



The
COUNCIL



K. F. BREENE

The Council
Darkness, 5

By K.F. Breene

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The Council

Chapter 1

“Sasha, hurry up. They’ll leave without us!” Charles paced by the door, his knitting supplies in one hand and a horrible rendition of a quilt in the other. Scarves were something that the man could do. Blankets even came out decently, if he chose the colors correctly. An object half-crocheted and half-knitted, one square at a time, then strung together? Not attractive.

“Charles, they aren’t going to leave without us. If they were that close, Jonas would be—”

I cut off as Jonas’ burly shoulders appeared just beyond the doorway. The nasty puckers of skin from our battle with an extremely powerful demon were finally healing, three weeks after the event. Jonas had an attractive appearance, but his surly attitude and grim expression made a person stop taking notice and shuffle quickly out of his way.

“Were you under the impression that the schedule didn’t apply to you, human?” The timbre in Jonas’ deceptively calm voice hinted that if I didn’t hurry, he’d grab me by the scruff of the neck and drag me down the hallway.

“Mage, Jonas. I believe you are supposed to call me ma—”

Jonas took a step into the room.

A nervous chuckle sounded right before I said, “Sorry! I’m coming, I’m coming!”

“I would make a sexual joke, but we gotta go,” Charles said.

“Yes, leave talking and walking at the same time for the more experienced of us.” I snatched up my backpack filled with travel items and slipped out the door. Jonas followed me.

“So, motorhomes, huh?” I asked as we made our way to the front of the mansion from where we’d basically travel eight hundred miles to an undisclosed location like a pack of gypsies in a caravan. While those of us going to the Council could fly, the powers that be—Stefan and Dominicus—didn’t want all that human interaction if it could be helped. Since it was drivable, *voilà*.

“You guys get a motorhome. Most everyone else has to sit in a stuffy car. So thanks for not letting me ride with you guys,” Charles muttered as we descended stairs. “I have to ride with...” He flicked his head toward Jonas.

“You guys get along; what’s the problem?” I asked.

Charles shook his head, not bothering to answer because Jonas was so close. Didn't matter—I was just poking the bear, anyway. Everyone in my crew got along with Jonas, but at the same time nobody did. He pretty much minded his own business (when he wasn't minding my business). He wasn't a wine-and-roses type of guy. I thought getting stabbed was *more* fun than trying to relax around him.

“Well, we're headed into shark-infested waters,” I said as we descended another set of stairs. “I want as much time as possible beforehand to cuddle.”

“Don't use 'the Boss' and 'cuddling' in the same sentence,” Jonas growled behind me. “It is not the image he needs around his clan.”

I rolled my eyes. “No one pays attention to me, anyway. Plus, what do they think he does: beat me over the head, grab my hair, and drag me to bed?”

“He *should* do that,” Charles muttered. “It'd teach you some manners.”

“God you guys are cranky today,” I replied.

“We're headed to the snake pit,” Charles said quietly. “Toa has gone over all this—what to expect. How are you *not* cranky?”

I got a thrill as we stepped out the front door. The cool night air greeted me. Two large, deluxe motorhomes hummed by the curb. A small fleet of luxury cars waited nearby. Stefan stood patiently beside the smaller of the motorhomes, speaking quietly with Dominicus, his breathtakingly handsome face shut down into a stern leader's mask. Toa stood by the other motorhome, which would transport a tied-up Trek and Andris, the prizes of battles past. Dominicus would claim ownership of the two since he was the reigning authoritative force. That sounded great to me. I had enough to worry about.

Toa had gone over the details of the Council. It was a collection of some of the oldest members of their race. They were intensely powerful men and women with hundreds of years of experience, limitless wealth, no end of creature comforts, and no real threat they cared to bother with. They were mostly high in power levels and attached to mages near the top of the power scheme. This snake pit was writhing with power plays, deceit, alliances and strategy, all greedy for power and bored with it at the same time.

It didn't sound like a wonderful retreat.

What was worse was that as the only black mage to walk through their gilded doors, I would be target number one. I could expect constant advances to steal my heart away from Stefan, kidnappings in order to swap blood and tie me in a blood link, and a steady stream of challenges.

No, they wouldn't be Parcheesi challenges. This was a warrior race and as the new kid on campus, a human, and sporting one of the highest power levels, I would draw the nay-sayers who wanted to prove I was a weak simpleton. How? By beating me senseless, of course.

Toa had stopped in his explanation at that point to pat me comfortingly on the back. They wouldn't kill me, he reassured me, because one thing they would not waste was a top-level power. If someone killed me, they would be killed and probably tortured to boot. So rest assured, I would at least live. I might be forcibly tied to a dozen people via sucking blood, which would drive Stefan into a mindless killing spree, but I would be alive.

It took everything I had not to literally punch Toa in the face. The guy just didn't have that social awareness that most people did.

"Oh look!" Charles exclaimed as we stepped down off the stoop.

Jen, witch-twin number one, and her three-year-old were weaving in and out of the monstrous warriors, making their way to me. As they passed by, all the fierce eyes and hard faces softened and smiles appeared. People bent down to get eye-level with little Aurora. The little girl preened, half-shy and half-excited to meet her towering playmates, any of which would drop what they were doing for a quick minute with a child.

I had never seen a group of people covet children so much as this group. It amazed me constantly. Even Stefan, an absolute hard-ass except behind closed doors, would get down low, put out his hands, and crack a smile if Aurora came to play. Jen might be human, and more than a little spacy and batty, but without exception if she brought her daughter, she was welcome anywhere in the mansion. She even had a whole mansion full of eager babysitters.

"Hi Aurora!" Charles exclaimed, bending down with his horribly ugly quilt. "Look what I made you."

"What is that?" Jen asked as they stepped up.

"A blanket!" Aurora giggled as she patted Charles on the arm in greeting. Charles was a favorite. He was the only one she was never shy with.

He swung her up and jiggled her around in his arms. Aurora's squeals

of delight drew in everyone's eyes and evoked smiles. Jonas put out his hands next, his stern face melting like hot wax when she reached out to him. He flew her through the air like Superman, his laughter matching hers.

"Anyway," Jen said with a smile as she watched her daughter squealing in delight. "We just came to wish you farewell. The others couldn't make it in time, but they say good luck and stay safe."

I nodded, that thrill of danger raging through my stomach again. "Thanks. You guys going to keep coming to learn to use your magic?" I asked, digging my hands in my pockets.

"Yes. We're doing so well that we don't want to stop and lose traction. And the Boss said that Jameson will be running the mansion, so he'll keep an eye on us. No one messes with us, though. After Delilah kicked that kid in the balls when he tried the pheromones, everyone kind of lost interest. And that stuff doesn't really work now, anyway."

I nodded as Jonas set Aurora down. The pheromones worked on most people right away, but the longer a human hung out with that 'motivator', the less it worked. Apparently this was already known by everybody except me. No one ever thought to mention it to the silly human, it seemed.

Such was my life.

"Well, we should probably go. I'm making everyone late," I said to Jen.

Jen nodded at me and guided Aurora in front of her until Charles whisked her up again. "Are the shape-changer people going, too?" she asked.

"Yeah," I answered as I made my way to Stefan. "They're flying though. They have a truce with this clan, but everyone is so keyed up about this council meeting, and so eager to be the head dick, that—"

"Sasha!" Charles hissed, putting his big palms over Aurora's ears. "*Language!*"

"Sorry. But, yeah, we don't need people fighting before we even get to the Council. The two groups still don't exist peacefully."

"Okay, well... good luck! Stay safe!"

I nodded at Jen as I reached Stefan. The world melted away as his eyes delved into mine before glancing at Jonas and Charles. After a silent exchange, he took my hand and guided me into the motorhome. As soon as the door was shut, he settled into the dining area with a sigh.

"Tell me again *why* we need a vehicle big enough for a family of

eight?” I asked, settling in beside him.

“Because I’m the Boss.”

“Didn’t answer my question.”

He smirked, moving his arm so I could lean against his rock-hard chest. After the motorhome waggled into the road, I asked, “How come you don’t have more kids at the mansion? It seems like people love them around.”

His fingers traced strands of my hair lightly. “When I was little, the mansion was attacked. It was more or less a routine situation—the neighboring clans often checked our defenses. Most of the kids were whisked away and sheltered, but two died. After that, we stopped allowing our children at the mansion unless in specific situations.”

“But can’t someone just attack the places where you *do* have children?”

“The only race interested in attacking us, at present, is our own. Since trouble reproducing is a species-wide trait, and losing even one child pushes us farther behind human populations, we don’t cross that line.”

“But—and I am just playing devil’s advocate here—wouldn’t that be a great way to thin down the opposing forces. The enemy?”

“Yes. And, in turn, a great way to thin down us, as a whole. It would soon be a contest of who could kill the others’ young. There is no faster way to end our species altogether.”

“Well, there *is* a faster way.”

He quirked an eyebrow at me.

“Tell the humans you are showing up to take over.”

A smile graced Stefan’s full lips. “That is true.”

We listened in silence to the rumble of the motor, the moving box swaying to one side or the other as we turned corners. After a while of quiet contemplation, Stefan still stroking my hair, he said, “When do you think you will conceive? Is that something we can try for soon?”

The spit got caught in my throat. “What was that?” I choked out.

His lips traced my ear lobe. His hot breath heated my skin as well as my body. “With you I would know it’s one of my own. I can be sure I’m the father. I’ve always wanted to be a father. To see what traits I passed over to my child.”

“Oh, you can be sure, can you? What if I’m waiting until you’re asleep and taking in the sights of the house, so to speak?”

The answering chuckle was deep and dark. “I would know. And someone would be dead.”

“Well, now is that fair?” I retorted in mock outrage. “What if I wanted to sow my wild oats?”

“Is there a point to this conversation?”

I threw him a glare.

He chuckled again. “What would you do if you heard I’d been with another woman? Tell me truly.”

My gut tightened and my fists curled of their own accord. Jealousy bubbling into rage would probably elicit something extreme.

“Exactly,” he whispered, trailing his lips down my neck. “We exist for each other, and are both too violent to suffer someone else touching what’s ours.”

“I don’t know that I’m violent,” I breathed, angling my head so he could kiss my collar bone. “I’m just a crazy bitch with a jealousy problem where you’re concerned.”

“However you define it.”

After another moment of quiet, I said, “Stefan.”

“Hmmm?”

“Is this council meeting going to be a shit show?”

With a small inhalation, Stefan leaned back against the seat and pulled me closer. “I’d be lying if I said no. You will be sought after. Someone will try to bend you to their will—and we have no idea who or how you will fit in their plans. Until we learn motives, it’ll be hard to know how the attack will come, or when. It’ll be harder to keep you protected.

“As for me, they’ll try to send me away, worried I’ll gain favor of one of the Council members. I have a high power level, I am excellent with a blade, smart and can be ruthless. Plus, I’m a good leader—I’ll draw notice. Some favorable, some not.”

“So, we’ll be in the fight of our lives.”

I got a squeeze. “Yes. From the first minute we step onto Council soil.”

The breath tumbled out of my mouth in a sigh. “Well, at least we have a few people we can trust.”

Stefan resumed stroking my hair. “And I hate to say it, but we have the shifters. They’re tied to you, and you to me. I don’t like your connection

with them, but in this, I'll take any help I can get."

"Just say it—*I was wrong*. Three little words: *I was wrong*. Or go a step further—Tim and his crew stuck around and helped us defeat the demon instead of taking off like cowards. It's not so hard..."

I got another squeeze. "Don't push your luck."

I snickered and settled in tight against him. "Well, whatever you say, I'm glad they're coming. They're different; I'm different..."

"There are other humans at this place."

I scoffed. "They're pets. They don't hold any positions of power."

"True, I suppose. Our way of sticking our tongue out at the majority of humans who keep us in the shadows. I wish it was different. It would make our situation easier."

"Something in my life easy? Yeah right."

"Careful, Toa's Doom's Day cloud is hovering over your head."

I laughed and lightly elbowed him. "Well, we'll just have to stick together, no matter what comes."

"There isn't any other way. Especially not with what *will* come."

Chapter 2

After a long trip, only somewhat shortened by love-making, the motorhome rolled onto a dirt road leading up to a small, decrepit barn. Beyond this singular barn there was an empty field leading to forest. It was desolate.

“Pretty good concealment spell,” I drawled, hazy from the many hours of boredom. I opened up and let the elements rush into me, stuffing my body with power before Stefan’s presence through the blood link smoothed everything out. I reached forward with my magic, trying to feel out the spell so I could wipe away some of the charm. Obviously that wasn’t easy inside a motorhome.

Using another tactic, I focused on the mid-morning sun sprinkling the area I knew had a building of some sort within it. That barn was most likely squatting in front or part of the spell, which would be an awesome bit of magic. I could just barely see the monstrous sides of a box-shaped facility, easily three or four stories high.

“They must’ve had a huge group of magical people to get this spell into existence,” I intoned.

Stefan was up, strapping on his sword, his eyes having gone hard and body fluid—all signs he was readying himself for battle. “They did. Older, experienced, adept magical people working in teams and building spell upon spell.”

“So this isn’t necessarily a meeting, this is just where people hang out.” I followed his lead and strapped my dagger onto my belt.

“Exactly. They have many meetings, but never about much. They reside here, mostly. Ready for new placements or recruits.”

“I can’t believe we have to go through all this just so I can be a mage like I already am. There’s nothing they can do about giving us the green light to be mated, right?” I knew the answer, but I raised my eyebrows hopefully anyway.

Stefan regarded me softly. “No. We only need permission from the rest of our clan. They must agree to follow you. I can force the issue, probably, but it would cause dissension. That would backfire on your leadership, and mine. No, we’re just here to proclaim you as a mage. It’s

necessary for you to meet the Council and ensure you have the proper magical power level—they like to know all the big players.”

“Yup, Toa has done nothing but lecture me on the magical part of things.” I had to meet the Council and try to keep from getting caught in their weird power games and webs of deception. We’d be here two weeks. That was it. Only two weeks, but apparently that was plenty of time for happy times to turn ugly.

We’d passed through the outer confines of the concealment spell enabling everyone to finally see what we faced. Charles and Jonas wore equally grim expressions outside our motorhome, wearing their battle garb and ready for war. Dominicus and Toa stood near their motorhome, waiting on us to come to them. Dominicus stood firm and solid, his usually twinkling eyes or hinting smile absent. He was preparing for the worst.

Beyond them stretched a massive compound. It could’ve been two Walmarts stacked on top of each other. Two large doors marked the entrance with windows dotting the sides. It was boxy, plain, and made to house a bunch of people.

As a progression, we moved beyond Dominicus’ motorhome, Dominicus and Toa in the lead, Stefan beside me, and the rest behind. We moved in perfect order and synchronization, Stefan’s handling of his Watch—what he called his battle unit—thorough and expert.

Chest tight, breathing laborious, I tried not to fidget. “Is it not going to look strange if we all show up ready for a war?”

“We come with a black mage, a clan leader, and a Regional. We show that we are a united front, ready at arms,” Toa said quietly as we approached the doors.

No one stood outside. No cameras pointed down at the entrance. It was a dark tan building with tinted windows, seemingly unguarded for anyone to walk on through. I had no idea how they monitored their front door, or if they did, and I didn’t plan to ask. I was human—that was already a strike against me. I didn’t need to add “clueless dumb-ass” to the list of accolades.

Dominicus slowed as he neared the doors, but didn’t stop. Just as he was about to bump into the glass, the doors opened inwards, revealing a grim giant wearing a sword and gun. His dark eyes scanned the group, lingering on Stefan a fraction of a second longer than anyone else.

“Welcome back, Regional,” the man said, nodding to Dominicus.

Dominicus nodded back, continuing his straight-backed saunter. Toa glided at his side. Another huge guard stood to the other side, watching our progression silently, his gaze choosing Jonas to linger on for just a bit longer than the others. The two guards were sizing everyone up they didn’t know, and had picked out the two most dangerous. This meant they were experienced.

I had asked Stefan why he hadn’t come here when he was named leader. The answer was simple—there were a great many leaders in the world, and the Council didn’t want to bother with all of them. Only those with the most potential were brought forth. Everything else could be left to the Regionals to handle.

Since he now wanted to step up to Regional, it was time to come forth. Plus, his prowess had been noticed in whispers and stray words. *And* he had helped capture two huge pains in the ass. *And* he had discovered black level talent. *And* he wanted to mate a human. Pretty much, in their eyes, his visit was just as important as mine.

I wished that was a good thing.

The room opened up into a grand foyer with a long desk off to the right. Couches and chairs dotted the wide room in clusters. The layout was something I might’ve seen in a grand hotel lobby. Two men walked forward from beside the long desk. Large and lithe, they certainly did more than merely push paper and type on computers. These guys also doubled as a line of defense from intruders, I’d bet my life on it.

Actually, scratch that. I didn’t want to bet my life on anything. Not when so many people would be trying to cash in.

“Regional, hello,” said one of the men. He was suave with feathered blond hair. He bowed extravagantly to Dominicus. “I trust your journey went well?”

Dominicus nodded, gaze scanning the mostly deserted room. “Fine.”

“Splendid.” The man turned to Stefan next, his lips turned up in a welcoming style. “And Stefan, is that correct? One of our clan leaders?”

Stefan nodded, eyes scanning like Dominicus. They were both trying to be self-important and ready for an assault at the same time.

“Wonderful.” The man’s gaze flashed to me, his smile remaining plastered on his face. “And Sasha, our first human in a mage role.

Spectacular. A great many will want to speak to you, I am sure. And you maintain the black power level, is that correct?”

Before I could answer or even nod, Dominicus jumped in with, “That has not been decided by the Council yet. As of now, she is merely a guest awaiting an audience.”

“Of course.” The man nodded, smile not even twitching. He was well used to strong, violent leader-types. Not good.

“Fantastic. Regional, I will escort you to your rooms. You will be stationed in the same suites as usual. My associate will escort Stefan and his entourage, who will be staying in the Blue wing.”

Dominicus’ gaze swung toward the speaker, hard and cutting. He stared for a moment, his posture tense and robust. The feather-haired attendant met the stare with his pleasant smile, something silent passing between them. Finally, Dominicus nodded and stared straight ahead. “Lead on.”

The “associate,” an aging guy with salt and pepper hair and a neck as big as my thigh, stepped forward. “Follow me,” he barked, turning at once and marching away to the right. Dominicus was led left.

There weren’t any connecting rooms with Toa and Dominicus. The Council attendants were separating us and judging by Dominicus’ severe bad mood, that was intended. Divide and conquer, starting now.

Our progression of eight people in all, followed Mr. Happy through mostly empty hallways and elevators until we got to the back of the third floor, a distance that felt like a football field. He stopped in front of a deep blue door and glanced at Stefan for a brief moment. “This is your suite. I was told you wished to share with your mage...”

“Correct,” Stefan acknowledged.

The man nodded and took a step back, leaving Stefan to open the door and usher me in. He waited until the rest of his guys were ushered into their rooms down the hall before he closed the door.

I wandered into the spacious room, a space plain and sparse compared to what Stefan and his people might’ve done with it. A few paintings of flowers or landscapes dotted the cream-colored walls, a couch and chair faced a tube TV with a desk in the corner, and through a small archway sat a large King-sized bed. I assumed the bathroom was beyond.

“Not real homey, is it?” I asked, plopping onto the couch.

Stefan had a quick glance around before his eyes settled on me. His chest heaved with a deep exhale. “We won’t be together much these two weeks, I fear.”

“Why is that?”

He regarded me solemnly. “They’ll keep me busy. I’ll have challenges constantly, I assume. They want to see my power, how I handle myself, and above all, how much shit I’ll take. Or *won’t* take, as the case may be. You’ll be...”

He took two slow steps and sank beside me on the couch. His muscular arm came around me and gathered me close. “You’ll be a science experiment. There are quite a few humans within these walls, and they have their agendas—don’t think they’re just ignorant pets—but none of them are mages. None have people at their back, supporting them. And none bear a mark of one of my kind. Not one.”

“How do you know?”

“Because none bear a mark, human or otherwise, that is under two hundred years old. I probably shouldn’t have done it. I probably should’ve waited until you were firmly aware of the implications.”

I thought back to that episode where he crashed through my door and made me his. I shivered with the exquisite memory of it. “Thankfully, I don’t think you were strategizing at the time.”

“Hmm.” He leaned down to me. I shivered again as the heat from his breath warmed my skin. “I wasn’t, no.”

I closed my eyes as his lips trailed down to my throat. His hand slipped in between my thighs, applying pressure as it worked its way up.

“We have one night of no drama,” I said in a sigh. “Or day, I guess. Let’s make the most of it before the world goes to shit.”

His hand reached my apex and started to massage. Hot waves of pleasure vibrated up my body. His mouth drifted lower, lingering over my pulse before inching down a little more. Deft fingers left my crotch to quickly strip me of my shirt and bra. His hot mouth surrounded a nipple, sucking gently until a moan escaped my throat, and then increasing the suction to the pleasing side of painful. My head dropped against the couch.

“Sounds good,” he said quietly.

With a quick movement he lifted me and carried me to the bed. After he set me down gently, he stripped my pants and knickers and spread my

legs. His tongue worked up my inner thighs, making a hot trail leading directly to my throbbing sex. He expertly parted my folds and licked up my center before sucking.

“Hmmm, Stefan,” I breathed, running my fingers through his hair.

I spread my legs wider as he worked, sucking and licking, one finger entering my body. The heat coalesced, burning now. I arched into him, tingles working through me, followed by fire. My stomach tightened, and then my core, two fingers now plunging. Faster he worked, harder he sucked. My hips swung up to him, my breath tearing out of me in fast pants.

“Almost...”

I couldn't complete the sentence with the waves of pleasure battering me. I held my breath, everything tightening. So intense.

“Oh god!” I exalted. An explosion rocked my body. Tremors tore through me as he lazily circled my sex with his tongue, letting me come down.

Breathless and languid, I relished in his kisses as he worked up my body. He flicked a nipple with his tongue and then suckled the other, his hands tracing my hot skin with his fingertips. He backed off a second so he could rip off his shirt and slip out of his pants. His large erection bobbed up, drawing my eyes.

“I got lucky with you,” I whispered, closing my eyes as his hands roamed my body slowly.

“What, because I'm well-endowed?” he laughed, nestling between my legs so he could pay more attention to my breasts.

“Because I could never do all this without you. Any of this. *Life*. Even without magic, without you I'd still feel achingly alone. Just... left to the side, you know? An outcast. The way I'd felt my whole life before I met you. But with you I fit in somewhere. Even if it was just the two of us, with you everything makes sense. I'm happy in a way I didn't know a person could be happy.”

He climbed up my body, his lips brushing mine lightly. His eyes sparkled, deep and pure, filled with love and longing. “You *were* pushed to the side. We were both alone. We didn't realize the other half of our being was out there somewhere, waiting to connect to the whole. Many people say they were meant to be. Most of them are lying. Fate designed us together, but more, we have accepted and cemented it.”

I deepened the kiss, tasting him. Feeling his body on top of mine. Feeling his thick manhood slowly moving on the outside of my slick sex.

“It’s a good thing we like each other, then,” I murmured against his lips. “Otherwise, this situation with Fate would be really awkward.”

He huffed out a laugh, his sweet breath dusting my face. “I love you, Sasha.”

“I love you, too.”

His tongue entered my mouth softly, almost playfully. He lifted his body just enough to line himself up, and ever so slowly he pushed in until he was fully sheathed inside of me. I sighed into his mouth, the feel of him a heaven so pure it didn’t feel real. He started slowly, fully leaving my body before coming back in, working at my already swollen and sensitive sex.

Before I knew it, I was rocking into that hard length, taking him all the way in. His body glistened over me, muscled and delicious. His fingers intertwined with mine, holding my hands above my head. Our lips locked, sensuous and needy.

The intense burning consumed me again, zinging through my body and tightening my core. He moaned into my mouth, squeezed by my insides. He strove harder then, the bed creaking under his rhythm. His hard thrusts, his strength, his love—before I could help myself, my body jolted out an orgasm. He deepened the kiss, still going, wanting more. Wanting to take me higher.

Immediately I started building again, wound so tight it was almost uncomfortable. Almost painful. So damn pleasurable. Harder he pushed, bearing down as my hips swung up. Our bodies slapped together. The bed groaned.

Another crescendo was upon me. His thrusts got harder. Wilder. The whole world condensed into a white-hot point of pleasure...

I screamed out the orgasm, flying apart. He shuddered over me, his hands gripping mine tight. Every point on my body was hyper-sensitive as shockwaves rolled through me. I let my muscles relax totally, now completely limp on the bed.

He was completely limp over me.

I would’ve said I loved him or maybe even good work. But I was too tired. Instead, I lay right where I was, closed my eyes, and hoped beyond hope that nothing in this world would tear us apart.

Chapter 3

The next evening I walked quietly up the hall next to Toa. Charles and Jonas walked closely behind. I'd only had four hours of sleep and was still travel-worn. My limbs ached and my head hurt. Regardless, I was being called on to face a test with a bunch of really old and highly experienced magical people. Toa wouldn't comment on why they wanted to see me so quickly, but his clenched jaws and flaring nostrils indicated it was not only highly irregular, but also dangerously suspect.

"You need to relax," Toa instructed in an eerily calm voice. "When you expect a test, you freeze up and overthink. This cuts down your working memory and you have a harder time pulling the correct answers out of your brain's storage space."

"You lecture like Toa, and you glide around like Toa, but this breezy thing is throwing me for a loop. Where's the frustration? Or the panic?" I glanced at him sideways. "Am I speaking to your evil twin?"

"While I don't love your sense of humor in these instances, it is less troublesome than your spells stemming from fear. So for that, I am thankful."

"How do you listen to that guy?" Charles muttered.

I couldn't help the chuckle.

Toa turned right at the end of the corridor into another long hallway. Charles' hand on my back made sure I followed.

"This is the beginning," Toa continued. "They will ensure you are actually a black level power. They need to check Dominicus' and my findings."

He turned left suddenly, nearly jostling me, taking us through an empty room. It was then something occurred to me. "Where is everybody?"

I thought back. From the second I stepped out of my room I hadn't seen a soul. We'd gone through, what felt like, miles of hallway. We'd passed doorways leading to sitting rooms. One gave a quick glimpse of a piano and recreation area. They'd all been empty. What should've been high traffic time for this race of people was instead a ghost town.

Then I felt it. A *presence*. Something lingered on the walls and loomed around us. I felt eyes on me, the feeling clawing between my shoulder blades. Watching from some unseen place. Speculating. Analyzing.

I glanced up, almost certain I'd see bats on the ceiling. Maybe mice on the crown molding.

"Toa?" I ventured, my voice uncertain. "Something doesn't feel right."

"They are listening. Waiting. Watching. They are hoping to gain the upper hand. They are wasting their time."

We turned into a doorway and cut diagonally across a large room. Books lined the walls, and desks and couches loitered around the floor. Not one desk had a reading lamp, and the lights were so low the sharp edges of the desk were hazy in the darkness. Humans probably needed to walk with a flashlight if they wanted to read anything.

After another couple of turns, we stopped in front of a closed door. A blur of movement down the hall caught my eye, dragging my gaze right. A small slice of black melted into the wall at the very end, someone having just walked out of sight. Goosebumps spread across my arms at the unseen watcher, but that feeling of eyes on me was still there.

I glanced behind as Toa knocked, *feeling* people around me. Body heat, breath stirring the air, huge bodies still and silent... Somehow they were masking themselves from my sight. They were here, though. *Watching. Creeping around like boogeymen in the night.* I knew it.

Come out, come out wherever you are.

I tore the blanket off my magical inlet and let the elements rush into me, spreading out in my body and spiking my blood. I wafted my magic out, feeling for spells. Like a black light at a crime scene, suddenly I could *see*.

I recoiled backwards. My fingers tingled with magic, ready to unleash hell.

"You should have done that immediately exiting your suite," Toa said in a monotone.

Like a heat map of whites and grays, I could see bodies lining the wall. Standing idly, some in twos and threes, they just stood around, staring at us. Because of the spell, I couldn't make out features or even sex, but I could make out the plain outlines of their faces, and most stared straight at me. Magic swirled around them, glowing patches of white making up the spell moving. Add a chain and some sheets and you had what lived in your attic the night before Christmas.

"You are not meant to see them, Sasha. They are employing some

advanced magic to stay hidden,” Toa said without inflection as he stared at the door. “They’ve grossly underestimated your ability. I half wonder if they’ve underestimated mine. Absurdity.”

“Don’t people usually come out from hiding when they’re spotted?” I asked quietly.

“Usually. But you are a silly human. Surely you can’t unmask the great leaders of our race.” Toa’s voice dripped with sarcasm. He was not impressed.

I focused in on the largest being, who was standing behind the gap between Jonas and Charles. He stared right back at me. I got the feeling that he didn’t think I could see him.

Which would make him either deaf or stupid, and I didn’t think he was deaf.

“Is someone right behind me?” Charles asked in a whisper with wide eyes.

“What gave it away?” Jonas mumbled in a low voice. “Sasha’s magic pulsing your power, her look of terror, Toa’s comments, or the body heat on your back?”

My eyes lost focus as I saw with my magic, analyzing the spell and its construction. Somewhat advanced, it had a lot of little nuances and intricacies. But compared with what Toa was teaching me, and with what Delilah had done with my help, this was nothing. *Child’s play.*

Higher level of magic, indeed.

I checked the spell on the next person and the next. Almost to the letter, they were all the same.

Well, when it worked, why strive for originality. Except...

“I see now why you said always tweak your spells just a little from the man next to you,” I admitted to Toa. “Makes it harder for the enemy to pick them apart *en masse*.”

“If you spent less time questioning, and more time doing, your rate of learning would excel dramatically.”

I rolled my eyes, working on all the spells at the same time. When they were the same, it was really just a matter of duplicating the effort; no thought involved.

“Will you have the energy, though, Sasha?” Toa commented in that same monotone. The man was always on teacher mode.

And unlike usual, I was so thankful for that fact!

With a flourish, I set everything in motion, feeling my energy drain. I tugged on the blood link with Stefan, sensing an immediate surge of energy riding a wave of love. I could handle this counter-spell alone, but since he was in a meeting with Dominicus and some council dude, he didn't need energy just yet. I might as well keep stocked-up—I had no idea what might come in the next few minutes.

Bodies wavered into view, eerie white glow turning into a shimmer of bronzed skin. Charles glanced behind him, startled, and then directed his gaze down the hall. After a pronounced shiver, he muttered, “Not cool, bro.”

I continued to stare at the large man right behind Jonas and Charles. He had a mop of curly hair and bulging muscle all over his seven-foot frame. The man was a goliath.

I couldn't help myself. “Boo!”

The man's eyebrows slid down his nose until they'd made a solid vee. Other people down the line glanced at their neighbor. Then leaned forward and glanced farther down the row. Gazes all came to rest on me, some in shock, many in anger.

“That's not how you make friends, Sasha,” Charles said in a low voice. “Not that you'd want to befriend people who think creeping around and standing behind a guy without saying anything is an okay thing to do. It's kinda fucked up. Just sayin'.”

Jonas rolled his shoulders as his eyes hardened. He must've agreed but he couldn't do anything about it now. Unlike Charles, though, he hadn't turned around to glance behind him.

The door clicked before it swung open on silent hinges. The same man that checked us into the establishment stood before us, that damned smile once again twisting his lips. His feathered hair was no less 80s, and unlike me he seemed well rested.

Drugs?

“Well, hello again,” he said, stepping back from the door. “Please come in, we've been expecting you.”

We walked into a large convention hall made a tiny bit more comfortable with pretty rugs and well-positioned chairs and couches. In the middle of the hall, there was a large table surrounded by cushy leather chairs. Of the twenty available seats at the table, eight had occupants.

We stopped in the space halfway between the table and the door. The twelve or so creepers from the hallway filed in after us, spreading out around the room. Feet apart, hands clasped, they stood staring at us in silence. Guards, apparently.

A heavy-set woman sitting at the front of the table said, “Toa, it is nice to see you again. How were your travels?”

Toa bent gracefully, something like a half-bow, before answering, “They were enlightening, Mage June. It is good to be back.”

“And how long do you intend to stay this time around?”

“That has not yet been decided.”

Mage June stared at him for a second in the same way he always stared at everyone else. Mage requirement? Her gaze then flicked to me. “Has Toa given you the scope of our Council—how it operates, how we are sectioned off, and how our Clutch works?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered, though I didn’t remember much of it. All I knew with surety was that the Clutch were the group of mages to the Council, in charge of large and tough spells. As such, each of these people had access to the ear of the Council member they were linked to. Their advice was pivotal. All mages, including Toa, wanted a backer in the Clutch to grease the wheels of power. Unfortunately, the Clutch mistrusted anyone with power higher than their own, including each other, and didn’t bother with any power lower. It didn’t speak well of my ability to make friends.

“Good.” Her unwavering stare turned back to Toa. “You were sent to assess her magical power. We received a report that she is a true black power level. Is this correct?”

“Yes,” Toa answered.

“And she deconstructed the spell in the hallway, not you, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Toa answered again.

“I see.” The gaze returned to me. “And you are human, obviously. Have you taken the blood from another in the last three months?”

“No, ma’am,” I responded.

“Not like it would matter.” She shifted in her seat, stocky and well-built. Muscular, though. I had yet to see a pudgy person among this race. All that fighting, sex, and sword-work obviously gave a thorough workout.

“Well, then,” she continued, focused on me. “Show me what you can

do. Prove your power, if you please.”

“Do not prove it on her, however,” Toa instructed quickly.

Hmm. Good point. I glanced around the room, finding that curly-haired creep. He’d be my newest helper. The problem was, most of the complex spells I knew were centered on hurting others so I could win challenges. I didn’t think this was the right setting for that.

“Something simple will do, Sasha,” Toa instructed. He’d probably been thinking the same thing I was.

I resorted to an oldie but goodie. Something that could show my power without a doubt, and wouldn’t hurt anyone. As I was mixing the elements just so, Mage June said, “What spell do you intend, child?”

Child?

“I was going to do a magical box. Um, cage. Like a magical cage?” I mentally stabbed myself for not remembering what the danged spell was called.

“Hmm. And you have done this spell before? With success?” Before I could answer, she waved her question away. “Of course you have. You successfully deconstructed an advanced spell on twelve well-educated and experienced personnel. Proceed.”

I turned back to Curly, seeing his eyebrows lowering even as a grin tweaked my mouth. He knew he was the target.

“On me.” Mage June leaned back in her chair. The other seven people around the table, two women and five men, shifted slightly.

I took a deep breath as Toa stepped away, giving me the floor and room to work. I did not miss that look of warning; I knew better than to kill one of the Clutch. I only hoped I didn’t mess up and do it accidentally. This slow spell-working under pressure wasn’t really my forté, even though it was an easy one.

I mixed the elements and cast, the spell forming around her in a hazy black box. The man next to her leaned away.

“Is that it?” Mage June asked of me, gaze pinning me to the spot.

“Well, if I make it a denser box, and you touch it, it’ll shock the hell—heck out of you. It’s not pleasant.”

“And this?” She reached a sure hand forward. One finger barely touched the wall.

A loud *zap* filled the room. Her hand flinched back.

“This one also shocks, like they’re supposed to, but it doesn’t hurt as much,” I clarified. “Sorry, should’ve warned you.”

“Uh huh. Give it all you’ve got. I need to see what you are capable of.”

I injected energy and power into my magical creation, solidifying the walls until the room could barely make out the inhabitant. My face started to sweat and magic tore through me, wanting more. Wanting me to reach higher, harder. Wanting to push into my body and blast out again.

With effort, I cut off the draw and sucked in a huge breath.

“Was that spell a strain?” the man across from Mage June asked softly.

“Her magic is different than ours, Mage Marius,” Toa responded. “She does not struggle to draw; she struggles to shut *off* the draw. Once she lays a spell, it will draw energy from her until completed. From her, and whoever is linked to her. This is an extremely rare trait, human or otherwise. I have done research, and the reason it is so rare is because those able to work with such magic are often, at one time or another, overcome with it. They succumb to magic shock—they are killed from it. Survival, then—not the trait itself—is the rarity.”

He had failed to tell me that little nugget of information.

“So, not exactly a gift, then. A time-bomb,” a woman with long blonde hair stated.

“Are you sure of this, Toa?” Mage June asked in a tight voice.

“Yes, Mage June, I am quite sure. And in some, yes, it is a time-bomb,” Toa stated in his lecturing monotone. “However, she has learned a primal, rough control of her magic, learning more control every day. She has had some close calls in the past, but at present, she is sustainable. It is her strength of character that creates this one-in-a-million magical situation. Otherwise, she would’ve been dead shortly after puberty when the trait manifested fully.”

Another nugget that he had not bothered to share.

“But you said others use it until they are overcome,” Mage Marius clarified.

“Many begin training at puberty, which is when the trait is discovered. Precautions are made at that time. But, eventually, most magic workers are overcome, yes. Sasha has only recently had training. She has

been surviving since age five, and this trait is no different than any other extensive and life-threatening trials she has faced in her life. She has scaled all obstacles, figuring out how to stay alive in any given situation with what is available at that moment in time. She creates some spectacular spells and chants completely randomly for this reason. Predictability is not her strength, however. She is not someone for a line crew. She cannot be counted on for uniform work. She is the head of a link and not the body. A commander, not a soldier. One must take the good with the bad in her case, and if they do, they will be vastly rewarded. If not, she is impossible to control. This is coming from someone who has tried to control her on numerous occasions.”

I blinked back tears. I had no idea Toa had figured out the real me, internalized it, and found it a positive trait rather than a drawback. It meant a lot that he'd taken the time to understand me, and learn about me, so he could better teach me. I wanted to hug the guy.

“Intriguing,” Mage June reflected from within her box. “Let it be known that I have tried to unravel this spell, and have yet been unsuccessful. It is an extremely simple concoction, as we are all aware, but powerful and tight in the construction. Well done, Toa, for your teaching. It is showing through. Now, Sasha, deconstruct this spell and show us some others.”

I went through my gamut of spells I knew wouldn't backfire, and then went through some that I hoped wouldn't. All went off successfully within a roomful of contemplative stares until, finally, Mage June said, “That is enough. You still have much learning to do, but you are entitled to your post. You may go.”

“Oh. Thanks.” I glanced at Toa, waiting for him to walk with me to the door.

“Toa, please hang on a moment. I have some things to discuss with you,” Mage June said.

Toa stared at me silently for a beat, before he said, “Go check in with Tim and his people. They arrived this evening. Stay with them until Dominicus, I, or Stefan comes for you.”

“It almost sounds like you don't think this facility is safe.” The woman with long blonde hair laughed as she whisked her mane off her shoulder.

Toa's intense blue glance held mine. The seriousness of that look and the haunted quality of it created tingles up my spine. I stepped closer to

Charles and Jonas as I nodded. I defied him as often as I listened to him, but in this place I'd follow his instructions to the letter. If I didn't know better, I'd say my life depended on it.

Jonas led me out of the room, wanting to be the first in the hallway. Charles followed directly behind, his hand on my back.

"You have your magic all over this bitch?" Jonas asked in a low tone as we started down the hall. "I don't need anyone sneaking up on me."

"I've got it." And I did. I wasn't taking any chances.

After a few feet I asked, "Why was Toa so paranoid, do you think?"

"Because you just showed, without a doubt, your value," Jonas growled, eyes always on the move. "He tried to lessen your worth, saying you didn't follow orders, and wouldn't conform, but the big power players won't care about that. They'll think they can bring you to heel."

"They'll *try*, anyway," Charles added, his bearing tense, his thick cords of muscle flexed from head to foot. "Trying without success would probably be worse than trying *with* success. The Boss needs to find a backer soon. Sasha just painted a damn target on her back."

"Does everyone find a backer here?" I asked, feeling my magic mingle with another. I slowed as we turned into an empty corridor.

"No. Not many do," Jonas answered, slowing with me. He felt it too. Fire danced in his eyes, a sure sign he was ready to rip someone's face off. "Which usually doesn't matter because most leaders aren't powerful enough to pose a threat. The Boss is, though."

"So, then, won't finding a backer be easy?" I whispered, feeling Charles' hand on my shoulder. My warning tingle started crawling up my back. I wanted to turn around and start sprinting. Where would I go, though? This was a big hotel surrounded by nothingness. I had nowhere to hide.

"He either finds a backer, or he finds the afterlife. The next two weeks will decide."

"Isn't it weird that when Toa is all jumpy, Dominicus is calm and jokey, but when Dominicus gets riled up, Toa gets crazy calm," I wondered aloud. I needed to take my mind off of that magic approaching. Panic and fear were not where my head needed to be right now. It would work against me.

"It's a great partnership," Jonas reflected, his muscles flexing. "Where are these—"

Jonas cut off as three men stepped into the corridor a hundred feet in front of us. One guy was slightly in front, his face tilted down in menace. The two behind walked with their chests puffed up, the first guy's backup.

"Here we go, bro," Charles growled, turning sideways so a quick turn of his head could have him seeing either end of the hallway.

"Oh God. This is a challenge, isn't it?" My breath was coming in fast pants. My chest felt tight.

The men stalked toward us. Stefan's height or more, huge and robust, they were thugs of massive proportions. The front man, eyes for me alone, ground to a halt ten feet in front of me. His lips quirked in a sardonic smile. "We don't like humans thinking above their station."

"Thinking above our station?" I said back automatically. "Well, I don't have to worry about you doing that, huh?"

"If more than one of you challenges, we can step in to defend her," Jonas drawled. He cracked his neck.

"I live here, haus. I know the rules of engagement," the man retorted.

Thankfully, my guys didn't mention Jonas' statement was for me, not them.

"So what's it going to be?" Jonas leaned in, his eyes flaring with crazy. "Am I invited to the party?"

The lead thug's eyes flicked toward Jonas, an answer on his tongue. When his eyes hit my bodyguard, though, those words must've dried up, because he shut his mouth with a click. The two guys to the back shifted with darting eyes, a normal person's version of begging to shuffle away quickly.

"I don't got a gripe with you, man." The leader nodded toward me. "I got a gripe with a bitch human prancing around with *my* kind at her back, like lap dogs."

"You calling me a lap dog, bro?" Charles growled.

The leader spit to his side and stepped forward. His two buddies didn't follow.

"Gross. You just spit on carpet." Magic flared inside me. I took a deep breath and fought the wave of power.

"Let's go, bitch human. I need to rearrange your face."

I rolled my eyes and thought about the spells I wanted to do, because obviously I wasn't going to physically fight a behemoth. "The rules of engagement? Rearrange my face? Let me guess, you're a fan of cheesy war

movies.”

I felt behind me for Charles’ leg, and then applied pressure, telling him to back off. I was aiming for harm, not to maim and certainly not kill, but the spell was volatile at best and not directional—everyone would get a blast.

“All right, then,” Charles said, pulling Jonas back and then further away.

The leader grinned. “It’s not going to take that much space to have this bitch human weeping for mercy.”

“God you’re tough to listen to.” Wasting no time, I mixed the elements and formed a large red ball. Its sides nearly touched the walls. To get around it, he’d have to crawl under it on his belly. No way was this guy doing that.

Of course, it was red. He’d probably try to disentangle it like a common, low-level spell.

Toa tried that once. But only once. Inverted magic was a tricky, unstable thing.

The ball glowed pale red as it hovered, non-threateningly, in the middle of the hallway. I backed away slowly, careful not to turn my back lest anyone think I was running away. Back with Charles and Jonas, I erected a strong shield, tied off the spell, and waited. Butterflies ate away at my stomach. If I failed at this, it would set a precedent for the rest of my stay here.

I could not fail at this.

“That’s it, human?” the guy laughed. His feet strolled from one side, to the other, underneath the floating orb. “Red? They’re trying to make you mage with red power?”

“No red could do a ball like that,” Charles muttered. “This male is about as sharp as a bowl of jello.”

“What is it, a PR stunt?” the guy continued. His feet stepped backwards. Next he’d try to unravel that spell. I hoped. “Those bleeding hearts that think we treat humans like crap are trying to make a point with you, is that it? Excited you fucking useless bastards can scrape up to a measly *red*?”

“Wow, you have a lot of hate. You seeing somebody for that?” I called.

“I’d heard she was a black,” someone on the other end of my spell

pronounced.

“Looks like you heard wrong. Probably *is* a PR stunt.” The leader’s feet shifted. Pale orange encased my spell.

“Pale orange?” Charles snickered. “He’s nearly a red himself.”

“Can’t work his magic, neither,” Jonas muttered, losing his patience. “How long does it take to work at that spell?”

“Oh, like you could do it, bro?” Charles shot back. “You know which spell that is? It’s that floating death one that Toa loves. I can’t make one of those... Well, I can’t make one and have it work properly.”

“That’s because you have your head up your ass most of the time.”

“Shut up you guys, here we go,” I chastised softly.

The pale orange started to sizzle, an interesting approach to unweaving a spell. His version of magic hit my opposite version of magic. Like a detonator, the orb exploded.

A blast of magical fire flayed my shield. I stepped back, pumping more energy into the shield so it held. The guys at the other end of the hall hadn’t made the same preparations. And even if they did, it wouldn’t have helped. The magic scoured the three, blistering their skin. Gashes tore their flesh, an assault of razor blades all over their bodies. Girlish shrieks drowned the hallway as the men staggered backward. One fell, screaming. The others tripped over him, stumbling backward, scrubbing at their faces.

“Fucking bitch!” the leader shouted, smashing into a wall with a thud.

The wave of magic rolled over them and disintegrated, leaving three bloody, whimpering men in its wake. As one they got up and staggered back the way they’d come, gingerly touching their skin and moaning.

“This one’s over, right?” I clarified. “This challenge is done?”

“The Boss would be proud.” Jonas lifted his chin and puffed out his chest. He gave me a solid pat on the back that had me staggering forward.

“He might be proud, but I’m a little terrified. That was way worse than what she did to Toa.” Charles stared at the backs of the three guys.

“I added a little twist of awful. Toa got blasted with paper cuts. These guys got a razor blast.” I let my shield fall away.

Charles shivered.

“How many more tricks like that you got up your sleeve, human?” Jonas asked, his own shield winking out. Apparently he hadn’t trusted mine.

“Ones that only hurt? Probably not enough.” I sighed and continued

up the hall. “Probably not nearly enough. Toa got creative and nasty with what he taught me. I think he’s trying to make a statement through me. I don’t know what I find worse—Toa needing to make a statement, or the fact that I am his vehicle. I can’t imagine the heat it’ll bring on us.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll handle it.” Jonas rolled his shoulders as his muscles flexed.

I really hoped he was right.

After a quiet walk through busy halls in which absolutely everyone stared at me, I finally arrived at Tim’s door. I nearly cried as I knocked, so thankful there was a crowd of shifters who would fight right beside us. My crew was grossly outnumbered in this place, and worse, they hated me because I was human. I was the gross insect they weren’t allowed to step on. I could see it in their sneers.

“You’re probably good for tonight,” Jonas reflected. “You got the first challenge, you answered, and now they’re going to take a lesson and find someone to come at you harder. You tore those guys up. I bet you just stepped up the competition.”

“Good and bad though, right?” I leaned against the doorjamb. “It’s going to get harder that much quicker. I should’ve hit that guy with something lighter. Like a shock or something.”

“No. You gotta play this hard and fast, human. You gotta match the Boss, because that male is going to take this place down. You have to show you deserve him.”

“Not much of a pep talk, Jonas,” I muttered.

“It’d be way more fun if we could join in.” Charles picked at the doorjamb in irritation. “Knock harder, Sasha. What are they, running around with four legs in there? They don’t have hands to open the door? What’s taking so long?”

I knocked harder.

“It’s a sad day when we have to turn to the mongrels for aid,” Jonas grumbled.

“You protect a *human*, Jonas. One you tried to off once. Isn’t every day a sad day in your book?” I asked in a dry voice.

He stared down the hall and ignored me, his way of saying, “Touché.”

The door opened slowly, the space filled with the stocky and robust

body of John, a shifter I had met at their forest compound. He beckoned me in immediately as his gaze scanned who I was with. “This it?”

“This is it.” I walked into the spacious room. Ann and four other shifters were spread around the room. Hard gazes in wary expressions surveyed me. No one gave a sign of greeting.

“Hey, guys, you okay?” I edged toward the couch in the center of the greeting area where Ann rested, her hair a vibrant blue. “Kind of keyed up, huh?”

Ann grimaced at me as I sat, but didn’t say anything, which wasn’t like her.

“Got your hair done, huh?” I asked, uncomfortable with the vibe in the room.

“Everyone’s nervous about where we stand in this place,” Ann said quietly. “We didn’t exactly get a warm welcome when we were being escorted to our rooms. I think Tim thought it’d be different. It’s put everyone on edge.”

Before I could say anything, I heard “Sasha.”

Tim emerged from a bedroom in the back, a six-foot block of solid and steadfast muscle. Angry red gashes marred his neck and upper arms where the demon gouged and scored him from the last battle. He’d nearly died, but being as stubborn as they came, he was in the process of making a full recovery. *“In the process” being the operative phrase.*

“How’d it go?” he asked, his smooth and sure step crossing the room and taking a seat on the coffee table in front of me. His soft brown eyes delved into mine. “Are you still mage?”

Suddenly I just felt tired. “Yeah. I have black, I have talent, and I am incredibly naïve and untaught. Oh, and apparently my form of magic tends to kill most wielders like me, so I’m all set.”

“Pity party, huh?” Ann asked, flicking me in the head. “What’s up with your hunk of man? How is he fairing?”

“I don’t know.” I rubbed my eyes, remembered I’d put makeup on, and then froze. “Did I just smear my makeup all over my face?”

Ann stopped in the middle of making fun of me and leaned forward to look. She shook her head and continued, “He hasn’t had to save you yet, huh?”

“They won’t let him save her. Not here,” Tim said softly, gaze still on

my face. “As a leader, he has to stand on his own. As a mage, she does as well. They have to each earn their respective positions.”

“What do you know about it, mongrel?” Jonas growled.

Tim spared him a glance. Then looked back at me. He didn’t plan to comment.

I helped him out. “Obviously what he just said, Jonas. He just told you what he knows about it. Comments like that make you sound dumb.”

“Look who’s talking.” Jonas wandered away toward the window.

A smile curved Ann’s lips as she watched him. “Since when does Jonas use a Charles-ism...?”

Jonas stiffened as an indignant expression crossed Charles’ face.

“Focus.” Tim’s firm voice, even though still soft, had every shifter shutting their mouths in a click. To me, he said “They’re going to call me in. We don’t know when yet, though. They wouldn’t say more than ‘follow me’. From what I understand from Dominicus, however, is that the Council wants to welcome me and mine into the fold. Make a pact with me. I want you to come, as a friend of the pack. I want us shown as one entity. I think that will look better for you now; and down the road, better for us.”

“You’re a marketing ploy,” Jonas said as he glanced out at the starless night. “You don’t matter any more than humans do. You’re animals in this place. That’s it.”

Tim’s body stiffened. Heat crept into his gaze. He turned toward Jonas.

I leaned forward and put a restraining hand on his leg. “He’s not being a dick this time. Well, I mean, not on purpose. He knows what he’s talking about with this stuff.”

Jonas half-turned. To the wall he said, “You are numbers for their army, that’s all. You can help them go against the European Council who’s talking about asserting themselves back into human society. Who are also just waiting for an *in* to extend their reach back into this council. They used to control this place, and if they try to retake it with force, the Council needs someone for the front line.

“And we have Andris now. With torture, Andris will give up secrets—he’s worked with the European Council, this Council—he’s well connected in the underbelly. Trek, too. That guy’s an idiot, but he’ll know a bunch. You are soldiers. You think you got a partnership, and that you’re

dying for a cause... but it won't be your cause. And probably not an important cause. You're expendable, and with the façade of unity, you're easy to control."

"So you're saying we shouldn't waste our time?" Tim shot back, his hand braced on his knee.

"I'm saying you should go in with your eyes open. They don't care about your best interests. You'd be even stupider than you look if you trusted what they told you."

"But yet, you're asking me to trust you. What makes you different?"

Jonas turned back to the window. "I'd just as soon have you fuck off. I don't need you trusting me. But you have a good plan as it concerns Sasha. She needs some power in her corner. You can provide it. I don't want you screwing it up with your head in your ass."

I raised my eyebrows. It was a fair point.

Tim must've thought so too, because his gaze traveled to the floor in contemplation.

"So, I got challenged," I announced. I figured I might as well get it out there. As expected, all shifter eyes found me immediately. I started the story without delay. If they were in my boat, they had to be warned.

Chapter 4

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t take the chance so early in the game,” said Kallias, Dominicus’ backer and the fourth-most influential Council member. He spread his hands in front of him apologetically. “You are not mated, and even if you were, what does that mean? The connection with you can be easily broken.”

Kallias, Dominicus, and Stefan all sat at the end of an absurdly large conference room table in an even bigger room. Apparently this was Kallias’ personal meeting room where he held important tête-à-têtes. Today, though, Stefan had every belief the aging Council member was trying to make a statement of his rank and importance. A statement that he probably hoped would gall when he withheld his help for Stefan and Sasha.

Dominicus leaned forward. He insisted on this meeting in the hope that Kallias would see reason. While that would certainly be great, Stefan had never been, nor was he now, under any false pretenses. Power players wanted to know their assets before they put their neck out. Stefan was an unknown and Sasha was a human. Dominicus was just being hopeful. “She is my daughter. She has chosen Stefan as her mate. She is his mage. She is marked by him, has marked him, and has a blood link with him. How much more connected can two people be? That kind of connection will not be broken. They are a power team, and the best move would be to snatch them up now before someone else does.”

“Those connections will be cut loose with my death,” Stefan stated. He leaned back in his chair and crossed an ankle over his knee. “I’m a liability.”

Kallias’ eyes sparkled. “You’re smart. And correct. Take it as a compliment. Were you a weak male, easily ruled and manipulated, this wouldn’t be an issue. Anyone would love to tether you up and reel her in through you. But, alas, you must enter the ring like everyone else. True strength will shine. Faults and weaknesses will be preyed upon. This is how it has always been done.”

“Except, in this situation, his disappearing would free up a sought-after mage,” Dominicus said with an edge to his voice.

Kallias rumbled his eyebrows, not denying it. “And you, Dominicus,

of all males would know what that is like. I recall having this very conversation with you all those years ago. And look where we are today.” His steel-blue eyes hit Stefan. “The best bet for you? Sever ties with the human. Fight your own battles, win, and claim a title better than the one you possess. We have many mages here. The human is the reason you will find your time here hard going. And, to speak frankly, she is the reason you may not... make it back to your leadership role. It is her they want, and they will go through you to get her.”

Stefan let the pause linger while he continued his flat stare at this conniving Council member. He could walk away, sure. And if it would help Sasha even a little bit, he would. He would walk away and never look back, even though to lose her would be to lose everything. But if he did that, he'd leave her completely vulnerable. She'd be wide open to this arena of festering, cruel power games. In the best case, she'd blow this whole place up to defend herself and die in the process. In the worst case, she'd become a slave through more than one blood link in an oppressive culture.

His leaving would be the worst thing for her. He'd sacrifice his life if need be, but he'd see her safe one way or the other.

“She cannot link unless she has Stefan,” Dominicus said in a contemplative voice. He leaned back to match Stefan's relaxed pose. His eyes were no less flat. “Her power fries anyone but Stefan who tries. This knowledge came from Toa, so you are assured it is accurate. She is not a pack follower, she's willful, and she will run head-first into battle to protect those she cares about. Plus, she is human, through and through. She hasn't rolled over and accepted our... morality differences. She fights it. She would be a hard addition to an already-established hierarchy. Her love for Stefan, and her absolute trust in him, skirts all of those issues. With him, she is a valuable addition to any team. Without him; constant problems.”

Kallias smiled condescendingly. “This coming from her surrogate father who wants to protect her. Forgive me, Dominicus, but you forget that those of us who have been around for hundreds of years know something of underlings falling in line.”

“I have not forgotten, Kallias. And yes, her welfare is my concern now.” Dominicus minutely shook his head. “Well, we are at an impasse, then. That's a shame—I had wanted to give you first pick.”

“Ah,” Kallias jabbed the air with his pointer finger. “But you are

giving me first pick with the leader. I wish first pick with the mage. It is her you have not offered up.”

A grin spread across Dominicus’ face. “Still trying to replace Mage Phillip, hmm? First Toa turned you down, and now you are after Sasha? I can’t imagine Mage Phillip has much love for you.”

“Bah.” Kallias waved his hand through the air. “He should work harder to be better rather than spend his time plotting.”

Kallias rubbed his thumb across his chin in contemplation. “The human element is a decided drawback, yes, as is her inexperience, but the Clutch is intensely interested. She has something. I want it.” His eyes hit Stefan’s, the shining light of a cunning plan burning within them. “You will forgive me, but this is a game of cutthroats. Her uniqueness has drawn my eye.”

Stefan kept his face impassive, but his heart sank. If she drew Kallias’ eye, she would draw a great many others. He knew they’d be a sure target, but hearing that spoken aloud made it real.

He got up before he knew what he was doing. Dominicus stood a second later.

“I apologize.” Stefan offered Kallias a half-bow. “But I think we are done here.”

Kallias rose. “Of course. I really do apologize. And who knows, maybe we can pair up after all.”

Stefan gave him a brief nod as Dominicus placed his hand on Stefan’s shoulder. Feeling the slight pressure, he allowed Dominicus to turn him toward the door and walk him out into the hall. Once there, they stood for a silent beat as the door gently swung shut.

“That went as I expected,” Dominicus said into the silence. “Unfortunately.”

He took his hand away from Stefan’s shoulder. “I have much work to do. I—” He cut off as his gaze lingered on something down the hall. His lips spread into a smile.

Stefan turned to follow his gaze. Three men stumbled through the corridor looking like they’d gotten sand-blasted with razors. Eyes half-closed, not able to walk in a straight line, they winced with every step.

That’s my girl.

“Toa looked like that once,” Dominicus grinned. “It made him

slightly more... careful.”

His eyes regained their edge. “As I was saying. There is an undercurrent to Kallias’ words that strike me as... desperate. Something is seething within the power plays in this Council. He’ll speak to me more openly without you present. Plus...” Dominicus shrugged. “You might as well get to those challenges. I was in your position—nearly exactly your position—at one time. Brutality is the fastest way to end the advances. Hard, fast brutality.”

Stefan took a step away, a shot of adrenaline pulsing through his body. “Agreed.”

“Oh, and... Toa thought I should say this to you.”

Stefan listened quietly as Dominicus explained about covering the blood link, giving himself privacy. He had to do everything in his power not to dig his hands in his pockets like a sullen child. Dominicus saw it and smiled.

“I wouldn’t worry about her figuring it out before you did.” Dominicus stepped toward the door. “Toa says she pulls a great many things out of her ass in dire circumstances. You may have lost your family young, but you had some loyal friends helping you succeed, not to mention other members of the clan. She only had a houseful of disinterested guardians, merely doing their part to keep her off the streets. She feels that is a blessing, and it is I suppose, but it creates a certain person. Pressure and time can create something beautiful, or it can create something cruel. We are lucky she turned into the former.”

Stefan snorted, turning toward the hall. “Dominicus the poet.”

“I have many facets. And Stefan...”

Stefan paused.

“She doesn’t need to feel your pain. Nor the depth of your viciousness. She’s still human, after all. She’s not as versed as she thinks in the savagery of our kind. Plus, if she feels your pain she’ll set the place on fire to save you. Best cover that link when you meet your challengers.”

“Didn’t need to be said.” Stefan started off down the hall.

The soft click of the door sounded unnaturally loud in the empty corridor. He set a course for his room, feeling his anticipation rise. Waiting for the challenge he knew would come. And as he walked, he felt something. Soft whispers of current barely moved the air around him. A heaviness

pushed in from the sides, the temperature a fraction warmer in certain places than the chilled air circulating the rest of the enclosed space. Prickles tickled up his back and around his arms.

Something watched him.

His eyes flicked right and left. He glanced behind and peered into a doorway as he passed. It was empty, which was not usual for the middle of the night. Even in a human hotel, a species that kept the opposite schedule, there would be one or two souls moving around at this time.

He slowed down, covering that link as Dominicus had explained and honed in. He didn't get where he was, as young as he was, without feeling danger pressing in on him. And reacting.

He struck out to his right, glancing off of a warm, solid form. Without wasting any time or even knowing how many were there, he grabbed hold of an arm, then a neck. With a roar of might, he picked up the large being and hurled it. The feeling of movement had him turning with liquid joints, striking out once again at a solid form invisible to his eyes. He rammed someone against the wall and pounded into a body. His hands felt upwards quickly, not wanting to lose the advantage. He found the head, and bashed it against the wall in two hard thrusts. The slide of a body said that the form was out of commission.

He turned back to the hall, his hands out, ready to grapple. If they had swords, he was screwed. But they wouldn't kill him. They needed to see that beyond a shadow of a doubt, he couldn't be attached to a leash and used to control Sasha.

Silky movements rustled the air. Nearly silent footsteps moved away in the opposite direction, leaving whoever was on the ground. Blood stained the carpet next to him, leaking out of thin air.

The corridor emptied out. He could feel it.

He needed the spell to undo whatever these people were using as disguise. He had to be able to *see*.

He pushed ahead. He needed to find Sasha first, to make sure she was okay, and then Toa.

Not five minutes later, as he turned toward the center of the building, it was as if a veil had been lifted, the first signs of life since he'd gone into that room with Kallias surging around him. Well-dressed males and females,

reveling in their arrogance, traipsed through the halls and meeting rooms, going about whatever business or games they had on their agenda. Humans often followed behind or bustled through on their own, running errands and living subserviently.

Sasha would not like that one bit. She'd probably form some kind of taskforce, even though it was, undoubtedly, the humans' choice.

He walked through at a measured pace, drawing eyes. Gazes dipped, finding the blood spatter on his ironed, collared shirt. Languid smiles curled the lips of a few women. One even reached out to trail a red, manicured finger along his chest.

Suddenly, he knew exactly how Sasha felt being called a plaything. He went from the King of the Mountain to the attractive jester in the space of a few hundred miles. No fuckin' way.

Another jolt of adrenaline rocked his frame. He couldn't help his body flexing, his anger seething out around him. As if a shockwave boomed out, a wide-eyed bubble of spectators opened up around him. Males and females alike glanced up, and then shuffled out of the way. He was ready for battle, no matter the venue—a male couldn't just fight his way to the top, he had to *own* his status as he did so. Stefan was no stranger to playing his role of leader.

He kept his measured pace up a flight of stairs, attracting eyes, and down a different corridor, this building nothing if not never-ending tunnels on every floor but the first. A hundred yards from his room, two males stepped into the hallway and stopped, facing him, side by side.

He couldn't help it but grin.

“Nothing but a backwoods nobody,” the male on the right sneered.

Standing four inches shorter than Stefan, with half the body mass, and the movements of a clumsy adolescent, this male was obviously only working with a half-deck in the intelligence department. That, or he was terrible at sizing up his competition. His friend, a smidge taller and more robust, had a gruesome scar on his face and a cruel smile.

These two weren't nearly smart or talented enough to pull off an invisible spell. He could see that in their blind swagger and their over-anxious movements, which meant possibly the invisible watchers earlier were exactly that: watchers. Spies. It explained why they took off so quickly. Which made these fools the first rung of challengers.

Stefan nearly laughed. Did they think so little of him?

His steps quickened as his temper rose. Electricity exhilarated his body, pumping through his chest and sizzling out his limbs. He focused on the male with the scar, obviously the stronger of the two. Reaching him with fluidity, Stefan grasped his shirt before the male knew how quickly Stefan would engage.

Stefan slammed the challenger against the wall once, twice. The hollow thump of his head rebounding off the wall echoed down the empty corridor. He punched the fool in the face three times, cracking a cheek and smashing his nose. Two more violent jabs to a kidney buckled the male's legs. Stefan ripped him to the side, splashing his limp body across the ground.

His hard black eyes beat down on the pale brown of the next challenger. For one beat, the challenger met his gaze. The challenger's chin rose fractionally, but his back was bowing. He hadn't been ready for the brutality with which Stefan had assaulted his counterpart.

Slowly, as if a great weight bore down on him, the challenger's resolve cracked. His eyes, dulling in defeat and submission, sought the ground. His body finished its bow. The power and fight in him seeped out.

He submitted.

"Challenging me was the wrong move," Stefan said in a low voice filled with command. "I give challenges, I don't receive them."

"Y-yes," the male stuttered. The acrid smell of urine wafted up.

"Yes, what?" Stefan pushed, leaning over the male, making his dominance complete.

"Yes, sir." The male swallowed noisily.

"Yes, *Boss*," Stefan corrected.

The man nodded adamantly. "Yes, *Boss*."

Stefan straightened up and walked away without another thought. He'd just stepped up the challengers. There was no sense in playing a game about it. This whole facility had turned into a cesspool of bored politicians. Backers and power plays and whispered words—it was a weak way to go about things. They needed a leader, not a decrepit council. They needed votes and action, not false promises and words with double meanings.

And if someone said Stefan wanted that role, they'd be wrong. Since he'd talked to Kallias, he just wanted to walk away from all of this. To head

toward a place that made sense. Home. But in order to survive, he had to be the toughest male they'd ever seen and the most vicious. His race worshipped that behavior, and Sasha's safety demanded it.

Fighting a sudden pallor, Stefan let himself into his room and took a deep breath. Dominicus said the one place, besides the dining hall, that was forbidden to invade was the living quarters. No listening, no spying, and no challengers wanting to get a jump on him or Sasha.

He took a moment in the still setting, peaceful and quiet. He could lightly smell Sasha's delicious scent. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. It'd only been half a day, but he missed her. He worried that she was okay. That she was handling her first challenge without a heavy heart.

Above all, he worried she wouldn't make it out of this in one piece. He was afraid that they'd kill him off and leave her vulnerable.

He looked around the room for a sign of where she might be. As he expected, he noticed a note taped to the window. Jonas' impatient hand scrawled the message: **With the mongrels**

Smart

Stefan paused at the door, his hand on the knob. His adrenaline was winding down, leaving his muscles quivering. Leaving him not as primed for another attack. But Sasha was out there.

Another deep breath and he was out the door again heading down the hall toward the shifters. Before he'd gotten two steps, though, he noticed someone coming up the corridor toward him. Slight and slinky, oozing sex, he could tell immediately that this was a human female. Not a challenge.

Slowing down, just in case she traveled with anything unseen, Stefan allowed himself a moment to analyze this creature—the type of human that seemed so common in this place. Submissive and with a desire to please, she, like the others, seemed to slink around with a promiscuous air. Even the males sauntered around promising sex. He'd seen these females glance at his kind imploringly and angle their necks, as if they were offering something. As if they were a buffet. There was no honor in their bearing, no pride. They were content to be used. To be *lesser*. It was disgusting.

The woman glanced up and noticed his advance. Her step slowed and a sultry smile curled her red lips. She veered directly into his path, all hip and breast. Her head tilted back, exposing three scabbed bite marks on her porcelain skin. Whoever had taken blood had not done so gently.

“Would you like a taste?” she purred. “I can please you in ways others cannot.”

He didn't bother to hide his disgust as he stepped to the side to move around her. It was at that moment, though, that he caught her scent. It curled around his senses and infused his body. Unlike Sasha's scent, however, this smell had a hint of decay. Like a dying rose in winter. Wondering about the difference, he slowed. “You have a scent to your arousal.”

“I taste just as sweet. *Use me.*”

He shook his head in frustration. “Is that common among humans? Are there many that give off a scent like you?”

Misinterpreting him, she stepped closer and draped her body over his. “Of the few I am one-of-a-kind. Sought after. I have my pick of the strongest and most attractive males at the Council.” Her hand ran up his chest. “Like you.”

He grabbed her by the wrists and removed her. “Do males have this scent as well?”

“Is that what you're into? Well then, I can find someone to fulfill your needs. I have all kinds of *friends.*”

The way she'd said *friends* had Stefan pausing. His stomach tightened up. “Do my kind pay for this pleasure? Are those with scents sought-after for this... type of... endeavor?”

She made a sound not unlike a purr. Her back arched, allowing her breasts to coat his chest. He tried to push her away by her hands, but the female was limber. She did everything she could to keep contact. “Nothing is for free, handsome. But for you, maybe I'll just ask a favor. You I'd like to taste. Tell me, what is your name?”

He let go of her wrists in order to grab her shoulders. As he made contact and started to push her away, a blast rocked the floor. Fifty yards up a door burst loose from the hinges, clattering against the opposite wall. Jonas flew out after it, hitting the wall with a thud and sliding down to the ground.

“Don't worry about that,” the female said in a feminine hum. “I'm protected.”

“Not from her, you're not.” Stefan pushed the female away.

Even as the last words rolled out of his mouth Sasha stormed into the corridor, her face a terrifying mask of rage and violence. She saw him in the corridor, and then honed in on the woman trying to cling to his side.

The expression on Sasha's face got even darker. *Not good.*

Her body turned to face him slowly, like one of those westerns with the gun slingers facing off at high noon. She didn't seem to notice Charles running out after her and saying, "You gotta leave him be, Sasha. Seriously. You can't go around saving males. People will think he's a sissy-la-la. Plus, you'd probably just—" Charles cut off when he realized what Sasha was looking at. The younger male's eyes widened. He stepped away slowly. "Uh oh. Boss, it probably wasn't the best place to be doing a thing like that..."

"He doesn't need you interrupting his fight for dominance." Tim stepped out of the door. Ann was right behind him. "This is how it's done. With his kind as well as Shifters. We—"

Sasha was still staring at him, hurt now mingling in with the rage. He could feel her magic building in the corridor. Feel her scratching at their link, desperate for him to take off the muffle. He did so, immediately washed in her pain at what she was witnessing. With it came fear and anxiety, probably from worrying about his challenges.

"This isn't what it looks like." Stefan pushed the female away again, only to have her stepping back up immediately. If it wouldn't make matters worse in Sasha's eyes, he would physically lift the disgusting female and toss her down the hall.

"Really, Stefan?" Sasha started walking forward slowly, eyes on fire. "Because it looks like some slut-bitch is draped all over you."

"Who the hell is she?" Ann demanded, walking right up beside Sasha. "Honey, get your filthy paws off him!"

"You're not helping, Ann!" Charles yelled. "He's probably got a good explanation. Right Boss? If not, you better think of one, quick, or your challenges are about to end in death."

Jonas got off the floor stiffly.

"Yeah, like he couldn't keep his dick in his pants?" Ann's eyes filled with a crazy light to match Sasha's. Ann was fiercely loyal where Sasha was concerned. Stefan had always thought that was a good thing. Now, not so much.

"Did you figure out how to cover up the link so you could screw this tramp, Stefan?" Sasha asked in a deathly-quiet voice. Bitter agony clouded the link.

Charles flinched back from Sasha's arm, yelping.

“I thought you’d died,” she continued. The link colored with fear now. “You didn’t tell me you knew how to do that—I thought someone had killed you. I ruined Tim’s room, I tossed Charles across the couch, I threw Jonas through the door—all because I wanted to help you. All because—”

Her voice cracked, moist eyes threatening to overflow. “And here you are, playing sexy with another human. What the—”

“A *better* human,” the woman spoke up.

Green magic whipped around Ann. Her eyes rolled with a feline gold. Tim, sensing his subordinate’s shifter magic, gave Stefan a long, assessing stare. He glanced at Sasha before shaking his head and going back in the room.

Ann was just let off the leash. Great.

“This isn’t what you think, Sasha,” Stefan said in a hasty release of words. “Don’t release that spell—”

Sparklers erupted within the wall. Blistering balls of pure black sizzled as they floated around lazily. Any one of them would kill whoever it touched. That kind of magic was extremely hard to control. And it was calmly floating around their heads.

Charles ducked and covered his head. “Sasha, you’re a little unbalanced. I don’t think...”

“Don’t tell a woman she’s unbalanced!” Ann seethed. “Because I will *show* you unbalanced if she won’t!”

Jonas started forward with powerful, purposeful strides. “Keep that magic off me, human,” he growled. He didn’t balk, even when one of the balls nearly didn’t shift in time. He cut a path to the female wrestling with Stefan’s hands to get closer to his body, grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, yanked her away from Stefan, and then tossed her down the hall like a doll. She landed in a pile of limbs.

He turned to Sasha. “Talk this shit out. Kill him after you figure out what’s going on.”

The female got up like a cat who’d just been splashed with water. “You will be punished for your harsh treatment of me!”

Jonas stared at her for a moment. The female’s eyes went wide and her mouth clicked shut. “Have some respect for yourself. You let males—or whoever—rip into your neck. That kind of tear is about disrespect. They might as well have been spitting on you. And yet you claim to be protected?”

You give all humans a bad name, and that's saying something. Scamper away. You're not good enough to be in this circle."

"Rudy will hear about this!"

"Super. Now go away."

With trembling lips, the female attempted a glare that didn't manifest and about-faced, marching away down the hall.

"Sasha doesn't like when you rough up women, bro. Not the right time to be pouring salt in the wound. Probably better to get a BJ." Charles scanned the floating orbs, now turning from black to rainbows of color. Stefan had no idea what that meant.

"Tough shit—that broad stunk like sewage. No way was the Boss messing around with that." Jonas started back toward Tim's room.

Stefan refocused on the beauty in the middle of the hall. She'd just displayed a raw power and control probably only one or two others in this whole complex could boast. She was young, inexperienced, and naïve, but she was a powerhouse and now she was starting to show it.

How could she ever think he'd be happy with another? She was the only one for him—his match in every way.

"Shall we take this behind closed doors?" Stefan asked quietly.

"Where were you?" Sasha's lip trembled before her eyebrows dipped low. Soul-crushing pain throbbed through the link, riding echoes of anxiety that said she really had thought he was dead.

"What were you going to do, storm the place?" Stefan asked softly, stepping toward her. Wanting to touch her so bad his hands were shaking. Because he knew she would've. She would've killed everyone she saw to avenge him.

"I'm not telling you your business, Boss, but I wouldn't poke the unhinged female..."

"Say unbalanced or unhinged one more time, you jackass!" Ann roared. "One more time. I dare you."

Charles flinched away from her glare.

"Move," Jonas said, ushering everyone into Tim's room.

Ann's finger flashed out. She pushed it into Jonas' face. "Do not drag me anywhere." She turned to face Sasha. Softly, she said, "Are you okay? Do you want me to stay?"

"No, you can go," Sasha said quietly, a tear overflowing.

Ann wiped the tear away before hugging her friend. With a last look at Stefan promising intense pain, she turned back and followed Charles into the room. Jonas followed her in.

Stefan waited for the hallway to clear before he said, “I stopped with that woman because she had that smell thing you do. A scent to her arousal.” He shook his head, stepping right up to her. “Only that. I didn’t want to rough her up because she is a human female—I know that you are opposed to that. I was coming to see you. I just got back. You can ask around—news of my efforts will have been heard by now.”

Sasha held her ground, shaking and rigid. Another tear dribbled down her cheek. “What happened to you?”

He brushed the wetness from her face. “The challenges have begun. Same as with you.”

“And you cut me off, why?” she whispered, moisture catching in her long black lashes.

“Because I didn’t want you to feel my pain, or my... brutality.”

Her hands came up slowly, aiming for his chest. Wanting to touch him as badly as he did her. He leaned into her, right before a blur of a fist rocketed into his lat.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me, you jerk!” she yelled at him, punching him again. “I was worried sick!”

She shook out her fist. “Ow.”

He brought her in to his chest. “Sorry. I’m sorry—Dominicus told me how to muffle the link right before the challenges came. Well, the first might not have been a challenge, but let’s go inside. The walls have ears.”

“No, they just have unoriginal idiots who don’t know what to do with themselves now that I know how to undo their spell. Turns out, Toa is a pretty good teacher. Did you know he was head-hunted once, too? They wanted him for that Clutch. The guy isn’t as powerful as some, but he’s way better at actually handling the magic.”

Stefan swept her up into his arms and carried her back to their room. He settled her softly onto the couch and sat next to her. He pulled her body against him.

“Did she smell better than me, is that why?” Sasha asked quietly.

“No.” He ran his fingertips down her face. “She smelled like decay. Not completely, but... I don’t quite understand it. Others smell you and suck

in a deep breath. Your arousal smells just as good to others as to me. So I should've smelled something equally as good from that female, but..."

"So you stopped to analyze."

He smiled. "Yes."

A relieved smile flickered across her face. She leaned her head against his chest. "This place is weird. I know I won't lose you to it, but at the same time, it's all your kind, and none of my kind."

"The female in the hall was human..."

"No." She put a hand on her chest. "My kind. Humans with self-respect."

"Ah."

"The pheromones must've worn off on most of them by now. So why stick around? They don't seem afraid—someone offered to be Charles' pet. She *offered* to be his pet. What the hell?"

"I was offered blood as a hello. Something is off here. That female was getting something from it, though. She said I could have her for a favor. Why would the humans be in demand for sex above our own kind, though? What's the difference?"

"She had the smell, though, you said. Maybe it's that."

Stefan pulled her closer. "I don't know. The more I know of this place, the more twisted it seems."

"Maybe Regional isn't the best of ideas."

"I was thinking the same thing."

Sasha bent and softly touched his lips with hers. Electricity singed through their lips and swelled in the link. She deepened the kiss as her hands felt down his chest. Her hips moved against his hard bulge, a soft moan starting deep in her throat. "Take me, Stefan."

His hands traced her chest, rubbing a hard nipple through her shirt. Right before he took off the shirt. Her bra came off shortly after, his mouth sucking in that nipple until her head fell back.

"Can you take blood?" she asked softly, her hips rocking just right.

"I can take yours, but you better not take mine. My strength is in question, your magic is." His voice hoarse, his fingers worked at her pants, having them unbuttoned in a flash, then standing her up to take them off. He pushed his pants down. His erection bobbed up, craving her. Wanting to push into her so deeply, so thoroughly, it was all he could think about. She stripped

his shirt, kissing down his chest and softly biting one of his nipples.

“They’ll come at you pretty hard, huh?” she asked softly, her body slowing.

“No harder than they’ll come at you. But we have Dominicus and Toa, who’ve been through this before. And we have Charles and Jonas, who we never have to worry about switching sides or loyalty. And I have four other guys that love to fight dirty. Plus, and I hate to admit this, we have a bunch of jumpy shape-shifters ready to make their point. They don’t even know which point they want to make, but they know they want to make one.”

She laughed, rocking her hips forward in a long draw, dragging her slick sex against his manhood. At the top, she angled, and sat down slowly.

Stefan’s thoughts disappeared. Lights and colors danced in his vision. Her hot sex wrapped around him dizzyingly, so tight. She pulled up, squeezing him, the friction making his eyes flutter. Then back down. His hands squeezed her butt cheeks, his legs trembled and his body shivered.

Then he couldn’t help himself. The need for her all day, the pressure on them both, the uncertainty—

He lifted her off him and threw her onto the couch. He covered her body a second later, thrusting into her with an animalistic need.

“Umm, yes...” Her eyes drifted shut as her legs squeezed his body close.

He drove into her, hard and fast, desperate. He clutched her shoulders, striving to get to the center of her to anchor himself. His lips met hers, deep and passionate. Their tongues matched the thrusts of their bodies.

Her hips swung up to him. His groin pushed down into her. Nails scratched up his back as she bared her soft, vulnerable neck to him. Unlike that other woman, this neck was pure. His.

He opened a cut and took a long pull. Sweet and spicy, she coated his tongue and filled his senses, the magic in her singing as it merged with his. Her ragged sigh made his balls tighten, right before her insides spasmed in a cock-crushing climax.

“Oh,” he moaned, clenching his fists and holding back with everything he had so that he could keep going.

As she settled back into the couch, a small smile curving her lips, he started again. Slowly at first, so as to keep a tiny bit of control, and then faster. The friction had his teeth grinding and his body flexing. Plunging into

her, deeply. His balls tightened up. His tip started to tingle.

“Hmmm, *YES!*” Her eyes fluttered. Her body trembled. Her sex tightened around him as she orgasmed. He exploded into her a moment later, emptying completely before collapsing on top of her.

Her arms came around him, as did her legs, holding him close.

“You and me,” she said softly, snuggling her face into his neck. “We’ll beat this together.”

“And if I left to give you a better chance?”

She laughed into his skin. “I’d blow up a lot more than a door to track you down and haul you back.”

Chapter 5

A few days passed in much the same way. Stefan had at least two challenges a day, and for the first few, he didn't get a scratch. He said they lasted a few minutes each and he walked away from unconscious, or quivering, men and women. The challenges got worse, though, as news spread. At the end of the fourth day, he always had one or two of his men with him, and still he had to heal with ice packs and compresses, the bruises and battering starting to leave their mark. Still, he was kicking ass and making a name for himself. No one had seen the like since... well, since Dominicus.

I didn't fare so well. I was going up against better magic workers with lots more experience. News had spread of me, too. People were in awe of my tricks and fluctuations in magic. To them I was largely unpredictable with spells created by a master—I'd had no idea how revered Toa was. The mages started working in teams, coming at me with everything they had. This meant that Charles and Jonas could fight as well, but they weren't on par with their magic. Our strategy then became me covering my two bodyguards while they barreled through and physically assaulted the challengers. Since Charles was starting to be just as savage as Jonas, and I was great at distraction, we kept winning.

The battles kept getting harder.

Jonas thought I was being tested. Pushing my limits. And I probably was, but there was nothing I could do about it. They were cataloguing all my weaknesses while I wouldn't even know who I was fighting the next day.

The start of the fifth day had Stefan standing by the door, a bruise on the side of his handsome face, staring down at me as I put on my runners. "I need to take Jonas today. Dominicus thinks it's going to get fierce."

I glanced up, trying to hide the worry. "Whatever you need."

"He's the best fighter in my clan besides myself and Jameson. And he's exactly what this place craves—unleashed brutality. Together we can cover more ground than the other guys I brought. They're good, but they're not Jonas good."

I stood and ran my hands up his hard chest. "Of course, Stefan. I'll be fine. Plus, the last challenge was only one person. I think the mages want to

stick to magic and they know Jonas and Charles won't."

"I've talked to Tim. He's going to keep guys with you. And you'll still get Charles, and I'll send Jessie."

I nodded and kissed him, savoring his taste. He clung onto me for a second, trying to steal my warmth, before he backed off. "Stay safe, you hear me? If you have to run, fine. If someone comes to tie you up, or secure you, kill them. Don't hesitate."

A burst of fear blossomed inside me. "Why would they tie me up?"

"Because something they do here is tether mages via a blood link. Toa had it happen when he was here the first time. They pinned him down for three days, out of sight of Dominicus, and forced a blood link on him."

My fingers clutched onto Stefan's arms. "How is that possible? There aren't rules against that? That sounds an awful lot like rape."

"It is like rape. It's the same thing—forcing control of a very intimate situation. It's banned, of course, but laws are only as strong as the enforcers. They thought they could control Toa—lure him away from Dominicus. He didn't take it well, as you can imagine..."

I rested my head against Stefan's chest. I closed my eyes as I listened to his steady heartbeat. "He's worried it'll happen to me."

"We all are."

"What happened to the guy that held the link?"

"Dominicus beheaded him and tossed his head onto the table in front of the Council. Dominicus had a backer the next day."

I shivered. Stefan caught my chin in his fingers, tilting my face up to him. "Say you'll watch yourself. You will always check your surroundings, and you'll always have someone with you. And say you'll run like a coward if the odds aren't in your favor."

I scoffed. "Run where? Outside?"

"Run to me, Sasha," Stefan said quietly. His deep black eyes reached all the way to my soul. "Run directly to me."

I nodded slowly, terrified of the gravity of this situation. I didn't want to be here anymore. I didn't want any part of this. If push came to shove, and it meant something happening to either of us, I'd be happy to toss away my magic and never look back.

Stefan felt all that through the link, of course. A sad smile drifted across his lips. "We'll make it through this, baby. We both have a lot of

supporters. A lot of people have given each of us nods of welcome. Dominicus and Toa are working hard to source out all the political angles. Stay safe. I'll see you as soon as I can."

I blew out a breath. "Think they'd be mad if I grew a plant through a wall of this establishment? Bet they haven't seen that before. Maybe the repairs would slow them down."

Stefan stopped with his hand on the door. He turned back to me, contemplative. "Remember those purple insects that work their way back to you and bite like a bitch?"

I smiled. The ol' *spells trying to kill me* trick. "Shoot them behind my attacker and just wait."

He winked. "Keep 'em guessing. And don't forget about the dinosaur one. That'll freak a few people out. Just memorize the room before you set it off. Using Toa's arsenal is excellent, but the more experienced mages won't be thrown off-kilter with those. You need to go back to some strictly *Sasha* spells."

My brain whirled with all the failed spells I'd created before Toa came on scene. I could definitely use more than one. It was time to take a trip down memory lane.

"Why'd we get stuck with *that* guy?" Charles flipped a thumb over his shoulder at Jessie, following behind us with a stern expression and darting eyes. "He's got no sense of humor."

"And Jonas does?" I led the way to breakfast. I'd stayed in my room for five minutes after Stefan left, really not wanting to step out the door. Charles and Jessie waited patiently, not asking why I needed the extra time. It was pretty much commonsense.

"This guy's not irate, either, though. There's really no point to him at all. He'd bore a plant."

I stifled a chuckle as I turned a corner. I held my breath as I noticed three people up ahead. Two were talking, a male and female. The third stood by idly. He was a human male.

"They aren't challengers," Charles muttered, falling back a little.

The male and female glanced up and saw us. I received a scowl from

both before they meandered off to the right through an arched doorway. They must've been heading to breakfast as well. The human had glanced up, too, and upon seeing me, smiled. He was a middle-aged man with a thick mustache and groomed hair. His stance and smile were pleasant and inviting.

He noticed my followers. "Oh. My goodness! You must be the black mage I hear so much about. A human to boot! Fantastic!" He stepped toward me, prompting me to stop and chat.

"How'd you know?" I glanced around anxiously. "Look, let's walk toward breakfast. I really shouldn't loiter around the hall."

He slapped his palm to his forehead. His comb-over quivered. "Of course. Please, we'll go together."

A couple steps in and I couldn't help but just kind of put it out there. "You seem normal. All the other humans seem a little... kinda... off."

He nodded in a knowing way. "I'm pet to a lovely female in charge of a homestead in Arizona. We only visit the Council once a year at most. Humans in here... Well, I'll be bold. They get a little warped. Always inside, always in blood circles, always trying to blood-let themselves to the most powerful." He shook his head sadly. "Wrong way to do it."

"Sorry—" I held up my hand as we entered the safety of the cafeteria. "Blood circles?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "You sure don't know much about this way of life, huh?"

Seeing a look that obviously answered his question, he smiled good-naturedly, stalling near the line for food. His glance took in Charles and Jessie before settling on me. "Do you go first, or do they? I've never met a human so high in the trade."

"I usually go first. Unless I offer Charles to go. He accepts because he's a child with no manners."

"I accept because you are a woman; I hear you roar. I want to treat you equally." Charles pushed me toward the line. "Also, you take too long and I'm usually hungry. Let's get crackin'. I could eat this whole place."

Remembering my own manners, I stuck out my hand to the man. "Sasha."

He shook it, letting me enter the line first. "Harry. So, yes, let's get you caught up. It's always nice to meet someone of my own speed. I will absolutely have to introduce you to my mistress. She'll be thrilled a human

has been able to breach the negative stereotype.”

“Right, so let’s just get something out of the way. You’re totally fine being a pet? That doesn’t bother you at all?”

He laughed, apparently tickled by this question. “The title is derogatory, yes. But that’s the title these people know. Most don’t mean it that way. I am basically a boyfriend with an open relationship. I am a trophy wife to a billionaire. I am a lover to a beautiful woman. The term used to describe all these things could be derogatory. But we have an understanding, and we share mutual respect.”

“But... you would let her kind go first?”

He picked up a shiny, white plate. “In this place, absolutely. Not to defer would cause offense, and I would receive challenges. At home... it depends. Generally I let ladies go first, and some of the more alpha males. After that, it’s just good manners—either I gesture someone on, or they do likewise to me.”

“Next question: were you lured with pheromones?”

“The mistress—Tessa—doesn’t condone that practice. Humans wandering around without memories, their personalities changing—it just calls too much attention.”

“But nothing about it being unethical.”

Harry shrugged. “That’s a nonissue since they don’t use the pheromones sexually, or in any way not specifically to protect the homestead. They try not to interact with humans when at all possible.”

I picked up my own white plate, and then handed it to Charles so he wouldn’t reach over me with his big arm and knock me to the side. It wouldn’t be the first time. “So how’d you get hooked up with her?”

Harry smiled. “I approached her.” Seeing my shocked look, he continued as he scooped a steak onto his plate. “You’re wondering how I could see them. Well, I had researched their kind pretty fully by that point. Follow the vampire myth thoroughly enough, and deep enough, and you find trails. Spend three years hunting trails, and eventually you find what you’re looking for. I’d approached her a few times, and woke up with no memory of it after. But when I went back to my research, the block they put in my head winked out. Finally she let me talk to her.”

“So you’re chasing the myth and fell in love?”

He led me to a table after we had full plates. “I haven’t fallen in love.

This is a mutual respect situation where we both benefit. I get my life prolonged, I get to learn a little magic—though I’m not picking it up that well—and she gets a blood source at her beck and call. I only take from her once in a selected number of months, so we don’t have a blood link. My blood has lots of power, so she says, but I just can’t access it. Since she doesn’t need me to, it’s a partnership until one of us grows tired of it and moves on.”

“What do you mean, it prolongs your life?”

His eyes widened in shock. “Did you not know? Wow, what a rare find. You are truly new to this whole scene, hmm?”

“Very, yes. As in, half a year or something.”

“Oh my, well, yes. Heavens.” He chuckled as he cut into an egg. “Well, yes, accessing magic and ingesting their blood prolongs life. It’s probably why this group of people last so long. Share blood with someone of high power ranking and it’s that much longer still.”

“Did you know that?” Charles asked Jessie. Jessie ignored him.

“Do you share blood with any of these males?” Harry continued.

“My, um, yes. I do. I’m not his pet—we have a mutual, um, thing.”

“They’ll be mated as soon as my clan accepts her as leader,” Charles butted in, a thick chunk of meat rolling around in his mouth.

“Oh, wow. Love, then. Wonderful.” Harry smiled at me in congratulations. “A very loyal people. Very good to the females—much better than humans. If you can stand all the dominance games, they are a treat.”

“Hell yeah, we are.” Charles pointed at Harry with his fork as he said to me, “Keep listening to this guy. He knows.”

“Did they take you from a play pen? Are you old enough to be out of the nursery unsupervised?” Jessie didn’t bother glancing at Charles, but it was obvious who he was talking to.

“Really, bro? And what’s your ranking again? Watch Guard, right? Instead of Captain, like me...”

“Right, okay. So here, though, they have blood circles? What is that?” I asked, getting back on track. Charles gave Jessie a dirty look.

“Basically, it’s an orgy where humans open their veins. They’re drained nearly dry, all in hopes that someone will give blood to them to prolong their life. It amazes me what humans will do for a fountain of youth. But then, I call myself a pet, so I guess I’m not one to talk.”

“That’s what all this is for? They endure all of this for a few more years?”

“For a hundred or more years, but... yes and no. Some are here to legitimately learn magic. Those who have a gift can learn from the best teachers.”

“Even though our magic is inverted.”

“Some people can learn from an instruction manual, unlike you.” Charles gave me a knowing look. I wanted to punch that knowing look.

I went back to Harry. “This all sounds like some freaky club. Like, a sex club or something.”

Harry shrugged. “Those exist in the human world, so maybe it is similar to that, yes. Like I said, I’m more interested in the mutual sharing of benefits. The second the balance is lost I’ll get back to my life.”

“And no one’s worried you’ll tell?”

His brow furrowed. “What would I say? I found what goes bump in the night? Who would believe me?”

Charles huffed out a laugh, spraying eggs all over his plate. I glared at him for a moment, trying to impress upon him that he was embarrassing me, before turning back to Harry. It took me a second to realize Harry’s whole bearing had changed, though. His back bowed and his face pointed downwards, like he was bending before a queen hoping not to get noticed.

Confused, I glanced up, and felt the breath being ripped from my lungs. An extremely attractive man stood in front of me with sparkling green eyes. Large-chested and muscular, like this whole species, his face could’ve been in a magazine. High cheekbones and a square jaw offset his perfectly white smile. He was really, *really* hot.

The eating area hushed as people noticed the man standing in front of me. No matter their race or sex, many hunched just like Harry had. I could tell by their bearing that they beheld someone high in status.

“Hello,” he purred with a medium-level tone. A perfect set of dimples enhanced his gorgeous face. “I don’t believe I’ve met you.”

“Sasha.” I half-stood to shake his hand. “Black mage.”

“Yes, of course.” His green eyes sparkled. “The one that helped capture Trek and Andris, is that right?”

“Something like that.” I cleared my throat, wishing it would also clear the red from my cheeks. Charles wasn’t helping by staring at me.

“I’m Rudy.” He pointedly looked at Harry.

When his focused stare was returned, Harry immediately stood with his plate half-full. “Excuse me. I must see to my mistress.”

Rudy stared at Charles next, arrogance and self-importance taking over the gaze. It wasn’t strength and power, though, like Charles was used to seeing. Rudy might’ve had status, but he didn’t get there through life trials and a commanding presence. Compared to Stefan, this guy was left wanting.

Something Charles made obvious as he leaned his elbows on the table. “I know you’re hinting at something, bro, and I get that you’re trying to push your weight around, but I don’t answer to you. I answer to the Boss. You have a problem, just shout that right out. Otherwise, I have some food to finish, and after that I might get seconds, so I’d appreciate if you’d stop staring.”

Charles had been spending too much time with Jonas.

“Interesting.” The light in Rudy’s eyes shifted. One second, charmer who owned the room. The next, snake that was coiled and ready.

My stomach flipped over. This guy was cunning, and because of that, dangerous. Charles didn’t need a knife in his back.

“Charles, Jessie, can you please give us a little space?” I asked, a command riding the request.

Charles gave me an assessing stare. Jessie stared at Charles. With a warning glance at Rudy, Charles nodded to Jessie and they both stood. “One table away, that’s it.”

“It appears you also answer to a human,” Rudy taunted in a knowing tone.

I couldn’t help my eyebrows rising. That was a quick way to *not* make a friend. *The human is sitting right here, by the way...*

“What can I help you with, Rudy?” I asked pleasantly, trying to control my features.

His dazzling smile seemed practiced. “I’ve heard so much about you. And, as it turns out, I am without mage. Kismet.”

“Except—and tell me if you’ve already heard this because I don’t want to be redundant—I am already paired with someone.”

He leaned in, cutting the distance between us. “I had heard, yes. Even still, a boy can dream. You are a beautiful woman. Beautiful, headstrong, and powerful. Perfection.”

The blood link muffled. I was cut off from Stefan.

I glanced at Charles, trying to hide the worry in my eyes. He caught the look, and knew by now what it meant. His mouth closed down into a grim line. His shoulders hunched over his plate. He couldn't help Stefan any more than I could, and it killed him equally.

When I turned back to Sir Lancelot, his smile sparkled. "I know this is awkward for you. And I am sorry. I know the effect I have on women—especially *human* women—and yet, I forget to give them time to adjust when I shower them with attention." He laughed, easy and light.

My stomach was knotting for what I knew Stefan and Jonas were going through. I wanted to rush out and help them. I could level their opponents. I hadn't used some of the truly gruesome things Toa had taught me, but I would if it spared Stefan's life. I would right now.

I took a deep breath.

"Anyway, please come see me with questions," Rudy continued, leaning in slightly. He laid a warm hand on mine. "I have the ear of the most powerful, most important male in the Council. I am a valuable ally, and I daresay, a better man for your pair..."

Wrong thing to say at the moment.

I leaned forward into that implied intimacy. In a silky voice I whispered, "Did they tell you that I'm one of those humans that emits a scent when aroused?"

Rudy's focused on my lips. His gaze sparked. "I hadn't heard. *Delightful*. I do so enjoy those humans."

"Yes. Well. Do you smell anything?"

His mouth leaned in a little more before what I said dawned. His pupils contracted, internalizing that thought. To help him out, I let a pure *zing* of fire surge through my body.

"Ah!" Rudy's hand flinched away from mine. A shadow passed over his features. His look turned sharp, bringing out my warning tingle before his smile wiped it all away. He stood smoothly with a quick glance around the room—probably making sure no one saw what had just happened. "I do not. Pity. Well, I'll just have to work on my charm."

Oh super. I do so love being hit on.

"I'll see you soon." And with that he was striding away.

"Not wise, Sasha," Charles muttered. "That male probably makes a

bad enemy.”

“He probably makes a worse friend. At least now we’re on the same page.”

Jessie sat down with a cup of coffee. “I would try to steer clear altogether.”

“I don’t think there was ever a chance of that. I’m in his sights and Stefan is in the way.”

“Your mood is rainbows and unicorns, as always.” Charles stuffed another hunk of meat into his trap. “This place sucks. The Boss just needs to find the most powerful male and cave his head in so we can all go home.”

Truer words had never been uttered.

Chapter 6

Rudy waved away his crew as he descended the stairs into the lower levels of the building. The dank air reached out to greet him, misery and filth lining the floors and huddled in the cells. He stopped in front of one of the guards, not bothering to state his name or his intentions. As expected, the lock clinked as it flipped over, the door opening in a rusty slide of metal.

He stayed to the center of the aisle, not impressed that the filth was reaching out into the walkway. He stopped in front of the cell holding a man seated in the corner on the disgusting floor, his hands folded in his lap peacefully, eyes closed. The male could be sitting on a beach somewhere, taking a moment for quiet contemplation, rather than this rank hellhole awaiting the torture that would surely come.

“Andris.”

The man’s hazel eyes opened slowly. A sardonic smile crossed his lips. “I’d heard you were here. Holding a high position. Leading around an old male by his nose. You’ve done well for yourself.”

Rudy glanced at the empty cells to the right and left. “They’ve put you on your own, I see. Afraid you would bring more people to your cause?”

Andris huffed out a laugh, not bothering to look at the objects of speculation. “I have plenty of people loyal to my cause. And plenty more desperate to join.”

“And you hope to lead from an iron cell, is that correct?”

Andris didn’t take the bait. Instead, he closed his eyes again, waiting patiently for whatever would come. Rudy took three steps to the side, needing action to worry away the frustration.

“You are overly confident, that’s the problem.” Rudy walked back the three paces. “You pushed too hard, too fast. Demons, Andris? That was your great plan?”

Hazel eyes opened again, the smile now condescending. “I’ve come further than you. I have all the tools I need. *All* the tools I need. I just need one more element, and I will be unstoppable.”

“What makes you think you’ll get her?”

“Her?” Andris laughed. “I don’t need a *her*. No, the last element is maintaining control of a demon powerful enough to wreak havoc.”

“You have come further than me, but you are here. In a cell.”

“For now.”

“Is that right?” Rudy paced three more steps. “You can get out at any time, then. Is that it? Your escape is guaranteed? This whole endeavor is planned.”

“I need that fool Trek. I also need revenge on a thorn in my side. Both of those elements are here. When have you known me to be impatient?”

Rudy dipped a hand into the pocket of his slacks to hide balling it into a fist. Andris’ cool gold eyes held confidence. Knowledge. *What does he have that I don’t?* “Wait... you have *all* the tools? Presently?”

The smile soaked up Andris’ face. “Yes. Accounted for and ready to go.”

Rudy shifted his stance in disbelief. “Why haven’t you used it before now, then?”

“Because that is a secret worth keeping until the last possible second. Not even that fool Trek knows. Secrets are only safe on the lips of the dead.”

Rudy’s finger scratched at the copper coin in his pocket. “But now I know.”

Andris closed his eyes peacefully. “You are talking to a dangerous man, Rudy. Some might wonder why.”

“For the good of the Council, of course.”

“True. Well, then. Run along and let everyone know my grand plans. And when they say I must be lying, you can say you know me personally—that we went through magic classes together. You can say you helped me set up my current empire. You can say you came here to try and corrupt from the inside, where I chose organizing an army to take power by force. They would surely believe you then. The problem there is, I know my enemies... you do not. We probably have the same number, but yours hate you more. Traitors are dealt with harsher than villains.”

Rudy dug his fingers into his palm within his pocket. Outwardly, he developed a little smile of his own. “That is dangerous information you have, Andris.”

“Yes. It is.”

“You might not live long enough to make your escape. I, too, have everything I need. Plans are already in place to capture a black.”

Andris laughed heartily. “Sasha, you mean? You’ll have an easier

time saddling up a cat. Besides, her magic doesn't function normally. She has a hard time linking—did they tell you that? As soon as I kill her beloved, she won't be able to link at all.”

“She has a blood link with the male. *That* is what enables her linking.”

Andris shook his head in delight. “No, Rudy. Once again, you didn't get all the facts. He has a special trait that levels out links and magic. She is useless in any capacity other than strictly a mage. And what's more, she can't learn in a classroom setting. She can't be told how to do something—she has to *do* it. You might have noticed that human teachers aren't in large supply. And no, I will not lend out mine, Rudy.”

“I can work a deal with the male, then. If they can link, I can use them both.”

Andris leaned his head against the grimy wall with a blissful expression. “You never were the thinker in the pair. Stefan cannot be manipulated or dominated. He *does* the manipulating and dominating. He is a quintessential alpha male who has been nothing but a continuous roadblock to me. He will make a splendid demon.”

“Pain has a way of calming people down, Andris. You have not won. Your plans are still in the air, while mine are rolling into effect.”

“Go away, Rudy. You're making my head hurt.”

Rudy stared at the smug, overconfident male. His ire rose as quickly as his uncertainty. “You die, Andris, and your merry plans die with you.”

“*Tsk, tsk, tsk.* Don't you think I've thought of that?”

“I'll just remind you who is in the cell,” Rudy said dismissively, turning.

Grating laughter followed him out of the dungeon.

He needed to kill off that male and capture the black. If he had to, he'd capture her male as well. Fear and pain were powerful persuaders. After that, everything would fall into place beautifully. The American and European Councils would both be his before long. He was in the home stretch, now.

Chapter 7

“Hey loser.”

I looked up as Ann slapped Charles in the back of the head.

Charles, Jessie and I had been sitting in front of empty plates for five minutes. It looked like we were hiding from challenges, which was obviously true, but what people didn't know was that we were waiting for the shifters to meet us so we could all go to the Council meeting.

“Damn it—” Charles rubbed his head as Ann sat down in front of him. “I liked you better before I knew you.”

“Oh, clever.” Ann bit into a piece of bread. She winked at me. “Hey She-ra.”

“You're late. Where's Tim?” I glanced back at the empty doorway.

“He's coming. He wanted to stop and talk to Dominicus. Don't stress, though. You can't get challenges when you're on official business, and this counts as official business.”

“Does everyone know you guys are official business, though?” Because if not I'd still get a fire-ball hurled at my head.

Ann shrugged. “But we've been cooped up for days, yo. Any excuse to beat some ass to protect our girl is a good one.”

“Lazy.” Charles drummed the desk. “Let's get moving. I hate just sitting here like a chick.”

“What does being a chick have to do with sitting at the table?” Ann gave him crazy eyes. “Do guys only like to eat on rocks with their hands?”

Charles gave her a mocking grin. “Chicks have nothing to do with it. But it pisses you off. Score to me.”

Ann threw a wadded-up napkin at him as a grin threatened her glower. He laughed and ducked away.

“Okay, seriously you guys, you're embarrassing me.” I threw a pleading glance at Jessie. “Is this not embarrassing?”

Jessie's disinterested squint took everyone in. “You're a human, he's a child, and she's a dog. This behavior fits my expectation level.”

Charles and Ann slowly straightened up and turned to Jessie at the same time. Ann's mouth was open in outraged shock, where Charles' was grinning madly.

“You *do* have a personality,” Charles exclaimed. “I don’t like it, but I’m glad to see you have one!”

“And *this* is my entourage,” I observed in dry tones.

“Ann!” The bark of command had everyone in the breakfast area glancing at the door. It was Tim standing in the center of the door’s arch. His sharp eyes beat down on Ann while his face remained stoic and expressionless. She got up immediately. More than one person, regardless of race, shifted in their seats. His gaze softened as it settled on me. “Sasha, it’s time.”

I filled my lungs with air. I stood with Jessie as I said, “She’s a mountain lion, not a dog. And she’s going to get you back for saying that. Just so you know.”

Judging by the lack of acknowledgement, he didn’t care. Or he didn’t think she could do much. Obviously he hadn’t spoken to Charles.

We filed out of the breakfast area into the hall where the rest of the shifters were waiting patiently. I threw John a high-five as I passed, making a grin peek through his stony façade. Being sports fans, most of these guys could not resist a little high-five action. I loved it.

“Sasha,” Tim said by way of greeting. “Has Ann filled you in on our role as we go to this meeting?”

“You can kick ass even if I am solely challenged because this is official business.”

“We haven’t been able to do much for you here, but we’re always at your back. If we have to rip you away from this place and hide you, we are prepared to do that. Hopefully this meeting will lighten your struggles.”

I bumped his shoulder as we walked. “Thanks.”

We walked in twos through the halls, people more or less stopping to stare at the oddity in their midst. For the first time, it wasn’t me. I may’ve been the first human with any real role, but the others were the first group of shifters to hang around.

“One of these things is not like the others...” I sang softly.

“It’s been a trip, here.” Tim’s eyes scanned the halls in front of us, hard and mean. His body moved gracefully but with an unmistakable power. “I feel like a circus performer.”

“Uh huh. Just waiting for the next bit.”

I got a glance.

“The part where you say Jonas was right...” I pushed.

He snorted. “He isn’t. Not yet. We’re odd, but we’re not picked-on or badgered.”

“Yet,” Charles’ voice drifted up to us. “No one is bothered until after their first meeting.”

“I doubt they want a bunch of animals running around.” That from Jessie.

“Bro, take it easy,” Charles mumbled. “You don’t have Jonas’ charm. You have to go easy with that stuff.”

Tim shook his head in annoyance. “Small-mindedness. Why you hang out with these guys at all, Sasha, befuddles me.”

“Oh, befuddles. Good word,” I hedged.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, but left it at that.

Turning the corner into a hallway, I saw the ends of a gruesome battle in front of us. Three huge guys lay on the ground, eyes closed, with blood dripping out of various places on their bodies. A fourth was pinned up against the wall, slouching. A tattooed arm, swirling in orange, used clawed fingers to rip a chunk of skin from the guy’s chest.

Tim put his hand in front of me to stop my progress.

Beyond them a body slammed up against the wall, bounced off, and fell to the floor in a boneless slide. His eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling unfixed.

Stefan straightened with wild eyes. Gashes marred his arms and across his chest. Blood splattered his face. Bruises peeked through rips in his clothing, violent purples and blues. He put a hand to the wall to brace himself, panting with fatigue.

I lost sight of him as Jonas straightened up, too. Then wavered.

“Holy shit,” Charles said, pushing past Tim with Jessie close behind.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t step forward. Stefan was in a battle for his life. Literally, it had progressed to people trying to kill him. And judging by the outcome, he’d had to kill them first.

“No,” I heard myself say, pushing Tim’s hand away. “This has to end.”

I made it to the throng with numb feet. Tim helped me over the bodies, most breathing, one not. Stefan waited, leaning roughly against the wall. His gaze found mine apologetically. “I didn’t want you to see me like

this.”

“Like what?” I asked with a flash of rage. “Tired, barely able to stand, with just *one* other guy to help you? Where are all the people you brought?”

He shook his head, trying not to let it bow. “They’re healing.”

I stepped up to him quickly, putting my hand against his cheek. “Let’s go. Let’s leave. We don’t need this, Stefan. I’ve been given the green light for mage. That’s all we care about, right? Let’s get out of here.”

He wouldn’t let himself lean into my hand—not with his men around. He gently took my wrist and moved it beside his leg. His fingers entwined with mine. “I’m not confident they won’t come for you, Sasha. There have been whispers…”

Tim spoke up immediately. “We’ll protect her. We have safe houses all over the country. I have a huge network of shifters organized and under my rule. Any of them would house kin.”

“You can’t claim a hundred percent loyalty. None of us can. This place isn’t what it was. The people here have lost touch. Leadership has fallen to the side and those greedy with power have stepped up. I don’t trust the things I hear anymore.”

Tim shifted. “Will you take some of my men?”

Stefan eyed Jonas, resting against the wall with his eyes closed. Jonas said, “Can’t have a bunch of wild animals running around this place. They’d shit all over the floor.”

Ann cracked a smile.

“Take some energy, baby,” I whispered to Stefan.

He shook his head, his eyes delving into mine. My heart banged against my chest, begging to be closer. Wanting to cross that small distance to him. “You’ll need it.”

“I have plenty. Seriously, they’re not after me like they are you.”

“Incoming.” Jonas’ growl almost sounded like a groan. He straightened up from the wall. Blood oozed down his arm.

Four giant guys stalked down the hall with hard eyes and tense muscles. Gazes hit Stefan, and then scanned those around him. Not one made a facial expression, but their complete disregard of more people around their prey didn’t seem to faze them. They’d come to finish off the job.

“No. No way.” I clenched my hands into fists and stepped forward. Tim put his hand out to stop me, but Charles was there first. Only, he

escorted me. He was obviously thinking the same way I was. This had to stop.

“Get out of here, Sasha. This doesn’t concern you.” Stefan’s step was off-balance. He tried to hide a wince.

I got a pang in my heart as tears sprang to my eyes. He was so strong, so tough. He was trying to take on all of this so I didn’t have to. He was the love of my life, and if he thought I wouldn’t protect him, like he was trying to protect me, he was daft.

“No, baby. Not anymore. No more Miss Nice Gal. Time to finally make the example Toa trained me to make. Time to show them not to fuck with a human.”

“Atta girl—let those balls fly.” Jonas nodded and let himself sag back against the wall. He’d been there when Toa taught me the more intense spells. He knew the kind of example I was fixing to make.

The large guys had stopped about ten paces away. They waited silently while I stepped to the front of our crew. The shifters filed in at my back, sealing off the wounded. Charles cracked his knuckles as he stepped up to my side.

“A bunch of animals for protection? That right?” The largest guy sporting a bulldog-looking face smirked.

“They don’t know who you are,” Charles whispered.

“Wouldn’t matter if they did.”

I linked with Stefan as I pulled in more magic. With him leveling me out, I filled up to bursting. My skin started to prickle in warning. More power tried to rush into me. The flow battered at my control.

If they thrived on brutality, I’d give them what they wanted.

I mixed the elements in an extremely complex formula. Everything was perfectly balanced. Each element rested precariously beside the other. Once done, I urged the spell out into small, fast moving orbs. With green power, it would appear I sent out shocking balls. Those were amateur.

These were not.

“Wait, can shifters have this kind of magic?” the man on the far right with a busted tooth asked. He studied my face.

“I thought his mage wasn’t due in this corridor for another half-hour?” The guy beside the leader with platinum, spiky hair watched the orbs race toward them with wide, worried eyes.

“It’s green—this is a nothing of a spell,” the leader assured them, already working on the first orb.

But as he worked, his forehead started to wrinkle. His face drained of color. And when the guy to his side said in a furious whisper, “I hear she can work in all different colors!”, the leader had clued in to who I really was.

Too late.

Pop.

“What the—”

“Oww. Ow. Ow! Oh shit! Oh shit!” The guy with the busted tooth slapped at his skin. Like a hive of insects biting his flesh all over his body, he wriggled and writhed.

Pop. Pop pop pop.

“They’re sparking!” The platinum blond shielded his face.

“I’m trying to kill it! It’s too complex,” the leader yelled.

I sent shots of pure black fashioned in strings. The magic wrapped around the chests and arms of the challengers. At first it just secured them as the popping spell blasted them with balls of fire. After that, though, the fire started to seep in. Magical acid coated their body and burned away their clothes. Their screams drowned out the sizzle of their skin.

“What is that?” Ann asked quietly.

“It’ll eat through their skin for a while. It’ll never heal, either. They’ll scar badly, but it won’t kill them. Then it’ll switch to cold and turn to ice. They may get magical frost bite. Then back to heat. It’s a revolving spell and truly nasty. It messes with the mind as well as causing intense pain. Not only does it send a message to those wanting to challenge that I have the balls to use a gruesome spell, it also lets the experienced mages know just what I’m capable of. That wasn’t the most complex spell I know, but Toa assured me there are only a handful of people here that could duplicate it. I am either ending the feud, or starting a war.”

“We are,” Tim said in a firm voice. “We stand with you. And with Stefan. These guys were sent here to finish Stefan off right before you walked down this corridor. They wanted you to see him dead. That shit is just wrong.”

“What were you doing down here anyway, bro?” Charles asked, turning to Stefan.

“Got a summons from Dominicus. Said he’d been in a meeting here.

When we got here, and asked about it, we learned that the time wasn't right. The challenge came immediately."

"I bet Dominicus doesn't make it to this meeting." Tim set his jaw.

"Bet not." Stefan took a steadying breath. To me he said, "Put them in a box and tie them off. If you're sending a message, let everyone see it."

After I took care of it, we walked slowly down the rest of the corridor until we got to the door at the end. This was the side entrance Tim was told to use. The others would enter through the front, which was around the hall.

Tricky.

I wondered who knew about this. Who was in on it.

"I'll wait outside," Stefan said with a tight jaw. "Call me if you need help."

Jonas had left a line of blood on the wall where he'd dragged himself along. And while Stefan stood straight and tall, with the strength and power he was known for, I could tell he was hurting. The pain in his eyes, and the will it took him not to fall, was etched clearly in the stress lines on his face.

"We stick together," I said in a firm voice.

"They won't let me stay in there, Sasha," Stefan said in a soft voice. "I'll be okay out here."

"We can walk you back to your room," Tim said. "Screw this Council—we can be late. They need me more than I need them."

"Just—you guys, shush for a minute." I pinched the bridge of my nose and thought back to that invisibility spell I'd unraveled. It wasn't all that much different than a concealment spell—a bit more solid, and a bit more complex, but the principles were the same. Unfortunately, there was a great many places I could actually invert my magic and blow the spell up, but by now I had a pretty good handle on that side of things. *I can do this!*

"Okay," I put out my hands as if to steady Stefan. "Stay still. I'm going to make you disappear."

"Don't blow me up, sweetie," Stefan chuckled, completely unafraid of his crazy girlfriend trying something she'd never done before. Hell, Toa always got nervous in these situations.

"What is she doing?" Charles peered around Jessie to hone in on me. "What are you trying, Sasha?"

"Making him invisible," I opened up to my magic again, immediately bombarded with the rush. Stefan was there immediately, having unmasked

the link and stepped in. I staggered with the rampant pain lancing his body, so fierce I didn't know how he was standing. Tears filled my eyes.

"Maybe just don't try this, Sasha." Charles shifted so he could see.

"She's got this. She never fails when it really matters." Jonas closed his eyes and let his head drop against the wall.

I pushed away Stefan's pain. I squeezed my eyes shut, remembering the feel of the spell I picked apart. Remembering that lazy structure. The way certain parts held hands with other parts. The way it looped under and around each other.

One last breath to still my head. I mixed the elements, letting intuition guide me when things got sticky. I worked the spell together, needing a chant or two when things got dicey, and threw a little wrench in there for anyone trying to rip this spell off of Stefan. "Charles, link with Stefan."

A boost of energy flowed through the link to me, and then directly into the spell. I tied it off, settled it onto Stefan's frame, and held my breath. I opened my eyes... to emptiness.

"Oh good. That's a relief." I braced my hands on my hips. I turned to Jonas' grim face and raised my eyebrows.

His eyes were still shut. So I just went ahead. The spell, easier to work this time, fell around him, settling in, and locking on. "Okay. Not as easy as pie. Kind of hard, actually. But I did it!"

Ann grinned at me, giving me an air fist-bump.

"All right, let's get this show on the road. These guys need a bed." Tim stepped toward the meeting room.

"Can people see me with magic?" Stefan asked in a low hum. Squinted eyes glanced in his direction.

"Some will," I answered honestly. "Toa would be able to see you, I'm sure. But the other guys hanging around with a similar spell went unnoticed most of the time, so probably only the higher level people can."

He probably nodded, but since I wasn't trying to see him with my magic, and had actually kind of tucked it away for now since I'd probably need my energy later, I didn't know for sure. With a glance back toward where Jonas may or may not have been, I winked at thin-air and followed Tim and John to the meeting room.

The large room had a surprisingly lot of people seated around the

table. I expected the eight Council members and a mage or two. Instead, the large oval table was full. All the Council members, the Clutch, and a great many others, including my new best friend the green-eyed bastard, sat chair-to-chair. In addition there were people loitering around the room, standing against walls or resting on the couch or chairs.

Who I didn't see, however, was Dominicus and Toa.

"Welcome, *Mata*."

It took me a second to find the guy with wispy white hair and paper-thin voice sitting at the far back of the table. The green-eyed bastard sat at his left, focused intently on me. To his right sat Mage June.

So this was the head honcho, huh? First impressions: he wouldn't live much longer.

"Cato, hello." Tim stood at the front of the room like an army man awaiting orders. His shifters stood back, equally straight-backed.

"Thank you for coming," Cato continued to Tim. "It has been some time since I have seen one of your kind within these walls. This, of course, is for no other reason than mutual suspicion between our two races, am I right?"

"Something like that, yes." Tim met the older man's gaze.

"And you have brought some of your members with you. How splendid." Faded blue eyes scanned the faces to the left and right of Tim, pausing on each before moving on. When they got to me, he squinted marginally. "And a human, is that right? I do not see the typical green flare around you. You are not a shifter. But... high in power."

Mage June leaned toward him and quietly said, "She is the black power level that has surfaced."

"Ah yes, of course. Quite a rarity. I would so like to speak with you. I had known a male of black power level once. This was many years ago. He died—what was it?" Cato looked toward the ceiling, blinking in thought.

"Ah yes!" He ticked the sky with his forefinger. "Witch burnings, I believe. He got caught up in that. Nasty affair. Half my foot is still blackened. I escaped, though, of course. Had a great many violent followers in that time. I did go back for him. Jacob was his name. Or was it Michael? I cannot recollect. But he had perished. Went out in style—took a few with him. The irony of the whole affair was that he was a follower of the church. How funny humans are. So fickle. So prone to fear. But beware the mob. Yes, yes. A mob of humans can do terrible things. Terrible, destructive things."

Most heads nodded around the table in agreement.

Humans are violent? And you're... what? Docile and even tempered?

Did they live in an alternate universe?

“Forgive me, but isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black?”

Oh, crap! Did I just say that out loud?

“What was that, human?” Rudy asked with a warning in his voice. His penetrating gaze hadn’t left my face since I’d come in. I could feel a rush of anger infuse the link. Stefan did not like that stare.

I didn’t, either. But I was in; I might as well go all in. Plus, when they found out what I did in the hall, I’d be in a world of trouble anyway.

I lifted my chin slightly, determined not to be terrified of a room full of gazes, many hostile, and said, “Yes, exactly. *What was that human.* You think only humans do terrible things? You nearly killed my almost-mate out in the hall because he is new on campus. Because he is with me. You pass humans around as a blood source. You basically try to enslave them. You beat on each other constantly. You conjure horrible demons and try to sic them on innocents—you guys aren’t roses and chocolates, either. So humans get freaked out and go mental. Well, aren’t your kind trying to take them over? Why wouldn’t they react? Someone tries to come after me and mine, and I am going to take that person down. And guess what, that is a philosophy taken directly from your people. Also: hey, did you know that technically, you *are* human? Scientifically speaking, yes, you are. You’re just a different branch. So suck on that—”

I flinched and felt my face turn red. I hadn’t meant to put so much sauce into my answer. Or say that last bit. Anger and fear were scattering my brain.

Silence rang through the room as my words disintegrated. My fingers tingled as my temper slowly drained out of my body. I risked a glance to those around me. Charles was minutely shaking his head. Everyone else stood frozen.

So... yes, then. Overboard on that one. Jonas was going to kick my ass.

“It’s just,” I started, trying to throw a little dirt in the grave I’d just dug. “Humans think back to those times in fear, too. Power corrupts all, not just humans. A great many independent-thinking women died in those witch burnings. Wars are terrible, and most of us hate them, but I think you people,

out of everyone, can understand how out-of-whack things can get. I mean, your whole system is built on violence. Yet, we're the bad guys? I mean, I'm a woman, and we are always viewed as lesser, even when we're supposed to be equal—you don't see me bitching about it..."

I stopped myself again and let my words trail away. That wasn't much better. I needed to just stop talking.

A delighted glint infused Rudy's green eyes. As if he'd just found a cookie among bananas. He glanced to a fierce-looking guy to his right. "Remove this human."

Tingles worked up my back. I'd given him a reason to take me away, and I didn't think that would be so I could get bathed in champagne and roses.

As five men pushed away from the wall, Tim said, "She is a pack friend. She stays with us."

I could feel movement. Stefan was coming closer.

"I agree with Rudy," some sandy-haired man said seated beside Mage Marius. "The human does not belong in this meeting, regardless who she has chosen as friends."

"If she goes, we go," Tim stated in a barely-suppressed growl. A warm hand found my lower back. Stefan was ready if something went down.

"Then this meeting will be in vain, since we cannot hope to work with a group of animals that cannot maintain the minimal level of respect," an older man said from a chair at the front of the table. He wore the white robe signifying a Council member.

I stabbed Cato with my gaze, imploring some order. I figured that since he sat at the head of the table, was the oldest person in the room, and had started the meeting, he was the leader. The problem was, as the turmoil mounted, his eyes stayed unfocused and distant. Sometimes his gaze moved to a speaker, but most of the time he was vaguely looking at the wall. He seemed as calm as tranquil waters while all around him a storm gathered.

"Is this a council meeting, or a public hearing?" I demanded of him, surprising myself with the force in my voice.

The light blue eyes slowly drifted to my face.

Rudy stood. "That is no way to address a superior. Remove her!"

Those five men were in action again, moving around and through people, trying to get to the front where I stood.

“Wait a minute!” Kallias stood as he spoke. “I would like to hear how she fits with the *Mata*. Keep her in this room!”

“She speaks the truth, Cato,” a white-robed female with salt-and-pepper hair threw in. “These are valid points she has. And moreover, if we section ourselves off from humans as we do, half the magic in the world will all dry up as we make ourselves extinct. We can breed with them while keeping magic intact. This has been proven. Why have we not sought to cross this divide? Tessa in Arizona is trying just that with her human. She’s hopeful.”

“Who leads this Council, Cato? You or him?” someone else shouted.

“Get that filthy human out of here!”

“Breeding with humans? Disgusting!” someone roared.

“What is so wrong with humans?”

“Why are we meeting with *animals*?”

“Disgrace!”

“Remove them all!”

Shouting blasted through the room. Arguments flew. Half the table was standing, screaming at the other half. Red faces and spittle, screams and shouts.

Stefan’s hand moved to my hip. Pressure had me stepping toward the door. We wouldn’t be going back to our room, we’d be leaving the premises. Probably with half this room on our heels.

“Get ready,” Tim said to his shifters in a low tone.

From the back of the room, I heard my name shouted out. It sounded like Dominicus but I couldn’t be sure.

The *Mata* drew in close to me, ready for an attack. Green magic started pooling around them, tingling my skin. I opened up to the elements, feeling the sweet rush. I felt Stefan’s magic balancing and leveling, and then coaxing a bit more. Another rush of energy entered the link. Probably Charles. Then another—Jonas. Stefan was pooling the resources so I could unleash hell.

“Here they come, baby. Get ready.” Stefan’s voice was low and anxious.

Those five guys, hard-eyed and determined, pushed their way through the crowd. Vicious gazes scanned my protection unit, two focusing on Tim. The other two picked out other shifters. One only had eyes for me.

Keep the protection busy while one guy makes the grab. Sounded logical. Thank God they weren't experienced enough to notice Stefan and Jonas huddled close. Not that I'd need them, though.

I drew in the elements and pieced together three attack spells of Toa's devising. I stitched them together, tweaked some of the elements to make them extremely volatile, and dared anyone to try and pick them apart.

The room seethed. Like a beehive after a bear, action and noise reigned. The lead attacker pushed aside a yelling woman and grabbed at me. Jonas pushed forward and delivered a hard punch with magic. He followed it up with a ripping hand. The other guys didn't even baulk at their buddy fighting the air. They swarmed around as sparks of green lighted up around the shifters.

"Let it fly!" Stefan said urgently, two hands on me. Ready to rip me away from this room.

With a deep breath I pulled fire and—
My spell disintegrated before my eyes.
"What the—"

The sound in the room went dead. Everyone around me froze. And then I realized it was because they couldn't move. *I couldn't move!*

The entire room was covered in the most intricate spider web of spells I'd ever seen. Weaves upon weaves of elements blended so perfectly they looked like a tapestry. I recognized the thickening spell, which is what kept everyone immobile, but that was it. I had no idea how the spell deadened sound. Or how my spell, made with a bunch of nasty booby traps, fell apart. Wasn't picked apart, or unraveled, but just disintegrated.

"You see? I still have a trick or two left up my sleeve." Cato smiled benignly. He was the only one moving. "Now, young lady-human. If you would be so kind as to stop working at my spell—I noticed you have an affinity for traps. I must confess—I do as well. We are similar, you and I. I would hate for our meeting of minds to extinguish everyone in this room."

Chapter 8

Faded blue eyes, like a polarized sky, surveyed the room slowly. “I feel as though I have been asleep for so long. Years pass in a faded blur when one lives so long. Menial issues seem nothing more than minor annoyances, best left to the vigor of the young. But it seems my partially stepping away, my here-but-not presence, has left a hole. A confusion in leadership, perhaps. Maybe, too, power and boredom has started to eat away at our sanity; such is the case with a warrior class relegated to the chairs and conferences of a committee. I will take this blame unto myself, of course. It seems it is time for me to once again take interest—to steer the needs of these people.”

His gaze settled on me like falling ashes. “And a human with the black power level has emerged. I am sure this is foretold. But of course it would be. It was only a matter of time. And our young, ambitious Rudy would have her for himself. A great many would, I am sure. Tied to one of so much power is promising. Especially one such as her, ready for molding and shaping. But she is not what she seems, is she? Look at what she has done with the vanishing spell. Inverted to my eyes, yes, as is the case with humans, but also tweaked. Patched together, as one might a table leg shorter than the other three. She is smart and ingenious; and protected. Let us not forget protected.”

His gaze drifted next to me, to Stefan, still invisible to those in the room without the magical know-how. And judging by the gazes, only a handful had it—and not all of the Clutch, at that. “So much strength and power in this youth. He could lead the whole organization perfectly, I have no doubt. And so trusting of the human next to him. Look at the spell he allowed her to drape over him. Dangerous, but perfectly safe at the same time. She is a marvel, is she not? Show yourself, young male.”

I let the spell fall away, revealing the most handsome man in the room. Also the most worse-for-wear. He stood beside me, straight and tall, as though he hadn’t gotten beat to hell a half-hour before. Jonas, now also visible, walked behind us to lean against the back wall. Blood shimmered on his bare arms.

“This is the young, promising new leader, is that right?” Cato leaned toward Mage June.

“Yes, sir.” She clasped her hands in front of her on the table.

“He has marked her, and been marked. Blood linked, too, I take it?” Cato waited for my nod. Obviously it didn’t come since I couldn’t move. He must have realized that because the spell fell away a moment later, letting me answer with a head bob. “I see. He was chosen not to succeed, but fought against someone else’s choice. Do we not have a ban against organized challenges?”

“Yes, we do,” Kallias spoke up. “But it hasn’t been in effect for years.”

“Years, yes.” Cato’s gaze traveled over Stefan’s wounds. “I wonder what else has fallen by the wayside in years.”

Three Council members opened their mouths, eager to fill Cato in, before he waved his hand. “That is a debate for another day. Now, let us speak to a new and exciting development.”

It was Tim’s turn in the intelligent gaze. “The shifters have reorganized, is this correct?”

Tim clasped his hands behind his back again. “All we needed was leadership. I have provided that. I directly lead a faction within my home town, and indirectly manage packs across the nation. We are coming together slowly, but we *are* coming together.”

“Yes. And you choose to keep your traits to your kind? You have not filled the humans in on your existence?”

“I don’t want to live out my days in a lab.”

“If you weren’t killed immediately, that is.” Cato leaned back in his chair slowly, hands clasped over his chest.

“They have attached themselves to the human,” the Councilwoman Constance stated.

“And why is that?” Kallias asked Tim. “Why her?”

Tim said, “She risked her life to save a great many of ours. She would do it again. And we would return the favor.”

“Loyalty. That is an honored trait.” Cato glanced around the room. “And Dominicus—is he here?”

Movement and shifting took place until finally Dominicus was able to step through a wall of people. Most of the room was on their feet, agitated at the proceedings, but also in awe of Cato it seemed like. Toa stepped out a moment later, completely unruffled. Every hair was in place even though he

was probably pushed and shoved around way back there.

How did he do it?

Both of their gazes fell on me before turning to Cato. “Yes, sir.”

“You have made an agreement on the Council’s behalf with the *Mata*, is this correct?”

Dominicus stepped forward. He offered a slight bow. “Yes, sir.”

“On whose authority?” Cato pushed.

“Mine.” Mage June’s impassive face met Cato’s eyes. “I’ve heard rumors of our kind wanting to step out of the shadows. To do this, they need more power. They need more likeminded followers. I wanted to prevent the growing organization of the shifters from joining that cause. I wanted them, instead, joined with us, whether for support, or so we could watch them.”

John and Ann both shifted behind Tim.

“I see. This need to claim our mantle as equals is in constant flux.” Cato glanced around at the Council members. “I have seen, and thwarted, the attempts to step into the light often in my life. Once I was a part of the desire to show myself to humans. To prove I was better. And physically, I was, of course. As soon as I was strapped to a stake, and the fires lit, I changed my outlook.”

His gaze went back to his Mage. “And who supported your decision? Who allowed you to carry out this decree?”

“They push through a lot of decisions from your office!” a man yelled from the back.

Mage June raised her chin slightly. “You are often lost to contemplation. I felt action needed to be taken, and I took it.”

“And you approved this, Rudy?” Cato asked.

“He’s not even on the Council!” someone off to the side muttered. “Why does he get a say in anything?”

“I thought having them at hand was a good idea,” Rudy reflected.

“But you detest them. Hmm.” Cato glanced around the table. “And the rest of the Council? Does no one make uniform decisions anymore? Is that not the purpose of this committee? Of having more than one in charge?”

“They make plenty of decisions on their own,” Mage June commented in low tones.

“You basically disappear for years, not doing your job, not policing your *assistant*, and you want *us* to apologize for trying to keep things

together?” The salt-and-pepper Councilwoman at the front glared at Cato. “Why don’t you ask what the youth in charge of the *menial* tasks has been doing with his time? For instance, why was he chatting with the prisoner earlier this evening? What are these secret meetings he has with only a few select members of the Council?”

“I am doing my job,” Rudy fired back. “I am trying to secure our—”

“Enough.” Cato held up a hand. “I have been absent in all but body. I see that now. Possibly soon it is time to step away and let the world rumble by. But, for now, we have other issues to deal with. *Mata*, welcome. We will talk in greater detail after the Council has a chance to meet and discuss. Sasha, a black. Stefan, a promising young leader. Welcome. I give you my backing and support. You have been through enough, and you are still alive. That warrants a reprieve. I also give you access to our archives, and to Mage June, who has a great knowledge of human magic. I, also, have a plethora of knowledge that may be helpful. We must nurture our connections with humans—I agree on that point. We must keep our eyes open for those that can use their magic. Truly remarkable things can happen with a link between the two opposing sides of magic.”

Cato’s eyes closed slowly. And opened a short time later; the rest of the room silent, waiting. Rudy’s face closed down into barely-contained rage. He probably had a million little “projects” in progress that would now be open to scrutiny. I had a feeling a great many of those projects weren’t in the best interest of anyone but him. Shame.

“Yes, we need to set things to rights, but that will take time. For now, we must convene.” Cato stood slowly. Those at the table stood with him. Everyone already standing kind of shuffled farther away, giving him room.

“But what about the growing faction of our kind trying to push into the human world?” an older Council member asked, nearly as old as Cato. “We have one of the leaders below level. Who knows *who* he’s tied to?”

Cato paused, gaze settling on the man. “Yes, yes. I had forgotten. We must extract that information. Organize it.”

The man nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. Rudy gave him a heated glance before he started off after his boss, muttering the whole time. Mage June rose quickly, hurrying after them—it appeared the minions warred with each other for their master’s ear. Which meant Mage June had the opposite view Rudy did.

Thank God.

Tim turned to me in barely-contained bewilderment. “Shall we?”

“Sasha,” Toa said, stepping closer with a harried expression. “Dominicous and I still have work to do. We are trying to open eyes; find out who is loyal to our way of thinking, versus... other factions. Cato as a backer doesn’t make you safe. Not yet. Not until he wakes up from his self-induced, walking coma. Stay vigilant. Keep support around you.”

I nodded as Dominicous stalked off after Kallias. Toa nodded with me, drifting toward Mage Marius a moment later.

Stefan’s hand came around my back, guiding me in front of him as the shifters came behind. In the hall the people Stefan had fought were gone. My conquests, however, had been left. A circle of people surrounded each box, laughing and cheering at the guys within.

“This place is madness,” Tim breathed.

“Let them out, Sasha. They’ve suffered enough,” Stefan said softly.

I was already on it. I agreed with Tim wholeheartedly. *This place was terrible and I just wanted to go home. But we weren’t home free yet.*

We all laid low for the rest of the night, each staying to our rooms, no one venturing out into the halls. *The trial period of proving ourselves was now over, thank God. Or so the rules stated.*

The next night, I awoke to a soft kiss. Stefan stood beside the bed, dressed and ready to get moving. His dark eyes stared down at me. “We’ve got a backer, of sorts, which means we’re free to leave. Toa thinks you’re still a target—which means we’re taking that pass and getting out of here. I’m going to talk to a few people, including Dominicous. I want everyone to know why we’re leaving.”

“Can’t we just write a few notes?”

A smile flickered on his full lips. “Unfortunately, no.”

He sobered. “I want you to pack everything and get ready. Stay in the room until I come back, okay? I don’t know what’s going on with the Council, but you’re still a target. And possibly hated since Cato has sided with finding humans important. Plus, there is Andris to think about.”

“Got it. Stay here. Does this mean I can get Charles to serve me

breakfast in bed?”

Stefan frowned at me in warning. “Flashing the hired help? No. He might forget you’re mine and try to jump in. And then I’d have to beat him senseless.” I got a wink.

I giggled and snuggled under the sheets. “Fine. Come back in for a moment? I’ll be quick...”

“I should go. Get things ready.”

“Pllllleeeaaassee?” I begged, throwing a pouty face at him. It worked half the time.

Stefan minutely shook his head, a smile warring on his lips. He half-turned to leave, and then stopped. Fast as lightning, he unbuttoned and stepped out of his jeans and boxer briefs. He had his shirt off a second later, his glorious body cut and defined, perfect right down to the last bump of muscle. His large erection bobbed as he slid into bed, covering my body with his warmth.

“Someday I’ll learn to say no to you,” he growled, sliding his length against my quickly-dampening sex.

“What would be the fun in that?” I breathed, leaning my head back against the pillow, savoring the feel of him.

“Hmm.” He captured my lips as he aligned himself, thrusting forward and filling me in one push.

“Ohh, goodness.” My legs tightened around him.

“Just a quickie,” he spoke against my lips, pace fast but steady.

I didn’t bother to nod, just focused on the warmth pooling in my core. On the tightness spreading through my body. Tingles and shivers worked my ardor higher, his girth filling me, his friction spreading glorious pleasure throughout my body. His kiss got harder and more insistent, his thrusts less controlled. My hips swung up to him. Our bodies crashed together. Waves of delight rocked through me, my breath coming out in fast pants.

He pushed harder and faster, the bed squeaking below us. The slide of him inside me felt so natural. So *good*.

An explosion tore through my body. My limbs quivered and my eyes rolled back in my head. Stefan finished a moment later, shuddering against me.

“I love you, Sasha,” he whispered into my ear. He kissed me tenderly, connecting eyes for a moment before getting up. “Stay safe and I’ll see you in

a few hours.”

“Thanks.” I stretched languidly, admiring his shiny and cut body. “For the ride.”

I could hear his chuckle as he left the room.

I sighed as I stared down at the not-delicately-packed suitcases stacked near the edge of the bed. We had a wardrobe to go back to; I no longer cared if my clothes got wrinkled. I strolled to the side of the room and pushed aside a heavy curtain. The world waited below me, nothing more than a few twinkling lights in a void of black. I had known the weeks would be hard here, but I had hoped to find a bit more of a toehold. Regardless, I couldn't say I wasn't happy to head out.

Heaving another sigh, I turned back to the center of the room. Then sat on the bed, staring at nothing. Conceivably, I could turn on the TV. Instead, I glanced at one of the packed suitcases, where I stupidly stashed my e-reader.

Rolling my eyes at myself, I pushed off the bed and bent down. As I was fumbling with the zipper, a hard rap sounded at the door. Leaving my suitcase, I did a quick peep through the peephole just to be sure. Jonas would bitch if I seemed surprised by his presence.

Blane, one of Tim's shifters that rarely spoke to me, waited outside. He was kind of a quiet guy, hanging out in the rafters, waiting for Tim to give orders. I opened the door with raised eyebrows. “Hey, Blane, what's up?”

“They got Ann,” he gushed immediately. “Charles said not to get you, but we need magic to fight them off!”

Cold water trickled down my back. “Them, who? Who's got Ann?”

Blane shook his head in quick jerks. “A bunch of guys. They want to have fun with her. I tried to fight them off. I got Charles but he said not to get you. But they had more magic than Charles—”

“Okay,” I said, stepping out of the door. “Where?”

Blane took off at a jog, going down a floor and cutting toward the back of the complex—a place I hadn't been before. The hallways were regularly active at first, but as we moved further toward the back, things quieted down. Only a few lovers tucked into the corners and the stray

wanderer crossed my sight.

“Are you sure, Blane?” I couldn’t help the wariness in my voice. I had no doubt that if someone was messing around with an honored guest, they’d do it out of sight, but heading to a place with no help wasn’t the brightest move.

“Just up here.” Blane breathed out through his mouth, a sign he was worked up. We turned a corner... into an empty hallway. Closed doors lined the dimly-lit hallway.

“Where?” I asked in a terrified whisper. Fear ran through me.

“Sorry, Sasha,” Blane said, slowing. He came to a stop, staring at me with deep brown eyes. “But I have to look out for number one.”

He took a step back as he glanced over my shoulder. “Did as you asked. Give me the money.”

I whirled, ready to fight the rush, only to come up against a block when I tried to access my magic. Three huge men stepped out of a room in quick steps. I turned to run. Blane’s fist barely glanced off of my cheek, making me flinch back. Pain blossomed, sight in my left eye going blurry.

Another three men ran down the hall behind Blane, straight at us.

“Where’s the money?” Blane yelled, reaching forward to grab for me. His huge hand wrapped around my upper arm. I ripped it to the side, scrabbling with that block on my magic. It was a link, a few marginal power levels joining together for more power.

“Right here—”

Blane pushed into me, his eyes widening in surprise. A wet gurgle sounded at the base of his throat. He coughed, blood splattering me and running down the side of his mouth. Someone else grabbed me as Blane fell away, a knife lodged in the back of his neck.

“What the hell?” I breathed in a terrified whisper, fumbling at that block with everything I had.

It wasn’t well constructed. One of these guys was probably the leader holding it, too, and judging by the flat eyes and clunky movements, they were hired help. Also familiar.

Two of them had been at the Council meeting. They were instructed to remove me.

I kicked out. My foot connected with testicles. I spun out of his grasp and jabbed at the next big thug of guy, my fist connecting with the man’s

neck. The grip on my arm fell away as the man grabbed his throat.

I got two quick steps toward freedom before someone grabbed my hair and flung me back. I smashed against the wall. Small white lights danced in my vision as a body pushed against me.

“No!” I cried, struggling. Trying to push him off.

“Hold her.” I recognized that voice. My heart sank as two of the enormous men moved to the side, holding me between them.

Rudy walked up quickly. “Get her ready.”

“I have backing!” I screamed. They held my hands at my sides.

One of the men clutched my hair and jerked my head back. Exposing my neck. Rudy winked at me as he bent, his hands low on my hips. My skin crawled at his touch. I wiggled and thrashed, trying to get away. Trying to fight. Trying to get at my magic.

Stupid for not having it at my disposal. I needed to get better control so I could have it available all the time; so I wouldn’t be worried to be overcome, as Toa had said.

That thought process wasn’t helping me right now.

“This won’t work—it takes more than one time!” I seethed at Rudy through clenched teeth. “And I won’t drink yours.”

He licked the base of my neck just over my pulse. My groin tightened up in terror. My body shivering in disgust.

“My plans are failing around me,” Rudy breathed against my skin. “But if I want to head Andris off, we have no time to lose. We’ll exchange again on the way. Again when we get there.”

“Get *where*?” I yanked my head, trying to free it. Trying to keep fighting as a tear of panic dripped down my face.

His teeth cut into my neck, ripping a sob from my throat. His lips settled onto my skin.

“Are we late to the party?”

Rudy jerked back, traces of my blood on his lips. But he hadn’t drawn. Not yet.

One of the guys holding me flinched toward the voice, giving me a glimpse.

Jonas stood in the middle of the hallway, arms out wide, crazy eyes pinned to Rudy. Charles pushed around him, strolling down the hall, no humor or twinkle in his eyes. I could hear movement further down the hall,

but couldn't tell who it was.

"Two of you against six of mine? Is that right?" Rudy's eyes went back to my neck. He pushed his groin against mine.

I couldn't help the whimper.

"It's not the number of fighters you should be concerned with, it's *which* fighters." Charles squared off to one of my captors, a viciousness I hadn't seen before creeping into his eyes. "And we brought some animals, too. They don't fight fair."

A deep roar rent the hallway. The walls shook. The doors jiggled.

Tim.

A childlike cry followed right after, and then the growl of a wolf. Ann and John. I had no doubt three more wolves followed. Tim's whole squad, less the dead man at my feet.

Rudy jerked toward the sounds, his eyes going wide for a brief moment. The block wobbled. He snatched me off the wall, his hands digging into my arms. To his men he yelled, "Kill them."

Charles was already moving, sword spinning so fast I could barely see it. He deftly sliced, his blade cutting through flesh and bone, chopping the sword hand off of his opponent. As Rudy flung me down the hall, my vision jiggling, I saw Jonas lunge forward with a violent growl, grabbing the head of the nearest enemy and wrenching. A disgusting crack signified a broken neck.

Another roar shook the walls. The huge bear pushed past Jonas and Charles, aiming right for us. The block wobbled again as Rudy tripped, dragging me against the wall with him.

What the hell was I doing? Waiting to be saved? This wasn't Sleeping Beauty—I needed to grow a pair!

Rage surged into my body, replacing my previous terror. I punched Rudy in the nose. My fist screamed in pain. I tried to gouge his eyes and instead scratched down his face. *That'll work.*

One of Rudy's men flew through the air, smacking the wall headfirst. The bear was once again in pursuit.

The link wobbled, so much weaker now. Rudy struggled, trying to maintain control of the link. Failing.

I pushed at the magic and then pulled again and picked. Then I screamed in his face. He ripped me off the wall, backhanding me as another

of his men's yells cut off. My other cheek erupted in pain. My eye felt like it was trying to squeeze out of the socket.

And then the hand holding me disappeared. I staggered into the wall, my shoulder connecting first and sending waves of agony through my body. Hazy, disorientated, I looked up to find Rudy sprinting down the hall. A mountain lion took up the chase immediately.

"C'mon, Sasha, I got you. Ann'll get him." Charles scooped me up into his arms and started running.

"I can't feel Stefan, Charles. We have to find Stefan."

Chapter 9

Bursts of emotion fired in Stefan's body as he shoved open the door. He looked around the room wildly, feeling Sasha cringe through the blood link. He could feel her panic.

His gaze fell over the packed suitcases. The made bed. Everything was organized. Even the vase with stationery on the desk had been straightened.

He squeezed his eyes shut as a sickening wave of violation swept over him. His stomach turned, knowing exactly what was happening.

Thoughts fleeing, panic creeping into him, he spun quickly for the door. A moving object expanded in his vision right before making contact with his face. The world went black.

Consciousness descended slowly. A cloudy haze took over his vision. Stefan's head throbbed. His brain pushed painfully against the inside of his skull. Coarse material cut into his wrists, stopping blood flow to his fingers.

He blinked, trying to clear his vision.

Soft cushioning beneath him barely hinted at the bump and sway of a moving vehicle.

"Hello." Andris' blurred head leaned into view across a smooth surface—a table, it looked like. "You're joining us."

Stefan stretched out his jaw and moved his face around. "What'd you hit me with?"

"Steel piping. Hurts, doesn't it? That's what Dominicus hit me with after you destroyed my demon. And then he drugged me. So, I thought I'd pay you the same courtesy."

A plethora of blinking brought Andris into focus, though it didn't do much for the agonizing pulse of his head. He reached for his magic, only to hit against a block. He focused on the link, its effects somehow muffled, but not by him.

"Trying to access your lady love?" Andris smirked and leaned back, crossing an ankle on his knee. "That's the wonder of the drug. Cuts out a

blood link. Well, *mostly* cuts out a blood link, I should say. Clever. I can only assume that white mage of Dominicus' thought that up."

"Where is she?" Stefan ripped at his hands. His bindings cut into his skin, hot and stinging. Liquid dribbled into his palm. Blood, by the feel of it.

"Oh, she's either safe and sound with a council full of people vying for her link, or she's in Rudy's hands. Though I wouldn't be overly concerned about Rudy. He's great at maneuvering people and edging into power, but his strategy is greatly lacking. No stamina."

They sat at a shiny table in a plush motor home—the motor home Andris had been carried to the Council meeting in, actually. A male sat on the couch, staring straight ahead, a sword at close reach. Two more males sat up front, swords and guns both handy. Stefan turned to see behind him. Two more.

"Afraid I'll escape?" he growled, testing both the block on his power and the block to his link with Sasha.

"Just a precaution. Not to mention, we have the extra space. Might as well use it, right? More the merrier."

Stefan leaned back against the seat and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. It didn't help the pounding in his head. "So, where to? And why me? What do I have that you could possibly need?"

Andris chuckled softly. "The end of the thorn in my side, Stefan. That's what you have. You'll make a strong sacrifice for a demon."

The world stilled. "You've kidnapped me... to kill me?"

Andris threaded his fingers together and leaned on the table with a smug grin. "Finally, yes. You're hard to pin down, I'll admit. You keep popping up, spoiling my plans, eluding me... So yes, while I was heading to the car, I figured I'd just swoop in and pick you up. Might as well, right? You were right there."

"And this has nothing to do with Sasha?" Stefan clarified, studying the face of the man in front of him intently.

Andris cocked his head. "When did you get so noble? No, this has nothing to do with that harebrained human. I have one of my own—one that actually works in the capacity I need her. When you're gone, your human will be no good to me."

A wave of relief washed through Stefan. This situation wasn't ideal, no, but it was much better than expected. Sasha had Charles and Jonas to

protect her, not to mention Dominicus and Toa, and he would even admit to Tim and his crew. Jameson would see to it that she continued as mage. He might not follow her strictly yet, but he understood her value. He'd make sure she had a good, safe life.

Shedding the need to get at that blood link, Stefan focused on the situation at hand. At present, even if he could get out of his bindings, Andris was a worthy adversary, and these other males presented more of a roadblock. There wasn't any point in trying to escape here.

"Nice ride," Stefan offered as he relaxed.

Andris' mouth quirked. "Always were level-headed." He glanced around, settling back into the cushion of his seat. "Yes. It wasn't so comfortable on the way here, but changing roles has really agreed with me."

"I can see that. Most of the dirt of the dungeon has been scraped away. Tell me, what happened to your caped brother-in-arms?"

A flash of irritation crossed Andris' face. "He is riding in your motorhome, actually. The brief stay in the basement... addled him. Somewhat."

"Ah. So you've always been leading the show. I figured as much."

"Yes, well, kudos on seeing through my ruse."

Stefan couldn't help a chuckle. He took a deep breath, wishing he could just feel Sasha for one moment. Just to see if everything was going okay. Hoping beyond hope Charles and Jonas got her out of danger in time.

Then something occurred to him. "Did you say you have your own human?"

The smug grin was back. Andris' eyes sparkled. "Unlike you and your... decaying Council, I immerse myself with humans constantly. Most are useless, yes. Weak-willed fools as terrified of our power as they are turned on by it, but some do exist. The one I found was hosting a séance. Can you believe that? She apparently thinks she can communicate with the dead."

Andris shook his head and laughed to himself. "Ridiculous. But she did see me right away. No fear."

"And she is a black power level?"

Andris tapped the air with this finger. "The thing about humans is, when they develop their own sense of their magic, they really go with it. They push and pull and get a hold of it. Maybe we would, too—we never have that option, do we? But this woman was nearly there. All she needed

was to be taught how to properly work with the elements, and *voilà*, myth reincarnate.”

Stefan barely kept his mouth from dropping. “She knows how to use it? You were able to train her?”

“Like I said—”

“Sir,” the driver interrupted. “We’re approaching the compound.”

“Ah.” Andris’ smile broadened. He nodded at Stefan before he stood. “I did not find a harebrained child, I found an educated adult, no matter what profession she chose. Given an apt pupil, I am an excellent teacher.”

As Andris moved away, Stefan was barely able to see a large facility looming in the window. “Where is this?”

Andris rested a hand on the passenger chair in the front of the motorhome. He turned back, glancing at the male behind Stefan. Hazel eyes fell on him a moment later. “Hope you don’t mind, I had to stop and pick up one or two things. I need to set some plans in action so mayhem rules the day within your precious democratic system. Don’t worry, we’ll be heading towards home, and your torture, soon enough.”

A bag pushed down onto his head as the motorhome shimmied to a stop.

Chapter 10

“Where is he?” I shouted as I stood in the middle of my room. Charles and Jonas looked at Tim, who minutely shook his head.

“What does that mean, the head shaking?” I demanded, panic choking me. “Have you tried calling him?”

“Yes.” Jonas paced toward the window. “No answer.”

“Where’s Dominicus? Has anyone checked in?” I asked Charles.

“Dominicus said he came back here looking for you. You guys were cleared to go home. Cato gave his nod and Mage June said she’d be in touch. Said they had some house-cleaning to do.”

“House-cleaning to do—*house-cleaning to do?! Yeah, I’ll say they have some fucking house-cleaning to do! One of their damn minions just tried to force a blood link on me, then KIDNAP ME.*”

“Sasha,” Jonas said quietly. “This isn’t the time to lose yourself. You need to figure out—”

“Shut up, Jonas.” I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed my temples. “Where’s Ann? Did anyone hear from Ann?”

“She’s here!” John peeked in the door before backing out of the way quickly.

A mountain lion loped in and stopped in the middle of the floor. Green magic burst from its body. A naked human form taking the place of the lion. Charles jogged two steps, ripped one of the suitcases open, and pulled out a dress for Ann to cover up. She nodded at him in thanks, exhaustion from two changes in a short period of time drawing down her features.

“Saw Stefan,” she panted, bending down to put her hands on the ground. She didn’t bother with the dress.

“What?” I bent forward to her. “Where? Is he okay? What happened?”

“I was chasing... that guy. Almost... had him, but saw a group... of men carrying Stefan... out to the parking lot. Thought you’d want me... to follow them, instead. Did I do okay?”

“Yes! Oh god, yes. Where’d they take him? What guys?”

Charles helped Ann stand so he could dress her like a child. She leaned against him heavily with closed eyes, trying to will a second wind as

she said, “Andris. It was... bloody Andris.”

Jonas stared, cellphone clutched in whitened fingers. “Did you follow the car?”

“Motorhome.” Ann filled her lungs and continued. “He took the motorhome. Both, actually. Had Trek, too.”

“But not Rudy.” I waited for her to nod before pacing while I bit my lip. That hurt, so I switched to biting my fingernail.

I spun toward Jonas. “What the hell would Andris want with Stefan? It was *me* he wanted last time.”

“To lure you?” Charles asked, an arm around Ann’s middle to hold her up.

I shook my head, continuing to pace across the floor. “They wouldn’t have known Rudy failed.”

“Insurance in case he failed? To lure you?” Charles tried again.

I looked upwards in thought, but all that lurked in my brain was panic-stricken fear for losing Stefan.

I walked it out, shaking my arms. *What does Andris want with Stefan?*

Well, he’d always hated Stefan, so there was that. But to snatch him from here? During an escape? For revenge?

I nodded at myself. Andris was that crazy.

Okay, but what else? He could’ve just killed him here. Why take him? Stefan was a huge liability—he wouldn’t be easy to keep as a hostage.

A weeping angel flashed into my head. “He’s going to sacrifice him,” I breathed quietly. “Stefan’s got a lot of power—a lot of life-force. Andris is going to sacrifice him.”

I turned to Jonas, pleading that I was wrong. Jonas stared back, calm and icy.

“Shit, that’s plausible.” My heart beat so hard it hurt. “And he’s got a head start. A *way* head start. We’ll never catch him. It’s been like... what, two hours? Maybe more since he was getting taken while I had my debacle? We don’t even know where he’s going. Ann, you didn’t follow him?”

“He got on the freeway.” She looped an arm around Charles’ shoulders. “I followed him that far, but four legs wasn’t keeping up with six tires. I couldn’t find a way to jump onto the motorhome.”

I nodded. Right before the tears welled up and overflowed down my cheeks. “Andris is going to kill him.”

Jonas stepped forward before Tim could, grabbed me by the front of the shirt, and slapped me across the face. A spark of anger lit deep inside as I looked up slowly, my bottom lip quivering. Jonas' crazy eyes stared down at me.

“There is one person that can get the Boss back, and that is you, Sasha.” Jonas hit me with each word. “You are the mage. Now, you are the acting leader. You have the shifters, you have magic, you have Dominicus, and you have authority. You need to bring it all together. You need to own your place. Your time to step up and lead is now.”

A tear leaked down my face. My world fractured, fear and the enormity of what Jonas was saying competing against a long-standing insecurity. At the bottom of it all, though, sat the love of my life. In trouble. Alone. Probably getting beat up and shoved around. On his death bed.

He'd probably go quietly, too, thinking I was safe.

That asshole.

I let my concern for Stefan consume me. My fear of losing him tethered me to the ground. My need to survive shot right past me and latched onto him. A goal in mind, I let my body lead. I let the action part of my brain take over. I let my intuition rule.

I took a deep breath through a tight chest. Another tear leaked out as I stared at Jonas, but determination hardened my resolve. I needed to own my role or Stefan would surely die. I had to do this. For him, and for myself.

I nodded once.

Jonas let go of my shirt and stepped back. Charles removed his hand from Tim's chest.

My mind whirled. “Okay, here's what we know. Andris has been plaguing our territory for years. Way before I got there. He was practicing with the demons there. There's no way he would move shop.”

My gaze swiveled to Tim. A blast of strength and power hit me as we connected eyes, the alpha in control. I summoned everything I had and matched that gaze, spilling out my hidden reserves of strength to fortify me. “I need to call in that kin-status.”

“Done.”

“Andris must be around that town somewhere. Can you guys try to source it out?”

Tim quirked his head. “We've been looking since that first demon

attack. I don't know where he's hiding, but you're right. He wouldn't uproot his whole operation."

"So we can't sniff him out, but get everyone ready, anyway. Knowing Andris, he isn't going to waste Stefan in one go. He knows how to make a demon—he's shown us that. But making one, and controlling one, are two different things. He is still riding that failure with the last one—he couldn't keep it in line. He'll start small to make sure he can keep it in his command to build his confidence. Then, when he manages that, he'll destroy his practice creation and then use Stefan for the big time."

"Ann." Tim fired the name across me. "Get some plane tickets. Call Bruce. Get everyone ready. Spread them out."

"Plane tickets, good idea." I paced. "Where'd that pecker-head Rudy go? That bastard must know something. He talked to Andris alone for Christ's sake."

Everyone stared at me. Then glanced at Ann. She shook her head slowly. "He crossed the courtyard into the far wing. After that, I had to go in a different direction."

"What about the guards?" John called in through the doorway. "We should ask them."

"Yes!" I stabbed the air toward the doorway. "And who can wrangle them up? My new best friend. Let's go pay a visit to Cato."

The crew was following me out the door a second later. Halfway down the hall something occurred to me. "Where are all the guys that came with us? Where's Jessie?"

"Three are healing—they came close to a hole in the ground. We'll scoop them up when we know what we're doing," Jonas answered behind me.

"Is Jessie one of those three?"

"He didn't pick up his phone," Charles answered.

"Damn it. If he turned traitor I will... do something extremely awful." I clenched and unclenched my fists. My emotions threatened to break free.

Get hard. You can do this, Sasha. You can lead these guys. This is not too big. You are able for it.

I took the stairs with quick steps. We exited the stairwell and pushed through the main floor, dawn approaching but the floors still busy with the escape of Andris and whoever else. A thick woman pretending to be willowy

stood in our path. A human woman stood next to her, fawning like a fool.

“Move!” I commanded. My voice boomed.

Startled, she looked up and met my eyes. It took a split second for her to realize I was human. Arrogance flowed over her like a drape, some sort of cutting remark at the ready to put me in my place.

She never got the chance.

I opened up and let the elements pour in, flooding me with the bite of magic. I threw a binding spell at her right before I magically *shoved* her out of the way. Ass over end, she somersaulted through the lobby and crashed against a couch, turning the whole thing over.

Sound stopped, but not because of one of Cato’s spells. Every eye, most of them wide, stared at me out of shocked faces.

“I’m one of those *mean* humans that don’t take shit from anyone.” I flicked some cracklers toward the ceiling; Toa’s rendition of a crowd-confusion tactic. *Pops, bangs* and *sizzles* flashed.

Gasps and shrieks filled the room as we left out the side, aiming for the right wing of the complex where I knew Cato was supposed to reside. We had hardly entered the hallway before three men approached with swords and fierce expressions.

Luckily for us, we were turning left down a corridor and wouldn’t have to go past them.

Using red power, I rocketed my famous bug spell beyond them down the hall. I slowed for the spell to settle. The men braced, staring at the arsenal of warriors I had at my side. They were grossly outnumbered and they knew it.

The magic settled into the ground.

“Yup, it worked. And they are going to be feisty.” I turned and kept going. My crew followed.

“Which spell is this?” Charles asked. The slide of metal scraping sheath meant he had just pulled his sword.

“The one where magical bugs sprout up, chase me, and bite anything in its way.”

“Oh, yeah. Nasty little suckers.”

“They chase you?” Tim asked.

“Yeah. Long story.”

The men in the way, not understanding why we didn’t step forward to

engage, had thirty seconds of confusion before they got a nasty surprise.

“Can’t you sic them on other people?” Tim watched the bugs in rapt attention, walking backwards to do so.

I shrugged. “Maybe. I’ve never actually tried. I learned how to work with magic and kind of forgot about all of these spells until recently.”

“Hey, where do you think—*ahhhh!*” The sound of the man’s voice turned into a shriek.

“Okay, hurry.” I started jogging down the corridor. “Some will get by them and I don’t want you guys to get hit from behind.”

“It’s going to catch us, Sasha,” Charles intoned, pushing me faster from behind. He’d seen those bugs a great many times.

“I’ll unravel the spell shortly, but I want them to delay those other guys.”

“Why didn’t you just take them out, human?” Jonas asked in a growl.

“One, they were just doing their job—I’d just flipped some woman across the room. Security was needed. And two, it would’ve taken a lot of energy, which I might need right now.”

This seemed to appease the grump, but I thought I would clarify one little thing. “Just so you know, Jonas, going forward, you are the only one that addresses me by ‘human’. And then only among my immediate crew who realize you are a shitty ol’ sod without a nice nerve in your body.”

“You don’t need to tell me my job. You need to learn yours.”

I couldn’t help but crack a smile. That was his way of saying, “Duly noted, Senator.”

We pushed on, nearly there, when Dave, one of Tim’s shifters, yelled up, “Here they come!”

“Are the guards coming behind them?” I yelled back, reaching with my magic towards those spells.

“No. But damn it, Sasha, they’re fast!”

I unraveled the spell as we reached a giant marble door with the name “Cato” engraved in the middle. Shiny and smooth, it looked like something that would guard a tomb.

“Um.” I didn’t know what else to say. The thing didn’t have a doorknob.

“Push?” Charles stepped forward and placed his palm in the middle of the door. His fingers turned white and his muscles flexed. “Nope.”

“They’re coming!” Dave yelled again.

“More bugs?” I asked in confusion as I tried to peer through a wall of muscle down the hallway.

“No. White-faced males. The Guards. They didn’t like that spell by the look of it. Don’t blame them—hurts like the bejesus.” Charles chuckled. “I’ll take care of this right quick.”

“Let my men handle it,” Tim spoke up quickly. “We don’t know what’s beyond this door.”

“Hopefully an old man with a clue.” Charles stepped back beside me.

“Tim’s right,” I agreed. “Let his people handle it.”

Jonas nodded in approval as I laid my hand on that smooth, cool marble. Tingles entered my palm and tickled up my arm, spicy and light. Some sort of spell.

“So... invite only, then. Hmm.” I closed my eyes and focused on that feeling. That intricate, lacy hum of a delicate mix of elements. Weaves so tight, so complex, I was in awe at the same time as frustrated.

“Blow it up, human.” Jonas stepped back.

“I doubt I can blow through this door.” I shook my head in frustration, my mind drifting back to Stefan. A pang pierced my heart, forcing moisture to my eyes. I took a deep breath, focusing. Trying to let my intuition guide me. Trying to find a way through or around that spell.

A dull thunk permeated the hall.

“Did you just stomp your foot like a housewife?” Charles asked in exasperation. “What, do you think the door is afraid of getting spanked with a spatula?”

“What are you even talking about?” I yelled at him, sounds of battle drifting up the hall. A snarl rent the air, someone having turned into a wolf.

“There goes the neighborhood,” I muttered, my breath getting shallow as I stared at a very real roadblock. If I couldn’t get through, then what? I didn’t have another plan.

Panic crept up, threatening to take over.

“No!” I yelled. I had to find a way through. I *had* to.

I stepped back. And back again. Staring at that door. Then the walls.

The walls.

Three quick steps had my palm flat to the wall next to the door. Wood. Plain, ordinary, non-magical wood. Well, it had some sort of magic

protecting it from demons or other creatures. The protective spell was something that ran through the whole complex, though—and judging by the hollow, wispy quality, there wasn't much juice in it. This wispy quality meant that an angry plant could push on through without any sort of hassle.

Or... I could just blow it up, like Jonas said. Ingenious in his violence, that guy. Very helpful.

“Okay. Everyone stand back!”

The rest of my crew, quiet now that the threat from earlier was gone, and also, three people were animals, backed away. I stared at the wall, pale yellow and slightly stained. I honed in on a black smudge. Fire welled up, mixed with air and only small amounts of the other elements.

With a huge *push*, I rammed the spell at the wall and infused another blast of fire. Right as the spell was soaking in, and one second before detonation, I went to throw up a shield.

I didn't make it in time.

Jonas' body crashed into me, taking me to the floor right before the wall exploded. Splinters of wood and debris fired into the hall. His big body covered mine, blocking any sort of shrapnel.

“Shields don't block physical things, human,” he growled as Charles pulled him off me.

I groaned. *Rookie mistake.*

Tim and John filed into the room before me. Charles and Jonas went after me, having to bend through the human-sized hole. The rest of the shifters were wolves and split up, each guarding the entrance but from different sides.

Cato sat at a mahogany desk, a pen in one hand and a piece of paper in front of him. His eyebrows gently lifted as I stalked into the room and faced him. The others fanned out around me.

“Well, hello.” He laid down his pen, entwined his fingers, and stared at me.

In a stern, authoritative voice, I said, “Stefan was taken by Andris. Rudy tried to force a blood link on me. I'm not sure if the two are connected, but I *do* know Rudy knows something, and I need to know what. Also, your guards must know something, too, unless they went deaf at opportune times.”

“I see.” Cato reflected a moment, his faded blue eyes honed in on me, but not exactly focused.

I shifted uncomfortably as he said, “It does me good to see a human own her place within our world. That used to be the way of it, you know. Humans and our kind paired quite often. We were stronger that way. Two opposite halves of magic merging together created a tight bond. I had wondered when I would see it again.”

“Awesome, great. Toa told me all of that. *Focus*, please Cato. I need to find out where Andris’ hiding place is. Where are the guards?” I couldn’t help raising my voice. The guy could drive a saint insane.

Or maybe he had in the past.

“The guards are dead, of course.”

Growls ripped through the room. Three wolf bodies braced on our side of the hole, staring outward. Someone must’ve been coming. Cato waved his hand. The huge marble door *popped*. It silently swung inward an inch, making another hole into the room.

Which was not great for defense.

Everyone now changed their position, protecting me from what was coming, leaving me to deal with the old guy with wandering thoughts.

“Someone killed the guards?” I asked, aghast. “Well, where’s Rudy?”

“Rudy has disappeared. Well, he thinks he has, anyway. It was him that killed the guards, of course. And while I do not have proof, they met their end shortly after he visited Andris. He has never been cunning or effective when under pressure. It is his greatest weakness. And one must always understand their enemy’s greatest weaknesses.”

I was waving my hand at him, trying to drag the words out a little faster. “Your enemy? Didn’t you let him have the run of the place?”

“Oh yes. He and my mage. You see, I have been around long enough to know how power corrupts. I have witnessed it firsthand on many occasions. It is only a matter of time. The issue has always been ferreting out the guilty parties. Using a man such as Rudy—young, ambitious, charming—and pitting him against someone like June, who is organized, logical and hyper-moral, one can really see the cracks that form within the ranks during the struggle for control. Especially when the master is at rest.”

“Great. Super. Except now my life is falling apart because of your stupid reindeer games. And if Rudy *thinks* he disappeared, that means you know where he went.”

A grin lit up Cato’s face as shouting started from the doorway. “Are

you okay, sir? Shall we cut these males down?”

“Do you not see the merits in my methods?” Cato spoke to me. “Now, let’s notice you, shall we? A human within the upper reaches of the black magical power slide. A human trained by one of the great magic workers we know, even though his magic is nearing only the middle of the white slide. You are linked to a god-like specimen—he has power, strength, command, inspires loyalty, and even has a heightened appearance. Your new father is the most brutal, vicious warrior I have ever seen in action. And no, I have not seen your future mate in action, so maybe Dominicus has a rival—”

“*What is your damn point?*” I interjected. My wrist was tingling where my imaginary watch ticked away.

“Impatience. A trait of the young. My point is just this—Fate has gathered the most essential of players to open a door to our past. In doing so, it will secure our future. Through you we will establish a link all but lost. We will rebuild what has been destroyed. We will reform what has been torn apart. And we will live on into the next generations to come as a united species.”

I started pacing. “Well that is just fucking awesome. God damn Fate. But here’s an issue you might be able to help me with—I’m just kind of *rounding* back to square one, here. *Where the hell is Rudy?*”

More shouts came from the hallways. Swords clashed. A zip of red magic beamed past the hole in the wall. Cato’s men streamed into the room. My guys backed up so they could.

A new threat had shown up.

“Ah. So. It has begun.” Cato stood from his chair. “I had no idea Andris would be so effective—he was the enemy I should have been watching closely. I misjudged. And now it will be up to you to set my folly to rights. But first, you need another lesson. Toa has been too easy on you.”

A blast of white hot magic slammed into me, throwing me back and plastering me to the wall. “I have magic to equal yours. We are on par, you and I.”

My lungs squeezed. Swirls started to block my vision. I grappled with the spell, just as intricate and fine as the one on that door. Sound cut out. My senses started shutting down. Air escaped my lungs and wouldn’t work its way back in.

“Embrace your magic. Don’t hide from it. Don’t struggle with it.

Embody it,” I heard through the din. Almost like it was said directly in my head. Those words were the only sound I heard.

Panic griped me as the air ran out. The pain from his spell set off alarms just as my vision started to fade.

He was killing me!

I sucked in more magic, filled to the brim, working at that spell. Trying to find the chink in the chain.

“*Embody it.*”

What the hell does that mean? I wanted to scream. I couldn’t though—I had no air.

My lungs burned. My body tingled fire. The magic threatened to overrun me, which wouldn’t kill me as fast as Cato planned to.

Black flog encased my brain. My eyes bulged.

Just need air. Just one gulp of air.

My consciousness started drifting. I reached out with magic, feeling for help. Touching on Charles and Jonas who were trying to work past a spell to get to me. To the strange but fascinating magic of Tim and his guys, sparkling green and earthy. I felt the jagged edges of someone bursting into the room looking for a link. I grabbed on.

My power flowed through me and into the person immediately. Joy dripped into me even as my life force dwindled away, my body and brain both starved for oxygen, while my blood pumped with the sweet elixir of magic.

That link cut out. Ripped away.

No. Transferred, somehow.

Suddenly I was on the precipice of a rolling, surging, flowing power exactly polarized to mine.

Another magical conductor!

Cato.

Of course it was. No one else would last this long without some sort of crazy-ass power. It was both great to know it could be done by me, and horrible to realize I had no way to overpower him. Not even with a link.

“*Embody it.*”

What the fuck does that mean?

And then I knew. As everything was slipping away, and my struggle for life faded, I let go. I let it all go. Threw the doors wide, stopped trying to

fight it, stopped trying to control it, and just surrendered.

Something clicked deep inside. Snapped closed. Aligned.

I took a huge gasp. The air was so sweet that it should've been illegal to be poured right into my lungs. The magic was so hot it should've burned me alive and saturated my body. My blood sizzled. My bones hissed. My fingers tingled.

I opened my eyes as laughter bubbled out. Elements danced all around me. Laughing and playing, magic invited me to join it. I didn't need to suck it in; I needed to simply flick the elements in a direction. I held hands with them at all times. Would hold hands, always.

"We are special, Sasha," Cato was saying in a hushed bubble that surrounded us. His eyes sparkled as they held mine. "We have a rare gift, and a dangerous burden. If we survive this day, I will show you."

"Why didn't you show me this sooner?"

"I had to know your merit, of course. Fate-touched does not always mean good. Nature is both brutal and beautiful. A forest fire, causing mass destruction and death, is necessary for rebirth and new life. I had to know which you were. One to destroy, or nurture."

"I hate that you are even more long-winded than Charles."

Cato laughed. With a flick of his hand, the bubble evaporated. Screaming and yelling assaulted me immediately. Swords clashed.

"What's happening?" I yelled, looking around wildly.

Mine and Cato's crew stood within the room staring out at struggling and fighting men and women I did not recognize. Mage June lay on the floor, unconscious—hers was probably the link I found. The door had been closed, and now only the hole in the wall stood agape. Except, those trying to burst in froze in midair amid sparks, which led immediately to screaming.

Cato had some sort of protective spell in place. I didn't have time to analyze, however.

"Andris has been busy. There will be a great cleaning of the Council today." Cato glanced over my people and let his eyes settle on me. "Rudy is unimportant. I had reports of one of your clan members—Jessie, I believe. He stole one of our vehicles shortly after your motorhomes exited the premises. If all goes well, he is still on your side. If not... hopefully he works with the enemy and you know how to track a cellphone."

"Jessie!" Hope surged into me. Whether he was a traitor or not, he

could definitely lead us to Andris. We just had to hope he still had his cellphone. And also that Charles knew the name of the nerdy guy in the mansion who always played video games. He was the electronic genius of the clan.

“Okay, we gotta go!” I slapped Charles to get him to focus. “We have to get out of here somehow.”

“What about Toa and Dominicus?” Charles yelled over the din.

“I will tell them whence you’ve gone.” Cato leisurely strolled toward the back of the room. “I am sure I will see them. Dominicus will be stuck in the middle of it. Until he learns of the more important battle being waged, of course. He will not resist Fate’s pull. But then, who among us can?”

“I am so tired of hearing about stupid Fate,” I muttered, the elements pulsing around me.

“Come out of there, old man! You’ve been crowned long enough!” A colossal guy bent to look through the mouth of the hole.

“Getting out of here is going to really suck,” Charles groaned, his grip tightening on his sword as he stared at the man.

“Here we are.” A click sounded at the back of the room, barely heard over the fighting outside. Cato gestured us closer as a small door cracked open. “Every important official has an escape chamber, whether they were told about it or not. I am a crafty old fool who has learned a thing or two in his years.”

“Please don’t ever be my enemy.” I rushed in that direction, Jonas and the wolves at my back.

“Where do you think you’re going?” The man straightened up, his stomach nearly filling the entire hole. Muscles waved, his limbs organizing something out there I wanted no part of.

The wolves loped out ahead of us. I paused for Cato as the spell on the house fluxed and bent. It pulsed again, a surge of color visible for one moment, before fading away into the light of the room.

“Oh dear, someone has unleashed a demon.” Cato waved me through. “That won’t be much fun.”

Unleashed sounded to me like something with free rein. Which sounded like a distraction Andris might use—let it loose to rip the place apart and take off so he wouldn’t be followed. It still fit.

A new blast of urgency hit me. I motioned for Cato impatiently. “No,

you go.” He was old after all. I half-worried Charles would have to carry him.

The wrinkles around his eyes creased as he smiled. “No, no. I will not be joining you. The battle lies beyond.”

“But—”

A blast took apart another chunk of wall, spewing wood and debris into the room.

“Go!” Charles yelled, shoving me through the door.

“But—”

My protesting didn’t matter. Charles picked me up and carried me through. We filed into a tunnel, pausing at a crossroads for the wolves to break up and scout it out, and then come back and stare at Tim.

“Right! Go right!”

The shoving started again as the weak protective spell on the house flashed.

“What about those plane tickets?” I yelled back.

Muffles and explosions echoed through the walls. We passed the opening of a corridor that carried echoes of battle, someone shuffling toward us quickly.

“Regardless, we gotta get out of here. Ann! *Ann!*” Tim yelled into what I assumed was the phone. “We’re headed outside!”

“She’s still inside?” Charles and I yelled together.

I tried to stop, but damned Jonas kept shoving.

“Yeah, we’ll be right there. No, she’s in a car at the north end. I got a text earlier. Keep going!” Tim shoved Jonas and Charles, who in turn shoved me.

Sprinting now, following the wolves’ lead. When they hit a questionable spot, they broke up, scouting out and coming back; so much faster on four legs. Through the middle of the building we wound until we neared the exit and I tripped over something in the way.

Charles scooped me up in a bear-hug before I could hit the ground. I was shoved roughly against the wall and smothered by a hard back. Opposite, Jonas and Tim held a smaller creature against the wall.

“Please. Please don’t hurt me,” a man begged.

I punched Charles to get him out of the way and stepped forward, recognizing that voice. “Congratulations, Harry, you just got picked by Fate. Welcome aboard.”

I turned toward the wolves. “Bring him. They’ll just kill him inside. He’s too nice for his own good.”

“But my mistress. She’s fighting in there,” Harry pleaded.

“Stop talking like that, Harry.” We ran, Harry carried along with us. “And if she left you behind, she couldn’t have been that worried.”

“She was protecting me. She told me to hide until it’s over,” Harry sobbed.

“Jesus.” By the disgust in Jonas’ voice, I could tell he wanted to drop Harry. He did not like sniveling.

“Well, you’ll hide a little further away than she originally planned. But don’t worry, if any of us, or them, live through this, we’ll get you back to her.”

His whimper indicated I could’ve broken that to him a little easier than I did.

I blamed Cato for putting the thoughts in my head.

Chapter 11

A spell whizzed by Dominicus' ear as he ran through the halls, trying to reconnect with Toa. He'd been sitting with Kallias, discussing plans, alliances, and the sudden interest in Sasha and Stefan Cato had taken, when news reached them of Andris' and Trek's escape from one of Kallias' informants. They barely had time to speculate when the door splintered and three guys came barreling through.

Kallias was getting up in his years, soft and complacent—he hadn't stood a chance against the behemoths that surged into the room, not even with his magic. Tessa, a quiet female with lethal sword-work, also backed by Kallias, stood over his lifeless body, smeared in blood, after she and Dominicus had dispatched the challenge.

There was no time for tears, though. Whoever had freed Andris had started a war, and they were cleaning out the good Council members to be replaced by the bad. Or not replaced at all. Wiping everyone out meant starting from scratch. It meant no leadership for their people. It meant their enemies had time, space and resources to chase after their expectations.

It meant the Europeans had a green light to move in and take over.

Dominicus had just landed in hell and he didn't know who was a good guy, and who was bad.

He also had no idea where his daughter was.

He dodged the swing of a glimmering red axe waved by a human without magic. The color wasn't from power. Dominicus' sword swung, slicing through an arm—giving him time to slip by. He didn't want to kill anyone until he knew more.

Breath coming out in even pants, he dodged a fist and ducked past an attack. A door swung inward as he raced past, someone in white robes rushing out with a gun and a sword. A second glance revealed Filacious raising his gun, aiming for Dominicus.

So, bad guy, then.

He slowed in time to heft a knife out of his belt. He threw it up, snatched it by the blade, aimed and threw in a few quick movements. The blade blossomed in Filacious' neck. The gun clunked to the floor.

“Dominicus!”

Toa's white head appeared down the hall, his arm waving an arc through the air. A large man stepped up to his side, knife held low, body bent.

"Look out!" Dominicus screamed.

The blade sparkled once as the dawn light from the windows caught it, before it stabbed towards Toa's side. The breath caught in Dominicus' throat... for no reason. A flick of Toa's hand and the man flew back. Toa followed with a sword through his attacker's gut. Feathery blond hair swished from Toa's face as he once again faced Dominicus.

"You're a pain in the ass, but I'd hate to lose you," Dominicus breathed when he got closer.

"Yes, well. Where is Sasha?"

Dominicus spun toward someone with a leather vest and long curved blade. Mage Marius jogged to a stop in front of them. Blood spattered his face. "Have you seen Constance? I lost her in the lobby. It's mayhem."

"Yes. I saw her with Cato." Toa glanced around to pinpoint his location. His head whipped north. "They were headed that way."

"Towards the demon." Mage Marius spat out a curse under his breath.

"A demon?" Dominicus breathed. "Andris."

"It would seem. We better help. I know how to cut one off from the source." Toa's head dropped. "We should've killed him when we had the chance."

"I would've," Dominicus pointed out. "As I recall, you fought against it. Wanted to get Cato active again, if I remember correctly. Thought that would wake him up."

"Can you guys argue another time?" Mage Marius started off at a jog, Dominicus and Toa right behind him.

"Sasha?" Toa reminded as they ran.

"I haven't seen her. I heard a whisper that Stefan might've been taken. Hopefully, if that was true, she went for him before all this."

"She got out?"

"I don't know."

As they ran, Mage Marius shot a grayish-white ball in front of him. It pulsed and throbbed through the corridor ahead of them, causing anyone in the way to flee lest they get trapped in it.

"I have not seen a spell like that travel so quickly," Toa said.

They emerged into the wide open, colors whirling and moving as

swords slashed and jabbed. A howl sounded way in the front, a claw rising over the heads and hacking down with incredible force. A group of people fought, working together, trying to bring the thing down.

At the front stood Cato, ten yards from the front entrance, leaning against a couch with his head down and eyes closed. Five men stood around him as protection, facing off to a group of six on the attack. Two lay dead and bloody on the floor, eyes staring. There was no way to determine who the dead belonged to—whether it was the attackers, the defenders, or both. Beyond them fought a crowd of people and one intensely strong demon, so powerful that it stood completely corporeal, moving so fast its limbs got lost in a blur.

“I know how to cut it off from this world,” Toa shouted as he ran up, a wary-eyed defender of Cato stepping to cut Toa off.

Cato glanced up and looked at Toa out of a face lined with fatigue. “Link with me. Pay attention to how you do it.”

“I know how to link,” Toa grumbled as he stepped forward.

Dominicus turned to the six attackers, all tired and drawn. They’d obviously been ordered to kill Cato, but looked like they knew they were no match for his defenders. The question was: would they die trying?

“Are you linked with anyone else?” Toa asked above the demon’s roar. It slashed through someone, ripping the body in half.

“Three, but they are secured in the rooms.”

“Is Constance with them?” Mage Marius asked in a harried voice.

“Yes.” The word was nothing more than a wheeze.

“Hurry Toa,” Dominicus called, stepping forward with a grin for the would-be attackers. Grins with swords always threw people off. “It’s probably sucking all the energy out of him.”

“You act as if I have not done this before.”

“Even in the middle of battle you’re snotty.”

“Must you two always fight?” Mage Marius asked. He whisked an intense spell up and fired at one of the attackers. As if shot by razor blades, gashes opened up half the male’s body. Blood seeped out from over a hundred cuts.

“Learned something from the human, eh?” Dominicus asked with a welling of pride.

“Anyone can get lucky.” Mage Marius lifted his chin in defiance.

“Uh huh.”

“You have the same power as her...” Toa’s breath drifted away into the room, colored with shock. “One in a million. How have you kept this a secret?”

“Notice how you are linking. I do not link like others.” Cato leaned heavily on the couch, his eyes fluttering, his breath forced out in pants. “This is to protect you. Sasha does not know how, though. You must adapt her to human magic. You must show her...”

“Talk after!” Dominicus roared. “Get that thing out of here.”

The demon howled, its monstrous jaws snapping. The tiny black eyes stared directly at Toa. Horrible scrapes and scratches hissed out of its mouth, trying to speak.

“Please tell me you don’t understand it,” Dominicus mumbled.

Cato slumped to the ground, face drawn and white. Toa staggered forward and braced himself. “Dominicus, I need more.”

Dominicus felt out and linked immediately, feeling a huge chasm open up before him filled with a pit of infinite magic. A sea of it, huge waves swirling and crashing, kept at bay. Toa didn’t need power, he needed energy.

Finally, Dominicus completely understood what Sasha had and what Cato had. They would never run out. They would never yank and twist and pull, trying to get every last drop of the elements to accept the invitation into their body. They had all that at their disposal, constantly. Instead, they would not remember to turn it off, and the magic would rage through their bodies, draining them of every last drop of energy until it completed its directions.

Dominicus had never felt so happy to have the kind of magic he did, even though he wasn’t white. It could be worse. It could be infinitely worse.

“Miraculous,” Cato breathed, his body limp as it rested against the back of the couch where he sat. “I would not have thought to go in that way. Much easier, though much more strain magically. More to do.”

“He never stops talking,” the defender next to Dominicus muttered in companionship as the last “maybe I just won’t bother” attacker turned and found somewhere else to be. “On and on he goes.”

As an afterthought, he nodded at Dominicus. “I’m Jim.”

Energy sapped from Dominicus’ body as he stood and waited. “Dominicus. He say anything about the black human?”

“Black human? The one with Julius?”

“No, not skin color. Black, as in magic level.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, that other guy is red, I think.”

“A black level *female*.” Dominicus had the impression this guy wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed.

“Oh right. Yeah, she took off with a bunch of wolves. Can you believe that? Intelligent wolves. It’s weird, man. An animal... that is a human. Anyway, he kept muttering about a link reformed or some damn thing. Said she was going to fight some kind of fated battle, or some form of stupid fantasy shit. I’m not into that kinda stuff. More a mystery guy, myself.”

Dominicus no longer had the energy to punch him in the mouth to shut him up, but he really wanted to. “Where?”

“Where’d she go, do you mean? Oh, she took off down that secret corridor with all them animals and whatnot. Gonna grab a plane to—somewhere. Oh wait—they didn’t know where. That’s right.”

With a final roar that shook the building, the demon dissolved, splashing the floor with thick black sludge. A weight snapped free from the center of Dominicus’ chest, having him pitching forward without the energy to put his hands in front of his face. His face slapped off the ground.

Cato sat right where he was. He did not bother moving. “As I was saying...”

Jim rolled his eyes and jerked his head. “See? Picking right up where he left off—that’s how much the guy talks. You need a hand up, man?”

“You need to push her harder, Toa.” Cato panted for a moment, his breath ragged. “You need to get her on the brink before she will open up to it. She’s a scrapper. She didn’t grow up poor, but she grew up deprived. She fights for survival with her teeth. She needs to be on that stake, with the flames licking at her feet, before she’ll fully give in to it.”

“There he goes with that black foot again. You’d think it was some kind of trophy.” Jim shook his head and glanced out at the battle still raging on.

“She has come extremely far in just a few months,” Toa answered just a tinge defensively.

A huge male with blood splatting half his body jogged out of the crowd. His fierce eyes found Cato, half-dead and exhausted, sitting on the ground. His eyebrows dipping low, he started forward.

“I got this, bro.” Jim jogged forward with his sword. Two other guys jogged forward with him.

Good. Dominicus didn't have much left. Not at the moment, anyway. He needed a Gatorade.

Cato sighed in fatigue. “Well, we will part here. I have to rest before I can be of any help. I'm not sure what state this place will be in, but if I see the other side of it, we will meet again.”

Toa glanced up at Dominicus with a confused expression. Dominicus said, “We have some traveling to do.”

Chapter 12

The canvas hood was ripped off of Stefan's face. He yanked at his arms, now tied to a feeble wood chair, ascertaining they were still bound. His legs were similarly tied.

He stared at Andris who stood in front of him. Stefan surveyed the dimly-lit room. Candles flickered on shelves and stands, like something out of a Renaissance painting. A large, perfect circle, painted with what looked like a stencil, decorated the ground in the middle of the open space. Males and females stood around, loitering in corners. If they'd all worn capes, Stefan would've thought they were on a movie set.

"When do you start filming?" Stefan asked, rolling his head to loosen up his neck. He'd fallen asleep in the motorhome on the way here. The drug had worn off and very minute impressions of Sasha had bled through the link. Her emotions colored him with determination, power and strength; all things that said she was kicking ass. It'd relieved him enough to catch a few hours of sleep while he could.

He still felt her, however distantly. Determination still bled through more than anything else. His heart swelled at the same time as it bled. He would never see that remarkable female again. He'd never feel her silky skin brushing against his body, or encourage her soft mews of delight. He'd been the happiest of his life with her. If he went for eternity, just him and her, with nothing else in the world, it would be plenty more than he had before her.

But at least she will live on.

He took a deep breath and refocused on Andris, directing the crew of four that lead something resembling a stubborn goat.

"You stopped to pick up a goat?" he asked, glancing around the sparse room. "Couldn't find one any closer? Where are we, anyway? In a gym?"

Andris turned and studied him for a second. "You find this silly. Yes, I agree. The pentagrams and candles—it's all a bit ridiculous. But I had human advisors who practiced this sort of thing—when they weren't fixing computers or playing Dungeons and Dragons, that is—or whatever that asinine card game is. They set it up this way, and since it worked, I continued."

“You *had* human advisors?”

Andris turned back to the circle where the goat was being chained to the floor in the middle. “They taught me a great deal. And then became redundant.” He smirked. “Well, actually, they became the sacrifice to call a demon. Poetic, I thought.”

“Did you plan to get caught? By us? And taken to the Council?”

The goat bleated as the helpers moved away.

“I did not, no. As I said, you’ve done nothing but get in my way since the beginning of this enterprise. But, I am ever an improviser. Also well-connected.”

Stefan couldn’t argue with that. The male got out of the dungeon, got Trek out of the dungeon, and both of them away from the compound without any problem whatsoever. He was good at what he did— Stefan had to give him that.

Andris gestured for one of his staff to approach, saying to Stefan, “And no, to answer your question. I did not stop to pick up a goat. I stopped to pick up something infinitely more valuable. If you travel too far, the blood link is nothing more than an echo. I like to be apprised of my possessions at all times.”

“Ah.” Stefan glanced around the room for the person of which he spoke. “Does she know she is a possession?”

“She knows that she has landed a handsome, rich, powerful, dominating man that gives her the best sex of her life. She cherishes the ground I walk on.”

“But does she know she’s a possession? Females really hate that.”

Andris scoffed. “You’re too soft. Human women need to be taken in hand. Once they submit, they flow along nicely. Except for that harebrained human you found. Bad luck.”

Stefan smirked. Not at all. The sex was better with the feisty ones. Conversations were more colorful with someone that could match one’s intellect. And his mansion would run ten times more efficiently with someone that was strong enough to steer the ship on her own.

A hard stab of longing pierced his chest. He muffled the link, just in case any of that bled through. Andris was right, all the distance only gave echoes of feeling, but with him and Sasha, it would be enough to make her come running with a sword and a snarl.

Mate.

“Now,” Andris interrupted his thoughts as he moved toward the circle, book in hand. “Let’s give this goat a purpose, shall we?”

“You know, if you gave that goat to a family in an impoverished nation, it would have a longer-lasting purpose.”

Andris swiveled his body to stare at Stefan. “Since when are you so light and carefree? Is that what hanging around humans does to a male? Turns him nonsensical and delirious?”

“Well, now you’re just saying words.”

Hazel eyes stared hard. His head tilted a fraction, calculating. “Maybe I should’ve taken her. Maybe used her while you watched. I think that would’ve gotten the reaction I was looking for.”

Stefan shrugged, unconcerned. *But you didn’t.* She was safe, and she’d look after everything Stefan spent his life to build. His job as a mate and protector would be upheld.

“I doubt she will live through the siege on the Council, but if she does, maybe I’ll target her when we’re done. Use her for a demon.” Andris continued to stare.

Stefan shrugged again. “If you’re irritated by *my* always getting in the way, I can’t imagine you’ll find *Dominicous* and *Toa* any fun.”

Andris’ look darkened. He nodded to a helper, handed off his book, and stalked over to Stefan in heavy, angry strides. With two hands he ripped Stefan’s shirt open, revealing his chest. The next moment a knife flashed.

Stefan sucked in a breath as the steel bit into his flesh, slicing the skin across his pec. Pain bled across his senses, merging with the throbbing in his skull that hadn’t gone away. He opened his eyes slowly, knowing Andris waited for a reaction of some kind. For anger.

Instead, Stefan smiled. “Jonas would really love you.”

Rage clouded Andris’ gaze. Crimson crawled up his face. Just as quickly, a cold, calm rationale settled down, muffling the loss of control. His lips curled slightly. “I see. Yes, you always had ways of manipulating. Clever. And maybe, were we playing fair, I would have met my match. Unfortunately, playing fair is merely a detour to getting where you need to be.”

“Poetic. Did you find that on a tee-shirt?”

Unblinking hazel eyes revealed the turmoil within. The spoiled kid

that wasn't getting his way. It almost made Stefan chuckle, but not yet. Someone laughing at him would certainly push him into a frenzy, but there wasn't enough pressure to make the frenzy escalate into carelessness. Not yet. Stefan would save the laughter for a pivotal moment—if one ever came.

After another moment of collecting himself, Andris turned slowly and stuck out his hands for the book. "I hate this old magic. It takes so long."

Two helpers entered the circle, one carrying a velvety blue pillow in two outstretched hands, and the other with hands folded down his front. They stood at the head of the goat, which pushed forward, seemingly looking for food. Andris walked in as well, stepping between the males with open book in hand. He glanced down at the pages, and then started to speak what Stefan thought might be Latin in a flat, monotone voice.

So he'd been right. Andris would create a lesser demon first. One he could control. Maybe even one that could help control a more powerful demon—who knew? Certainly not Stefan; he'd never seen old magic performed before now. And on first appearance, it seemed archaic and laughable. If he hadn't fought what this type of magic could produce, he'd dismiss it out of hand.

The speech stopped. Andris handed off the book and held out his hand. Like a surgeon, the helper plucked a marble-handled knife off of the pillow and placed it carefully in Andris' palm. The helper then bent to the goat, holding the neck steady with eyes downward.

The goat bleated, nipping at Andris' pants. Andris flinched as he got in position—the goat's teeth apparently nipping more than clothes—and held the knife above the goat's neck. Another helper shuffled quickly into the circle, an ordinary galvanized bucket held between two hands.

"You think you could've at least sprung for a silver bucket or something. Make this a little more festive." Stefan's voice fell on deaf ears. Andris was completely in the moment.

When the third helper was in position, the knife came down hard and fast. At least it was fast.

Andris started speaking again, which had started to sound more like chanting. The helper poured the blood around the floor, covering the carefully painted circle in messy splatters. After, they moved to the top of the circle so Andris could dip a paintbrush into the leftover blood, and paint signs of some sort on the hardwood, gym-type floor.

It really did look like a gym. Near the back, pushed against the ceiling, he could swear were basketball hoops. And was that a stage lurking behind the large drapes of curtain?

A bark dragged his attention back to the ceremony. The goat's body had been carried away, and a dog was being led to the circle.

"Ah now, that just isn't right," Stefan said as the mostly docile animal's collar was snapped onto the chain.

The chants began again, all the helpers now saying them. As a group, they moved to the outside of the circle, spreading out along it, speaking together. Louder and louder their voices rose, carrying across the open space. Males and females alike, those hanging around the edges, began creeping forward with their swords and knives, eyes intent on the circle.

Candles flickered harder. A soft breeze tickled Stefan's face, and then blew. Swirls of dust got caught in the air currents, funneling toward the circle like a cyclone. Faster and faster. A soft moan rumbled the floor. The chants increased. Louder. The rumble turned into a shake, vibrating the entire facility. Stefan's chair jumped, his weight not enough to hold him down. The dog started barking, pausing only to snap at the air with bared teeth.

The chanting competed with the barking and the rumble of the ground. A slice of light tore through the center of the circle. A translucent shape emerged, wisps mostly, the shape hard to determine. The dog snarled, biting at solidifying air, right before two impressions of hands bent down and snatched up the dog.

Stefan cringed at the sound of a spine breaking. His body flexed, his instinct saying to rip out of his bonds and kill Andris where he stood. He wouldn't make it far, and he wouldn't make it out of here. He could do nothing for the dog, but he knew he couldn't let this continue. He might be sentenced to death, but if he went, he'd take Andris down with him.

The book was thrust to the side as Andris worked his magic, encasing the circle in an orange glow. The demon, a small, not completely solid form, rushed the circle, gnashing at the barrier with long, curved teeth. The orange blinked. Andris' brows lowered.

The orange magic—Andris' magic—was just a precaution, Stefan realized. Andris used it in case the old magic of the blood circle and chants failed. He had a pretty good handle on all this, but not a great one.

The demon scurried to the side of the circle where Andris stood. Its

black eyes stared out.

“I command you to stand in the center of the circle!” Andris waited expectantly.

The demon growled, but took a step back.

“To the center!”

Another growl, and another grudging step.

“Now. I will give you your instructions.”

Stefan listened carefully, monitoring the fight of the demon for control. Monitoring the strain in Andris’ face and the sweat beading his brow. This was hard for him, maintaining ownership. Without the utmost concentration, that meager thread would break. And then the demon would get loose like all those before it.

The only comforting thing about this was that Andris was in way over his head, but wouldn’t admit it. Breaking his concentration and sabotaging this circus would be easy. Unfortunately, if he did call a stronger demon, Stefan wouldn’t be around long enough to watch what happened when it ripped control out of Andris’ grasp.

Chapter 13

“He’s alive!” I repeated as we tore up the street. “I felt him. I know I did. He is alive.”

“He’s gone now?” Tim asked from the front seat of a stolen vehicle. Well, not exactly stolen—kind of given to us with the help of Jonas and Charles’ pheromones. I did make them pick a jerk big-shot getting picked up in a limo, though, so I didn’t feel as bad about leaving him and his driver in the pick-up zone of the airport with a dazed, blinking stare.

Sorry, guy, but this is important.

“He muffled it. But that means he doesn’t want me to feel whatever he’s feeling. Which means he’s trying to die in silence like a pining bitch idiot.” I hit the seat, just for some way not to cry. Then, because my eyes still filled with tears, I punched Charles.

“After this is over, you will get paid back ten-fold, just so you know.” Charles rubbed his arm. “But I will also take this moment to compliment myself on teaching you to punch effectively.”

“How can you knit at a time like this?” Ann barked, staring at some cockeyed pink hat resting in Charles’ lap. Unfortunately, Ann had remembered the knitting supplies, but not the three men that were healing in the room next door. Charles got a mighty grin when he heard that little nugget.

“It relieves stress, which you know. If you didn’t want me to knit, why did you bring my knitting supplies, hmm? I will answer that for you—you did it because you were being thoughtful. And when a woman is thoughtful, it means she wants sex. You didn’t have to try so hard, though, I would’ve—”

“Enough.” Jonas stared at me. “What’s next?”

“We’re almost at the mansion.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, almost wishing I could tell Charles to keep prattling on about trying to get laid. It lightened the mood and made me stop focusing on the intense pounding of my heart. “I have to bring everyone to my cause.”

“They will be wrapped around your cause already. Getting Stefan back is all your causes.” Tim turned in the seat to look back at me. “You just have to make sure it is *your* cause. That they follow *your* command.”

“I know this, you guys. I know what I’m up against.” I stared at the trees flashing by.

The flight had only been an hour even though we’d had to wait for half the day to get on it. Thanks to those helpful pheromones, we pretty much just skated right through all the airport hubbub to get to the gate. A few humans weren’t dazed—pheromones didn’t work on anyone that couldn’t be hypnotized, apparently, or so Toa had said—but none of them were in an authoritative position, and instead just stared in slack-jawed shock at huge, human-looking predators stalking through a brightly-lit airport with strange and scary tattoos snaking around their arms.

“Jameson is who you need to convert first. He will call everyone to his lead. But *you* need to assign him the power, not let him take it for himself, or he’ll never be yours.”

I turned to Jonas with murder in my gaze. “I. Know.”

“Just drop it, bro. Let her stew in it for a while—hey,” Charles raised his hands in surrender, yarn dangling from one of his needles, “I’m just saying. Let her wrap her head around it and she’ll figure it out. Lecturing just makes her shut off.”

“Do you want to take over helping her, *child*? You think you can do a better job?”

“Would you guys *please* shut up?” I rubbed my temples as the limo stopped in front of a quiet mansion. Dusk was settling gracefully over the large structure, its perfectly manicured lawns and artfully decorated façade ringing *home*. The first home I could remember that was *mine*. A place I belonged. And I belonged there because Stefan belonged there. And now he was in danger and possibly dead—

The slap rang out in the car.

“Thanks Jonas, I needed that. But can you find a different way of toughening me up, because that’s starting to hurt.” I rubbed my face and took a deep breath. The mansion was quiet on the outside, but inside, everyone was hopefully primed and ready, just waiting for the location.

“I don’t know that I have the strength for this. He is Stefan’s right-hand man.” Panic squeezed my chest.

“Get your shit together, human, or I’ll beat you senseless.”

I rolled my eyes and climbed from the car. Extremely on-edge and worried Jonas was so much worse than any other kind of Jonas. The concern

was touching, yes, because he was just as terrified as I was about Stefan, and me not pulling this off, but *really* guy? A bit overbearing.

I took another deep breath as everyone gathered around me. We didn't have time to lose, it was true. We'd heard from Jessie, thank god. He'd called Jonas from a payphone. When he saw Stefan dragged from his room, Jessie sprinted after them immediately. He'd thought about overtaking them, but known he'd never overcome a large group of males, so he'd followed instead. Somewhere along the way his phone had died, but now he huddled outside of a rundown old sports center about ten miles outside of town next to a decrepit old payphone. While it was probably still in use for sports when Andris showed up, there was no way that was its purpose now.

"Tim, your people are in position?" I queried.

"There or on the way. All in animal form and staying to the sidelines."

I turned to Charles. "And the witches, they've been notified? Warned of the dangers?"

"All headed to the site to check it out," Charles answered. "Whoever chooses to stay will wait for you there."

"They'll all stay," Ann remarked softly.

I nodded. They would. They were dear ladies, always ready to help a sister in need. I got a lump in my throat as I said, "I'm the last piece."

"Yup," Jonas confirmed.

"Okay. Bitch face on."

Charles nodded at me.

One last exhale and I was walking. Striding across that spongy grass, I headed straight for the front door.

My front door.

To my house.

Where I was mage.

Jonas stepped up before me and opened the door, standing aside so I could go through. A crowd of leather-clad warriors stood in an organized line at the ready, all eyes turned to me as I walked through the door. One or two people bent their heads, acknowledging my status.

I couldn't demand respect, I had to earn it. Starting now.

"Where's Jameson?" I asked Maggie, a woman as big as any man, standing to the side perfectly relaxed.

“He’s in the battle room, waiting for your call.”

I nodded and stalked ahead, Jonas and Charles following, Tim and the other shifters waiting by the door or outside.

I pushed through the door and found Jameson pointing at a map with three others standing by—Stefan’s strategy council, if I remembered correctly. I stood in the doorway, waiting for their notice. I hoped they didn’t notice my trembling.

Jameson glanced up expectantly. “Yes? Do you have a location?”

Indignation sparked my anger. “Yes? Is that how you greet your mage and acting commander?”

Jameson stood up slowly and turned to me. His tattoos flashed orange. The others around the table ignored me entirely.

No, this will never do

In a stern voice and commanding eyes, Jameson said, “You have barely enough knowledge to make a spell and *no* knowledge about leading warriors in battle. Since the Boss is gone, *I* am acting commander. Now, do you have a—”

I didn’t wait for what came next. He was challenging me, and I was pretty good about dealing with that from my last week at boot camp.

I flicked the magic poised around me, wrapped it around him with a solid grip, and thrust him across the room. I flattened his body against the wall and spoke in a gentle voice. “I would hate to lose you Jameson, because you have a lot of—don’t try to fight it. Your magic can’t compete with mine—okay, well, you brought this on yourself.” I squeezed the magic around him. “You see? Breathing was a luxury I granted you just then.”

I’d picked up a few things from Cato. They were awfully helpful.

I stared at his stern, impassive face, handsome and dashing. The longer I denied him air, though, anxiety started to creep in to his expression. His eyes flicked toward the other three around the table, who were looking now! Oh yes, they stared from him, to me, back to him. Not one dared to make a move.

His gaze settled behind me, then, checking out my backup. Jonas and Charles probably stood by, waiting patiently. No help there.

Finally, his gaze resettled on me. I had his attention.

I let the magic loosen up a little, controlling my face so I didn’t show my pleasure at gaining the upper hand.

“As I was saying.” I spoke in a normal tone, completely in control—or so it sounded. “I need you. I need you to monitor the warriors so that I may focus on the magic. Andris is, right now, summoning a lesser demon. Jessie is under the impression it is a trial run. I would agree—Andris would make sure he could maintain control before going big. But Stefan is up next, and I need you leading this clan in there so I can rain down terror. Do you hear what I am saying?”

I am in charge, did that come across???

A long second ticked by. Jameson nodded.

“Good.” I released the magic and turned to the map. “Tell me what we’re dealing with.”

It turned out that Jameson was something of a strategic genius. The man spent ten short minutes linguistically sprinting around a map before explaining his positioning recommendations. Helped with his two cronies, he had a full-scale attack expertly planned.

There was only one glitch. He hadn’t thought to include the shifters. And the ‘recommendation’ that he did turned into another stare-off in which he almost kissed the wall again. But I won, we brought in Tim, and we moved on.

I could not believe I didn’t piss myself in his stare, though. It was an intense ten minutes with a guy I barely knew who didn’t have Stefan’s or Jonas’ reservations about killing me. The man was terrifying. Stefan had chosen his backup well.

“Nice work,” Charles whispered as I strode past him into the hall. “That cat didn’t hold anything back and you still bowled him over.”

“She asserted herself, nitwit, which is all she was supposed to do,” Jonas growled as he followed me.

I stopped to allow everyone to go ahead of me so I could face the whole crew, which was a battle-hardened horde of probably a hundred. They stood in the first greeting room in the mansion, tightly-packed and awaiting instructions. “As you know, Stefan is being held captive in an old sports center in a desolate area. Warriors, you will section off with Jameson as your acting commander. He has his instructions and will carry them out until such time as Stefan is able to take over. Magic workers, you will come with me. Before you link or work your craft, you will wait until I address you. I know what we are up against magically—you’ve heard or seen firsthand when I

dealt with the last demon; I don't think I need to press this issue. However, if you don't follow my rule, I will deal with you as I see fit. Do you understand me?"

A small group of people nodded quickly.

"We will be working with the shifters. They are already positioned and in animal form. If you do not do your part, and *let them do theirs*, I will remove you from this battle, do I make myself clear?" The gravity in my voice filled the room, widening eyes and making Tim's eyes sparkle.

Many nodded, some said, "Mage," but all agreed. Good. Moving on.

"Any questions?" I glanced around, trying not to fidget or look impatient in any way. Stefan always stayed completely cool when addressing his people, as if his leadership was his right and he was simply enacting it. I hope I pulled off the same thing.

"What of the others? Of the captors?" someone asked from the back.

"Andris is mine. The others can meet their maker."

Shifting, nodding and wide grins lit up the horde. Jameson ticked his head—a nod he couldn't help. Apparently I'd said the right thing. Good times.

"Load up." I pushed through the room, through the aisle made out of bodies, to the front door. Everyone waited for me to pass, more nods granted this time around. More acknowledgement.

I no longer had time to care. With the fundamentals taken care of, I couldn't help feeling the urgency of the situation. I had to get to Stefan before things escalated.

"Where do you want me?" Harry asked in a shy jog beside me.

Oh yeah, the spare human. I'd almost forgotten about him.

"Can you fight?" I asked.

"Not very well."

"He was cowering in the hallway when we found him," Charles said.

Good point.

"Magic?" I tried.

"Some."

"Uh, okay, well, stick around, get a ride there, and... I guess we'll just see how it goes."

Harry nodded and fell behind.

"We'll probably have to use the fifth element for this one," Charles

said as he strode beside me, leading me to Jonas' black Hummer. Jameson also walked slightly behind, exactly where he would walk if I were Stefan.

What Charles said dribbled into my head. "The *fifth* element? Since when is there a fifth element?"

"The element of surprise! Everyone knows that!"

I rolled my eyes as Jameson said, "Can you take nothing seriously?"

"Bro, you do you. Let me do her. She doesn't have a tree up her ass like you do; she needs to keep things light or she might blow something up."

"He's just pissed he's got no sense of humor," Jonas reflected in his customary growl as he climbed into the driver's seat.

"Says Sir Chuckles-A-Lot," Ann laughed as she jogged past.

Why me?

Chapter 14

The car crunched to a stop in the still of the night, the gravel loose and dirty. A large building hunkered a hundred yards ahead of us. Old and decrepit, the structure looked about ready to collapse. A collection of cars and two motorhomes waited in the parking lot in front, silent and empty. Everyone was inside playing their demonic games.

I took a deep breath as I quietly exited the car. All around me huge warriors collected in an organized horde. The magic users collected off to the sides. Beyond them, in a cluster, stood my girls—my witches. Magic users like me. Birdie had her hands on her hips, as usual, and Delilah picked at her nail as she stared at the distant building. The twins looked around with wide eyes and faint smiles, somewhat dense but more lovable for it.

I was so relieved that I wanted to rush over there and give them a bear hug.

“Okay, Jameson, work with Tim and get this place surrounded. I’ll take the magic users and see if we need to knock down any spells.”

Jameson nodded and stalked off to the side. Tim stepped up to me, his eyes serious and intense. “Don’t sacrifice yourself tonight. Don’t do something that will get you killed needlessly. I don’t know Stefan that well, but if he was anything like me, he would want you safe. He wouldn’t want you killing yourself for him.”

I stared into those brown eyes and saw something I hadn’t noticed before. My stomach swirled with butterflies. “Okay.”

He held my gaze for a second longer before glancing at my lips and walking away.

“A bit gooey for friendship...” Charles nudged my arm.

“Don’t tell Stefan,” I murmured, heading toward the magic users. “He would think it was more than it is and it will make it that much harder for the two to get along.”

“Oh, he already knows. A guy looks out for that kind of stuff.”

“Great.” I wouldn’t think about that now. I put on my bitch face and stalked over to the magic users, motioning for the witches to join us.

“More magic users! Wow!” Harry, who had become my shadow, smiled at the witches. Who ignored him.

“So they got the Boss, huh?” Birdie gave an acknowledging nod to the group.

“Yes. Thanks for coming.” I gave her a shaky smile, trying to bottle up the emotions threatening to break loose and pour out through my eyes.

“Well, what’s next? My ankles are killing me from standing around all night.” Birdie pursed her lips and stared off at the building.

“There is a spell around it,” Delilah noted quietly. “It’s the same sort of thing we saw at that park, and then with that demon. Probably the same guy. He’s pretty good, but not great.”

“If you ever get to meet Cato, you will just sit in an open-mouthed gape at what he can do.” I shook my head as I inhaled. “What does that spell do? Did you check it out?”

“It alerts those inside of someone entering the building, I think. Pretty basic premise with a few embellishes to make unraveling it a little more difficult.” Delilah chewed her lip.

“My, my, you’ve been paying attention in magic class.” I smiled at her, unable to keep the pride from showing on my face.

I turned to the clan magic people. “Zeke, link with Delilah and go take down that spell. You remember the pitfalls of linking with human magic, right? You have to keep it balanced for best effect.”

“Yes.” Zeke’s eyes hit Delilah. “C’mon.”

Her shy smile competed with a business-like furrowed brow. Apparently she thought Mr. Zeke was attractive. *All these people were attractive.*

I addressed the rest of the group. “As soon as that spell comes down, I’ll give Tim and Jameson the signal. I’ll send four of you in with their front line to combat any magical attacks. The rest will hang back with me until the way is cleared. Then we are going to bust in there and find Stefan. Okay? Pretty simple.”

“Pretty simple until shit goes sideways,” Olivia said, a middle-aged woman with curly red hair and aggressive attack spells. She always went in first, and apparently, killed on sight. She was not one to mess with.

My elements around me shifted and swayed, the magic from the large spell unraveling and rushing back into nature around us. I gestured the first team forward as I signaled the warriors. Tim and Jameson both turned to get their people ready.

I jogged forward behind a wave of leather-clad people. A mountain lion—Ann—gracefully loped over, accompanied by a huge jackal—I had no idea who that was, but they were my protection unit.

“Hey guys,” I whispered.

“Oh wow.” Harry nodded in appreciation. “I haven’t seen shifters fighting in battle.”

One of the twins—Jen possibly, but it was hard to tell—reached out to pet Ann. Apparently she’d forgotten for a moment that A, that was a person, and B, we were about to go into battle.

“Damn it, my head is scattered to hell.” I massaged my temple.

“Focus on the small things,” Jonas said quietly. “There go the first wave. Empty your mind and let your instincts take over. Let your muscle memory lead you. Take your head out of it.”

Okay. No problem. I could do this.

I wonder if Stefan knows we’re here... I wonder if he’s okay.

I shook my head. And tried to do as Jonas said.

The night caressed me; young and just beginning, it covered the scene in a velvety blanket. The stars twinkled merrily above us, accenting a half-moon climbing the sky. I felt the elements all around me, joyous and blissful, always within immediate reach. The magic of the witches rose and swept me up; unity and togetherness, not linked but still inclusive. It lightened my heart and sang through my blood.

“Okay, battle time.” I pushed forward, a group of warriors parting to wrap me in their folds. Jonas and Charles joined them easily, all members of the Watch, used to fighting and working together. Used to protecting their key asset.

They were officially part of my team. And damn that felt good.

Yelling broke out. A growl tore through the serenity of the night.

“Here we go!” I jogged forward as our warriors pushed into the building, swords flashing.

“Did we bring any guns?” I asked a muscular arm next to my face. I couldn’t see who it belonged to.

“Guns don’t kill magic. Magic kills magic.” Sounded like José, a guy on the younger side that took everything way too seriously. He wasn’t telling a joke just then.

Which made me chuckle.

“No, we didn’t bring any. Should’ve, though.” Charles’ voice had lost all humor. Fighting time was drawing near.

A loud bang sounded to our right; someone breaking the lock on a door. Three people pushed in, not meeting resistance of any kind.

“Through there!” José pointed.

As one, our unit changed course, aiming for the door. A blast of red shot out—a spell missing its mark. I threw up a shield and pushed past the muscles to the front, Charles next to me immediately.

“Let me go first,” he yelled over a loud, ground-shaking roar. Tim had changed.

“I have a shield up. No one is going to be able to—” I cut off as a stream of light black smacked into my shield. My teeth chattered. My feet stopped moving. I stared at my spell in front of me, slightly singed where the attacking spell had hit. It wasn’t as strong as mine, but it was exactly the same type of magic. And the same color.

“No fucking way.” I glanced up with wide eyes. A woman stood opposite us at the back of a room teamed with fighting and swords. Magic flew around her, all different colors, hitting off her shield, leaving her completely unharmed. A smug smile twisted her face as she stared at me; probably mid-thirties and gorgeous.

“She has black.” My voice sounded distant. The Watch around me had begun fighting, keeping me safe in a protective bubble. The magic users waited impatiently, needing to know what to do next. But I needed a moment to stare.

She started laughing at me—she wasn’t surprised that I existed. But I was sure shocked as hell to see her.

“They’ve got one of their own!” I bleated.

“Surprise!” Charles stepped forward with this sword to take out someone rushing at us while yelling.

“Damn it! And she’s pretty, too. What a bitch!”

“What does her being pretty have to do with anything?” Harry asked.

“I’m just sick of beautiful competition. C’mon, let’s beat her up!”

I shot a spell at her. Like acid dribbling down her shield, it ate away her power. I mixed the elements just right, and flicked another spell her way, so easy and effortless now that the magic hovered around me. Now that I didn’t have to fight the rush anymore.

That stupid smile melted off her face.

“What’s up, lady love? Not used to someone who you can dance with?” I shouted.

An expression of hatred stole her beauty. She fired away more spells. They were all fairly simple with no real flair, and certainly no intricacy. It was obvious Toa was a much better teacher than whoever had trained this girl. I blocked easily, my mind honing in. I was learning and seeing her construction. I noted the different spells and how she worked them. They were simple, yes, but she had a better handle on the principles of magic. She was not as strong as me, but more knowledgeable. She had the theory, but just lacked the application.

“What are you doing?” Jonas shouted, a splatter of blood making his face gruesome. “The Boss is somewhere in this hellhole. We don’t have time to stare.”

Damn it! I wanted to cry in frustration. I needed this woman. I needed her on my side. I needed her to train with me, and learn with me. She could pick up things from words where I couldn’t, and I could show her how to work it better. We’d be a great team.

But she was the enemy, and judging by her absolute aggression, loyal to the cause. I worked the elements and fired them out at her. She tried to unravel, but it was too complex. The first layer of the spell, intended to distract, fell away. The second layer eroded her shield in slashes. The third and most brutal bashed her, knocking her back and exploding in a system of shocks against her skin.

The scream wrenched the air, high-pitched and terrible.

“Cut off her magic and get her out of here!” I yelled at my magic users. “Use as many as you have to. I want her alive.”

“She’s dangerous,” Zeke yelled. “We can’t risk her getting loose.”

“We can talk to her—see if she’ll come around. She’s valuable, damn it!” I swung my most commanding stare Zeke’s way. “She might not know she’s on the wrong side. She might think she’s a good guy. Keep her knocked out if you have to, but keep her alive.”

Zeke grudgingly nodded and directed a few people to retrieve her body while the mayhem went on all around us.

“Hard to think you’re a good guy when you are killing people to make demons.” Jonas directed me forward as our people pushed in.

He had a point, but still. She might not be a bad person—maybe she was just misinformed.

Steel rang around us. Arms and bodies swung out. Teeth and claws tore through flesh. Our side had more bodies and better fighters, both. We pushed the enemy back. We forced through the melee, deeper into the building, following people yelling, “This way!” Or “Mage, through here!”

Jonas or Charles always had a hand on me, monitoring my position with touch. They’d trade off, one stepping forward to cleave someone out of the way, or the other doing it, but one always hanging back with me. The rest of the Watch clustered around the magic users, a shield of bodies, pushing us toward the end zone like a bunch of linebackers.

“Almost there,” Jonas said in an elevated voice so he’d be heard.

We pushed into a huge space, the windows all covered with black material. Gym floor, slick with blood, glistened beneath our feet. I slipped and was immediately steadied by Charles’ strong hand before I could hit the ground.

“Get him out of there before it kills him!” we heard.

My blood ran cold. Images of the masticated bodies I’d seen lying in circles flashed through my head. Stefan’s face imposed on those twisted limbs set my heart to throbbing painfully.

Without another thought, I sprinted, stumbling through bodies and sliding on the slippery gym floor. I shot sparklers into the sky and an explosion off to the right, getting people looking in different directions. I used the distraction to slide between huge warriors of both sides, bloodied and deadly. Near the front I heard it: the high-pitched squeal of what could only be a demon.

Panting and half-terrified, I pushed a wolf out of my way and got the first glimpse of the scene.

Stefan, head lolling, sat tethered to a chair in the middle of a circle. Blood dripped down his hands and onto the floor. His chest and arms were covered in wounds and more blood. One pair of bindings were broken at the base of the legs, but a fresh set put on. At least five stab wounds pumped blood out of his body; some superficial, but at least two fairly deep.

Andris stood at the top of the circle, ignoring the mayhem around him, working on calling something into that circle. Something to take Stefan’s offered soul.

I shot an exploding spell at Andris, only to hit off an intensely strong shield. He was linking with everyone around him; he must be.

Fine.

“Link up. Everyone link up!” I ordered, running forward. My Watch kept up as best they could, fighting around the cluster of magic workers clinging on to each other to stay together.

“Get them out of the battle zone!” Jonas roared. “Get the magic workers out of here. They don’t need to see what they’re doing to use magic.”

“I can’t link with them, Jonas.” I grabbed onto Zeke. “You have to stay with me. Be the focus point. I’ll tell you where to direct the spells and how.”

“I’m sure if you linked with all of us, we could sustain it,” Zeke yelled back, trying to be heard above the roaring of the wind. A small but rampant demon battled a group of shifters off to the right. The fighting thrashed all around us.

“You don’t understand. I have an endless supply of magic. It never runs out. I never have to strive to pull in more. It’d fill you up and keep looking for more.”

“Then why do you need us?”

“I need the energy. I need to link for energy.”

Zeke shook his head, frustration raiding the determination on his face. “Okay. Then let’s get to work.”

I pointed at Andris. “Work on that shield. Get me in there.”

I glanced at the demon to the right as a huge green sword swung into my vision. I didn’t even have time to open my mouth in surprise before it slashed down. Charles leaped in, faster than thought, stabbing the man in the arm and wrenching his hand. The trajectory of the sword altered at the last second, slicing across my upper arm.

I cried out, slapping my palm to the wound. Pain radiated outwards, burning my skin and searing down my arm. I pushed the pain away as I focused on the demon at large. It was small in comparison to what was coming, easy to knock out. But knocking that out would take at least half of my energy, and I’d need everything I had with my only linking partner all but unconscious.

“Shit, my magic sucks! C’mon Zeke, knock it out.” I grabbed his arm

and led him forward, trusting the guys around me to keep us safe. It was a lot of trust—the enemy knew who we were. Knew that we could tear this all down. We were target number one.

A flash of white blasted to the side, smacking into a wolf. I strained behind us, looking for the source, and connected eyes with the freaking caped crusader. “Trek’s here. Damn.”

I blocked his next spell and hurled a spinning razor ball at him. Some unfortunate shmuck got in the way, though, taking the pain. I fired off another, lobbing this one over everyone’s heads. He saw it coming and threw up a shield, the blast knocking him back. Some spell got through, but not much. I was stronger, but not by all that much.

“In the air!” Charles pointed next to my face. I had to take my eyes off of Trek for a moment to look at that circle.

The air sliced in half near Stefan, slowly, the fabric of air ripping apart. It was the demon’s big entrance.

“No!” A spell blasted us. My legs went gumby and spilled me onto the ground. I couldn’t see to shoot one back, so I threw up a shield to work out how to disentangle that spell.

“Get Delilah on that spell!” I yelled at Zeke. “This is taking too long. He doesn’t have any more time.”

Jonas hoisted me up and held me. I zipped another spell off, but that coward was playing hide-and-seek behind anybody he could. It didn’t matter if it was his enemy or not, if he didn’t get hit, he was happy. What a jackass.

“She’s working on it,” Zeke muttered, his voice lost in strain. “Just... trying to keep... the link balanced.”

“Wake up, baby. We need you,” I begged Stefan.

The slice in the air got bigger. Wind whirlpooled around the gym. Another blast hit my shield, weakening it. Too many. There were just too many elements to this battle. I couldn’t do all this alone.

“C’mon, baby, wake up,” I begged, another blast from Trek hitting me. Soon I wouldn’t be able to keep the shield over everyone. “Would someone just kill that fucking idiot!”

“On it!” Harry hollered.

Oh, great. The one that couldn’t fight.

The slice in the air became a hole. My fingers dug into Zeke’s arm, begging them to work faster. “Do you need more people to link with?”

“Can barely... hold this one.” Sweat drenched Zeke’s pale face. His body flagged.

I swore under my breath as something nearly invisible stepped into the circle.

“Oh God, no. Please, please no.” I wrung my hands. My heart thumped in my chest. The dust creature, seven feet high and packing so much damn power it prickled my skin, looked down at Stefan.

Chapter 15

“We need a miracle. Right now we need a miracle. Please,” I begged, tears clouding my eyes. “Please don’t take him. Please, please don’t take him from me.”

“Got it!” Zeke panted. The shield winked out. Andris tore his eyes away from the circle. From the nearly invisible creature stepping toward Stefan.

A blast of white hit my shield, knocking me forward. I zipped a spell at the guy right behind Andris—a really nasty one. It hit the center of his chest and exploded. The force slammed into Andris’ back, knocking him forward.

I was running a second later. Arm burning but forgotten, feet tingly from Trek’s spell, I didn’t care. I stumbled and slid nearer, Charles and Jonas racing to catch up. Andris stumbled past the blood line into the circle. The reaching claws of the demon stopped. Its head snapped up.

Andris’ arms flailed, windmilling, trying to get his balance. Eyes as big as the world, he stared at the demon.

“You offer yourself?” the demon rasped.

Charles crashed into a guy reaching forward to pull Andris out. Jonas stabbed his sword through someone stepping towards us. I reached the circle a moment later and shoved Andris as hard as I could.

He was bigger, stronger, but already off-balance. The momentum carried him forward, right into the demon’s waiting hands. Claws gripped his shoulders and jerked him off the ground. With strength no human could possess, the demon lifted Andris high over his head and said, “I accept your sacrifice. I will use it well.”

Andris’ scream was cut short in a stomach-turning crack. I heaved, averting my eyes, but stumbling forward nonetheless.

“No, Sasha!” Charles screamed. “You can’t go in there.”

“Someone has to pull Stefan out!”

A huge being loomed in front of me, leathery hide scaly and repulsive. A massive mouth grew a row of one-inch fangs. Claws clicked as they flexed. “This circle cannot contain me.”

I curled my fingers around the back of Stefan’s chair. My right arm

screamed in agony as I started to pull. The demon stood over, watching me. He found the sight of me in pain funny.

“Yes, I realize how dumb this is, but after I pull him a little more, I plan to stand in front of him, and then take control of you. Just so you know the whole gamut of my foolproof strategy.”

“You wish to control me?” Its scratchy laughter raked through my body, dizzying my mind.

I yanked again, Stefan impossibly heavy, one hand nearly useless. The chair groaned as it reached the back of the circle. Charles and Jonas pulled it to safety, and then grabbed for me. I was too quick, though. I shimmied away to the other side.

“Stay out of that circle, Sasha,” Charles begged. “That circle will contain it.”

“You did not tell him what I said.” Hollow eyes regarded me. “Why, I wonder.”

“This way, they won’t try to take me away.” My vision went foggy as it stared at me, reaching into me and squeezing.

“Control is mine. I am too powerful for you.”

I focused on Stefan. On our link. On his body pulling me closer, a chemical reaction born into us, made stronger by the blood link, but not made entirely by the blood link. Fate had chosen us for a reason.

I was his other half. I was the other part of his heart. I helped make up his soul.

I was his.

What I was not, was this filthy demon’s.

I grabbed onto our link with everything I had. Grinding my teeth, I ripped my conscious out of that thing’s grip. I stared at it, hard. I flexed my fingers. Then slapped at my wounded arm. Pain, the smelling salt of the moment, cleared the rest of my vision.

“You are mine!” I yelled at it. “You belong to me. *I command you.*”

Hopefully one of those phrases was the right one.

It stepped toward me. The haze resumed. I fought it off, bracing myself. I slapped my arm again and yelled. “I command you!”

It roared in my face, its putrid smell singeing my senses. But it didn’t push forward.

I slapped my arm again, pushing away those clouds. Focusing on

Stefan. Focusing on my love.

“Step back!”

It roared again. But haltingly, it took one step back.

“Another one you ass-face!”

No, I didn’t need to call it names, but it helped with the bossy factor.

Another step. One more roar.

“Okay, so... now what?”

“Disentangle it!” Charles yelled. “Get rid of it. Or whatever. Kill the fucking thing, Sasha!”

“I don’t have enough energy. Get Zeke. Get them to start working on it. I’ll start—I’ll lessen it, but they’ll have to finish it off.”

“Why?”

“Because this will kill me, Charles!” I cried.

“Then don’t do it. Hold it!” Panic lanced Charles’ voice.

“Get out of there, human. We’ll kill it with swords.” Jonas braced on the edge of the circle, the fear in his voice not for a battle with a demon. Not for himself dying.

For me dying.

I blinked back tears. Swords didn’t kill demons. They hacked them up, yes, but it would just take another sacrifice and regenerate its body. No, I had to do this. It had to be me. I knew how to do it, had the power to get a good whack at it, and was the only way they’d be able to cut it down with lesser magic after.

I slapped my arm again, clearing the fuzz. “Just stop trying. I’ve got you now.”

“You will get weak, human, and then I will kill you.”

“Ugh—you sound like Jonas.”

“I take that as an insult,” Jonas growled, inching right up to the circle. “C’mon, Sasha. Get out of there.”

I focused on that spell. On the lacy quality. On its lifeline connecting it to this world. Taking a hold of it, I felt Delilah’s magic holding hands with mine. Near me. Supporting. Working with Zeke and the large link everyone else had.

“Tell Delilah not to wrap her magic around me. A link will be established and it’ll wipe you all out.”

“Just come out of there and tell her yourself,” Charles whined. “Don’t

do this, Sasha. Just hold it, we'll find another way."

"I can't hold this forever, Charles." I slapped my arm and sat down heavily. Focusing on control, and that spell... I set the spell in motion to unravel it. I closed my eyes.

A roar assaulted my senses, but my control held. My spell toiled. Another roar—it knew what was happening. Its power in this world was draining, and draining my energy right along with it. My muscles sagged even as the creature did. Another roar, not as loud now.

Was that because of its power drainage, or because I was drifting away?

My body, so heavy, bent. I couldn't hold myself up anymore. I lay down, focusing solely on the demon and Stefan. On my control, and my love.

Each breath became laborious. Needles pricked my skin. Magic swirled around me, playful and happy, doing my bidding. Taking my energy to do so. Stealing my life as it worked.

Blackness clouded my vision. Arms encircled me and picked me up. My head lolled on a muscular shoulder.

"Open to link, Sasha. Open to link."

I weakly tried to push someone away. Barely holding on to the leash. Barely keeping in charge. "Can't."

"Open up to link!" Fingers pinched my face. Pads of fingers pushed open my eyes.

An angelic face with a halo of white. Heaven, then? The door to the afterlife?

"Link with me, I know how. Cato showed me!"

Cato?

Toa?

"How did you get here?"

Was that out loud? I couldn't be sure.

Energy sapped from my body. No more roars, so that was good. If there was, though, would I be able to hear it?

Eyes fluttering, I gave in. I opened up to the person shaking my face. I felt the sticky magic and connected, except... the configuration changed. Parts of the connection bent in on itself, twisting out of the way. Like wires, some joined, but others tied off.

I felt his energy pour into me in a sweet rush. More was coming in

than going out; as many magical people as possible flooded the link. It pumped into the spell, quickly. Gratefully.

My vision cleared slowly. My hearing turned back up. Dominicus held me with a dirty and disheveled Toa standing next to him, staring at the growling demon. Its claws clicked one last time before it vanished, a wash of sticky black coating the ground.

“We did it,” I panted, laying my head on my father’s shoulder. “Is Stefan okay?”

“He’ll live. Thanks to you, we all will.” Dominicus kissed my head and carried me out.

Chapter 16

I slept for a long time. My fingers entwined within Stefan's, I slept as he healed. His injuries weren't enough to kill him, and his concussion wouldn't have any lasting damage. Dominicus assumed that he'd tried to break free, but was one man against a great many—he never had a chance, but he never stopped fighting.

The first time he woke up, his eyes trained on my face for a long moment before he said, "You shouldn't have come for me."

He got a good slap for that comment. *Literally*. I slapped him in the face. I didn't even care that he was hurt; it was that stupid of a thing to say.

His answer was a smile and, "I love you."

Laughing, I scooped forward and kissed him softly. "I love you, too."

Two nights later—because really, a hurt arm and being tired were my only issues—I found myself striding through the hall with a sulking Charles behind me.

"Charles, aren't you a little old for the silent treatment?" I waited for a response. I didn't get one. "I had to do that. Otherwise, everyone would've died."

Empty space where words should go.

"Mage." One of the warriors in the hall saluted me. Another person nodded as I passed.

The hall in front of me parted of people as I strode through. Like it always did for Stefan. More so than it did for Jameson. The way I handled myself, and how I'd tried to sacrifice myself, secured me a great many votes of confidence. It obviously wasn't why I did it, but I loved it all the same.

I fit in, now. I had a position, and the respect to go with it.

I could barely contain my elated smile.

"Hey!"

I stopped as I turned a corner in time to see Ann limping up the hall. She still had three bandages, despite the fact that shifters healed at a pretty

fast rate. She'd been separated from us early, not being able to hold on to us with paws. She wound up with that smaller demon. Even at a low power level, it gave them plenty of problems.

"Hey, Ann, they let you out?" I asked.

Ann shook her head as she stepped around me. "Hey, loser."

"I know you like me, so you can quit calling me loser." Charles didn't crack a smile.

Ann's brow furrowed. She looked back at me. "What's up with him?"

"He's mad at me for almost dying."

"Ah. No gratitude."

"Exactly." I matched Ann's laughter. And then laughed harder at Charles' glower.

"Where we headed?" Ann asked with a chipper voice.

I motioned her on without saying a word. A moment later we turned into a room down the hall. A woman's still form lay on a bed, arms on her chest, eyes closed. A white sheet covered her from head to toe.

"She killed herself," I said quietly, looking at the second myth reincarnate. I had every reason to believe there were more of us out there; we just had to find them.

"What?" Ann stared, aghast. "Who?"

"That other lady. The black power. We held her without problem, but when she found out Andris was dead, she shot herself in the head."

Ann shifted to stare at me incredulously. "Where'd she get the gun?"

"They didn't frisk her. Zeke didn't think to tell anyone to—he was worried about assigning magical coverage—and the guards... are idiots."

A grunt sounded off near the door.

"Sorry Paul, but seriously. She could've had anything on her. Like a *gun*." To Ann I said, "She took down two people and then offed herself."

"Because Andris was dead?"

"Because Andris told her we'd rape and murder her anyway," Charles said disgustedly. "She didn't want to be defiled. She went on her own terms."

"Well, you do rape," Ann shot at Charles.

"They ask for it!" Charles snapped.

Ann held out her hands in a 'See?' sort of way. "They *ask* for it? That's exactly what every rapist says."

"I mean..." Charles huffed. "They go for us. If I just stand still,

humans will make use of my body. I don't force anything—they come to me.”

“You use the date rape drug,” Ann scoffed. “How is that okay?”

Charles was about to retort when I said, “It isn't. And it stops. I'm a human, I'm a co-leader, and that practice stops. Contrary to what I've heard, they don't do it *everywhere* else—Harry can vouch for that. It's a shit practice, and it stops.”

“I haven't even done that since I tried it on Sasha, anyway.” Charles wandered away toward the window with his arms crossed.

“Whatever happened to Harry?” Ann asked.

“He tackled Trek. Literally tackled the guy. They rolled around for a while before one of our people ended the fight.”

“How'd they end the fight?”

“We don't have Trek to worry about anymore.”

Ann's eyebrows crawled up her forehead. “Ah.”

“And you know what else?” I asked with a smug smile, leading the way out of the room.

“What?” Ann asked dutifully.

“Harry's lady love mistress, some clan leader in Arizona, is coming to personally collect him and take him home. With many thanks. I totally made an ally!”

Charles huffed. “We don't have any opposition from any clans. Why would we need an ally?”

“Oh, you talk to me when you want to crap on my parade, is that it?” I fired back.

“Don't you have knitting to do?” Ann asked with a mischievous grin.

“Yeah. I'm working on the key to your chastity belt.” Charles squinted at her.

“It's going to take more than an ugly hat for that. In fact, you are quite possibly *making* my chastity belt.”

“Gods help me, you girls are a couple of bitches.” Charles crossed his arms again in sulking distaste. His eyebrows settled low over his eyes as we laughed.

We meandered out the back of the mansion and settled on the stone bench, letting the breeze ruffle our hair. “I heard from Cato.”

“Oh my God, really?” Ann said with wide eyes. “Did he call you?”

“Yes. Personally. He called to make sure Stefan and I were okay. I told him about the battle and everything, and the other black, and he wants me to start looking for more. He thinks I’m the herald to band the two halves of magic together again. So I have a mission.”

“That’s cool. I mean, you just earned people’s respect, and are still learning names in this mansion—not to mention still learning your job. Oh yeah, and *magic*. But, cool. Another job. Great idea.”

Charles huffed out a laugh.

“Yeah, right?” I smirked. “But it gives me a reason to meet more humans that do magic, so I’m up for it.”

“What happened with the Council?” Ann asked.

“Mass death. Like... cut down by a third. They’re still figuring out who’s good and who’s not. But Dominicus will probably be offered a position on the Council, so that’s good. And Toa will finally be in the Clutch where he belongs.”

“And Dominicus’ old position...” Ann’s eyebrows were up near her hairline.

“Vacant. Offered. Not sure.”

“That Council is a damn mess, so let’s hope the Boss sees reason and doesn’t step up,” Charles grumbled.

“Yes. That’s the discussion that’s coming.” I shook out my hair and relished the evening air.

“How is he? Speaking of Stefan?” Ann ventured.

“Healing. He’ll be okay, but they beat the hell out of him, so... it’ll be another week, probably.”

Ann let silence descend for a while, just taking in the night.

“So now what are we going to do?” she asked after a while. “I’m tired of healing, and I have a few hours until the nurse realizes I took off.”

“Then what happens?” I asked.

“Tim gives the command that I have to rest. And then I rest. Because I do not need to be pissing him off and then getting my arms ripped off.”

“Yeah. At least he was mostly unscathed this time. He was a rock star. Without him, we would’ve taken three times as many losses.”

“We worked well, all of us. Jonas even had to acknowledge that.” Ann laughed merrily.

“Yeah, he hated it. You could tell that acknowledgement tasted like

dirt in his mouth.”

Even Charles cracked a smile at that, not able to help himself.

We sat there for a couple hours, talking and relaxing, until the call came for Ann to go back. After that, I waited a while and called the witches, checking in. They were all fine, of course, just a little tired, but they’d become important to me. I liked having them close. I needed that unity.

“When’s the Boss supposed to be up and about? A week you said?” Charles asked with tight lips. He’d never been very good at grudges.

“That’s what they think.”

“So, a couple days, then.”

“Yup.”

Epilogue

I clutched the note from Stefan and looked at Charles. “What’s this all about?”

Charles gave a big stretch and scratched his chest. He glanced at the note, then at the clock on the wall. Dawn was just around the corner. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s finally trying to get freaky. Anyway, I have to go. I need to get in some ‘me’ time before I hit the sack.”

That was Charles’ way of saying he was going to go find someone and get busy.

I glanced down at the note again.

Run directly to me. –Stefan.

“Kind of cryptic.” Charles snatched his sweatshirt off the couch and headed for the door. “See ya.”

I focused in on our link, feeling the tug of his body drawing me. I had just started walking toward the door when Charles said, “I found a clue. What a sap. Is this the sort of thing it takes to keep a female? Because if so, no way. Way too girlie for me.”

I glanced out through the door that he was holding open. A line of red rose petals led away from the door and down the hall.

Butterflies filled my stomach. Stefan had always been affectionate, but since he healed and was back in charge, he was much more so. Even in public, he was always touching me and kissing me, as if the veil had lifted and he didn’t give a damn what his people thought. I was his, and he wasn’t afraid to show how much he loved that fact.

I couldn’t help wearing a stupid grin as I followed that trail down the hall.

“Mage.” Someone bowed. “Mage.” A nod of the head. “Hey Sasha.” I got a high-five that time.

Down the stairs and through the next hall people stopped what they were doing and stared as I passed. I received more nods and bows, often smiles, and sometimes a salute. The only sound made was my footsteps and the word “Mage.”

What is going on?

Wide-eyed, I jogged down the last set of stairs and to the back of the house, following the petals the whole way. Feeling how close I was getting to Stefan.

Jameson stood at the back exit of the mansion with a stern face. He bent his head as I came closer. He said, “You led an excellent battle. I’d fight beside you any day.”

He stepped to the side so I could exit the mansion, my heart in my chest. Sure, they’d all said or done something to acknowledge our victory, but Jameson had never been so formal. He’d never finished with obviously lowered eyes and posture, showing my dominance.

What is going on?

I met Jonas just outside the mansion. Charles still lingered behind.

“Do you guys know what this is?” I asked.

“Just get going, human. I got shit to do,” Jonas said, putting a hand to my middle-back and gently steering me forward.

The rose petals led to the hidden bungalow where I’d spent the first few months of this new life. Charles and Jonas stopped at the entrance. Charles pulled me into a tight hug and kissed the top of my head. “You turned my position from something laughable, to the most coveted position in this place. Thanks, Sasha.”

I couldn’t help the moisture in my eyes.

Jonas pulled me in next, hugging me just as tight. “You’re a pain in the ass, but at least I constantly get to kill stuff.”

I huffed a laugh as a tear overflowed. “Sap.”

Jonas gave me a small push toward the door. “Off you get.”

Quietly, I walked through the concealment spell and through the front door.

I stopped dead.

Flower petals covered every inch of the ground, a swirl of beautiful, fragrant colors. Mouth dropping open, I turned into the bedroom I used to use, but didn’t see Stefan anywhere. I walked back out and peeked into the living room. Stefan sat patiently, gashes healing on his arms, a small smile curving upwards on his perfect face.

“Hi, baby.” His deep voice rumbled out of his muscular chest.

Champagne waited on the table with still more roses.

I sat next to him. My heart pounded. “Hi.”

His beautiful black eyes delved into mine. “We were made for each other, you and I. I loved you before I even met you. I wanted you since I first felt that tug on my heart—since the first time we connected eyes. You are the only one on this earth that can make me happy. That can fulfill me. I thank the gods every day for you.”

He held out his hand. In the palm of his hand, there was a small blue box. He cracked open the lid, revealing a beautiful diamond ring.

“Will you marry me and help lead my people?”

Tears dripped down my face. “But... can I? Can we?”

He took my hand and gently slid the ring onto my finger. “Yes. You have earned the trust of my clan and your place by my side. A unanimous agreement by the community means you have full support. We don’t have a formal mating ritual—my marking you was more permanent than anything we do, but I know that humans do it this way. I wanted to honor you in your own customs as I will continue to honor you in mine.”

Another tear fell. He leaned forward and kissed it off my cheek.

“Yes. Of course I will. Yes!” I hugged him, sobbing happily. He kissed me tenderly, wrapping me in his arms.

It had been a long road and a hard one, but I finally, *finally* ended up exactly where I was meant to be, with the person I was meant to be with.

The End

~*~*~*~

Sasha's journey continues in *Shadow Watcher*, Darkness Series #6, due out 11/30/14 (or slightly before). [Darkness Series \(Paranormal Romance\)](#)

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