geez. You wore me down!”

He shifted back and adjusted his clothing. “Great!”

Felix crowded me and gathered me into a hug. The side of my face pressed against his chest, squishing my cheek. “How is this training?”

“Shhh.” He stroked my hair. “I’m the expert here.”

I rolled my eyes. He was going to be worse than Cyrus.

“When you call upon your spirit, it envelops you like a hug. You need to call upon this feeling. Close your eyes and focus on your sensations. What do you feel right now?”

I felt like I wanted to hit something, but I did as he said and took a deep breath to clear my head. Sensations. Focus on the sensations.

It was nice. I never thought I’d let anyone but Em touch me like this, but Felix made me feel at ease. I couldn’t explain it. His arms tightened around me, and he swayed gently.

I let the movement carry me, lulling me into relaxation. His arms caged me in a protective blanket. I was safe.

His body heat permeated my layers of clothing, warming my frozen body. His energizing aura surrounded me, embracing me. Accepting me.

Pine and citrus filled my nose and coated my throat. It went straight to my head, chasing away my racing thoughts and leaving me dizzy.

Soft fur brushed against my skin. I opened my clenched hand, stroking the fuzzy head that pressed into it. My spirit.

The thought jolted me. I jerked my hand away and opened my eyes. What was I thinking? I couldn’t just turn into a fox

right here in the garden. My druid mark burned. I pulled away from Felix's embrace, and he let me go.

I hissed at the pain in my hand. It glowed, but I didn't feel a shift come over me. It pulsed, sending a wave of agony up my arm. I tried to pull my mana from the mark, but something held it there. I couldn't control it.

I cursed and grabbed a handful of snow, pressing it to the mark. Cyrus and the twins rushed over.

Felix gave me a serious look. "You're rejecting her."

I cried out when the next wave came, forcing me to my knees. I glared at the mark. "What's happening?"

"You need to let her take control." He knelt next to me. "She chose you, but you need to let her in. You need to accept her."

Pain wracked my body again. Millions of needles injected my arm with venom. It spread up to my shoulder and lanced through my chest.

I couldn't think. I just needed to make it stop. A fluttering presence caressed my heart, chasing away the pain. I focused on the feeling, willing it to spread through my body.

It burst from my chest and wrapped around me like a warm blanket. My mana settled, and I opened my eyes. My hands clawed into the snow, but the mark was dim again.

"Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

My eyes traveled up Felix's body to glare at his face. "I think I prefer Cyrus's drills. At least nothing tries to kill me from the inside out."

Cyrus scooped his arms under my shoulders and helped me to stand. My hands were numb, and droplets of sweat were already turning to ice on my skin. I shivered.

"You're off the hook for the rest of the day," Cyrus said. "Go inside and warm up."

"You're all gonna stay down here?" I said through the chattering of my teeth.

“Do I need to send a chaperone, or can you stay out of trouble?”

“No, sir, I’ll be good.” I saluted him and ran to the palace. I rarely had time alone during the day with all of them buzzing around. I was going to enjoy it.

I burst through the palace door in my rush to get inside, but I didn’t expect a small crowd of servants to be on the other side.

“Oh! Sorry!” I caught one girl before she fell on her butt. She recoiled from my touch like I was a poisonous snake. The group scattered in a flock of whispers and dirty looks.

“I said sorry,” I muttered. Why was everyone acting weird? I tried to shrug it off and took the grand stairs to our rooms, avoiding the route I usually took by the servant’s quarters.

I went straight to the bath to warm up. I dipped below the surface of the water. It scalded my frigid skin, and I sank lower.

I pulled a few of the more outlandish bath products from the tiled shelf. One ended up being a sort of scented bubble bath, so I added half the bottle and played with the suds. I had just given myself a bubbly beard when I heard a knock at the main door.

Jeez, Kira was late! It must have been noon by now. Maybe she’d be able to stay after she dropped the cart off. I wanted to see if I could gift her any of my mana.

I jumped to my feet and wrapped a towel around my body. I barely remembered to hold my mask to my face before I opened the door to the hallway.

“Oh, it’s you.”

The matron stood in the doorway. She wore a long ruby dress and a feathered headband. Her painted lips rose in a scalding smirk. “Were you expecting someone else?”

“Uh. Nope.” I cleared my throat. This was awkward. I held the towel around my chest with one hand and my mask to my face with the other. “Just ... hanging out.”

“Are the Aegis guardians here?”

“Oh, you’re looking for them?” I chuckled nervously. I was glad she didn’t want to talk to me. I didn’t particularly like her, and I definitely didn’t want to do anything for her. “They’re in the garden.”

“Good.” She moved to the side and snapped her fingers. Two massive daeva burst through the doorway. I barely had time to let out a yelp of surprise before they were on me.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Hands covered my mouth and nose. I kicked and thrashed, trying to wrench my body from their grips. They were too strong.

My magic lashed out at them. I tore their mana from their bodies. They trembled, but the matron stepped forward and shoved a damp cloth into my face.

I gagged on the sickly-sweet chemical. My vision spun. The matron’s cold smile duplicated and turned upside down. I sought her out with my magic, but I couldn’t seem to focus on her. My mana rose to the surface, but it stumbled and crashed back into my body.

The matron held the cloth to my nose and mouth in a crushing grip. “I know all about your little tricks, hunter. But regardless, I’d prefer not to make another mess in my own territory.”

Her henchmen bound my wrists and ankles with rope. I struggled weakly, but my limbs were numb and heavy. Roughness burned my skin. I whimpered as he tugged on the knot.

QUILLON! ARI! I screamed in my head. I chanted their names in my mind as I fought to keep my eyes open.

I couldn’t breathe. I was suffocating. Tightness squeezed the air from my chest as dark spots clouded my vision.

“Take her out the back. She’s going to the Colosseum like the other one. I’ll follow in a minute. I’ll make it look like she ran. They’ve been worried she’d get scared off. Hopefully, that’ll be enough to keep the Aegis from sniffing around too much.”



MY STOMACH ROILED. Vomit surged up my throat, but I bit it back and tested my limbs. They were still bound. Thinly padded surfaces surrounded me, and everything was dark.

They'd put me in some sort of box, maybe a clothing trunk? My body bobbed gently. We must have been on a boat. The matron's final words filtered into my consciousness. They were taking me to the Colosseum.

Would the Aegis men really believe I'd run? I mean, sure, they scared the shit out of me in the beginning, but we'd formed a strange bond.

I crushed my eyes closed as the mother of all headaches split my skull. Sharp pain pierced my forehead. Low voices filtered through the walls of my box.

"You delivered the other one last night?" I could hear the matron's forked tongue struggle over the words. I'd give it to her, snakes weren't built to speak English.

"The servant?" The deep voice answered.

"Yes, you idiot!" She hissed. "Did she give you any trouble, any witnesses I need to take care of?"

"Nah, it was just like you said. She came to your office. No one saw nothin'."

My eyes widened.

Kira was going to see the matron last night. The matron was the one who monitored Quillon's slaves. She discovered Kira was digging into the assassination.

That meant the matron made the girl, Sandi, poison Quillon. It would have been easy. Do what I say or you're going to the Colosseum. She wasn't compelled, she was threatened.

I pressed my forehead against the wood. I was such an idiot. Of course, the matron was tangled in all of this. Quillon relied on her to alert him of any issues with the staff. It wasn't that someone found a way to infiltrate the wards. It was an inside job.

I stayed still until the boat jerked as it bumped into something and came to a stop. I was lifted, and they weren't particularly gentle. Apparently, the daeva curse had nothing to say about bruises. They jarred me again as they dropped my trunk somewhere hard and stable.

"Tilvara," a new, nasally voice said. Was that the matron's name?

"Ringmaster." I heard a slimy wet kiss, and I gagged on the wadded cloth stuffed in my mouth.

"I have another for you, but this one isn't going in your arena. She's too much of a risk. Just have one of your gladiators deal with her and sink her body in the sea."

"But Tilvara," the Ringmaster grouched, "we had a deal, and I have a business to run. No fighters mean no money. Valeria hasn't been giving me anything good lately. Mostly humans." He scoffed.

"I'll speak to Valeria about her supply. She's had trouble sourcing in Porada. A new uprising."

"How about you give me another one of Quillon's slaves? The last one you delivered was nothing but skin and bone."

Shit. If they were talking about Kira, the Ringmaster was right. She wasn't cut out for fighting. She could barely look someone in the eye without passing out.

"If this one's dangerous, she'd do well in the ring. If Valeria wants more bodies, I need more to work with here. I'm in the business of entertainment, after all."

"Kill her," Tilvara said. Her tone was final. "Or you won't have *any* fighters for your Colosseum."

"I love it when you order me around." The Ringmaster breathed heavily, and I heard Tilvara giggle. "What's this?"

“Just some of her belongings. Toss it or sell it. I don’t care but do it carefully. I’ll check in next week.”

After a few moments, the lid to my trunk opened, and the pudgy mustachioed face of the Ringmaster looked down at me. I was painfully aware I was still in only a towel, my face bare.

“You don’t look so scary.”

I tried to answer but just ended up slobbering on the cloth. He pulled it from my mouth.

“Thanks?” I said.

Maybe I could play this to my advantage. It wasn’t like I had a lot of options. But I did have something he needed, and he seemed like a shady enough character to go against orders for profit.

“But I’d be a much better fighter than the girl they brought before me.” I struggled against my bindings to sit up. My hands grasped the edge of the trunk to keep my head above the lip. “Put me in the ring instead of her. You get a shiny new fighter, and we get to live. It’s a win-win, really.”

The Ringmaster’s eyebrows rose on his perspiring forehead. “What’s this girl to you?”

We were at the top of a tiny ramp. It descended into the murky water of a narrow canal. The hulking Colosseum cast a shadow over us.

My heart raced, and my arms shook as they tried to hold me up. I took a deep breath and met the Ringmaster’s eyes, trying to push every drop of confidence I had left into my gaze. “She won’t survive in the ring, but I will. Tilvara was right. I can handle myself.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’ll have to make me enough to support two slaves if you want to protect your little friend.”

I nodded.

“Okay, little scrapper.” He laughed. It took over his body, and he ended up doubled over, slapping his knee. I glanced around nervously until he stood and wiped the tears from his eyes. “You bring in crowds, and I’ll honor my word.”

“Deal.”

I just had to survive until the Aegis found me. Hopefully that wouldn't be long. They wouldn't believe I'd run, would they? I just had to hope the matron wasn't working any daeva magic on them.

“Oh! I almost forgot. What do you want your ring name to be?”

“The Enchanter,” I said the name like a prayer. This was perfect. If they heard about the Enchanter sucking people's souls out in the Colosseum, they'd surely come to investigate.

The Ringmaster's face scrunched up. “Are you sure you don't want it to be something more intimidating? Something like ‘Shadowkiller’?” He splayed his hands out with a flourish, emphasizing the name. “Or what about ‘Empress of the Void’?”

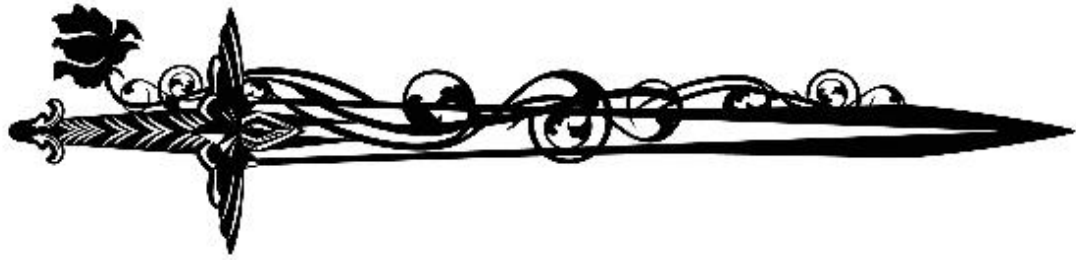
I blinked. Was he being serious? I faced my imminent death, and this man was workshopping my name?

“The Enchanter is fine, thanks.”

“Alright, then.” He shrugged and closed my lid. “Just remember, Enchanter, give us a show!”

He knocked on the top, and I heard his heavy footsteps retreat into the menacing metal tower.

Nineteen



ONE OF THE Ringmaster's guards came to collect me. He wore a full suit of armor, and his aura was human. He threw me over his shoulder and carried me into the Colosseum's underbelly.

We passed through layers of locked checkpoints and rows of uniform cells, their doors plated in steel. I tried to see through some of the barred windows set into them, but all that greeted me were shadows.

I had to fight the urge to struggle against his hold. The towel barely held on as it was. He set me down on a bare cot in a tiny metal cell. A foul-smelling bucket sat in the corner, but otherwise, the cell was empty.

I scooted until my back touched the wall and cold seeped into my flesh. The guard didn't move to take off my bindings. He left, slamming the door behind him.

I pulled at the ropes and gnawed at the knots with my teeth, but they wouldn't budge.

I tucked my head between my knees and groaned. Why did I always take on more than I could handle? I should've left it alone.

"No," I whispered to myself. My voice cracked, reminding me of how long it had been since I had anything to drink.

I trained my entire life to fight. I grew up with a sword in my hand and blood on my lips. The matron was smart to want me dead. Once I survived this, she'd be at the top of my shit list.

I'd hunt her down. There was nowhere in the four worlds she could run.

I couldn't tell how long I waited. I listened to the battles above me and counted the drops of blood that soaked through the sand to rain down on the metal floor of my cell. The stench of unwashed bodies and sweat hung in the stagnant air.

Kira was down here somewhere. I put her here. I clawed at my damp scalp with numb fingers. I dragged her to the library. I tricked her into helping.

It must have been hours before I heard a key scrape in the lock. The door opened in a shower of rust and dried blood, filling my room with harsh light from the lanterns in the hallway. I flinched at the sudden assault to my senses. Everything was too loud, too bright.

"Your turn," the daeva guard said. Like the others, he wore armor, but this one didn't wear a helmet. Scars ran across the side of his face. His dark hair was cropped close to his scalp, revealing more jagged white lines where hair could no longer grow. He must have been another of the Ringmaster's slaves.

He cut the rope and gently removed it from my body. He moved slowly, allowing me to hold the towel to my chest.

When he was done, I stood. My bare feet slipped on the slickness of the floor. I caught myself and used the wall for support as we walked through the narrow passages.

It ended in another heavy metal door. My escort opened it and led me up the stairs to a room. It was bare except for a short bench in the middle. A barred gate was set in the far wall, giving me my first clear view of the sand.

I went to it and studied the inside of the Colosseum. It looked like a tall prison. Bars, like those of jail cells, stretched upwards. I counted four more levels above me.

The ring itself was lined with a ten-foot wall of smooth metal, broken by a few more gates. Each was protected from the fighters by bars, but the top level only had a short railing. I could see the shimmer of wards protecting the Daevasi beyond.

"Do I get a weapon?" I asked the guard, who was still standing in the doorway.

He nodded to a sack in the corner I hadn't noticed before. "Your belongings are in there. The Ringmaster is letting you choose one."

I walked to the bag and opened it to find nearly everything I'd brought to Draqaar. They'd even left Ted, likely not realizing what he was. I smiled. The action cracked my dry lips. "Any of them?"

The guard nodded once, confused at my reaction. I pulled Ted from the back. This was perfect. If waving a bennu weapon around as the Enchanter didn't draw the attention of the Aegis, I didn't know what would.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" I looked to the ring to find a larger-than-life image of the Ringmaster in the center.

On the first level, spectators crowded to the fence. Children crouched low to the floor and pressed their faces between the iron bars. Remnants of the earlier fights still stained the sands, decorating the arena with dark blood and fetid entrails.

The Ringmaster raised his hands and twirled them in fanfare. "For the next match, I present ..."

A gate across from mine rose. The rapid ticking sound kicked up my heartbeat. "From the overgrown wildlands of Porada, it's the Savage!"

Rabid cheers and boos shook the Colosseum as a tall druid strode to the center of the circular arena, next to the projection of the Ringmaster. His brown hair was matted into something resembling dreadlocks, and he wore nothing but a leather loincloth.

In one hand, he carried a medieval-looking flail. The spiked ball dragged behind him, gouging deep grooves in the sand.

The druid let out an over-the-top snarl and pounded his chest, driving the crowd wild.

"And from Earth's most debaucherous underground city, it's the Seductress!" the Ringmaster bellowed as another gate ticked open. A nude woman emerged from the darkness. The

curtain of her long black hair covered her sensuous figure and pooled on the ground around her.

She was the first demon I'd seen in Qaanir. I wasn't aware daeva took demons as slaves, but I supposed they didn't discriminate when it came to forced labor. Even so, demons were rare, especially succubi. Why would they put her in the fighting pits where she could die?

My question was answered when the Ringmaster yelled, "Fight!" And the succubus went to work. She smiled. She'd already caught her prey in her web. Her blood-red aura wrapped itself around the druid, and one of its smoky tendrils wound around his throat.

He resisted for a moment, and it seemed he might break free, but the succubus doubled down. She strode forward and dragged a finger across his chest. I looked away when she started moving that finger lower.

What was with these people and sex shows? Was I a prude?

The guard handed me a bundle of cloth. I unfurled it to find a pair of thin pants and a shirt. Both items were way too big for me, but they looked like they would fit the man in front of me.

"Thank you."

The guard grunted and turned his back to me, giving me privacy. I didn't understand why he trusted me. I was a captive with a bag of weapons.

I dressed quickly and returned my attention to the ring. The demon straddled the druid. It looked like they were kissing, but I could see the druid's aura as it dimmed.

Before she finished draining him, she slashed his throat with her clawed nails. I flinched, but the crowd fell into a renewed wave of cheers. She rose to her feet and went back to her gate, licking her fingers while the druid's body was dragged away.

The Ringmaster returned to his place in the arena.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Ringmaster bellowed again over raucous cheers. "For our last fight of the night, I have a real treat for you."

The crowd grew silent, hanging on every amplified word out of the Ringmaster's mouth.

“An undefeated champion will face the ring's newest combatant. From the sweltering heat of the Qaanir steam works, it's the Inferno!”

Across the sand, an orange-haired fire elemental stepped into the light. He was dressed in dark leather with burnished metal plates strapped to his chest and shoulders. He juggled four blazing orbs, popped them into his mouth, and released a dazzling stream of fire on his breath.

The audience ate it up, screaming their adoration for ‘the Inferno.’ He was clearly a fan favorite.

I groaned. Of course, the Ringmaster would put me against this guy. It wasn't exactly a fair fight, but I doubted he was concerned with ethics. And a fiery death would certainly provide plenty of entertainment.

At least the last guy got to go out while balls deep in a succubus.

“Making her debut appearance from the eternal marble metropolis of Niaras, it's the mysterious Enchanter!” The Ringmaster gestured to my open gate and waved for me to come out.

Leaving Ted wasn't a mistake then. He expected me to select my strongest weapon, and he used it to turn me into an exciting character for his arena. I didn't like the man, but he certainly knew how to run a fighting ring.

I took my first step into the arena with courage I didn't feel. The sand was rough on the soles of my feet. It scraped against my sensitive skin.

The crowd took in my disheveled appearance and broke out in confused whispers. I kept my attention on my opponent as he looked me up and down, evaluating me. Pity and uncertainty colored his sharp features.

“Is this a joke?” The elemental looked to the image of the Ringmaster, who simply smiled at the bennu weapon in my hand.

“Fight!” the Ringmaster yelled and disappeared.

The elemental—I certainly wasn’t calling him the *Inferno*—hesitated, a fireball ready in his hand. He couldn’t see past my messy hair, dirt-streaked skin and bare feet. I must have looked like a street urchin who’d wandered into the wrong room.

I released Ted in an arc over me like I’d seen Cyrus do in training. Shining golden light flooded the arena, reflecting in the wide eyes of the onlookers. I seized on the momentary distraction and closed the distance between us.

My opponent reacted, throwing the fireball in his hands, but it was too late. I was already moving. Where I lacked brute force, I was fast. The blast landed behind me, leaving scorch marks on the sand. It released a wave of heat that pressed against my back, urging me on.

When I was close enough, I swept the whip at his legs. Ted wrapped around his ankles and pulled him into the air. With a flick of my wrist, I flung him across the ring. His body collided with the barrier of the top floor, scandalizing the Daevasi beyond.

The elemental recovered quickly and caught himself before he hit the ground. He rolled gracefully into a crouch. He flung a barrage of fire attacks at me without missing a beat. I dodged as many as I could and sucked the rest out of the air before they could make contact.

Noise from the Colosseum surged. A few hoarse screams rose above the rest. Now they called *my* name.

My heartbeat kicked up a notch at the sound, pushing my humming blood through my tense limbs. I watched with unease as the elemental picked up a handful of sand and tossed it into the air. His fire engulfed the grains. It turned them to tiny shards of glass before he sent another blast of flame my way, carrying the cloud of projectiles in the wind.

I could absorb the spell, but it would do nothing against the tiny razor-sharp spikes flying at me. I let out an embarrassing yelp and swung my whip at the ceiling. Ted grappled to a supporting bar and pulled me out of the way. I slammed into the

wall. The impact jarred my shoulder painfully, but at least I'd avoided becoming a human pincushion.

I pushed off from the wall, ignoring the twinge in my shoulder, and hurled myself at the elemental. I couldn't hold him off for long. I had to go on the offense. He had the clear advantage at range, so it was time to get up in his personal space.

I swung at him, and my feet landed in the middle of his chest. He was briefly knocked off balance but didn't fall like I'd hoped. He grabbed at my leg and wrenched it at an awkward angle. I kicked at him with my other foot, driving my heel into his nose. I winced as I felt the bone crunch beneath my foot. Blood bloomed from the injury, and he finally let me go.

I rolled to the sand, but I lost my grip on Ted as I tumbled. I saw another flash of light and knew Ted had returned to his hilt. Something hard collided into me, knocking the breath from my lungs.

The elemental was in my face. I searched the ground nearby with my hands, desperate to find Ted. I hoped he'd landed within reach. The elemental straddled me and pushed me to the ground. He grabbed my wrists, wrenching them above my head. I cried out at the pain that shot from my shoulder.

Boos and whooping cheers echoed in the arena, mixing with growing calls for blood. Rabid spectators clawed at the bars and reached their arms through the barrier, as if they could wrap their hands around my neck themselves.

"You've got spirit." The elemental panted from the exertion of the fight. "But the Ringmaster won't be satisfied until one of us is dead ... I- I'm sorry."

He whispered the last words as he transferred my wrists to one of his hands and began gathering a fireball in the other. The fire in his hand condensed and turned a sinister blue. He was going in for the kill.

Panic surged through my body. It crowded out every other emotion. I bucked my hips frantically to throw him off, but he wouldn't budge.

My mana lashed out to defend me, focusing on our skin contact at my wrists. It pushed through my skin and sought him out. The silver shimmer climbed up his arm like a bolt of lightning. When it reached the fireball, it exploded.

Searing heat and glaring light ripped through the air. It singed my skin and caught the loose threads of my clothing on fire. The force of the blast threw the elemental from my body.

The pressure was relieved from my chest. I made the mistake of sucking in a breath. Hot air scalded my throat. Tears welled in my eyes, and I choked.

For a few moments, we lay there like that, stunned. I coughed and rolled onto my front, trying to push myself up. I managed to get to all fours and sat back on my knees. I caught my breath while I scanned the area for Ted.

I spotted him a few yards away, dormant in his hilt. I crawled to him in a rush to reach him before the elemental could recover.

Flakes of glass were mixed with the sand. They pierced through my pants as I dragged my knees across the ground. A few got stuck in my palms as well, but I ignored them. They weren't big enough to cause any major gashes.

When I reached Ted, I plucked him up and struggled to my feet. My opponent still hadn't moved from his place on the ground. He was badly burned. The arm that held the fireball was reduced to a gooey mess, and the damage extended across his chest. The side of his face was red and weeping. Sand stuck to the skin.

I gagged when the smell reached me. Like a charcoal barbeque and rancid meat.

He groaned in pain and lifted his head. His gaze met mine, but it wasn't scared or enraged ... He looked relieved.

"You won, Enchanter," he said, his voice raspy. I swallowed, trying but failing to wet my burning throat. I was in way over my head. Why did I think I could do this?

Tears stung my eyes. I would always be the scared girl who couldn't face her demons.

The elemental's orange eyes darkened and focused on the whip in my trembling hand. I ignored the frenzied noise of the crowd and took a deep, shuddering breath.

I had to remember the reason I came here. Here, at this moment, I could fix my mistake. I could save Kira.

I understood Cyrus's actions at the warehouse. He was responsible for so many lives that he could not place the value of one above the other, but I wasn't so noble. I would sacrifice others if that meant saving those I cared about. Hell, I would even sacrifice myself.

I would continue to fight for the Ringmaster. I would continue to kill for the Ringmaster, but I would bend his rules. The Ringmaster wanted blood, but I wouldn't give it to him.

I'd give this man a peaceful death. It wasn't much, but it was all I could afford.

"Okay," I whispered as I approached the elemental. "What's your name, really?"

"Eiri," he said. He slumped forward. His head hung low over his lap.

"Where are you from, Eiri?" I knelt beside him and carefully took his uninjured hand between my own. His mana already grew faint, flickering with his heartbeat.

"Porada," he said, longing in his voice. "A town called Artair, in the south."

I pulled gently at his mana, coaxing it from his body. He inhaled sharply at the sensation, but then he relaxed again. I helped him lay down, and when he was settled, a dopey expression took over his face.

He was almost gone now. Just a little more.

"I'm so tired," he slurred as his eyes, once burning embers, grew dull.

My eyes wandered to the Ringmaster, sitting on his throne on the top floor balcony. He glared at me, displeased at the gladiator's subdued, bloodless death.

The noise from the stands was muffled as I took in the last of Eiri's life force. He released a final, rattling breath. A delicate orb of shining light emerged from his body and floated above us. It looked like a tiny star. Its prismatic surface boiled and flared.

The crowd would just see a lifeless body. Only hunters could see the last sign of death. I always thought it had something to do with mana, but maybe my mother was right, and this was Eiri's soul moving on to the next life. I hoped so.

I released his limp hand and rose to my feet. His mana briefly swirled in my chest before it settled into my blood. It wasn't a curse, but it left me feeling stained just the same.

I walked numbly to my gate. I waited there, not daring to turn around as I heard Eiri's body get dragged across the sand. My gate finally opened, and the same dark-haired guard waited on the other side.

Wordlessly, I handed him Ted and walked to the next door, where I waited for him to open it.

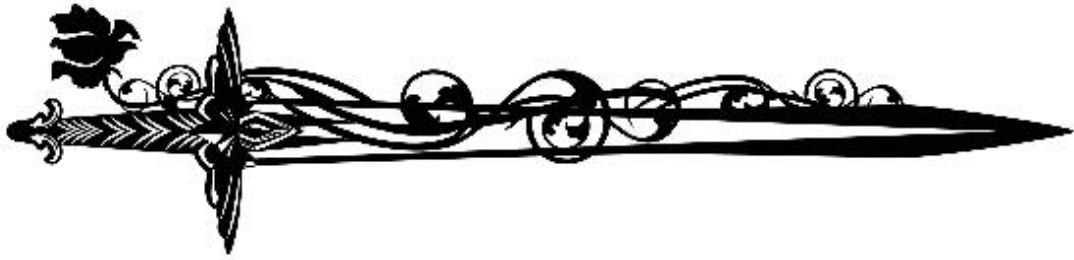
"Well done," the dark-haired guard said, startling me. He looked down at me. Something like respect reflected in his penetrating gaze. "You gave Eiri a good death."

We went the rest of the way to my cell in silence. The metal floor soothed the raw skin of my feet, and I tried not to think about the slick layer that covered it.

The guard paused in my doorway, as if he was contemplating saying something more. Instead, he gave me a terse nod before he shut the door.

A moth-eaten blanket sat folded on the bare cot. I climbed underneath it and curled into a ball on the hard surface, careful not to move my injured shoulder. I'd absorbed enough mana that it should be better by morning.

Twenty



SLEEP EVADED ME, so I sighed and shifted to my back. Faint beams of yellow light filtered through the bars of my cell's door, illuminating the rusted ceiling.

My thoughts drifted to the Aegis boys. Maybe they were looking for me right now. It wouldn't be long. I clung onto that thought with everything I had left.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that I had my first encounter with the Aegis in Sabrina's spare room. I'd never let myself grow close to anyone but Em since I ran, but somehow it happened.

Em was right. I liked them.

I drifted between sleep and dazed restlessness for the rest of the night. When I finally woke to the sound of activity, relief and apprehension warred in my chest. Soon it would be time to enter the ring again.

I paced the short length of my cell, trying to ignore the way my feet stuck to the metal surface. Other than when the guard dropped off a tray of bread and water, I'd been left alone all day.

The fights had been going on for ages. At least, that's what it felt like. Nervous energy squirmed in my stomach.

I'd mostly healed from the fight the night before. My shoulder still ached, but the small cuts on my hands and knees were nothing but tiny white marks.

My clothes were torn and burnt, barely clinging to my body. I did some emergency repair work, tying pieces together to ensure they would cover the important bits while I fought.

I combed my hair with my fingers and tried to undo some of the knots. I resumed my pacing as I braided it tightly and tied

it with a strip of cloth.

When the usual guard came to collect me for my fight, I was ready. He led me to the same room as before. A pile of bloody bandages sat discarded on the floor.

I looked around for the sack of weapons that had waited for me last time, but it wasn't there. I turned to the statue in the doorway. He'd followed me silently so far, even less chatty than usual.

"Where's my whip?" I asked him. He pressed his scarred lips together and broke eye contact without answering my question.

The Ringmaster appeared in the center of the arena.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" He lifted his gaze, reveling in the explosion of applause. My gate started to rise.

"I've heard your calls, and we will give you what you desire. She's the unexpected champion, the electrifying underdog, it's ... the Enchanter!"

My gate was fully open now. I approached the guard. Adrenaline shot through my veins. "Where's my whip?"

"I'm sorry." The guard ground his teeth. The creaking sound made my skin crawl. "The Ringmaster is up to something."

"What's happening? I can't go out there without a weapon! I'll die!" I pleaded. The crowd was getting restless.

Why would the Ringmaster refuse to give me a weapon? Was this a new challenge? A game for the spectators?

He drew a long, thin knife from his belt and held the handle out to me. "Good luck."

I took it as he ushered me through the gate. The roaring cheers of the crowd washed over me as I stepped into the oppressive heat of the overhead lights.

The Ringmaster frowned at the small knife in my hand. He quickly wiped the look from his face and replaced it with his usual strained showman's grin.

“Tonight will be a real test for the new champion. Such a powerful gladiator deserves a worthy challenge! But how will she fare without her enchanted weapon?”

The other gate opened as the Ringmaster spoke. I could see the outline of a small woman. I reached out with my senses and searched for an aura. Earth magic. Another elemental? I could handle that.

Without another word, the Ringmaster’s image popped out of existence, and the earth elemental stepped into the light.

No.

Her tawny hair was tangled and matted, collecting in a knot at the base of her neck. She dragged a heavy broadsword behind her, barely able to carry it.

Her dull eyes locked onto me, but there was no spark of recognition there. She wore armor, like the Colosseum guards, but around her throat was a familiar amulet.

A chilling shadow settled over me despite the sweltering heat of the spotlights.

“Kira?” I swallowed against the pain in my throat as she made her laborious approach.

She was dead. They killed her. Because of me.

Confused murmurs spread through the rings of spectators. I heard a scream and looked up at the first floor. They no longer faced the inside of the circular building. Instead, I saw the backs of the audience on every level.

A man cried out. The heavy material of his coat puckered against the iron bars as the crowd shoved him against the barrier, trying to move away from the threat I couldn’t see.

Even those on the highest floor were spooked by something. They ran to the railing. Daevasi women pressed their hands to their chest and clung to their companions.

I pushed my grief down for the moment and sprang into motion.

Kira was slow. I circled the ring and tried to catch a glimpse of what was scaring the crowd. It was no use. I couldn’t

see above their heads. Another scream rang out, followed by panicked cries for help.

A group of spectators in the front row removed their hoods. I choked on my jumbled emotions at the sight. I wasn't alone. The Aegis was here.

I tucked the knife into my waistband and made a running jump to the fence at the top of the wall. I reached the bottom of the bars with my hands and clawed at the smooth metal wall with my feet, trying to get some traction. My arms burned with the effort, but eventually I could reach the next rung with my hand and pulled myself higher.

Sharp scraping sounds filled the still air as Kira slashed at the metal wall beneath my feet.

Soldiers dressed in strange, dark armor formed a wall of metal on the other side of the crowd. They carried a variety of weapons and held them out clumsily in front of them.

From this distance, I couldn't make out the carvings on their amulets, but the vacant look in their eyes was unmistakable. They were more undead. Like those assassins ... like Kira.

And they were slowly closing in.

Ari pulled his glamour around him and disappeared from my view while Skye and Shael jumped into the battle, casting spells back-to-back.

Felix tore off his jacket and shifted into a massive bear. He shook his tattered clothes from his black fur and swiped at the nearest zombie. Her armor crumpled under the force of the blow, and she was sent flying into the wall.

As if the attack had been nothing, the undead woman rose to her feet. Her bones cracked into place. Black, viscous blood oozed from the gashes left in her skin.

"Cyrus!" I tried to yell above the noise and get his attention and waved one of my hands. His icy gaze landed on me before he had to focus on fighting. "They're undead! You need to take off their necklaces!"

One of them seemed to hear me. I slapped the palm of my hand against the bars. The clamor drowned out the noise.

Skye summoned vines around the undead woman's ankles. She pulled at her feet, but the vines grew higher and wrapped around her wrists. The thorns dug into her sallow skin, leaking more thick blood. Skye shouted a command, and Cyrus tore the amulet from her neck.

She let out an earsplitting shriek before she collapsed to the ground. The guys scattered as each took on a new target. More screams filled the air as they tore their way through the soldiers. When enough of a gap had been cleared, those on the first floor started fleeing to the exit.

As fast as I could, I climbed the bars of the first three levels. The situation was the same on each, but the undead circles were slowly shrinking.

I glanced across the arena to the Ringmaster's throne, but it was empty. What was his plan? Surely, this wouldn't be good for business.

When I reached the top level, I pushed my hand between the bodies that blocked my way. The wards washed over me, but I easily absorbed the mana. It joined the thundering of my blood and injected me with a jolt of strength.

The daeva in front of me reacted to my touch and turned their startled gazes on me.

"Move out of the way!" I yelled over the noise of the panicked crowd. "I'm trying to help!" The Daevasi nearest to me pounded on the backs of the others nearby, but no one else seemed to notice. Their full attention was on the obvious threat.

"Oh, for the love of the gods," I muttered as I climbed on top of the railing. I nimbly hopped across the pack of bodies, stepping on their shoulders and backs. I dropped to the ground when I reached the edge.

The undead soldiers continued their slow advance, unbothered by my arrival. I took the knife from my waistband and threw it at the soldier in front of me.

It lodged itself in the center of his throat. Greasy ichor sprayed down the front of his armor. It caused him to stagger back, but once he had his balance, he continued his march forward.

He carried a single long, chipped blade. I took a step closer, eyeing the amulet around his neck. He sluggishly raised the sword above his head and charged at me. I waited until the last moment to dodge, hoping he would be as slow with the swing as he was with everything else.

His blow missed, and he stumbled forward. I launched myself at his back and clutched at his neck. I hooked my fingers around the chain and wrenched it from his neck.

He let out a sickening gurgling sound and dropped to his knees. He fell forward, forcing the knife deeper. The Daevasi watched me with apprehensive terror, but one pushed his way to the front.

A man in a gold-stitched vest followed my lead, tempting one of the undead to attack him. One soldier took the bait, but her movements were uncoordinated and sluggish.

When she slashed at him with her sword, he ducked and took out her knees with a swing of his leg. While she was down, the man plucked the blade from her hand and tossed it to me. Then he bent down again. His hands searched her neck.

“No, don’t!” I warned, but it was too late. The undead woman screamed and curled into a ball while the daeva man convulsed and fell to the carpet beside her. Another soldier was already stumbling toward him, lifting the heavy maul in his hands.

I surged forward and wrapped my arms under the daeva’s shoulders, dragging him a few feet away. The maul narrowly missed him as it crashed into the floor. I dragged him to the others, and a few Daevasi pulled him away from the line of soldiers.

Another daeva man separated himself from the group and tried to run through the narrow gap between the soldiers. They went for him. They swung their heavy weapons as he neared.

The tip of a sword caught his shoulder, and he went down in a cry of pain.

More daeva followed him, and the floor descended into chaos. The Daevasi fought back, but it was a losing fight.

One woman had removed her silk shawl and wielded it like a weapon. She blocked an oncoming attack, wrapping the cloth around the sword. She wrenched it from the soldier's grip.

I slashed through the line of undead with my stolen sword. I got into a rhythm. I approached the next soldier. I blocked his strike and knocked him off balance. A kick to his chest drove him backwards and onto the ground.

Bodies collected around me, both the undead and slain Daevasi. I wouldn't be able to kill them all, and we were being swarmed. The undead were merciless, cutting down anyone within reach.

One shambled toward a young woman, who pressed her back to the railing in terror. Looking around, I spotted a heavy tumbler glass on a table nearby. I chucked it at the undead's skull.

It smashed into the back of his head with a sickening crunch that sent him careening over the railing.

"Leave if you can!" I ordered the remaining Daevasi. "We're faster than them, and I'll clear a path!"

At least, I hoped I could. The Aegis guys were here, but there were two floors between us.

The survivors picked their way through the scattered bodies to the stairwell. The undead tried to follow, but their movements were slow and clumsy.

I ran to the front of the group and rushed down the narrow stairwell. I hesitated at the bottom.

It was a massacre. Only the undead remained, huddled over the bodies of the daeva. They drank blood from the bodies, using their blades to open fresh cuts and clamping their mouths to the wounds.

Someone gasped behind me. The sound drew the attention of the undead. A dozen heads jerked up. Their eyes shone with a

glassy luster.

The undead nearby climbed to their feet and moved closer. They sprinted and leapt over bodies in their rush to us.

A hulking shadow descended over me, and a big furry butt blocked my view of the approaching soldiers. Felix lumbered towards the undead army, and Cyrus, Skye and Shael followed. They must have cleared the other floors.

“Enchantress!” Shael pounced on me. I melted into his arms. I couldn’t hold back a grin. He pulled back slightly and cupped my maskless cheeks. “Your face! It’s–your face!”

“Not the time,” Skye said from behind his brother. Shael grudgingly released me.

Daevasi continued to pour in from the top level. Skye yelled orders and guided them down toward the exit.

“I’ll make sure they’re safe.” Shael kissed my cheek before he disappeared into the frantic stream of evacuees. Cyrus and Felix were already working their way through the third floor.

I joined them, but the undead here were different. Faint black auras dripped from their bodies like heavy smoke. They must have been drinking the blood for the mana. It strengthened them, as it did for hunters.

I pulled on one of their auras and drained every drop of corrupted mana. The undead soldier shuddered and slowed. I rushed to meet him. His movements were sluggish again, and I dispatched him quickly.

The others easily dodged Felix’s heavy attacks, moving too fast for him to get a hit in. I spotted one running toward the fight. He brandished a pair of daggers with grooves cut into the blades. Hunter weapons.

I reached out with my magic, but he was too far away.

“Felix!”

He followed my gaze. The undead soldier stopped and flung the daggers. They sank to their hilts in Felix’s tough hide. He roared in agony and flickered between forms before settling back into his naked self.

A deep laceration bled freely on his back, and the second dagger remained buried in his shoulder. He pulled it out, but it took all his strength. Breathing heavily, he grasped at his wounds, trying to stop the flow of blood.

Cyrus jumped between him and the undead, a slender runesword in each hand. Runes blazed on his skin.

He danced through the endless waves of undead. His swords reduced his enemies to piles of severed limbs before he ripped their amulets from their writhing bodies.

I ran to Felix and tried to pull him away from the fight. “Gods, you’re heavy!”

When his dazed eyes focused on me, he mumbled something. The hunter blades had weakened him, drawing the mana from his body. I could give it back.

I pressed my palms to his clammy skin. My magic responded. I was getting better at controlling it. All I had to do was lower my barriers and mana poured out of me, infusing Felix with raw power.

He growled, the sound deep and dangerous. His head snapped up. His amber eyes swirled with silver. “What did you do to me?”

“I gave you mana.”

He smiled wide, baring sharp teeth. After giving me a sprightly wink, he surged to his feet and shifted into a lion.

I sat back on my heels and watched as he rejoined the battle. His aura was brighter. Rays of pearlescent mana radiated from him, burning away the black fog of the undead auras.

Footsteps thundered from above. The undead must have fed before they followed. Ari appeared behind me, making me jump. He was no longer glamoured, and his hood had fallen off, revealing his shaggy brown hair.

Thought you might need this. He reached under his cloak and tossed me a cylindrical object.

“Ted!” I hugged the whip to my chest before I unfurled him and dropped into a fighting stance. The footsteps were louder

now, and they were descending quickly. “How did you find him?”

It was in the Ringmaster’s office.

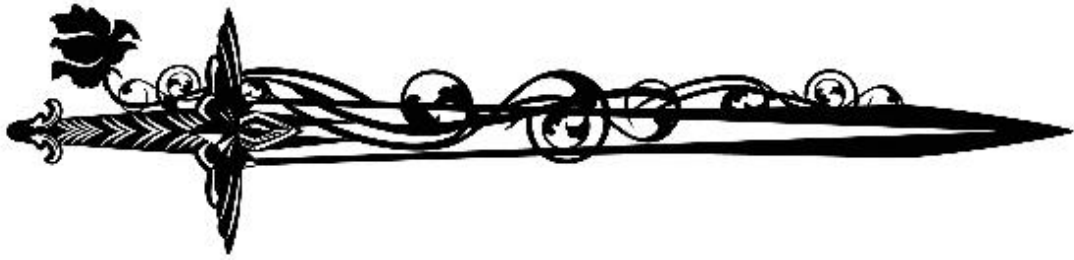
“Did you see him there?” The first two undead emerged from the stairwell, moving much faster than they had been just minutes before. I whirled Ted around my head and slashed out in front of me. The whip caught their throats and severed their pendants.

Ari clenched his hands into tight fists. It must have been killing him to stay back. If he seriously hurt any of them, the curse would take him.

The Ringmaster wasn’t there.

“Find him. He and Quillon’s head servant are working with Valeria.”

Twenty-One



I READIED MYSELF for the next wave while Ari disappeared from my peripheral vision in a burst of purple mana. The sounds of fighting rang out behind me as I ripped into the next group of undead. Ted worked with precision as I cracked the whip against their bodies. He tore through their flesh and stripped their amulets.

I fought my way back up the stairs while the guys worked their way through the floor below. The relentless stream of undead finally stopped, and I cautiously climbed the rest of the steps.

I peered around the corner. The remaining undead clustered on the other side of the ring. They stared across the arena at me. The hair stood up on the nape of my neck at the sight.

Something was off. Dread hung in the air, mixing with the smell of blood and fear.

I edged closer, my whip in my hand. Their dead eyes followed my approach, and they parted as I neared. A round, red face glared at me, her glossy red lips parted in a snarl.

The matron strode toward me, stepping on the stiff body of the Ringmaster. His arms stretched above his head, as if he were presenting his last show. Blood trickled from the many lacerations and teeth marks across his body.

“I should’ve known I couldn’t trust a slimy showman.” She snapped her fingers, and the undead behind her surged at me. “If you want a job done right, you do it yourself.”

I swept my whip around me, and Ted did the rest. They were too close.

I disarmed one, but she clawed at me. Her jagged fingernails caught on my clothing. I pushed her away, but another took advantage of the distraction.

His dull blade tore through my skin, spraying silver blood on the dark wood. I swallowed my cry as pain flared across my back. Adrenaline and mana rushed in, numbing me.

I jerked my head backwards. The undead staggered, and I spun on him, stealing his amulet.

A hard form slammed into my side, tackling me to the ground. The rest swarmed on me. Their heavy bodies crushed me to the hard floor. Pain pricked my arm as an undead dragged their blade across my skin and pressed their cold lips to the wound.

My mother's desperate eyes flashed in my vision from the day of her sacrifice. The elder pressed his blade to her wrist. Her pearlescent blood dripped from my chin.

I screamed. My aura sealed around my skin like a barrier. The wave of energy throbbed and spread, forcing the undead from my body. Then, it imploded, draining everything within it before it crashed back into me.

My body hummed with power. Mana glowed through my skin, joining my lustrous aura. I rose to my feet. The undead were motionless and limp on the ground.

My hair lifted from my shoulders, as if suspended by static energy. I strode to the matron. She sat among the piles of bodies, her venomous gaze locked on me.

Her breath rasped in her throat and sweat gathered on her brow. She was powerless. At my mercy.

I squatted next to her. "You know all my tricks, huh?"

"You have no idea what you've started! You don't stand a chance!" She spat at me, but she was too weak to put any real force behind it, so she ended up dribbling on her lap.

"You're really not in a position to talk shit right now."

"Hunter filth!"

I covered her mouth with my hand.

The others must have been close. Oh gods, she would tell everyone. The walls closed in around me. Dark spots clouded the edges of my vision until only the matron remained in focus.

I wouldn't be able to go back to my life in Haven. I'd lose the Aegis.

My heart thrashed in my ears.

I felt for the last of her mana. It fluttered weakly in her, clinging to life. She trembled at my touch.

I gritted my teeth and pulled. Her eyes widened, and her hands beat against my arms. She reached for my face, struggling as I ripped the last of her mana from her soul.

I fell back and scrambled away from her. An orb floated from her parted lips. It rose to the ceiling to join the others gathered there.

"Oh, no." My sob caught in my throat. What had I done? The Ringmaster's unblinking stare bored into me, accusing. The matron was our last link to Valeria.

All this work, all these deaths were for nothing.

I hid my face in my hands. Adrenaline drained from my system, leaving me raw to the overwhelming energy. My stomach flipped, and I dry-heaved.

"Enchanter?" The rough voice startled me, and I flinched away.

Ari slunk closer and took in the scene. His gaze lingered on my back, where my silver blood still wept from my wound. He knelt beside me and gathered me into his arms.

I pushed him away. They would know now. They'd know I was a murderer, a monster. Tears welled in my eyes. Would they send me to Niaras for a trial, or would they execute me here? I'd never seen a hunter get a trial before.

"Shh. It's okay," he whispered into my hair. "It'll be okay."

"I'm sorry. About everything. I didn't think it would get this messy." I sniffled and pulled away from Ari's embrace. "I need to tell them."

“No.” He stood and blocked my path. “The Aegis has spent centuries fighting against the hunters’ extermination campaign. We’re all bound to the shield. They won’t understand. Not yet.”

His words hit me like a blow to the stomach. “They’re going to find out. I’m still bleeding, and it looks like a unicorn jizzed all over the floor.”

Ari’s mouth pressed into a grim line. He untied his cloak and pulled off his shirt. His brown hair fell in loose waves to his masked chin.

“I’ll take care of it. Put this on and go find Cyrus downstairs.”

I kept my eyes on his face as I took the clothing. He got to work cleaning up my mess while I covered myself. The cut on my arm stung as I stuffed my arm through the sleeve.

“Thank you.” I took a step toward the stairs.

“After my rampage, the Daevasi executed their justice. I didn’t struggle while a slave drove a knife through my heart. I deserved death.”

I paused and breathed deeply, but I couldn’t bring myself to turn to him. Ari lived in the shadows. He knew everyone’s secrets but kept his own close to his chest.

He’d seen the darkness in me, and instead of the rejection I’d expected, he met it with the admission of his own guilt.

“But the bennu Luminary found me.” His voice was quiet, like the low rumble of an earthquake. “She saw something in me, something worth saving. You’re worth saving, Arsyn Morgan.”

“When did you find out?”

“The day I stepped into the room beneath the Dungeon. Your associate couldn’t stop thinking about how dangerous it was for you to accept our job.”

I ran my hands down my cheeks. I was in way over my head. I’d spent this entire time believing I’d tricked everyone and kept my secret when Ari had known all along.

“But you didn’t tell them. Why?”

“I know what it means to be judged by your circumstances.”

I gazed at him over my shoulder and nodded. Ari hid himself, too. He wore his secrets on his skin, yet here he stood shirtless.

My lips parted as a piece clicked into place. “That’s why you saved me in the alley.”

“You’re capable, but I couldn’t afford to let the battle play out. They’d see your blood.”

I swallowed thickly. Ari had always been hanging in the shadows, quietly watching and protecting my secret. He was my dark guardian angel.

I wrapped his cloak tightly around me as I descended the stairs. Cyrus examined the bodies, poking around for missed amulets or surviving daeva.

The caps on his pointed ears caught the luminescent light as he bent down over the still body of a young woman. He was like a shining beacon. I went to him.

His blue eyes landed on me, scanning my body. When they finally met mine, they carried a tenderness I didn’t expect.

“What happened?” He stood and closed the distance between us.

I wiped my face with the edge of the cloak. It came away smudged with dark blood and tears.

What could I say? So much had happened, and it was all my fault. I’d been careless in my investigation and set in motion a chain of events. Kira was taken because I asked for her help. The matron attacked the Colosseum because I played on her disagreement with the Ringmaster.

“It’s a long story.”

He stepped closer and cupped my cheek. His long fingers stroked my ear. “I said stay out of trouble.”

I choked on my laugh.

He pulled a marker from his jacket pocket. “Come on, let’s go home.”

Cyrus drew a portal to my apartment on the back of my hand. He activated it, and we popped out on the other side.

Em jumped to her feet from the couch and rushed to me. “What the hell? Is that blood? Are you okay?”

Cyrus squeezed my shoulder. “It looks like you’re in good hands. I’ll get the others.”

A rune on his wrist flared to life, and he disappeared.

“I need a shower.” On the way to the bathroom, I shrugged the cloak from my shoulders. Em followed and shot questions at me in rapid-fire.

“What happened, Syn? Is that *your* blood?” Em gasped. “Did they see it?”

Kira’s warm brown eyes swam in my vision.

“Ari did.” I turned the water on and began undressing. “He gave me his clothes. He said the others couldn’t know yet, that they wouldn’t understand.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

I thought I’d already proven myself. That after I worked with them and fought beside them, I could sit Cyrus down and spill every dark shadow lingering over my heart. And he’d accept me.

I’d realized something in Qaanir. I was no longer content living behind a mask. Ari seemed to think the others weren’t ready, but I ached to be free of the secrets.

I hoped Ari had a plan to persuade them, because eventually, I’d shed my cloak. Ready or not.

I couldn’t change what I was, but I could decide how to use my power. My hunter blood gave me the chance to do great things, and I was no longer content with survival.

And though the Aegis may not be ready to accept me, I could use their resources. There was a lot to be done.

I opened my eyes and looked at my reflection. Dried blood streaked the strands of my tangled hair. My eyes were swollen, and bruises covered my ashen skin. I turned to inspect the wound on my back.

The bleeding had stopped, and the edges were already stitching themselves back together. Its sharpness had turned to a throbbing itch. I gently pressed my finger to the angry tissue around the ragged line. It was tender, but not as painful as I'd expected. My healing was accelerating.

Commotion in the apartment had Em poking her head out the door. When she ducked back in, her face was pale, and she blinked quickly. "There's a naked druid in our kitchen."

I snorted. "Felix shifted during the fight."

"I'll get him some pants. Yell if you need anything." Em clamped her eyes shut and slipped through the door.

I stepped into the shower and let the scalding water run over me. It turned brown before draining from the tiled stall. I started scrubbing.

I didn't stop until my skin was red and the water ran clear again. I dried off and bandaged my wounds.

I wrapped myself in my feather-trimmed robe. It scraped against my raw skin. I slid my hands over its silky surface, smoothing the material over my sensitive flesh.

I was alive, and I was home.

I went back into the living room. Felix had borrowed a pair of Em's sweatpants. They only came to his knees, and he looked like he was about to burst out of them. Gauze wrapped around his torso. Em must have gotten to him.

His damp black hair was uncombed. He pushed it out of his face as Shael emerged from Em's room behind him, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist.

Where the others were broad mountains of men, the twins were more lean and defined. Shael's tanned skin still glistened from the shower, highlighting the ridges of his compact muscle.

He jumped me, catching me in an enthusiastic hug. He buried his face in my neck and kissed my cheek.

"I knew you wouldn't run from us."

I opened my mouth to promise him I wouldn't, but Ari's warning rang in my ears. If they found out, would they become

a danger to me?

Luckily, Felix saved me.

“Bedtime.” He scooped me into his arms and carried me to my bed. I eyed the trunk filled with my hunter gear. It was locked, but I’d have to make sure none of them went snooping.

Shael followed us, and I pointed to my dresser. “There are shorts in the bottom drawer.”

He rummaged around and pulled on a pair of my exercise shorts. He looked in the mirror and raised his eyebrows. He struck a pose and checked out his butt.

“Okay, hot stuff.” I snickered as Felix set me on the bed.

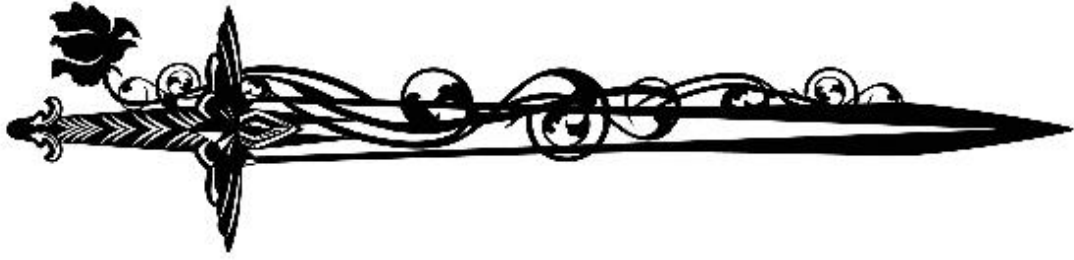
Shael landed next to me and made me bounce. “You’re just jealous because I fill these out better than you.”

I narrowed my eyes, but he was probably right.

I climbed beneath the blankets. My robe rode up around my legs, reminding me I was still naked beneath it. One wrong move and I’d have a serious nip slip situation. Or worse.

I debated changing, but hard bodies pressed against me on either side, robbing my thoughts. I snuggled into Shael’s heat, wrapping myself around him. Felix molded to my back, slinging his arm over me, and I fell asleep to the sound of their breathing.

Twenty-Two



I WOKE UP sweaty, the ripples of a hazy nightmare flooding my body with adrenaline. I swallowed against the dryness in my mouth.

Felix and Shael were still asleep. Felix snored quietly. His arms held me loosely while Shael cuddled a pillow. His blood-red eyelashes fluttered as he dreamed.

His face shone in a soft, golden glow. I traced its source to my headboard, where a faint rune smoldered in the darkness. I ran my fingers along the lines, and a smile lifted my lips. It was a rune of protection.

I rolled over to look at the clock. It was still the middle of the night. I carefully detangled myself from Felix and crawled to the end of my bed. The cup I kept on my nightstand was empty. I sighed and headed for the kitchen.

I opened my door, but it hit something solid. Someone grunted on the other side. I peered through the crack to see Skye rubbing the back of his head. I glanced at Felix and Shael, making sure they were asleep, before I stepped into the hallway.

“What are you doing outside my door?” I whispered. He wore the same clothes he’d worn during the battle, and flecks of blood still painted his skin.

“Sleeping.” He ran his fingers through his wild, midnight-blue hair. He jerked his cold gaze to me. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

Felix’s snoring stopped as he stirred in his sleep. I quietly shut the door and spun back to Skye. I jabbed my finger into his chest.

“Why can’t you go home and sleep in a bed like a normal person?” I smirked at him and crossed my arms. “Or were you jealous? You can join our sleepover if you just asked nicely.”

He bent down to get in my face. His tensed hands landed on the wall on either side of me, caging me in. “You know they tried to make it look like you ran from us? Shael was almost convinced, but I knew it couldn’t be that easy to get rid of you.”

His words struck a nerve. I clenched my jaw as fire pounded through my blood. My nails bit into my palms, but I refrained from punching him.

“I’m the worst case of bed bugs you’ll ever have, baby.” I pushed away from the wall, not backing down. I grabbed the fabric of his shirt in two fistfuls. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Not the best comeback I’d ever had, but in my defense, I had just woken up to an intruder in my hallway.

He leaned in and pressed me against the wall. His heat penetrated the thin fabric of my robe, and the smell of the ocean filled my nose.

His breath tickled my lips. “You have the rest of the team wrapped around your little finger, but I see what you’re doing to us.”

“What exactly am I doing?” I lifted my chin. I darted my tongue out and licked my lips. His teal eyes followed the movement, and his brow furrowed.

“You drive me fucking crazy!” He bared his teeth, and his arms trembled around me.

“I drive *you* crazy? I’m not the one that sulks around like a Victorian ghost!”

His lips crashed into mine. He crushed me to the wall as his hands slid down my body, seeking the hem of my robe. I moved my lips against his, matching each bruising stroke.

He found the bare skin of my thighs and squeezed. He lifted my legs, and I locked them around his butt. Need erupted in my body, drowning my mind with the fog of desire.

I pulled his bottom lip into my mouth and nipped. He groaned and his hands climbed back up my body, searing my

skin everywhere they touched. I arched my back against the wall, and he moved his mouth to my neck.

I whimpered as he pulled away and dropped my feet to the ground. He backed away until he hit the opposite wall.

“That was a mistake.” He shook his head.

I flinched and swallowed hard as I tried to slow my spinning thoughts. I forced my quivering muscles to relax and nodded. “Yeah.”

I retreated to my room without another word and slid down the door.

What the hell just happened?

Skye kissed me. And I’d kissed him back. I brought my fingers to my swollen lips and willed my heartbeat to slow.

When my body was back under control, I slipped back into bed between Felix and Shael. Felix’s arms snaked around me, and I scooted closer. I squeezed my eyes shut and willed myself to go back to sleep. Maybe this was all just a nightmare.



THE NEXT MORNING, I awoke with more energy than I’d had in a long time. Shael was still in bed with me, but Felix’s side was empty. I smiled and stretched.

Shael opened his burning eyes. He squinted at the sunlight that filtered in through my curtains. He looked adorably disheveled. His crimson hair was even more messy than usual. He groaned and buried his face in the pillow.

I laughed. “Good morning.”

The door opened, and Em strutted in, dressed in her disguise. “Perfect! You’re up. It’s time for our first appointment.”

“What appointment?” I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

“You think I’d let you just hang out at home when our Enchanter book is full? Chop chop, let’s go!” She clapped her hands and turned on her heel.

I shrugged. It would be nice to have some normalcy after everything that’d happened. “I’ll put on my disguise.”

I left Shael in bed and grabbed some clothing to get dressed in the bathroom. It was strange putting everything on again. The Enchanter and the disguise had become a suit of armor for me, but now it felt like a cardboard facade.

To my surprise, Skye sat on the sofa in the living room, his nose buried in a book. His eye twitched as he focused on ignoring me.

I stared him down. He’d changed clothes and cleaned up. He wore his leather jacket and dark jeans. His knee bounced, but he crossed his legs to temper it.

Fine, if he wanted to pretend as if nothing happened, I’d let him. It wasn’t like I was the one that started it.

I’d just kissed him back. And enjoyed it. I was thankful to have my mask on my face again, because I was sure my cheeks were red.

Delicious smells wafted into the living room from the attached kitchen. Felix seemed right at home as he prepared breakfast in our tiny nook. I made a beeline for the coffee.

“Hey there, sleepyhead.” Felix dropped a plate piled with eggs and pancakes on the table and pulled the chair out for me. Em was already digging into her own stack of pancakes.

“Wow, Felix, this looks amazing.” I brought my coffee to the table, and he sat next to me. “So, what’s the case?”

Em swallowed and unfolded a piece of paper. “Apparently, some guy’s been cursed to believe he’s a chicken.”

Felix laughed with his mouth full and choked. “What?”

The air pressure in the room surged and popped as Cyrus teleported into the connected living room.

“Have you ever heard of knocking?” I took a sip of coffee and quirked an eyebrow at him.

Cyrus held up a finger and the rune on his wrist ignited as he disappeared again. A precise knock sounded at the door.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. I got up and opened it to find Cyrus standing in the hallway.

He folded his hands behind his back and cocked his head. An easy smile graced his chiseled face. “Good morning, Enchanter. May I come in?”

“Be my guest.” I motioned for him to enter.

He strode to the small kitchen table and took the last seat. He straightened his back as I returned to my breakfast.

“Both the Ringmaster and Quillon’s master servant were killed in the attack on the Colosseum,” he said. “We managed to flush out her help in the palace, but we don’t have any further leads at the moment. You’re a hero to them now. Word’s spreading quickly about the Enchanter, standing alone against hordes of the undead.”

I bit my cheek and played with my eggs. “Why did they attack, anyway? The Ringmaster went against the matron’s orders, but why did she bring all those undead to kill the daeva when she could have handled it more subtly?”

“For one, Valeria likely wanted to make an example of the Ringmaster and send a message to Quillon. The Ringmaster went against her will, and he needed to be destroyed.” He clenched his jaw and tapped the wooden tabletop. “But more than anything, she fears you. For whatever reason, she wanted you dead, and she thought that would take an army.”

“Why?” I shook my head.

“We’re not sure yet, but it goes beyond your little operation in the palace.” His lips quirked into a smile, and something like pride shone in his glacial eyes. “Quillon sees it as a declaration of war.”

A declaration of war. “That doesn’t sound good.”

Cyrus gazed at his hands. “Valeria’s undead killed over a hundred daeva that night. We didn’t know what she was capable

of, and I couldn't predict her next move. A member of the Aegis will come with you on your Enchanter cases until we've gotten a handle on things."

I wanted to laugh and tell him that wasn't necessary, but I couldn't shake the memory of the daeva's hands on my body and the chemically sweet smell of the cloth the matron pushed into my face.

I looked at Felix. He still wore Em's pants, and he was wounded from the fight. Given that the sun was out, Ari was probably hanging upside down in a cave somewhere. Shael was even more naked than Felix, and still in bed. I glanced at Skye, who looked like he'd rather shove a pencil into his eye than be forced to spend time with me.

"Me it is," Cyrus said, following my eyes. He stood and straightened the collar of his jacket. Em crossed her arms like she was annoyed that we had to have a bodyguard, but when Cyrus turned to leave, her wide eyes met mine and her shoulders climbed to her ears.

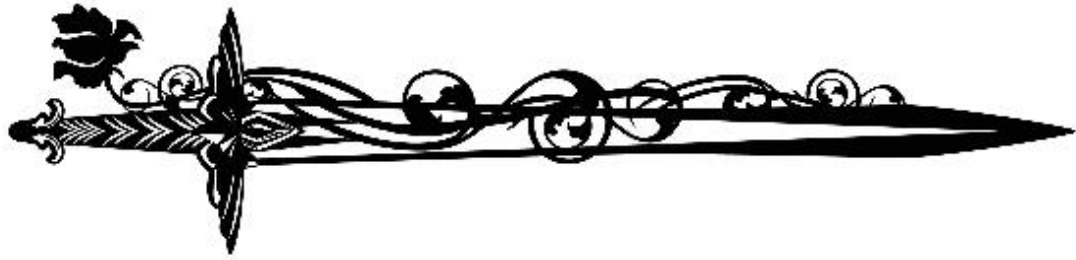
I secured my mask to my face and went to grab Ted before we filed through the door. "Hundred bucks says it's a Vexed Ex."

"I'm not taking that bet," Em said, leading the charge.

Cyrus wrinkled his forehead. "What in the four worlds is that?"

I laughed. "Welcome to Enchanter Inc., Cyrus."

Epilogue



I PULLED THE hood of my leather jacket over my head and wrapped my arms around myself. I hadn't bothered changing into daeva clothing. I wouldn't be here long. A small boat pulled into the palace dock. It bumped against the rubber side as the skipper secured its rope.

It had been a full week since I left Qaanir, but I couldn't hide from the events of that night any longer. I was done hiding. From everything.

"Are you the Enchanter?" the skipper asked, inspecting my strange clothing.

"I am." I accepted his hand, and he helped me into the swaying raft.

"You're the one that saved them people."

I took a seat at the bow and turned my head from him without answering. I wished it were true.

The skipper pulled in his wooden paddles and yanked a cord on the engine. It roared to life, and we sailed through the canals to the edge of the city. Nothing looked any different, but there was a sense of unease in the misty air.

Children stayed close to their homes, playing in their cramped yards behind wrought iron fences. A woman walked on the narrow path along the canal. She startled at a neighbor's greeting and nearly dropped her bundle of shopping in the water.

I braced myself for the wards, but no magic seized me as we pierced the invisible wall around the prison barge. A familiar form waited for me at the top of the ladder.

“You called off the wards, I see.” I took his outstretched hand and stepped onto the deck. His familiar scent washed over me. Tobacco and honey, mixed with the briny smell of the ocean. I breathed deeply and willed my heart to slow.

“No need anymore.” His voice was soft as he tucked me into his shoulder. “I’ve seen what you can do.”

Quillon kept us updated while we were on Earth. With his help, Cyrus used the influence of the Aegis to free the Ringmaster’s surviving slaves. Some joined Quillon’s servants at the palace, while others took my offer to come to Haven. Sabrina was already putting them to work and trying to assimilate them into Haven’s unique culture.

The Aegis men had stayed with me, and as hard as Em tried to kick them out, they refused to budge. Secretly, I didn’t mind, though I would never admit it to them.

We climbed the ladder and Quillon led me belowdecks and into a small, windowless room. The stale air was rancid, smelling of sour death and sweet, rotting things. Kira sat in the center of the space, her bony limbs tied to the rusty chair.

She watched me with milky eyes. Paper-thin skin stretched over her gaunt frame. It was torn in places, revealing weeping black flesh. Her body was decomposing.

“Are you ready?” Quillon didn’t ask if I was sure or if I could handle this. He didn’t treat me like a delicate china doll. He saw my strength and understood my reasoning. It had to be me.

“Yes.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about this moment. Her face haunted my restless nights. The blush that crept up her round cheeks when she caught anyone’s attention and the beaming smile that took her over when she felt magic for the first time. I saw it all, over and over again. But she was already gone. Only an empty vessel remained.

I knelt beside her, taking the metal amulet in my hand. She didn’t react. She simply watched my movements with flat indifference. The amulet burned my skin, but I ignored it and pulled until there was nothing left.

She sagged in her chair as the runes lost their magic. I waited, but no orb emerged from her wrinkled lips. Maybe her soul was already in the next world, unaware of what had been done with her body after her death.

I pulled the amulet over her head and slid it into my pocket. Its runes were branded into my palm. The design was nearly the same as the first amulet, but something was different. I cautiously dropped my barrier, just a crack, allowing a drop of mana to infuse the marks.

The rune was incredibly complicated. I sensed the layers of magic, one on top of the other. They wove together into a powerful spell. It was meant to bind somehow. *What* it bound, I didn't know. I was missing a crucial link. Without the daeva magic, I could only see half the picture.

I rose to my feet and turned to Quillon. I had one more piece of business to take care of in Qaanir. "I'll help you break the curse. I accept the deal."

I'd made more enemies in my time with the Aegis, but I'd also gained new allies. I wouldn't be able to tackle the curse alone, but I knew I wouldn't be without help. If I could break it, I would. These people didn't deserve to be treated like possessions, and the daeva didn't deserve to be punished for what a few of them chose to do with their power.

Quillon dragged his hands down his face. I noticed the bags under his eyes for the first time. He must have been having a tough week, too. His city was attacked from the inside, and they didn't know who to blame or how to prevent it from happening again.

"Finally, a bit of good news."

"The runes on these undead are different." I looked down at my palm again, trying to remember the exact pattern of the older rune.

Quillon nodded and eyed my palm. "It guarded them against daeva influence. They must have learned from their mistakes."

I shoved my hands in my pockets and started walking back the way we came.

“And so will we.”

Continue the Story in:
***The King's Bargain (Arsyn Morgan
Book 2)***

Coming December 2022

I knew accepting that Aegis case could only mean trouble.

Hunters are closing in on Haven, and Valeria's declared war on Draqaar. I'm the only one that can turn the tide of battle. I'm the only one that can break the daeva curse.

The bargain's been struck, and Quillon has a daring plan.

Luckily, I'm not in it alone. With the Aegis men and a daeva king at my side, I'm beginning to feel like I've found my purpose. Where I belong.

But when someone from my past bursts into my life, I question my future and my growing bonds.

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed getting to know Arsyn and her men, feel free to leave a review or sign up to my mailing list for news and updates!

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About J.A. Stowe

J.A. Stowe is from northern California where they have no seasons, but somehow have seasonal allergies all year round.

She tried her hand at many careers including a bachelor's in anthropology and a stint as an EMT before surrendering to the stories and voices inside her head.

When she's not squinting at a bright screen in the darkness, she enjoys riding her motorcycle, playing video games, and spending time with her rescue dog, Lily. Right now, she's probably petting her pup with one hand and failing to kick her caffeine habit with the other.

Get in touch!

Jastowe.com

[Instagram.com/j.a.stowe](https://www.instagram.com/j.a.stowe)

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